Angel of Death

Book one of The Reaper Series

by

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Reaper: Angel of Death

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THE BEGINNING OF THE END

He gritted his teeth and waited for the pain to pass as he watched from the shadows. Watching as his prey steadily approached. He hoped that after a century of looking, this was finally the one.

The icy wind blew gently through the park, gently shifting the branches of the trees, the sound of rustling leaves carrying through the night. The girl walked quickly through the park, her breath visible as small clouds of fog with every exhale, her way lit only by the dim lamps lining the footpath, not knowing that she was being watched. Liz approached a playground on her right, keeping a brisk pace, but was startled by a sudden movement and a voice coming from the darkness.

"Got a light, darlin'?"

She stopped in her tracks and looked in the direction of the voice. She saw a man appear from the shadows, holding a cigarette between his fingers, leering at her. He had a shaved head and was wearing a black singlet over baggy jeans. Liz eyed him apprehensively.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't smoke."

The man stepped closer. "I didn't ask if you smoked,"

he replied. "I asked if you've got a light."

Liz took a step back as the man continued to casually walk closer. "No, I-I don't." She was scared now. She wondered if she would be able to outrun the menacing stranger. He looked lean and fast. And still he kept walking toward her.

"You in a hurry or something?" he asked her.

"Um, yeah, so if you don't mind, I'll just-" Liz turned to leave, but froze when she saw three other men stepping out the darkness all around her, each one grinning and leering at her.

"Why don't you hang out?" the first one said.

"Yeah, we've got beer," said another, holding up a six pack, minus two. "Stay."

Liz felt panicked now. She kept turning on the spot, watching as the men came closer. She wheeled around and tried to run through a gap between two of them, but they moved fast and grabbed her by her arms, lifting her off the ground.

"Let me go!" she screamed. "Get off! Help!"

"Keep quiet, bitch," the first man said, stepping in front of her. He lifted his hand and Liz saw something glinting in the dim lamp light. The man had flicked open a butterfly knife and was now pointing the blade at Liz's chest. "Scream again and you won't be so pretty no more."

Liz, held immobile by the brutes on either side of her, quivered as the man lowered the blade to her chest.

"Please, there's money in my purse," she whispered. "Just take it, I won't say anything, just take the money and don't hurt me. Please."

The fourth man, an overweight man with far too many

piercings in his face, stooped down and picked up the purse Liz had dropped when they grabbed her. Looking inside he said, "Score, fifty bucks!"

"That won't even cover the beer!" said the one on Liz's right.

"I'm not looking for a payout tonight, darlin'," said the first man, leaning in close enough for Liz to smell the alcohol on his breath.

He placed the blade of his knife under the top button of Liz's blouse and, staring into her eyes, slashed the button right off. Liz cried out with the swish of the blade, looking away as she realized what the man wanted.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" came a scream. But not from Liz. It was a man screaming, a terrible shriek that chilled the blood. She and the three men turned toward the sound, looking for the source. All they could see was Liz's purse lying on the ground. The man who had been holding it was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, where's Levi?" said one of the men.

"Yo, Levi!" yelled another.

"Shut up!" hissed the first man, turning away from Liz and keeping his blade ready at his side. He took a step into the darkness, scanning the shadows for a sign of movement.

Suddenly, out of the corner of Liz's eye, she saw something she couldn't explain. It was as though the night itself opened up and swallowed the man holding her on her left. As it took him, his scream echoed in the night and was then smothered by the veil of the shadow. The scream and the man were as if they had never been there.

"Wh-what the hell is going on, man?" said the one still holding Liz.

"What did you see?" said the first man, stepping closer, his eyes flashing with anger as he tried to understand a situation that could not be understood. "What happened?"

The other man, now clutching Liz's arm more out of fear than anything else, was looking around like a trapped rat, searching for an escape.

"The night, man," he whispered. "The night took Eddie!"

The first man rushed forward and slapped the other hard across the face. "Talk sense, you idiot!" he shouted. "What the hell do you mean, 'the night?'"

"Like I said, the night!" the man shouted back. "The goddamn night took 'em, man!"

"That's stupid, you dumbass!" the first man screamed. "How can the night 'take' someone?"

But the panicking man had apparently had all he could take. Breathing fast, short breaths, he tossed Liz aside, stepping away. Liz fell to the ground, then watched as the man began to run away, shouting over his shoulder, "You're on your own, man!"

That's when Liz saw it. As she watched the man run away into the night, she saw a shape even blacker than the night flying through the air toward the fleeing man. It moved too fast for Liz to make out what it was, but she watched as the man saw it at the last second and turned to look at it. It flew right into him, there being no sound of collision as it grabbed him and lifted him off his feet. The only sound was the man shrieking bloody murder as he was carried off into the night.

The first man saw it, too. He held his knife up in front of him, ready for a fight, but his eyes were bulging out of his head as they darted left and right, searching for the

creature that had taken his crew.

"What the hell was that?" he shouted at Liz. When she didn't respond, he turned to face her, his face white with terror and his hand shaking so badly he could barely hold onto the knife. "WHAT WAS THAT?" he screamed.

"I don't know, I-" Liz stopped talking and her gaze moved from the man to a point just over his shoulder. The man noticed and felt his heart skip a beat and a tingle run down his back, like a stone cold finger tracing his spine. He turned, lifting the knife as he did so, to face the darkness. He thrust the knife forward, but felt something grab his wrist, holding his arm in place. He came face to face with the entity, his terror freezing him to the spot.

It seemed like a man. A man wearing a long black cloak. The cloak had a hood, which concealed the face of whoever was underneath. The grip the man held on the thug's wrist was like stone, hard and cold. The two stared at each other in silence; one was calm, the other was filled with dread.

"What are you?" the man whispered to the cloaked figure.

The figure didn't respond right away. It simply stared out from the darkness of the hood, its face shrouded in the shadows of the night. Then it spoke. It was the voice of a man, deep and resonating. He spoke in a whisper, barely loud enough for Liz to hear.

"The end of your life," it whispered.

As Liz watched, she saw the terrified man become rigid. She watched as his mouth dropped open in a silent O of horror. As she watched, she noticed that his shaved head was beginning to sprout hair at an alarming rate. In an instant, it was as long as her arm, but then it turned

grey, then white, then shriveled away and fell to the ground, where it vanished into the dirt. His cheeks sunk into his skull, his skin began to wrinkle before Liz's eyes. His fingernails grew long, turned yellow, then vanished into nothing. His skin began to turn white, then grey, then a rotten black, before finally starting to peel away, revealing patches of the skeleton beneath. His eyes rolled back into his head, then vanished as they too rotted away. The man was decaying right in front of her. Just as Liz realized this, the man collapsed, crumbling into ash at the feet of the cloaked figure.

The man in the cloak remained where he was, standing still and silent. Liz watched him with trepidation, unsure of what had just happened. She shakily climbed to her feet, watching the man without blinking. He never moved, but she felt certain he was watching her. She found her feet and cautiously stepped closer, staying out of reach.

"What…" she began, finding it difficult to speak. She swallowed and tried again. "What just happened?"

The man didn't move. All he said was, "They were going to harm you."

Liz nodded. "Well, I don't exactly understand what just happened, but I guess you just saved my life."

"Actually," the man in the cloak began, "I didn't. I only saved you… for me."

And as Liz stared in horror, the figure reached up and took hold of the hood in its hands. It lowered the hood and Liz was able to see the face that was once hidden in darkness. She opened her mouth and screamed. She screamed and screamed until her screams were suddenly silenced.

And the night was still again.

DOCTOR DEATH

Peyton Paradisa quietly sipped her fresh cup of coffee as she sat at the nurse's station in the hospital's Emergency Room. She brushed a lock of shimmering golden hair back over her ear as she leaned forward to read the magazine she had flat on her desk. It was so late, it was early, and Peyton was silently counting down the seconds until her night shift was over and she could go home.

Suddenly, the doors at the end of the ward crashed open and a pair of paramedics came running in, startling Peyton. The two paramedics were shouting at each other over the man lying prone on the gurney between them, but Peyton couldn't hear a thing they were saying. The man was yelling at the top of his lungs, screaming in maniacal terror, spit flying from his mouth and blood streaming down his face as he shrieked and strained against his restraints.

"The night!" the man was screaming. "The night! It was the night! Oh God, they're dead, they're all dead!"

As Peyton leaped to her feet and rushed to help, she noticed the doctor on duty, the 46 year-old Chief-Resident Gary Voss, jog into the room and head toward the patient.

He and Peyton arrived by his side at the same time.

"The night!" the man on the gurney screamed at the paramedics. "The night! *THE NIGHT TOOK THEM ALL!*"

"Nurse!" cried Voss. "30 milligrams of propofol!"

Peyton was already on her way to the anesthesia station, but hesitated at the doctor's orders.

"Propofol?" she repeated. "Doctor, morphine might be-"

"Now, Nurse!" he yelled, holding down the patient as he struggled and screamed.

Peyton quickly grabbed the propofol and raced back to the gurney, drawing the sedative into a needle as she moved. Before administering the drug, however, she paused and looked up at the doctor.

"Sir, this could be dangerous, we don't know-"

"Damn it, Nurse, give it to me!" the doctor yelled at her. "Hold down the patient, for God's sake!"

Peyton placed the drug in the doctor's outstretched hand and replaced him in helping the paramedics to restrain the hysterical patient, who was still screaming incessantly. As Voss carefully lined up the needle with a vein in the man's arm, the patient suddenly kicked wildly, catching everyone off guard and breaking free of their holds. Before anyone could react, the patient reached up and grabbed Peyton by the throat. She gasped as her airways closed under his tight grip, instinctively clawing at his hand to break free. The man pulled her close, sitting up and leaning in, and hissed in her ear.

"*Monster!*" he whispered, uttering the word as though it took every ounce of strength he had to form the word. "*It ate her…* "

At that moment, one of the paramedics recovered his footing and grabbed the man's arm, forcing it down and releasing Peyton from the sweaty grip. She staggered back, away from the gurney, choking and coughing as she drew in breath after breath. She looked up in time to see Voss administer the propofol. The patient stopped screaming all of a sudden, beginning to immediately drift into a dreamless sleep. The paramedics lowered him gently and carefully removed their hold, slowly stepping back and keeping their hands at the ready, as though they thought he might leap up again and attack them all.

Before they could all calm their nerves, however, Doctor Voss roughly grabbed Peyton by her arm and forced her to face him.

"The next time I tell you to do something," he sneered through gritted teeth, his brow bent into an angry furrow, "I expect you to DO IT!"

Peyton flinched as Voss screamed the last two words in her face, spit flying out of his mouth and landing on her cheek.

"Whoa, dude…" one of the paramedics began to say.

Peyton wasn't fazed, however; she may not have been a nurse for long, she may have only graduated her nursing degree less than a year ago, but she knew that doctors often took out their frustrations on the nursing staff. She also knew that Doctor Voss was the most short-tempered person in the hospital. She also knew she was right.

Refusing to let herself be bullied by anyone, least of all Doctor Voss, Peyton stopped massaging her throat and glared back at him with equal ferocity.

"I'm sorry, *sir*, maybe next time I'll ask your permission before I do my job." Voss still had a tight grip

on her arm, so she grabbed his wrist and roughly threw it off of her, almost knocking Voss off balance in the process. "And if you grab me like that again, I'll report you to the board. *Doctor*."

Voss, it seemed, wasn't done with her yet. He kept his hands to himself, but he compensated by standing uncomfortably close to Peyton, using the fact that he was taller than her to try and intimidate, pointing in her face as he continued to tell her off.

"I don't care how new you are, there is a chain of command that needs to be followed, girly, and you better obey it."

"Oh, you did not just tell me to obey! I don't *have* to do a damn thing you say. I'm here to help and if I think you're making a decision that could endanger someone's life, I'm going to call you on it!"

"What danger?" Voss cried. "It's a sedative, we use it all the time!"

"Yes, with patients whose medical history we know about. We don't know anything about this man."

"He was hysterical, I needed to put him down fast before he hurt someone or himself. And look, he *did* hurt you!"

"Oh, don't pretend you're concerned about me," Peyton scoffed. "You made up your mind about him the second you saw him freaking out. What if he has drugs or alcohol in his system? What if you gave him too much? What if he has allergies? You just don't know and you've put him at risk!"

"Whatever," Voss snapped. "I don't need to explain myself to you, anyway."

Peyton crossed her arms over her chest and stared

defiantly into Voss' eyes. "You're right, you don't. But if that man dies tonight, you *will* have to explain to someone."

Voss' lip curled and his hand twitched at his side. He looked as though he wanted to say something cutting, but instead he simply said, "Your shift's over. Go home, Nurse."

Peyton noticed that Voss said 'nurse' as though it was a filthy word. "Gladly."

Before she left, Peyton stopped by the nurse's station and quietly spoke to one of the other nurses on duty.

"Hey, can you do me a favor? Just keep an eye on the psych-patient that Voss put under, could you?"

"Sure thing, Peyton. Now go home and get some sleep, girl."

Peyton smiled. "Trust me, that's exactly what I've got planned. All five hours of it before I'm right back here. Night!" As she left the ward, Peyton wondered if she should stay a bit longer, to keep an eye on the man who came in screaming. She hesitated at the door, looking back over her shoulder at the unconscious man in the bed. She nearly turned around and went back inside, but then she made eye contact with Voss, who was still lurking nearby. He was glaring at her with an unreadable expression that made her incredibly uncomfortable.

I'll just check on him tomorrow, she thought. She reminded herself that propofol was a short-term sedative and, despite the scandal around Michael Jackson's death because of the drug, it was perfectly safe when used correctly. Then she quickly left and went home, hoping that the man would be alright.

As the night progressed, the man's condition remained the same. He slept while the hospital moved around him, hours slipping by, unnoticed. Voss was checking on another patient at the other end of the ward, the nurses were doing their rounds and taking care of the clerical duties, and the man who came in screaming was beginning to stir as the propofol began to wear off. His eyelids began to flutter as he fought to regain consciousness. He tried to move his leg, but all he could manage to do was twitch his foot. In his semi-conscious state, he knew something was wrong. He felt strange, and not because of the sedative they gave him. His chest felt tight and his arms were numb. He tried to call out to someone, but he couldn't find his voice. And the only doctor he could see was walking in the other direction.

As the man began to panic, another man stepped forward and stood silently at the foot of the bed. No one reacted to his presence, because no one could see him, not even the one he had come for. He had dark-chocolate skin and was dressed in a suit; black pants and jacket, no tie, and a white collar shirt, the top two buttons left undone. His hair was short and was so black, it almost seemed to emanate the darkness. His expression as he looked upon the man in the bed was a somber one, as though he was attending the funeral of an acquaintance.

As the man on the bed continued to twitch, the man in the suit looked at his watch, but there were no hands or numbers there. It appeared to simply be a blank face, but as the man stared at it, he passed his other hand slowly over the watch face. When he lowered his hand, the watch

face was glowing a luminous white, reflecting in the man's eyes as he stared down at it. Seven hands had appeared on the watch, all but one of them pointing at where the 12 should have been. The seventh was moving like the second hand would on a regular watch, but counterclockwise, slowly ticking down to meet the other hands. The hand that appeared to be counting the seconds was the only one that was glowing white. The others, the ones stationary on the 12 location, were completely black. The man watched the second hand as he waited, counting down silently with each soundless tick.

3… 2… 1…

When the hand reached the 12 location on the watch, it faded to black, like the other hands, and stopped moving. And so did the man in the bed.

The man with the watch waited a few moments. The ER continued as though nothing had happened. Voss was nowhere in sight, the nurses were continuing their rounds and no one noticed that one of the patients had just died. No one had thought to have his vitals monitored.

A few moments later, something began to stir, drawing the eyes of the man with the watch. Something was rising out of the corpse on the bed, shining bright, burning blue like the hottest part of a flame. It was almost like a mist, but moved through the air like water. It was coming out of his chest, as though he had sprung several leaks, and was twisting and coiling through the air as it made its way up above the body. The ends of each coil met and began to blend together, forming a slowly spinning orb of light and mist. Suddenly, the orb burst forth a blinding flash of blue and white light, although no one in the ward reacted to it. When the light faded, the orb was gone and the young

man was gently floating down to the floor, his eyes closed, facing the man with the watch, but his body still lying on the bed behind him. He stood there, motionless, his eyes closed, as though he was asleep.

The man with the watch took a step closer and spoke a single word to the apparition.

"Jeremy."

The man named Jeremy responded as though he'd been shocked. His eyes snapped wide open and he looked around the ward as though he was surrounded by vicious animals.

"What happened?" he cried. "Where am I?" Then he turned around and looked at the bed. The bed where his body was still lying.

He gaped at his body, his mouth opening and closing and his eyes bulging. He spluttered as he couldn't find the way to comprehend what he was seeing, sounding as though each attempt to speak caused him to choke.

"What? But… What? I-I-I-I, no, no-no-no-no-no, no! NO!"

"Jeremy, please try to stay calm," the other man said.

"*Calm?!*" Jeremy shrieked. "You want me to be calm? I'm here, but I'm also there!" He gestured wildly towards the bed. "What happened? What's going on? Who the hell are you?"

"If you calm yourself, I'll explain," the man said.

Jeremy struggled for a moment to compose himself, but he stopped shouting and waited for an answer, although his eyes were still bulging. The man with the watch, once satisfied that Jeremy was calm enough, told him what he had told countless others before.

"My name is Darius," he said. "I'm sorry to tell you

this, but I'm afraid you… are dead."

Jeremy just stared at Darius, as though he was waiting for the punch-line of a really bad joke. He began to shake his head from side to side, not believing Darius, not *wanting* to believe. Darius was familiar with this response. People rarely had the capacity to believe they were dead, or else were in denial, but they would always quickly come around. The severity of their new reality is something that not even the most stubborn person could ignore for long. Besides, Darius knew how to convince people.

Darius stepped closer to Jeremy, who looked at him with worry and apprehension. The two remained motionless for a moment as Darius let the seriousness of the situation dawn on Jeremy.

"If you were still alive," Darius said quietly, "could I do this?"

And with one movement so fast that Jeremy didn't even react, Darius reached out and thrust his fist through Jeremy's chest. His hand passed straight through Jeremy, coming out his back, between his shoulders. Jeremy looked down at the arm sticking into his chest and opened his mouth in a silent scream as he saw the area of his chest around Darius' arm rippling like the surface of a lake after a stone had been thrown into it. Darius removed his arm and stepped back, allowing Jeremy to process what he had just experienced. Jeremy frantically felt his chest, finding it to be completely intact.

"Dude…" Jeremy murmured. He started to double over and reached out a hand to lean on the rail at the end of the bed, but as his hand touched the metal, it passed through and he almost fell, managing to regain his balance at the

last second. He raised his hand to his face and stared at it, as though it was some foreign object that was a complete mystery to him. Looking as though he might panic again, he ran his hand over his shaved head and turned away from Darius.

"I need a drink, man."

Darius shook his head, sympathetically. "I'm afraid you don't drink anymore. You don't need to. Or eat. Or sleep. All that's left for you is to let go, and move on."

Jeremy slowly turned and looked at Darius with sudden suspicion. "Who are you, man? How do you know all this stuff? Are you dead, too?"

"No, Jeremy. Not exactly, anyway. As I said, my name is Darius. I'm here to help you."

"Help me how?"

"I'm a Reaper, Jeremy. I'm here to help you move on."

Jeremy reacted as though Darius had just pulled a gun on him. He staggered backwards, nearly falling in his haste, suddenly terrified by the sight of Darius.

"You're the Grim Reaper?" Jeremy cried. "You killed me?"

"No, you misunderstand. I'm not *the* Grim Reaper, I'm just one of many Reapers. We help people, we don't kill them. Your soul needs guidance to the other side. I can send you there. I can show you the way."

"No!" Jeremy shouted. "No! This isn't right, I'm not supposed to be dead! I'm not ready!"

"People never are," Darius said sadly.

"But I was murdered!" Jeremy shouted. "It's not my time, I was murdered!"

"Murdered?" Darius repeated, sounding confused. "I was to understand you died from heart failure due to a bad

combination of the sedative the hospital gave you and the drugs already in your system."

"No, man!" Jeremy yelled at him. "Open your ears! I'm only here because of a monster killing my friends and trying to kill me!"

"A monster?" Darius frowned. "What kind of monster?"

Jeremy shrugged. "I dunno, but it turned my buddy to *ashes*."

"Ashes?" Darius repeated, suddenly feeling uneasy. "Just by touching him?"

Jeremy hesitated. "Yeah. How did you know that?"

Darius was very serious now. He stepped closer and spoke with great urgency. "This creature, what did it look like? Tell me, this is very important."

"I-I dunno, man, I didn't see its face. It was wearing a big black hood."

Darius reeled as though Jeremy had slapped him. He turned away and took a few steps, as though uncertain of what to do next. He rubbed his chin and surveyed the room, as though an answer might present itself.

"Hey!" Jeremy snapped. "Dude, over here! Remember me? I'm dead, here! You gotta help me!"

"There is nothing I can do for you, Jeremy," Darius said absently. "Your time has passed, and I am charged with guiding you out of this world and into the next. But…" He paused as he thought. "Yes, Charon. Charon will help."

"Charon?" Jeremy scoffed. "Can he bring me back to life?"

"You will have to ask him. And I have some questions for him, too. He will know what to do about this

'monster' you saw."

"*CODE BLUE!*"

Darius and Jeremy turned toward the shouting to see a young nurse standing over Jeremy's body, her fingers on his neck, having just felt for a pulse and not found one. Darius and Jeremy had been so distracted they never saw her approach.

Now that he looked at her, Darius instinctively knew her name was Peyton Paradisa. He knew everything about her in an instant from a glance. Where she was born, her parents' names, mother still alive, her father died years earlier, and the names of every boyfriend she'd ever had. He got all this and more in a flash, seeing it all in his mind's eye, but even though he was in a hurry to get Jeremy to Charon, he paused as he looked upon the nurse named Peyton, who was now starting chest compressions on Jeremy's lifeless vessel. With all of the information he knew about her, there was one piece of crucial information that was missing. It should have been the first thing he knew when he looked at her, but it never came.

The day of her death.

Where he was supposed to see her ultimate fate etched into her destiny, Darius saw nothing. It was blank. This fact was an impossibility that he had never heard of. Everyone lived and everyone died, that was the way order was kept, and to discover someone who had no visible fate…

Darius stared at Peyton Paradisa as she tried to revive Jeremy. This new revelation, the fact that this girl seemingly had no destiny or would live forever, only made things worse. And to top it all, Darius felt certain he had seen this girl before, though he couldn't remember

where. His familiarity with her only made him more uneasy.

"Will she be able to save me?" Jeremy quietly asked Darius as they watched Peyton perform CPR and the doctors come running.

Darius shook his head. "No. Come, we have to go. Charon is the only hope for any of us now."

"Wait, wait!" Jeremy said, holding up his hands. "What's going to happen to me?"

Darius sighed. "I don't often accompany souls after Reaping them. Normally a Reaper will send a soul to the other side alone. But I'll lead you straight to Charon. What happens then is up to him. But I can promise you this; as long as you do exactly what he says, no harm will come to you."

And with that, Darius waved his hand and the air beside them appeared to open up, like the universe had been cut open to reveal a dark hole in reality, but with a bright light shining somewhere deep inside, glimmering and beautiful. Jeremy looked into the void with uncertainty, worry and mistrust etched across his face. Darius placed a hand on his shoulder and, with one last glance at Peyton Paradisa, who was still trying desperately to save her long-gone patient, he stepped into the light with Jeremy.

THE RIVER MAN

When Darius and Jeremy emerged on the other side of the void, the brightness faded instantly and Jeremy slowly looked around, nervously taking in the strange environment he suddenly found himself in. They were in a small cavern and ahead of them lay a long tunnel carved out of the stone. Stalactites reached down from the cavern ceiling, their points hovering ominously overhead. Far ahead, at the end of the tunnel, there appeared to be a shining light. It reflected off the walls of the cavern tunnel, shimmering gently.

"Where are we?" Jeremy asked Darius, nervously.

"Don't worry," Darius said calmly. "This is the Tunnel. To reach Charon, we simply head toward the light." He pointed at the glimmering light at the end of the tunnel. "There is nothing to fear in this place."

They began to walk, Darius allowing Jeremy to lead the way. Jeremy was moving slowly, with caution, and kept looking back over his shoulder at Darius, who would gesture for him to keep going.

When they reached the end of the Tunnel, Jeremy carefully peered out as he stepped into the main cavern.

"Whoa," was the only word he could find in response to what he saw.

The Tunnel had opened up into a huge underground cave, so big that Jeremy couldn't even see its edges. All around, he could see hundreds, maybe thousands, of other people emerging from similar tunnels in the cavern walls to the one he had just stepped out of. They all were looking around in wonder and amazement. Many looked surprised, some were smiling at the beauty of the cave. The wall directly behind Jeremy was sparkling and he turned to look at it.

The whole wall was twinkling at him and he realized that the entire cave was lined with large diamonds, sticking out of the walls and sparkling invitingly, casting rainbows clear across the cave's sky. Jeremy turned again and looked towards the center of the cave. The ground sloped downward not far from where he was standing. Jeremy noticed a lot of people were walking down the decline, heading towards the middle of the enormous cave. Even from where he was standing, Jeremy could see the river. It appeared to flow straight through the entire cave, twisting and curving through the stone floor, as both ends kept stretching into the distance until they faded away, having gone farther than the naked eye could see. The rainbows that danced above were reflected on the surface of the river, drawing the eye and inviting all who could see it to go in closer. Jeremy could see thousands of people milling around the water's edge. He felt suddenly and powerfully compelled to go down to the water. He turned to Darius, who had been standing quietly by, allowing Jeremy to take in his surroundings.

"Can we go to the water, man?" Jeremy asked him,

sounding like an excited schoolboy, asking a parent if he can play on the swings.

"That is exactly where we need to go," Darius replied. "Charon is a part of the River, as much as the River is a part of him. But you must promise me two things, Jeremy. First, you must do exactly what Charon tells you without argument. He is not to be offended. Second, no matter what, no matter how much you want to, no matter what you hear, do not look at your reflection in the water. Not until Charon has spoken to you. Can you do that, Jeremy?"

"Yeah, sure," Jeremy replied, already walking towards the river. Darius, feeling apprehensive, followed.

When they finally reached the river, Jeremy looked around, confused.

"Hey, where'd all the people go, man?"

Darius glanced around, remembering. It had been a long time since he had come to the River.

"The River is where souls come for Judgement," he explained. "When one reaches the water, they are invisible to all others, and all others are invisible to them. Judgement is a very private moment for the soul and distractions must not be permitted."

Jeremy nodded, still looking around in captivation, the lack of other people now seeming to not bother him at all. He looked at the water in front of him. For a few moments, he did not move. He simply stared across the water's surface, his eyes sparkling as the glimmering water was reflected within. He began to slowly step closer to the water's edge. He was about to place a foot into the water, a strange, blank look on his face, but just before his toe could touch the water, Darius grabbed him by the

shoulder and roughly yanked him back, away from the inviting river.

"No!" Darius cried. He positioned himself between Jeremy and the River, keeping a hand firmly on Jeremy's shoulder, his expression serious and stern. "Not yet. First, you need to speak to Charon."

"Yeah," Jeremy said, sounding distracted. "Yeah. Okay. Charon. Yeah."

Darius stepped away from Jeremy and turned to face the River. He stepped right up to the water's edge and stopped, the toes of his shoes less than an inch from touching the water. He knelt down and surveyed the surface of the River. Jeremy stood quietly behind him, unfocussed and distracted by the shimmering rainbows above.

Darius slowly reached out and held his hand above the surface of the River. Lowering his hand, he gently placed his hand on the River, barely touching the surface, only the smallest disturbance rippling out from his touch. He took care to not look at his reflection in the water. There was a reason Reapers didn't often go to the River.

With his hand still upon the water surface, Darius looked out into the seemingly eternal distance and quietly said, "Charon."

"Darius," came the immediate reply.

Darius and Jeremy saw a figure emerge from the darkness ahead, out over the River. It slowly rose out of the water, but no rippling occurred. The water remained undisturbed as first a head emerged, then shoulders, arms, a torso and so on. The creature lifted itself out of the water with apparent ease until it was standing comfortably on top of the surface. The being smiled, a grin that was

barely visible in the gloomy distance, and began steadily approaching, becoming clearer as it neared. The colors and the lights of the cave immediately faded, plunging Darius and Jeremy into a murky twilight. Jeremy blinked as he snapped out of his oneirism, the strange figure that was coming closer from the River now drawing his attention.

The figure came into focus, gliding across the surface of the River and drawing closer. Charon was a tall, foreboding figure, standing at an intimidating nine feet tall, towering over the heads of both Jeremy and Darius. He glided across the surface of the River, his long gray robes reaching down to the surface and appearing to become the water that made up the River. His fingers were long and his nails were sharp and pointed and black. His flesh seemed to be on the verge of rotting, being a moldy white and sagging off his bones. He was completely bald and there were filthy bandages wrapped around his head, covering his eyes. However, the lack of tautness over his eyes indicated that there were no eyes to cover. Charon grinned down at Darius as he approached, Darius stepping back to allow room for Charon's massive frame to reach the shore, his robes still flowing like water into the River.

"Darius," Charon smiled in greeting. His voice, while polite, sounded like a hundred people speaking quietly at once from within an echoing cavern. Despite not having eyes beneath his filthy cloth, Charon looked down at Darius. "This is a surprise. It has been over 150 years since a Reaper last paid me a visit. What troubles you?"

"Charon, this young man has brought some disturbing news to my attention," Darius explained, gesturing

towards the cowering Jeremy behind him. "I have come to seek your guidance."

"Y-yeah," Jeremy spoke up, finding a small amount of courage. "And I want to live again. I wasn't supposed to die, it's not cool and I-" Jeremy stopped abruptly as Charon snapped his empty eyes in his direction, his smile gone. When Charon replied, he maintained a calm and polite tone, but the finality was definite.

"First, young Jeremy, I will hear this news you and Darius have brought. Then, and only then, will I hear your request for life anew. Be patient and you will get your chance."

Charon turned back to Darius, smiling pleasantly again, his blackened teeth showing. Darius began to explain.

"Jeremy told me upon his death that he witnessed a creature annihilate his friends and turn one of them into ash, at the simple touch of his hand. I fear that-"

"There is a rogue," Charon finished thoughtfully. "Strange, very strange. Why would a Reaper go against his oath and murder the mortals?"

"I was hoping you might have some answers, Charon," Darius said solemnly. "You have been here far longer than any Reaper, if anyone would know why a Reaper would do this..." Darius left the sentence unfinished, allowing it to speak for itself.

Charon stroked his chin with a pointed finger. "I could offer many suggestions, of course, but they would only be assumptions and guesswork. However, you say that Jeremy here witnessed the rogue at work?"

"Yes."

"Well, perhaps he can be of assistance."

Jeremy looked terrified as Charon once again looked at

him with eyes that were not there.

"Dude, like I told this guy," he began, jerking a thumb at Darius, "I didn't see nothing. I was running for my life!"

Charon chuckled, the sound echoing all around. "Don't sell yourself short, my friend. You may be more useful than you think. Please, come closer."

Jeremy hesitated, but an intense glare from Darius reminded him that he needed to do whatever this 'Charon' told him to do if he had any chance of living again. He stepped cautiously forward, aware of suddenly being within arms reach of the nine-foot monster before him.

"Relax," Charon whispered. "This will not hurt. I need to see what you have seen."

Charon reached out and gently placed his clawed, rotten hand upon Jeremy's head. In an instant, Jeremy saw his whole life flash before his eyes. Everything from his father leaving, his mother dying of alcohol abuse, the numerous foster homes, his first armed robbery, the violence, the drinking, the drugs, the blood, the screams, everything he had ever seen and done was dragged before his eyes in a heartbeat. He saw once again, the cloaked figure in the park as it swooped down and grabbed him, lifting him high into the air and dropping him. He saw, again, the same figure grabbing Tobias' wrist and turning him to ash. He saw the figure speak briefly to the girl. He watched for the second time as the figure lowered its hood, but he could not see a face in the darkness. He witnessed the girl scream in immeasurable terror, the figure reach out and thrust a hand into her chest. The figure pulled out his hand, the girl no longer screaming, and look at something he held in his grasp as the girl

collapsed, dead at his feet. The thing he had ripped out of the girl's chest was shining brightly, looking like something between water and mist, burning a blueish-white, but at its core, there was another color, shining brighter than the rest. It burned a brilliant gold, sending rays of light dancing through the air and across the ground. Jeremy watched as the figure lifted the bright light to its face, keeping its back to Jeremy. Then everything faded to black as Jeremy had passed out.

Suddenly, Jeremy found himself back on the shore of the River with Darius and Charon, who was lifting his hand from Jeremy's head.

"Ah, yes," Charon was saying. "It is clearer now."

"What is it?" Darius asked, but Charon quieted him with a gesture of his hand.

"In a moment, my friend," he said. "First, we must allow Jeremy a chance at obtaining his request." Charon glided backwards, farther out into the River and spread his hands, gesturing at the water he towered over. "Come, Jeremy. Stand in the River and look upon your reflection. The River will determine your reward."

"Wait, what?" Jeremy said. "Hey, I thought you were going to, like, send me back, or something. Not make me look at some stupid river."

"If you want to live again," Charon said softly, but with an edge of danger to his voice, "you must look into the River. The River will decide your fate. The River is never wrong."

"And what if I don't?" Jeremy demanded. "What'll you do?"

Charon was silent for a moment, staring at Jeremy with his vacant eyes, his robes flowing steadily into the water.

When he replied, his voice was soft, but resonated as though he was shouting.

"Then you will remain on this shore, stranded and alone, for all eternity."

Jeremy gulped as he recognized the seriousness of Charon's threat. He began to walk hesitantly towards the River, wary but determined to be brought back to life. If looking into the stupid river was all he had to do, then he would do it.

Darius watched as Jeremy took a few steps out into the River, the water now lapping at his ankles. Jeremy took a deep breath and looked down into the water. He stared down at his reflection for a few seconds. Darius looked at Charon at that moment, who returned his gaze and gave him a tiny shake of the head. Darius sighed with a deep sadness, then turned away from the River.

That's when he heard Jeremy scream. It was a terrible, horrifying, haunting scream, one that would forever torment the deepest regions of one's subconscious. Darius could hear the water splashing and roiling, as though something large and heavy was rolling around in it. Jeremy was screaming, begging for help, crying out for God, but then his screams began to fade. Darius could hear them still, from far away, and knew that Jeremy had been taken downstream. Darius finally turned back to the River. All he could see was Charon hovering over the water, his expression blank. The surface of the River was calm and still as before. Jeremy was gone.

"I saw his life when I placed my hand upon him," Charon said to Darius. "He had done many bad and terrible things. His fate was sealed long before he died."

"I know," Darius replied. "Now, did you see the rogue?

Did you see their face?"

Charon shook his enormous head. "Sadly, no. Jeremy did not see his face, so nor could I. But I saw the rogue kill a young woman. He first saved her from Jeremy and his friends, who were going to do unspeakable things to her. And then the rogue ripped out her soul."

Darius looked confused. "But... but why would he do such a thing? Why would a Reaper interfere to save a mortal, only to then destroy her?"

"That, my old friend, is a question better left to someone with a more profound knowledge of the inner workings of Reapers," Charon smiled.

"You mean Azrael," Darius replied.

"Of course. It was good of you to bring this to me, but I fear that this may go beyond my reach. If this rogue is taking souls for their own, I fear something far greater and terrible is in motion. The only one who could do anything about this rogue is, naturally, the one who created him."

Darius nodded, but seemed distracted. Charon leaned in closer, bowing his head, having noticed Darius' lack of focus.

"Something else concerns you," he said, not needing to ask.

"Yes," Darius confirmed. "There is one thing. I don't know what it means, I didn't even know it was possible until today."

"Tell me, my friend. I shall help if I can."

"When I was collecting Jeremy, he died in a hospital. While I was there, there was a nurse trying to revive him. Normally when I look at a mortal, I can see their fate. I can see all the choices they've made in their past that made them who they are, as well as the very moment that

they will die."

Charon nodded. "Yes, I know of the Reaper's Sight. Go on."

"Well, when I looked at this woman, this Peyton Paradisa... I couldn't see her fate. I couldn't see anywhere in her future where she dies."

Charon considered this information, stroking his chin with the blackened nail on the end of his index finger and looking down at Darius thoughtfully.

"My, my, that is a new one," he said softly. "However, I do have a theory."

"You do?" Darius asked, surprised.

Charon grinned. "Of course. If we consider the actions of the rogue, we know that he is reaping souls that are not yet meant to be reaped. This is changing the design. People who are meant to die much later are suddenly not where they were going to be, which changes the design for others who were once going to interact with them. I believe Chaos Theory applies here. A mortal who passed through here several years ago would refer to this as the butterfly effect. Edward Lorenz, was his name. Nice man, I spoke with him for a while. He was fascinated by this place. But I digress. The fact remains that when this rogue changes one thing..."

"He changes everything," Darius quietly finished the sentence. Charon nodded.

"It could be that her fate is simply yet to be rewritten," Charon suggested. "I wouldn't concern myself with it. She will end up here one day, as all mortals do."

Darius nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Charon. You've been a great help."

Charon bowed his head. "Anything to be of service.

But I will again advise that you speak with Azrael on the matter of the rogue. If nothing else, he should at least be made aware of the problem. It is not just the fates of mortals that this rogue could change."

"Of course. Thank you Charon."

Charon smiled one last time, bowed again, then was gone, vanished back into the River, only a small ripple fading away to indicate where he once stood.

ACCUSATIONS

Peyton sat in the hall of the hospital with her elbows resting on her knees and her face buried in her hands. Her shining blonde hair hung in a ponytail over her shoulder, dangling down, almost reaching her knees as she hunched over in the small, plastic, blue seat.

She had returned to the hospital earlier than she was supposed to, after only three hours of sleep, because she couldn't stop worrying about the man to whom Doctor Voss had given the propofol. The man who, until half an hour ago, was still alive. Peyton had immediately suspected something was wrong when she walked into the ward earlier that night. As she drew closer to the hospital bed, she could see the man's eyes were open and glassy and empty of life. That was when she raised the alarm and attempted to revive him, but with no success.

No one even knew his name. He had no identification on him. It would be left to the police to determine who he is.

Was, Peyton silently corrected herself without lifting her head.

She sensed someone sit down in the chair beside her.

She looked up and saw her fellow nurse and friend, Tina, looking at her with concern. Tina was a petite, mocha-skinned, girl who had taken Peyton under her wing, adopting the position of what they both jokingly referred to as "Peyton's work mother." Peyton sighed and sat up straight, looking despondent.

"How're you doing?" Tina asked her.

Peyton shrugged slightly. "I guess I'm okay. Just... I've never seen someone die before now. Well, not that I *saw* him die, but I was one of the last people to see him alive. I just wonder if... I don't know. If I didn't go home, would he still be alive?"

"Don't start that kind of thinking," Tina told her. "You'll only hurt yourself. That guy was most likely going to die if you were here or not. It wasn't your fault."

"Yeah," Peyton said quietly, nodding. "Maybe."

Tina placed a reassuring hand on Peyton's shoulder. "It's okay. These things happen. You'll get used to it. I'm not gonna say that it gets easier, because it doesn't. But you'll learn to not place blame. Death isn't always someone's fault."

There was silence between the two for a few moments while Tina's words hung in the air. Then Tina shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Look, I wanted to talk to you about this whole... *thing*. I was talking to the coroner, and he said his early report would be that the cause of death was a bad reaction to the anesthetic."

"Damn, I knew it," Peyton said, shaking her head. "I tried to warn Voss... Has anyone told him?"

"Voss?" Tina asked. "Well, yeah, they have. And that's the other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Peyton turned her head to look at Tina. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Well..." Tina hesitated, shifting in her seat again. She looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"Tina," Peyton urged her. "Come on, just tell me. It can't be that bad, can it?"

"Well..." Tina said again. "It depends on your perspective."

Peyton was confused now. "Tina, what's going on?"

"It's Voss," Tina blurted out. "I'm really sorry, but... You won't believe what he's been saying."

Only minutes later, Peyton was storming down the hall, her blonde ponytail bobbing with each step, a look of furious determination on her face. She reached an office door and burst in without knocking, slamming the door against a filing cabinet with a loud crash as she swung it all the way open. She barged into the room and, spotting Voss seated at his desk with his eyes widened in surprise, she marched up to his desk and slammed her hands down on the hard-polished surface, and fixed him with a contemptuous stare.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snarled at him. "You're telling people it was my fault that man died? That I gave him the propofol? You've got a lot of nerve you son of a-"

She stopped suddenly as she heard someone out of sight clear their throat. Spinning around, she saw three people she had failed to notice originally, being blinded by her rage. Her surprise was immediately replaced by embarrassment, because one of the people seated in front of Voss' desk, the one who had cleared his throat, was the Chief of Medicine, Doctor Nolan Spencer. Peyton felt her

face go bright red as she met Spencer's eyes. She then stood up straight and tried to maintain what little dignity she could muster.

"Doctor Spencer," she flustered. "Sir, I didn't see you there."

"Clearly," he said, not without amusement. "But as it stands, it's actually good that you're here. Please, take a seat."

Spencer stood up and gestured towards his vacated chair for her to sit down. Hesitantly, fully aware of all the eyes that were now on her, Peyton cautiously sat down and looked around at the other occupants of the office.

Standing at her right shoulder was the kind-faced Doctor Spencer, who, despite always being very nice and friendly with every staff member and patient within the hospital, Peyton still found to be rather intimidating. Not because he was a scary looking man. In actuality, he looked more like the Monopoly Man, having replaced the top hat, mustache and monocle with a white doctor's coat. Peyton was only intimidated by him because he was pretty much the smartest man she had ever met and every word she spoke when he was around made her feel like she was a blithering idiot.

Behind Spencer, standing silently by the wall, looking like an angry hawk, was a man Peyton had never met, but knew by sight. The hospital's attorney, Byron Anscomb, lurking in the back-corner of the room in his brown suit and orange power-tie, staring at Peyton with his dark, narrow eyes and his even more narrow, pointed nose. The hairline of his short, black hair forming a prominent widow's peak, and his thick black eyebrows shaped into a permanent V, further accentuating his hawk-like

appearance.

Finally, seated beside Peyton in the second chair facing Voss' desk, was a woman looking at Peyton with no discernible facial expression. She had short, auburn colored hair and eyes that were the darkest shade of hazel Peyton could recall seeing. The woman was dressed in a basic, no-name-brand, dark pants-suit with a red shirt that either clashed horribly with her hair or somehow managed to compliment it, depending on your perspective.

"Nurse Paradisa," Spencer began, "this is Detective Valerie King. She's here regarding the young man who died earlier this morning."

For one wild moment, Peyton was on the verge of panic, thinking that Voss had gone so far as to call the police and tell them, as well as half the hospital staff, that it was her who had decided to give the deceased the dose of propofol that had most likely killed him. She dismissed it, though (almost entirely) when King extended her hand and smiled politely, saying, "Nice to meet you, Nurse. Paradisa, was it?"

Peyton nodded, shaking King's hand. The skin on the detective's palm felt rough and calloused. "Call me Peyton."

Detective King nodded and then sat back and rested her elbows on the arms of her chair, her hands folded in her lap.

"I came here to speak with the young man Doctor Voss was treating before his death," King explained to Peyton. "I was just explaining to your colleagues that when he was found in the park, screaming and crying under a lamp, the body of a young girl was also found nearby. I was hoping to question him, but I guess that ship has

sailed, hasn't it?"

Voss leaned forward behind his desk and fixed Peyton with a dagger-sharp stare. "I informed the detective that your oversight with the propofol is what most likely caused the negative reaction, resulting in his death, Nurse."

Voss spoke with careful enunciation, silently implying that if Peyton wanted to keep her job, she had better play along. Peyton, however, returned his stare and said, "Excuse me? I warned you not to use propofol, but you insisted and ignored everything I said. I suggested morphine, Doctor."

Voss looked livid, his face quickly turning a dangerous shade of purple. Spencer, however, looked shocked by the news.

"Voss, you told me it was Nurse Paradisa who gave the propofol!" he admonished. "Which is it, then?"

Voss bristled at Spencer for a moment, fumbling to find words, but he simply tapped a pen nervously against his desk and said, "Is that important right now? A man is dead and Detective King here is trying to figure out why there was a dead body left in the park."

"Actually, Doctor Voss," Anscomb spoke up. His voice was quiet and solemn, much like you'd expect the staff of a funeral home to speak when arranging burials. "If the young man's death was a result of negligence, that is quite a pressing matter for the hospital. We will assist Detective King however we can right now, but I think Doctor Spencer would agree with me in saying that disciplinary action will have to follow, once we determine exactly who is responsible for giving the propofol. Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

Anscomb directed the last of his statement to Doctor Spencer, who looked gravely between Peyton and Voss, before setting his disappointed gaze on Voss and nodding slowly. "Yes, I would say exactly that."

Voss' purple face quickly began to turn white. King cleared her throat, calling attention back to her.

"Now, as I understand it," she began, "Doctor Voss and Nurse Paradisa were the last to see the patient alive, correct?" No one contradicted her, so she continued. "What can you tell me about him from the time he arrived in the ER? How was he behaving?"

"He was behaving like a lunatic," Voss snapped. "Screaming and thrashing about, he even attempted to strangle the nurse." He gestured indifferently towards Peyton. "He had lost his mind. Kept screaming about ashes."

"Ashes?" King repeated. She had taken a small notepad out of her jacket pocket and was writing in it. "Did he say anything else?"

Voss shook his head, but Peyton said, "Yes, Detective, he whispered something to me when he grabbed my neck. He… He was in a clear state of shock, though, I'm not sure he knew what he was saying, because it's just… Just weird."

King nodded. "What did he say?"

Peyton nervously glanced at Spencer and Anscomb before answering. "He said... I don't know, he said something about a monster."

"A monster?" King repeated.

Peyton nodded. "Yeah. And then he said, 'it ate her.'"

At this, King frowned as she wrote Peyton's statement in her notepad. She looked up at Peyton, still frowning,

and rapidly tapped her pen on the paper.

"Are you sure he said, 'ate her,' Miss Paradisa?" she asked.

Peyton nodded. "Definitely. But he was just talking crazy, right?"

King looked down at her notes and carefully set her pen down, sighing audibly as she did so.

"The body of the young woman that was found in the park, where the man you treated was also found, is causing a great deal of confusion for everyone. Because, as far as anyone can tell, the woman's body doesn't have a scratch on it. No evidence of foul play. No cuts, no bruises, no marks of any kind. It's like she just... died. For no reason. So I don't understand what our mystery man could possibly have meant by something *eating* her. Did he say anything else? Anything at all?"

Peyton shook her head. "No, nothing. I'm sorry. I wish I could help."

King waved her hand in the air, as though shooing away a fly. "Forget it. You've done enough. But if you do think of anything else, here's my card." She held out a business card for Peyton to take, who took it and looked down at the name 'Detective Valerie King: Homicide' and her phone number and precinct address.

"But don't worry if you can't think of more." King glanced at Voss, then back at Peyton. "I get the feeling you've got your own problems to deal with." King stood up, returning her notepad and pen to her jacket pocket. "Thank you for your time, everybody. If I need anything else from you, I'll be in touch."

Anscomb stepped forward, still looking like a hawk despite his polite smile. "Detective, I do hope this

unpleasantness won't reflect badly on the hospital. When you speak to your superiors, please offer our-"

King held up her hand to silence him. "Mr Anscomb, as I told you before, if legal action is to be held against the hospital because of the suspect's death, it won't be because of me or my precinct. You'll have to answer to the young man's family for that, once they have been notified. Have a nice day, Mr. Anscomb." Then Detective King left swiftly, closing the office door on her way out.

Spencer moved toward Voss' desk and said over his shoulder to Anscomb, "I'd like you to stick around a moment longer, Byron, if you don't mind." Anscomb nodded his concurrence and resumed his position at the wall. Spencer ignored the vacant seat and stood over Voss' desk, beside the still-seated Peyton, staring down at the middle-aged doctor before him.

"Now, about this patient of yours," Spencer said, his eyes flashing menace from behind his wire-frame glasses. "I was informed - by you - that young Nurse Paradisa here was responsible for administering the propofol. But she now claims that it was you and that she advised you against it. Logically, only one of you is telling the truth. I want to know which one. But know this, Doctor. It may be common practice at other hospitals to blame the nursing staff for mistakes made by doctors, but I will not have it. Now, do you want to tell me anything?"

There were a few seconds of heavy tension in the air as Voss and Spencer attempted to stare the other down. Finally, Voss said coldly to Spencer, "I told you the truth."

"The hell you did," Peyton snapped. "You asked me for propofol, I said morphine would be better, and you damn

near bit my head off, screaming at me to get the damned propofol. And for you to go and try blaming me-"

Voss banged a fist down on his desk, knocking over a picture of his wife. "Look, you little bitch-" he began.

"Voss!" Spencer shouted. "I will have none of that kind of disrespectful language used with staff!"

"Sir, she's lying to you," Voss told Spencer. "She's new to nursing, these things happen, but she just won't own up to her mistake."

Spencer held up his hand to silence Voss. "Enough. This is your word against Paradisa's and I honestly can't deal with this a second longer. A man is dead because of someone's mistake. I expected better honesty from my staff. I'm going to have Byron begin an investigation. Considering the other nurses that were on staff at the time of the incident, I expect it will be a short investigation in terms of witnesses. But I would expect that the dishonest person here will come clean to me before Byron is finished. I'll be in my office, for anyone who may want to speak privately with me. That's all."

And without another word, Spencer turned around and marched from the office, Anscomb loyally following in his trail.

Peyton stood up to leave as well, but stopped when she heard Voss call her name, push his chair back and stand up. Turning to face him, he was leaning over his desk and glaring at her, his palms pressed into the surface of the mahogany.

"I hope you understand what needs to happen here, Paradisa," he said quietly. "You've only been nursing for a few months. Accidents happen and it is entirely understandable for freshman to make mistakes, and those

mistakes can be forgiven, even if someone dies as a result. For someone like me, though... I've been a doctor for 20 years. Mistakes for someone in my position aren't so tolerable. It would be much easier for everyone involved if you just confessed to Spencer for your mistake. I'm sure he would be lenient."

Voss spoke slowly and clearly, making sure that Peyton understood exactly what he meant for her to do. Peyton understood perfectly what he wanted from her. He wanted her to take the fall for his mistake. To go and tell Spencer that *she* gave the deadly dose of propofol, knowing full well that it was Voss. Voss was probably right. She would have it far easier than if Voss caught the blame. Spencer would still have to discipline her in some way. She might be suspended, possibly without pay. Although, there was always the chance that she would be fired. She would be able to find work in another hospital, of course, based on her exceptional results from nursing school and excellent letters of recommendation from her professors and summer internships. Then again, if the family of the deceased decided to press charges, then she would be the one to end up with a criminal record, but that wasn't the point. Voss couldn't be allowed to get away with blaming other people for his own negligence.

Peyton turned her full body towards Voss and faced him square-on. With her face set, stern and dead serious, she said to Voss, "This was your mistake. You can deal with it." Then she turned and calmly left the room, satisfied that she had not let Voss bully her into potentially ruining her career and confident that the situation would not harm her in any way.

Although, she didn't see the look on Voss' face as he

watched her leave. The narrowed eyes and flared nostrils, the white knuckles pressing into the surface of his mahogany desk; these all spelled out one thing:

Danger.

NO FEAR THE REAPER

Azrael. If there was ever one that could be called 'The Grim Reaper,' it was he. Older than the world itself, Azrael was an angel sent from Heaven, deigned to help the souls of humanity pass from their world into the next. He was the father of all Reapers, having created them all to assist him in his cause as the human population grew. Once, he was the only Reaper required, but now... Now there were thousands of Reapers. And Azrael was their commander, offering guidance where he could to those who needed it.

Azrael did not Reap much from the normal world anymore, leaving the fates of those who died because of old age, illness, accidents and other such causes to Reapers such as Darius, choosing to take the responsibility of Reaping those who fell during battle in wars. A hard task that no Reaper took pleasure in, given the vastness of the death, pain and horror that the poor souls endured in their final moments. He was never in one place for long, traveling the globe as more and more people waged war every day. He was impossible to find, but there was a way to contact him.

Darius was back in the mortal realm. He had appeared inside a church, now standing beneath the alter, gazing up at the large crucifix before him. The church had been locked for the night, so Darius knew he was alone, the clergy having gone home hours ago.

Darius moved from the alter and stepped closer to a bowl that had been placed on a pedestal. The bowl was full of water. Holy water. To wash away one's sins. Darius reached behind his back and pulled out a hooked blade; similar to a scythe, only much smaller for single-handed use. He held his free hand out over the holy water and pressed the blade against his palm. With a quick slash, he let his blood flow from his hand and into the holy water, where it swirled thickly around the bowl. Darius then placed the tip of his blade into the water and slowly stirred clockwise, mixing his blood with the water, murmuring quietly under his breath as he did so.

"*Ostendo sum vestri, angelus nex, quod dedi mihi regimen turbatus vicis.*"

Darius removed the blade from the holy water and watched as the liquid continued to swirl. It began to swirl faster and faster, red and black blurring together in the darkened church. Darius heard a gush of wind surge through the church, rattling the candelabras and rapidly flipping the pages of a bible that someone had left behind on one of the pew seats. The church was already dark, but it seemed as though whatever light remained was then extinguished, the stars vanishing from sight through the windows and the moon seemingly having blinked out of existence.

Suddenly, the wind stopped and the church was left in almost-darkness. Under the crucifix at the front of the

church, a shadowy figure suddenly loomed. The silhouette stood at a little more than six feet tall and was shaped like a man standing in shadows that were only slightly lighter than he was. Also, there were additional shadows stretching out from the man's back, spanning so far they almost touched each opposing wall of the church. They looked exactly like wings.

Darius took a knee in the church aisle between the pews, bowing his head in respect of the creature that had appeared before him.

"Azrael," Darius said in greeting.

"Hello, Darius," Azrael said pleasantly. "Please, rise. There is no need to kneel. Are you well? Why have you summoned me?"

"I wish to speak to you about a matter that has concerned me greatly," Darius said, slowly rising from his knee, but keeping his head bowed in respect. "A Reaper has gone rogue. This rogue has taken the soul of a young woman, before her time. I thought you should know."

Azrael was silent for a few moments, the shadows of his giant wings flexing as he thought. Glancing up, Darius could see Azrael, half shrouded in darkness, rubbing his chin in consideration.

"Did you see this rogue?" Azrael asked softly.

"No," Darius replied. "I Reaped the soul of a mortal who witnessed the attack, the ordeal resulting in his death. I consulted Charon, who looked through the eyes of the mortal soul, but was unable to identify the rogue."

"I see..." Azrael said, his voice nothing more than a whisper, but still perfectly audible and resonating. "That is disappointing. But I am glad you brought this to my attention, my friend." Azrael then seemed to look around

in surprise and chuckled. "But look at us, discussing these matters in such a grim setting. Perhaps less darkness will lighten the mood? Please, forgive the pun." And as Azrael barked a short laugh, all the candles suddenly came alight, chasing the darkness back to the corners of the church where they were held at bay by the light of the flickering flames.

Darius looked up at Azrael and saw a glimpse of movement by his shoulders as Azrael drew his wings in out of sight. In the light, and with his wings hidden from view, Azrael looked like a normal man. Although, 'normal' may not be the most apt term. Breathtaking, was more accurate. He had long hair that reached his shoulders and was such a light shade of brown, it almost seemed yellow. His face was beyond words for description. Everything from his bright-green eyes to his perfectly formed jaw structure was captivating. He had a constant smile on his full lips, as though he knew something that no one else did. As though he alone held the secrets of the universe. He looked no older than 30, but his eyes held untold years of wisdom.

While Darius wore a black suit and white shirt with no tie, Azrael wore the more 'traditional' attire that one might expect of the Grim Reaper. The long black cloak reached the floor and *swished* softly whenever he moved. The sleeves hung loosely from his arms, leaving room for arms far thicker than Azrael's. The cloak also had a hood that Azrael could pull up and shield his face in darkness, but he had left it down now. There was no need for him to hide from Darius. They were comrades, brothers, brethren. They shared a cause.

Azrael stepped down from the altar and approached

Darius, still smiling at him. Darius kept his head bowed, even when Azrael was only a foot in front of him.

Azrael sighed and said, "Darius, if we are to speak, the least you can do is look at me. I've never been one for this 'respect of servitude' thing. Please, treat me as an equal and not as the being who granted you immortality."

Darius cautiously lifted his head, the life he had endured as a mortal, before becoming a Reaper, screaming at him to remain respectful and to bow his head. It had been hundreds of years since he became a Reaper and left his life behind, but some things were just harder to let go of. Especially when they had been taught by the lash of a whip. Even now, Darius could hear the crack of the whip and his own screams echoing far and wide.

Azrael was considering him, smiling like a caring father, despite his apparent age suggesting that he would more likely be Darius' brother. He reached out and laid a hand on Darius' shoulder.

"There's something else, isn't there?" he asked. "Something more than the rogue?"

"Yes," Darius nodded. "But please don't concern yourself with it, Charon has already explained it to me. Is there any way I can help you with the rogue?"

"Ah, don't worry about the rogue," Azrael grinned. "As the father of all Reapers, I am quite confident I will be able to find him soon enough. It should be over quickly. Rest assured, his punishment will be just and severe."

"What will you do?" Darius asked, then quickly added, "If I may ask?"

Azrael patted him on the shoulder, then proceeded to wander among the pews, his hands clasped together inside

his robe sleeves. "The most fitting punishment would be to strip him of his immortality and cast his soul to Eve and Tartarus for eternal judgement. But don't worry, my friend. I'll make sure they understand the gravity of their actions and give them a chance to repent. Perhaps then the punishment will be less severe. But believe me when I say that they will deserve whatever they get in return for what they have done."

Azrael turned from his position between the pews. He had picked up the forgotten Bible and was turning through the pages. Darius could see the inscription on the cover read *New Testament*.

"But enough about that, Darius," Azrael said, without looking up from the Bible he was now aimlessly flipping through. "I want to hear about whatever else is troubling you. I'd hate for such a loyal and talented Reaper to be distracted by some concern eating away at him. Please, if you don't mind..." He finally looked back up and Darius found himself almost hypnotized by Azrael's green eyes. He found himself calmer and allowed himself to tell Azrael what was bothering him.

"It doesn't matter, it's not a great concern. I've simply never encountered the situation before and I was confused, maybe a little troubled. But Charon explained that because of the rogue changing Fate's Design, many fates must now be rewritten."

Azrael nodded. "Of course. Please, go on."

"When I was Reaping the witness, I saw a nurse. But she had no fate. Her entire future was blank. I expect by now she may have a future written for her, but it was disturbing at the time, as I have never been unable to see someone's fate."

Azrael slowly closed the Bible in his hands. "Yes, I imagine it would have been quite troubling for you. This nurse, where did you see her?"

"She works at Mercy Heart Hospital. Her name is Peyton. Peyton Paradisa."

Azrael nodded. "Is this close to where the rogue was last known to have operated?"

"Yes. In the very same city."

Azrael smiled. "There you have it. Charon... Sometimes I wonder if he is wiser in the dance of life and death than I am. He has told you true, Darius. This Peyton woman simply required a new fate. And yet... you are still troubled?"

Darius looked down at his feet, confused and a little embarrassed. "Yes, Azrael. I don't know why, though. For some reason, I can't help but feel like there is something very wrong. And that this woman has something to do with it."

Azrael stepped closer and placed a hand on each of Darius' shoulders, looking him in the eyes. "It is natural to be concerned. We are charged with not only assisting those who have passed into the afterlife, but we must also ensure that the balance of life and death is left in check. What you are feeling is the same sensation I have been feeling, but until now was unable to identify. We are sensing a great unbalance in life and death. This rogue has damaged more than the pattern of Fate. He has damaged our very being. So yes, I understand your concerns, as I also share them. But leave the rogue to me. I will take care of it and all will be right once more. Thank you for telling me all of this, my friend."

"It was my duty and an honor to speak with you once

more, Azrael," Darius said, inclining his head in respect.

Azrael stepped back from Darius and barked another short laugh. "You and your respect. You could live to be 10,000 years old and you will still maintain that charm and decorum. Farewell, Darius. We shall speak again soon, I expect."

In the blink of an eye, a loud rush of wind and what sounded like the rustling of feathers, all the candles in the church were suddenly extinguished and Azrael was gone.

Darius turned to leave, but his attention was caught by the Bible that Azrael had placed back on the pew seat. Stepping closer, he saw that, in the rush of wind, the pages had blown open to a particular section. The very first passage that Darius saw read;

Peter 4:17

For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God.

FATE

Despite what both Charon and Azrael had told him, Darius was still concerned. Days passed and he could not get over the feeling that something was wrong and that the woman, Peyton Paradisa, was somehow involved. Furthermore, he was driving himself crazy with the thought that he had seen her before, but no matter how hard he tried to remember where he might have seen her, the knowledge eluded him. He began to tell himself that it was only his imagination, that she only looked like or reminded him of someone else he had once known. Or perhaps he had only seen her in passing during a previous Reaping. He told himself numerous reassurances, ordered himself to focus, to not worry about her, to forget he ever saw her... but he couldn't.

One day, almost a week after he had first seen her, Darius decided to revisit the hospital and see her. It was against the rules, but he had to check on her, if for nothing else but to confirm her fate had been written and ease his troubled mind. When he saw her, though, he knew he had made things worse for himself.

Darius experienced two different sensations when he

set eyes on her. She was assisting a patient, an elderly man who Darius knew with only a glance would die in less than three weeks, despite the fact that he was currently smiling and flirting with his young, attractive, nurse. The first sensation that Darius felt when he looked at Peyton was one he had grown accustomed to; that feeling of nagging familiarization. He knew her from somewhere. Maybe not knew her personally, but he felt certain that he once knew her name and her face, but had long since forgotten. Again, he wondered if he knew her when he was mortal, but frowned at the thought. That was over two-hundred years ago and this woman was little more than two decades old. Knowing her back then was an absurd thought. Then he wondered if maybe she was a descendant of someone who did live back then. It was possible.

But still, why can't I remember?

The second sensation Darius felt was a cold prickling down the back of his neck and spine. A feeling so foreign to him now, after centuries of fearing nothing, that it took him several moments to place.

It was dread.

An almost overwhelming feeling of foreboding, of feeling confident that something terrible was going to happen very soon. And he knew exactly why he was feeling this way. Peyton still had no fate.

Darius stared at her for almost forty minutes, hoping that he was mistaken, that her fate would be written for her at any minute, that her ultimate destiny would reveal itself to her if only he looked hard enough. He followed her around the hospital, watching her go about her duties, helping patients, caring for people, laughing, smiling,

talking, completely unaware that she had no future.

Surely a fate would have been written for her by now, Darius thought.

Everyone needed a fate written. It was the rule that all Reapers and other beings of the afterlife followed to keep order. For this woman to go almost a week without a fate... it was unthinkable. Fates could be changed, Darius knew this. But they could not be erased.

As Darius watched Peyton, wondering why she still had no fate, a thought occurred to him. He wondered if maybe her lack of a future was not caused by the rogue. What if she had never had a fate written? What would that mean? What was she, if not mortal?

Darius noticed Peyton lean over the desk of the nurses station and sigh audibly. Another woman, one Darius knew was called Tina, began to speak with her and Darius moved closer to listen in, invisible to their eyes as he hid in the veil of shadows.

"How much longer do you think they're going to take?" Tina was asking Peyton.

"Who knows?" Peyton shrugged. "Can't be too much longer, though. They've already been in there, what, an hour? Hour and a half?"

"Something like that. At least we know you're not taking the blame for him."

"Can you believe he suggested I do that?" Peyton asked, sounding incredulous.

"I wonder what they'll do to him?" Tina wondered aloud. "Whatever it is, he deserves it for trying to pin a death on you."

"Yeah, I guess..." Peyton sighed again.

"What's wrong?"

For a moment, Peyton didn't answer. Then she said, "The family was in here this morning. They were talking to Spencer and Anscomb."

"Are they suing?" Tina asked.

Peyton shook her head. "I don't think so. To be honest, I don't think they could afford a lawyer even if they wanted to sue. It was only the mother and the brother. I don't think they have anyone else. It was just sad, is all."

Suddenly, the general peace of the hospital emergency room was broken by the sound of a door banging open and shouts coming from down the hall. More than one voice was yelling, all different things.

"Stop!"

"Voss, calm yourself!"

"Where is she?"

"DAMMIT, Voss!"

The double doors burst open and a furious faced Voss barged in, his eyes darting around the room, searching for something. They finally settled on Peyton.

"You!" he cried, pointing at her. He began to charge at her, running with his fists clenched and his eyes wild with rage. "This is your fault!"

Before he could reach her, an orderly rushed him from the left and tackled him to the ground. Voss tried to get up, struggling and screaming in rage at the man on top of him, but the orderly was large and pinned him easily. Spencer, Anscomb and several other people in a combination of doctor's coats and suits came quickly into the emergency room, looking fearful. When Spencer saw Voss pinned on the floor, his worry gave way to anger.

"Dammit, Voss, you're only making things worse for yourself!" he almost shouted. "Stop making a scene,

you're scaring the patients."

"To hell with them!" Voss cried, spit flying from his mouth. "It's this bitch's fault, you know it! I told you! She killed the guy! Fire her, you idiots, not me!"

Peyton was watching the scene in shock, having frozen when Voss charged at her. Her mouth was slightly open as she watched a once respected doctor flail about on the floor with a former college-linebacker sitting on top of him. Everyone was watching Voss with varying degrees of shock, distaste and pity.

The orderly hoisted Voss onto his feet, but held him in place with his arms pinned behind his back. Spencer marched over and stood right in front of Voss, forcing him to look him in the eye.

"Get a hold of yourself this very instant," Spencer said, his voice deathly quiet. "If you calm down, I will still allow you to leave the hospital without handcuffs on your wrists."

Voss stopped struggling, but continued to sneer at Spencer. Spencer took a deep breath to calm himself, then went on.

"As you insist on making this a public scene, fine. I can not, and will not, tolerate dishonesty among my staff. Especially when a life has been lost because of a mistake. Had you owned up right away instead of blaming a nurse, I might have been more lenient. But your mortality rate has been increasing over the last couple of years and, frankly, it's a concern. It all makes me wonder if you actually want to be a doctor. At least, for the right reasons, anyway. I suggest you see the silver lining here. This is a chance for you to think about what you really want. Now please, peacefully leave the premises."

The orderly slowly, cautiously, loosened his grip on Voss' arms. Everyone held their breath, expecting Voss to fly off the handle again, but he didn't move. He was still for a long time, breathing deeply, staring at the floor. When he finally looked up, his expression was one of calm acceptance, but Darius could sense the true feelings behind those cold eyes. He knew what Voss truly wanted.

Revenge.

Without a word, Voss calmly marched through the exit. Before he vanished from sight, however, he glanced back into the ER. Directly at Peyton. Darius followed his gaze and looked at the expression of surprise that had frozen on Peyton's face from the moment Voss barged through the doors.

The vision hit Darius like a sledgehammer to the back of his skull. In his mind, in a flash, he saw Peyton struggling against someone. That someone had her pinned on the floor. There was music playing, a song Darius didn't know, but Peyton enjoyed. The person holding her down lifted something up above their head, the object flaunting with menace in the dim lighting. A knife, long and sharp, taken from any normal kitchen. Darius saw the face of the man holding the knife. Darius saw Voss scowling down at Peyton as she continued to struggle against him. Then Darius saw Voss bring down the knife. He saw the knife plunge again and again, over and over, relentlessly into Peyton's body. Blood spray flew with every plunge of the blade, going across the walls, spreading quickly over Peyton's face and body. She was screaming, screaming in pain and terror, but one final plunge of the knife silenced her forever. Voss stayed kneeling over her body, panting hard, his face and hands

covered in the blood of the young woman he had just murdered.

Darius snapped out of the vision and nearly fell, the ferocity of what he had just witnessed having caught him off guard. He was looking quickly around as though trying to figure out where he was, taking short breaths, his eyes wide, but his eyes quickly returned to Peyton. She was still standing in the same place by the nurses station, now talking quietly with Tina and some other staff members, still visibly shaken and surprised by what she had just witnessed. Feeling the dread close over his chest, Darius lifted his left arm and passed his right hand over the watch on his wrist, thinking of Peyton as he did so.

The pearly-white hands appeared, but only three of them. The others were stationary in the 12 location, faded to jet black. Darius then knew what had happened. Peyton's fate had been written. Voss had made the decision to kill her, sealing her fate.

And she had only hours left to live.

TIME OF DEATH

Peyton got off the bus half a block from her house a little after 11:30 that night. She was renting a small two-story brownstone in Brooklyn, just a half-hour bus ride away from the hospital, which suited her busy and constantly changing schedule just fine.

Her way was well lit by the street lamps and she walked without fear. The neighborhood was safe, even late at night.

Walking up the front steps to her brownstone house, Peyton took her keys out of her handbag and slid them into the lock, the tumblers easily giving way for her silver key. Opening the door, Peyton slipped inside and shut the door behind her, sliding the lock back into place. The neighborhood was safe, but that didn't mean she was foolish.

Peyton switched on the lights and took a calming breath, now finally beginning to relax after a long and stressful day. The ordeal with Voss was troubling at the time, the way he was looking at her having haunted her for most of the day, but she had pushed it all from her mind so she could focus entirely on her job. People's lives

were on the line, after all. And Voss was gone now. She could put that whole chapter of her life behind her.

Kicking off her shoes and leaving them in the hallway (a bad habit from her childhood she had never been able to shake, despite daily scoldings from her mother), Peyton walked up the stairs to her bedroom to change out of her work scrubs. A few minutes later, she was coming back down the stairs in a pair of purple pajama pants and a black sleeveless shirt that fit snugly to her athletic body shape.

Peyton walked through her small living room toward the kitchen, but paused at her iPod stereo. She turned on her iPod and began scrolling through the list of songs she had saved on its memory.

"Oh, nice," Peyton said aloud when she found a song she felt in the mood for. She clicked play and stood back, listening as the song started.

When the days are cold
And the cards all fold
And the saints we see
Are all made of gold

When your dreams all fail
And the ones we hail
Are the worst of all
And the blood's run stale...

Imagine Dragons, *Demons*. A song that Peyton just could not stop listening to lately. Smiling and singing quietly along to the lyrics, she walked into the kitchen to grab something to eat and maybe a cup of coffee.

Meanwhile, Voss was sitting outside in his Porsche, his hands gripping the wheel so tight that his knuckles had turned white, glaring out the side window at Peyton's home. There was an open bottle of whiskey in his lap, the contents more than half gone.

Darius sat in the passenger seat beside him, but invisible to Voss' eyes. Darius was staring at his watch. There were only a few minutes left until Peyton's time ran out. Since he had had the vision of her fate, one of the three hands had faded to black and the remaining two did not have far to go.

"Stupid bitch," Voss was muttering under his breath. His voice was slurred and slow. His eyes drifting in and out of focus. "Couldn't just play a... play along. Wouldn't've hurt... She'd've been fine. Spencer's pet. Bitch."

Voss picked up his whiskey and took another swig. Then he opened the car door and uneasily climbed out. The bottle slipped from his fingers as he stumbled out of the car, falling to the street and shattering as it hit the ground. Voss swore once more, slamming his car door in anger.

Darius appeared at Voss' side, feeling apprehensive. He wasn't sure why he felt so badly about this. He had seen countless people die who didn't deserve to, many of which had been murders like what was about to happen. He felt badly for the victims, sure... but never so...

He couldn't even think of the right word. He supposed he felt pity. Peyton seemed like a nice person, too nice for this fate. Darius also felt disgusted by Voss, this drunken, prideful, fool who was willing to kill a young woman simply because he had failed in blaming her for his own

idiocy. As Voss staggered towards Peyton's front door, though, what Darius felt most was guilt.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Those five words kept repeating inside his head, over and over like a ritualistic chant. Darius felt guilty about Peyton's fate, because if it hadn't been for the rogue changing the design, she might have lived a long life and died a natural, peaceful, death when she was old and gray and had grown children and young grandchildren.

Instead, she had this. A drunk idiot lumbering heavily toward her front door, climbing the steps as though they were the Himalayas, intent on "teaching her a lesson."

Darius followed Voss to the front door. Voss was trying the door knob, apparently confused as to why it was locked. Like Peyton should have been expecting him and welcomed him into her home, smiling and pleasant, handing him the knife with which to murder her.

Darius passed through the solid wall and was then inside Peyton's home. He could hear her moving around in the kitchen. Heard boiling water pouring into a mug as she made herself a hot drink. Coffee. Darius could smell the caffeine. There was a song playing on a small device in the living room, but the melody did nothing to sooth Darius' mind. The song was the same as the one he had heard in his vision. The last song Peyton will ever hear.

There was a crash behind Darius as glass broke. Turning to look, Darius saw that Voss had put his fist through the frosted glass window in the door. Darius silently hoped that Peyton had heard the glass break and was running for her phone to call the police, but the song was playing too loudly and Peyton heard nothing as she sang along.

Voss reached in through the broken window and undid the lock, bleeding from two of his knuckles. The door slowly, silently, opened as Voss pushed on it, blinking in the light of the hallway.

At the curtain's call
It's the last of all
When the lights fade out
All the sinners crawl...

Voss moved slowly through the hall, his eyes roving, searching, hunting. He stumbled into the living room, crashing his shin against the small coffee table in front of Peyton's two-seater sofa. Voss cried out sharply, bending down to clutch his sure-to-be-bruised shin.

"What the?" came Peyton's voice from the kitchen. Darius looked towards the arch to the kitchen from the living room and saw Peyton poke her head around the corner, holding a steaming cup of coffee in one hand. When she saw Voss hunched over in her living room, her jaw dropped and her eyes shot open in surprise and not a small amount of fear.

"Doctor Voss?" she said. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

Voss stood upright and pointed his finger at her accusingly, wobbling slightly on his unsteady legs.

"I'm not 'Doctor' Voss anymore, am I?" he demanded. "Thanks to you."

Peyton took a step back, holding her coffee in both hands, as though it might protect her. "Look, Voss, you know that wasn't because of me."

"DO I?" Voss screamed, making Peyton jump. He

began walking towards her, the song still playing, his face contorted with rage and inebriation. He reached the kitchen entrance and stepped inside, Peyton taking another two steps back, keeping distance between her and Voss.

"If you had just done what I said," Voss was saying, "if you had just played along like I asked, this could all have been avoided. I would still have my job, Spencer would have made sure you were looked after, everything would have been fine. But you sold me out!"

"Look, I didn't-" Peyton began, but stopped when Voss slammed a fist down on the kitchen counter. He looked down at something he spotted beside his clenched fist. Both Peyton and Darius followed his gaze.

On the kitchen counter was a knife, long and sharp, sitting beside the sink. Voss looked back up at Peyton, a strange look on his face, an expression that lay somewhere between satisfaction and anticipation. Voss moved his hand, without looking, and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the knife.

He and Peyton were frozen in a staring match, Peyton holding her coffee, Voss holding the knife. Darius watched everything unfold as though he was watching a movie.

Suddenly, Voss lurched forward, dragging the knife off the kitchen counter, the blade scraping loudly against the tiles. He rushed at Peyton, lifting the knife, but in the same instant, Peyton thrust forward her coffee cup, launching the contents straight into Voss' face. The scolding hot liquid splashed against Voss' face and Darius was certain he could hear flesh sizzling.

Voss clawed at his face, screaming in agony as steam

rose from where black coffee had made contact. Peyton took the opportunity to run past Voss, who slashed wildly at the air as she ran by, still holding his eyes and groaning in pain.

Peyton ran through the living room and made her way toward the front door, but Voss was after her. He dove through the air and tackled her to the floor, knocking the wind out of her as he landed on top of her.

Voss grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back, making her cry out in pain. Then he slammed her face into the floor, hard. Peyton felt dizzy from the force of the blow and, somewhere, the medical part of her mind was telling her that she could possibly have a concussion.

Voss grabbed her shoulder and rolled her over onto her back. Despite her dizziness, Peyton drew back a fist and punched Voss in the throat. Voss was choked for a moment, grabbing his neck with his free hand, as though he might be able to clear his airway. Peyton struggled to free herself from under his weight, but Voss was determined to keep her there. He lifted the knife and hit her in the face with the handle, the force of the blow almost knocking her out cold.

Coughing as he regained his ability to breath, Voss used his empty hand to push down on Peyton's shoulder, holding her still against the floor, her head lolling from left to right as she fought hard to maintain consciousness. Voss slowly raised the knife over his shoulder, preparing to plunge it down into Peyton's chest. Peyton suddenly seemed to snap out of her daze and began to struggle, screaming.

Without thinking, without a moment of hesitation or consideration for what he was doing, Darius leaped into

action. He appeared behind Voss in an instant and thrust his hand into Voss' body, just between his shoulder blades. Voss convulsed once, looking confused, then froze with the knife still poised above Peyton. Peyton, not having noticed anything, was still struggling.

With a strong pull, Darius withdrew his hand from Voss' body, but left no wound. What he tore out left no physical evidence of having been removed. In his hand, Darius held a glowing orb of bluish-white light, made up of a consistency that was something between gas and liquid.

Darius had ripped out Voss' soul. The air filled with a haunting sound, like a scream that was coming from far away, but still echoed all around and never seemed to stop to take a breath. The screaming was so loud, Darius cringed and felt as though his head might be about to split in half, the sound almost seeming to come from inside his own head as much as from the orb in his hand. Peyton heard it too, the sound reverberating from the metaphysical world and straight through to the physical. She pressed her hands down over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut, her scream of pain inaudible over the sound of Voss' soul shrieking incessantly.

Waving his empty hand at the air behind him, Darius opened the void that would lead deceased souls to the cave where they could find the River. In one fluid movement, Darius turned to face the void and, with the athleticism equal to that of a professional baseball pitcher, hurled Voss' soul into the void. The hole in reality immediately sealed, the echo-scream cutting off, leaving no trace of ever having been there.

Voss' body seemed to be in suspended animation, the

knife still poised over his shoulder, wobbling only slightly. His eyes were wide and staring, vacant and glassy, looking into the distance at an object that wasn't there. Peyton opened her eyes and took her hands away from her ears, realizing that the strange screaming had suddenly stopped and that something was wrong. She stopped screaming and looking momentarily confused. She slowly raised a hand and waved it in front of Voss' eyes. She arched one eyebrow in confusion at Voss' lack of response, then she reached up and shoved Voss' chest. The push sent him falling backwards, collapsing to the floor over Peyton's feet, his eyes still wide open. The knife finally fell from Voss' lifeless grasp and clattered noisily to the floor.

Peyton scrambled backwards, pulling her legs out from under Voss' weight. Quickly climbing to her feet, she looked around, as though she might still turn and run out the front door. Her heart was racing, pounding hard in her throat, and she kept her hands poised to defend herself in case Voss suddenly returned to life and came at her again, but instead of running, she took a tentative step toward the empty shell that was once Voss, moving slowly and still expecting another attack.

"Voss?" she said softly.

Darius watched her as she kneeled beside the body and slowly reached out a hand. She felt for a pulse on Voss' neck. She stayed still for a moment, checking, but finding nothing. She then lowered her head and turned her ear towards Voss' slightly open mouth. She couldn't hear, or feel, any breathing.

She wondered if maybe Voss had had a heart attack, but then realized it had been far too sudden to be that.

Maybe a stroke, or an embolism? she thought. *But what the hell was that scream?*

As Peyton continued her attempt to determine the cause of death, confused by everything that had happened, Darius looked at his watch again. He stared at it in wonder, unsure of what it meant. The hands had all lit up to their former pearly-white glow, none were jet black anymore. But none of them were moving, either. They were all frozen in the location of the 12 on regular watches. All were glowing, but they weren't counting down. Peyton's life clock was frozen.

"What the hell?" Darius said aloud.

Suddenly, Peyton snatched the knife up off the floor, leaped to her feet and spun around, facing the direction where Darius was standing, holding the knife out like a broadsword. She looked quickly around, as though expecting another attack.

"Who's there?" she called out.

Darius looked around, but saw no one.

"I heard you!" Peyton shouted. "Come out!"

Darius, confused, continued to look around. There was no one there. He hadn't heard anyone. He couldn't sense the presence of another soul. Was Peyton just being paranoid? But-

Wait. A thought occurred to Darius, but it was impossible. More than that, it wasn't even imaginable. Still, he considered it just the same, the possibility chilling him.

"Can you hear me?" he asked Peyton.

"Yes, you bastard, now come out where I can see you!" Peyton shouted. "Who are you? Did you come with Voss?"

Darius nearly fell over with shock. This was not possible. This was unthinkable. This was breaking more rules than he had ever thought even existed. Mortals could not, must not, ever see or hear a Reaper. Darius knew he wasn't allowing her to hear him, though. She just... was.

"I don't understand..." Darius began, muttering.

"What was that?" Peyton demanded, taking a step closer. Darius decided he needed to do something.

"Please, I'm not going to hurt you," he said, trying to sound soothing and not so panicked, not sure if he was succeeding.

"Oh yeah?" Peyton said, not believing him. "Then come out where I can see you."

"I'm standing right in front of you, Peyton."

Peyton didn't respond right away. She stared at the spot where Darius was standing, Darius staring back with a mixture of disbelief and fear on his face.

"What, you're invisible?" Peyton scoffed. Then she blinked and her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Wait... How do you know my name? Did Voss tell you?"

"I'm not a friend of Voss, nor have we ever spoken. I just... know things. It's hard to explain. I'm sorry, but I'm confused."

"You and me both," Peyton replied, but lowering the knife slightly. "Any chance you might want to try and explain?"

Darius sighed loudly, not out of frustration, but because of an inner turmoil going on inside his head. He wanted to explain to Peyton everything, but not only would that break more rules, enough to bring down the wrath of Azrael, but she most likely wouldn't even believe him. Then, of course, there was the question of what was going

on with her fate and the life-line that wasn't counting down. Darius tried desperately to find something to say.

"Look, Peyton," he began. "It's going to sound very strange to you, but I promise I am not going to hurt you. Furthermore, even if I was, that knife would do nothing to me, so you might as well stop waving it around."

Peyton considered this for a moment, then slowly lowered the knife to her side, but did not drop it. "Okay. Who are you?"

"My name is Darius. I am part of... an order."

"Like a secret society or something?" Peyton asked.

Despite the situation, Darius grinned. "Something like that. I can't tell you much, but Voss was going to murder you. Until I stopped him."

Peyton glanced over her shoulder at the body of Doctor Voss lying on her hallway floor. Then she returned her gaze to the seemingly empty space in front of her. "Why would you save me?"

Darius wasn't certain how to answer that question. He didn't know what made him intervene. He had never intervened before, never even felt the need or desire. Peyton was looking around now, wondering if he was still there, his silence worrying her.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But I think... I am going to get into a lot of trouble for everything I've done and said to you, but... I don't think this was supposed to be your time."

Peyton looked right at him, but still couldn't see him. Darius was suddenly struck by how her bright blue eyes seemed to shine and noticed that they were tinged with a shade of green. "What do you mean, 'my time?' Who would you be in trouble with?"

Before Darius could answer, there was a sound like a small explosion behind him and he felt a blast of wind on his back so strong it nearly knocked him over. Even Peyton seemed to feel it, as she covered her ears and cringed from the wind. Before Darius knew what was happening, he felt his feet lift off the ground as he was snatched backwards by some invisible force. He flew backwards with unfathomable speed, disappearing inside what he recognized to be the void. In an instant, Peyton and her home were gone from sight and Darius felt as though he was flying very fast through a darkened tunnel, the walls close by all around him. Then, just as suddenly, his feet hit solid ground and he collapsed to his knees, falling on his hands to steady himself.

"*What have you done?*" a loud voice demanded.

Looking up, Darius found himself in the cave, on all fours beside the River. And standing in the River, looming above him, was a very angry Charon, glaring down at him with a vicious frown. If he had eyes that Darius could see, he felt they would have been narrowed with fury, maybe even glowing from the level of anger that was now pulsating from Charon's body. The water surface around where he stood was churning and boiling, no longer calm and peaceful as it was upon Darius' last visit.

"What have you done?" Charon repeated.

Darius pushed off his hands, but remained kneeling, looking up at Charon from the edge of the River. He was momentarily afraid that Charon would make him look at his reflection in the River. That was a fate he was not yet willing to face.

"Charon, I don't know what happened," Darius began.

"Don't you?" Charon snapped, his ethereal voice powerful and commanding, more angry than Darius had ever known the usually peaceful and calm Charon to be. "Really? I'll tell you then. A man just came to the River, confused out of his mind, more so than is natural for anyone who comes here. I peered into his memories and saw his soul torn from his body and cast through the void. I saw a man taken from life before his time was up. Is this not the very thing you sought guidance for not so long ago? A Reaper going against the design and destroying all that we have worked tirelessly towards for a millennia to maintain order? Tell me, Darius, *what were you thinking?"*

Darius remained silent, thinking, trying to gather his thoughts.

"I didn't know at the time why I intervened," Darius said solemnly. "But I couldn't let that girl die."

"It is not up to you to decide who lives and dies," Charon said simply.

Darius nodded. "I know. But it's not for the rogue to decide, either. Charon... this woman, Peyton, she is the one I asked you about before. The one with no fate. I saw her fate be written, that she was to die a vicious and pointless death, but I know it was not supposed to be that way. This rogue has ruined a great many things, but I simply couldn't allow Peyton's life to join that number. She is important, I know she is. I can feel it. Why else would this happen?"

Darius then pulled up his sleeve and showed Charon the watch, with its pearly-white hands still frozen in place. Charon stooped lower to see better, then the rage on his face gave way to surprise.

"What is this, Darius?" he asked, his voice having softened somewhat, but still grave.

Darius shook his head. "I don't know. It happened right after I intervened in her murder. Before, she only had no fate. But now... now she has no *death."*

Charon stood up straight again, looking troubled. The water around his body began to become more subdued, the frothing and boiling becoming less and less fierce.

"This is not possible," Charon stated simply. "She is a mortal. All mortals die."

"There's something else," Darius said, slowly lowering the watch. "After I saw that the countdown on her lifespan had stopped... she heard me."

"What do you mean she heard you?"

Darius rose from his knees and stood before Charon with all dignity and seriousness. "Exactly that, Charon. I spoke and she could hear me."

Charon placed a white hand over his chest in his surprise. "Did you somehow allow her to?" he asked. "Was she on the brink of death?"

"No. She was mostly unharmed. She couldn't see me, but she could hear me perfectly."

Charon half turned away, absently scratching at the bandages over his eyes as he thought.

"I have never heard of such a thing," Charon muttered, more to himself than to Darius. "A mortal human... first no fate. Now no death." Charon turned his speech back to Darius. "Even if you did intervene, her fate would have simply been rewritten again, and the hands of your watch should be counting down for her. How did she react to hearing you?"

Darius shrugged a little. "Surprisingly well, actually.

Better than I would have imagined anyone to. She asked me who I was."

"And you told her?" Charon pressed, all anger gone and now replaced by his inquisitive nature.

"I didn't tell her I was a Reaper, but I did tell her my name."

Charon was silent to think again. He was silent for a long time, having a lot to consider. This had never happened before, not to any Reaper or to any mortal.

"I think we should perhaps keep this to ourselves, for now," Charon said.

"Shouldn't we tell Azrael?" Darius asked.

Charon shook his great head. "No. Not yet. Not until we have something to tell him. But don't misunderstand me, Darius," Charon said, his voice suddenly turning harsh again. "This does not mean I approve of your actions. There is simply more to consider now. More that I need to look at. There is a bigger picture here, something that is yet to become clear." Charon's voice trailed off as he got lost in his own thoughts, but he soon snapped out of his reverie and returned his attention to Darius, no longer angry.

"I feel I should tell you something, Darius. Perhaps you will be able to help me figure out something."

"I will help however I can," Darius replied.

Charon appeared to take a deep breath, his huge shoulders rising and then falling as he prepared himself to say what was on his mind.

"After your previous visit," he began, "I was thinking about the woman that Jeremy saw fall victim to the rogue. Now, I remember every single soul that has ever passed through this cavern, Darius. Every one. From the very

first human that was little more than a wild animal and barely even conscious of his own existence, all the way to each soul that has passed this day. But that girl... I never saw her, Darius. She never came through here."

There was silence as Charon let the information sink in. Darius felt uncertain, confused.

"But..." Darius began, fumbling to form his sentence. "But she died. Jeremy saw her."

"Not quite," Charon replied. "What Jeremy saw was the rogue tearing out the girl's soul. What happened to it after he removed it... clearly he didn't send it through the void. The rogue has a different plan in mind for the souls he Reaps."

"What could that possibly be?" Darius asked.

Charon fixed Darius with a stare that, despite his lack of eyes, made Darius felt as though Charon could see straight through him. "The rogue is eating souls."

Darius felt the cold wash over him like a wave. The act of eating a soul... As far as Darius knew, the very possibility was only a rumor, a myth, never to have really happened and completely impossible. To eat a soul was a vile and disgusting act, even worse than cannibalism. With cannibalism, one only eats the flesh, but the soul is free to move on. Eating the soul, though...

"But then her soul is trapped!" Darius almost shouted. "Trapped *inside* the rogue! How? How can a Reaper do this? It's worse than Hell! If there was ever a fate worse than death, that's it! The worst fate imaginable. Charon, this is so much worse than we thought."

Charon nodded. "Yes, Darius, I know. Which brings me to my next point. I suspect I may have been wrong when I told you why this Peyton of yours had no visible

fate. I no longer believe that to be the case. I now believe that Peyton did, in fact, have a fate all along."

"But I would have seen it," Darius pointed out. "Right?"

Charon looked suddenly sad and defeated. "Not necessarily. I suspect the rogue is somehow hiding their actions, which is how he has been able to operate without Azrael discovering him. So, the reason you are not seeing Peyton's fate-"

"Is because the rogue is after her soul," Darius finished in a whisper.

"Yes," Charon nodded. "The rogue has targeted this woman and hidden her fate. You saw her fate only because it changed when the man named Voss decided to kill her, which changed the design. You intervened, preventing that from happening, so now her fate has returned to that which the rogue has in mind."

"What can we do?" Darius asked. "We can't allow the rogue do this to Peyton."

"No, of course not. I think you need to keep an eye on the girl. Watch out for the rogue. And if he shows himself, call on me. I will drag him down to the River, as I did with you. Only I will force him to look into the water and see his reflection, and Tartarus will claim him."

Darius nodded, suppressing a subconscious desire to shudder at the thought of Tartarus coming forth and claiming another being, a sight Darius had seen only once and hoped to never see again.

"I should go back to Peyton, then. I should be ready for when the rogue appears." Darius turned to leave, but stopped when another thought occurred to him. "Charon," he began, slowly turning to face Charon once more. "If

the rogue is... *eating* souls... Why? What possible reason could there be to do such a thing?"

Charon fixed Darius with a look that, despite having no eyes, told of countless years of age, his face suddenly heavy with worry.

"That is a question only the rogue can answer, my friend."

TARGETED

Peyton sat silently on the sofa in her living room, staring at the blank TV screen on the opposite wall, lost in thought, almost completely oblivious to the dozen or so police officers that were traipsing around her home. Uniformed officers would come and go and a police photographer was taking pictures of Voss' body and the broken glass around the door. Plain clothed officers were talking in hushed tones in the kitchen. Peyton could feel them glancing in her direction on occasion. Or maybe she was just imagining it.

She hadn't told anyone about her conversation with the invisible man. And definitely not about the strange scream that she had heard, the one that felt like it was going to burst her eardrums and make her head explode. She knew it would sound crazy. She wondered if she *was* crazy. She had had a full conversation with a man she could not see, but told her his name was 'Darius' and that he had killed Voss to protect her. Which, by the way, was against the rules of his secret society. The more she thought about it, the more Peyton began to seriously consider the possibility that she had lost her mind. The only thing that

prevented her from believing she had, was the fact that Doctor Voss was lying dead on her hallway floor without a scratch on him.

"Miss Paradisa?"

Peyton looked up at the mention of her name and saw a red-haired woman in her thirties approaching, wearing a suit and a red blouse.

"Detective King?" Peyton said.

"That's right," King replied. "Looks like I was more right than we knew when I said you had problems to deal with. Do you mind if we have a talk? I have a few questions I need to ask you."

Peyton nodded and gestured towards the small armchair. "Okay. Have a seat."

As King sat down, Peyton looked over her suit once more and then became dimly aware of the fact that she was still in a pair of pajama pants and a tight fitted T-shirt. She now suspected why the male officers kept giving her looks.

"To start with, how about you run me through what happened?" King said.

"I already told the other officers," Peyton said.

King nodded. "Yes, I know, but it's better for my investigation to hear it from you. In your own words. If you don't mind."

Peyton nodded and then explained how she had just gotten home from work and was in the kitchen when she heard a noise from the living room. How she had looked and found Voss standing there, drunk, accusing her of getting him fired. How he had cornered her in the kitchen and picked up the knife. How she had fought him off, but Voss had overpowered her in the hallway. Peyton

concluded with how Voss had been about to stab her when he had suddenly gone rigid and unresponsive and that Peyton had realized he was dead when she was able to easily push him off of her.

King made notes throughout Peyton's story, not interrupting or making a sound, but when Peyton finished, she finally looked up from her notepad and met Peyton's eyes.

"Miss Paradisa, it's no coincidence that I'm the detective on scene," King began. "The reason for that is that the death of Doctor Voss is remarkably similar to that of the young woman we found in the park a week ago. Do you remember the one I mean?"

Peyton nodded. "Yeah, you said there wasn't a mark on her."

"Exactly. Now we have another victim with no visible cause of death, who you reported as having broken into your home to kill you with a knife. Is that right?"

"Yes," Peyton said quietly, still shaken.

"What do you think caused his death?" King asked.

Peyton shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. I first thought of a heart attack, but there were no warning signs, such as shortness of breath, suggestions of chest pain, anything. Heart attacks work slower than people think and there is usually time to prevent them from becoming fatal if you know what to look out for. Doctor Voss would have known right away, and I'm pretty sure his own survival would have meant more to him than my death."

"But you said he was drunk," King said. "Could he have been so drunk that he failed to recognize any signs of a heart attack or any other life threatening event?"

"Well, he wasn't so drunk that he couldn't hold me

down and try to shove a knife through my chest," Peyton pointed out.

"Did he show any signs of illness?" King questioned. "Could he have contracted some sort of virus from the hospital?"

"Any virus or other type of contagious disease that could kill someone that quickly would have wiped out the entire hospital by now," Peyton replied. "It would be a pandemic. I don't think he was sick. He was drunk, but not sick."

"Do you have any theories?" King pressed. "If it was only Doctor Voss, we could write this up as some sort of accident, but because of the previous death, people are confused. And when the people I work for get confused, they don't like it and they demand answers. Anything you can tell me would be a huge help, even if it doesn't seem like much to you."

Peyton averted King's gaze as she thought about the invisible man, Darius, and what he had told her before the loud wind came and he wouldn't answer her anymore. Peyton had wandered through her house for nearly twenty minutes, calling out and searching for him, before she determined that he was gone.

"No," Peyton said to King. "That's all I know."

Though no one could see him, the rogue stood just behind Peyton's left shoulder, staring down at her from under his hood. He longed to reach out and take her. She was the final piece to his plan, the one he had spent so long searching for, the one that had taken so long to find. He knew it from the moment he saw her. This Peyton Paradisa looked so much like her. There was no doubt that she was the one he needed. That her soul was the one he

must have.

Except now was not the time. There were too many people around. The rogue could easily destroy them all, certainly, but that was unnecessary. He had only intervened with the last soul because he had to take a living soul, and those men were going to kill her. Peyton was safe. She was in no immediate danger.

However, the rogue had looked at Peyton's memories and was troubled by what he saw. Another Reaper, Darius, had stepped in and all but revealed himself to this mortal. The rogue was grateful that Darius had prevented Peyton's demise, because there was no telling how many more centuries the rogue would have to wait to find another like Peyton, or if he ever would, but what troubled the rogue was the fact that Darius was now aware of him. Undoubtedly he would soon figure out that Peyton was a target, that self-righteous, know-it-all, Charon having certainly spelled it out for him by now. Peyton would soon be under constant surveillance by Darius.

The rogue wasn't too troubled by the thought of being confronted by Darius. He was confident that Darius would be no match for him, after all the power the rogue now had, power he was not supposed to possess, but if Charon was protecting Darius, then that was of great concern to the rogue. Charon and his strange connection to the being known as Tartarus was one of the few remaining things in this universe that could defeat him. One of only a handful of beings stronger than he currently was. If he were able to take Peyton's soul... well, that would no longer be the case.

The rogue reached out a hand toward Peyton, as though

he was going to lovingly stroke her hair, her beautiful, silky, golden hair, but he stopped himself just inches from contact. He looked down at his hand, frowning beneath his hood.

The flesh was gone. All that remained were the bones beneath. He held his skeletal hand up to the light, examining it, curling and flexing his fingers,turning his wrist and watching the bones move without the aid of any muscular structure. As much pain as he was in, he found his transformation to be fascinating. He had learned to shield himself from the eyes of those like Charon, those who watch over the Reapers, all for the purpose of his cause, but the closer he came to fulfilling his goals, the closer his plan came to completion, the stronger his curse became. Even now, he could feel his flesh burning. He could feel his flesh smoldering beneath his robes, slowly turning to blackened charcoal, only to then crumble from his bones like ash. It had been slow, at first, but now... when he started this night, his hand had been intact. Now it was nothing more than bone. He would need to leave Peyton's soul with her for now. He was feeling weakened from the energy of holding himself together. He would need to rest before having the power to tear out her soul. He would leave and regenerate as much as he could, then return and fulfill his destiny.

When I have her soul, I will have the power to undo this curse. And I will rain death down upon everything.

THE ROGUE

Peyton never slept that night. Fortunately, she had the next day off, so going to work was not a problem. She was lying in bed, tossing and turning for hours after the police had left, taking Voss' corpse with them. She had relocked the front door and taped a sheet of plastic over the broken window pane, hoping that no keen-eyed potential thieves would spot the weak spot from the street and decide to break in. Peyton had had enough excitement for one night. Possibly forever.

Her mind just would not slow down enough for sleep to come. She was exhausted, but wired to a point of alertness that no amount of coffee had ever done for her. She would close her eyes, willing herself to sleep, only for her eyelids to shoot open again a few seconds later to stare at the ceiling as she ran through the entire evening's events once more.

What Peyton thought about most was the invisible man, Darius. How? How was it possible? Who was he? Why was he there? How had he known Voss was going to try and kill her? Peyton had more questions bouncing around inside her head than she could keep track of.

Eventually, Peyton decided sleeping was a lost cause and threw back the comforter as she swung her legs out of bed and got up. She made her way downstairs, glancing at the front door as she descended the steps. The door was closed. It still looked locked. She walked over to it and checked the lock anyway, just to be sure. Everything seemed fine.

So why do I feel so edgy? she wondered.

Darius stood in silence, watching Peyton as she paced around the house, checking doors and windows, even looking inside her linen closet under the stairs. She was scared, he knew. That much was obvious. You didn't need to be a Reaper to see that.

Darius went to the living room window and peered out at the street, keeping a vigilant watch on everything he could see. So far, everything had been peaceful, aside from Peyton's restless movements. The street was quiet, a tabby cat prowling the darkness across the road, the leaves of the trees rustling in a gentle breeze. So far, there was nothing to worry about.

"Darius."

Darius jumped when he heard Peyton speak his name. He spun around to face her, stunned that she was suddenly able to see him. She could only see him if he allowed it, and he certainly had not. He had broken enough rules for one night. However, when he looked at Peyton, she wasn't looking at him. She had sat down on her sofa and was holding her head in her hands, a look of frustrated confusion set on her face. It seemed she had only said his name to hear the sound of it, to hear the sound of anything.

Peyton sighed in frustration, raking her fingers through

her hair. She then threw her hands down with exasperation and shook her head."Never even heard the damn name before."

Darius began to wonder. How did Peyton hear him before when he hadn't stepped beyond the veil, hadn't revealed himself to her? Was it a one-time thing? Or was there more to Peyton than he and Charon realized? And still, there was that nagging insistence in the back of Darius' mind that he had seen Peyton before. He knew it, but from where? He felt as though the information was dangling in front of him, within sight, but out of reach. Every time he reached for it, his fingers would only brush lightly against the side of the knowledge, but he would come no closer to grasping it. As he considered Peyton, Darius slowly stepped closer to her, away from the window. He was suddenly aware of her natural beauty, of her golden hair and gleaming blue-green eyes. He noticed that, even without makeup, she was breathtaking.

Darius was so captivated by Peyton in that moment that he didn't notice the rogue materialize behind him.

Peyton was staring down at her feet, lost in thought, feeling as though she might be driven crazy by the constant whirlwind of thoughts that were blowing through her mind like a hurricane. She was about ready to grab the bottle of liquor she kept in the cabinet and fix herself a drink to calm down with, when she felt the air around her move and, suddenly, the bookshelf to her left crumpled under the weight of an invisible force. Books went flying and shelves snapped as though something large had been thrown against them. Peyton leaped to her feet, staring at the phenomenon. Then she heard a familiar voice, a voice to a face she had never seen.

"*It's you!*"

Suddenly, more movement of air and the coffee table right beside her was crushed to splinters. The room began to steadily tear itself apart, hanging frames being knocked off the walls, cracks appearing out of nowhere along the plaster, the curtains being ripped down from the window, the armchair beside the couch toppling over backwards.

Finally, everything seemed to go silent and all destruction ceased. Peyton stood frozen on her feet, her breath fast and short, as she surveyed the room. It looked like a fight had just taken place. Destruction was everywhere. She had heard Darius again, she knew it, but now there was only silence. Peyton had the terrible feeling that there was another person there, someone else she couldn't see.

"Darius?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

There was silence. Peyton waited for a response, both praying she would get one and also that she wouldn't. Finally, she heard a voice, but it was not the one called Darius.

"No," it said.

The voice chilled the blood in Peyton's veins and her hands began to shake. The voice was cold and quiet, barely more than a whisper. It was raspy and labored, as though the speaker was struggling for breath, but there was power there, oh yes, the speaker was strong and confident. As Peyton stood immobile, she saw the air in front of her begin to shimmer, much like the air above a highway on a very hot day might shimmer. Only this shimmering seemed to be made up of darkness, like the shadows were peeling backwards to reveal something more terrifying, to reveal all of the paranoid fears of youth

hiding beyond a thin curtain of darkness.

The creature that now stood before Peyton appeared to be a man. It was the right height, right shape, had two arms and a head, but the sight of it made Peyton stumble backwards and fall onto the sofa. The being stood in a long black cloak, with a hood pulled up to conceal its face. It reached out to her and Peyton went white with terror and was paralyzed with fear when she saw that hand. The hand had no skin, was nothing more than a skeleton's hand, like the kind she and some friends played around with on a fake skeleton hanging in the classroom at nursing school. Only this one moved on its own and was reaching out to her, moving closer and closer, the fingers flexing and curling in anticipation. Peyton wanted to scream, but no words would come out. Her jaw had dropped and her mouth was frozen open in a silent shriek.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her left eye, she saw the air shimmer again and the curtain of darkness revealed another being, launching itself off the floor before the veil could settle. The man launched himself through the air at the being with the skeletal hand and tackled it from the side, bringing it down to the floor in a mighty crash that shook the house. This man that had appeared from nowhere had short black hair and wore a suit with no tie and was now pinning the cloaked creature on the floor. The suited man reached out to grab the hood of the cloaked figure, but there was suddenly a flash of light and a loud bang, and the next thing Peyton saw was the suited man rolling through the air before crashing hard into the wall on the opposite side of the room, before collapsing to the floor.

The cloaked figure was immediately on his feet again,

lurching towards Peyton in what seemed like desperation, but the suited man launched at him again and grabbed the skeletal arm, twisting it up behind the cloaked figure's back and holding it there.

"Charon!" the suited man screamed. "NOW!"

Then, as Peyton watched in horror, a hole in the world seemed to open up in her living room. It seemed as though wind was being pulled into it, the force of the gale whipping Peyton's golden hair around her face, pages of her fallen books flipping at great speed, other fallen objects actually shifting around on the floor, rolling closer to the black hole.

The cloaked figure, despite resisting, was being dragged across the floor toward the hole, the folds of its cloak flapping as though caught in a hurricane, but with a great amount of force he managed to spin around and slam a palm into the suited man's chest, sending him flying backwards. Then the cloaked being faced the black hole and spread his arms wide, as though he was welcoming the dark void. Only then he quickly clapped his hands together, the sound exploding and rolling like a clap of thunder, and suddenly the black hole closed, and the wind stopped.

"Impossible," the suited man said.

The cloaked being reached down and grabbed Peyton by the hair and pulled her to her feet, Peyton crying out in pain. She saw the cloaked being draw back its skeletal hand, the fingers pointing directly at her chest. Then it thrust its hand forward and Peyton felt a horrible sensation of something moving around inside her. She looked down and saw that the creature had shoved its terrible, skeletal, hand inside her chest. She suddenly

found it hard to breathe and she fought desperately to draw breath. Her eyes bulged as she began to feel faint. The room began to grow dark. She felt as though she was being drawn closer to the cloaked being, being drawn into the darkness of the hood.

Peyton suddenly felt something large and heavy collide with her and she felt the tight and horrific sensation in her chest pass and was replaced with a strange numbness, followed by a loud and uncontrollable coughing fit. She was vaguely aware of the suited man crouching beside her on the floor, with an arm around her. As she watched, the man extended one hand and flexed his fingers at the air in front of them. Suddenly, the dark void was back, but the wind was not. Peyton felt the grip of the suited man tighten around her waist and, suddenly, she felt the two of them launch forward, directly into the void. If she had been able, Peyton would have screamed, but behind them, as though from the end of a very long tunnel, she heard a scream of rage that exceeded any she could imagine. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the cloaked figure was left behind in her home, rushing toward the void as the opening quickly closed, its skeletal hand outstretched. The scream was unnatural, animalistic and full of more rage, pain and frustration than could be put into words. The scream was not any word, but a simple cry of untold fury, before it was finally silenced as the opening in the void closed and Peyton found herself in a quiet place, held in the arms of a mysterious man in a suit, plummeting through a dark tunnel that had appeared out of nowhere. That was when the darkness completely surrounded her and she lost herself to unconsciousness.

BEYOND THE VOID

Peyton didn't know how long she was out. She was only dimly aware of all the things that had transpired, almost certain that she was waking up from a vivid and freakish nightmare, that she was in her own bed, wrapped in her blankets, and that she would soon be enjoying a fresh cup of coffee from her own kitchen.

Except she then realized that the surface she was lying on was too hard. That she could hear water running, like from a stream. Then she heard voices. Two men, but one of them... one sounded strange. Like his voice was echoing up from a deep well, and that the voice belonged to many speaking in unison.

"This is far from what we discussed, Darius."

"I had little choice. The rogue is far stronger than we imagined. He closed your void with barely an effort. Overpowered me with ease. He came so close to taking her soul, I thought for sure I had failed."

"Do you call *this* a success?"

"I call it improvising."

A deep sigh resonated from the one with the strange voice. "Azrael will not be pleased with this. To be honest,

Darius, I am not very happy, either."

"What would you have had me do, Charon?" Darius snapped, sounding as though he was losing patience. "Leave her to the rogue? Let him have her? Hand her over to a fate that was never meant to be written for her, or *anyone*? You know me. You know I would never have done that."

"Yes, but why bring her here? No living mortal has ever set foot here. *Ever!*"

"This is the only place I could think of where the rogue wouldn't chase her. He was afraid of the void, Charon, he closed it as soon as he was able. I think that as much power as he has gained, you may still be able to overpower him."

"But I cannot leave the River. I am bound to it."

"Which is why we are safe here."

Peyton slowly opened her eyes and looked around, blinking rapidly as she shook off the grogginess of having just awoken from her unconscious state. She was immediately wide awake, however, when she saw her surroundings. She was in a huge cave, full of light and color and a gigantic, gorgeous river flowing so far in each direction that she couldn't see where it ended. As she looked around, she uneasily climbed to her feet, beginning to turn in a circle to take it all in, but when she saw the two men she had heard speaking, she froze and stared in horror at the taller of the pair, the one that stood in the river, bandages over his eyes and claws at the end of each finger. Both men were looking at her.

Before either Darius or Charon had time to react, Peyton had screamed and stumbled backwards, tripping over her feet and falling onto her rear end with a thump.

She scrambled backwards, not taking her eyes off of the giant monster that stood mere feet from her.

"Miss Paradisa, please stay calm," Darius said, holding out his hands in a non-threatening way. Peyton was in no mood to listen to him, though. She climbed quickly to her feet, turned and ran, ignoring the fact that she was barefoot. She had only gone a few steps, though, when Darius was suddenly in front of her again, appearing out of thin air.

"Please, we're not going to hurt you," Darius said as Peyton skidded to a stop in front of him. Peyton stared at him, close to hyperventilating.

"You..." she began, trying to regain some control. "You're the one. From my house. The invisible man?"

Darius inclined his head respectfully. "Darius, Miss Paradisa."

"Call me Peyton," she said automatically, still sounding uncertain. She glanced over her shoulder at the man in the river. "And, um... what is that?" She pointed her thumb over her shoulder, lowering her voice as she spoke so as to not be overheard by the creature.

"That is Charon," Darius informed her. "The River-Man."

"A pleasure to speak with you at last, Peyton," Charon smiled. Peyton noticed that his teeth were rotten and pointed. Charon seemed to notice what she was looking at, despite the bandages, and grinned wider. "Don't let my appearance alarm you. I am harmless to you."

"Charon only has power over the deceased who come here," Darius explained. "Not that he harms any of them. He is surprisingly gentle."

"Darius, you embarrass me in front of the lady."

"Wait, wait!" Peyton cried, holding up both hands in a gesture to stop. She looked at Darius with an expression of disbelief and incredulity, as though she was speaking to a crazy person.

"This is nuts," she said plainly, almost laughing as she spoke. "I don't know who you people are, but I want to go home. Right now."

Darius sighed with sympathy. "Peyton, I'm afraid that can't happen right now. The creature that attacked you may still be there. And if not, he is still hunting you."

Peyton remembered the cloaked figure, the skeletal hand and the shortness of breath as something inside her was being torn loose.

"What was that?" Peyton asked in a whisper, unconsciously holding a hand to her chest where the creature had passed its hand through.

"That was a Reaper," Darius replied, gravely.

Peyton didn't react right away. She continued to stare at Darius, now with renewed conviction that he was a lunatic. "The Grim Reaper?" she asked.

"Not quite," Charon said. Peyton turned to look up at him. "The notion of *The* Grim Reaper is a mortal invention made up of centuries of mistranslations of text and inaccurate interpretations. The Grim Reaper is a fairy tale. But, there are still Reapers. One of which is standing beside you now."

Peyton turned her head and looked at Darius, instinctively taking a step away from him. "You kill people?"

Darius frowned slightly. "I'm sorry, Peyton, but you have many years of inaccurate information, so this is clearly disturbing for you. But no, I do not kill people.

People live and people die, I only show them where to go when they do. I have no involvement in causing death."

"What about Voss?" Peyton questioned.

Darius suddenly looked visibly upset, the guilt filling his face in an instant. He turned away from Peyton and stared at the River, his arms folded over his chest.

"I... I had never done that to anyone before. It felt... wrong. Like I had soiled my soul. But I couldn't let him kill you, Peyton. I believed that it wasn't your time, that you were not supposed to die. So I intervened. I will undoubtedly face punishment for my actions, but first we must make sure you are protected from this rogue Reaper."

"Why does it want me?" Peyton asked, almost pleading. "I'm not anything special. I didn't even know any of this stuff was real! Why me?"

Charon spread his hands wide. "We do not know. But we believe it has something to do with your lack of fate."

"Lack of… what?" Peyton asked, her confusion only growing stronger.

Darius stepped closer and held up his wrist for Peyton to see. She saw he was pointing at a blank, faceless watch on his wrist.

"This watch," Darius began, "is supposed to tell me, and all Reaper's who wear it, exactly how long is left in a mortal's lifespan. Precisely how long, down to the second."

"There's nothing there," Peyton pointed out.

Darius passed a hand over the watch and Peyton was surprised to see several hands appear, all glowing a bright pearly white. Darius pointed at them and continued to explain.

"As you can see, there are seven hands. Each one counting down a particular aspect of time. Years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and seconds. When the hands all reach the upwards position and turn black…"

"Someone dies?" Peyton asked. "So is that thing… counting down my life right now?"

"Not exactly," Darius said. "If you look, you can see that the hands are not moving. They are not counting down at all. This is why I initially took an interest in you, Peyton. You have no fate, which is impossible for mortals. You need a fate. All life has a beginning and an end, it's the way the universe functions."

"Are you saying I'm immortal or something?" Peyton asked, smirking hesitantly at how ridiculous the words sounded coming out of her mouth. Darius didn't seem to notice and lowered his arm, shaking his head.

"Far from it. I believe the rogue has caused some disturbance in the design, which has resulted in your fate no longer being visible to us."

"It is a strange occurrence," Charon said. Peyton had almost forgotten he was there and his ethereal voice made her jump. "As far as I know, it has never happened before, so why this rogue would be stealing souls and changing the design is beyond my understanding."

"But he must have a plan in mind," Darius said. "Something far bigger than any one of us. He has changed too much, taken too many souls, ruined the design. He can't be allowed to continue. For whatever reason, he has decided you are his next target, Peyton. And whatever reason that is, he cannot be allowed to get you."

"Wait," Peyton said. "You said 'taken too many souls'. What do you mean? What..." Her voice trailed off as she

thought of the skeletal hand inside her chest once more. The sensation of something being moved around, of being pulled, of being forcibly removed from her body. "When it had me... it was stealing my soul?"

Darius nodded. "Yes. That is what I did to Doctor Voss when he was about to murder you. The difference is, I sent his soul here for Charon to guide wherever it must go. The rogue, however, seems to be keeping them."

Peyton suddenly felt a tremendous urge to sit down. Failing the presence of any chairs, she simply sat heavily down on the ground. She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them tightly.

"I'm dreaming," she said aloud to herself. "This is only a dream. This can't be real. It has to be a dream."

Charon bent low and gently placed an enormous hand on her shoulder, his fingers so long that they were able to reach her opposite shoulder with ease. Peyton stiffened, but otherwise did not react.

"It will be okay, child," Charon said softly, his ethereal voice suddenly sounding soothing to Peyton. She found her body relaxing and her racing heart began to slow. "You are safe with Darius. He will protect you."

Peyton suddenly felt calmer, more in control. She loosened her hold on her knees and looked up at Charon. While his face was horrific, she suddenly felt ashamed at her initial response to his visage. She had seen worse in burn victims and patients with various diseases. She began to climb to her feet. Charon offered his hand to help her and she took it.

"Thank you," she said to him. "I'm sorry about the way I acted when I saw you. I hope I didn't offend you."

Charon grinned widely. "Nonsense. Others have

reacted far worse than you. A musician named John Lennon once started throwing rocks from the riverbed at me, telling me to 'go back to hell.' You were far more rational."

Still dumbfounded, and surprised by the name-drop, Peyton smiled at Charon. The smile was still uncertain, but it came easily.

"So, um..." she began, turning to Darius. "What now? Do I just hide out here or something?"

Darius looked at Charon, who shook his head. "I cannot watch over you, I'm afraid. The rogue may be afraid to face me, but I have crucial work to do that I have neglected long enough. Eventually the rogue will come here searching for you and there is no guarantee that I will be able to reach you in time to stop him. Darius, Peyton must stay with you at all times."

"Of course," Darius replied. "But I certainly can't fight off the rogue. He has already proven himself to be stronger. I'm not even sure if Azrael could stop him now."

"Who's Azrael?" Peyton asked.

"Azrael is the father of all Reapers," Darius told her. "An Angel from Heaven who watches over all the souls of Earth."

Peyton only stared. "An Angel? Okay then." She shook her head a little to break out of her daze. "Okay, so, if he created all of the... the *Reapers*..." The word sounded strange to her, like she was trying to speak a different language before knowing what the words meant. "Then shouldn't he be strong enough to take one out?"

"Perhaps," Darius said, "but the rogue has been consuming souls. They have made him stronger. I will need to speak with Azrael about all that we have learned.

I only hope he can help."

"The sooner you ask, the more likely he can help, Darius," Charon said. "You should go now. I will return to my duty. Farewell, Miss Peyton. It was an honor to meet you."

"The pleasure was mine, Charon," Peyton replied, smiling once more. Peyton's smile seemed to make Charon's face several shades more colorful and his grin was as wide as Darius had ever seen. Charon looked directly at Darius, who could feel the non-existent eyes upon him.

"You take care of her, Darius," he said. "Ah, before you go, Peyton." Charon lowered his head and looked Peyton directly in the eyes. "You were wrong before. There is indeed something special about you. You will come to see it in time. For me, though... it is as plain as day."

And with that, he slowly sunk back into the River, waving as he descended beneath the surface. Peyton stared at the spot where Charon had disappeared, feeling more and more confused by the second.

Well, this is definitely messed up, she thought.

In the course of a few hours, she had gone from a completely normal day at work, disregarding Voss' dramatic departure from the hospital, and now found herself in a fantasy world that no one knew existed. Still staring at the River, she wondered just how Charon ended up there. What was he to actually become a part of a river? But stranger than that, she was told that a supernatural creature of untold power and strength had singled her out and was planning on stealing her soul and doing God-only-knew what with it. And to protect her from this Reaper, was another Reaper.

Peyton turned to Darius. She looked up at him, looked into his stern brown eyes. It was only then, in the seriousness of the moment, that she realized just how much sadness was in those eyes. There was pride, yes. Plenty of that, but there was definitely sadness there, the kind that comes with only great regret. Peyton saw that look in the eyes of patients everyday. The patients that knew they were dying, and were spending their final days wishing they had done things differently. Peyton couldn't help but wonder what parts of this Reaper's past he wished he could change.

"So," Peyton began, realizing that she had been staring at Darius in silence for too long. She shifted on her feet, embarrassed, once again aware that she was still in her damn pajama pants! "What do we do now?"

"Now we speak to Azrael," Darius replied. "Right now, he may be our only hope."

Darius stepped closer to Peyton and held out his hand for her to take. Slowly, hesitantly, Peyton reached out and held his hand. She had expected his touch to be cold, but was surprised to find he was quite warm.

"Hold tight," he told her.

With a wave of his hand, a black void appeared in the world beside them. Peyton shrank away from it, but Darius kept his firm, but gentle, grip on her hand, watching her, telling her with his eyes that it was okay. Walking beside Darius, hand in hand, they stepped into the void and vanished.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Darius and Peyton stepped out of the void into a large room. Light filtered in through windows from a rising sun, casting multicolored lights through the air as the natural sunlight was altered by colored glass. Looking closer, Peyton realized the colored glass depicted images of saints and Christ and God and numerous other Christian religious imagery.

"A church?" she asked Darius. "We have to meet Death in a church?"

Darius smiled at her. "Firstly, he is not Death. He is Azrael, father of Reapers, wisest of our order, an Angel doing the bidding of Heaven. Secondly, we didn't *have* to be in a church. Speaking to Azrael is not easy, he moves around too much to be found. We have to summon him. And that requires the use of a holy object."

"You're kidding," Peyton said.

"No, I'm quite serious. Any holy object would do, but I'm afraid I tend to favor the religious views I was raised on before I became a Reaper."

He was walking towards a bowl at the church entrance as he spoke. Peyton moved beside him, still trying to

understand this new world she found herself so abruptly a part of.

"Before you *became* a Reaper?" she repeated. "You mean you were human once?"

Darius nodded as they reached the bowl and looked down at Peyton. "Yes. A long time ago."

"How did you become a Reaper?" Peyton asked.

Darius didn't answer. He looked hesitant, the sadness returning to his eyes, but then he turned his attention to the bowl and frowned at it. Peyton looked and saw that the bowl was empty.

"No Holy Water," Darius said. "I'll have to use something else."

He looked around the room and quickly found what he was looking for. He walked over to the wall and looked up at a crucifix that was nailed into the plaster. Without taking his eyes off the crucifix, Darius reached under his coat and pulled out a gleaming silver blade that was roughly eleven inches long, the blade curving into a half-moon shape. Peyton stared at it in wonder, keeping a safe distance, as she was unsure of what Darius was about to do with such a deadly looking weapon. As she watched, Darius pressed the blade against the palm of his hand and slashed. Peyton gasped as the movement surprised her and the blood began to flow, but Darius was unfazed. He calmly reached up and pressed his bleeding hand against the crucifix, murmuring something in a language that Peyton couldn't understand. When Darius appeared the have finished, she rushed over to him and took hold of his wrist, pulling his wounded hand in for a closer look.

"We'll have to get this taken care of," she said. "It's so deep, you might need stitches, I hope you didn't sever a

nerve or-"

She abruptly stopped speaking as she inspected the wound, because the blood that was running over Darius' palm began to draw back into the open flesh. It ran in reverse, running back into the wound like water running down a drain. Once the blood was gone, the skin seemed to knit itself back together. In the span of a few seconds, Darius' wound seemed to have never existed. Peyton looked up at Darius, her mouth open in shock. Darius was only smiling, seemingly amused.

"The blade can wound a Reaper," he told her, "but only temporarily. We heal much faster than mortals."

Peyton suddenly felt a torrent of wind blow through the church and she felt, rather than saw, a dark shape pass by in an instant. She and Darius turned and looked to the front of the church, where a man in a dark cloak stood, his hands clasped together, out of sight beneath the folds of his oversized sleeves.

"Twice in one week, Darius," the man smiled. "Did you miss me so much?" His eyes suddenly shifted from Darius onto Peyton and the friendly smile on his lips froze and became something more stern and dangerous. He looked back to Darius. When he spoke, his voice was calm, but quiet with controlled anger. "You revealed us to a mortal?"

Darius bowed his head. "Azrael, please allow me to explain. This concerns the rogue and I had no choice."

Peyton, who was watching in silence and some fear, glanced at Darius and saw that he was keeping his head bowed. Following suit, Peyton bowed her own head.

There were a few rapid heartbeats of silence as Azrael considered them both, but then he stepped forward and

said, "Please, not you too, Peyton. I can barely put up with the outdated respect of servitude that Darius here insists upon without him bringing you into it."

Darius and Peyton lifted their heads to look up at the once again friendly smile of Azrael as he strolled towards them from the altar. Peyton brushed her hair from her eyes and said, "You know my name?"

"I am the Master of Death and the Guardian of Life," Azrael replied solemnly. "With only a glance, I know everything about you, Peyton Paradisa. Except..." He paused and studied her, seemingly fascinated. "Except Darius is correct. Your fate is hidden from me."

"Fate?" Peyton questioned.

"Your destiny, my dear," Azrael explained. "The outcome of your life that should be revealed to any Reaper that happens to look upon you. You don't seem to have one."

Peyton glanced at Darius, then back at Azrael. "I don't believe in fate."

"You don't have to," Azrael replied simply.

"I thought the point of life was to choose your own path?" Peyton pressed, feeling annoyed. She didn't like the idea of not being in control of her own life. "If everything about someone's life is mapped out in advance, then what's the point of free will?"

"One book, many writers," Azrael said. "The story may change, but the outcome is always the same." He turned to Darius. "She's smart, Darius. I like her. But now you should probably explain *why* we are in the company of a mortal."

Darius quickly explained everything that had happened. He told Azrael about Peyton's fate suddenly appearing,

about Voss trying to kill her. Darius explained how he intervened and stopped Voss, then went on to explain why, how he thought the rogue had changed the design too much and that Peyton may not have been supposed to die. Darius told Azrael everything, from Charon's anger and disappointment to the brief, but furious, encounter he had had with the rogue.

"The rogue is stronger, Azrael, much stronger than I am. He closed Charon's doorway with almost no effort. But Azrael, there is something wrong with him. His skin, it is rotting away. The bones in his hands are completely exposed, and I could feel the flesh going on his body when we fought. But it doesn't weaken him. He only seems stronger, more determined to get what he wants."

Azrael was silent for Darius' entire explanation. He waited patiently for Darius to finish, not interrupting or giving any sign of disapproval, anger or surprise. Only when Darius fell silent did he speak.

"This rogue," he began. "He is consuming souls."

Darius nodded. "Charon said the same thing."

Azrael smiled. "I do marvel at that creature, sometimes. But what Charon may not know is what happens to a Reaper who devours the souls of the living."

"What's that?" Peyton asked.

"They burn," Azrael said plainly. "See, the human soul is a powerful, yet unstable, source of pure energy. If a Reaper were to consume even one, that soul would slowly 'burn' them from the inside. They would burn and melt and rot, all at once, very very slowly. And the Reaper's ability to regenerate would only prolong the process more, growing back the flesh only to have it burn away once again. It would be excruciating. The Reaper would never

die, but live in terrible pain."

"Then why do it?" Darius asked. "If he is suffering, why doesn't he just release the souls and stop?"

"He must be planning something. He must have more in mind than only power and strength. Which makes him even more dangerous. His pain will make him desperate, more likely to strike first, like a cornered beast. We need to get Peyton somewhere safe."

"But where?" Darius asked. "Charon has already ruled out the River. Where else is there?"

"I know a place. Darius, I need you to try and find the rogue while I take Peyton to safety. Start at Peyton's home, you may be able to pick up his trail from there. Summon me the second you find him."

"Yes, Azrael."

"Shouldn't I stay with Darius?" Peyton asked. "I mean, this rogue thing is stronger than he is, right? Shouldn't Darius take me to this safe place and you go after the rogue? Round up a posse or something?"

"Peyton," Darius whispered. "Don't question Azrael's command."

"Trust me, Peyton," Azrael said, smiling. "This is what needs to be done."

But Peyton suddenly found Azrael's smile to be false, distrustful. She took a step back from him, shaking her head.

"Peyton," Darius began, sounding shocked that she was disobeying Azrael's orders.

"Show me your hands," Peyton suddenly said.

Azrael looks puzzled. "Excuse me?"

"Before I go anywhere with you, I want to see your hands." Peyton gestured at Azrael's long sleeves that

shielded his hands from view.

"Why would you want to see my hands?" Azrael asked, still smiling.

"Peyton, please," Darius begged. "Azrael is an Angel. You can trust him."

"It's a simple request," Peyton pressed. "Let's see them."

Azrael didn't respond. He stared at Peyton with what looked like curiosity, his head slightly tilted. Peyton stared back, politely, but defiantly. Slowly, Azrael raised his arms and let the sleeves fall back from his hands and down to his elbows.

"What?" Darius gasped.

Azrael's hands were half rotted. All the skin that was now exposed was a sickening white, a horrible shade of yellow and black, but most of the flesh was gone, rotted away to nothing and revealing the smooth white bones beneath.

"I have healed some since you last saw these hands," Azrael said conversationally. "But they will rot again. Soon, my flesh will stop healing and I'll be nothing but bone. Unless I have your soul."

Before Darius could do anything, Azrael moved with lightning speed. He turned on the spot, spreading his enormous wings as he moved. Before his wings could even reach their full width, his right wing collided with Darius, sending him flying through the air. He flew up and went crashing right through the frosted glass window, shattering the face of God. Peyton stared at Azrael in horror, looking at his wings. She had always imagined an Angel's wings to be beautiful and magnificent, but Azrael's wings were grotesque. He stood there, grinning at

her, flexing his wings to their full, enormous, wingspan, his fleshless fingers curling at his sides.

His wings were blackened and looked as though they were bleeding, but the blood that ran over the dying feathers was black and oily. Azrael's wings had deteriorated greatly as well, it seemed, because there were very few feathers left. Peyton was suddenly reminded of a picture she had once seen of the skeleton of a bat.

As she watched in horror, Azrael closed his eyes and slowly rolled his head from the left to the right, as though he was trying to crack the bones in his neck. Peyton saw a trail of flesh burning away underneath his jawline and down his throat, an almost inaudible groan of pain escaping his lips as black smoke rose from the flesh as it burned away. When the burning stopped, he locked eyes with Peyton once more.

"Yours is the soul I need, Peyton," he whispered, his voice suddenly changed to the one she had heard before, in her living room as Azrael had tried to rip her soul from her chest. A low, dangerous rasp, undoubtedly due to something in his throat having burned away or rotted. "I have taken many souls like yours, but yours is the only one I truly need. I will be free of this curse and this agony."

"Wait!" Peyton cried. "If you just let all the souls inside you go, you won't suffer anymore. You won't be cursed!"

"There is more than one curse I must break."

"Azrael!" Darius shouted from behind the monstrous deformed Angel. Azrael turned to see Darius standing at the opposite end of the church, holding something in his hand above the flame of a lit candelabra. It was the crucifix. Peyton could see Darius' blood still stained on

the wood.

"NO!" Azrael shouted. He whirled back to Peyton and lunged towards her, flapping his great wings once as he leaped, propelling himself forward with enormous speed. The sound of his wings rushing over the air sounded like the crack of whip.

Before Azrael could reach Peyton, Darius had thrust the crucifix into the open flames, where it ignited instantly. A heartbeat later, Azrael appeared to explode into a dark black cloud, his skeletal fingers only inches from her throat. The cloud swirled wildly around the air for a few seconds, the sound of furious screaming coming from deep within it, then it sped out the broken window and vanished, leaving Darius and Peyton in silence.

"Oh my God," Peyton choked. She rested a hand on the back of a pew to steady herself. She suddenly realized Darius was standing beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Peyton nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine, but... what happened to him?"

"I returned him to wherever he was before I summoned him. But we need to leave, quickly. He knows where we are now and he will come back."

Peyton nodded again. Darius reached down and took her hand. Before Peyton knew it, they were back in the dark tunnel of the void, hurtling through complete darkness, the only indication of movement being the pin prick of light far off in the distance, steadily growing larger. As they passed through the light, Peyton found her feet on firm ground once again. She immediately turned to Darius, looking concerned.

"Darius, I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't... I wasn't sure.

I only..."

Darius held up his hand to stop her from continuing. He looked her firmly in the eyes and said, "It wasn't your fault. Azrael has betrayed us all. I only... I don't know why. Or even how! He's an Angel! This goes against everything the Angels stand for!"

Darius' face was pinched with anger and betrayal. He walked a few paces to Peyton's left, only to turn around and walk back. He seemed unsure of what to do next.

"He was your friend, wasn't he?" Peyton asked quietly.

Darius nodded. "In a way. He made me what I am. We were close. As close as he could be with the Reapers, anyway. He personally showed me how to be a Reaper." He sighed deeply. "I don't know what to do, now. Azrael was my last hope."

Peyton grabbed Darius' shoulders and made him look at her. Surprised, Darius did nothing to pull away, only stared at her with wide eyes as she held him in place and spoke firmly to him.

"Stop that," said simply. There was no rage in her voice. Only a serious determination. "You stop that right now. You do know what to do. You managed to fend him off twice now. He is stronger and more powerful, but twice you've stopped him from killing me. You can do this, Darius. So stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're more capable than you think. You can beat him, Darius. You've got this! Why else would you have brought us... um, where are we?"

Peyton let go of the still shocked Darius and considered their surroundings for the first time. The location failed to fill her with confidence. They were standing at the top of a tall cliff, only feet from the edge. The landscape around

them was made up of dirt and stone. There were no trees to speak of, only black rocks pocking the ground like hideous warts. The wind was weak, as though it, too, was dying, and felt like ice on Peyton's exposed arms and face.

High above, the sky was blotted out by thick gray clouds that seemed to be threatening a downpour. Occasional flashes of light from deep within suggested a constant lightning storm in the atmosphere. Thunder rolled with each flash of lightning, making Peyton feel anxious, as though she was under attack, or the threat of one loomed over her.

Darius looked out across the terrain, a blank expression on his face.

"This," he said, "is Purgatory."

Peyton looked slowly around, taking it all in. "Purgatory? This place is *real*? Why would you bring us here?"

"It was the first place I thought of," Darius replied, a little defensively. "And I didn't exactly have a lot of time to think."

Peyton peered into the distance. "Hey. Who are they?"

Darius faced the direction Peyton was looking and saw, far off into the distance, a small cluster of people climbing over the edge of the cliff and onto level ground. Some turned around to help the others up, while others simply collapsed with exhaustion and some left without looking back, wandering away from the cliff, searching for somewhere to go.

"Souls," Darius said simply. "The deceased who were not ready to ascend to Heaven."

"So, what, they have to just wander around this place forever?" Peyton asked, disturbed by the thought.

Darius shook his head. "Not forever. And first, they need to climb the mountain."

"Mountain?" Peyton repeated, looking around. She couldn't see a mountain anywhere, but Darius pointed toward the cliff.

"That mountain."

Peyton carefully stepped closer to the edge and looked down. What she saw was astounding and horrifying. For miles below, much farther than she could even see, the side of the mountain they had apparently been standing on stretched forever. There was a road carved into the side, which appeared to spiral around and around, so steep it defied all logic, leading up to the cliff where the souls had climbed over. Peyton could see people on the road. Walking, crawling, not moving at all. Some were trying to help others, but as Peyton watched, she saw one man running as fast as he could several spirals below. As the man caught up to a group of people in front of him, he barreled through them and knocked one off the road and into the empty air beyond. That person screamed as they fell, flailing their arms and feet as they plummeted past the point where Peyton could see or hear them. She turned back to Darius, looking pale and feeling sick.

"Don't worry. It is a trial. A test. No real harm can come to them. Once they reach the Wasteland," Darius explained, "they need only head toward the horizon, keeping the cliff to their backs. They all do. If you look, you can see the only thing around here that might suggest safety."

Darius pointed in the direction that many of the new arrivals were now walking. Peyton looked and didn't see anything at first, but as she stared, she noticed a light. A

bright glow that was warm and inviting, even from this great distance. She turned back to Darius.

"What is it?" she asked.

"That is the Beacon. Eve placed it there centuries ago, to guide these lost souls to the next step of their journey."

"Who's Eve?"

Darius smiled secretively. "You'll soon see. That's who we're going to see now. I have an idea to stop Azrael and save your soul. But we need to see Eve first."

"Okay, then wave up another portal and let's go," Peyton said, eager to leave the Wasteland. The uninviting dead-looking land, and the horrifying trial that was happening to countless souls below, did nothing to ease her already anxious mind, but Darius shook his head.

"My powers don't work here. I'm afraid we have to walk."

"You're kidding," Peyton said, feeling disheartened. Then she said, "Darius, I'm barefoot! How am I supposed to walk that far on these rocks without any shoes?"

Darius looked down and saw that Peyton's small feet were completely exposed, her weight shifting from left to right as she struggled to find ground to stand on that did not result in small, sharp rocks stabbing into the soles of her feet. Darius immediately sat down and pulled off his own shoes.

"Lift your foot," he told her. Peyton did as she was asked, but looked dubious.

"I don't think we have the same size shoe, Darius."

"It will do," Darius replied as he tied the laces as tightly as he could around Peyton's foot. "Just walk slowly. If you need to rest, let me know. You are the only living person to ever come to this place, so I'm not sure how it

will affect you. For the souls that come here, they tend to feel a certain degree of despair."

"Well, I definitely feel *that*," Peyton replied, looking around.

"If you feel strange or unusual in any way, no matter how minimal you think it might be, tell me immediately," Darius insisted.

He finished tying his shoes onto Peyton's feet and leaned back, remaining on his knees, to study them. He and Peyton surveyed the shoes that were four sizes too big, both looking doubtful. There was far too much room in the shoes. They would undoubtedly fall off with every step, slowing them down. Darius quickly slid off his coat and grabbed a sleeve in both hands. With a loud rip, he tore the sleeve from the body of the coat. Then he did the same to the other sleeve. Tossing the ruined coat aside, Darius rolled up the torn sleeves and carefully placed one inside each shoe with Peyton's feet.

"That should help," Darius said, rising to his feet. "They won't be comfortable, but they won't slip so much."

"But what about your feet?" Peyton asked. Darius only smiled. Peyton realized what he was thinking and smiled back. "Right. The healing thing. So no problem?"

"None at all. Now, let's go. Quickly. Before Azrael can work out where we are."

*****

At that moment, on another plain of existence, a church sat quietly with no signs of movement inside. The morning mass had not started yet and light from the sunrise filtered gently through the stained-glass windows.

Suddenly the doors to the church exploded inwards, sending splinters and debris flying across the length of the church, the heavy wooden doors spinning over the pews, breaking everything in their path, until they crashed into the alter at the head of the church, sending candles everywhere as they fell and came to a stop. As the dust settled, Azrael stepped in, his face taut with anger. He surveyed the destruction without interest, looking for his quarry. He felt the rage build up inside of him as he realized they had gone. The pain was almost overwhelming now. He gritted his teeth and groaned aloud as the fire spread up the inside of his neck and over the right side of his face. He felt the intense burn slowly spread from his collar and over his jaw, making a slow and painful progression up his cheek, stopping only when it had reached the corner of his eye. Once the pain had passed, Azrael raised his hand and touched where it had been. His fingers came into contact with nothing but charred flesh and bone. His entire cheek was gone, exposing his jaw and teeth. The skin all around the area felt like paper that had been singed in a fire. At his touch, more flesh crumbled away like ash.

Azrael walked farther into the church and stood where he had last seen them. Yes, they had been here. He could feel the energy of their presence. Now, where had they gone? Darius would have taken her somewhere, somewhere he thought would be safe. But where? The ingrate had said that Charon would not shelter them, which ruled out the River, thankfully.

Azrael closed his eyes and concentrated on the energy he could feel. Concentrated on what might have transpired here after Darius had managed to banish him. Azrael did

not want to kill Darius, then. Only to take Peyton away and complete his task. Darius would have been useful in the days that would follow, but now... now he was a lost cause. Azrael now knew that Darius would never side with him. Not now.

There it is!

Azrael could feel the thoughts of his formally loyal Reaper. He knew where they had gone. Purgatory. That would only shelter them for so long, though. Once there, what would he do? Ah, yes... Eve. Darius would go to Eve. She would not be able to protect them, but she would be able to assist them. It was becoming difficult enough already without her involvement. Azrael needed to move quickly...

"Hey, you there!"

Azrael opened his eyes and sensed the presence of a man standing behind him. A mortal man.

A priest. Of course. How fitting.

"Are you okay there?" the priest asked Azrael. "What happened to the doors?"

Azrael slowly began to turn. As his face came into the priest's view, the look of concern and desire to help became one of horror.

"My God," the priest gasped. "Your face! Stay there, let me call 911. Just stay calm, child."

"I am not your child, filth," Azrael snarled. The priest froze on the spot and Azrael was moving towards him. "I will not bow to your kind anymore. You will bow to me!"

Azrael spread his wings, his horrible, decayed, wings, allowing the priest to see their full width.

"Oh my God," the priest whispered, making the sign of a cross on his body as he took several steps backwards.

"What are you?"

"Don't you know, priest?" Azrael sneered. "You say you are devout, that you believe in Heaven and God and Angels, and yet you do not recognize what I am. That is the problem with your kind. Many of you do not even believe in the powers of Heaven, don't believe that there could possibly be anything stronger, smarter or more powerful than yourselves. And those of you who do say that you believe in powers above are the first to doubt when you see something that is genuinely borne from Heaven."

The priest looked confused, taking another step back, away from Azrael. "What? I don't…"

Azrael rushed forward, moving so fast he seemed to simply appear only a foot from the priest's face. The priest convulsed slightly when he looked into Azrael's eyes. Blood began to run from the corner of the priest's mouth, but he didn't seem to notice. He felt his feet lift off the ground and he was suspended in the air before Azrael. Looking down, the priest saw the tip of Azrael's wing had penetrated his chest. He could feel it through his body now, passing out through his back. He looked back to Azrael, silent horror written on his face. Azrael pulled him closer, dangling from the bones of his wing.

"What am I?" Azrael questioned quietly, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I am Azrael. I am the solution. I am the Angel of Death."

EVE

They had walked for hours. The journey was taking it's toll on Peyton's weary, mortal body. She was struggling to keep her feet moving. She dragged Darius' shoes over the ground, sending small stones and pebbles in all directions as she scuffed the toes with every step. Her eyes were growing unfocussed, her vision blurry and faded. All she wanted to do was lie down and sleep. To bury her face in the stones and stay there forever. Her breathing was weak and ragged, like she had punctured a lung and simply breathing caused her pain.

Peyton suddenly fell to her knees. Darius stopped moving forward and hurried to her side. "Peyton," he said as he knelt beside her. "Peyton, what is it?"

Peyton was unresponsive. She stared into the horizon at the Beacon, but wasn't really looking at it. Her forehead was damp with perspiration. Darius gently held her chin and turned her face to his. He was immediately sick with worry when he looked into her eyes. They were glassy and blank, as though the life was all but gone from them.

"Peyton, please," he begged. "You need to keep moving."

"I can't," Peyton whispered. "Just leave me. Leave me here to die."

"No, Peyton. That's not what you want."

"Yes it is!" she cried.

Darius shook his head, holding the sides of her face now in both of his hands. "It's the Wasteland talking. It's not good for you. Living people aren't meant to be here and it's affecting your mind. Your soul is giving up."

"Then let it," Peyton begged. "Just let it be over. This is all too much. Reapers and monsters and Purgatory and Eve... Yesterday, this was all myth. Now it's in my face." She clutched desperately at Darius' hands, still holding her cheeks. "Kill me."

Darius slapped her. "Peyton, I'm so sorry for that. And for bringing you here. But we need to keep moving. You need to move."

Peyton wasn't listening. She was beginning to cry, tears running down her face as she sobbed silently. She threw her arms around Darius' waist and held him close. Darius hugged her back, regretting his decision to bring her to Purgatory, no matter how much Eve would be able to help. Darius then felt Peyton's hands groping around his back, feeling for something. Suddenly, Peyton shoved Darius back, pushing hard into his chest with one hand. He fell backwards and looked up at Peyton as she clutched his curved blade in one hand, holding it triumphantly. Knocked off balance when she pushed Darius, she fell onto her back, clutching the knife as though it was the Holy Grail. Then she went to plunge it into her throat.

Darius, diving forward from the rocky ground, managed to catch her wrist before she could slice open

her throat. Ignoring her cries of protest, Darius wrenched the blade from her fingers and replaced it in his sheathe. Peyton stared at Darius miserably, then, having spent all of her remaining energy, she collapsed, closed her eyes, and did not move.

"Peyton?" Darius said. She didn't answer. Darius shook her shoulder and said her name again, the sickening worry crashing down on him again. "Peyton!"

Peyton still would not respond. Fearful, Darius pressed his fingers against her neck, feeling for her pulse. When he found it, it was weak and erratic. He knew she wouldn't last much longer.

As he was struck with a fear he had never known, a fear that cut so deep it reached parts of himself he didn't know still existed, Darius hoisted Peyton onto his shoulders, climbed back to his feet, and ran.

*****

Far, far behind Darius and Peyton, a small number of souls were climbing over the top of the cliff. The two that led the group turned to help the others. As they all made it over onto the flat surface, looking around in dismay at the world they now found themselves in, one pointed at something that they had noticed in the distance. They all turned to look.

A hole had appeared in the fabric of reality, a tear in space. As they watched, a man-sized creature walked through the rip. It was wearing a dark cloak and stood silently, surveying the landscape as the rip closed behind it. As the souls watched, the creature turned its eyes upon them. The souls felt horrified by the face of the creature.

It looked like a man, but half of his face had been burned away, revealing the dirty white skull and teeth that should have been hidden beneath the flesh. The man stared at them for a while, considering them, but then he appeared to grin at them, a horrible grin that was not at all friendly or inviting. The man then reached up and grabbed hold of the hood of his cloak. His hands were also burned away, no flesh remained at all and the bones appearing cracked and filthy, like they too had been burned. The man pulled his hood over his head, hiding his face from view. Then he turned and started walking away towards a brilliant light in the distance.

The souls decided to wait a while before continuing on, giving the creature a big enough head start so that they didn't cross its path again.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

Trees. Green. Color had returned to the world. She wasn't moving, but the world slowly slid by. She remembered darkness. Misery. Despair. A knife had been in her hand. Why had she been holding a knife? There were people all around. She was in the middle of a large crowd of people, all moving towards something. Some would glance at her, but most were focused entirely on the light. There were other people too, but they weren't walking with the crowd. They stayed clear of the weary travelers, dressed in clothes of pure white, pruning trees and hedges, watering flowers, pulling weeds. Some scowled at the travelers, others ignored them entirely, focussed on their gardening duties, while some looked up and smiled in welcome.

Peyton blinked away the fog that seemed to be clouding her mind as much as her sight. She suddenly realized that she was being carried. She was slung over someone's shoulder in a fireman's lift, watching the ground slowly pass by beneath. Peyton could see their bare feet walking over grass that was easily the greenest she had ever seen.

"Darius?" she said groggily. She immediately felt him stop and lower her gently to the ground. She managed to stand by herself, wobbling slightly as her feet landed on the grass, but Darius kept a hand on her shoulder to help keep her steady. Even through his oversized shoes, Peyton could feel that the grass was unbelievably soft, like walking on a floor made of pillows. Then she saw Darius' feet and was overcome with guilt.

Darius' feet were red and bloodied, skinned almost raw from running over the black rocks of the Wasteland for hours on end. Peyton could see a trail of blood leading back the way they had come, marking the otherwise green beauty of their new surroundings. Then she remembered everything that had happened.

"Darius, I'm so sorry," Peyton said. "About everything. I don't know what happened. I was fine, then it just seemed like everything was too hard. I couldn't think straight, it was like being drunk or drugged or something, but… I was so sad! I've never been that sad in my life, I couldn't… and your feet!"

"Don't worry about my feet, they'll heal."

"But look at them!" Peyton cried. "They're sliced! Couldn't you have taken your shoes back? I obviously wasn't using them and you needed them!"

"There wasn't time. Peyton, you were dying. I had to get you to safety." Darius smiled at her. "It's okay. I

should be apologizing to you. I had no idea the Wasteland would affect you that badly. I'm certain that if we hadn't hurried, you would have been lost forever in your despair. It's supposed to make the souls that pass through it feel helpless, but the Beacon is to guide them and give hope. But because you are still alive… It was different. But you're safe now. We've reached the Beacon."

Peyton turned to look at the brilliant light. She wasn't sure what she had expected to see when they reached the Beacon, but it sure wasn't this. The source of the bright, orange light was a tree. A huge, oversized, towering tree, full of bright leaves, more orange than leaves could get during the Fall, and each leaf of this enormous tree seemed to be giving off a bright glow, lighting up the sky and signaling those from miles away that this was a safe place to come. Furthermore, as amazed as Peyton was by the sheer size of the tree, how the top-most leaves were far too high for her to see, how the circumference of the trunk was like standing in front of the Empire State Building, Peyton was also astonished to see there was fruit growing from the branches.

"Apples?" Peyton said aloud, astonished. Darius stepped forward and, placing his hand on the small of her back, led her closer to the tree. The souls of those around were also stopping to marvel at the tree and its strange light. Darius led Peyton to the very base of the tree, branches hanging just over their heads, leaves and apples dangling around them. Darius reached up and gently held an apple in the palm of his hand, but did not pluck it from its branch.

"These are Eve's great pride," Darius explained. "She has cared for this tree and its fruit for as long as anyone

can remember. Since the dawn of humanity, she has been the caretaker of this garden. The garden this tree stands in is a symbol of hope renewed for the souls that have come here from Purgatory."

"Wait a minute…" Peyton said slowly. "Eve? A garden? Apples on a tree? Are you trying to tell me we're in the Garden of Eden?"

Darius grinned. "This isn't the Eve you're thinking of, and this garden is far from paradise." Darius suddenly spotted something over Peyton's shoulder and looked nervous. "Don't be alarmed, but we're about to see what happens to many of those who come here."

Peyton turned to see what Darius was looking at. A few feet away, she saw a man in an expensive suit standing under the branches of the giant apple tree. He looked to be in his mid-fifties and was reaching up to an apple that hung over his head. The man was staring up at the apple as though it was a precious gem. His eyes were wide in awe of it and he was smiling, but not in a way that suggested he felt humbled by the beauty of the tree or the garden it resided in. It was more like the smile of a burglar who had just worked out how to break into Fort Knox. Reaching up, he gently wrapped his fingers around the apple and pulled. The branch seemed unwilling to give up the apple at first, but then finally let go and snapped back, the leaves rustling quietly. The business man held the apple in his hand and was staring down at it in wonder, but as Peyton watched, a dark substance began to ooze from the branch, from exactly where the apple had been picked. The substance was jet black and moved through the air like a gas, but looked exactly like liquid. It flowed through the air, twisting and turning like water

from a stream. It moved so fast, Peyton was barely able to track its movement. It spouted from the branch and wrapped itself around the business man's wrist. It ran over his body like bath water and enveloped him in its impenetrable darkness. The man never even had time to utter a sound. He was instantly sucked into the tree branch and was gone, the apple he had picked now returned to its place in the leaves.

Peyton gasped and looked around. No one else seemed to have noticed, but she saw several others picking apples all around. She turned to Darius.

"Shouldn't we stop them?" she asked. "What's happening? Why isn't anyone reacting?"

"They are all in a trance," Darius replied. "They don't notice anything that's happening around them. This tree is the final test of the soul. Those who take from the tree… fail. Tartarus takes them to face their punishment and Eve, well… Those who know not to take the fruit, Eve will reward. Look. This soul knows better."

They walked together towards an elderly woman who had wrapped her hand around an apple, but was now letting go and lowering her hand, staring at the apple, shaking her head slightly. As they watched, the woman began to smile. She began to glow as bright as the tree itself. When the light that seemed to illuminate from within her grew blinding, it suddenly dimmed and the woman was gone. Peyton looked at Darius, silently asking for an explanation.

"She has gotten another chance," Darius said. "She will be reborn and will live again."

"Reincarnation?" Peyton asked. Darius nodded, but then another voice spoke.

"Yes, of course."

Peyton blinked and suddenly found herself no longer looking at a giant apple tree, but a much smaller garden, somewhat darker, as though the sun had set some, but it was only due to the sudden disappearance of the light given by the enormous tree. Even Darius looked surprised by the sudden change in setting. They looked around and came face to face with the owner of the voice.

"Eve," Darius smiled, sounding pleased to see her.

"Hello Darius. My, what are you doing here? Reapers never come here."

"Wait, *this* is Eve?" Peyton asked.

The person standing before them was a woman, but barely. She was a teenage girl, maybe just past seventeen or eighteen years of age. She was skinny and petite, shorter than Peyton by almost a head. She was smiling pleasantly at Peyton, wearing a lipstick of bright red. Her red hair, though, was even brighter. It almost glowed with a red light, shimmering as it hung freely around her shoulders. Eve had her hands folded together in front of her at her hips, and wore a gorgeous white dress, much like the kind worn by young girls at debutante balls. Peyton noticed, however, that she was barefoot. The final thing that Peyton noticed about this girl was her brilliant green eyes, that seemed to sparkle under the light of this strange garden.

"You seem surprised, Peyton," Eve said kindly.

"I'm not surprised that strangers know my name, anymore," Peyton said, almost to herself. Then to Eve she said, "I'm sorry, I am surprised. Darius told me that you've been here for, I don't know, I guess centuries. But you look like a teenager."

"By the standards of an Angel, yes, I am a teenager," Even smiled. "We do age, but far slower than humans. I'm actually millions of years old."

"Whoa," was all Peyton could say.

Eve giggled. "Come this way, Peyton, please. I have something for you."

Peyton and Darius followed Eve as she walked into a small clearing, filled with flowers of various vibrant colors, shapes and sizes. Peyton slowed down to admire a row of flowers that were almost as tall as she was. When she first looked, they appeared to be violet, but as she moved, the color of the flower seemed to change. It shifted from violet to blue, then green, then orange, before becoming violet again. These flowers, and many more that were far beyond Peyton's ability to comprehend, let alone describe, were beautifully placed all around the field, made up of so many colors that Peyton didn't even know existed.

"This place is beautiful," Peyton said, looking all around.

"Thank you," Eve said. "I've always been comforted by plants and flowers. I like to think that the souls who pass through here enjoy them too. Ah, here we go."

Eve turned around to face Peyton and was holding an armful of neatly stacked and folded clothes. Peyton recognized a pair of blue Guess sneakers resting on top of the pile.

"Are those my clothes?" Peyton asked.

"Yes. I hope you don't mind, I thought you might need them," Eve said. She glanced at Peyton's purple pajama pants and smiled. "Looks like I was right."

Eve held out the clothes to Peyton, who took them

graciously. "Thank you. But how did you know I'd need them? Did you know we were coming?"

Eve nodded. "I saw you coming through the Wasteland. I briefly left the Garden to get you some essentials. Shame on you, Darius," Eve suddenly scolded. "Making a woman run all around in her pajamas. What were you thinking?"

"There wasn't time for her to change," Darius explained. "And it wasn't safe for her to return home."

"Ah, of course," Eve nodded. "Azrael."

Darius looked surprised at Eve's mention of Azrael. "You know?"

"Please," Eve smirked. "Of course I know. Azrael entered the Wasteland several hours ago. He's hunting you. I can feel his thirst for you, Peyton. I'm mortified at his betrayal to us all and I will help you however I can. Starting with some more appropriate clothing."

"Thank you," Peyton said gratefully. She was tired of wearing the clothes she had been sleeping in. She glanced around the field, then turned back to Eve. "Is there somewhere I can change?"

"Of course, one moment."

Eve turned and looked up at the top of a nearby tree. In an instant, thick tendrils began to snake their way down to the earth. Dozens of leafy branches began to entwine and quickly formed a large partition. Eve turned back to Peyton and gestured towards the thick green curtain. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Grinning, Peyton walked around the branches to change. "Thank you."

When Eve turned to face Darius, he was smiling and shaking his head slightly. Eve grinned up at him. "What?"

"You just couldn't help showing off in front of her, could you?" Darius chuckled.

"It's not often that I get to speak to anyone that's still alive, Darius," Eve huffed with mock annoyance. "Besides… I saw your little stunt in the Wastelands. Carrying Peyton all the way here? Tell me, Darius, why are you so determined to save this human?"

"Because Azrael has broken the design," Darius answered. "Peyton is supposed to live, not have her soul devoured."

"And is that the only reason?" Eve asked sweetly.

"What other reason could there be?"

Eve smiled knowingly and patted Darius on the arm. "Never you mind, Darius."

At that moment, Peyton came back around the green curtain, fully dressed in a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and her favorite pair of Guess shoes. "That's so much better."

"Much," Eve agreed. "Now, about Azrael. I will help, but I cannot stop him. He has grown too powerful. He is slowed down by the Wasteland of Purgatory and its ability to prevent certain powers from being used, but he is still not far behind you. I expect you came here with a plan, Darius?"

Darius nodded. "Yes. I need you to show me to Fate."

Eve was silent as she considered this. "Darius," she began slowly. "No one has seen Fate in tens of thousands of years. And it is incredibly dangerous to get there. Fate does not like to be trifled with and has made the way almost impossible. You will face dangers that might even kill *you*, not just Peyton. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"It's the only way I can think of to stop Azrael. Only

Fate can stop him."

Eve sighed. "Very well. I will show you the way. But please, rest a while first. You must both be exhausted. I know Peyton must be."

"I am a little," Peyton admitted, cheering silently for Eve for suggesting they rest. She may have slept for the journey to the Garden, but Peyton was still beat.

Darius looked unimpressed. "Fine. But then we need to move. If Azrael isn't far behind…"

"Don't worry, Darius," Eve said, rolling her eyes at Peyton, who hid a smile behind her hand. "You worry so much. I might not be able to stop Azrael, but I can at least slow him down when he arrives. Now sit, please. I expect Peyton has a lot of questions. I must say, you are doing exceptionally well."

"How do you mean?" Peyton asked as she sat down on the soft grass with Eve and Darius.

"Well, think about it," Eve shrugged. "Did you ever imagine any of this was real?"

"Well, no, to be honest," Peyton said. Then added as an afterthought, "Sorry."

Eve laughed. Her laugh was sweet and for some reason made Peyton think of Tinkerbell from Peter Pan. "There's no need to be sorry. I expect you to be curious, though. Yet, you don't seem to ask many questions."

"I guess I felt like it might be rude," Peyton shrugged. "I mean, I kind of have no idea who you are. I first thought you were Eve from the bible story of Adam and Eve, but Darius said you weren't."

"Well, I am and I'm not," Eve said, smiling that secretive smile of hers. "You look confused. Let me explain. I am an Angel. The youngest of all the Angels

when they first arrived in this universe."

"Arrived?" Peyton interrupted. Then looked embarrassed at having done so, but Eve smiled patiently.

"Yes, we came here from another plain of existence. The one you would know as God created this entire universe for us to live in, and he also created the Earth and humanity. Now, I was so young at the time, no more than a child, with the maturity of one as well, I might add. Anyway, God had a plan. He wanted humanity to grow on its own, to mature gradually, to slowly become self aware and then to start considering the external parts of the universe and what makes them what they are. But I felt sorry for them. They seemed like abandoned puppies to me. They looked so lost in their primitive state. So helpless. The first time I saw them enduring a vicious winter, I decided to do what we had all sworn not to do. I gave them knowledge. I gave them the fruit of knowledge, as you might recognize from the Bible and such, a metaphorical term and no more. I helped them become self-aware and intelligent, so that they might be able to make their lives that much easier in the unforgiving wild of the Earth. For this act, I was punished."

"Why?" Peyton asked. "It sounds like you were trying to do a good thing."

"Thank you for saying so, but no. I was foolish. Tell me, what do you know about butterflies?"

"Um, not much," Peyton frowned, confused about the mention of butterflies.

"Well, when a butterfly is emerging from its cocoon, the struggle it endures to do so is helping it develop the muscles it needs to move, to fly, to survive. It is strengthening itself. So, do you know what happens if a

child were to help the butterfly out of the cocoon?"

Eve paused, smiling secretively again. When no one answered, she finished.

"It dies. It will not have developed the necessary requirements to survive on its own. You may help it out of the cocoon, but it will not be capable of flight. It will simply sit there, unable to move, until it dies. This is what I did. I helped humanity get out of it metaphorical cocoon. I nearly wiped out humanity. All because I thought I knew better."

"Well, you didn't mean to," Peyton said. "You thought you were helping. And anyway, humanity is fine. We survived. It couldn't have been that bad."

Eve shook her head, like a teacher humoring a misinformed student. "If you only knew how close you came to destruction. I deserved my punishment."

"How were you punished, if you don't mind my asking?"

Eve gestured all around them, to the tall trees, the soft grass, the beautiful flowers that surrounded them. "I was told to leave Heaven for a thousand years. I was to come here. Because of what I had done, there were those humans who grew selfish and cruel. Their deeds tarnished their souls and were no longer able to enter Heaven once they died. It became my job to guide them from Purgatory and into the Garden. From here, I needed to reeducate their souls. Teach them the error of their ways and send them back to Earth to try again and live good lives of decency and kindness."

"So, reincarnation?" Peyton asked, to which Eve nodded. "So, wait… I'm sorry, but I'm still confused about something. You're Eve… and you gave humanity

knowledge, against God's wishes. A crime for which you - Eve - were punished. I'm sorry, but I thought Eve was human and the Devil corrupted her and humanity."

At this, Eve was instantly on her feet and extended her wings to their full length. The feathers on her wings were a brilliant pearly-white, but seemed to be tinged with flecks of red. She floated above the grass, he toes now several feet above the ground. Her green eyes blazed brighter and caused Peyton to almost fall backwards in surprise.

"Don't call me that!" Eve shrieked, her voice echoing all around them, but then, as suddenly as she had exploded, Eve looked surprised and then folded her wings back into her shoulders and out of sight. She settled back down on the grass, looking ashamed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean… I just… I don't like that so many think of me that way."

"It's okay," Darius told her. "Peyton didn't mean it that way."

Peyton was shaking her head, trying to force her heart to stop thumping so hard. "No, of course not. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

Eve took a deep calming breath. What followed was an awkward silence.

"Um…" Peyton faltered. "So, if the Garden was your punishment, why do you seem to enjoy it so much?"

Eve seemed to still be too shaken up to respond, so Darius answered for her.

"She only needed to remain here for a certain amount of time, until she fully understood what her actions had done to humanity. When she had served that time, she understood all too well. So she decided to stay and guide

the souls of humanity for as long as they needed her. A fact her father wasn't too pleased with, but at the same time, I understand he was very proud as well. Eve gave up eternity in Heaven so that she could offer guidance to these poor souls."

"Couldn't her father have come, too?" Peyton asked. "I mean, technically she was still a kid, right? Doesn't a little girl need her father?"

"Unfortunately, Eve's father couldn't leave Heaven, as he had a lot of very important work to do there," Darius replied. "Being the creator of the universe and all."

"Your father is *God*?" Peyton gasped. Despite her still-pounding heart from Eve's outburst, she was impressed. "You gave up Heaven for humanity?"

Eve managed to smile. "I suppose so. These souls… They need guidance. They can be good, they just need to be shown how."

"How do you do it?" Peyton asked.

"Tartarus," Eve said simply.

"Tar-Tartarus?" Peyton repeated, unsure if she was pronouncing the word properly. "What's Tartarus?"

Darius shrugged. "No one knows for sure. It has simply always been."

"My father discovered it here, in this universe," Eve explained. "It seems to be drawn towards those with tarnished souls, those who have a dark place inside themselves. You may have seen Tartarus by the tree. The black substance?"

Peyton remembered the man that was engulfed by the dark ooze and shivered. "What does it do to them?

"Tartarus imprisons them," Eve said. "It used to be that he would trap them and never release them. This was

what my 'help' had caused. Where all souls once ascended to Heaven, there were now those who drew the attention of Tartarus and they would be trapped forever. But my father somehow managed to communicate with Tartarus, as much as anyone can, anyway. To this day, no one knows what happened between Tartarus and my father, but he now releases those who learn from their mistakes. Here, at the edge of the Garden, the green ends and Tartarus begins. He is as big as an ocean, stretching far into the distance. He reaches out and takes the darker souls and keeps them within his depths. They don't seem to be aware, but Tartarus is able to give them visions of their lives, from the perspective of those they had hurt. That way, they may learn how their actions have affected others. Once they have learned this, Tartarus releases them into my care. I then have them help me tend to the Garden. In caring for the plants that grow here, they learn to value the lives of all living things. Once they have proven themselves to me, I allow them to be reborn."

"It sounds very complex," Peyton said.

Eve shrugged. "Not so much. After the first thousand years, it became a really smooth process." Then she grinned and stood up. "Now, I have to go back to it. There's a group of souls fresh from the depths of Tartarus that need me to show them how to best care for the hydrangeas. You rest. I'll return soon to show you the way."

"Thanks for your help, Eve," Peyton said.

"Yes. Thank you for everything," Darius added.

Eve smiled at them both, then turned and walked away into the trees, seeming to glide across the grass with limitless grace. When she was gone, Peyton sighed loudly

and fell back on the grass, looking up at the blue sky above. Darius moved closer and sat beside her, looking down at her face.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Peyton nodded, remaining on her back. "Yeah. It's just… mind blowing, you know? Like, this is Hell? Really? It's beautiful here. How can the churches have gotten it so wrong?"

Darius thought for a moment before answering. "It's not so much about being right or wrong. It's just as time goes on, people form different ideas and opinions. Those ideas get mixed up and confused with the truth, creating many of the stories that are in all religious texts. It doesn't make them false and it doesn't make any religions more or less right than the others. It's just that people have forgotten that they all came from the same place at one point. That they are all connected, despite their beliefs. See, one thing that I have learned above all else since I became a Reaper is that the details of any particular religion or belief is not what's important about faith. Strip all of the stories and particulars away, you are left with a simple message of kindness, of being good to one another. That is what people often forget."

Peyton nodded, considering Darius' words. She suddenly felt like her eyelids were exceptionally heavy. She felt too wired to sleep, but she was physically and mentally exhausted and the grass was so soft and comfortable. Before she knew it, she had drifted off to sleep, with Darius watching over her.

DEATH APPROACHES

Azrael could see the green edge of the Garden as he approached. He smiled to himself, knowing that his pain would soon be at an end. He kept his hood up, hiding his face as he felt the energy from the hundreds of souls inside him burning away his flesh, the damage now too far gone for him to regenerate completely, but he ignored the pain as much as he could, no matter how close to unbearable it was. He knew Peyton was in the Garden. Eve could try to protect her all she wanted, but in the end, she couldn't stop him. He was determined. Focussed. Confident. Nothing could stop him. He had grown too powerful and had been working too long to be stopped now. The Beacon glowed brightly in the distance. A signal of hope for everyone who came to Purgatory. And hopeful Azrael was. Hopeful that Peyton's soul would soon be his. He cursed Eve's power of Purgatory and how she had made it so all others were weakened by its cursed ground. He longed to spread his wings and fly, to reach Peyton that much faster, but Purgatory's Wasteland would not allow it.

As Azrael watched the Beacon, aware that he was still

hours away from reaching it, he saw something approaching in the sky. A movement that stood out against the otherwise still and dead environment. Azrael paused to watch it from beneath his hood. He saw it growing larger, quickly getting closer and closer. He immediately knew what it was, but did nothing to get out of its way. It was coming straight for him, whistling through the air like an arrow, a blur of white and red.

It landed only a few feet in front of him with bended knees and red hair flowing from the sudden halt of momentum, white wings flecked with red, flexing as they were folded back and withdrawn.

"Hello, Eve," Azrael whispered.

"Azrael," Eve replied flatly. "I wish I could say it is good to see you."

"Why so cold, Eve?" Azrael sneered. "I thought you Devil types liked it hot."

Eve's eyes narrowed and burned bright green as she scowled at the term she detested so. "Turn back, Azrael. I will only warn you once. You will find no victory here."

"Oh, I disagree," Azrael replied. "Victory is within my reach."

"I won't allow it," Eve fired back. "Darius won't allow it."

Azrael bristled at the mention of Darius' name. "That traitor."

"You are the one who has betrayed us all, Azrael!" Eve shouted. "What are you doing? I know you want Peyton's soul, and I know why. What I don't know is why you would want to do this to us."

Azrael grinned from under his hood, knowing that Eve couldn't see his toothy smile. "Wouldn't you like to

know?" he taunted.

"You disgust me," Eve said, looking at Azrael as though he was something filthy she had found stuck to the bottom of her foot. "And people call *me* the Devil."

"I am not evil, you petulant child," Azrael spat. "I am cursed."

"No, you're selfish," Eve shot back. "Turn back Azrael. I'm warning you."

"You aren't strong enough to stop me, Eve. Not anymore."

"Maybe not," Eve agreed. "But you aren't strong enough to win."

Without another word, Eve spread her wings once more and took off into the air. Azrael glared after her as she sped away back to the Garden. Then, on foot, he began to follow her.

<center>*****</center>

When Peyton awoke, the first thing she saw were the leaves and branches of the trees hanging above her, rustling gently in the breeze. She stared up at them curiously, momentarily forgetting where she was and that she had not been dreaming. After blinking the sleep away from her eyes, she saw Darius sitting nearby, tying his shoes. Peyton stretched and sat up, yawning.

"How long did I sleep?" she asked.

"About an hour," Darius replied. He suddenly smiled slightly. "You snored."

"What?" Peyton said, sounding shocked and feeling humiliated. "I don't snore!"

"Don't worry, I could barely notice," Darius grinned at

her. "You did scare some birds away, though."

Peyton leaned over and thumped him on the arm, to which Darius only laughed.

"Any sign of Eve, liar?" Peyton asked.

Darius shook his head. "Not yet. But she'll be back soon enough."

"I hope I didn't upset her too much with that Devil comment," Peyton said, hugging her knees.

"She's endured worse," Darius said.

Peyton looked at Darius thoughtfully. "Do you mind if I ask another question? I feel like I'm pretty frustrating with how much I don't know."

"Please, ask all the questions you like."

Peyton thought for a moment, then said, "If Eve is, like… God's daughter… then shouldn't she be a god and not an Angel?"

Darius smiled. "And what is God?"

Peyton arched an eyebrow in confusion. "Um, a god, right? That's why people call him God, isn't it?"

"And what about gods in religions other that Christianity and Catholicism? Does everyone call every deity 'God?'"

"Well, no, I guess. But what does that have to do with-"

"What I'm saying is that God is not *a* god. Not in the sense you might have been raised to believe. He is a very, *very*, powerful and wise Angel. He does not go by the name of 'God,' nor does he expect anyone to call him a god. But these things happen. He is much more like a spiritual leader amongst Angels, like Ghandi with humans."

Peyton could only stare. Yet again, she felt a sense of ignorance that overshadowed her entire life. Everything

she had been taught, everything she had learned about religion and mythology, none of it had been right. She had never really considered herself to be overly religious or anything, far from it in fact. She believed that there was likely to be a greater power in the universe that humans couldn't understand, but she wrote it off as something she, and the rest of Earth, would never fully comprehend. Her mother had raised her in a Christian household, but they never attended church regularly or said Grace before a meal, but Peyton had found some comfort in much of what she had been told about God and religion. It seemed like some aspects had been true. There was a Heaven and a Hell, even if they weren't what Peyton had expected. Reincarnation was real, as were Angels and souls and so many other things, but she still felt embarrassed by how little she knew. It was like going to a foreign country and acting as though you knew all about the culture, only to learn you knew nothing.

At that moment, they heard footsteps approaching and turned to look. To their left, Eve walked quickly out of the trees and directly towards them, her face set and serious. She waved her hands at them, indicating that they should stand.

"There isn't much time," she said. "Azrael is nearly here. He is moving quickly and is determined to get your soul, Peyton."

"But why?" Peyton asked, climbing to her feet. "Why does he want *my* soul so badly? He told me that my soul was the one he needed. What does he need it for?"

Eve hesitated, glancing at Darius, who looked back at her curiously, but then she was serious again and began to lead them both out of the clearing.

"There isn't time," Eve said. "Darius, I will take you both as far as the edge of the Garden, but then no further. I'll stay here to try and slow Azrael down more, to give you as much of a head-start as possible. Once you are beyond the borders of the Garden, you will have limited use of your powers returned to you, but as long as you are within the reach of Tartarus, you won't be at full strength and you won't be able to use the void. You won't be nearly as powerful as normal and certainly nowhere near as much as Azrael will be. If he catches up to you before you reach Fate, I don't think you'll be able to stop him."

They suddenly emerged from the trees and Peyton gasped at the drastic scenery change. It was as though they had walked out of a forest onto the beach of some deserted island. Only this beach was not the appealing white sand of the Caribbean or Fiji or similar. The sand on this beach was black and glimmered like broken glass. There was a small wooden boat sitting on the shore, bobbing gently in the water, but the water was not normal water. It was…

"Tartarus," Darius whispered. "I've never seen it like this before."

The black liquid that flew like gas stretched into the distance like the sea. Peyton expected to see small waves on its surface, but as she studied the surface, she saw that there were no waves, nor any movement of any kind. There were no birds, no animals that would normally be found on a beach. Eve grabbed Darius' arm and held it firm, her face as serious as a teenage face can be.

"Darius. Listen very carefully." Eve was speaking quickly now. "You will need to cross Tartarus. Take the boat. Tartarus will not harm you while you are inside the

boat, but do not, under any circumstances, touch Tartarus. Do not get out of the boat until you reach the shore on the other side. The boat will guide itself, so don't worry about rowing. When you reach the other side, no matter what you think, no matter what you see, stay on the path. Do not step off for even a moment. No matter how lost you feel, keep going and ignore what you hear. Don't stop moving. And keep that blade of yours ready, Darius. You will need it."

"What's over there?" Peyton asked, feeling apprehensive.

Eve faced her with eyes full of worry. "The Chthonic Island. A place teeming with monsters from the darkest tales of human mythology. They're there to stop people from reaching Fate. Fate doesn't like to be disturbed. They will attempt to stop you from reaching your destination. But you mustn't let them. Darius," Eve turned back to Darius, who was listening intently. "I know what your plan is with Fate. I fear it may not work. But you have to try."

"Yes, Eve, I know," Darius said. "Thank you."

"Now quickly, go!" Eve waved them both towards the small boat, ushering them away. Peyton started towards the boat, but stopped suddenly. She turned back to Eve and quickly gave her a tight hug, hoping that it was enough to convey her gratitude. "Thank you, Eve."

Eve smiled and hugged her back. "You're welcome. Now go. Hurry. And good luck."

"Will you be okay with Azrael?" Peyton asked.

"I'll be fine. It's you we need to save. Everything depends on it."

Peyton stared at Eve, confused by this statement. She

wanted to ask more questions, but Darius was pulling on her hand, urging her to follow him. So, with little choice remaining, she ran with him to the boat. They both climbed in and, before they could even sit down, the boat gently lurched forward and began to sail out into the distance, surrounded by the black ethereal ooze that was Tartarus. Eve stood at the shore, her hand held high in a gesture of farewell. Under her breath, Eve said a quiet prayer.

"Dear Father in Heaven, hear my plea. Watch over my friends, make safe their journey. And watch over me, as I face your fallen soldier."

Then she turned her back on Tartarus and stood in silence, facing the tree-line, waiting for Azrael to appear.

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Darius and Peyton weren't sailing for long in the small wooden boat before they lost sight of the shore and Eve entirely. The boat seemed to move with surprising speed, despite having no visible means of mobility. It would have been peaceful if it weren't for the deeply foreboding ethereal darkness that lay beneath them, stretching endlessly into the distance. Once the shore was no longer in sight, Peyton realized that everything had fallen silent. Everything was completely still and quiet. Whereas the sky over the Garden had been bright and blue, the sky now was gloomy and overcast, heavy dark clouds hanging overhead and only adding to the cold shiver that was running along the back of Peyton's neck.

"So," Peyton began, mostly to just end the anxious silence that hung over them. "What's this plan of yours?

What do we do when we get to Fate?"

Darius, who had been determinedly staring at the floor of the boat, slowly looked up at Peyton. He seemed as anxious as Peyton felt, but unlike Peyton, he actively avoided looking at Tartarus.

"I need to get Fate to change the design," Darius said. "As a Reaper, I should be able to see your death when I look at you. But because of Azrael, you don't seem to have a death in your future. It seems your fate is to have your soul stolen and consumed."

Peyton shuddered, but Darius continued.

"This is why I can't see your fate. Because, technically, you don't die. Azrael will imprison your soul within his for as long as he chooses. Maybe forever. But, if I can convince Fate to rewrite the design, if I can see a different fate for you, maybe then Azrael won't win."

"Do you really think that will work?" Peyton asked. "I'm no expert, but it sounds…"

"Unlikely?" Darius finished. "Yes, it might be. But if there is even the smallest chance we can beat Azrael, we have to take it."

Silence fell over them again and they sailed on. Peyton began tapping her foot nervously. She had barely become adjusted to the fact that this entire world actually existed outside of story books and religious text, and now she seemed to be on a quest for her very soul. It was sounding to her a lot like something that should be in an ancient Greek play, or something Homer would have written.

Peyton's Odyssey, Peyton thought, not being able to help but smile at the random thought. She looked at Darius. Always so serious. So determined to save her. Even though he didn't know her. They weren't friends.

Not exactly, anyway. Peyton was comfortable around him, despite him being the embodiment of an idea she used to consider as Death. From what she could understand, he was in as much danger as she was, but spared barely a thought for himself.

"Why did Eve tell you not to touch Tartarus?" Peyton asked suddenly.

"It's not a good idea for a Reaper to come into contact with Tartarus," Darius said flatly. "Most of us simply avoid it at all costs. See, Tartarus is… not very understanding."

"What do you mean?"

"Eve said that Tartarus is drawn to those with a black mark on their souls," Darius explained. "To become a Reaper, one must have two things. A great fear of dying. And a tainted soul."

Peyton smiled indulgently. "Come on, you can't be tainted. Look at what you're doing here, how much you've done to save me, a complete stranger to you. If anyone has a good soul, Darius, it's you."

Darius gave her a small smile, but it was grim. "That's kind of you to say. But it's not entirely true. I hope to make amends for past mistakes."

Darius was suddenly reminded of how familiar Peyton looked and was once again digging through his memories for any hint of where he knew her face. He had thought he had seen a moment of recognition on Eve's face, as well, when she saw Peyton, but he was sure he imagined it.

"So, how did you become a Reaper?" Peyton asked.

Darius was silent for a long time, considering her question. He stared out across Tartarus for the first time, lost in the memory. Peyton suddenly seemed to think she

had asked something personal and rude.

"I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that," she quickly said.

Darius turned back to her and said, "No, no, it's alright. I'll tell you, I don't mind."

He took a deep breath and looked back out across Tartarus, thinking back. He had tried not to think about it for so long, but found himself remembering every day.

"I was human during the American Revolution," he began. "Before the war, though, I was a slave. I was born into slavery and had never seen the land my family came from. When the war began, the man who owned me gave me to the American Militia, gave me to men who thought of me as nothing so that I would fight for a country that was not my own, for a cause that was not mine. But there was a benefit to serving. If I served long enough, and the American colonies beat the British, I would be freed. Freedom was a concept that I hadn't thought about or considered once in my life. It seemed so out of reach, it wasn't worth my time. But then it was right there in front of me. Freedom became all I could think about. The problem, though, was I was not placed with the regular army. I was with the militia, so things were different. Very different. The soldiers were undisciplined and reckless. We lost more men in a single day than the British did in a week. Many of the men I fought with often discussed me as though I was as much their enemy as any Redcoat. Talked about killing me, for no reason. I was not treated well during my time with them, but I endured, driven only by my thought of freedom. My Captain… he wasn't really a Captain, but that's what he told us to call him. His real name was Benjamin Myles.

Captain Myles grew impatient with us because of our losses. We were yet to win a single fight. He was angry all the time, blaming us for our constant failures, ignoring all suggestions from everyone about improvements to our strategies, convinced that everyone was against him. In his defense, it didn't help that most of the men preferred drinking and chasing women than actually fighting a war. But one day, we heard about a shipment of weapons that was being delivered to a British camp outside of Charlestown. We set a trap and had them surrounded. They killed twelve of us, but we killed twice as many of them, and captured three others. They had surrendered to us, throwing down their weapons and falling to their knees. I can still remember their cries for mercy. One boy, no older than 17, he had been wounded. He was bleeding badly and not likely to survive. I was ordered to line up the prisoners on the side of the road, and this… child needed my help to walk. I remember his blood on my hands. How he begged me to let him go home. How he missed his mother, his father and his sisters. Once Benjamin Myles had secured the wagon full of weapons, he congratulated us all on a 'job well done.' Then he came over to me. He gave me his pistol. He ordered me to shoot the prisoners. I… I didn't know what to do. I was always told that enemies who surrender would be given full quarter, that they would be spared and taken prisoner. This, what I was being ordered to do, was murder. But when I tried to argue, Captain Myles told me that either I shoot the prisoners, or he shoots me. So, being weak and afraid of death, I turned around and took aim at the two men, my pistol aimed at one and the Captain's aimed at the other. They tried to protest, to yell, but I had already

pulled the triggers. They both fell. Then there was only the boy. He was lying in the dirt and mud, unable to stand, staring up at me. He was having trouble breathing. He stared at me through a mask of blood and sweat and tears. He was begging me. Begging me to let him go. But when I looked at Captain Myles, he was grinning. Watching. Having used all of my bullets, I drew my dagger. I remember the boy's last word like it happened this morning. Thinking about it still makes me feel more guilt than any man should in a lifetime. He pleaded with me. One word. 'Please.' That's all he said. Right before I cut his throat."

Darius took a deep breath, still haunted by the look in the young boy's eyes, but his story wasn't over.

"A day later, the Captain allowed us all to go to the tavern and celebrate our victory. I was still very upset and drank heavily. I drank alone, as the others wouldn't allow me to join them, and I got very drunk. At some point, I staggered outside to get some fresh air when I heard two people talking, a man and a woman. The woman sounded upset, like she was crying, so I went to see what was going on. When I found them, I saw Captain Myles with a woman, a young girl who worked at the tavern. He… He was trying to drag her into an alley, where it was dark and secluded. He was calling her horrible names, telling her to stop crying. He was trying to make her take off her dress. Had I been sober, I probably would have thought of a better way to resolve the situation. But instead, I ran forward, threw the Captain off the poor girl. She ran away and Myles started to pull his knife from his belt, yelling at me. We fought briefly before I managed to get the knife from his hand. Then I stabbed him to death. I didn't want

to, but he kept fighting me. He eventually reached for his pistol, and that's when I realized he was leaving me no choice. When we were found, everyone saw me kneeling over his body, holding the knife, blood everywhere. For this, I was branded a traitor and sentenced to death. Had the color of my skin been the same as theirs, things might have been different, but I wasn't surprised. I knew how they would react, and when they tied me up and locked me away, I never fought them. I never argued. The next morning, they blindfolded me, stood me against a tree just outside of town. And executed me by firing squad. That's when Azrael came to me. He offered me a choice. Either pass on and face the consequences of my actions, no matter what they are. Or become a Reaper and help him guide the souls of the deceased into the next world. Obviously, I chose the path of a Reaper."

Darius fell silent, afraid to look at Peyton. Peyton didn't say anything right away. The silence stretched on until Darius was sure that Peyton thought of him as a monster, but then he felt her hand on his. She took his hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. He looked up at her and saw that she was smiling kindly at him, still holding his hand.

"It's okay, Darius," she said. "We've all done things we're not proud of. You were just following orders when you killed those men, it wasn't your choice. You couldn't have stopped it. As for your Captain, well, it sounds like he got what he deserved. You were only trying to save an innocent girl. Just like you're trying to save me now. So, I don't think you're tainted, Darius. Not one bit."

Darius smiled at her. For a moment, it was nice. Sitting in a boat, holding hands with an attractive woman. He

almost forgot where they were. And what they were about to face.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

Eve waited on the shore until the sun had set. She could sense how far away Azrael was. She knew he could sense her, too. She knew he would come straight to her.

Let him come, she thought.

Finally, once the sun was down and the bright stars had come out, Eve sensed movement in the trees nearby. She set her eyes on the spot and stared, waiting. She was calm. Her heartbeat was even and her breathing was normal. She stood calmly, waiting, hands clasped gently together at her waist. Everything was quiet, as though the volume of the world had been turned down. The only thing that moved was Eve's long vibrant red hair as the breeze gently brushed against her locks. A few minutes passed. Then Azrael appeared directly where she was looking.

He loomed out of the darkness like an ethereal beast from an ancient horror story. His hood was still hiding his face and, as he reached out to push a tree branch out of the way, Eve could see his hand stretch out from beneath his sleeve. A skeletal terror, tiny bits of flesh still clinging to the bone, burned like ash and rotting away. Azrael saw her standing in front of him and Eve could feel him grin. He emerged from the tree line and stood still on the black sand, watching her. Both were silent, staring the other down.

"You took your time," Eve said, almost pleasantly. "I was getting bored."

"Why should I rush?" Azrael replied. "Are you in a

hurry to die, little girl?"

Eve shook her head sadly. "Your threats mean nothing to me, Azrael. We both know you can't kill me."

"Perhaps. But it will be fun finding out for sure."

"Why are you doing this, Azrael?" Eve asked. "Why? I used to look up to you, we all did. What happened?"

Azrael was silent, but began to pace to his left, still watching Eve from under his hood.

"I know it's Peyton you need," Eve continued. "I know who she is, even if Darius doesn't. And I know what taking her soul will do. Don't you care? Don't you care what will happen if you do this?"

"No," Azrael replied flatly. "I don't care. Not anymore. I've cared for far too long."

"So now you're willing to destroy us all?" Eve fired back.

"I don't have to," Azrael said quietly. "Not all. Join me, Eve. We're not as different as you think. You once refused to bow to commands, as I have now chosen to do. You knew what you wanted to do and you did it without the permission of Heaven. You knew what needed to be done and you knew no one would support you. So you just did it yourself. This is all I am doing now. I know what is needed, what humanity needs desperately. They all cry and moan about their freedom, but that is not what humanity truly wants or needs. What they need is *peace*. Safety. They wage more wars every day, killing others in the thousands. With me as their new god, with me as their savior, I can bring an end to the wars. Bring an end to the suffering. If only they serve me, they will exchange their abused freedom for protection. Protection from each other. Others in Heaven will join me, you know they will,

once they see my power, once they see the future that I envision. Join me."

Eve narrowed her eyes at Azrael, shaking her head, her fiery red hair flowing gently with the movement. "You're a fool if you think I would join you, Azrael. I would never go against my father again. You say we are the same? That I too disobeyed Heaven for my own purposes? You are wrong. I was young and stupid and only *thought* I knew better. My actions nearly destroyed humanity. I will never disobey my father again."

Azrael glared at Eve from under his hood. "Fine. If you will not stand with me, you will fall before me. You will lie in the pit of destruction, along with your beloved mortals."

As he spoke, he held his open hand straight out from his side. Then he quickly closed his fist, but something appeared in his hand in an instant. It was as tall as he was and made of steel, with intricate patterns carved into the length of it, the base thumping loudly against the ground as it appeared. There was a loud sound of metal scraping against metal, like a knife being sharpened on a flint, and a long blade was suddenly at the top of the steel staff, as long as a man's arm. Azrael stood completely still, holding his scythe and watching Eve closely.

Eve only rolled her eyes. "A little cliched, isn't it?"

"I'm a traditionalist."

"Well, I like surprises, myself," Eve replied.

Suddenly, from all sides, long vines whipped through the air and wrapped themselves around Azrael's limbs. They roped around his wrists, his ankles, tied his legs together, wrapped around his neck, any part they could get a hold of, and lifted him up into the air. Azrael seemed

momentarily surprised, but then he clenched his scythe tightly and extended his wings. They flashed out in a blur and cut right through the vines, freeing him from their hold. He fell to the ground and landed on his feet, then lunged at Eve, whirling his scythe around like a battle-axe, ready to implant it into her skull.

Eve was already prepared for his attack. She threw both hands forward and something materialized in her grasp, one in each clenched fist. In each hand appeared a handle, wrapped in leather and colored red. From the handles, at amazing speed, a rope began to uncoil, whizzing through the air towards Azrael, until they finally reached their maximum length and cracked loudly at Azrael's feet. Eve now had a long whip in each hand and started cracking them at Azrael, trying to catch him unprepared. Azrael dodged and weaved, avoiding the blows from the whips that made high-pitched whizzing sounds as they sped through the air, threatening to cut Azrael in half. As the whips sped through the air and Azrael dodged and blocked with his scythe as Eve tried to split him open or choke him, the whips began to glow. They burned bright orange and left a trail of light in their wake. As she drew back her swing, the whips suddenly burst into flame and Eve was whirling long tendrils of flames through the air, the fire whooshing as they were whipped above the Angels' heads like fiery halos. Eve danced and spun, whirling the flaming whips this way and that, keeping Azrael at bay, preventing him from advancing, moving with all the grace and poise of an accomplished ballerina.

Eve swung a whip-lash down at Azrael's face, which he blocked using the staff of his scythe. The whip swung around and tightened on the staff, then Azrael yanked and

pulled the whip from Eve's hand, but she had already swung the other whip and the tip caught one of the exposed bones on Azrael's wing, slicing it clean off.

Azrael screamed in pain as the bone fell to the ground and the cracked and broken stump where it once was smoldered and smoked. In his rage, Azrael dove toward Eve, swinging his blade like a war hammer, but his swing swished harmlessly through the air as Eve, in the blink of an eye, spread her own wings and launched herself into the air. Before Azrael could recover his balance, he felt the coil of the rope wrap around his throat, then he was lifted up into the air, dragged in Eve's wake. She flew up and up and up, the wind rushing through her hair and her wings pumping hard, flying faster and faster. The ground all but vanished far below as she carried Azrael high into the sky, the coil of her whip wrapped tightly around his throat as he kicked his legs and tried to free himself. Suddenly, Eve came to a halt in midair, but Azrael, pushed on by his momentum, rose up to meet her. As he came level with her, Eve planted a powerful kick square into his chest, sending him tumbling and rolling through the air. Azrael spread his decaying wings and halted his tumbling progression, facing Eve with renewed fury from under the hood of his cloak. Eve was already flying at him, the coil of her flaming whip trailing behind. She twirled in the air and sent another crack of the whip towards Azrael, but this time he reached forward and grabbed the burning whip in his skeletal hand, just inches before it sliced into him. He held the whip firmly, seemingly indifferent to the burning fire in his hand, glaring at Eve from under his hood. Eve tried to pull the whip back, but Azrael held tight. Then he yanked on the

whip as hard as he could.

Eve, caught off guard, tumbled towards him. By the time she was able to right herself, she saw the butt of the scythe slamming into her face. She felt Azrael's strong hands latch onto her and then they were suddenly both falling. No, not falling, they were moving too fast to simply be falling. Azrael was flying them both towards the ground, as fast as he could, flapping his wings steadily to urge on their speedy descent. Eve realized he meant to crush her into the dirt. Eve struggled to break free of his hold, but he was too strong, his grip like an iron vice. At the very last second, Azrael pushed away from her, but then planted his feet on her chest to push her down with one last kick, soaring away as Eve plummeted down. She crashed into the ground with such force, the trees of the Garden all shook and dirt swirled around in the air. Eve vanished within the cloud of dust that arose, unable to see anything but dirt particles spinning around her as she lied on her back, her body hurting, but still watching for Azrael.

Stunned, Eve moved slowly. She rose to her feet, her wings flapping slightly and incoherently, like a bird that had just flown into a closed window. She looked around for Azrael, vaguely aware of the fact that she had lost her whip. She couldn't see through the dirt that still spun around her. She turned left, then right, knowing he was somewhere nearby, but unable to find him. Her eyes scanned her surroundings, searching, but he was staying out of sight.

Until he suddenly flew at her from out of the dust, his decayed wings spread wide, looking like a demonic bat. He slammed into her and tackled her through the air. They

flew a few feet together, before Azrael slammed Eve into a nearby tree with such force, the tree split up the middle, a great opening like a fork of lightning stretching up the tall trunk. Before Eve could regain her footing, she saw Azrael swing his scythe forward, directly into her stomach.

The blade pierced through her flesh, so far it pinned her to the tree. She gasped from not only the pain, but also the suddenness of it. She held onto the staff of the scythe, attempting to pull it out, but Azrael held it firm. Eve could see her blood pooling around the wound and staining her white dress, could feel it trickling from her mouth. Azrael leaned in close, grinning in victory from beneath his hood.

"Oh, how I wish I could kill you," he whispered. "You have no idea. You were always His favorite. His little girl. The daughter of the Almighty. If anyone else had done what you did, they would have been imprisoned for all eternity."

Eve coughed and more blood spilled out of her mouth. "He would… never… do that… My father… forgives… all." Eve was struggling to speak, but she managed to look directly into Azrael's eyes, speaking as clearly as she could, so that he might understand. "My father forgives… everyone… Even you."

Azrael glared at Eve, his blank face hidden in darkness. With a sharp tug, he pulled the blade free of Eve's body, watching her gasp from the movement and fresh bout of pain, then stepped backwards as she slowly slid down the tree and sat on the ground, resting her back against its broken trunk, her wings lying flat and useless around her. Azrael stared down at her with disdain. While his blade couldn't kill her, it would at least immobilize her for a

time. Long enough for him to catch up with Darius and Peyton.

Without another word, Azrael turned and walked away, leaving Eve to her pain. And her pity.

INFERNO

Night had fallen over Tartarus with a sudden and foreboding speed. Darius and Peyton sat in the small boat, looking around, only able to see one another. Once the sky had fallen dark, as dark as Tartarus itself, it seemed as though they were simply floating in space, nothing anywhere around. The darkness was as complete as darkness could be. And so was the feeling of being lost.

"Are we even still moving?" Peyton asked. "I can't tell anymore."

"Neither can I," Darius replied, looking around. "I can't see anything. We just have to hope that Eve's boat does what it's supposed to."

Peyton began to shiver, a chill that had nothing to do with being cold. A few minutes ago, they had heard what sounded like thunder coming from somewhere behind them, but saw no lightning to accompany the booming sounds. It had only lasted a minute or two, and gave them both a very bad feeling, but neither spoke about it. They didn't want to consider what that noise really was.

"I hope Eve's okay," Peyton suddenly said, hugging her arms.

"Me, too," Darius agreed. "I'm sure she'll be fine. She's strong."

They fell silent again, unsure of what else to say. Darius tried to look through the darkness, hoping to see a shore in the distance. The sooner they were out of Tartarus, the better. He felt exposed. Not just because of Azrael undoubtedly following them at that exact moment, but also because of being surrounded by one of the few substances in existence that could destroy him. All it needed to do was touch him. With a single touch, Tartarus would know his sins, then drag him into its depths and hold him there for eternity.

"We've been going for a long time," Peyton said, unconsciously whispering. "How big is this Tartarus thing?"

"No one really knows," Darius replied, also keeping his voice down. "Some say he goes on forever, as far as the universe itself. That he has no ends."

"What exactly is Tartarus?" Peyton asked. "I mean, sometimes you call it 'he,' other times 'it.' Is it alive? Does it think? Does it know we're here?"

Darius turned away from the dark horizon and looked at Peyton. "Oh, Tartarus undoubtedly knows we're here. He may have been watching us this whole time, without us knowing at all. The truth is, no one knows what Tartarus is, or even where he, or it, came from. Sometimes he seems to have conscious thought, as he decides who comes to Purgatory or Hell, and he knows who he should leave alone to ascend to Heaven. The rest of the time, he looks like this. On the surface, a thoughtless mass of water with no sentient self. But underneath… well, who knows?"

Peyton looked confused. "But… I don't get it. Where did it come from if no one created it?"

Darius didn't have an answer. Tartarus had simply always been. Perhaps before the universe was created, he *was* the universe. No one knew for sure. Not anyone Darius had spoken to, anyway.

Peyton looked over the edge of the boat into the blackness that was Tartarus. She couldn't tell if it was moving, or flowing, or if it was alive, but she had the heavy feeling that something was watching her. As she stared into the abyss, she thought she saw something, just beneath the surface. They were passing over it, and that momentarily gave Peyton comfort in the fact that they were, indeed, still moving, but then she looked closer, curious as to what the object under the dark surface was. Peyton leaned out over the edge of the boat as far as she dared. Whatever it was, it was far lighter than Tartarus, looking grayish in the ceaseless black. She stared down into the darkness, trying to make out its shape. Its color. Its…

Peyton suddenly gasped and fell backwards, away from the object in the water. Away from the grayish, submerged face that was frozen within Tartarus, his eyes closed and his mouth open in an eternally long scream that made no sound. Darius turned to her, to see what was wrong, then glanced into the water. When he saw the face, he looked deeply distressed. He actually moved as though he wanted to reach in and pull them out, but then realized that was foolish.

"What is that?" Peyton whispered. Darius moved closer to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"That is a damned soul," he said quietly. "Not allowed

to be reborn. Not ready to ascend to Heaven. It will remain trapped inside Tartarus for as long as it takes for the soul to learn from the mistakes it made in life. It will be tormented by the memories of its sins. It will feel the pain of its victims. The sadness of those they hurt. All the pain, emotional and physical, that they inflicted in life, they now feel in death, until they truly understand how their actions have affected others."

"So… Tartarus is Hell?" Peyton asked.

"In a way, yes. What Tartarus does is punish those who are unable, or unwilling, to repent. Some will be trapped for only a short time before Tartarus releases them to Eve. Others may never be free. It's different for everyone."

The face in the water passed them by, the frozen scream still locked in place. Suddenly, Peyton could have sworn she heard whispering. Countless voices, carried on the wind, speaking incoherent words, all at once. Peyton strained her ears, trying to listen and discern the words that were being spoken, but nothing was coming clear to her. The words were all strange, rushed and garbled, like a million voices all whispering as one. The boat suddenly lurched, as though someone heavy had jumped on board, but when Peyton and Darius looked around, there was no one there.

"What was that?" Peyton whispered. Darius shook his head, unsure.

Peyton suddenly felt a very localized cold sensation creeping around her waist. She looked down and nearly passed out with fear. Black water, creeping like a snake, had managed to reach out of the mass beneath the boat, a long tendril of water that almost seemed solid climbing over the side of the boat, and was now slowly wrapping

itself around her body. Tartarus was wrapping around her. She raised her hands, as though to beat it away, but froze, afraid of making it angry. Darius stared in horror, watching Tartarus move slowly over Peyton's body, but unable to do anything.

Peyton remained perfectly still, her heart pounding hard and her face having lost all color. Tartarus didn't seem to be in any particular hurry, as it moved like a sluggish caterpillar on a tree branch. It didn't have a care in the world. It began to raise its head, if you could call it that, and met Peyton at eye level. Peyton stared at the tendril tip that looked very much like a faceless black snake, as it remained motionless before her. She had the feeling of being watched again. Like Tartarus was looking at her. Looking *inside* her. Peyton stared at it for a time, feeling like it was looking back at her, Darius sitting still nearby. He was slowly reaching behind his back, moving cautiously, slowly wrapping his fingers around the handle of his blade. As Darius closed his fingers around the hilt of his blade, he slowly pulled, trying to not make a sound as he began to pull the blade free. As the steel slowly began to slide out of its sheathe, there was an almost imperceptible sound of grating steel, as quiet as the tick of a clock.

Tartarus suddenly moved. It moved away from Peyton and turned its 'head' toward Darius. Darius froze in his act to unsheathe his blade, not wanting to anger Tartarus by appearing threatening, but fully prepared to fight if he had to. While Tartarus was definitely looking at him, it came no closer. It stared, despite having no eyes to see with, the black water of its body still running through the tendril wrapped around Peyton's waist. Then, silently,

Tartarus began to unwind from Peyton's body. It slid without a sound back along the floor of the boat and back over the edge. It disappeared back into the main body of water without making the slightest noise, not even the tiniest splash. There was no trace that it had ever been there in the boat.

Shaken, Peyton turned to Darius, but kept glancing back at the edge where she had last seen Tartarus. "What… what was that about?"

Darius sounded grim as he replied. "I think we're close."

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A short time later, the boat touched land. Darius quickly leaped onto the shore, still being careful not to touch Tartarus, and dragged the boat farther inland, then helped Peyton out onto the rocky ground. They turned their backs on Tartarus to survey the land they now found themselves in. They had landed on an island, seemingly tropical in nature. Except that it was cold to the point of freezing. Peyton hugged herself and shivered, wishing that Eve had also grabbed her a jacket. Darius, unaffected by the cold, looked out across the land. Where they had come ashore was entirely stone, cracked and broken in countless places, with steam rising out of most cracks. Farther inland, the stone gave way to a jungle. Wild trees and plant life that appeared harmless, but gave the distinct feeling of danger when looked upon, simply because they grew so wild and untamed that they were reaching out towards Tartarus as though they were trying to reach the souls trapped within his depths. Furthermore, the trees

and vines and plants all seemed to be trying to strangle one another, wrapping around everything they could reach. Towards the middle, several hours walk away, there was a volcano rising into the sky, smoke rising from the top. Peyton tried to comfort herself by saying that it must not erupt because of all the plant life around, but her rationalization was quickly chased away by pessimism, thinking that just because it hasn't erupted, doesn't mean it can't.

"There," Darius said, pointing. Peyton looked where he was pointing and saw a gap in the trees. There was a pathway there. Not a very comforting path, more like a stretch of land where nothing happened to grow, but it was still covered, all the trees around providing a nice ceiling, where anything could be hiding above them as they walked.

"Is it safe?" Peyton asked.

"No," Darius replied. "Not at all. But we have to try. And I'll protect you. Nothing will harm you while I am with you."

Feeling only slightly better, Peyton walked with Darius onto the path. They walked side by side as they progressed, remaining alert, not speaking. Darius listened intently to everything around them, his hand twitching toward his blade with every rustle of leaves and twig snap underfoot. They walked for half an hour, but it felt like an eternity. They were now so deep into this foreboding jungle, this Chthonic Island, that they felt like they had been swallowed whole by it.

"*Help me!*" a voice suddenly cried out nearby. "*Please, somebody, help me!*"

"Darius," Peyton hissed, grabbing his elbow. "There's

someone else here."

Darius shook his head. "It's a trick, Peyton. There's no one here but us and monsters. We need to keep moving."

Uncertain, Peyton continued to walk with Darius, but was now looking around for the source of the voice. It hadn't sounded like a monster. They rounded a bend in the path and Peyton heard the cry again, much closer.

"*Please, won't anybody help? My baby! My baby!*"

"Ignore it, Peyton," Darius whispered. "It's not a friend to us."

As they walked, Peyton saw the source of the helpless pleas. A young Asian woman was standing just off the path to their right, crying, holding something in her arms and staring down at it. She looked up and saw Peyton and Darius coming, her eyes going wide. She began to shy away from them, shielding the bundle in her arms from them with her own body.

"Don't hurt us!" the woman cried. She spoke with an accent, Peyton guessed Japanese. The young woman's eyes were full of tears and terror. Peyton and Darius stopped in their tracks and watched the young woman. She was a mess, her clothes filthy and torn, her hair wild and caked with dirt and grime. The bundle in her arms looked no better. The woman was standing behind a waist-high bush of prickly, vicious red, thorns. The woman herself looked harmless and terrified.

"We aren't going to hurt you," Peyton said to her. Darius stiffened beside her. Peyton could see that his hand was already on the handle of his curved blade. "What's wrong?"

The woman looked at Peyton, tears still streaming, leaving tracks on her cheeks as they cleared their way

through the dirt on her face. She suddenly seemed to decide she could trust Peyton, because she turned and faced her full on, holding out the bundle in her arms.

"My baby," she sniffed. "My baby needs help."

"Okay, okay, it's alright," Peyton soothed, stepping closer.

"Peyton, no," Darius whispered.

Peyton looked over her shoulder at him. "She's just a woman. She's alone and scared."

"She's no woman and she is certainly not alone," Darius replied, not taking his eyes off the crying mother. "That's a Joro-Gumo."

Peyton was stepping closer, dangerously near to the edge of the path, reaching out to take the baby, her instincts as a nurse having taken over. The woman was leaning toward her, holding out the bundle in her arms, weeping openly. Peyton's fingers were nearly touching the bundle now, inching closer and closer.

Darius leaped forward and, with one arm, swept Peyton behind him and stood himself between her and the crying mother, his hooked blade in his hand and pointing at the woman.

"Hey!" Peyton protested, but her shout was drowned out by the sudden high-pitched shriek that washed over her and Darius, making the two of them press their hands down over their ears. Darius' sudden movement seemed to have surprised the woman and, in her shock, she had dropped the bundle she had been handing over to Peyton.

Peyton watched the bundle, hands still clamped down on her ears, as it tumbled to the jungle floor. When the bound rag hit the dirt, it suddenly burst open and dozens of spiders the size of large rats burst out, legs scuttling

and pincers clicking as they ran this way and that, looking for their prey.

Peyton watched in horror as the young woman who had been crying for help now shrieked in rage, her high-pitched wailing threatening to split the heads of Darius and Peyton wide open, but her shrieking suddenly tapered off, and was replaced by a cat-like hiss. Darius pointed his blade at the woman again, yelling at her to "Leave now!" But the woman continued to hiss and then swiped at the air in front of Darius, the fingers on her hand having suddenly become long and hooked, with sharp claws at the end of each. As Peyton watched, the woman's skin began to turn gray and her once almond-shaped eyes grew large and blackened. The woman began to grow taller, rising up higher and higher, now towering over Darius as he stood between Peyton and the woman who was changing her shape in front of them. The woman, who was previously hidden from the waist down behind the bushes, now stood high above, glaring furiously down at Darius as he flashed his blade at her. When Peyton saw what was once hidden behind the bushes, she opened her mouth to scream, but no sound could come out.

From the waist down, the woman was a giant dark spider. She was like a monstrous centaur, the upper body of a woman, but the lower half that of a tarantula. What should have been her hips were the beginning of a large, black and hairy abdomen, as long as a man and with a sharp stinger on the end. Her long legs stepped easily over the bushes and onto the path, the woman slashing her sharp claws at Darius as she moved. Darius stepped deftly backwards out of reach, keeping her attention on him and not on Peyton. The Joro-Gumo opened her mouth and

hissed again, but this time, her jaw split far along her cheeks, her head almost cracking open like an egg. As her mouth opened wider, a pair of sharp mandibles slowly reached out, clicking together viciously, beckoning to Darius as though daring him to come closer. She loomed over Darius, her full height now at ten-feet tall, clicking like mad, stepping closer and closer, occasionally swiping a claw at him, her mandibles now dripping a clear liquid that Peyton suspected might be poisonous.

Suddenly, Peyton saw the smaller spiders had regrouped and were now scurrying towards her at an alarming speed. She cried out and began to step back in a hurry, but the spiders were quickly upon her and started climbing her legs, clicking madly. Peyton screamed and began to swat at the spiders, but each one was as big as her fist, so her flailing failed to accomplish anything but evoke more vicious clicking. They were all over her legs now, moving farther up. Peyton began to panic, crying out in fear.

Darius ducked as the spider-woman advanced and swung a clawed hand at his face, hissing angrily. The Joro-Gumo kept coming, moving faster now, fed up with the game of cat and mouse it had been playing. It leaped at Darius, who ducked and rolled aside, but as he climbed back to his feet, the Joro-Gumo kicked him in the chest with one of its long tarantula legs, sending him sprawling backwards. He fell on his back and the Joro-Gumo was instantly upon him, screeching in his face as it towered over him, savoring the moment before the kill. Darius acted quickly and slashed at it with his blade. The sharp edge caught the Joro-Gumo's belly and the monster threw back its head and screeched its pain, allowing Darius time

to roll aside. Before he could get up, the Joro-Gumo was after him again, this time attempting to stomp on him with one of its powerful legs. Darius continued to roll, the first stomp thumping loudly into the dirt, but the next came soon after, barely missing Darius' head by an inch, He actually felt the scratch of the course hairs against his cheek as he rolled away. Stomp after stomp, faster and faster, the Joro-Gumo was determined to crush Darius beneath her feet.

Peyton was flailing about, trying to throw the spiders off her body with a combination of slaps and kicks, but they managed to hold on. They hadn't advanced any farther up her body, as they had been heading towards her exposed throat, Peyton's wild movements forcing them to cling on, lest they be thrown away. Peyton fell against a tree that stood beside the path and began batting at the spiders on her thighs. She thrashed about on the trunk of the tree, trying desperately to remove the determined arachnids, then felt something break on the tree under her weight. Glancing behind her, she saw that she had snapped off a low-hanging branch and it now hung limply in the air, barely clinging to the tree by its bark. Quickly, Peyton snatched the branch off the tree and started using it as a bat on the spiders. It worked much more effectively than her fists had, because as she swung the branch like a golf club, the first spider she hit from her leg went sailing through the air, screeching. Peyton began to beat at the other spiders, using the branch to knock them as far away as possible.

Darius rolled aside once more as the Joro-Gumo tried to crush him, this time rolling to his feet. Diving through the air, Darius rolled beneath the monstrous spider and

looked up at the underside of its abdomen, clenching his blade in his hand, ready to slice open the beast's gut, but the Joro-Gumo bent at the waist and Darius saw the face of the woman-half glaring at him furiously through her spider-legs. The woman screeched at him, then reached out and grabbed him by the throat. She dragged him out from under her body and flung him through the air. Darius sailed several feet, then slammed into the trunk of a tree, sliding back down to the jungle floor. Before he could get his bearings, the Joro-Gumo sent a stream of transparent string-like substance flying toward him from her abdomen. The string splattered against Darius' wrist and slammed his hand that held the blade against the side of the tree. The string was strong and stuck like glue. Darius couldn't pull his hand free.

The Joro-Gumo spat another stream of webbing at Darius, this time catching his legs. Darius was immobile. He tried to free himself from the webs, tugging furiously with his only free hand, but was unable to do anything but watch the Joro-Gumo slowly approach, ready to make its kill.

Peyton knocked the last of the spiders from her body, panting heavily from the exertion. She held the branch like it was a Louisville Slugger, ready to knock one out of the park. Then she saw one of the spiders running toward her again, screeching its high-pitched screech. Peyton scowled at it and, when it was close enough, raised her foot and crunched it loudly beneath her sneaker.

The Joro-Gumo, inches away from Darius' face, heard the crunch and whirled around to look at Peyton, clicking questioningly. It saw Peyton lift her shoe and look at the black and green mess that was now splattered against the

sole of her shoe and all over the ground. "Ugh!" Peyton said, feeling like she might throw up. Then she looked up and saw Darius pinned to the tree and the Joro-Gumo staring at her. The spider-woman screeched loudly, angrier than it had been so far. It pushed away from Darius and began to run toward Peyton, moving faster and faster. Peyton was frozen with terror as the giant half-spider, half-woman, bore down on her, claws extended, mandibles dripping poison, screeching wildly.

Darius quickly tried to pry the blade from his imprisoned hand, tugging and pulling as hard as he could. He pulled desperately, the knife moving slowly, so slowly! He wouldn't get it free in time! As the Joro-Gumo sped at Peyton, she raised her branch and planted the base of it against the tree from which it had broken, the sharp tip now pointing directly at the fast approaching monster. As the Joro-Gumo grew close, inches away and ready to crush Peyton under her weight, Peyton leaped aside and let the monster slam into the tree, and the branch Peyton had positioned there. The monster slashed at her as she dove aside, catching Peyton's arm with its wicked claws. Peyton cried out, but was safe from being crushed and killed at that moment. She heard the Joro-Gumo screeching loudly, sounding like it was in pain. Looking back over her shoulder, clutching her bleeding arm, Peyton saw the Joro-Gumo stagger away from the tree, a long branch now implanted in its stomach. The monster screeched wildly in pain and rage. It suddenly spotted Peyton and hissed at her. Then it wrapped its long fingers around the part of the branch that still stuck out and, with a sharp tug and a brief screech, yanked the wood from its belly. It threw the branch aside and began to approach

Peyton once more, clicking dangerously. Suddenly, the clicking stopped, it stopped moving closer. It began to teeter on its eight legs. Then it went limp and collapsed, falling sideways and sprawling all over the pathway, legs splaying out in all directions.

Breathing heavily, Peyton rose to her feet, still holding her wounded arm. She edged closer, unsure of what happened, expecting the creature to rise up and attack, but as she drew closer, she realized that it was dead. The giveaway being the familiar handle of a blade embedded in the base of the creature's skull.

Peyton looked over at Darius, who was still stuck to the tree by the creature's web, twenty feet away. He had thrown the blade with all the force he could manage. He was taking a deep, calming breath, watching the monster as its legs began to twitch in death. Then he looked at Peyton.

"A little help, please?" he called out.

Peyton stared for a moment, in shock, then blinked herself back to reality. "Oh, right. Right. Yeah. Hang on." She looked around for something she could use to cut Darius free, but found nothing. Then her eyes landed on the handle of the blade in the Joro-Gumo's brain. Peyton took a deep breath, then reached down and took hold of the handle. With a sickening sound of metal scraping against bone, Peyton pulled the blade free. Thick greenish-black blood began to ooze from the wound. Suddenly, Peyton heard the screeches of the smaller spiders from behind her and she spun around to face them, holding Darius' blade ready, but the small spiders ignored her. They ran around her and crawled over their dead mother. Peyton watched them for a moment, but then

realized what they were doing. They were devouring their mother's corpse.

Rushing to the edge of the path, Peyton leaned into the bushes and vomited. When she was done, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and took a deep breath. Then, without looking back at the spiders, she hurried over to Darius. Darius was looking at her with concern. A look she was beginning to know from him all too well.

"Are you okay?" Darius asked. "Your arm. You're hurt."

"I'll be fine," Peyton said as she began to saw at the webs that bound Darius' wrist. She cut his hand free, then moved on to his ankles. When he was loose, she stood back up and handed his blade back.

"Thank you," Darius said.

Peyton suddenly threw her arms around Darius and hugged him tight. She began to shake, all the nerves and fear finally catching up with her. Darius held her close, remaining silent while she quivered in his arms.

"Okay," Peyton said into Darius' shoulder. "Okay. Next time, I'll listen to you. No more talking to strangers."

Darius smiled. "It's okay. We're fine. But we should move. The Joro-Gumo's blood might attract other creatures."

The embrace was over and Peyton began to regain some control, her quivering no longer so severe. Darius sheathed his blade once more and they carried on, walking around the corpse of the Joro-Gumo, making sure to give it and her hungry children a wide berth.

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Azrael sped through the sky, his rotten dragon-like wings still carrying him forward over the endless Tartarus with great speed. He felt the wind in his face and, momentarily, was distracted from his pain. The ceaseless, almost unbearable pain that scorched him from within, burning away his very being, leaving nothing behind but a rotten corpse of putrified flesh and bone. He gritted his teeth as a fresh bout of fire coursed through his body, so strong that he very nearly passed out. He actually began to drift closer toward Tartarus' surface, the pain so strong that he lost focus on staying in the air, but he suddenly came to his senses and pushed aside the pain, flapping his wings harder to push himself higher into the sky, racing after Darius and Peyton. He had come so far, worked for so long, he was not about to allow himself to be beaten by falling into Tartarus and allowing the unfathomable creature to look into his soul. With everything he had done, he knew Tartarus would take him in an instant, given the opportunity. Tartarus had taken human souls for much less.

Not wanting to think about an eternity trapped in darkness and tormented by memories, Azrael changed his train of thought and instead focussed on Peyton.

Ah, Peyton Paradisa, he thought with longing. Her soul was so precious, so valuable, yet neither she nor Darius knew why. That would come as a surprise when they found out, and they undoubtedly would. Azrael thought of all the hundreds of souls he had ripped from their mortal shells over the pads century, thought of the brief feeling of relief he had when he consumed one. He could feel them all, every soul, deep inside his own. Sometimes, he

could hear them screaming, but they were inconsequential. Peyton was all that mattered. He had only consumed the others in his search for her.

Thinking of her, Azrael began to move faster.

HUNTED

The sun was now rising over the Chthonic Island. Darius and Peyton had walked for some time after encountering the Joro-Gumo, but nothing eventful had happened since. They had heard things moving in the jungle, but seen nothing. It seemed Eve's warning to stay on the path was a wise one, as many creatures seemed to wander through the deeper parts of the jungle, searching for prey. Peyton had looked through a gap in the trees at one point as the sun rose above the island and seen a creature in the distance that looked like it was made up entirely of human skeletons, hundreds of them, mashed together to form a gigantic creature that lumbered through the jungle aimlessly. Darius strongly suggested that they remain out of its sight, lest they wanted their own bones to join the mass.

Eventually, the path was cut in two by a river. It was a relatively small river and looked fairly narrow, but they were still dubious about approaching it. However, they could see the path start up again on the other side.

"Well, we're still on the path, right?" Peyton asked. "I don't see anything around."

Darius was looking in all directions, not taking any chances. "It should be safe to cross. If it's fresh, maybe you should drink, as well."

"Is water safe to drink here? I mean, there isn't any sort of supernatural bacteria or anything I should be scared of, is there?" Peyton asked. But she was desperately thirsty and began to walk towards the river anyway. Darius moved with her, his curved blade already in hand. They approached the edge of the river with caution, looking all around for any sign of danger. Peyton reached the water and knelt down on the riverbank. She carefully reached out and touched the water with her index finger, swirling it around in a figure-8, her eyes scanning the opposite shore, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she pulled her hand back and sniffed the water on her finger.

"Smells fine," she said to Darius. Then she licked her finger. "Tastes fine, too. It's fresh."

Feeling satisfied, but no less wary, Peyton cupped both hands into the small river and brought the water up to her mouth. She gulped it down steadily, then retrieved more water for another drink.

"We probably shouldn't stay still too long, should we?" Peyton asked Darius over her shoulder.

"No, probably not," he agreed.

Peyton cupped one last handful of water and washed it over the deep scratches on her arm, souvenirs from the giant spider-woman. The water ran down her arm as she washed the wound, causing the blood to run down her arm. From her arm, the blood flowed down over her elbow, down the length of her forearm and over the back of her hand. Finally, it trickled down her fingers until it

dripped from her fingertips, falling silently through the air until it dripped into the river with a minuscule splash that neither Peyton nor Darius could hear.

"Okay, let's go," Peyton said, standing up and patting her hands dry on her jeans.

She and Darius began to wade into the river. The water only ever got as deep as their knees, even out in the middle. The flow was gentle and the river floor was smooth, easy to navigate with no rocks or sinkholes to trip them up. They were beginning to climb out onto the opposite riverbank when Peyton heard something that sounded like a bird chirping. She turned around to look over the river, but couldn't see anything. It was just as still and silent as it had been before. Peyton turned back to the path and kept walking.

The chirp happened again. A short burst of musical notes, right behind them. Darius heard it that time, too. They both turned around, only their feet still in the water, and searched for the source of the noise. All Peyton saw in the river was a spot where circles of water were rippling out, as though someone had dropped a stone.

Suddenly, silently, something lifted its head out of the water directly in front of them, not three feet away. Only the top part of the head showed, though, everything from the nose down remaining submerged. It had a rounded head, similar to that of a dog, but with a much shorter snout. The ears were long and pointed, twitching as they moved around, listening for movement. The creature's fur was wet and sleek, but thick and grayish-black. The eyes were a light shade of orange, smart and calculating, watching Peyton and Darius curiously. It lifted its head farther out of the water, revealing itself up to its chest, the

fur there changing from grayish-black to a dark white plume. It's mouth seemed to be smiling, the mouth-line spanning the width of the jaw and up the cheeks to present a wide intelligent smile, the ears still moving from side to side. It cocked its head to the right and considered Peyton and Darius, uttering yet another chirp, but came no closer.

Peyton began to back away from it, slowly stepping backwards out of the water. She didn't know what the smiling animal was, but she knew from the previous experience that she wanted no part of it. However, Darius grabbed her elbow and held her in place.

"Stay very still," he whispered as quietly as he could. "Don't make any sudden movements."

Peyton froze and kept both eyes on the creature in the water as it stared back at her. It seemed fairly harmless and reminded Peyton of a dog or large cat. Its face seemed friendly enough. Even if the cunning smile on its face was strangely unsettling and gave Peyton the creeps.

"What is it?" she asked Darius under her breath.

"Ahuizotl," Darius replied. "Don't move. And stay quiet."

Peyton and Darius watched the Ahuizotl as it remained motionless in the river. Time passed and it seemed like the three of them were in an intense staring contest, but as they all continued to stare at one another, the Ahuizotl began to come closer. It moved slowly, moving forward with the caution of a dog being scorned by its owner, but that eerie smile was still on its face. It began to emerge from the river, first its front legs, which were muscular and strong. The feet looked almost like hands, with bony fingers sinking into the mud as it walked, sharp claws raking the ground. Then the body rose out of the water,

dripping wet, followed by the rear legs, which were much like the front legs, but looked much more powerful, built for swimming and running. The creature was similar in size to a German Shepherd, standing tall and proud, like nothing could hurt it. It continued to come closer, its long tail dragging in the water, the tip still submerged. It walked slowly up to Darius and Peyton, sniffing with its short, wide nose. Darius, with his blade in his hand, still didn't move. Peyton stayed as still as she possibly could, certain that the Ahuizotl could hear her heart beating. The creature looked directly into Peyton's eyes, sniffing the air again. It suddenly made a chirping noise, somewhere between a bird chirp and a cat's meow. The closest thing Peyton could think of in similarity to the chirping noise was a short, loud, high-pitched, purr.

The creature was almost entirely out of the river now, only its tail remaining half-submerged. The Ahuizotl was within a foot of Peyton now, sniffing with interest in her direction. Every instinct Peyton had was screaming at her to turn around and run as fast and as far as she could, without looking back, but she stayed still, waiting, praying that the animal would get bored and go back to the river. Instead, it seemed to just be staring at her. Then its eyes began to drift away from her face. They lowered and panned to the side, now looking about a foot below Peyton's eyes. Peyton suddenly realized that it was staring at something on her arm. Slowly, carefully, Peyton moved her head, ever so cautiously, to look down at her arm. At the spot where the Ahuizotl was staring, she saw the wound she took from the Joro-Gumo. She saw the blood that still marked the flesh. The open gash that was still raw and full with drying blood. The animal that stood

before her now, as large as a big dog, was staring directly at the blood. In her fear, Peyton's hand twitched.

The Ahuizotl suddenly bared its teeth and growled, sounding now like a tiger. Its teeth were small, but looked razor-sharp and numerous in numbers. The creature finally lifted its tail out of the water and arched it over its back, like a scorpion tail ready to strike, but on the end of the tail, instead of a stinger, was another hand. It was a horrible, gray, scaly four-fingered hand, with wickedly hooked claws at the end of each finger, now curving in Peyton's direction. Faster than Peyton could see, the tail suddenly shot forward, the hand reaching for her throat and the sharp claws flashing in the light.

Before the hand could touch her, though, Darius moved with all the speed a Reaper could muster and slashed his blade through the air. The Ahuizotl suddenly seemed to scream as something splashed down into the water. Looking down, Peyton saw the severed tail-hand floating in the river, blood pooling around it. The Ahuizotl shrunk away from Peyton and hissed ferociously at Darius. Then it lunged forward at Peyton, reaching out with the claws on its fore-legs, but Darius swung his blade again and drove it down into the monster's head, up to the hilt. The creature yelped once, then fell limp. Darius threw it off, freeing his blade, the animal splashing noisily into the river, where it bobbed briefly beneath the surface, then bounced up to float gently on the current.

Peyton breathed a deep sigh of relief. Darius wiped the blood from his blade on his pants-leg, turning to Peyton.

"Can we go now?" Peyton asked.

"Yes, let's. The sooner we get to Fate, the better."

Peyton then glanced up at the treetops overhanging the

river and suddenly felt her mouth go very dry. "Um, Darius?"

Darius turned to look where Peyton was staring. He slowly surveyed the branches above, knowing instantly that they were in trouble. High above, the trees were filled entirely with dozens and dozens of Ahuizotl. Perched and hanging from branches, all glaring down at the two of them growling and hissing and beginning to climb down, teeth bared and claws extended.

"Run!" Darius yelled, grabbing Peyton by the arm. They both turned and started sprinting along the path. The Ahuizotl took chase, growling and barking and snarling, some running down to the jungle floor to pursue them, while others stayed up in the trees, following through the branches, jumping and swinging like carnivorous monkeys. Darius and Peyton ran as fast as they could, hearing the drum of the Ahuizotl feet behind them.

One suddenly leaped out of the branches ahead, landing on the path before them. It crouched low and snarled at the two of them as they ran towards it. It crouched down on its haunches, baring its teeth and swinging its tail from side to side, eyes darting between the two it planned on tearing apart. With one last snarl, it seemed to decide on who it would kill first and lunged with its teeth bared right for Darius. Darius quickly fell to his knees and slid along the ground, raising his curved blade as he skidded along. As the Ahuizotl flew over his head, he stuck his blade into its belly and cut it from sternum to stomach. It sailed overhead and Darius, with one fluid movement, rose back to his feet and kept running beside Peyton, while the gutted animal landed on the ground behind and rolled along, entrails spilling across the path. Its brethren ran

over it, barking and snapping at the heels of their quarry.

"Keep going!" Darius yelled over the snarls of the Ahuizotl. Peyton glanced over her shoulder and saw a sea of teeth and claws in hot pursuit. She looked ahead and saw that the jungle suddenly came to an end, the path leading out into a large open space of long grass. She and Darius burst out of the jungle and into the clearing. In the center of the clearing there was the base of the volcano, towering high above, black smoke rising aimlessly into the air from the top. Ahead of them, in the side of the volcano, there was an opening that lead underground into complete darkness.

"In there!" Darius yelled, pointing at the opening.

Suddenly, from the tree line burst the Ahuizotl, having massed in quantity and now numbered in the hundreds. They exploded from the pathway, but also launched from the trees for yards across, sending leaves flying as they burst through bushes and treetops, barking and growling and snapping, drool flying from their still smiling mouths.

Darius and Peyton ran as fast as they could toward the opening in the side of the volcano, Peyton expecting one of the creatures to tackle her to the ground at any second and devour her. They reached the opening and Darius ushered Peyton inside. She ducked her head and hurried into the cave. Darius glanced over his shoulder at the approaching Ahuizotl and his eyes widened in shock. They had approached so fast and were now so close. Several were diving through the air towards him, mouths wide and teeth ready to bite through his neck. Darius turned back to the opening and dove headfirst inside. He tumbled down the steep incline, rolling over and over, until he hit the floor and came to a stop at Peyton's feet.

She bent down to help him up, ready to keep running deeper into the long, dark tunnel. As Darius climbed to his feet, he looked back up at the opening to the cave.

"Wait, wait," he said.

"But they're coming!" Peyton cried.

She looked up to the opening and stopped. The creatures were out there, but they were now yelping as though in pain or frightened. As Peyton and Darius watched, they could see the shadows of the Ahuizotl moving around outside, then they suddenly vanished, their yelps quickly growing farther and farther away. Then everything was silent. Darius turned to Peyton.

"They won't come here," he said.

"Where are we now?" Peyton asked, wondering what could be fearsome enough in this cave to make the monsters of the jungle run in terror.

"We're beneath the volcano," Darius explained. "Fate is here."

*****

Azrael pulled the scythe from the corpse of the creature that had made the mistake of thinking he was its next meal. He continued to walk along the path, letting his scythe evaporate in his hand as he walked. He didn't need it right now. He knew Darius and Peyton would stick to the path. It was the safest place to be before reaching the cave. The rest of the jungle was teeming with monsters that were powerful enough to kill even a Reaper. Only the smartest creatures would think to check the path for prey, but Azrael was hunting a prey of his own. And he was getting closer.

THE TRUTH REVEALED

Darius led the way down the cave-tunnel, with Peyton staying close behind him. With every step, it grew darker and darker. They moved slowly, their footing unsure as loose stones moved underfoot, threatening to slip from beneath them and cause them to fall. The tunnel was narrow, small enough for Peyton to keep a hand on the walls on either side of her for help keeping her balance. Darius stared ahead with determination. They were close. So close, now. Fate was only at the end of the tunnel. Fate was the only one who could help, now, their last desperate hope. If Fate refused to help, refused to change the design… Darius didn't know what else he could do to save Peyton. He looked over his shoulder back at her. He still couldn't see her fate. All he could see was a young woman, scared to find herself in such a fantastical situation, running for her life in a world she didn't even know existed a day earlier, hunted and very nearly killed by creatures she thought belonged in myth and storybooks. She was brave, braver than he had ever imagined any mortal could be in her situation, Darius had to admit. She had even fared well with the monsters they

had come up against, especially the Joro-Gumo. Darius was impressed and even…

Darius looked ahead again. He couldn't let himself start thinking like that. Not now. He had to remain focused. Thinking about Peyton in any way other than how to keep her alive was a waste of his energy. But still, his mind sometimes wandered.

And what do you think would happen, anyway? he thought, sardonically. *You would save her life and then you could be together? That you would take her out to dinner, meet her family, propose, get married, have children? You're a monster to her. No different than the creatures outside. You'll save her, take her home, and never see her again.*

"Hey, look," Peyton said, snapping Darius out of his misery. "I think the tunnel is ending."

She was right. The tunnel began to open out and there was light beginning to shine from up ahead from within a large opening. Darius and Peyton reached the end of the tunnel and found themselves standing at the entrance to a huge chamber. The ground they now stood on was flat, but quickly gave out to an enormous abyss. Darius leaned forward and looked down the gigantic hole, but couldn't see the bottom as the darkness quickly swallowed the light. Ahead of them stood a narrow stone bridge, seeming to have formed naturally. It stretched out over the abyss toward a stone island that had formed over the abyss, held up by a combination of stone walkways and giant pillars that vanished into the darkness above and below. The light was coming from the center of the island.

"Something is moving over there," Peyton whispered.

There was, indeed, something moving around on the island. Its shape stood out against the light whenever it moved. It seemed to be walking back and forth, like it was in a hurry, but had nowhere to go.

"That must be Fate," Darius whispered back. "Let's go."

The bridge was only wide enough for them to walk one at a time, so Darius led the way. There were no handrails to keep them from falling, so they moved carefully. Peyton kept repeating to herself under her breath, "Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down…"

"Are you alright?" Darius asked.

Peyton nodded and said, "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just… I'm not good with heights."

Darius glanced back at her and saw that she was walking rigidly, keeping her eyes straight ahead. "Put your hands on my shoulders," he told her. "It'll be easier to keep your balance. I'll guide you."

Peyton obliged and placed her hands on Darius' broad shoulders. She held tight, but Darius liked the feel of her touch. He quickly shook off the thought and continued on.

"Darius?" Peyton said.

"Yes, Peyton?"

"I don't remember if I said it already or not, but… Well, I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" Darius repeated. "For what?"

"What do you mean, 'for what?'" Peyton said. "For saving my life so many times, of course. You could have just let Voss kill me, but you didn't. You could have let Azrael take my soul, but you stopped him. You could have just walked away so many times, but you stuck it out with me. So, I just wanted to say… Thank you."

"You're not completely safe, yet," Darius replied. "We still need to convince Fate to help. Then we need to make sure Azrael can't come after you again. And then there's-"

"Darius, just accept my thanks, will you?" Peyton interrupted, smirking and rolling her eyes.

Darius couldn't help but smile. "Yes, I'm sorry. You're welcome, Peyton."

"Was that so hard?" Peyton teased.

They came to the end of the bridge and stepped onto the island. Peyton stepped from behind Darius to stand beside him, looking around. There wasn't much to look at, the entire cave being almost entirely shrouded in darkness, but there was a strange source of light coming from the center of the island. It seemed to be coming from a large pool, about twenty feet in diameter, that was submerged in the stone. It shone with an ethereal blue light, the rippling surface casting reflections of light on the stone pillars that surrounded them. The only other thing of interest on the island was a small person, running around the pool, occasionally stopping to stoop over the water and wave a hand in some fashion or another, then immediately stand up and carry on, repeating the process as they ran to and fro. The creature seemed to be constantly muttering, their voice echoing slightly in the large cave, but Peyton couldn't make out what they were saying. Darius stepped forward.

"Fate?" he called, but the person ignored him, continuing to go about their business. Darius cleared his throat and called out again, louder this time. "Excuse me, Fate!"

Suddenly, the person looked up at them. Peyton

realized that it was a woman. An ancient woman with thin white hair that hung wildly around her face. She wore a robe, almost the same as the one Azrael wore, but much shorter sleeves and no hood. Not to mention her robe was so filthy it looked gray and was torn in numerous places. Her face was wrinkled and decrepit, full of deep lines. The woman suddenly hurried toward them, shuffling quickly, scuffing her feet on the stone floor. She shuffled up to Darius and stuck her nose right in his face, standing on her toes to get a better look at him.

"It's Darius, the Reaper, finally come to see us," she said, talking very fast. Then she immediately said, "Yes-yes-yes, I can see that, what took him so long? Maybe he stopped for a snack, a drink, showed his friend the sights? No-no-no, that's not fair, you know what's out there, how difficult it is, how long they must have walked, we must be hospitable. Come in! Come in!" The woman then hurried back towards the pool, waving a hand for Darius and Peyton to follow.

Peyton and Darius looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Peyton leaned closer to Darius and whispered, "Is she okay?"

"I have no idea," Darius replied, sounding confused. "But I suppose we should go with her."

The woman had returned to her frenzied shuffle around the pool of illuminated water, stopping here and there to reach over the surface with her hands. Darius and Peyton approached her, watching with as much interest as caution, in case the strange woman decided they were no longer welcome.

"I'm sorry, but are you Fate?" Darius asked.

"Stupid Reaper, doesn't even know who we are," the

woman snarled, but then her voice suddenly turned sweet and she said, "You know they have all forgotten us, we are out of sight, out of mind, it's as simple as that. Yes, Reaper, we are Fate."

Darius and Peyton reached the same conclusion at the same moment. This woman, Fate, had clearly lost her mind. As they watched Fate, uncertain of what to do next, having discovered their savior was insane, the old woman seemed to spot something in the pool and hurried over to the place she was staring with twinkling eyes and leaned over it, cackling excitedly and clapping her hands, the sound echoing all around the cave.

"Oh, yes, they did it!" she cried. "I knew they would make the right choice, didn't I tell you? Yes-yes-yes, well done, you were right, this time. Enough cackling, you two, let's get to it."

Then Fate held her hands over the pool and slowly waved them around. The pool began to ripple beneath her position, suddenly glowing brighter, then quickly dimming again. Fate hurried away and began checking other spots in the pool. Darius tried again to get her attention.

"Fate, please, we must speak with you!" he called out.

"Then speak, Reaper, speak! We haven't got all day!"

"We've come to seek your help," Darius said, beginning to walk around the pool to follow Fate. "Azrael, the Father of Reapers, Master of Death, has turned on us. He has been stealing the souls of mortals and-"

"Good lord, does he ever shut up?" Fate interrupted. "Tell us something we *don't* know, Reaper! Don't listen to her, child, she doesn't mean anything by it. She has a

point, though, we know all of this, it's wasting time, time we - and they - don't have."

"If you know what has happened, then you know why we're here," Darius said.

Fate nodded, still staring into the pool. "Oh, yes, we know, alright, we know. You have come to save the mortal woman. Peyton!"

Peyton jumped when Fate shouted her name, but the woman was gesturing kindly to her, inviting her closer. Peyton obliged and walked around the pool to Fate's side. Fate reached out and took hold of Peyton's hands and held them tightly in her own wrinkled ones. She held them up close to her face, inspecting the palms. She didn't seem to be too concerned with being gentle, because she was turning and twisting Peyton's wrists and fingers as she studied them carefully, causing Peyton a little pain and a lot of discomfort. Fate then let go of Peyton's hands, reached up and took hold of Peyton's face, pinching her cheeks and turning her head from side to side while Peyton winced in pain.

"Oh, yes-yes-yes, yes, it's her alright, this mortal Peyton Paradisa, definitely her, no doubt-no doubt. Azrael has been looking for this one for a long-long-long time, oh yes, she is the one he wants. No, the one he *needs*, remember? The one he needs."

Fate suddenly snapped her attention back to the pool and gasped. She released Peyton's cheeks and hurried over to the spot that drew her attention. She held her hands out over the water again, shaking her head sadly and clucking her tongue with annoyance.

"That was a poor decision, indeed, yes-yes-yes. Very poor decision. Yes, that will not do them any favors after

they die, none at all. Tartarus will have them for sure, yes-yes-yes."

Darius' face had set in a mildly annoyed expression, like he wanted to say something to the old woman before him, but held back. Peyton decided she should deal with the lady. Her nursing education had given her a pretty decent bedside manner and she had a lot of patience when it came to dealing with people suffering from dementia. Peyton stepped up beside Fate again to speak with her.

"I'm sorry, Miss?" she began. Fate turned to look at her, momentarily surprised to be addressed. "Are you able to help us? My friend here, Darius, he's been trying to stop Azrael from taking my soul. And I certainly don't want Azrael to have it. Is there any chance you can help?"

Fate suddenly smiled and gave Peyton a look of pity. "Oh dear, dear-dear-dear. We know what Darius has brought you here for, but we cannot help. Not in the way he would like, no-no-no. The Reaper wants us to rewrite your fate, but that is impossible. We do not *write* fates. We do not control what happens to mortals."

Darius, surprised, stepped forward, his face suddenly shocked and desperate. "What? Of course you write the fates, you *are* Fate! You write what happens to mortals throughout their lives."

"Boy, do not tell us what it is we do when you have it all wrong," Fate snapped, suddenly bitter again. "We do not determine the outcome of the lives of mortals. We do not deign to control any creature. Why else would the Almighty have created free will amongst them? No-no-no, we do not control. We test. We arrange tests of the soul for mortals on Earth. Did you ever hear the phrase, 'everything happens for a reason?' Well, we are that

reason. Every choice, every decision, every act, every time you need to choose between right and wrong, hard or easy, love or power, that choice was placed in front of you because of us. We do not write the resolution, only the conflict. The choice, and the fate, is up to the mortal."

"But if you don't write the fates of mortals, how do you explain a Reaper's Sight?" Darius replied. "How can I see someone's ultimate fate if it isn't predetermined?"

Fate shook her head, clucking her tongue. "You see the destination of the path they currently walk. But they may choose another path at any time. The path twists and turns and has countless other paths to turn on to. It is not predetermined by anyone but the mortal walking that path."

Darius fell silent. He looked around the large cavern, shifting his gaze from Fate to Peyton to the pool and then wildly around the darkness, unsure of how to proceed.

"So," Peyton began. "You can't write a different ending for me? You can't make it so Azrael doesn't get my soul?"

Fate, suddenly kind again, smiled sweetly at Peyton. "I'm afraid not, my dear. That outcome is up to you. You will be faced with a choice. To save your soul. Or save everyone else's."

Peyton stepped back, away from Fate. "What? What do you mean?"

"There is a fork in the road you currently walk," Fate said, turning back to the pool. She cast her hands over the water and suddenly a swirling cloud of light rose off the surface and floated in the air before them. Peyton and Darius watched the light as it swirled around, watching it as Fate continued to speak. "You will face a test and you

will need to make a choice. It will be a hard choice. The hardest choice anyone could make." The swirling light began to take shape and Peyton could see three people standing in the image. She recognized one as herself and another as Darius, glowing, ethereal representations. The third was a figure in a long cloak, their face hidden beneath a dark hood. Peyton watched the images as they floated before her. Fate continued to speak.

"You will have to choose," she was saying. "Azrael wants your soul and nothing anyone does will keep him from it. Not even Darius. The world is in peril, my dear. Not just the mortal world, but our own as well. The lives of all mortals, spirits and Angels depend on you. And your choice will decide the fate of countless souls. On one hand, you can choose to escape Azrael's clutches, run, hide, stay away forever. Darius would undeniably help you do so, but sacrifice his own soul in the process. He fears his own fate, because of his mortal decisions. And in saving you, by himself, he will lose himself to the fate he so fears. And once Darius is no longer with you, nothing will stop Azrael from taking your soul by force."

The glowing light that was Darius began to shimmer and fade, breaking up into nothing and slowly falling back to the water's surface.

"But then, you can save him, Peyton," Fate whispered. "You can save everyone. But you will not like the means."

"How?" Peyton asked. "How can I save everyone? I'm only one person."

"Ah, if Azrael takes your soul by force, he will be too powerful. An unstoppable force of destruction and chaos. But you have the key," Fate grinned. "You have the one

thing that Azrael wants above all else. To save Darius and everyone you have ever loved, cared for, met or even seen on the street, you must offer your soul to Azrael."

"No!" Darius shouted, his powerful voice echoing through the cave.

Peyton only stared at Fate. "What?" she asked, her throat suddenly very dry.

Fate was nodding. "Oh yes, I'm afraid so."

In the image of swirling light, the light that shaped Azrael reached toward the light that was Peyton. Light-Peyton turned to face him, offering herself over. Light-Azrael reached his hand through her chest and then she suddenly faded away in a swirling mist, leaving only Azrael standing there.

"Giving yourself to Azrael is the only way, my dear," Fate said solemnly. "Once he has what he wants, he will be on the path to self-destruction. He will take many with him, destroy many lives. But many more will survive."

The light faded back into the pool and the representations were gone. Peyton felt sick. She wanted desperately to sit down and think, but there didn't seem to be anywhere for her to sit. She ran both of her hands through her hair, processing everything she had just been told.

"That can't happen," Darius said. "Those can't be her only choices. Either way, Azrael gets her soul!"

"Yes, but the manner in which he obtains it will make all the difference," Fate explained. "A soul stolen and a soul given are very different energy sources indeed. Yes-yes-yes, listen to us, you fool, we know! Azrael will have Peyton's soul, one way or the other. The only thing you can do for your precious mortal now is ensure that her

soul remains pure and selfless. By sacrificing herself to Azrael, she will be protected. She will be trapped, yes, but safe. But why are we talking to you, Reaper? The decision remains with Peyton. It is her choice. Pointless self-preservation? Or selfless sacrifice of her soul?"

"Azrael will never have her soul," Darius swore.

"Stop," Peyton suddenly said. "Please, just… stop."

Darius and Fate fell silent and watched her as she folded her arms over her chest and chewed on the nail of her thumb, struggling with her offered choices. Peyton wasn't sure what she would do. Save herself? Or save the world? Like a lot of people, she had once or twice envisioned herself saving the world in some courageous and noble way, but that was only ever in fantasy. A daydream. This was very, very real. She turned to Fate.

"Why me?" she asked. "Why does it have to be me that Azrael takes? What's so important about my soul?"

"Ohhhh," Fate suddenly sighed. "Oh, she doesn't know. No one told her, of course she doesn't know, how could she?"

"What?" Peyton pressed. "What don't I know?"

"Dear-dear-dear," Fate muttered, shuffling around the pool. "How to explain, how to explain? Just tell her, already, it can't be that difficult. She looks just like her, how can no one have told her already? The Reaper doesn't even remember her. How can he forget her? Stupid Reaper, he was too caught up in his transformation to pay attention."

"Wait, who do I look like?" Peyton asked. "Darius, what is she talking about?"

Darius shook his head. "I-I don't know. But… Ever since I saw you, I've felt like we've met before, but I

could never remember where. I don't…"

"See?" Fate cackled, pointing at Darius. "He has forgotten! Should we tell him? Of course, we must, the mortal must know and so must her guardian."

"What is it?" Peyton begged.

"Shekinah," Fate stated simply.

Darius felt it hit him with the force of a speeding truck. His eyes shot wide open and his jaw dropped. He stared at Peyton and immediately knew why she looked so familiar. He remembered the day Azrael came to him and made him a Reaper.

Darius had only just risen from his own dead body. The first thing he could remember after being shot was looking down at himself, his bleeding corpse lying on the ground, his former squad having already walked away. He turned around and came face to face with a handsome, green-eyed man, wearing a long dark cloak. Azrael.

Azrael had been smiling kindly, but Darius was still apprehensive. He didn't take a step back, didn't try to run. He only sighed at the man in the cloak and said, "I'm dead."

Azrael had nodded. "Yes, my friend. You have fallen victim to your own comrades during this time of war."

Darius nodded, letting it sink in. "So who are you?"

"I am Azrael, the Angel of Death," Azrael said. When Darius didn't react, Azrael seemed surprised, tilting his head to the side. "You aren't afraid?"

"I've seen many things during this war," Darius had said. "Many of which gave me nightmares, and all of which were far more terrifying than you, sir."

Azrael had laughed. "You are brave. Marvelous. Tell me, young Darius… What do you think waits for you on

the other side?"

Darius had been uncertain, but he was afraid then. He didn't want to think about what he faced after passing on. He had killed people, outside of battle and in. He had sinned. He feared for his soul.

"I don't want to go to Hell, sir," Darius had said, almost pleading, but Azrael grinned back at him.

"Perhaps you won't have to. I don't know what awaits you beyond this world, but I'm going to make you an offer. You can pass on to the other side and take your chances. Or you can join me. You can become a Reaper and help me guide the souls of the deceased, much like yourself, on to the next world. You will never grow old, you will never get sick, and you will never die. What will it be?"

Darius had agreed immediately. He never gave his decision any thought. All he knew and cared about at the time was that he didn't want to go to Hell. The next thing he knew, he was in darkness. Azrael still stood before him, but everything else had been extinguished. He couldn't even feel the ground beneath his feet. It was as though he was floating.

Suddenly, he threw back his head and screamed as pain coursed through his entire body. It was a pain like he had never known. Every part of him felt as though it was being burned and flayed. He had writhed in the darkness, Azrael standing silently over him, watching. As Darius screamed, emphasizing every ounce of pain he was enduring, he suddenly looked up and saw a light. It was small, at first, but growing. It seemed to be getting closer. As the light drew near, Darius could see a person standing at its center. A woman. With glowing yellow hair and

bright green eyes. She was smiling at him kindly, her eyes filled with sorrow at the pain he was enduring.

"Please," Azrael said to the woman. "Grant this soul the power he needs to help others find their way. Please help me make him a Reaper, Shekinah."

The woman nodded once at Azrael. Then she reached out slowly and placed her hand on Darius' forehead. Suddenly, the pain stopped and Darius' entire field of vision became nothing but a bright, blinding, white light.

Darius snapped out of the memory, his eyes darting between Fate and Peyton. He had all but forgotten his transformation into a Reaper. The pain had been so intense, he must have repressed the entire experience. Including her.

"Shekinah," he whispered. "You do look just like her."

"Can someone please tell me who Shekinah is?" Peyton said, sounding frustrated.

"Shekinah, my dear," Fate began, "is one of the Archangels. One of the few who had a hand assisting in the creation of this universe. You, Peyton Paradisa, are her descendant."

"Excuse me?" Peyton said.

"Thousands of years ago, when humanity was still only an infant," Fate explained, "the Archangels and the Almighty realized that humanity was erratic. Unpredictable, due to the combination of free will they were given by their creator and the early onset of knowledge given by His daughter, Eve. Heaven was in turmoil, trying to understand the actions of humanity and how best to guide them to Heaven at the end of their lives, but coming up with no real evidence or solid theories. Finally, the Almighty came up with the idea that He and a

few of the Archangels would descend to Earth and live a human lifetime. They would start as children, they would grow, they would love, hate, age and die. All the things that all humans do in life. The only way to understand humanity was to become a part of it. So, they came to Earth. They allowed themselves to be born to humans. They grew and they learned. Shekinah was one of them. She, and almost all of the others, gave children. When they all died, the Archangels returned to heaven with all of the knowledge they had gained. But their offspring remained on Earth. Those children grew and bore children of their own. And then *they* had children, and so on. The bloodlines have continued to this very day. Those descendants bare certain qualities that their Heavenly ancestors possess. Those bloodlines, the ones that have survived for thousands of years and are still existent today, are the very souls that Azrael has been hunting. He seeks them out, like a shark seeks out blood in the ocean, and he rips those souls out of the mortal shell. Azrael needs the souls of the Archangel descendants. Those souls are half-human, half-Archangel. The humans whose souls he has taken know nothing of this, of course. They were targeted for no reason other than their ancestry and the power lying dormant within their souls. Shekinah is your ancestor, Peyton Paradisa. The bloodline continued down on your father's side, leaving only you upon his death. You are the last surviving member of Shekinah's bloodline and the only chance Azrael has of gaining the final power he needs."

Peyton simply stared at Fate, like she thought the woman was talking complete lunacy and that the safest course of action would be to simply flee. She suddenly

scoffed in derision and started shaking her head, staring at Fate.

"You're crazy," she grinned. "There's no way. No way."

"Why did you become a nurse, dear?" Fate asked.

"What?"

"Why did you become a nurse?" Fate repeated. "Why did you decide you wanted to devote your life to helping others, to saving lives?"

Peyton frowned. "Does that matter right now?"

Fate nodded fervently. "Oh, yes, it matters a great deal. What made you want to be a nurse?"

Peyton sighed in frustration. "I actually wanted to be a doctor. I got into med-school and everything at Harvard, but I didn't qualify for any full scholarships. I got a partial scholarships, but since father died when I was young, my mother didn't have the money to pay the tuition. She did what she could, worked two jobs just to get me as far as I got, but it still wasn't enough. So I figured the only thing left to do was become a nurse. It was the only thing left I could do to help people the way I wanted to."

"And why was helping people so important to you?"

Peyton shrugged. "I just… I always wanted to be in medicine. I wanted to help people. I never really considered doing anything else."

"That, my dear, is the part of Shekinah that is in you," Fate said. "That need to help people? That is the piece of Heaven that resides in your soul."

There was silence as Peyton considered Fate's words. It still seemed ridiculous to her, but who was she to argue with Fate?

"Okay," Peyton said, not really knowing what to say.

"Okay. So… I'm part Angel?"

"Archangel, dear," Fate corrected kindly.

"It's a lot to take in," Darius said. "Take your time, if you need it."

Peyton nodded, looking down at the floor by Darius' feet, not sure what to think or do or say anymore. She turned her gaze on the blue pool and stared into the shimmering light within its depths. Her first thought was to say both Fate and Darius were psychotic and that there was no way she was part Angel, or Archangel, or anything other that completely human, but she knew there was no point in arguing with them. Especially Fate. The way Peyton saw it, if anyone knew for sure what was what, it would be the being that knew absolutely everything about everyone.

"So, what is it about Shekinah that makes me so important to Azrael?" Peyton asked.

Darius explained. "Shekinah is the one who made it possible for human souls to gain entry to Heaven. That's why it was her who helped Azrael transform me. Reapers need a part of her power to guide souls to the next world. She is the key. Her power is what attracts the good souls of humanity to Heaven. That power is dormant inside you. If Azrael gains that power and unlocks it…"

"Then all the souls of humanity will go to him," Fate finished, nodding.

"He'll become a God," Darius whispered. "Countless souls, a continuous source of pure energy? He'll be unstoppable."

"And that's why he wants my soul?" Peyton asked. "So he can become the new God?"

"Yes, dear," Fate said. "So now you see why your

choice is so important. Azrael has grown bitter over time, has come to hate humanity. He resents them for currying so much favor with Heaven. He does not want to be the Angel of Death, anymore. He wishes to return to Heaven. But not to bend on one knee and pay homage to the powers that be. He wants to rule. He will be a tyrannical deity. He will all but destroy the world."

FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

Peyton stood at the edge of the island, staring out at the endless nothing, resting against one of the giant stone pillars. Darius, remaining by the pool with Fate, his arms crossed over his chest, wanted to go see if she was okay, but knew that she needed time alone. She needed to process. She had been through more than most in the course of a day, only to discover that the fate of the universe rested on her shoulders. One thing Darius was certain of, though, was that Peyton would not have to lose her soul to Azrael. He would find a way. There had to be another choice. No matter what Fate said.

Darius tore his gaze from Peyton and looked back at the pool. Fate scurried around him, seemingly oblivious to the despondency of Darius and, especially, Peyton. Fate continued her task of testing humanity, giving them choices to make that would ultimately lead to their deaths and their fates. Whatever Fate could see in the pool, Darius was blind to it. He frowned at the calm water, seeing nothing but the ethereal light shining up into the sepulchral cave. He continued to stare into the water, thinking hard, trying to figure out if there was anything

else he could do, if there was any way around the destiny that Fate had foreseen for Peyton. The pool's light shimmered on his face as he frowned down at it, the blue light shifting the shadows of his features on his face, reflecting in his dark eyes.

"What are you doing?" Fate said. Darius started to respond, but then Fate kept talking and he realized that she was talking to herself again. "That's too easy, they know better than that. Ah, but they haven't been tempted like this before, this could test them well. I for one feel certain they will give in to temptation if it presents itself. No, he'll be fine. Let's see what he does."

Then Fate fell silent and began shuffling around the pool once more. Darius tried to think of how he could help Peyton now. Fate had obviously gone off the deep end long ago, maybe she could be wrong about Peyton and her choices. But who was left to help? Eve couldn't stop Azrael. Charon refused to get involved. And where was Heaven in this? If the fate of everyone on Earth and in Heaven depended entirely on Peyton, then why wasn't anyone getting involved?

"Darius?"

Darius looked up from the pool and saw Peyton walking slowly towards him, her hands shoved into her jeans pockets. Darius walked around the pool to meet her. She looked dejected, beaten. She didn't seem to stand as tall as she did before. Darius looked into her eyes and suddenly realized that the blue in her irises was also flecked with green. The green that all Angels seemed to have in their eyes.

"Darius, I think…" Peyton began, but seemed to falter. She took a quick breath and started over. "I *know* what I

need to do."

Darius knew what she was trying to say before she could say it. He was already shaking his head, denying her decision. "No. No, Peyton, no, you can't give Azrael your soul. If you give him what he wants, he'll have the power to annihilate Earth and Heaven. Your soul inside him is a conduit for all the souls on Earth, he can't be allowed to have it. He can't be allowed to wield that power."

"But you heard what Fate said," Peyton argued. "If he takes my soul by force, then he'll be that much more powerful. But if I give it to him, then the rest of the world has a chance. You might be able to beat him. You and Eve and everyone else, you could all overpower him."

"He'd still have your soul, Peyton," Darius said sadly. "Do you understand what that means? It's not like you would just fall asleep and not know what's going on around you. You would be trapped in a dark place deep inside Azrael's own soul, where he would keep you locked away, able to see, to think, to feel, but unable to do anything. You would experience first hand everything Azrael does with that power, as though it was you personally committing each act of destruction. How can you think to do that to yourself?"

"Because I have to, Darius," Peyton snapped, suddenly angry. "How can I keep fighting when I know that resisting will only kill everyone else? But if giving my soul willingly means that I can save even a few people, Angels or mortals, then I have to do it. Can't you understand that?"

Darius, overcome with a sad desperation he had never known, found himself lost for words. He knew Peyton

was right, but he didn't want her to be. He glanced wildly around the cave again, looking from Peyton to the pool to Fate herself, who was still shuffling around the pool in a ceaseless frenzy, completely ignoring the two of them.

"Please, Peyton," Darius begged. "Please. Don't do this. Just… just give me one last chance. We can… We can go to Heaven. We can speak to Shekinah. She must be able to help. She has to! How can Heaven just stand by and let this happen?"

"This is Peyton's test, Peyton's choice," Fate sang from the pool. "Heaven will not interfere with the choices of mortals. Free will and all that."

"Damn free will!" Darius shouted. "Heaven faces extermination as much as Earth does and they won't do anything? This isn't just about allowing mortals to make their own decisions, this is about the entire universe! Humans, Angels, everyone will be destroyed if something isn't done! It can't be like this! It can't! It…"

Darius trailed off, suddenly exhausted. He seemed to deflate, his shoulders slumping and his head hanging down. He lifted his hands and ran them over his short hair, groaning in frustration and desperation. Peyton stepped closer and gently held his arm, squeezing encouragingly. Darius slowly looked up at her. For the first time in over two-hundred years, he could feel tears welling up in his eyes. Peyton smiled kindly, offering Darius support and her eyes expressing more comfort and gratitude than any amount of words ever could.

"If you are planning on allowing Azrael to take your soul," Fate chimed, "then I suggest you leave this island as quickly as you can."

"Why?" Peyton asked. "Azrael is probably coming to

us, right? Why not just wait for him?"

"Because, deary," Fate snapped, the angry side of her personality suddenly at the surface, "if a soul is free of its mortal shell anywhere near Tartarus for even an instant, then he might think that it has escaped from his depths and drag it back under. Tartarus runs all around, under and through this island, his power reaches far and wide. Mortals do not come here. Tartarus is unfamiliar with them. But a soul, he can recognize. And all the souls he knows are trapped inside of him. Is that what you want, mortal?"

"Maybe we better leave, then," Peyton said, looking back to Darius, thinking of the silently screaming face she had seen during their crossing to the island.

"But Azrael is likely to be back the way we came," Darius said. "We can't possibly get back to the boat without running into him."

"There is another way," Fate sang. "One needs only to ask Fate to show the way."

"You can get us out of here?" Peyton asked.

"Of course-of course-of course!" Fate cackled. "This way, this way!"

She gestured for them both to come closer. They walked over to her side at the pool and she grinned a toothy grin at them both. Then she turned to the pool and, taking a deep breath, blew one fast exhalation of breath at the water. The surface rippled like she had thrown a large stone into it and the glowing blue water suddenly swirled and swirled and became a small whirlpool, with no bottom in sight.

"Jump in, jump in, jump in!" she cried.

"Where does it go?" Darius asked.

"Back to Earth, fool, now go!"

Looking at Darius, Peyton shrugged. Then she stepped off the edge of the pool and jumped feet-first into the swirling vortex. There was a flash of light and she was gone. Darius moved to follow her, but suddenly felt a tight grip on his arm. He turned and saw Fate, the frail old woman who had lost her mind, holding him with surprising strength.

"Remember, Reaper," Fate began, sounding stern. "Remember what we told you. It is the choices made that determine one's fate. *Everyone's* choices will be respected and the outcome unchangeable. Remember."

Then she let go, stepping backwards, still staring at Darius with fierce eyes. Darius turned back to the pool and jumped in. A few moments passed where his entire field of vision was taken up by a bright blue light, spinning around and around. Then, suddenly, the light blinked out and he found himself a few feet above the ground, falling. He landed on his feet and looked around. Peyton stood nearby, leaning against a tree to regain her balance, the trip apparently having made her dizzy. Darius looked around at their surroundings.

"Where are we?" he asked aloud.

Peyton stood up straight and looked around as well. Then she turned to Darius. "Central Park, I think," she said.

They were standing in New York City's Central Park. From where they stood, Darius could see the lights of New York City at night, lighting up the otherwise dark sky. It must have been very late at night, given the fact that it was extremely dark and there was no one around.

"So, what now?" Peyton asked. "Should we just… wait

here for Azrael?"

She looked pale and Darius could see her hands were shaking. As though she realized he had noticed, Peyton folded her arms and hid her hands from view.

"Peyton," Darius began.

"Darius," Peyton snapped back. Then she sighed, realizing that she had sounded harsh. "Look. I know this isn't ideal. But like Fate said. It's my choice. I have to do this. But… Can I ask you to do a couple of things for me?"

"Yes, Peyton. Anything."

"Could you find my mom?" Peyton asked, sounding like she was close to crying. "I don't talk to her much anymore, being so busy at the hospital and everything. I just wanted… to let her know that I love her. And that I'm sorry I didn't visit or call more. She always felt guilty about not being able to afford Harvard for me, but I never blamed her. Could you let her know that? And no matter what happens after tonight, could you… Do you think you could…"

"I'll look out for her," Darius said softly. "To the best of my ability, I'll make sure she is safe. And that she knows what you did for the world."

Peyton nodded. It seemed the tears were finally beginning to become too much for her and she turned away from Darius to wipe them away. She took a shaky breath, trying to regain control of herself. "There's one last thing."

"Whatever I can do, Peyton." Darius felt as though he might have been about to cry as well. He felt a burning lump in his throat and a prickling sensation behind his eyes.

Peyton turned back to face him, her eyes brimming with tears she could barely contain. "Could you stay with me? Until the end?"

Finally, it was too much for Darius. A single tear began to roll down his cheek as he replied, his voice thick with emotion. "Until the end."

Peyton moved closer to him then and wrapped her arms around him. He embraced her in a firm, but gentle, hug and held her, waiting for the end to come.

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Azrael slowly emerged from the shadowy depths of the cavern and walked off the stone bridge and onto the island, watching Fate as she danced around the pool, talking to herself and waving her hands over the water. He was having trouble with walking, now, the pain from the burning souls inside him beginning to grow too strong. They had burned away almost all of his flesh, now. He hadn't looked at himself lately, but he could feel that there wasn't much of his former self remaining. Azrael limped over to Fate and watched her for a moment while she shuffled left and right, talking to others who weren't there, taking no notice of the cloaked figure that had arrived.

"Where are they?" Azrael demanded of her. "I'm looking for-"

"You seek the Reaper and the soul he protects," Fate stated simply. "We know what you want and we know where they went, and we know what awaits us all if you succeed."

"Do you intend to stop me, old woman?"

Fate suddenly smiled widely and began to cackle. "Stop him, he says to us! As though we could. As though we *would!* Fate does not interfere in the decisions of others, this is your path to take, fallen Angel. Be warned, though. There is a choice that remains with you, but I already know the decision you will make."

Azrael smiled. "And what choice is coming to me?"

"You shall know when it presents itself to you, fallen Angel," Fate cackled. "But first, we must show you the way! Here, this way!"

And then she opened the vortex in the pool and gestured to Azrael to go through it. Azrael didn't move. He simply glared at Fate, suspicious.

"Why should I trust you?" he growled. "You let them leave. You knew I was coming for them. If you're so willing to help me, why would you let them escape?"

"We didn't let them escape, you idiot," Fate snapped. "We *preserved* her for you. Honestly, you call yourself the Angel of Death? You don't know a thing. If you tore the mortal's soul from her body with Tartarus so close, he might have snatched her from your clutches before you could feel the warmth of her energy on your fingertips. Stupid, idiotic…" Her voice trailed off as she began to mumble.

Azrael hadn't considered what would happen if he took Peyton's soul with Tartarus all around. Tartarus didn't just surround the island, he also moved under it and through it. He was everywhere. And a soul without a body might attract his attention like ants to sugar.

"Why would you help me?" Azrael asked.

Fate cackled again. "Do you think you're the only one who has grown weary of their duties? If humanity were

ruled and controlled by a more, shall we say, proactive deity, there would be no need to test their souls, to constantly watch and plot and guide. We would not need to be on this island anymore. We could be free. Much like you, Azrael, Angel of Death."

Azrael considered the old woman standing before him for a moment, thinking. He had considered destroying her, but perhaps her wisdom could be useful in the future. With a wicked grin from under his hood, Azrael stepped off the ledge and into the pool after Peyton and Darius. The pool spun faster and the blue light glowed brighter and brighter, almost blinding, and then it faded in an instant and the pool stopped spinning and became calm and still as it had been before. Once he was gone, Fate shuffled around the edge of the pool, staring down into the water with its gentle blue light, a slow grin beginning to grow on her ancient face. Then she began to laugh. And laugh and laugh and laugh, the sound echoing back at her from all sides of the enormous cave.

*****

Darius and Peyton were still in Central Park, waiting. They didn't know how far behind Azrael was, or how long it would be before he caught up to them, but Peyton was ready. She knew what path lied before her and she knew it was one she had to take. Her tears had stopped, dried out as she had hugged Darius, but she was ready now. Ready to face Death, in every sense of the term.

Even though she knew what was about to happen, that her soul was soon to be imprisoned inside a supernatural being, she couldn't help but feel bad for Darius. He had

done so much and risked so much more to protect her, to save her time and time again. She didn't know what Azrael would do to him once he had her soul. There was a strong likelihood that Azrael would simply destroy him. She wanted to ask what happened to a Reaper's soul if one died, but didn't want to put that kind of thinking into Darius' mind. He was worried enough about her. No need to scare him with the possibility of his own doom.

Peyton and Darius stood side by side, looking out into the shadows of Central Park, waiting for Azrael to appear. They stood hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder. Darius had left his curved blade in its sheathe. There was no need for it. Not anymore.

Suddenly, the wind began to blow harder and a glowing vortex appeared in front of them. It glowed a bright violet and spun like water going down a drain. Peyton tightened her hold on Darius' hand and he squeezed back. Then someone walked out through the vortex.

"Eve!" Peyton cried.

Eve had stumbled out through the vortex, holding a bloody wound in her stomach. She had taken two steps, then collapsed in a heap as the vortex closed behind her. Peyton and Darius rushed forward and kneeled beside her, rolling her onto her back.

"Eve, did Azrael do this?" Darius asked.

Eve nodded, her face pinched in pain. "His blade… it's stronger, too. It… it somehow slows down my healing."

"Why did you come here?" Peyton asked. "You need to rest."

"I need… to stop you," Eve breathed in agony. "What are you doing? Azrael… will kill everyone."

"It's the only way," Peyton said quietly. "Fate told

me."

"But you're giving Azrael what he wants!"

Peyton looked desperately to Darius, unsure how to explain, then looked back to Eve. "It's complicated."

"He can't have your soul, Peyton," Eve pleaded. "He can't."

"He's going to get it either way, Eve," Darius said, his voice thick with emotion. "Fate has foreseen it."

"She… must be wrong," Eve said, turning her eyes up to Darius. "Azrael will… destroy everything."

"But if I offer my soul to him, then you have a chance," Peyton said. "If I resist, you won't stop him. If I give in willingly… then you could beat him."

"No…" Eve whispered, closing her eyes. "No… Fate schemes. She twists truths. She tells you… only what you *need* to hear. You can't give up!"

"I'm not giving up," Peyton replied, beginning to sound angry. "This is the only thing I can think of doing that might help. I'm not an Angel and I'm not a Reaper, I wouldn't stand a chance in a fight. And I can't run forever, Eve. Azrael has been behind us the entire way. He'll catch up soon. He could be here any second."

As Eve and Peyton argued, Darius thought back to everything Fate had said. Something was nagging at him, but he couldn't place what it was. Fate had said something that bothered him, but he couldn't think exactly what she had said. It somehow made him think of Charon. What was it?

"Think about this, Peyton," Eve said, holding Peyton's hands in her own. "Even if what you say is true, think about how many people will die in the next few days alone if you do this. It will be a bloodbath. Biblical scale

annihilation."

"It'd be worse if I don't do this," Peyton said.

"Wait," Darius said. "Fate said something before we left. She said… she said it's choices that are made that determine one's fate. She told me to remember that."

"Yeah? So?" Peyton pressed.

"It reminds me of something Charon said not long ago. Charon was helping me work out why I couldn't see your fate, Peyton. Before we knew about Azrael. He told me about… what was it? Chaos Theory!"

"What, like a butterfly effect kind of thing?" Peyton frowned.

"Exactly. He told me that one occurrence can drastically change occurrences elsewhere. Peyton," Darius said. "What if someone else's choices can change the choices you need to make?"

Peyton looked confused. "You lost me."

"What if I have a choice to make as well?" Darius went on. "What if my choice causes a butterfly effect that affects your life and changes the choices you need to make? What if I can make it so you don't have to make *this* choice?"

"But Fate said-"

"You heard Eve," Darius interrupted. "Fate is a trickster. She wants you to think you have only these two options. But there are more choices. Choices that I can make."

"Darius, did you think that maybe you're reading a little too much into it?" Peyton asked. "I know you want to believe you can save me, but…"

"That's not what this is," Darius replied. "I can do something. I know it."

"I don't know," Peyton said slowly, sounding dubious.

"Please, you have to try," Eve said, still lying on the ground with her flaming red hair pooled around her head. "Whatever it takes to stop Azrael from getting your soul."

"This could work, Peyton," Darius said. "I'm just asking for the chance to try. If I fail, then the choice is back on you. But, please… let me try."

The silence stretched on as Peyton thought. She looked down at Eve, bleeding on the ground. Then she looked back up at Darius' desperate face. She opened her mouth to give her answer.

"Peyton," a raspy voice said. "Finally."

AZRAEL'S WRATH

Peyton, Darius and Eve all looked towards the voice. Azrael stood nearby, walking slowly towards them, his skeletal fingers wrapped tightly around the steel shaft of his scythe, only small patches of stringy, rotten flesh still clinging to the bones, some hanging like fallen cobwebs.

"Azrael," Darius sneered. He rose to his feet and stood between Azrael and Peyton, sliding his curved blade out of its sheathe. "You can't have her."

Azrael began to laugh. It was a cruel laugh, full of condescension and ridicule. Darius only glared, gripping his blade tightly.

"Eve couldn't stand against me," Azrael spat. "What chance do you think you have? You can't stop me, Darius."

Azrael began to walk closer again, and Darius noticed he was limping, using his scythe to lean on. Darius suddenly grinned.

"You're weakened," he said. "The souls inside you… They've begun to take their toll, haven't they? You're losing strength."

"I am still stronger than you, Darius," Azrael sneered.

"Stronger than any of you. And once I have the girl's soul, I will be stronger than anyone in Heaven. I will be all-powerful."

"I don't think so, Azrael," Darius replied. "I'll never let you take Peyton's soul. Even if that means I have to die to protect her. But no matter what happens here, I can guarantee that you will lose. One way or the other, you will be stopped. You will be destroyed. But if you walk away now, I won't stop you. I won't hunt you. I'll let you go. We all will. If you just leave and give up on this pointless war you're waging. Just walk away."

Azrael stopped and stared at Darius from under his hood. Darius could feel the rage radiating out from him. Azrael definitely looked in bad shape. He seemed to be unsteady on his feet. Even his robe seemed to have decayed, now looking frayed and torn, the ribbons blowing gently in the breeze.

"I'll never stop," Azrael spat.

Darius paused before saying anything further. Then, without taking his eyes off of Azrael, he spoke over his shoulder. "Peyton? Please."

Everyone was silent for countless heartbeats. Eve watched weakly from the ground as Peyton thought hard. Darius prayed that she would give him the chance he asked for. Azrael stared at her from under his hood as he slowly advanced. Finally, Peyton looked squarely at Darius and replied.

"Fate said this is the only way, Darius. I need to give Azrael my soul."

Darius felt his heart sink at Peyton's response. He didn't want the outcome to be like this. But, he was left with no alternative.

"That's your choice, Peyton. But I have a choice, too. Eve!" Darius shouted. "Take Peyton!"

In the blink of an eye, Eve's wings burst forth from behind her shoulders and closed around Peyton and herself, Peyton trying to protest, but everything happened too fast for her to react in time. The violet vortex spun open and the two women were drawn into it, vanishing in its light.

"NO!"

Azrael cried out as the vortex began to close. He moved forward in a flash, extending his wings as he moved. Using one wing, he knocked Darius aside, sending him flying backwards. As the vortex drew closed, Azrael swung his scythe at the fading light, swinging it blade-first directly into the vortex. There was a bright flash and a loud crack of electricity, and Darius felt a rush of wind blow over him. He looked up and saw Azrael standing with his scythe still in his hands. His robes were billowing around him in a hurricane of wind. His scythe was stuck inside the vortex, the powerful blade preventing it from closing all the way. Sparks were flying from the steel blade as the violet portal tried to close itself, but couldn't. Azrael tightened his grip on the staff of his scythe and, as Darius watched, he began to pull. The vortex resisted, but began to slowly widen as Azrael used his scythe to force it open.

Darius jumped to his feet, brandishing his curved blade and squaring off with Azrael. He raced forward, only a blur in the darkness, and drove his blade deep between Azrael's ribs, the momentum carrying them both through the air, away from the vortex and the scythe. Darius slammed Azrael into the ground, pulling his blade out of

Azrael's body and stood over him. Darius looked over his shoulder, back at the vortex. Azrael's scythe was still lodged in the small opening, sparks flying through the air, the staff vibrating from the effort of the portal trying to close. Darius turned back to Azrael and saw him rising to his feet, decayed wings slowly spreading wide. Darius couldn't see the expression on Azrael's face, as his hood still kept him hidden in darkness, but Darius could feel the anger pulsing through the air around the Angel.

Darius slashed at Azrael, his blade whizzing through the air, but Azrael dodged every slash, every stab, every cut. The air was full of whirling steel, Darius' hand only a blur as he moved with immeasurable speed, but Azrael avoided every blow, leaning left, right, sidestepping, ducking, Darius' blade catching nothing but air as it sailed harmlessly by. As Darius brought the blade swinging down towards Azrael's chest, Azrael reached out and wrapped his skeletal fingers around Darius' wrist, his vice-like grip stopping Darius from bringing the blade any closer. Then, with his other hand, Azrael punched Darius in the chest with an open hand and sent Darius soaring backwards. Darius smashed straight through a tree, reducing it to splinters, before crashing to the ground and rolling through the grass and dirt, the tall tree now falling sideways, creaking loudly until it crashed noisily to the ground. He looked up and saw Azrael advancing on him.

"Why do you insist on defying me?" Azrael roared, his voice growing louder and louder. "Why? We could have helped one another!"

Azrael reached Darius and, before he could climb back to his feet, Azrael kicked Darius in the stomach. Darius rolled along the ground several feet, then stopped,

clutching his stomach and gasping for air.

"I created you!" Azrael continued to shout. "I gave you life!"

"You used my fear of death against me," Darius hissed.

"You were weak!" Azrael spat. "You were weak in life, so in death, I gave you strength! And what do you do to repay my kindness? You betray me!"

As he shouted the word 'betray,' Azrael kicked Darius in the face. Darius spun on the ground, the force of the kick sending him skidding across the dirt again. He felt blood spill from his mouth and run down his chin.

"You could have been at my side, with me, when I take back Heaven," Azrael whispered, pointing down at Darius and sounding genuinely saddened.

"To what end, Azrael?" Darius demanded, slowly climbing to his knees. "Will you be a kind and fair God? Will you help guide humanity and Angels to a higher plain of existence? Or will you decimate Heaven and subject humanity to a life of imprisonment and slavery? A farm of souls to power you for eternity?"

"You don't understand," Azrael said. "None of you understand. I never wanted this! I never wanted to be here! I was not supposed to ferry the wretched dead from one world to the next! I did not volunteer! I was told, ordered to take this duty, which I never wanted. This is not what I was supposed to do. I've had enough. I can't do it any longer. I want to go back to Heaven, I want to have the power to rule over my own life and fate! Not because I am selfish, but because I believe the humans *need* me! Their gods ignore them, they are left alone to live meaningless, empty lives of self-preservation and fear. They do not even know how alone they truly are!

They feel it, but do not understand it. Many think that creatures like us do not exist, that there is no God, no Heaven, no Hell, no Angels or any of it. They do not understand what is required of them, they do not understand their importance in the universe. The ones who *do* believe suffer, because they feel abandoned. Their God has abandoned them. They can *feel* it! They are lost and lonely children, in desperate need of a hand to guide them, to discipline them. To stop all the senseless violence, death and war that is carried out daily in the name of a God that has chosen to ignore them. I will lead humanity into a new age, an age where they will sacrifice some freedoms for the good of everyone, guided by a new God, one who will not ignore them, one who will not abandon them. But you… You think you can stop me?"

Azrael swung a fist down at Darius and punched him square on the left cheek, the sound of the impact sounding like thunder booming across the sky. Darius fell down to the earth again. He tried to push himself up, but was feeling dazed and couldn't seem to balance himself well enough to lift himself off the ground.

"You can't stop me, Darius," Azrael said in a whisper. "No one can. Even as the souls inside me burn away my flesh and weaken my body, I am still stronger than anyone who will oppose me. And now, even you will die."

Azrael reached down and grabbed Darius by the throat and lifted him up to look into his eyes. Darius looked into the hood and, though he couldn't see Azrael's face clearly, he could just see that Azrael was looking far more skeletal than the last time he saw his face. His green eyes burned bright, but they seemed sunken into their sockets.

"Did I ever tell you what happens to a Reaper when it

dies, Darius?" Azrael asked quietly.

Darius struggled to break free of Azrael's tight grip, but the bony fingers were like stone and Darius could not remove them from his throat. He looked around and saw his blade lying in the dirt several yards away. There was no way he could reach it.

"Nothing," Azrael said. "When a Reaper dies, nothing happens. They don't go to Heaven, they don't go to Purgatory, even Tartarus won't claim them. They simply cease to exist. You will vanish as though you never were. And your very last thought will be that you could not save the mortal and that her soul will soon… be… *mine*."

Darius felt Azrael's grip begin to tighten. He felt his air supply get cut off and he began to kick wildly, trying desperately to break free. His eyes bulged out and his mouth opened and closed in a futile attempt to breathe. Azrael stared from under his hood, watching his favorite Reaper die.

Suddenly, Darius reached out to his blade that lied yards away, far out of reach. A black void opened beneath it and the blade fell inside. The void closed and, in an instant, another void opened in the air above Darius' outstretched hand. The blade fell through and Darius caught it in the air. Before Azrael could react, Darius brought the sharp steel down and implanted it deep inside Azrael's hood. He felt bone resist, then break, as the sharp blade broke through and impaled Azrael's face.

Azrael shrieked in pain and let go of Darius' throat. Azrael pulled away and Darius held on to his blade, pulling it out of Azrael's skull with a sickening grind of steel on bone. Darius gasped for breath, holding his throat where Azrael had nearly crushed the life out of him.

Azrael staggered away, holding his face and groaning. Darius took the opportunity to hurry over to the scythe that was still sparking and vibrating in midair. Sheathing his blade, Darius took hold of the scythe and tried to pull it out, so the portal could close. Once it was closed, Azrael wouldn't be able to follow Peyton.

Before Darius could move the scythe an inch, Azrael crashed into him, his wings extended to their full width, and carried him through the air at breakneck speed. They soared higher and higher into the sky, the ground quickly dropping from beneath their feet, leaving Central Park and heading toward the city. Darius saw the zoo flash by in an instant, then found himself surrounded by the tall buildings of New York City. Darius began fighting against Azrael's hold, his fists and elbows and feet flying as he used every part of his body to attack, but Azrael fought back, holding Darius with one hand, throwing punch after punch at Darius' head. As they fought in mid-air, Azrael circled around the southern end of Manhattan and began flying back towards the center of the island and directly towards the bright lights of the city, tall buildings rising around them. Darius looked ahead and saw his own reflection rapidly growing as he and Azrael flew at full speed toward the dark windows of a tall building.

Azrael carried Darius with full force straight into the windows of the building, the pair of them shattering the glass and flying straight through the empty offices and hallways inside. Azrael smashed his way through the building, using Darius' body as a battering ram, crashing through walls, desks, pillars, anything that stood in the way was instantly reduced to rubble, splinters and dust. Finally, they came out the other side of the building, glass

shards bursting outwards with them in a magnificent bullet-paced exit. Azrael spun in the air and launched Darius through the air with extra momentum. Darius tumbled and spun helplessly, having no means to stop himself from falling. He fell at incredible speed, tumbling over and over, the world spinning so fast around him he had no idea if he was facing up or down.

Finally, he crashed into the street with enough force that he cracked the road, bounced from the impact and continued to tumble through the air along the street. He collided with a yellow cab with such force that the side of the vehicle crumpled and the whole car tipped over as Darius continued sailing through the air, then he tumbled along the street until he crashed through a statue of some sort, shattering it from the force of his crash, the head of the statue sailing through the air. Darius crashed into something big and red and finally stopped, dust floating down around him as he lied motionless in the chaos.

Slowly, carefully, Darius began to climb to his feet. He stumbled and nearly fell again, rubble collapsing around him as it was disturbed by his movements, but he managed to hold himself up against the broken remains of the red thing. Looking around, he saw where he had landed.

Times Square. He had crashed right on 7th Avenue and smashed into the red stairs on Duffy Square. The stairs were crushed beneath him, snapped and broken from his impact, the statue of Francis P. Duffy reduced to rubble, the head lying in the street several yards away. Bright lights and billboards shone down at him from all directions, illuminating the otherwise dark night. There were people all around. They were staring at Darius in

shock, whispering to each other, many were taking pictures. Traffic had all but stopped, drivers and passengers staring out their windows at the path of destruction that had crossed Times Square and come to rest on the infamous red steps, where a bleeding man was slowly rising to his feet. Darius realized that he had not hidden himself from the eyes of mortals, having become accustomed to letting Peyton see him.

Before he could even consider hiding behind the veil, a dark figure sped out of the sky and landed on his feet on the road in front of Darius, the impact of his landing cracking the pavement beneath his feet. His wings were still extended, the bones and tattered remains of flesh still exposed. Azrael glared at Darius from under his hood, letting his wings reach their full width, which nearly reached from 7th to Broadway, close to the full width of Duffy Square. People suddenly began to scream. They screamed and suddenly people were running, fleeing from the terrifying creature from their nightmares, while others still continued to furiously take photographs. A uniformed officer of the NYPD hurried over, pulling his gun from his holster. He aimed the revolver at Azrael, the gun quivering as the young cop held firm, but shook with fear.

"Freeze!" the cop shouted.

"Get out of here!" Darius yelled at him, but it was too late.

In no mood for interruptions, Azrael sped towards the cop and, using one wing, cut the officer in half. The cop looked momentarily surprised, blood instantly pouring from his mouth and down his chin, but then he collapsed in two separate heaps, staring at his own legs, now detached from his body.

Darius dove forward to tackle Azrael, but with an almost careless backhand, Azrael knocked him out of the air. Darius hit the ground and was still. His face was broken and bloody, his entire left arm covered in his own blood as he suffered numerous cuts from broken glass. He felt like most of his ribs were broken and one eye wouldn't open all the way. Blood poured, thick and dark, from his nose. Darius turned his head and spat, coughing up more blood that splattered against the concrete.

"You can't stop me, Darius," Azrael said. "You can't stop Death."

Darius glared up at Azrael from the ground, pain and fury mixing on his face. "You're not Death, Azrael. Just an Angel who became a monster."

Sirens blared in the distance and red and blue lights began flashing down the street. Azrael turned his head and watched as a pair of police vehicles screeched to a halt a few yards away, the officers inside staring in horror at the creature that stood in the middle of Times Square, wearing a dark cloak that was ripped and rotten, with enormous skeletal wings folded on its back. The officers jumped out of their cars and, crouching behind the open doors, pulled their guns out and trained them on Azrael.

"What the hell is that thing?" Darius heard one of them ask.

Azrael looked back down at Darius. "They're worthless, Darius," he said. "They're pathetic insects. A drain on all creation, wasting their potential as they float through their lives. They have no idea what they're doing, where they're going, why they're here. They don't care about anything but themselves. They consume every resource they have until there is nothing left, then they

move on to the next to devour that as well. They need me to stop them. They need me to show them the truth. They overpopulate this planet, this beautiful planet that they had handed to them, a wondrous gift from their creator, and they are on the verge of destroying it. Between their relentless pollution and out-of-control overpopulation, they are destroying this planet and themselves. But once I destroy their industries and thin out their numbers, they will be free to learn the secrets of the universe that I can share with them. They will understand, as I do, why they all exist."

"Attention… winged-man!" one officer shouted out, sounding unsure of how to address Azrael. "Keep your hands where we can see them! Step away from the man on the ground!"

Azrael looked back towards the officers. There were four guns aimed directly at his chest, but he didn't care. He glanced back down at Darius.

"Let me show you how fragile and weak these humans are," Azrael said.

"No…" Darius tried to say, but Azrael was already moving.

Azrael turned towards the police officers, arcing his wings upwards in a threatening fashion, looking like a dragon about to take flight. He reached up to his hood, letting his skeletal hands and forearms show through the tattered remains of his rotting robes. When the police saw Azrael's rotting limbs, they all took a hesitant step backwards, like they were all considering fleeing, but New York's finest stood their ground and watched as Azrael took hold of his hood and slowly lowered it from over his head.

"Oh my God," one cop said in horror.

Azrael's face had been ravaged. Where it had once been smooth and attractive, it was now a grotesque disarray of peeling flesh and exposed bone. Only a small amount of tendons and skin remained around the jawline and in patches down his neck. His exposed skull was dark and rotted, his skeletal mouth clenched tightly as he surveyed the horrified cops, but how he could see was unclear, because even his eyes had decayed to nothing. His eye sockets were empty, but deep inside, an ethereal green light burned like small fires, like the flames of a bright candle. Azrael stared at the police officers with the burning light from his otherwise empty sockets. He began to walk towards them. Slowly, with obvious ill-intent, he flapped his wings once, the air disturbance blowing the hats off the officers' heads and making them squint their eyes. Azrael stopped halfway between the police and Darius and, spreading his wings wide and curling his skinless fingers at his sides like claws, he opened his mouth and roared. He roared at the police with a horrifying sound that reverberated all through Times Square, making the air quiver and teeth rattle. The sound he made was unlike any sound ever heard by human ears. It was louder than any animal roar, making a lion's roar sound like the meow of a kitten. It was a deep, resonating bass, the sound completely surrounding, but also shaking right through the body, but within the bass of his roar, there was also a high-pitched wail, the shriek of an eagle that went on and on.

"Open fire!" one cop screamed.

He, and the other three officers, began firing at will, each bullet landing home in Azrael's chest. Azrael

stopped roaring, but simply stood there, allowing the police to empty their clips into his body. Shot after shot rang out across Times Square, none of them having any effect on Azrael. Finally, one by one, the cops stopped firing and slowly lowered their revolvers. Azrael stared back at them, his skull grinning at them all. The moment seemed frozen in time, Azrael glaring at the officers, them staring back at him. No one seemed willing to move, but then, Azrael began to laugh. It was a cruel laugh, full of ridicule. And then he suddenly stopped laughing and rushed at the police.

He moved so fast that the police barely even knew what was happening while it happened. Only Darius was able to keep track of Azrael as he shot through the police with all the speed of an Angel. Azrael reached the first officer and, grabbing him by the jaw, instantly snapped his neck with one hand. Then he tossed the lifeless corpse aside and moved in a blur towards the next cop, who was trying to load a new clip into his gun. Azrael impaled him through the back with his wing and then immediately flung him backwards over his shoulder. The next cop had noticed something happening to his left and was turning to see what the movement in his peripheral vision was, only to come eye to eye with Azrael's burning green embers, deep within the sockets of his skull. Then Azrael grabbed him by the throat and threw him through the air. As the officer soared, Azrael opened a void, which swallowed the officer as he screamed, the screams being cut off as the void closed. Then another void opened somewhere above and the man came tumbling out of it, screaming, speeding headfirst towards the ground. The final officer saw Azrael coming for him and had managed

to reload his gun. He took aim and fired more shots into Azrael's body as he rushed towards him, wings flapping to build even more speed. Azrael raced right up to the officer and plunged a hand into the officer's chest. The cop froze and made a noise like he had been punched in the stomach. He dropped his gun and stared at Azrael in horror. Right before Azrael ripped out his heart.

Darius closed his eyes and looked away, feeling more helpless than he ever had in his life. It had all happened in only a few seconds and Darius was too injured to have done anything to stop it. Azrael, his skull still grinning horribly, began to slowly walk towards Darius, ready to finish him off, the green fire in his eyes burning brighter and brighter. Darius watched him approach, not moving, barely able to see out of his half-closed eye, his face filthy with his own blood. Azrael stood over him now, staring down at him, his rotten skull grinning horribly. Azrael folded his wings against his back and just stood there, staring down at Darius. Then, with curled fingers, he reached down to grab hold of Darius.

Darius, without thinking, then opened another portal. Right beneath his body. Azrael tried to grab him, but his fingers only curled around air as Darius plummeted into the void, vanishing into darkness as the opening closed, Azrael's furious roars echoing only in his memory.

SACRIFICE

Peyton and Eve stared in horror at the tip of Azrael's blade as it stuck through the portal, preventing it from closing. Sparks showered through the air and there was a sound like steel being fed through a wood-chipper as the portal tried desperately to close, the air all around them being disturbed and tossing their hair wildly about. Eve managed to climb shakily to her feet, holding the slowly healing wound in her stomach with one hand. Peyton began to walk towards the portal, thinking that maybe she could push the blade out and let the portal close, but Eve grabbed her arm and held her back, shaking her head. When she spoke, she had to shout over the sound of the portal grinding on the scythe.

"No!" Eve called out. "Don't touch it! It will kill you!"

"Is there anything we can do?" Peyton shouted back.

Eve shook her head, pushing her hair out of her eyes as it was whipped around her face. "We have to wait! Hope that Darius can stop Azrael!"

Peyton looked back at the portal, shielding her eyes from the sparks with one hand, watching the blade of the scythe vibrate and shake violently as the portal tried to

close around it.

"Why did he have to do this?" she said angrily. "Darius could be dead by now."

Peyton felt sick with worry, furious at the betrayal, but praying that Darius was okay. She didn't know what to think anymore. Fate had convinced her that she needed to sacrifice herself to Azrael in order to save everyone, but then Eve came along and said not to take Fate at her word. Why would Fate tell her something that wasn't true? Was Eve wrong? Could Fate have been telling the truth? Had Darius just ruined the only hope the universe had? These, and countless other thoughts, raced through Peyton's mind as she watched the swirling violet light shower sparks down at her feet, the tip of a powerful blade pointing at her face, seemingly appearing out of thin air. Peyton suddenly turned to Eve.

"If Azrael comes through that portal," she said, "I'm giving him my soul."

"Peyton," Eve said. "Please."

Peyton shook her head. "No. It's bad enough that Darius is probably dying for me right now. I won't risk the whole world because I was scared. If Azrael comes here, I'm giving him what he wants. I want you to promise me. Please, don't try to stop me."

Eve shook her head. "Peyton, please don't make me promise that."

"It's the only way, Eve. If Darius can't stop Azrael and you couldn't stop him, who's left? Is there anyone? Anyone at all?"

Eve couldn't answer. There were, of course, those who had the power to fight Azrael, and together they had the power to destroy him, but they had sworn long ago not to

interfere in the concerns of Earth and mortals. And while Azrael threatened Earth, their oath meant they couldn't touch him until he struck Heaven.

Peyton took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "Please, Eve. Promise me. Promise you won't try and stop Azrael if he comes through here. Don't try and stop me from giving him what he wants."

Eve felt cornered. There was nothing she could do to stop Azrael, even if she tried. He had become too powerful. Finally, she nodded slowly at Peyton. "Okay. I promise."

"Thank you, Eve." Peyton turned her gaze back on the vortex, the shower of sparks reflecting in her eyes.

Eve could only stare sadly at Peyton. She had said all she could. Nothing else would convince Peyton of the dire consequences of giving Azrael her soul. All she could do was pray that Darius could close the portal before Azrael came through.

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A homeless man was digging through a garbage can in an alleyway when he felt the air move around him. Looking up from his search, he turned and saw a strange sight. He saw the world apparently tear open, a space in reality now opening up onto nothingness. As the man watched in surprise, a man in a suit, torn and bloody, tumbled out of the hole in the air, which then immediately vanished. The man hit the ground, hard, and rolled along the pavement until he came to a stop, face down by the gutter. The homeless man stared as the bleeding man slowly began to raise himself off the ground. Once he was

standing on his feet, wobbling slightly as he tried to keep his balance, the man looked through a mask of blood and saw the homeless man watching him. Without a word, the man turned and began limping away down the street, away from the homeless man. Deciding he should be on his way, the homeless man shuffled off in the other direction as quickly as he could go.

Darius staggered through the streets of New York. He could barely see where he was going, his blood now drying in his eyes. He stumbled and fell to his knees, his palms slamming into the pavement as he stopped his fall, the concrete grazing skin from his hands. He spat and saw a glob of blood mixed with saliva splatter on the ground. He pushed himself up to his feet and continued limping along, dragging his left leg behind him. People in his path would look, but steered clear of him, trying to avoid the man who was battered and bleeding, staggering as though drunk.

Barely aware of his surroundings, Darius stumbled off the curb from Manhattan's Upper West Side and into the street. Car horns blared and headlights blinded him as he stared into oncoming traffic. Tires screeched and the front-bumper of a taxi came to a halt only inches away from him. The driver stuck his head out the window to scream abuse at Darius, but Darius simply turned and staggered away. More drivers displayed their annoyance at the man in the street by sounding their horns and waving their middle fingers at him as they sped by, but Darius ignored them. He made his way across the street and into Central Park. He stumbled through the open gates and began to make his way down the path towards a softly glowing violet light not far in the distance. A short

time later, he reached the vortex, which was still valiantly attempting to close around Azrael's scythe. The wind and the noise had grown so loud it hurt Darius' ears and the hurricane emanating from the vortex was so strong, it threatened to blow him backwards off his feet.

Carefully stepping forward, Darius reached out with both hands, leaning into the hurricane before him, reaching out to the the staff of the scythe. He grabbed hold of it with both hands, the steel feeling hot in his hands, the friction and energy of the vortex having heated it to near burning temperatures. He began to pull, trying to wrench it free of the swirling light, using all his strength and weight to lean back and pull the blade free and allow the vortex to close. Darius squinted his eyes and gritted his teeth as he fought to remove the scythe. It seemed to be trying to resist him, feeling as though it weighed a thousand pounds, still vibrating chaotically in his hands, like it was attempting to shake Darius loose. Finally, the blade began to give and pull free, sliding half an inch out of the vortex.

Before Darius could move it any farther, he felt a pair of powerful hands grab him from behind. They lifted him off the ground and away from the scythe, Darius losing his grip on the staff as he was lifted into the air. Then he was suddenly thrown away from the vortex, rolling through the air, before crashing back to the ground. He looked up, quickly taking hold of his blade and holding it defensively, and saw the horrifying face of Azrael standing by the vortex, glaring at him with eyes that burned furiously.

"Her soul is mine, Darius!" Azrael roared.

Then Azrael was upon him. Darius found himself lifted

off the ground once more, but then immediately slammed back down into the earth with such force that he could feel bones in his back shatter. Then he was lifted again and smashed backwards against a tree, the back of his head cracking hard against the trunk. Darius was pinned against the tree trunk, his feet dangling helplessly as he was held up by Azrael's unfathomably strong hands. As Azrael held Darius against the tree, he began to open his wings. He opened them slowly, allowing Darius to see them spread, to take in the full magnitude of their size and to see each and every one of the sharp, pointed, tips that were the exposed bones. Then Azrael began to arc them forward, over his head, aiming directly at Darius. Before Darius had time to do anything, Azrael snapped one of his wings forward like a striking cobra and impaled Darius on the sharp tip, the bone going right through Darius' chest and coming out of his back, stabbing into the tree.

Darius choked and convulsed once as he felt the bone pierce through him. Then Azrael pulled the bone out and immediately struck again, the bone now going into Darius' stomach. Blood began to flow from the wounds with alarming speed, coursing down the front of Darius' body like a torrential rain. More blood flowed down Darius' chin as he coughed up mouthfuls. Azrael pulled back his wing again, blood dripping from the bone-tip, taking careful aim. Aiming directly at Darius' face.

Darius, realizing that his curved blade was still in his hand, acted quickly, even though he felt himself drifting dangerously close to unconsciousness. As Azrael struck, Darius simultaneously moved his head to the right. He couldn't move far, but it was enough. The bone struck the tree trunk with a loud *thunk*, cutting open Darius' cheek

as it shot by, but leaving him otherwise unscathed. Before Azrael had time to retract his wing and stab again, Darius slashed upward with his blade. He caught Azrael's wing at the joint near the shoulder, slicing right through bone and rotten flesh. Azrael shrieked in pain as his right wing fell away from his body, collapsing to the ground in a heap of bone and decayed flesh. Azrael instinctively stepped backwards, staring down at the stump where his wing was in horror and fury, still roaring in pain. Darius slid down the tree trunk and landed on his feet. Then, focussing his strength, he pushed himself off the tree and flew through the air, straight at Azrael. Darius jumped and kicked Azrael hard in the chest with both feet, a kick powerful enough to send the decaying Angel falling backwards through the air. As Azrael fell, he saw that he was falling directly towards the swirling vortex of bright violent light.

"No!" he cried. Azrael spread his remaining wing and flapped, trying to change his course, but only one wing wasn't enough. He couldn't correct his trajectory. Azrael collided with the swirling violet light and there was suddenly an enormous surge of energy crackling through the air. The force of the blast was so strong, it bent the trees that stood nearby, blowing leaves from branches and threatening to crack tree trunks in two. Darius stayed flat on the ground and covered his head with his arms as the energy wave rolled over him. There was a sound like a cannon firing and Azrael burst into flames and was thrown off into the night, a raging inferno hurtling through the air, before landing several yards away from Darius, where he lied still, a smoldering pile of robes and bones.

Darius sighed deeply, relieved, slowly rising to his knees. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, letting himself fall into his relief. He wondered vaguely if he was dying. If he was dying, it didn't seem to hurt as much as he expected it would. The pain in his beaten body was even beginning to fade. He considered just lying back down on the grass and letting it happen, to just let himself drift off into the nothingness that Azrael had promised awaited him. But then Darius thought of Peyton. How she was on the other side of the vortex, waiting. Likely to be wondering what was happening on this end, wondering if he was still alive.

When he opened his eyes and looked, Darius saw the vortex was still intact, even after the impact with Azrael, spinning fast around the blade of the scythe. Darius slowly struggled back to his feet, holding the wound in his chest. His vision was fading fast and he didn't know if he would be able to heal these wounds. They were inflicted by an Angel and while a Reaper's ability to regenerate was strong, Angels were infinitely stronger.

With what seemed like an enormous effort, Darius began to slowly move towards the vortex, tripping over his own feet as he felt lightheaded and weak. Darius fell to his hands and knees as his legs gave way beneath him, staring down at the grass that was quickly turning red as he bled over it. He looked down at his hands and saw the blood there was dark and thick, pouring out of his body like a faucet that had been left on. Finding it difficult to breathe, Darius forced himself to look up at the violet light. The edges of his vision were almost completely dark, now. He knew he didn't have much time. Forcing himself to stand, Darius wrapped his bloody hands around

the staff of the scythe. With every last ounce of strength he had left, Darius pulled. He put all of his strength and weight into forcing the vortex open. He wanted to let Peyton and Eve know it was okay. Let Peyton know it was over. And, most of all, before he fell into eternal nothingness, he wanted to see Peyton's face. He wanted to look into her greenish-blue eyes and see her smile. He wanted to let her know that she was safe.

Groaning now from the strain, Darius leaned into the scythe and felt it start to give. He felt the vortex begin to open, forced by the powerful blade. Digging his feet into the ground, ripping up the earth from the effort, Darius forced the vortex to open, slowly, inch by inch, to the size of a small window, through which he could see the luscious green of the Garden. He could see the golden glow of the Beacon. And he could see Peyton. She looked out through the portal back at him, he saw the fear on her face give way to relief, then shock as she saw the damage that was done to him. All of the blood and stab wounds and bruises were a horrific sight. Darius saw Eve's eyes widen in surprise at the sight of him, then she waved a hand at the vortex and it opened entirely. Dropping the scythe through the portal and to the ground on the other side, Darius faced the open vortex. He set his eyes on Peyton and, despite the pain and his fading vision as the darkness enveloped him, he managed to smile. He had stopped Azrael. He had saved her.

"Darius!" Peyton screamed, running forward, but Eve suddenly reached out and grabbed her, pulling her back. "Look out!"

Darius, his thoughts murky and slow, wasn't sure what she meant. He turned his head and saw a dark, smoky,

shape flying at him, teeth exposed and fiery green eyes burning. Azrael crashed into Darius and tackled him through the vortex. Eve had been closing it, but it was too late. Azrael slammed Darius into the ground, now in the Garden, where the Reaper slowly exhaled, closed his eyes and didn't move. Azrael looked from Darius' unresponsive face and up at Peyton's. He glared at her, the green fire in his eyes burning brightly while his bones and robes continued to smolder from the extinguished flames. Peyton wasn't looking at him. She was looking at Darius. Her eyes were wide and her jaw had dropped open. She suddenly fell to her knees and stared at Darius' body, her face so full of pain and disbelief that even Azrael was surprised and could only stare back at her.

"Peyton, run!" Eve cried out. She stepped forward, but nearly fell over, as her wounds were still too painful for her to walk properly.

"You killed him," Peyton whispered.

Azrael slowly rose to his feet, his robes all but burned away, his bones blackened and his remaining flesh charred. Now his ribs and arms were exposed and the sight was gruesome. Bones stuck out of charred, rotten flesh, some parts of his torso now so decayed and burned that there was nothing left to shield his bones. His abdomen was completely gone, exposing the spine that seemed to defy physics to keep him standing. He lifted his hood back over his head, but the tattered and burned remnants did little to hide his features. He looked at Peyton in silence. She ran her hands through her hair, still staring down at Darius.

"You killed him," she said again.

"Yes," was all Azrael said. The word was completely

void of regret, but there was a hint of confusion, of hesitancy.

Peyton felt like she was going to be sick. She didn't know what to do, what to say, where to look. She started breathing fast, hyperventilating, clutching at her hair as she stared down at Darius' motionless body. He was splayed out on his back, blood pooling on his chest and stomach, leaking down to the ground beneath. Through the layer of blood on his face, Peyton could see his eyes were still closed.

"Why?" Peyton asked Azrael, finally looking at him. Her eyes were dry, but they were full of an emotional pain she had never known. It was the pain of knowing that a friend had died for the single purpose of protecting her. And that it had now been for nothing. Azrael stood before her and there was nothing to stop him. "Why?" Peyton whispered again. Her voice was not sad or quivering, she did not sound like she was about to cry. Her tone was one of demanding. She needed to know why. Why Azrael had done this. Why Azrael had targeted her. Why Azrael felt he needed to destroy the world in order to be happy.

"You wouldn't understand," Azrael growled. "You're only human."

"I deserve to know why," Peyton snapped. She stood up and looked Azrael in his burning green eyes, her own eyes burning with a fury that felt like it could burst out of her at any moment. Eve watched in silence, unable to do anything, knowing that Peyton wouldn't want her to interfere.

"Death," Azrael finally said, "is no way to live. Even for an Angel."

"But why like this?" Peyton demanded. "Why?

Couldn't you have asked for someone else to take over? That you were tired of it? Why did you have to steal people's souls? Why did you have to kill so many people? Why did you have to… why did you have to kill Darius?"

"It's complicated," Azrael said simply. "But rest assured, I did only what I had to do."

Peyton scowled at him. She clung to her anger. She clung to it like she was adrift in an endless sea and her rage was her life preserver. The only thing that could prevent her from sinking, sinking down into an abyss of despair.

Darius… she thought. *You should have let me do this earlier.*

Peyton stood up straight and looked at Azrael's eyes. "Fine. Do it, then. Take my soul. I won't fight you."

"Peyton, no," Eve whispered.

"Silence," Azrael snapped at Eve. He returned his attention to Peyton, but didn't come any closer. He regarded her with a silent curiosity, whatever he was thinking being impossible to tell, as his featureless skull gave away no emotions.

"What are you waiting for?" Peyton asked angrily. "Get it over with. You win, okay? Just do it!"

"What did Fate tell you?" Azrael suddenly asked.

"What?"

Azrael took a step towards Peyton, stepping over Darius' prone body, now being intimidatingly close. "What did Fate tell you?" he repeated.

"Does it matter?" Peyton said. "You win."

"I want to know," Azrael insisted. "Before I take your soul, I want to know what Fate told you."

Peyton bristled with fury. Why was he toying with her?

"She told me to make a choice. Run or submit. That's it."

Azrael was silent. He stared at her, thinking. "Why would you submit?" he asked. "Unless…" His voice trailed off as he lost himself in thought. Peyton, confused as to why her soul was still in her body, only watched him, unsure how much longer she could hold herself together with Darius' body lying so close.

"Submission of your soul will not be the same as me taking it by force," Azrael realized. "I will be vulnerable. I could be destroyed, in time. The purity of self-sacrifice. That's why you would submit to me."

"Damn right, it is," Peyton snapped. "So what's it going to be? Are you going to take your chances with my soul? Or give it up?"

Azrael felt his rage begin to boil over. This is what Fate had meant when she said he had a choice. Continue his vendetta and risk eventual destruction, or let go of Peyton's soul and his quest for power. He had been searching for Peyton Paradisa's soul for so long, hunted her across the afterlife. Could the very thing he had longed for be the very thing that could be his undoing? But he was so close! Did Fate plan this? Was she on his side, or did she set him up for failure? He should have destroyed her when he had the chance. She had said he had a choice to make. Was this that choice? Could he really walk away? No. No, of course not. Not after so long, so many years, so many souls. He would have Peyton's soul. Nothing could stop him. He was so much stronger than before. So much more powerful. And nothing this pathetic mortal woman could do would ever be enough to stop him!

He took another step closer to Peyton, the green fire in

his eyes burning brighter once more. "Don't be fooled into thinking that what Fate says is prophecy," Azrael growled. "She is a fortune teller, full of parlor tricks and lies. She doesn't know what the future holds. Fate only knows the odds. She's a gambler, a card-counter in a casino, nothing more. Regardless of how I take your soul, Peyton Paradisa, I will have the power it holds. And once I have it, I will be more powerful than you could even comprehend. I will even be strong enough to destroy Eve." Azrael paused and Peyton could see his gaze travel from her to Eve. He considered her for a moment and Peyton had the strange feeling that if Azrael had the lips to smile with, he would have. He looked back to Peyton, taking yet another step closer, towering over her as he said with malice, "And once you give me your soul, she will be the first to die."

He looked back over at Eve, who was standing nearby, leaning against a tree with one hand to stay on her feet, her other hand tightly holding the stab wound in her stomach. She didn't look surprised or shocked or scared. She only looked sad. She looked at Azrael with pity, as though he was a sick and dying animal that needed to be put out of its misery, because it had no hope of being saved. Peyton, however, looked mortified. How could she give Azrael her soul if it meant killing Eve?

"I'll only give you my soul if you promise not to hurt Eve," Peyton demanded.

Azrael laughed, still walking closer. Peyton took a step backwards, not wanting him to come within reach of her. Not yet. "I am not negotiating," Azrael said darkly. "I am taking your soul, by force or by your will, it does not make a difference to me."

Azrael began to reach out, smoke still rising lazily from his skeletal fingers. Peyton stepped back again, trying to stay out of reach, but not run away. She didn't know what to do. She needed to give up her soul to give the Angels a chance to stop Azrael, but in doing so, she would condemn Eve. But she didn't have time to consider. All she could do was hope that Eve would be able to run, to escape, make sure that Azrael couldn't get to her.

"Eve?" Peyton said. "Remember your promise?"

"Yes, Peyton," Eve replied, looking distraught.

"Get out of here," Peyton told her. "Get as far away as you can. Don't make it easy for Azrael."

Azrael laughed quietly, glancing sideways at Eve, who stood helplessly by. Eve shook her head. "I'll stay with you, Peyton."

"No, please, he'll kill you. Just go. Save as many people as you can, tell the other Angels what's happening. Go."

Eve looked like she was going to be sick. Tears began to run down her cheeks, sparkling in the light from the Beacon not far away. The souls of the deceased that were drawn to it passed by on the other side of the trees, the trance rendering them completely oblivious to the conflict that raged nearby. Eve nodded at Peyton. Then, in a flash of violet light, she was gone.

"She will still die," Azrael said. "They will all die."

Peyton stopped stepping away from Azrael, standing her ground. She didn't want to look at him, didn't want to look into the eyes of the monster that was about to kill her, but she forced herself to look up into his burning green eyes. He looked back at her, his skinless face set in a permanent grin. He stepped closer. Closer. Closer.

Peyton remained still, allowing him to come within reach. She raised her chin, trying to look unafraid, even though her heart was racing and she could taste bile in the back of her throat. She thought of her mother, the only family she had left. She thought of her friends at the hospital. She thought of all the people she had loved and cared for throughout her life, from her best friend in elementary school to the boy who bullied her in high school. Her first boyfriend at age sixteen. The prom. Receiving her college admission letters. Tearful conversations with her mother about money. Nursing school. All the people she had met, all the people who had come in and out of her life over the years. Every single one of them meant something to her, even the people who she had wished at the time she hadn't known. She thought of the plans she had had for her future. Of establishing her career as a nurse. Of maybe even going to med school later and becoming a doctor. Of one day settling down and marrying a good man, having children, grandchildren, all of this, all of her life and her plans, her hopes and dreams, flashed through her mind. She stood still and waited, refusing to close her eyes, determined to make Azrael look into her eyes as he ripped her soul from her body.

Azrael paused momentarily, savoring the moment of his victory. Then he plunged his hand into her chest. Peyton gasped and grabbed Azrael's wrist out of instinct, but didn't try to remove his hand. She felt that sensation of something moving around inside her. Something that should not be touched. She couldn't breathe, no matter how hard she tried. She looked down and saw Azrael beginning to slowly retract his hand, his fingers curled around his prize. In his hand, Azrael now held a glowing

blue orb that was made up of something not quite gas and not quite water. In the center of the orb, a bright golden light shone even brighter. Tendrils branched out from the orb, reaching back into Peyton's chest, unwilling to be torn from its home, but Azrael was pulling it free with ease. Peyton's soul was grasped firmly in his fingers, his burning green eyes staring down at it hungrily, while Peyton watched in terror as the life began to drain out of her.

THE DARKNESS

Darkness. There was nothing else. An endless space of infinite darkness. There was no sound. No floor. No light. There was no distinction between up or down. It felt like floating, but at the same time, the sensation of being weighed down was overwhelming. Despite all of this, all of the uncertainty, the oddity, the feeling of helplessness in this place, there was also calm. There was no need to concern oneself with anything. All the things that used to seem so worrying were no longer worth thinking about. They were a waste of time. They were meaningless. In fact, they weren't even worth remembering. All that mattered now was the self. Or what remained of the self. Everything else was irrelevant.

Darius couldn't even see his own body. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure if he had a body anymore. If he did have a body, he couldn't tell if his eyes were even open. He felt like trying to move, but wondered if it was worth the effort. Why would he want to move? This place was calm. Peaceful. He no longer needed to worry about… something. He suddenly felt a nudge of annoyance, like something was poking him in the back of his brain,

insistent. He couldn't think what could possibly demand his attention at a time like this. Not when he felt more at peace than he had in both life and death. More calm than he had ever felt since becoming a Reaper.

Ah, a Reaper. He remembered that's what he was. He guided the dead to the next world. It seemed like a tiresome job. How many people died every day? How many of them had he guided in his time? More than he could count. Until… until… Something had happened. What was it? It was so difficult to focus in this place. His mind kept drifting, drifting back into a waking slumber of calm and lethargy.

Peyton. The name flashed across his memory like a fluorescent sign. Darius remembered now. He remembered everything. He remembered seeing Peyton for the first time. He remembered stopping Voss from killing her. He remembered saving her from the rogue Reaper, introducing her to his world, then taking her to who he thought would be an ally, only to be betrayed by him. He remembered walking through Purgatory with Peyton, how he carried her most of the way when she couldn't go on. He remembered the Garden and watching her sleep. He remembered crossing the Chthonic Island with her, finding Fate, fighting Azrael to protect her. The last thing he could remember, before finding himself in this place, was her face. The face that he could now remember vividly, right before Azrael had struck. The next thing Darius had known, he was here in eternal darkness.

Darius tried to look around. He felt sure that his eyes were open, but the darkness was complete. Although, it wasn't quite like darkness, now that he thought about it. It

was more like the complete and utter absence of anything else. There was nothing. Darius couldn't see his hands when he held them in front of his face. That was when he knew. He knew he had died. This was the eternal nothingness that awaited a Reaper upon death. To seemingly float in this endless void forever, unable to see, unable to feel, unable to focus. Already Darius felt his mind beginning to drift back towards the indifferent calm. He tried to cling to Peyton's face, to hold on to something pure and beautiful, but even she was beginning to fade. He felt hopeless. He wondered if he should just give up. What was the point in fighting the darkness? There was nothing left. Nothing…

Now why do you give up so easily?

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. It surrounded Darius, but simultaneously felt like he had thought the words himself, but the voice was not his own. It was a woman's. Darius tried to search through the void, to find where the voice had come from, but there was still nothing.

You have done so well, Darius, come so far. Why give up now?

The voice was soft, pleasant. It seemed to draw Darius in, helped him to focus his mind. He felt as though he was able to concentrate better now. He focused on the voice.

"Who are you?" he asked, surprised to find that he had a voice.

I think that is a question you should be asking yourself, Darius. Tell me, who are you?

Darius hesitated before answering. "I… I don't know what you mean. You already know my name."

A name is inconsequential to the self. I would like to

know who you are. Tell me, Darius. Who are you?

Darius struggled to make sense of the woman's question. "I'm Darius. A Reaper of souls."

The voice suddenly laughed, a gentle laugh that soothed Darius' soul, reminding him of his youth, playing with other children and laughing loudly throughout their games. The laugh faded and the voice spoke again, but the hint of a smile could be heard in her tone.

That's not what I meant, but nice try. Tell me. Who are you?

"I don't know what you want to hear from me," Darius called out to the nothingness. "I don't know why it should matter, either. I'm clearly dead. Azrael killed me. By now, he probably has Peyton's soul and is laying waste to Earth and Heaven."

And why does this matter to you?

"It should matter to everyone!" Darius cried, astonished that the being who spoke to him couldn't understand the gravity of the situation. "I can't stop him now. I can't save…"

Darius let himself trail off. There was no point. No point in going on. There was nothing he could do.

You can't save…? the voice pressed.

Darius sighed. "I can't save anyone. Not now."

Is it your responsibility to save anyone, Darius? Are you bound in some way to protect others?

Darius shook his head. "No. I take the dead to the next world. I don't save anyone. It's not something I'm supposed to do, I'm not *allowed* to interfere. I can't save anyone. Only watch them die."

Then why does it matter that you can't save someone now?

"Because this is different," Darius said quietly, not sure if the voice could hear him.

How?

"Because this time I care!" Darius shouted. "I never cared before. Not since before I died. No one cared for me when I was human. Once I was taken from my parents, no one cared what I wanted, I was only a tool to them, nothing more than the horse that pulled the plough. When I became a Reaper, I thought there was no reason I should care about the living. Why should I? Only… The woman… Peyton. She doesn't deserve what's about to happen to her. She's facing a horrible fate, so much worse than anything I endured. Her soul is going to be devoured by a monster and she is going to be trapped forever in pain and torment. And now there's nothing I can do about it. I tried. I tried so hard to save her. To save everyone."

So you were trying to save the world?

Darius paused. He hadn't thought about it. He had supposed that he had been trying to save the world, Earth and Heaven, but he suddenly felt as though that wasn't the right answer. Like they were only secondary concerns.

"I suppose…" he began. "I suppose I was only trying to save Peyton. I almost didn't care what happened to anyone else. I just needed to save Peyton."

Why?

Darius knew why, but he didn't say it. He didn't know how to say it, but the voice didn't seem to need an answer. It sighed in his head, a soft sigh that was like that of a lover, a gentle breath that surrounded him.

Oh, Darius. I know why. And so do you. It is as plain as day. And yet, you resist your feelings.

Darius shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. Peyton's

about to give her soul to Azrael, if she hasn't already. And I'm dead."

The voice laughed again. *You are not dead.*

Suddenly, there was a pinprick of light ahead of Darius. It glowed a brilliant white, shining like a star. Darius stared at it in wonder, then realized that it was growing larger. Quickly it went from being a tiny speck far, far away, to being the size of a coin, then a dinner plate, larger and larger. And at its center there was a shape, but the light was so bright, Darius couldn't see what it was, squinting his eyes from the blinding brightness. Then he figured out that the light wasn't growing. It was coming closer. It was descending on him, coming closer and closer, the light almost taking up his entire field of vision. He could finally see himself as the light lit up the void. He was still a tangible body, but he didn't seem to have any of the wounds that Azrael had inflicted. He was pristine.

The light descended and Darius shielded his eyes with one hand, still trying to see what was in the center of the light. Finally, the shimmering star came to a stop in front of Darius. For a moment, nothing happened, as though the light was studying Darius, considering him, but then the light began to fade. As it faded, quickly growing softer and more bearable, Darius could see that the shape in the center of the light was a person. A person wearing a flowing white dress. She had long blonde hair that seemed to have a glow of its own. She had a smile that was warm and inviting. She had eyes that sparkled with a brilliant green. She was the most beautiful person Darius had ever seen. She was…

"Peyton?" Darius said in a breath.

The woman smiled wider. "No, Darius," she said, now

speaking with an audible voice. "Not quite."

Now that the initial shock began to wear off, Darius could see that while this woman did look exceptionally alike to Peyton, she was not identical. And yet, she was identical. She looked exactly like Peyton, but with none of the human imperfections that come naturally. There were no pores. No age lines. No freckles. Her hair sat perfectly on her head, far too perfectly to be natural or even held by any kind of product. And her eyes. Her eyes were the biggest difference. They shone with a brilliant shade of green, much like those of Eve's and Azrael's. They were the eyes of an Angel.

"Shekinah?" Darius asked. The woman nodded, standing with hand folded over hand at her waist.

"It's lovely to see you again, Darius," Shekinah said.

Darius could only stare. Shekinah, the Archangel, one of the most ultimately powerful beings in the universe, standing before him and speaking as though they had simply run into each other on the street, and not while Darius had been floating aimlessly through nothingness. Shekinah seemed to find Darius' surprise and confusion humorous, grinning at him, her eyes sparkling.

"As I was saying," she said, "you are not dead."

"Then where am I?" Darius asked.

"Don't you recognize this place? This is where we first met. This is where you became a Reaper."

"Why am I here?" Darius asked.

"You're not," Shekinah replied, smiling a coy smile. "Not really. You are actually still lying in the Garden, bleeding from the wounds Azrael inflicted on you."

"So, this is in my head. Why?"

"I wanted to speak with you," Shekinah said. "What are

you doing?"

"What do you mean?" Darius asked, confused. "Azrael has won. I can't beat him. He's too powerful."

"Whoever said *you* needed to beat him?" Shekinah asked, inquisitively.

"Well… No one said I had to," Darius replied, feeling more and more confused by the minute. "But I still had to try. He's going to kill Peyton. He's going to destroy Heaven and Earth. Shouldn't someone stop him?"

Shekinah shrugged, her golden hair flowing like water. "Maybe, maybe not. The choice is up to you, Darius."

Darius was beginning to feel aggravated. Shekinah wasn't being helpful at all, she only spoke in riddles. "What am I supposed to do, then? Let Azrael win? Let him take Peyton's soul?"

"Oh, no, of course not," Shekinah frowned. "That would be dreadful."

"Then why won't you stop him?" Darius all but shouted. "Why is it up to me?"

Shekinah smiled at him kindly. "Heaven has long known that direct involvement on Earth only leads to trouble. As long as Azrael's betrayal is affecting the life of a mortal, we are… hesitant to intervene."

"But if you don't, everything will be destroyed," Darius said emphatically.

"Not if you realize who you are, Darius," Shekinah said.

"I don't know who I am!" Darius shouted. "I don't know what I'm doing! I'm lost, Shekinah. I can't help anyone. All I can do is reap souls. I take them from their loved ones, from the entire world they know, and I send them to another world for judgement. Many I help

condemn to the depths of Tartarus, where they suffer for God-knows how long."

"Tell me, Darius, how did you die?"

The question was so sudden and unexpected, Darius faltered and forgot his anger. "I was sentenced to death for murdering my commanding officer."

"Ah, but was it murder?" Shekinah asked. "What is the line between murder and defending one's self? Is it murder to shoot a man who is holding a knife to a child's throat?"

"I still killed a man," Darius replied. "No matter how gray the lines are, they are still there."

"Tell me, Darius the Reaper… When you killed that man, did you know what might happen to you?"

"I… I can't remember."

"Oh, I think you do," Shekinah smiled. "I think you remember all too well. Please, Darius. Be honest with me."

Darius' shoulders slumped and he hung his head. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Before I stopped Captain Myles from… hurting that girl… I knew there would be consequences for interfering. He was a respected white man in a time that thought very little of my race. He… He was an angry man."

"Did you know you would die?" Shekinah asked, floating around Darius as she spoke, never taking her eyes off him. "Did you know that saving that girl would result in your death?"

Darius shook his head. "No. I… I didn't know. Not for sure."

"But you suspected."

Darius nodded.

"Did you want to die?" Shekinah asked.

"Of course not," Darius said. "I was scared of dying. I felt certain I would go to Hell for the things I had done."

"Then why did you interfere?"

"Because that girl was innocent," Darius answered. "She didn't deserve what was about to happen. She was young and pure and… innocent. So I stepped in. Even though I knew it might result in my death."

Shekinah placed her hands gently on Darius' shoulders as she floated behind him. "There you have it," she whispered in his ear. "That is who you are, Darius."

She turned Darius around to face her, keeping her hands on his shoulders, looking deep into his eyes, a kind smile on her lips. "You say you are only Darius. That you are a Reaper. That you are a monster. These things do not determine who you are. They are only titles. The part of you that I wanted to know was the part you don't seem to see. But I see it, Darius. So does Peyton. Everyone has seen it but you. You, Darius, are a good man. You are a selfless man. Many years ago, you gave your life to save a young girl you had never met. You didn't know her. She was a complete stranger. And yet, you sacrificed yourself to save her. And now you will save Peyton. Still so selfless. Still so brave."

"But how?" Darius asked, desperately. "How can I save her? How can I stop Azrael when he is so much more powerful?"

Shekinah drifted backwards, away from Darius, her smile still playing across her lips. "You already know the way. Don't give up, Darius. I know you will remember the way."

"Wait, no, you have to help me!" Darius cried,

realizing that Shekinah was leaving. The bright light was returning around her, growing brighter and brighter, making it difficult to see her clearly.

"Just remember, Darius," Shekinah said, her voice growing more ethereal as she vanished within the light. "Remember. When things seem at their worst, remember this question. Who are you?"

"Please!" Darius begged, shielding his eyes from the light as it continued to grow brighter. "Please, don't go! Help me!"

You don't need help, Darius. You know what you need to do. The very thing you always do.

Then the light began to shine so bright, Darius could see nothing else. The void was lit up until the darkness became white and then Darius felt himself falling. He fell without warning, like in a dream, sudden and fast. He reached out for something to grab hold of, but there was nothing. As he fell, the light began to grow more and more distant, shrinking away as Darius fell into the nothingness. Then, finally, the light was gone.

That's when Darius awoke with a jerk, lying flat on his back in a luscious green field surrounded by trees. Darius jumped as he woke, like someone who has had a dream where they are falling and wake up just before they hit the ground, convulsing with his entire body. Darius sucked in a deep, rattling breath, gasping for air. He looked down at his body and saw the blood-stains all over his clothing and hands. He ripped open his shirt to inspect the damage, but there was none. He ran his hand over his bloody chest, feeling for a wound, but there was nothing there. He was smooth and whole. He sat up in the grass, still staring down at himself. He wondered how he had healed so fast

from wounds inflicted by an Angel, but then realized that it must have been Shekinah. She had healed him. Healed him so he could go on and stop Azrael. Darius looked around, wondering where Peyton had gone, hoping it wasn't too late. He saw Azrael's scythe lying nearby, still where Darius had dropped it earlier. There was a pool of blood all around him. Darius couldn't see anyone. Not Eve or Azrael or Peyton.

As he turned his head from where he sat in the bloody grass, Darius saw her. And Azrael. Standing together, a glowing orb of light and gas floating in the palm of Azrael's hand.

It was too late.

1ST CORINTHIANS 15:26

Azrael stood with Peyton's glowing soul in the palm of one hand, staring down at it like a child on Christmas who just received a deeply desired gift. With his other hand, he was holding Peyton's arm, gripping tightly, the only thing that kept her from falling to the ground. There were tendrils of light and energy trailing from the main body of the orb and back into various points on Peyton's chest. She still seemed to be aware, staring at her own soul in horror, her face completely void of color, her eyes wide and her mouth open in a silent scream of pain and fear. Azrael was pulling out her soul. As she watched, he began to raise it to his mouth. He opened his skeletal jaw, bringing the soul to where his lips used to be. He began to inhale, a long, drawn out breath that sounded like the dying breath of a very old man. As he breathed in, the watery-gas that made up Peyton's soul began to drift into his mouth. A tendril of energy that still clung to Peyton snapped and broke away from her body. Peyton could feel it snap, felt the pain like breaking a bone. Azrael continued to inhale, slowly sucking in Peyton's soul, savoring his victory.

Suddenly, he threw back his head and screamed in pain, at the exact moment the tip of a sharp blade burst through his chest. The blade retracted and Azrael turned to see what had struck him. He came face to face with Darius, wielding the scythe, teeth bared and eyes burning with a hellfire that had never existed there before, glaring with contempt at Azrael through a mask of dried blood that still clung to his face.

"Impossible," Azrael snarled.

Without saying a word in response, Darius lifted the scythe and swung it at Azrael like it was a baseball bat. The back end of the blade caught Azrael in the side of the head and knocked him clear off his feet, cartwheeling once through the air and crashing to the ground a few yards away. At the moment the scythe impacted with the side of his head, Azrael let go of Peyton's soul and it hovered in mid-air, only a few tendrils of energy keeping it attached to Peyton's body. Peyton was staring at it, convulsing now, her face so white she might have been already dead. Darius reached out and gently took her soul in his hand. Then, carefully, he slowly lowered it back to her chest. Placing his hand over her chest, he pushed the soul back inside of Peyton's body, his hand going with it, vanishing inside of Peyton as Darius replaced her soul inside of her. Peyton gasped deeply as Darius pushed her soul back into place, sucking in air like she hadn't breathed in hours. She looked down, still pale, and saw Darius' hand inside her chest. She looked back up at his face, shaking, still so pale.

"Darius?" she whispered hoarsely.

Darius finished replacing Peyton's soul and carefully pulled out his hand, hoping that he wasn't hurting her too

badly. As soon as his hand was free, Peyton fell to her knees, coughing and choking, but the color was returning to her face.

"Peyton, are you alright?" Darius asked desperately.

Still coughing, Peyton could only nod. She looked up at Darius, her cheeks flushed and sweat beading on her forehead.

"What have you done?"

Darius turned and saw Azrael approaching. The exposed bone was cracked on the side of his head, broken from the impact of Darius' swing.

"I won't let you take her soul, Azrael," Darius said, gripping the scythe in both hands. "You can try, but I'll never let it happen. You'll have to kill me first."

"I thought I already had," Azrael snarled. "I'll just have to try again."

There was suddenly a flash of violet light and, without warning, Eve was standing beside Darius, staring at Azrael defiantly.

"I won't allow you to take Peyton's soul, either, Azrael," she said. Then she looked over her shoulder at Peyton and said, "I'm sorry, but some promises need to be broken."

Azrael glared at the pair of them, his eyes moving from one to the other. Peyton was trying to speak, but still hadn't fully recovered and was gasping on the ground, clutching her chest.

"I will destroy both of you," Azrael said quietly.

"You can try," Darius said. He tightened his grip on the scythe, brandishing the blade towards Azrael. "But you will fail."

The rage seemed to radiate from Azrael's body. Darius

could almost feel the heat of it on his face. "Fine," Azrael said. "If I have to destroy you first, so be it."

Suddenly, without warning, Azrael spread his one remaining wing and snapped it towards Darius. Darius lifted the scythe and blocked the attack, the sound of bone on steel ringing out loudly all around them, like someone striking a church bell with a hammer. Azrael whipped his wing at Darius again and again, Darius only barely managing to block and dodge each attack. He moved toward Azrael, trying to force him back, away from Peyton. Azrael began to walk slowly backwards, still striking at Darius. With amazing speed, Azrael thrust the tip of his wing at Darius' face, the sharp point rushing forward. Darius, using the staff of the scythe, manage to deflect the attack, but Azrael suddenly rushed toward Darius and slammed his shoulder into him. Darius went flying backwards, the world suddenly turning upside down as he flipped over, but he managed to land on his feet after backflipping through the air, using the scythe to help keep his balance, holding it horizontally like a balancing beam. He landed in a half-crouch, glaring at Azrael, ready for the next attack.

Before it came, however, Eve suddenly raised her palm to Azrael and everyone stopped. The ground seemed to be rumbling. The ground was shaking, leaves falling from the trees overhead. Suddenly, a deep crevice opened under Azrael's feet with a loud crack. Azrael teetered on the edge of the chasm, then suddenly fell into its depths, roaring in fury. Eve quickly clapped her hands together once and the chasm slammed shut, the ground sealing and looking as though nothing had ever happened. She hurried over to Darius, still limping slightly from her wound.

"That won't hold him for long," she said in a rush. "What should we do?"

Darius thought quickly. He knew Azrael's anger would make the Angel want to finish him off before going after Peyton. Eve was good in a fight, but still wounded. She already looked weakened by the effort of trapping Azrael in the earth. Peyton was still struggling to breathe properly, she would be incapacitated for a while, but even if she wasn't, Darius would never let her stand against Azrael in a fight. Darius was the only one who could stand up to Azrael right now.

Or was he? He walked over to Peyton and knelt beside her, leaning on the scythe. He reached out and took Peyton's hand, squeezing it gently.

"Just breathe, Peyton," he said. "It's okay. You'll be fine."

Peyton's body shook as she was overcome by another loud cough, then she looked up at Darius with a red face and watery eyes.

"I thought you died," she said, her voice hoarse and weak.

Darius smiled. "It will take more than just the Angel of Death to put me down."

Despite her obvious pain, Peyton managed to smile, tightening her grip on Darius' hand.

"Peyton," Darius began, "I need you to stay with Eve. Look after each other. You're both wounded and won't last long if Azrael catches you. Eve will take you out of sight. I'll take care of Azrael."

Peyton looked worried as she tried to breathe properly. "But… Fate said-"

"I believe Fate was wrong," Darius interrupted. "I

spoke to someone else who gave me an idea. A way to stop Azrael for good. But I need you to trust me, Peyton, and do what I ask of you. Can you do that?"

Peyton stared at him for a moment, fighting back another coughing fit. "Well, you've kept me alive this long. How could I not trust you now?"

Darius smiled and gave Peyton's hand one last encouraging squeeze, then rose to his feet and turned to Eve.

"Who did you speak with?" Eve asked. "Who told you how to beat Azrael?"

"It's a long story, and we don't have time," Darius said. "Eve, take Peyton somewhere safe, but don't go too far. We need Azrael to know she's still close. He's obsessed with her soul and if he's sensing her energy, he'll be distracted, and that might give me the chance I need to succeed."

"But what are you doing?" Eve asked.

"I need to get him to Tartarus," Darius said. "I need to wound him. Get his blood. If I can get him or his blood to make contact with Tartarus…"

"Then Tartarus will claim him," Eve finished. "But Darius, he nearly killed you once. How do you expect to beat him, even with him distracted by Peyton's energy?"

"I have to try, Eve," Darius said somberly. "It's the only chance Peyton has."

The earth nearby suddenly cracked, as though something very large, or very strong, had hit it from beneath the surface. Darius ushered Eve towards Peyton.

"Quickly," he said. "Get going. Remember, stay out of sight, but don't go far. No matter what you see, Eve, no matter what happens to me, do not get involved. Just get

away. Peyton, if I fail, don't give in. Don't give Azrael your soul."

Peyton tried to respond, but was overcome by another wave of hacking coughs as Eve lifted her to her feet. Darius stepped back and watched, his eyes meeting Peyton's. They stared at each other, neither one sure when they would see the other again. Or even *if* they would see each other again. Then, in a sudden flash of violet light, both Peyton and Eve were gone.

There was a loud bang and the ground cracked open some more. Azrael was fighting furiously to get out of his earthy prison and he would be free soon enough. Darius knew he had only seconds. He turned and ran toward the edge of the clearing.

The earth suddenly burst open, a skeletal hand exploding out of the ground like a demonic tree, clawing at the sky. A moment later, the ground tore apart in an explosion of dirt and grass, clumps of earth flying in every direction as Azrael burst out of the ground, launching himself several feet into the air before landing on his feet at the edge of the crevice, looking around furiously. He wanted little more than to tear Eve's head from her shoulders and present it to her father. Azrael cast his burning eyes around the half-destroyed clearing, searching for a sign of her flaming red hair. The color most certainly would stand out against this endless backdrop of green, but she was nowhere to be seen. However, Azrael did see someone of interest. A man in a torn white shirt, with long black hair, running into the trees, holding a scythe. Azrael's rage burned inside him, as did the many souls he had taken.

The pain… the pain was getting to be too much now.

Every inch of his body burned with an intense fire, while simultaneously felt like it was being flayed, over and over again. He kept telling himself it was nearly over. Once he had Peyton's soul, he would be free of the pain. He would have the power to heal himself permanently. He would be a god. All of Earth's pure and decent souls would go directly to him. He would become more powerful than everyone in Heaven and he would lay waste to it, bringing about a new age for both Angels and humanity. Many would die, but those who chose to stand by his side would be spared.

But as long as Darius was alive, he would never allow Azrael to get Peyton's soul. Darius would be there to stop him, to fight him at every turn. Only when Darius was dead could Azrael meet his destiny. Trying to ignore the pain in his body, Azrael moved into the trees after Darius.

Darius was running through the trees, moving as quickly as he could, but was slowed down by the wild terrain. The scythe was large and cumbersome, slowing him down even more. He had heard the ground break open moments before he entered the tree line, so he knew that Azrael was free and most likely pursuing him.

Suddenly, it became much darker. When it was light only seconds before, it was now a bleak semi-darkness. Darius stopped and looked up. The sky had been clear, but now there were thick ominous storm clouds forming overhead, swirling tighter and tighter together, spinning like an airborne maelstrom, blocking out the sky. Darius knew this was Azrael's doing. Like Eve and her ability to manipulate the earth, Azrael had Angelic powers as well.

As Darius stared up at the sky, a bolt of lightning suddenly shot down and struck a tree nearby, the power of

the bolt exploding the trunk. Darius ducked and shielded his face and eyes with one arm as he turned away from the explosion, which had sent thousands of pieces of flaming bark and wood in all directions, like fiery fragments of shrapnel, as the tree was instantly reduced to splinters and a burning, blackened stump was all that marked where it had once stood. Darius immediately began to run again, sprinting across the terrain, jumping over rocks, bushes, logs, anything that threatened to slow him down. As he ran, he could hear the rumble of the sky overhead. There was a flash of white light and the ground behind him exploded, dirt and dust flying everywhere as lightning struck where Darius had been only an instant before. He could feel the heat on his back as he ran. There was a quick succession of explosions behind him as bolt after bolt struck the earth again and again, missing Darius' heels by only inches. Braving a glance over his shoulder, Darius saw the trail of destruction left in his wake, small craters now disfiguring the previously pristine landscape, smoke climbing up out of each hole, marking where each bolt of lightning had struck. And not far behind, he could see Azrael coming after him, moving so fast and easily, he seemed to be gliding over the ground. He had one hand extended towards Darius, as though reaching out to grab him. Then Darius lost sight of him as another bolt of lightning struck the ground and flared in his vision. Darius turned and focussed on where he was going. There wasn't far to go, now. Tartarus was close. Darius wasn't entirely sure on what he was going to do once he got to Tartarus. He knew his only hope was to trap Azrael in the depths of Tartarus, but how he was going to manage that was another thing entirely.

Darius suddenly burst out of the trees and found himself on the black sand beach that bordered Tartarus. He stopped in his tracks and looked around, trying to think quickly of what he should do next, but then he heard the rumble of the booming atmosphere and saw a flash of light up in the sky. Darius instinctively raised the scythe and used the blade as a shield, turning his head and squeezing his eyes shut tight, certain that he was about to die. However, Azrael's scythe must have grown in power as Azrael did, because the lightning struck the blade, so hard it forced Darius to one knee as he cringed behind it, the power of the lightning strike making his hair stand on end. The lightning crackled around the steel blade, strings of bright blue electricity criss-crossing all over the steel and branching out into the air, reaching for Darius' face, but leaving him untouched. Then the electricity stopped and Darius looked at the blade in amazement, scarcely believing his luck.

He heard a noise in the trees behind him and turned to see Azrael gliding closer, his arm still outstretched. The air boomed again and the sky lit up, but Darius was prepared this time. Raising the scythe into the air, Darius caught the bolt of lightning as it sped towards his body. The electricity crackled around the blade once more, but Darius didn't let it fade. Instead, he gripped the scythe tightly in both hands, stepped towards Azrael while spinning once around like an athlete competing in the hammer throw. He cried out with the force of the swing he put in the scythe, then launched the electricity off the blade like an expert lacrosse player, directly at Azrael. Azrael, caught by surprise, was struck in the chest with the full force of the lightning. The air sizzled with

electricity, several nearby trees burst into flames, and Azrael was blown off his feet, vanishing back into the trees.

Certain that Azrael wouldn't be firing lightning at him again, Darius glanced down the black sand beach for any clue of how to get Azrael into Tartarus. That's when he saw the boat. The same boat he and Peyton had used to cross to the Chthonic Island. It must have returned here after he and Peyton failed to go back to it. Darius, quickly glancing over his shoulder to where he had last seen Azrael, sprinted towards the boat. As he neared, he leaped through the air and landed feet-first inside the boat, which then immediately began to sail gently out into Tartarus. Remaining on his feet, Darius turned to face the land, where he saw Azrael stepping out of the trees, smoke rising from his body where the lightning had struck him. He looked around the beach, searching for another boat, but saw none. He turned his gaze back on Darius, his featureless skull leering at him from under the tattered hood.

"Do you think I can't reach you out there, Darius?" he asked loudly, the storm clouds still spinning overhead. "You don't seem to understand. I am so much more powerful now."

As Darius watched, Azrael hunched over on the sand, extending his remaining wing. The stump where his other wing had been sat uselessly on his shoulder blade, but then, something began to happen. The stump was growing. The stump that marked where his severed wing had been was suddenly beginning to sprout. More bones appeared. Then thin layers of flesh webbed between the bones. It continued to grow and grow and grow until it

was as big as its counterpart on Azrael's opposite shoulder. Azrael stood up straight, stretching his wings, testing them out. He had grown his wing back. Then, with one powerful flap, Azrael launched up into the sky and sped out over Tartarus, directly at Darius, the wind screaming over his hellish wings.

On shore, Peyton had managed to regain normal breathing. She and Eve were heading through the trees in the direction that they had seen Darius running off in. They were moving quickly, but cautiously, both remembering Darius' instructions; to stay close, but hidden. Peyton had picked up her speed when the sky suddenly turned dark and thunder and lightning raged overhead. The pair finally reached where the forest ended and the black beach began, but did not dare step out into the open. Instead, they remained hidden behind the trees and peered out onto the beach.

"I don't see them," Peyton whispered.

Eve stared silently into the distance. A breeze was blowing her fiery red-hair gently around her face, but she made no move to sweep it back. Peyton followed her gaze and saw what was captivating her so.

"Oh my God," Peyton said, a feeling of dread rushing through her entire body.

Darius swung the scythe at Azrael as he swooped overhead, ducking one of the deadly wings as he did so. The blade passed harmlessly by Azrael as he sped over the top of the boat, tilting to the left in order to dodge the attack. His left wing clipped the boat and Darius was nearly rocked off his feet as the small dinghy leaned dangerously from side to side. Once the boat stopped rocking so violently, Darius found sure footing again and

searched the sky for Azrael. He was circling overhead, picking up speed. He then folded his wings back and went into a steep dive, coming in low, directly at Darius. Darius prepared to swing the scythe again, but at the last second, Azrael pulled out of the attack and veered upwards. He spread his wings wide and flapped hard, sending himself straight up, but the flap of his wings sent a powerful gust of wind straight at Darius and the boat. Darius felt the wind smash into the side of the boat, rocking it fiercely, and he felt as though he was about to be knocked off his feet. He stumbled backwards and nearly fell over the side of the boat, but managed to drop to his knees and brace himself against the inside of his tiny boat, preventing himself from falling overboard and into Tartarus, where he would never get out. He quickly rose back to his feet and searched the sky for Azrael once more.

He had vanished. Darius turned left, then right, turning slowly on the spot as he scanned the dark horizon. Azrael was toying with him now. He had disappeared in the clouds, waiting for Darius to have his back turned. Darius kept the scythe ready, gripping it tightly in his hands. He focussed on the sounds he could hear, listening for something out of the ordinary. It seemed the seconds took an eternity to tick by. Everything was silent on Tartarus. Darius held his breath and listened.

Suddenly, behind him, he heard an almost silent whooshing sound. The sound of air being disturbed by something moving very fast. Darius tightened his grip on the scythe and waited. When the sound seemed to be directly behind him, he jumped. He leaped straight up into the air, everything seeming to slow down. As he jumped, he tucked his legs up and began to flip backwards. Azrael

came into his field of vision, a dark nightmare flying through the sky, a wing cutting through the air where Darius' head had been a split-second earlier. Darius spun as he flipped, now looking down on Azrael's back as he sped by. Darius swung down the scythe and felt it cut into Azrael's robes and hit something hard. He felt a strong resistance, and then something gave. Azrael sped underneath Darius, quickly zooming upwards, back into the air. Darius landed on his feet in the boat, rocking only slightly on impact. Looking up, he saw Azrael hovering in the sky, holding his arm. Darius had sliced into Azrael's arm, cutting into the bone. Darius looked up at the blade of the scythe, expecting to see blood, ready to fling the whole scythe into Tartarus, ready to give Tartarus Azrael's blood so that the entity knew the enemy. But there was none. Not a single drop of blood was to be seen, the blade of the scythe shining traitorously above Darius' head. Darius stared up at the steel in shock, knowing he had cut deep into Azrael's flesh, horrified as he realized why there was no blood. Azrael had decayed so much he no longer had any blood to bleed.

I've failed, Darius thought blankly.

Peyton, watching from the shore, had unconsciously emerged from the trees, stepping closer to the violent aerial display and Darius trying to fend of the horrific creature that tormented him from the air. She had gasped on several occasions when she thought Darius was going to fall overboard. She knew what it meant when a Reaper touched Tartarus.

"Is there anything we can do?" she asked Eve, sounding as though her inability to help was causing her physical pain.

"We have to wait," Eve said, also having stepped out of the trees and onto the beach. "We have to pray that Darius can get Azrael into Tartarus."

Peyton turned her gaze back out to the sea-to-air battle that continued to rage. Then she did something she hadn't done since she was a little girl, going to church with her grandmother.

She prayed.

Darius ducked as Azrael swooped down and whipped at him with both of his deadly wings, the pointed tip of one wing barely missing his throat, Darius blocking the other with the blade of the scythe, the sound of impact clanging loudly across Tartarus. He slashed outward at Azrael, but the Angel had already shot up into the sky.

Darius was getting tired. He could feel it. He had forgotten that when so close to Tartarus, he would be weakened. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer, but his plan had failed. Azrael had no blood that Darius could use to draw Tartarus to him. The tar-like ocean continued to be silent and still while a Reaper and an Angel battled to the death above it in a furious, seemingly endless clash of bone against steel, Azrael swooping and slashing and flapping and striking like a giant bat. In that moment, Darius found himself suddenly angry at Tartarus. Angry for not being more intelligent, to know when he was needed. All he needed was Azrael to touch Tartarus. Just one touch, a single drop of blood or flesh or bone, but Azrael moved so fast and was so strong, Darius couldn't hurt him.

Darius then thought of Shekinah and was angry all over again, even as he dodged another attack from Azrael, the bone cutting so close, it ripped open the sleeve of his

shirt, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Darius cried out in pain and slashed at Azrael with the scythe, but missed as Azrael quickly moved backwards and resumed circling Darius and the boat, a black and gray blur zooming by on all sides. Azrael swooped down on the boat and landed a kick to the side with both feet. The boat tipped to the side, over and over, threatening to capsize and throw Darius down into Tartarus. Darius dove onto the higher side of the boat, throwing his weight down hard to try and force the boat to level out again. The boat teetered on its side, Tartarus silently waiting directly beneath Darius' feet now, calmly waiting for a soul to claim. Darius flattened himself as much as he could against the raised side of the boat, willing it to lower.

Slowly, so slowly, the boat began to level out. Then it fell back into the black sea and rocked from side to side as it resumed its position. Darius quickly rose back to his feet and searched the sky. Azrael was gliding high overhead, circling back for another attack.

Darius thought desperately. What could he do? He had trapped himself out here on Tartarus. There was nowhere he could go. He couldn't make Azrael bleed, so he couldn't encourage Tartarus to claim him. Darius thought of everything Fate had said. How if Darius continued to protect Peyton and didn't allow her to give in to Azrael, then his soul would be lost. Perhaps this was what she meant. Perhaps he had sealed his own fate by thinking he knew better than Fate. Tartarus was sure to claim him. Why had Shekinah insisted that he could save Peyton? Why had she been so sure? Had Darius misunderstood something? Had he made a mistake? If only she hadn't been speaking in riddles. If only she had leveled with him.

If only she hadn't been so cryptic, asking ridiculous questions.

Who are you, Darius?

The words suddenly loomed in his memory. He remembered her asking about how he died. Commenting on his sacrifice to save a girl he didn't know. Much like he was trying to do for Peyton. He barely knew her, but he was risking his life for her. Shekinah had called him selfless. Told him that that was who he was.

When things seem at their worst, remember this question. Who are you?

Who was he? He was the man who had sacrificed himself to save the life of a stranger. That was what Shekinah had been saying to him. That he was the kind of man who would give his life to save another.

Darius looked to the shore that lay behind him. It was much farther away than when he last saw it, but he could still see two people standing on the black sand, staring out at him. He recognized Peyton, even from the current distance, her golden hair making her stand out against the forest of green and the black sand she stood upon. In that instant, he knew what he had to do. It was the only way.

As Darius heard the whistling of wind over wings beginning to approach, he turned to face the oncoming Azrael. He threw the scythe down onto the floor of the boat, where it clattered loudly against the wood before it came to rest. Darius reached behind his back and pulled out his own curved knife. He glared at Azrael defiantly as he swooped closer, screaming over the surface of Tartarus, ready to use his wings to slice Darius' head clean off his shoulders. Still staring at Azrael, Darius placed the blade of his knife in his opposite hand and

squeezed tightly. He felt the sharp edge bite into his flesh and then the warm blood began to flow down the blade to the hilt. Darius quickly slashed his palm, making the cut all the more deep. Azrael was close, now, coming in faster and faster, green eyes blazing with certainty of his victory. Darius clenched his hand tightly, feeling the blood pooling in his fist and running through his fingers. Suddenly he turned and flung his hand out towards Tartarus on the opposite side of the boat, the side with empty skies. He watched as several large drops of his own blood sailed out over the black sea, arcing out over Tartarus and slowly beginning to fall. Before they hit Tartarus' surface, Darius turned to face the oncoming Azrael.

The blood fell through the air, soaring down towards a sea of black eternity. They splashed into the watery substance silently, instantly disappearing beneath the surface. For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Tartarus was as still and calm as ever, not even a ripple in his surface to indicate that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Then, suddenly, Tartarus roared to life. He seemed to erupt, a giant column of black water exploding out of the mass and reaching skyward, stretching dozens of feet high, branches breaking off in every direction, clawing at the sky, like a giant, many fingered hand. The branches immediately began racing through the air towards Darius.

Darius could hear it coming, could see in Azrael's eyes that it was coming. The normally placid Tartarus was now sounding like a torrential downpour, like standing at the base of Niagara Falls, water rushing and crashing and churning. Azrael tried to slow and change course, but he was already too close. Darius leaped off the floor of the

boat and planted one foot on the wooden edge. Then pushed with all his might, leaping through the air towards Azrael, his curved knife clenched tightly in his hand. He sailed through the air, out over Tartarus, not taking his eyes off Azrael as the Angel tried to turn away from the approaching clutches of Tartarus. Darius reached out with his bloody hand and grabbed hold of Azrael's robes, then landed heavily on Azrael's back, holding tightly to his shoulders. Azrael spun and flapped, trying to shake Darius off, but he held firm. He raised the bloody knife in his hand, high above his head, and plunged it down, deep into Azrael's back, directly between his wings. Azrael cried out as the blade pierced his rotten flesh, then again as Darius twisted it so that the curve of the blade hooked around Azrael's spine. Darius wrapped his arms around Azrael's body, holding himself firm, his body getting in the way of Azrael's wings and preventing him from flying effectively. They spun and struggled in the air, Azrael trying desperately to shake Darius off, but Darius held on with all the strength that he had. He turned his head and saw the hundreds of branches of Tartarus racing forward to take him. For the first time, Azrael looked frightened.

Darius leaned in close to Azrael and sneered, "See you in Hell."

Then Tartarus hit. The branches struck Darius in the back, immediately wrapping themselves around every part of him and beginning to spread over his entire body. As the inky darkness spread over Darius, they also struck Azrael, initially trying to get at Darius' blood that was lodged inside of him, but the moment they made contact with Azrael, he was a target as well. The black watery-gas that was Tartarus enveloped the Angel and the Reaper,

spidering across their bodies with ferocious speed. It pulled them away from one another and began to wrap them both separately, both now all but consumed in darkness.

"No!" Azrael was screaming, over and over again. He roared in fear and rage, trying to flap his wings and fly away, but Tartarus had glued to them and was pinning them against Azrael's body. Azrael clawed at the sky, watching as his hands were swallowed by the darkness. Azrael managed to let loose with one final roar, before he was silenced as Tartarus dragged him beneath the surface. Darius, however, was completely silent while Tartarus swept over him. He closed his eyes, spread his hands, and allowed Tartarus to take him, pulling him down to the surface, which churned hungrily with the anticipation of a new soul to claim. Before he vanished beneath the surface of Tartarus, he thought of Peyton.

And, despite everything, he smiled.

THE END IS NIGH

"Darius!"

Peyton screamed Darius' name when she saw the clutches of Tartarus drag both him and Azrael beneath its surface. She ran to the edge of Tartarus, only stopping from diving in to go after Darius because Eve had grabbed her arm and held her back.

"Darius!" Peyton screamed again. *"Darius!"*

Eve dragged her back, away from Tartarus, Peyton struggling to break free, but not succeeding. The two finally fell backwards on the grass at the edge of the beach, Eve still holding Peyton immobile by wrapping her arms around her, holding Peyton's elbows against her body as she struggled to get back to her feet, still screaming Darius' name.

"Peyton!" Eve shouted, sounding pained. "Peyton, he's gone! You can't save him! He's gone!"

Peyton shook her head and continued struggling. "No! He isn't! He isn't! We can save him! Let me go!"

Eve held firm, refusing to let her go. She held tight, letting Peyton struggle and kick and scream, still calling out to Darius. Finally, Peyton seemed to lose her energy,

all the fight falling out of her and she collapsed against Eve's body, letting the tears fall, crying loudly. Eve finally loosened her grip and sat up on the ground, pulling Peyton up into a sitting position beside her. She let Peyton bury her face in her shoulder, holding her close and trying to soothe her. She held Peyton like a sister, letting her cry, blinking hard as she also felt the tears come.

They both lost track of how much time passed as they sat on the black sand beach, staring out across Tartarus. Eventually, Peyton stopped crying loudly, but let the tears continue to fall down her cheeks until she had nothing left inside. She felt lost. She knew Azrael was no longer a danger to her, but not having Darius there to assure her she was safe made her feel anxious. She kept wanting to hear his voice. To silently roll her eyes at how serious he was. To talk to him. To thank him for everything he had done for her. She wished, desperately, for just one more minute with him, so that she could thank him for saving her life. She thought about the last time they had been together. He had just saved her, again, from Azrael taking her soul. She had tried to tell him to be careful, but couldn't speak due to the chronic coughing fit. She thought of all the things she wished so much that she had been able to say to when she still had the chance, but now she couldn't. She would never get to say anything to Darius ever again. She suddenly realized that she knew almost nothing about him before he became a Reaper. A fact that made her feel miserable all over again. She would never get to ask.

"I never told him," Eve suddenly said, her voice thick from crying, "how much I respected him. He was so... honorable. And good. He took no pride in what he did.

But he recognized the importance of it."

Peyton sniffed. "Is there any way to…" but she didn't finish asking. She knew the answer. There was no way they could save Darius. He had told Peyton what happened to a Reaper that had been claimed by Tartarus. They would be trapped forever. Just like Darius was now, to relive the suffering of others for eternity. Peyton wiped her eyes and lifted her head from Eve's shoulder. "What do we do now?"

Eve sighed. "We do what Darius wanted. We send you home, safe."

"How can I go home?" Peyton asked. "I mean, after all of this? How can I go back to my life? My home, my job… How can I just go back like all of this never happened?"

Eve stared out across Tartarus, thinking before replying. "You don't. You don't go back like this never happened. You go on. And you remember. Remember everything Darius told you. Everything he did. Everything he believed in. Honor his memory and never forget a single moment of your time with him, however brief. That's how you go back."

Eve rose to her feet and held out a hand to Peyton. Peyton took it and Eve helped her stand. Eve smiled at Peyton encouragingly, though her eyes were still filled with sadness, squeezing her hand gently. Peyton managed a weak smile back, but still felt like she had been hollowed out. She and Eve began to slowly walk off the beach, heading back into the trees. Eve led the way back into the forest, Peyton following sadly behind, not wanting to leave the beach, but knowing that staying would serve no purpose. Even so, as she reached the tree

line, she couldn't help but stop and turn, staring out into Tartarus one last time. Tartarus was silent as he had always been, there being no sign of the epic chaos that had happened there. No sign that a good soul had been taken beneath the surface. Sighing, she turned to leave, but she suddenly planted a hand against the trunk of a tree, as though stopping herself from walking any farther, and stopped in her tracks. She turned around and squinted into the distance. She took a step back onto the black beach, uncertain if she was seeing anything at all. She took another step onto the beach, watching the strange sight.

In the distance, slowly coming closer, Peyton could see something. Tartarus was moving. The black water had risen and was slowly moving towards the beach, like there was something large moving just under the surface. The lump was coming closer and closer, moving slowly but certainly towards the shore. Eve stepped out of the forest beside Peyton, having turned back to see where she had gone and also seeing the strange occurrence within Tartarus. She stood silently beside Peyton, watching as the anomaly came closer.

Finally, the bulge in the water reached the shore and stopped. It began to grow. It grew taller and taller, stretching up towards the sky. It then leaned over the beach like a giant dark candy cane and touched the sand. Then it began to suddenly peel away, revealing something it had been holding inside. Tartarus pulled itself off of the object inside, slowly letting it free, peeling off like a sticker, leaving only a thin residue that quickly faded away. And as Tartarus pulled away, Peyton and Eve could see what it was.

"Oh my God," Peyton gasped. "Darius!"

Darius was standing on the beach, his eyes closed as Tartarus slowly released him, his arms still spread wide. Tartarus was only attached at Darius' back, now, but the very moment he severed all contact with Darius' body, Darius' eyes snapped open and he gasped in a deep breath, instantly falling to his hands and knees, gasping for air. Peyton ran forward while Eve only stared in amazement, her mouth open in surprise. Peyton dropped to her knees beside Darius and held his face in both her hands while he sucked in enormous lungfuls of air. Behind him, the section of Tartarus that had held Darius slowly lowered itself back into the main body of water and silently disappeared, resuming the usual quiet stillness that Tartarus always maintained.

Peyton threw her arms around Darius' neck and held him close, hardly able to believe he was real. Darius, starting to regain normal breathing, slowly put his arms around her. Peyton held him even tighter, clutching the back of his shirt tightly, just in case he was going to disappear again.

"I thought you were gone," she whispered. "I thought… I thought…"

"I know," Darius said weakly, holding her tight. "I know."

Suddenly, Peyton pushed away from him and thumped him on the arm. "What the hell were you thinking?" she snapped, suddenly angry. Then she grabbed the increasingly confused Darius and pulled him in for another tight embrace. "Don't do that again," she said.

Smiling weakly, Darius said, "I'm not planning on it."

"Darius, I'm so glad you're alright," Eve said, stepping

forward. Darius and Peyton rose to their feet and walked back up the beach towards her. "But how? How are you standing here right now?"

Darius looked down at himself, then glanced over his shoulder, back at Tartarus. "I don't know," he said. "The last thing I remember is being pulled under the surface. Then I was here." His eyes suddenly widened and he looked around wildly. "Did Azrael get out, too?"

Eve shook her head. "No, Darius. Just you."

Confused, Darius ran a hand through his hair. "Why? Why did Tartarus let me go?"

Eve shrugged, but Peyton gasped and grabbed Darius' arm in her excitement.

"Darius, it was because you're not tainted," she said. "You told me that Tartarus claims tainted souls, people who aren't good enough, or ready enough, to go to Heaven. So if he let you go, doesn't that mean you don't belong there? That you're *good*?"

Darius considered it. He always felt like he had sinned, like he had done many bad things and had tainted his soul, but could Peyton be right? Could Tartarus see a side of him that he didn't know was there?

"I suppose we'll never know for sure," he replied. "But that's as good a theory as any."

They all turned and looked out into Tartarus, standing side by side.

"So, Azrael won't be getting out any time soon, then," Peyton said.

"No," Eve replied. "I don't imagine he will."

"Maybe if he realizes his mistakes," Darius said. "If Tartarus can show him the error of his ways, and if Azrael lets go of all his anger, maybe then he will be freed."

"I doubt that will happen for a long time," Peyton said. Smiling, Peyton turned to Darius. "So, can you see my fate now? What's my destiny, Mr Reaper?"

Darius looked down at her, silent for a few seconds, his eyes half-squinted and serious. Then he grinned at her, looking into her eyes. "That's more like it," he said.

"What?" Peyton asked, grinning. "What do you see?"

Darius shook his head, grinning. "Knowing would spoil living. It's the mystery of it all that makes life worth while."

Peyton stared up at Darius with her bright blue eyes, flecked with green, a small smile playing across her face. Darius smiled back at her, still confused as to why Tartarus released him, but in that moment, he didn't care. He was with Peyton and everything was alright.

"We should get Peyton home, Darius," Eve said. "I think she's had enough of our world for now."

Darius nodded, breaking his gaze from Peyton's. "Yes. Yes, of course. Peyton, I'll take you back to your home."

With a wave of her hand, Eve opened the violet portal, the light swirling madly before them, the sudden increase in wind blowing their hair about as they stared into the vortex.

"Will I ever see you again?" Peyton asked.

Darius grinned at her. "Of course, Peyton. Not even Death could stop me."

Peyton grinned at Darius as he took her hand. Together, they walked towards the vortex and stepped through. The black sand beneath their feet was suddenly gone and the green trees vanished, being replaced with a dimly lit living room, the ceiling lights still burning and sunlight peeking in through the windows as the sun rose over the

city. Peyton blinked in the change of lighting, letting her eyes adjust. A moment later, Eve appeared through the vortex behind them, smiling pleasantly around the living room, even though the room was still half-destroyed from the fight that had taken place there.

"It's weird being back here," Peyton said, looking around. "I know I wasn't gone that long, but… Jeez, it's weird, you know?"

Darius stepped back and smiled at Peyton. Eve stood beside him, also smiling at Peyton. Peyton smiled back at the pair of them.

"So… with Azrael gone," Peyton began, "what does that mean for you and the other Reapers?"

Darius spread his hands to show his ignorance on the matter. "Who knows? I'm sure someone will eventually replace him. But then, the other Reapers and I are so used to governing ourselves, most of the others might not ever even know he is gone. We will be fine, though. If there's one thing that endures, it is life and death."

Eve rolled her eyes. "Life of the party, isn't he?" she said sarcastically to Peyton, who smirked back at her.

So, now what?" Peyton asked.

Darius' smile became a little sad, because he knew he was saying goodbye. "Now, Peyton, you live your life the way you were destined to."

Peyton considered Darius and arched one eyebrow. Then, without warning, she walked directly up to Darius, grabbed his shirt and pulled his face down, pressing her lips against his. Surprised at first, Darius quickly leaned into the kiss, feeling the warmth of her lips on his. Eve smiled at them and turned away, giving them their moment together. Darius lost all thought as he pressed his

lips against Peyton's soft ones, raising a hand and brushing it through her hair.

When they broke apart, Darius stared at Peyton, still surprised by the kiss. Peyton straightened his shirt and stared up into his eyes seriously. "I don't believe in destiny."

Darius, still stunned, could only stare at her, the memory of her lips on his still tingling. Eve stepped toward Peyton and embraced her in a sisterly hug, a huge grin on her face.

"Take care of yourself, Peyton," Eve said. "It was truly a pleasure to meet you."

"Eve," Peyton began, not knowing exactly what to say. She looked at Darius, directing what she was about to say to both of them. "You two changed my life. I don't think I will ever look at things the same way again."

Darius finally found his voice again and said, "My life is changed as well, Peyton. Ever since I first saw you."

Peyton blushed and grinned up at him, playfully pushing him away. "You better visit me."

Darius inclined his head, silently promising to see Peyton again. When he could.

"We should go, Darius," Eve said, placing a hand on Darius' shoulder.

Peyton took a step back as Eve opened the vortex, the violet light flooding the room. Darius and Eve walked into the portal, both stopping to look back at Peyton one last time. Peyton raised her hand in a sign of farewell, and Darius felt a pang of longing, of wishing he could stay. But there was work to be done. There was always work to be done. Not taking his eyes from Peyton's, Darius watched her until the vortex closed and he found himself

staring out across a field full of flowers. They were back in the Garden. Darius stared out across the beautiful field of flowers, listening to the breeze rustle the leaves of the trees and watching the flowers sway gently.

"You lied," Eve said.

Darius shook off his daze and looked at Eve. "What?"

"You lied," Eve repeated. "You didn't see Peyton's fate at all."

Darius frowned with concern. "Yes. I lied. But only to keep from frightening her."

"She has a right to know, Darius. It's her fate."

"I'd rather tell her when I know more," Darius replied. "I'll tell her when I have something to tell her."

"What does it mean?" Eve asked. "If Azrael is trapped, why is her fate still blank to you?"

Darius frowned across the field, looking in the direction of Tartarus, imagining Azrael trapped and frozen beneath the surface, imprisoned inside his own mind, tormented by the pain and suffering of all of his numerous victims.

"I don't know," Darius said. "But it definitely means something else is coming."

THINGS TO COME

Far away, across Tartarus, through the jungle of the Chthonic Island, deep underground beneath a smoking volcano, an old woman shuffled around a pool of brightly glowing blue water. Fate was cackling, talking under her breath, staring down into the water as she circled the pool.

"The Reaper stopped Azrael, yes-yes-yes, that's good, very good. Of course he stopped him, we knew he would. It didn't look good for a while there, no-no-no. But he did it, he did, yes, he did. I still think he got lucky. Lucky or not, the design is playing out. But will he follow through? He still has choices to make, choices that will be difficult, far more difficult than any he has ever made before. Before too long, his choices won't matter. No-no-no."

Fate continued to shuffle along, wringing her hands and cackling quietly as she spoke to herself. Suddenly, the luminous blue water began to change. The light began to shimmer and pulsate, quickly changing from blue to a color beyond description. It seemed to shift and melt, changing from blue to red to purple, but was never any one of them, continuously changing colors, but not being any color recognized by mortals. Fate saw the change in

the water and froze in her tracks, staring down into the water. She looked surprised, but then laughed loudly and clapped her hands together, cackling as she approached the water and kneeled before it.

"It's him, it's him, it's him! He's finally making contact with us! Yes-yes-yes! Finally! Finally! Speak to us! Speak to us!"

There was then a strange sound. It seemed to pulsate out of the pool itself, a deep resonating bass, but there was no echo in the enormous cavern. There were no distinguishable words, but Fate listened intently, captivated.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, lord… Everything is going as you asked." She paused and seemed to listen to the resonating sound again. "Yes, Azrael is where he needs to be, for now. The Reaper is on his path… You will have your chance soon, lord. We have laid the path out for you. The way will soon be open."

The bass boomed again and Fate grinned and cackled at the sound.

"Yes, lord!" she laughed. "Yes! The traitors will all soon kneel to you once more! This abomination of a universe will soon be at your mercy. Oh, the destruction will be glorious! These humans, lord, they are terrible creatures! We need you, lord, we need your help. These humans must be annihilated. They are cruel and impulsive and selfish, the choices they make, they are erratic and foul, they should never have existed, they-"

Fate stopped as the bass emanating from the pool grew louder and drowned out her voice. She was nodding fervently.

"Yes, lord. Yes. We only ask for your patience. You

will have your revenge, we swear it. But to succeed, we must put the pieces in place. Azrael was acting too soon. We have ensured that he must wait until the proper time. Only then will you be able to lay waste to this universe and Heaven."

Fate's wrinkled old face broke into a wide grin, the lines in her face deepening as she imagined a universe where humanity no longer existed, and Heaven, along with all of its inhabitants, was destroyed.

"Your time will come soon, lord."