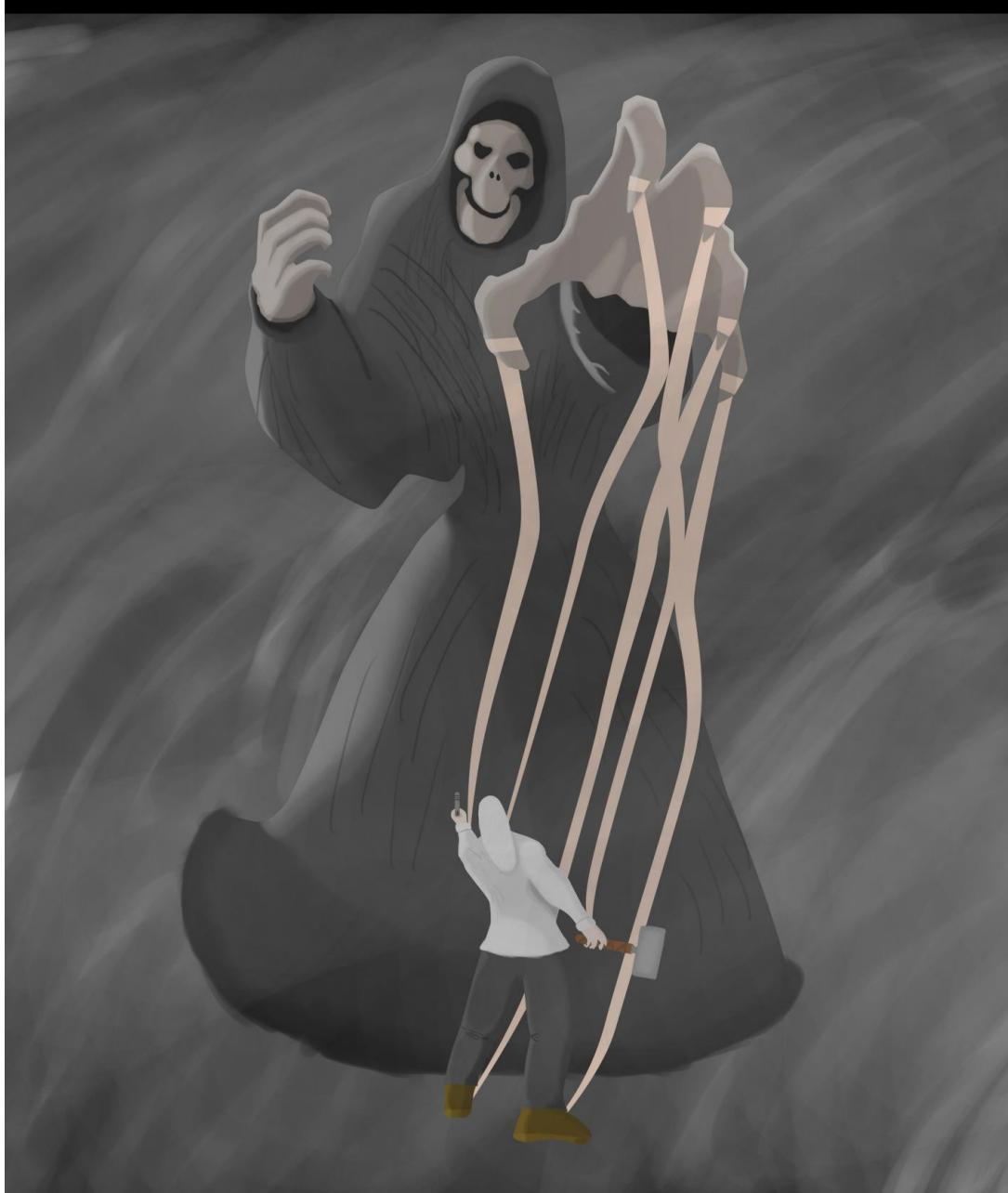


# Death

Sean francis

"No one controls Death."



The Desert Eagle pistol in my left hand bucked hard as it fired its heavy .44 Magnum bullet. Metal crashed into the soft rotting bone of the reanimated woman's head and she rocked back and to the ground. I saw that the round actually pierced through her head and entered the zombie man behind her. There was no time to be surprised by that. We had to get out of this Victorian manor as soon as possible and we were quickly being surrounded by the living dead.

"Damn necromancer!" I growled as I fired another round behind me. The missing sound of bone crunching told me that I had missed my wildly aimed shot.

Yet, a large blast of fire followed it seconds later and I could hear flammable flesh catch ablaze. Soft cries could be heard from decaying throats but they were quickly drowned out by the shuffling of feet and our pounding hearts. Well, mine since I was sure I could not hear his.

"This was a trap from the beginning." The man next to me huffed out.

His trench coat billowed with the wind he was creating by running. A white tee shirt covered his rather impressive torso and dark blue jeans fell over his lean legs. Long black hair mimicked his coat and his rounded face was drenched in sweat. I was not surprised. I was not a wizard, yet even I could feel the horrible oozing power of the black slab of obsidian he held crooked in one arm. To him it must have been something out of Hell itself. Power beyond belief.

I heard sound from our left and raised the Desert Eagle, which I had named Alison, and opened fire. Chunks of skin, bone and rotten gore ripped from the zombie as round after round exploded.

After three shots, though, I heard the click click of an empty magazine. Cursing, I released the empty rectangular tube inside of a holder I kept on my belt and then slammed the empty handle of the gun into a fresh magazine just below the first. To make sure it was in tight I hit the butt of

the gun into my leg and felt the magazine secure itself. I then used a protrusion of the holster to slide the bolt back.

During this time, though, a dead creature snuck up to our right and pure reaction saved us both. I flashed my warhammer up and felt it sink into the zombie's head with a squishy sound. That would have disgusted me if I had not been traveling with Landon for the past four years.

"But I don't understand." I panted, "Our names are on that thing already. If he had not specified a time, we would be laying in the middle of that vault without being the wiser."

A chill raced up my spine as the memory of seeing our names on the slab. It was barely perceptible as the user of the slab had to use his own blood to activate the object but Landon helped me see it. Our names were among the hundreds that had died recently. Most of the names did not have anything else with them which meant that they would die immediately yet we were one of the few names that actually had a specific time. We were the only ones with a date as well.

Landon spun around and raised his free hand. Spikes of wood rose from the oak flooring and spitted most of the undead in the hallway behind us. The rest of them were slowed while trying to get around the columns so we had some time that we would not get molested.

"You are assuming that he is just going straight for his goal of killing us." Landon said.

"What do you mean?"

"You missed the fact that he left the slab here for us in the first place. Why would he?"

I thought about it as we rounded the corner to the front door of the manor, "I don't know."

"Because he is just playing with us!" Anger tinted his voice. I felt like inching away from him as I knew what he was like when he was pissed off. My garage took the brunt of his rages.

"Playing with us? So, he is just trying to have fun?"

"Yes!" He growled, "He is probably watching us right now and laughing his fucking head off."

As if to prove that he was angry, he sent a wall of earth down the hall behind him. It was not completely useless though, as he took out another horde of undead that was behind us. Yet if he kept this up, we would have the manor fall on us right at the front door.

"Just focus on getting out for now." I said, "We can worry about him when we make sure we are safe."

He snarled but nodded. I could see him physically restrain his magic and I nearly sighed in relief. Landon could be really scary when he was angry.

We arrived at the door and readied ourselves to burst through the door assuming it was still unlocked. However, we felt like complete idiots as we slammed our noses against the sturdy oak. Well, I know I did. But the scowl on Landon's face gave me the idea that he did too.

"Back me up!" He yelled.

I stepped away from the door and aimed Alison down the hall. Zombies slid toward us and their collective voices moaned in hunger. Alison barked out in annoyance and two zombies fell with sections of their heads removed violently. This happened four more times before they were right on us.

The first zombie to reach out toward me was met with the top of my warhammer Betsy. Its head crunched with the force of the massive weapon. I then swung it to the right and felt the resistance of two more zombie bodies.

Something surprisingly sharp sunk into my thigh. I turned my head to find a zombie clawing at my leg and getting ready to bite down. Growling, I cracked the butt of Alison over its head to stun it then followed the blow up with Betsy. The floor shook a bit under her weight and I pulled it up in a backswing to slam into another creature's torso.

I felt a blunt object hit my torso and I stumbled back. The hesitation allowed for two zombies to pull me to the ground. I grunted as my back hit

the floor and looked up to see zombies crawling over me with mouths wide open.

Before they could start taking nibbles of me, though, a great explosion knocked them all back. Sunlight poured into the hall and the zombies immediately started skirting away. Landon's hand gripped the back of my leather jacket and hauled me to my feet. We ran outside, knowing that the zombies would not follow us, and headed for Travis.

He was waiting for us next to the path up to the manor. His metal shell was polished and the tires recently washed. Light reflected off of him and it was great to see that he was not tampered with. Our helmets were on both seats and I rushed to put mine on. I barely waited for Landon to get settled on his seat before kickstarting Travis and pulled out onto the road.

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Travis roared up into my driveway and through the garage door which I opened a block ago. His purr gradually died down to silence as if contented with the ride and I swung my leg around to dismount. Landon did the same and seemed to rush toward one of the tables along the walls. It was the only one that was clear and when he let go of the obsidian slab he seemed to sag with relief. Like a boxer who has just won a long fight.

"I'm going to check on Alicia." I said as I pulled off my leather jacket revealing the white button down shirt underneath.

Landon just grunted.

I climbed the small set of stairs up into the house and called, "Angel! I'm home!"

Even though I did not call her, I could hear the scrambling of tiny claws. Seconds later, a puppy-sized dog careened around the corner to the dining room and leapt at my chest. With a huge smile, I caught the white furred beast and hugged her tight.

"How is my tiny fluff-ball doing?" I asked in my pet-voice.

The Toy American Eskimo in my arms licked my cheeks as she panted happily. Laughter bubbled out of my mouth, "Alright Eskimo. I understand!"

Eskimo pulled her muzzle back and looked in my eyes with the cutest smile a dog could make. Footsteps clicked against the wood floor and Alicia appeared from where Eskimo came from.

She was a natural beauty. Short blonde hair that curled slightly at their tips. Bright blue eyes that always seemed sad yet she had eyebrows that gave her the contradiction of being constantly happy. A tiny upturned nose and thin lips that always seemed to pull me in along with her delightfully tanned skin.

She must have just come home from her early morning shift at the hospital. The blue scrubs wrapped around her small frame very nicely and revealed details that were very pleasant to look at.

"You're home." She said with a small smile, "I just—" She inhaled sharply, "You're injured!"

My eyebrow raised in surprise, "What?"

She rushed to me and started rubbing her hands along my arms. At certain spots, I felt sharp pain from unnoticed scratches and bruises. It was hard for me to hold back flinches from her and it showed in her expression.

"See? Get upstairs." Her tone brooked no descent.

I thought about trying to do it anyway. Alicia was not a part of the path I traveled with Landon. It was too dangerous for her. Hell, it was too dangerous for me yet I figured that I had to do it. For years she has accepted that and just took care of my injuries without any complaint. Lately, though, she has been subtly trying to pull me away from the missions I do.

I nodded, "Sure."

I gave Eskimo a couple more scratches and rubs then put her down and headed around the other corner, down the hall and up the stairs. Turning left, I entered the master bedroom and then the master bathroom attached to it. I removed the button-down shirt, the black jeans and combat boots. Standing in front of the mirror in my underwear I sighed.

I never understood how or why Alicia chose me. Stout was a kind word to describe me. Sure, I had bulging muscles and was fit, but in this world that was one of the worst things to be as a woman. Wide faced, overly muscled and large everywhere except where it counted in the beauty department. If that was not enough, pure white hair flowed down my back and bright red eyes looked right back at pale-skinned me. And not the pale skin of natural skin. I meant the kind of pale that meant I never went out into the sun even though I was outside every day.

I did not even notice it when Alicia came in and started the water in the large tub. I then felt her light arms wrap around my belly and her cheek against my back.

“Come on.” She whispered.

Her hands removed the rest of my outfit and I stepped into the now full tub. When we first got the house, she had asked why I needed to get the abnormally large tub. However, within a week of living together she understood. It was hard for me to fit in a normal bath without even trying to consider getting us together in one.

Next to me I heard the rustling of clothes and seconds later Alicia entered the tub behind me. Her hands glided over my skin and she worked special medicines into the wounds. At first, the wounds sent pain throughout my body, but as the medicines worked their magic it became a refreshing sensation. I sighed in relief and leaned back against her.

“I know I have been kind of subtle about this, and your answer has been the same.” She seemed hesitant as if she was uncomfortable about the conversation that would start from this, “But I have to ask again.”

I bent my head forward. I knew it.

“I know.” I said, “But I cannot. Especially now.”

She sighed, “Could you at least tell me why? Why do you have to come home every day busted up and bruised? Some days you even look like you are Death itself walking around.”

I suppressed the sudden giggle that threatened to burst out. She already worried about me. I did not need to add ‘crazy’ to her list. But I also could not add ‘I may die in two days’ to her list either. Right?

I debated it. The only reason I kept her out of my other life as much as possible was to protect her. To indirectly tell her that the world was still normal and that she did not have to worry. Sure, I came home with cuts, scrapes, and other injuries not so easily explained but that was a far cry from actually telling her ‘hey, things such as zombies, dragons and wizards actually exist!’

She knew who Landon was, but she did not know that he was a wizard. I told her that he was a homeless cop and she believed it. With my agreement, she even let him stay here until he was able to move on his own. But that was years ago and he certainly could have done so. Yet, he still lived with us. I believed that he was doing it to help me protect her and she did it because at this point it was habit.

I did not need to scare her by piling all of this all at once. Yet, did she not deserve to know what was going on? It was an issue that I have been struggling with since I met her oh so long ago.

Alicia noticed my hesitation and patiently waited as she continued to rub her fingers gently.

“Shit.” I growled.

She said nothing.

“I don’t want to tell this to you. But at this point,” I hesitated, “at this point I don’t think I can hold this back from you anymore.”

Her arms wrapped around my body again, “I am right here.”

I sighed. And then I told her.

Everything.

### III

It took multiple hours. While there were no ‘official’ groups of wizards or whatever there was a lot to explain. Throughout my explanation Alicia remained silent. The only thing she did was continue to rub at my wounded skin. After half an hour of being in the tub, she gently guided me out of the tub to dry and then to our bed while I kept talking.

When I was finally done, we were both in new clothes and laying down on the bed. I was on my back with my blue button-down and blue jeans. Alicia sat leaning on the pillow next to me in a black tee-shirt and sweatpants. My eyes were on the ceiling yet I could feel her gaze on me.

“That is a lot to take in.” She said.

I nodded, “And you can understand why I kept it quiet.”

“Yeah. What I am most worried about is that slab.”

I snorted, “You and me both.”

Alicia shuddered, “It can really kill by putting your name on it?”

“Not quite. The way Landon describes it the user has to use their own blood. Which is something only the desperate or crazy would do.”

“Would that not include anyone that would think of using it?” She asked.

I let out a surprised huff, “True enough.”

“Do you know how to prevent it from happening?” Her voice was full of worry. Which of course was understandable.

“That’s what Landon has, hopefully, been trying to figure out. He’s had plenty of time to do it.”

I could feel Alicia shaking her head through the bed, “I still cannot believe that he has been a wizard this whole time.”

“I could not believe it at first either.” I said, “But being on missions with him is what is showing me this world that was right under our noses.”

“Are there any monsters and things that I should be worried about?”

“Only what a wizard creates. As far as I know myths do not exist and neither do fairy tales. It is just people who can use magic.”

She sighed in relief, “Well, that is something.”

“Don’t be fooled by that, though. Wizards can certainly create those monstrosities such as the zombies I fought today.”

“But I would imagine that those would not be as strong as they are in the stories.”

I had to give the woman credit. She was just told that magic existed and some of the basic rules that govern it yet she was still using her brain. Much better than my reaction to the news.

“I don’t know. That would depend on the user.”

Alicia’s next question was interrupted by the whole house shaking on its foundation. We both leapt out of our skin at the sound that came from the garage. Mixed in with the shaking and explosion was sulfurous curses.

I sighed, “Let’s check on him before he burns the house down.”

My legs were completely stiff as I swung them over the side of the bed. I had to stretch them before I could stand properly. When I was finally able to, we both headed downstairs and to the garage. On the way, we found Eskimo underneath the dining room table trying to hide her face in her paws. Whatever Landon did must have scared the poor dog to death.

I picked up the dog and hugged her as we descended to the garage.

Landon was on his ass leaning against the opposite wall of the garage from where the slab was. His head lolled around and I could tell that he was stunned. Everything around the slab, except the table it sat on, was either on its side or forcefully shoved away from the slab. As if it had exploded with pure force.

Alicia ran over to the stunned mage and checked on him. After a couple of seconds she said, “He is just stunned.”

“I soup just hopefully.” He muttered.

“No kidding.” I grinned at him.

While Alicia looked him over more I moved to the slab. It was untouched. If it was the cause of the explosion then it was able to effect everything except what it touched. And what incited the explosion in the first place?

“I’m alright now.” Landon said weakly.

I turned around to find that he was slowly rising to his feet using the wall as a support. When he was fully upright, he shakily returned to the table with the slab.

“What happened?” I asked him.

Even though his mind was still trying to kick back into gear, he turned toward me and nodded his head toward Alicia. I could tell that he was warning me that she was still in the room.

“She knows.” I said, “I explained it to her.”

His eyebrows tilted in confusion and slight annoyance.

“What the hell else was I supposed to do?! We could die in the next two days!”

He sighed, “Fine.” The man turned his attention back to the slab, “I was examining it magically. Trying to figure out what made it tick so to speak.”

“Since it exploded in your face, I assume you found something?”

“Nothing concrete.” He said shaking his head, “It kicked me off before I could confirm anything. But I did find what might be the link to its power.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise, “What do you mean?”

“Most of its power is contained within it. Like a web of energy that kept moving back and forth throughout its strands. That’s how artifacts usually work such as my rings.”

I blinked, “I never knew you had rings.”

He smirked, “You just don’t pay enough attention yet.”

“Get to the point.” I growled.

He grinned. His mind was put back together, “Remember I said most of the energy was contained. I found three ‘strands’ so to speak that were connected to something outside of the slab itself. It was when I found that out that the damn thing exploded on me.”

“Multiple hours and that’s all you got?” I asked.

Alicia piped up, “How many names on that list are still alive?”

Landon nodded to her as if she figured it all out, “Only us two.”

My gaze kept going back and forth between those two, “What are you talking about?”

“I was not able to confirm it, but I believe that two of those strands connect directly to you and me. And the third one goes right to the current owner of the slab.”

Alicia nodded, “Because of his blood right?”

I tilted my head at her, “How do you figure that?”

Before she could answer, though, we heard something knock loud on the front door. Eskimo, who had been quiet, now started growling. Something she had not done since a couple of weeks after getting her. Alicia and I looked at each other in worry.

The knocks again landed on the door. The dog’s growls only grew louder.

“What do we do?” I asked.

Landon quickly grabbed the slab and hid it under a pile of spare parts I had under another table, “We go talk to him.”

“Him?” Alicia’s voice was shaking with fear.

Landon nodded, “That is our friend. The owner of the slab.”

# IV

As we did not want to show the man Alicia, since she was a normal, and we needed Landon for a sucker punch if needed, it was up to me to answer the persistent door knocks. On the way to the front door, I traded Eskimo for Alison and Betsy. I slipped Alison and her holster around my waist and left Betsy around the corner where I could grab it in a rush. With that done, I walked up to the door, which was being knocked on yet again, and opened it.

A boy of no older than twenty stood in the doorway.

His brown hair was cut in a military style. Dark brown eyes looked up at me with the expression of one who was ready for fun and his mouth was turned up in a massive smile. A black Offspring shirt was baggy on him and his blue jeans were similarly baggy around his legs. He held nothing in his hands and his feet just had black sneakers on them.

Yet, I could FEEL the power radiating from him. Either he was careless about hiding his abilities or he was exponentially stronger than Landon. Maybe even both. I had to force myself not to shiver.

“Hello, Normie.” He said with a huge grin.

I cringed reflexively at my name. My parents must have been high, drunk, or both when they gave it to me. Thankfully I was surrounded by people who did not care for it either and they normally just called me N.J. or just N. Except for now, as seeing my reaction to my name the twit in front of me smiled even more.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

Without warning, the boy shoved me out of the way and he sauntered in. The muscles where he touched spasmed uncomfortably. Was he really that strong?

My hand twitched to Alison and the urge to blow the guy’s brain out came to me swift. He dare enter my home as if he owned the place even after

condemning me and a friend to death. And he had power if my recovering body had anything to say about it. After a couple of seconds I managed to restrain it though. We were not sure how to fix our predicament and killing the man or boy behind it might not solve anything.

“I just want to talk.” The boy said while looking around at the decorations, “What a lovely house.”

I let out a growl, “Talk about what?”

“Now is it not rude to talk about someone behind their back? I know Landon is here. He should hear this too!”

I gritted my teeth, “He is not here. In fact, he is currently looking for you.”

The boy snorted, “Do you really think I cannot feel his power in the house? If I remember the house’s layout correctly, he is in the garage right now.”

My eyebrows shot up. How the hell did he know my house’s LAYOUT? Sure, it was probably similar to many houses on the block but how did he know about this house specifically? And how did he know where I lived? Did he stake it out before getting us involved? Did he know about Alicia?

He gave me the smile of a victor. I bared my teeth at him but yelled, “Landon!”

Steps sounded from the garage and Landon appeared down the hall. The boy nodded happily, “Good. Everyone’s here.”

So, he in fact did not know about Alicia. Good. At least we can keep her safe.

“So, what I wanted to talk to you about.” The boy started pacing the dining room. Both Landon and I traced his movements throughout the room. If he made any sudden move we would know about it. “I am sure you have seen my gift to you in my manor.”

We both nodded.

“Good good.” He said clapping excitedly, “Then that makes things easier.”

I blinked, “You did not think we would have seen it?” I carefully made sure not to give any hint that we actually had the damn slab. If he was asking about us seeing it, then he may not have noticed it gone yet.

“I thought you would. Actually, I was almost certain you would. But you two can be a bit unpredictable at times.” He chuckled, “Such as the fact that you were actually able to find my manor.”

Landon shrugged, “It was not hard. Just follow the damned trail you left behind.”

For the first time the boy seemed to lose some of that cocky attitude, “Trail?”

I could not tell if Landon noticed it when he nodded, “Yeah. The magic you have been using has a special stench to it.”

The boy blinked, “Is there a cologne for that?”

I nearly barked out in laughter. Thankfully, I managed to hold it in.

“Nope. It’s a bit too late for you.”

“Well shit.” The boy sighed, “Anyway, the reason I wanted to talk. I wanted to make a proposal to you.”

Landon and I traded a glance.

“What proposal?” I hedged.

“I will remove my connection to the Death Slab.” He said, “I will remove your names so you do not die and I will never touch the slab again. You can do whatever you want with it and I will never try to get it again.”

This time Landon and I gave each other a full on look of confusion. Was he recalling going to give up the slab that easily? Why? We had not figured out why he needed or wanted the slab at first but something must have happened for him to be willing to give it away.

“That sounds good.” I said, “But what is the catch?”

At that question everything about him turned from a cocky schoolboy to a sinister maniac. His smile turned creepy and it seemed like all of his features became starker, sharper and darker. I was not sure if he did it for

effect or if the sudden change caused it but the lights in the whole house started to flicker. Then they died. The only light remaining was what came through the windows.

"Why," he said and his voice became harsher along with the rest of him, "Alicia of course."

As soon as he said that, I heard an explosion from the garage. A motorcycle engine revved up and tires squealed. I ran to the front door, still open, and saw a bike and two riders speed down the neighborhood street. Turning back to the dining room, I saw no one but Landon. The boy was gone.

Fear rushed up my spine as I ran from the front door to the garage and stomped down the stairs. Alicia was nowhere to be seen and the garage door was blasted in. Eskimo was on her side on top of the table I set her down on. I could not tell if she was breathing.

"Fuck!" I screamed.

Alicia must have been one of the riders on the bike taken by the boy. The one we were talking to was not the real one but a well-crafted illusion. And he left me with a horrible choice between two family members. Sure, Eskimo was just a dog, but she was one of the first things Alicia and I got together when we finalized our relationship. The beast meant everything to me.

But so did Alicia.

Landon rushed down into the garage behind me hauling Betsy and yelled, "I got Eskimo! Go!"

I hesitated for a split second unsure of what to do. He looked me in the eye and said, "I will do what I can. You have to save her! Go!"

With that I nodded, grabbed Betsy from him, and mounted Travis. I was glad that the boy had a bike of his own. I was not going to be able to shake him in a car.

Travis roared as if ready for what was to come and easily growled as I shifted gears and kicked him into motion. He slid through the hole in the

garage door, squealed as he made the same sharp turn the boy did, and flew down the street.

# V

There was no time for thought. If I hesitated for a single millisecond it could mean my death. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my speed gauge. The orange needle contained in the rather fragile glass was slowly tilting toward the left and was already passed the 100 mile per hour mark. I had nothing on to protect me. Not even my combat boots which I had no time to grab after the sudden kidnapping. All I had was the fresh clothes whipping in the wind, Alison at one hip and Betsy at the other.

They had to be enough.

I was not going to accept anything other than Alicia's rescue.

Horns blared before quickly fading away as I swerved in and out of traffic. My target was barely out of sight having a head start of a few seconds and hundreds of feet. He sailed over the street smoothly so I had to assume that Alicia was out cold. She would have been putting up a hell of a fight otherwise.

We crossed over a bridge and at our speeds instead of simply going over we leapt a bit at the top of the curve. I was able to keep myself controlled just fine having decades of experience on a motorcycle and years of doing stuff like this. The boy, however, seemed to have trouble. He wobbled dangerously from side to side. To my surprise, though, he righted himself and kept speeding on. The action, however, slowed him down a bit so I was able to gain some ground.

After a minute of constant movement and my eyes drying from the wind pounding into them, I heard one sound I did not need right now.

Sirens. Multiple converging on our little chase.

Cars immediately started moving to the right hand side, which made it good for me to gain some ground. However, this also gave the cops a good way to catch up to me. And since I was the one closer to them, they would stop me but not the boy.

Cursing, I urged Travis forward. The speedometer was at 150 and still pushing further. Under me, I could feel the heat and shaking of Travis as if he was at the last of his energy. Yet, like a faithful hound he kept going. I was definitely going to upgrade him for his service later. If I survived it that is.

The cop cars were close enough for me to see the red and blue flashing lights reflected off of the surfaces in front of me. I dare not look behind me to see precisely how far away they were, but I assumed that if they kept on us they would catch us within minutes.

“This is the police!” I heard from behind me, “Pull over immediately!”

Like hell I would.

I was very tempted to pull out Alison and open fire. If I did, though, I threatened to send the bike out of control and kill both the boy and Alicia. That was something I could not do no matter what.

The boy turned toward the right and flung himself onto the highway. I forced myself into the turn, Travis squealing in complaint, and managed to ride centimeters away from the protective railing before managing to get back into the center of the road.

We got back into heavy traffic and had to watch for obstacles. However, as we entered the highway I noticed that the boy was closer to me. I must have started to outpace him. Bonus points for Travis.

The boy noticed that, though, and started playing dirty.

I only saw a flash of light before something crashed into the street in front of me. My reflexes kicked in and I sent Travis in a sudden turn. He barely managed to avoid the crater in the street and continued forward. Behind me I could hear the sudden scream of tires as cars had to quickly brake in order to avoid being killed by the crater.

I growled. This guy was going to have a world of hurt when I finally got to him.

He sent another blast toward me and I had to swerve around that as well. The motion, however, sent me dangerously close to hitting a blue car. I righted myself and maintained a safe distance from any car. Yet, the next

attack from the boy showed me that trying to do so was pretty hopeless. This time when I avoided on attack I slammed hard into a car and left a massive dent in its side. The vehicle was heavy enough to not be sent spinning away. However, the force of the connection sent my brain in a spiral of its own.

I lost control.

Travis slid and I was flung off of him. All I saw was blinding white yet I could feel every painful bump and scrape as I tumbled over and over and over. What felt like a century later, I finally landed for one final time. Then my whole world became pain. It raced all over my body and I did not have the energy to scream.

Somewhere around me, I could not tell direction anymore, I heard the sound of crunching metal getting closer and closer to me. Seconds later, I heard and felt it slam next to me. Opening my eyes, I could see that it was Travis badly bent, scratched and just purely damaged.

Damnit. It was going to take days to repair him. Did we have the money for the parts I would need? I would have to talk to Alicia about it. She was not going to be happy about it. Maybe I could get a loan.

A foot hit the ground next to me and the sound of it pounded in my head. A head bent down to look at my face. It was the boy. His eyes lighted with anger and hunger. I then felt something crash like a wrecking ball into my belly. Blood exploded from my mouth. Another blow and I was out.

# VI

I was alive. That was something I did not expect. However, I figured that out because my whole body reported pain. A groan escaped my lips without my bidding and immediately heard sounds in response.

“N?”

My muscles froze. It was Alicia and her voice was one of the saddest and most pained things I ever heard from her. The loving girlfriend in me wanted to try and find her, even though I could not see for some reason, and hug her. Yet, when I tried I found that my hands were tied around something behind me. I struggled and heard the familiar clinking of metal against metal. The objects around my wrist must have been some sort of cuffs.

“Alicia?” I asked. It was then that I noticed the echoes of sound. We must have been in some sort of cavernous space.

“Yes.” She huffed out a breath as if relieved that I was actually there, “Are you here to save me?”

I hesitated. Could she not see me? Did she think that I managed to find her on my own?

“Well yes... but I won’t be able to right now.”

I could hear the confused frown, “Why?”

“Like you, I have been taken.” I sighed, “Honestly, I’m surprised that I am alive right now.”

“Oh.” Her voice softened dramatically. Already she had lost hope. While it annoyed me, I could also understand.

“Listen to me.” I said, “We will find a way out of here.”

Laughter rang out from my right and echoed everywhere, “Are you sure about that?”

Steps thudded from the voice and I immediately recognized the boy's cocky tone. He must have either just entered the room or had been listening to us the whole time. I growled and strained against the restraints. The smarmy bastard laughed again.

"You have to be wondering why I captured both of you."

"Honestly?" I said, "I am just wondering how long it will take me to bash your head in."

"Ooh." He said and I could just imagine that damn grin on his face, "I am so scared." His steps moved over to where I had been hearing Alicia's voice. I heard metal clink and her whimper quietly.

"Don't touch her!" I snarled. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was surprised to hear that it sounded very close to a lioness.

Again the boy laughed, "And you'll do what? Kill me?" Again I heard metal clink and this time Alicia's whimper was louder. "Good luck from where you are." The steps moved back to what must have been the entrance to the room and the sounds of something being dragged followed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to have a long talk with Alicia here."

A door slammed shut and a bolt squealed. The steps faded. With each sound my anger rose. I do not know how long I was standing there trying to break free. Working with metal as a profession gave me an idea of how strong and resistant each kind of metal was. Somehow the boy had gotten the strongest metal I could think of as after what felt like half a day of struggling I could not break through.

I stopped when I heard the steps returning. The door opened and the dragging sound followed the boy. Good, Alicia was still there. But something seemed wrong. I could not tell anyone how I knew it, but something felt off about the boy's return.

Metal clicked against metal again and the boy chuckled before leaving. No mocking comment. Not even giving a second of our time gloating. Just returned Alicia and left.

As if he was hanging up dead meat.

Panic rose up in my chest and I called, "Alicia?"

There was no reaction from her. The fear in my chest continued to pulse.

“Alicia?”

A ragged breath. Relief suddenly flooded through me. Alicia was alive. That feeling of wrongness did not go away though.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

A weak sob from her. The fear returned in full.

“What is it?” Worry turned my voice from angry to something softer. I feared that I already knew the answer.

“He... h-” She could not get it out between the now explosive sobs.

Knowing I did not want to force her to say it I yelled out, “Hey! Bastard Boy!”

The door to whatever room we were in immediately opened and the boy stepped in.

“Yes?” He knew what I was going to ask. I was even sure that he had waited outside for the chance to say it.

“What did you do to her?”

He walked up to me and I felt his hands on the sides of my head, “See for yourself.”

Whatever was covering my eyes disappeared. And I wanted to club the son of a bitch right then and there.

Alicia was standing against the wall right in front of me. Similar to what I must have been like, she had her hands tied behind the small of her back. Unlike me, though, she was completely naked and bleeding. While she had a few scratches and gashes on her limbs and torso the most noticeable runnels of blood were on her legs.

I lift my foot to kick at the boy but he was already out of my reach. Five or six attempts later, I settled with giving him a deadly glare and baring my teeth in a snarl.

“What the hell did you do to her?!”

That cocky grin formed on his face, “I just talked with her.”

“She is covered in injuries!” I screamed and tried to force myself from my restraints.

I did not think that shit stain grin could get wider but it somehow did and he shrugged, “I had to use some methods to talk with her, sure. But I needed answers.”

Anger boiled over. So much so that there was no more room for rational thought. Or any thought other than to kill the boy in front of me. Metal screeched and I could feel the resistance on my wrists against the thing holding them to the wall gradually lessen.

The boy laughed at that, “You still think that you will be able to escape? After over day under here I’d think you would have learned.”

I kept pushing. While I did not pay much attention to it, somewhere in the back of my mind I could tell that the metal binding was about to break. Just a couple more seconds.

He turned around, “I have things I need to do. If you will—”

I crashed into the smug bastard with a shoulder tackle any football player would be proud of. The pure power behind it sent him flailing into the wall next to the bleeding and sobbing Alicia. He spun around to find an over 200 pound monster glaring down at him with murder in mind.

# VII

I did not see the force that hit my chest and sent me backward. My back hit the wall hard but I had already braced myself for a counter. Shin met side with a satisfying sound of escaped breath and the boy went down again. As he fell, though, he lashed his hand out and a whipcord of fire lanced toward me. I lunged toward the side, receiving a strike to my shoulder, and twisted my foot to shoot toward him.

Another whipcord swung in an arc from the floor to the ceiling. I had no time or room to actually get to him so I instead completed my motion. It caused me to spin completely around. I felt the fire fly up between my legs and hit my cuffs.

And then felt the cord wrap around the chains.

The heat from the attack was not enough to break the chains, but I was able to pull it toward me. There was no way for me to know what would happen, but I had hoped it would remove the boy's connection to the spell.

I was only half right.

The connection to the spell was gone, yet the cord lasted long enough to hit my back. Heat burned my skin and I snarled a curse. Yet, the resistance the cord had created was gone with its heat seconds later. Before I could turn around, invisible force crashed into my back and slammed me into the wall. I tried to push myself off but the force hung around and kept me pinned.

The boy laughed and it sounded more menacing than anything else, "You have no idea what day it is, do you?" I continued to fight off the spell. However, it only redoubled as he continued laughing, "You only have a minute to live bitch!"

My eyes widened. Had it really been two days already? Is that really how long I was out? What was about to happen?

“And guess what?” He asked with a voice that dripped with perceived victory, “I am just going to hold you here and watch you die. In front of me and in front of your precious Alicia.”

My shoulders fell. In one minute I was going to die. And Landon would as well. Alicia would be a victim to whatever the bastard had planned for her. Despair filled my core like a candle that had just run its wick. The darkness consumed everything and I could feel my muscles start relaxing in defeat.

As if to taunt me, images of what was about to happen filled my head. My imagination had demented fun showing me my body on the floor contracting from a heart attack. Then Landon, standing in my garage furiously trying to figure out the slab, screaming in pure agony, stripping his voice, before falling to the ground. The creature called my imagination told me that the energy from the slab tore out all of the magic he had and a wizard could not live without magic.

Then Alicia was laying on a table. The boy was whipping her and yelling trying to get her to say something. When she was silent he cracked the whip. After five repeats of this cycle, he turned to worse methods. I did not want to see what my imagination played for me. It was horrible.

Seeing those images, something sparked. That candle at my core erupted in a campfire of pure anger. The light from that fire pushed away the darkness. Like hell I was just going to sit here while I died. If I was going to die, I would at least take the smug bastard with me. I would not lie down like a dog.

My vision returned to reality and I felt the spell still holding me against the wall. The cuffs were still around my wrists and I could hear the laughter behind me.

“Thirty seconds!” He cheered.

Thirty seconds? That was plenty of time.

Once again I pushed against the wall. I did not know if the boy had subconsciously lowered the spell’s power or what but I managed to pull back enough for me to slip from its hold. The sudden weight off of my body felt euphoric and in the split second of confusion I rushed forward.

My target did not have time to react before I slammed a knee into his groin.

The expelled breath was a few octaves higher. I twisted around and swept my leg through his. The boy fell to the ground, but my assault was not over. My foot lashed out and crashed into his torso. His hand flashed up and I felt something uppercut my chin and send me flying across the room yet again.

“You bitch!” He yelled, “Watch as you die!”

Hitting the wall I prepared to send myself forward. Yet I felt something wrap around my heart and start squeezing. Hard.

My thirty seconds must have been over. The slab was working its magic. I halted in place and fell to one knee. My lungs tried to bring breath in. They could not. Through my chest I could feel my heart trying to pump blood through my system and working itself to its eventual death. Blackness started to fill my vision and the boy walked up to me.

“You should have just taken the inevitable like a good girl.” He gripped my hair and pulled my head up forcefully so my eyes would meet his, “Now suffer.”

Through the pain and the fear racing up my body I gritted my teeth, “Like hell.”

I clinched my fist and slammed it into his belly like the bullet from a gun. He crashed into the wall and slid to the ground. The blast that held me against the wall did what an angry woman and a fire whip could not: break the cuffs. Without understanding how I was able to do it, I rose slowly and unsteadily to my feet and stepped toward the boy. If my blackening sight was an indication, I only had a few seconds.

The boy’s head lulled back and forth before tilting to look up at me. Even at this moment, he had that confident grin. However, there was also something else mixed in: confusion.

“Have fun in the afterlife.” He whispered.

In answer, I raised my foot and kicked his face in. Blood sprayed and flowed. His nose must have broken as well as a few teeth. I kicked again,

the force of the attack weaker. More blood as well as some gore. A third kick caused a crater and a fourth shattered pretty much every bone in his head. The fifth killed him.

My heart continued to be constricted and my vision was only a pinpoint. I could not feel it, but my legs must have buckled under me as I started falling back. Through my sight I could tell that I had bounced off of the ground a couple of times before laying down. That was it then. I was at my last breaths.

The blackness took me and I lost sight of the one thing I had been staring at.

Alicia.

# VIII

I woke up. Which, once again, was surprising. My back was against a soft surface and I could feel something thin over my body. My right ear registered a rhythmic beep beep beep that sounded really familiar. My left ear, however, registered soft conversations. I could not see yet, but I recognized one of the voices instantly.

“You know it’s not nice to talk about people behind their back.” I said. Or tried to say. What came out did not sound like English but garbled gibberish. It did get the desired reaction though. Cloth rustled and what must have been hands pressed down on the surface I was on.

“N! How do you feel?” Alicia asked.

Her voice was as if from an angel. It was concerned yet also relieved and I could feel it glide through my body reducing the tension I had not felt before.

“Confused.” I said and I could tell that my ability to speak was increasing rapidly. My statement actually came out as English, “And thirsty.”

With a snort, Alicia poured water next to me, “You may want to open your eyes in order to drink this.”

Groaning at what I knew was going to happen, I opened my eyes slowly. Blinding light pierced my brain as all I could see was white. I growled at Alicia as if to say ‘see?’

She snorted again and said, “Not all the way silly.” Her voice quieted, as if talking to someone else and not wanting me to hear it, “She is grumpy in the mornings.”

Growling again, I cracked my eyes open and had much better results. I was in a hospital, which should not have come out as a surprise. The soft surface under me was a hospital bed and its sheets were over me. Alicia leaned over me holding a styrofoam cup of water in one hand and she had

a smile on her face. Next to her was a man wearing the scrubs of a doctor. He was looking on with controlled amusement.

“Damn morning people.” I muttered.

Alicia turned to the doctor with a ‘told you’ look. The man’s controlled amusement turned into a small smirk. I growled again and allowed Alicia to tilt the water into my mouth. When she finished I asked, “What is going on?”

Alicia gave the doctor a very noticeable and meaningful glance and said to me, “You had a heart attack.”

At first, I was confused at her vagueness, but then understood. The doctor had no idea about the magical side of the world. Alicia took the news of the ‘second world’ well but that was not the same for everyone and the doctor would probably sign us both up for straightjackets if he heard it.

“Must have been working too hard.” I said. Alicia gave me a grin that I could tell was just to play along, “I told you to take a break from your work. But did you listen?”

“I guess not.” I said.

She nodded and turned to the doctor, “Can we talk in private?”

“I will just be outside.” He bowed to us and left.

When the door firmly closed I turned to Alicia, “What happened?”

She took a seat in one of the standard hospital chairs and scooted up so I could see her face. It took her another minute or so to start explaining, “You...” She hesitated then seemed to compose herself, “You killed the mage. And then you collapsed. I almost had a heart attack at that point as I watched your body tense up. Seconds later, you relaxed and I feared the worst. I don’t know how long it had been but sometime later Landon burst into the room.”

I blinked, “He’s alright too?”

She nodded, “He got me free and looked at you. I was relieved when he said that you were alive but that we had to get you to a doctor fast.” Her

attention turned to the window of the room which I had not noticed until now, “That had been three days ago.”

“That long?” I asked.

“Yeah. Landon has no idea how you two are alive. He said that killing the mage may have automatically removed the connection and therefore the slab no longer had the power it needed. What he has done, though, was hide the slab somewhere no one should be able to get it again.”

I sighed, “Good.” I looked at her, “What did he want from you?”

Alicia looked down, “I don’t know. He kept saying something about Nephilim.”

“Nephilim? Never heard of that.”

“I asked Landon about it once I had calmed down. He said that Nephilim were believed to be the scions of angels and demons.”

“That can’t be.” I said, “I did not think that angels or demons existed.”

“He didn’t either.” She shrugged, “I’m just happy that he was taken care of.”

I nodded, “Amen to that.”

The chair slid as Alicia rose, “Visiting hours are almost over. Even for me.” She kissed me on the lips, “Rest. Tomorrow, if nothing happens, I’ll be able to take you home.”

I smiled, “Good.”

Alicia left the room after giving me another kiss. I stared up at the ceiling, thoughts of the past couple of days rolling around my head. And Nephilim. Then a scoff exploded from my mouth, “There is no such thing.”

Then I fell asleep.