

A Deafening Silence in Heaven: A Remy Chandler Novel

By Thomas E. Sniegowski

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Fallen* series comes a new Remy Chandler novel.

He was once known as the angel Remiel. But, generations ago, Boston PI Remy Chandler renounced Heaven and chose to live on Earth, hiding among us humans, fighting to save our souls...

Remy Chandler is hovering on the brink of death, surrounded by friends who are trying to ward off those who would take advantage of his vulnerability. Unbeknownst to them, the greatest threat to Remy is one they can't fight—God himself. The Almighty dispatches Remy far beyond their reach, to an alternate universe where there has been an apocalyptic catastrophe: the Unification.

Only as he hunts down the source of this calamity, it becomes clearer and clearer that the person responsible for the tragedy may have been none other than Remy himself.

And while he searches for a way to stop his world from following in the footsteps of the doomed alternate reality, enemies are massing in his universe. For the Unification is at hand and, this time, Remy may be powerless to affect its outcome...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Remy Chandler Novels:

“Engaging [and] tightly written.”—*Sacramento Book Review*

“A hard-boiled noir fantasy by turns funny, unsettling, and heartbreaking.”— *New York Times* bestselling author Christopher Golden

About the Author

Thomas E. Sniegoski is a full-time writer of YA novels, urban fantasy, and comix. His novels include *Walking in the Midst of Fire*, *In the House of the Wicked*, *A Hundred Words for Hate*, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, and *Dancing on the Head of a Pin*.

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For my father.

PROLOGUE

A shopping mall food court

Somewhere in the United States

It was a day that seemed just like any other.

The sun rose as it was supposed to, and people woke from their nightly slumber to begin their daily routines: preparing for work, getting dressed for school, walking the dog, retrieving the morning paper from the front walk, making breakfast.

It was all so normal.

All so mundane.

If only they were aware of the event of cosmic proportions and significance that was about to occur.

• • •

He who had been called the Son of the Morning sat at a table in the food court of the mall, observing the ebb and flow of humanity.

Leaning back in the metal chair, Lucifer Morningstar saw them at their best and worst: an old woman fumbling with multiple plastic bags unwittingly drops a wad of dollar bills to the floor; a man sidles up

alongside her, snatches up the money, and then promptly returns it to her. A teenage girl—a mere child—picks up her phone from the tabletop, her hands shaking horribly as she checks to see if her dealer has called, and bursts into tears when she sees that he hasn't. An overtired and whining child is brought to obvious joy when handed a book to read. A man who is unhappy with the speed in which he received his burrito takes it out on the young girl at the counter. A Benny Goodman instrumental plays over the food court sound system and an old man grabs hold of his wife's hand; they look into each other's eyes and smile, their love still strong.

"Don't tell me that you're still upset with them," said a voice beside him, and Lucifer turned to see an elderly gentleman, dressed in a beautifully tailored dark suit, standing at the table, orange tray in hand.

"I was never upset with them," the Morningstar said, pushing out a chair so the gentleman could sit down. "I was much more upset with you."

The old man sat down and began to disperse the items on His tray. He placed a cup of steaming coffee in front of the Morningstar. "You thought that I loved them more," He said. He took His own steaming cup from the tray, and what appeared to be a container of chicken fingers.

"I wasn't the only one," Lucifer said. He continued to watch the patrons of the mall food court.

"No, but you were the loudest voice."

The old man prepared His coffee: two sugars and three containers of cream.

"I felt I needed to be loud so you would hear me . . . hear us." Lucifer sipped his own black coffee, dark eyes roaming the court.

The old man chuckled, drinking delicately from his cup before setting it down upon the table. "Oh, I heard you, all right."

Lucifer fixed Him in a steely gaze.

"But did you listen?"

The old man did not answer but reached into the foam container and removed a piece of fried food.

"Is that a chicken finger?" Lucifer asked Him, shocked by what he was witnessing.

The old man studied the batter-covered object, which did not resemble any part from a chicken, or a finger, for that matter. "I love chicken fingers," He said, taking a bite. "Horrible for you, but everything in moderation."

Lucifer drank more of his coffee, noticing the euphoric teenage girl from before, walking past them while talking happily on her cell phone, her dealer having finally called. Life was good again. Or not.

"I listened, but I don't believe there was anything I could have said at that time to convince you otherwise," the old man said, picking up a napkin to wipe the grease from His mouth. "You did what you felt you needed to do, as did I."

Lucifer turned his cup ever so slowly.

"Was it worth it?" he asked, feeling a heavy sadness for all that had come to pass.

“That’s a question I should be asking you,” the old man said, pointing with a chicken finger.

Lucifer continued to slowly turn his cup, a faint trace of steam billowing from the hot liquid.

“It is what it is,” he said finally, neither regretful nor content.

The old man finished His chicken finger and licked the tips of His delicate fingers.

“Things happened, and as a result . . .” He made a rolling gesture with His hand.

“Here we are,” Lucifer finished. “When it’s presented that way, it all seems so simple.”

“It’s all in how you look at things,” the old man replied as He wrapped His hand around His coffee cup. He was watching the elderly couple that Lucifer had been observing earlier. They were talking happily, and for a brief moment even began to dance, which got them both laughing.

“Why are we here?” Lucifer finally got up the courage to ask. “I’m sure you’re well aware of the whispers of a new war between Heaven and Hell floating in the ether.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I am.”

“So?”

The old man lifted His cup and had some more coffee. “I think it’s time for something more to happen,” He said, speaking over the rim of His cup.

Lucifer leaned in closer. “War?” he asked.

The old man was silent, as if deciding on His answer.

“No,” He said after a moment. “The opposite.”

“Truce?” Lucifer suggested. “I thought we already had that.”

“Peace,” the old man corrected.

Lucifer was shocked. “What are you suggesting?”

“I want you to come home.”

And for the first time in countless millennia the Son of the Morning was speechless.

“It’s time for us to be whole again,” the old man told him.

“Do you mean to say . . .,” Lucifer began, and stopped as the old man sitting across from him nodded slowly, a loving smile spreading across His face reminding Lucifer of the very first dawn over the world on the eighth day.

“Unification, my son,” the old man said, and then slid the container of chicken fingers toward him. “Chicken finger?”

• • •

The Bone Master screamed far longer than Remy Chandler imagined it could have.

When the creature finally fell silent, Remy let its body slip from his grasp. But the fire continued to burn, jumping to the assassin's robes and the flesh beneath; before long, there would be nothing left to show that the assassin had ever lived . . .

. . . except for the physical and mental damage it had inflicted.

Marlowe came to Remy, leaping up onto his chest, stretching his neck to eagerly kiss Remy's face. Remy found it suddenly difficult to remain standing, and dropped to his knees, giving the dog ample opportunity to display his rampant affections.

As Marlowe licked his face, Remy caught sight of Linda staring at him from where she sat, perfectly motionless upon the floor. He wanted to explain everything to her, but the words would not come.

The look of fear in her eyes froze them in his throat.

"I believe," he began, forcing the words from his mouth, "I owe you an explanation." He found his speech strangely slurred and wondered what could be the cause, then realized that his entire body was growing increasingly cold. He could not feel his limbs and suddenly toppled over onto the floor.

Marlowe yelped in panic as he fell, and Linda was at his side, leaning over him, tears in her eyes, her face racked with the beginnings of panic.

"You're bleeding," he heard her say, though the words were strangely muffled.

He managed to lift his head and saw that he was indeed bleeding. The cold realization washed over him—the assassin's bullets had found their target, the venom-infused teeth sending a powerful poison coursing through his veins.

Remy tried to alter his internal chemistry, as he had so many times before, to burn the poison away. . . .

Nothing happened, and the cold continued to permeate his every fiber. He was finding it harder and harder to remain there—to remain with Linda and Marlowe.

Marlowe cried pathetically, pacing back and forth in front of them. Linda was holding him now, gripping him tightly in her arms and begging him to stay with her.

"Remy, what should I do?" she pleaded.

She was panicked, and he wanted to hold her, to tell her that he would be fine, but he could no longer move his arms, and now that what he truly was had been revealed, he did not want to begin another lie.

"I . . . I'm so sorry," he managed to squeak. "Didn't want . . . to lie."

"Remy," she cried, her tears raining down upon his face—tears that he could not feel.

He tried to stay with her, but his eyes had grown so heavy, and he could no longer hold them open. *Maybe if I close them for just a moment.*

To rest.

Marlowe howled, his cries reverberating through the room, and Remy thought it was the saddest sound he had ever heard.

Darkness surrounded him, but there was fire in the midst of shadow, a flame struggling to stay alight within the encroaching gloom.

But the flame grew smaller with each passing moment until it was but a faintly glowing ember, and it could fight no more and gave in to the dark.

Is this what it's like to die?

• • •

Remy opened his eyes to look upon an eternal expanse of ocean, the color of copper and fire in the light of the sun hanging over the horizon.

He felt a sense of calm as he realized he had been to this place before.

“Is this it?” he asked, shifting in the beach chair so he could see the person sitting beside him, still as beautiful as she had been in life.

Madeline stared out at the ocean, her attention unwavering.

“Do you want it to be?” she asked.

“I . . .,” he began, then hesitated, letting his wife’s question reverberate through his mind, surprised that he couldn’t answer right away.

“Did you finish?”

He watched her as she continued her study of the ocean.

“What do you mean?” he finally asked.

Madeline turned her gaze to Remy, her dark sunglasses showing the twin reflections of the setting sun in their center as if they were her eyes. “Did you finish everything that you started?”

Again, he had to think about her question, the memories of what he’d left behind already starting to fade. It would have been so easy to just say yes, but he knew he would be telling another lie.

“I doubt it,” he said sadly.

She nodded, smiling the way she always had, and he felt a love for her that was so great he was surprised his mortal form could contain it.

And then he remembered another woman who had managed to capture his heart after Madeline’s devastating loss.

“Linda,” he said quietly, fearing that speaking the name of another would somehow take away from the love he had shared with the woman sitting beside him.

“I bet you two would have told a wonderful story,” Madeline said.

Remy held on to the memory of Linda, refusing to let it diminish—refusing to let her go. “Yeah” was all he could say.

“Yeah?” Madeline repeated, reaching out to let her fingertips caress his biceps.

“Yeah,” Remy said again. “I’d like to tell that story.”

Madeline smiled, and he knew that she was truly happy for him.

A sudden breeze came off the ocean then, a cold sharpness to the air that made him wince as he pulled his bare legs up from the sand. Remy gazed down and saw that he was bleeding. He’d forgotten that he had been hurt.

The sky above the ocean had grown dark, thick, roiling clouds blotting out the warmth of the sun.

“That’s going to be a problem,” Madeline said, her fingers still gently caressing the skin of his arm, which had now gone cold.

“It looks bad, doesn’t it?” Remy said, staring at his wound, not quite remembering exactly what had happened.

“It’s even worse on the inside,” Madeline told him.

“Do I have a chance?” Remy asked, a sudden despondency washing over him.

Madeline returned her gaze to the ocean. The water was receding, exposing an ocean floor that resembled the surface of some alien world.

“That’s not for me to say.”

“Something’s happening,” he said, his body racked with pain as he too watched the sea pull away from the shore.

“He’s coming.”

There was a sound, far off in the distance, like the blast of a trumpet heralding the arrival of something great, but as Remy listened more closely he realized it was the sound of a giant wave as the ocean rushed back to meet the shore.

The wall of water came toward them with incredible speed, and he reached out, searching for his wife’s hand, before—

The wave froze in place as his fingers wrapped around hers.

“What’s happening?” Remy asked, eyes fixed on the wall of bluish green water before them.

“I told you He was coming,” she whispered as she leaned in to kiss him warmly on the lips. “Your Father.”

The water parted like a curtain, and an old man stepped out.

Remy gazed quickly to where his wife should have been but found that she had left him alone on the beach with a petrified ocean and an old man.

An old man.

Remy knew this man, dressed in His fine, dark suit. They had spoken on this very beach, not long ago, about a coming war.

“The war,” Remy called out as he stood.

The old man, who was so much more than that, did not look at him, instead gazing off in the distance as if seeing something that Remy was not privy to.

“A horrible thing,” He said.

“What are you saying?” Remy was confused. “The war hasn’t happened.”

The wall of water crashed to the sand behind the old man in a roaring rush that sent water and foam splashing through the air. But it did not touch the man. “Yes,” He said, His gaze drifting toward Remy. “And no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“In some instances it did happen, while in others . . .”

Remy still wasn’t certain what He was going on about, but who was he to question his Father?

“So many worlds,” the old man said. “I wish I could save them all.”

“My world?” Remy asked, stepping closer. He could feel the power emanating from this being, and knew he should be on his knees with his head bowed in respect, but his concern was too great. He needed to know if his world was all right.

The old man looked Remy up and down, the hint of a smirk playing at the wrinkled corners of His mouth. Remy took a step back.

“A favorite,” He said. “But on the brink.”

A nearly overwhelming sense of panic washed over Remy . . . followed by the numbness. Once again, he found it difficult to remain standing and fell to his knees. “Please,” he begged. “I need to help them.”

The old man stared at him and Remy saw in His eyes an array of infinite possibilities.

And as he believed his question—his plea—was about to be granted, the old man turned His attention to the sky above. The clouds had grown thinner and the stars were beginning to shine down upon them.

“You need to see,” He said wistfully. “You need to see what it will be like if you fail.”

“Show me,” Remy pleaded.

“It is a sad thing,” the old man said, His voice quavering with emotion. “A tragic thing.”

“Show me,” Remy demanded.

The old man turned tear-filled eyes to Remy, extending a hand to gently cup the angel’s face.

And Remy saw.

CHAPTER ONE

Time was standing still.

Linda Somerset was afraid to move as she sat, cradling her injured lover in the doorway to the living room of his Beacon Hill home.

What she had just seen—what she had just experienced—tested everything that she had always considered her reality. She was even afraid to breathe, afraid that the up and down of her chest would be enough to cause it all to break away.

Her entire world shattering like an old mirror.

But she had to breathe to live. Carefully, slowly, she exhaled, eyes darting about, watching for signs that the world was about to come apart.

And it stayed as it was.

For the moment, at least.

Linda took in a small, tremulous breath, not sure exactly what she expected to happen. Would there be the sound of something cracking as her world fell apart? Like a frozen lake on a late winter's afternoon, when the sun was at its strongest.

There was a moment of silence, and then the sound of a soft exhalation, followed by the most pathetic of whines. Linda jumped, remembering that she wasn't alone. Marlowe lay on the floor nearby, the black Labrador's brown, soulful eyes locked upon his master's still body.

Reality had remained in one piece after all.

Linda dared to look at Remy as she cradled him in her arms. There was blood on the front of his dress shirt, the expanding stain reminding her of the violence that had erupted in her lover's home.

She saw the fight in staccato images burned into her memory: Remy—her wonderful, handsome Remy—fighting a pale, horrible thing that seemed to have appeared out of nothingness. The memories were as clear as if the events were unfolding before her at that very moment.

But it was really just one particular sight that caused her to doubt her sanity.

Made her doubt her reality.

Maybe it had already fallen, insanity growing like some malignant vine, twisting the normal into something beyond comprehension.

Remy had had wings—powerful, golden wings. She had seen them as clear as day in the theatre of her mind's eye but still doubted their actuality.

Marlowe whined again and shoved his black snout beneath Remy's still hand, attempting to flip it so that

Remy would pet him. But the hand just flopped back to the floor.

The Lab's sadness was palpable, and whether Linda believed in what she had just witnessed, Remy was injured, and she needed to help him.

She let his body slide gently to the wood floor, placing her hands on his face, struggling to remain in control of her emotions. His skin was cold and turning an unhealthy shade of gray. She could feel Marlowe's eyes watching her as she searched for signs of life.

"He's going to be all right," she told the dog as she jammed her fingers beneath the collar of Remy's shirt, desperate to find a pulse. "Don't do this to me," she said aloud, panic creeping in as she felt none. "Don't you dare!"

She'd had to take CPR classes when working as a waitress at Piazza and tried to remember what she'd been taught. She placed the heels of her hands, one atop the other, on the center of Remy's chest and began compressions.

Marlowe paced around her, vocalizing his concern.

"It's okay, buddy," she said, breathlessly, still pumping. "We're going to bring him back to us."

She stopped for a moment and checked again for a pulse. Still finding none, she reached into her back pocket for her phone to call 911—and found it empty.

"Fuck!" she screamed in frustration, turning toward the living room, where she had landed when Remy had thrown her inside. Her eyes scanned the room, landing on a small pile of crushed bone smoldering in a patch of sunlight that managed to creep from beneath the pulled shades. She thought of the pale-skinned attacker and the weapon he'd wielded. She remembered the feel of it shattering beneath her foot as she stomped down upon it.

It was real.

She recalled the ferocity of the battle, Remy holding on to his foe as his hands began to burn. And there was the black, oily stain where the pale man had died, eaten alive by the fire that had come from her lover's hands.

It was real.

Linda was suddenly dizzy, but the sound of Marlowe's whines as he licked Remy's ashen face spurred her on. She caught sight of the phone and lunged across the floor, snatching it up.

Just as Marlowe erupted. The dog stood over Remy, staring beyond the open door to the foyer, barking furiously, black hackles raised the length of his back and tail standing out stiffly from his body.

As if yet another threat was about to present itself.

• • •

Francis was in the basement apartment of the Newbury Street brownstone that he owned, trying to drown his anxieties in a tumbler of scotch and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. But he hadn't even made it to the introduction of Henry Fonda's reptilian villain, Frank, before being forced to switch the Blu-ray player off.

He couldn't banish the look from his mind—the expression of utter disappointment on Remy Chandler's face.

He'd tried to explain his actions to his friend, why he had joined with Heaven's angel elite to execute the offspring of Nephilim whores and archangel soldiers.

"I didn't have a choice," Francis had said. *"Part of the deal I made. He says, 'Jump,' and I ask how high."*

"And exactly how high can you jump, Francis?" Remy had retorted, wearing the look that now haunted Francis' memory.

It wasn't as if he had never disappointed Remy before; the former Guardian angel's penchant for violence had often been a bone of contention between the two friends.

But this time it was different. This time, Francis might have gone too far. He considered just leaving Remy alone, giving him a chance to work through his anger, and maybe in time, they would talk things through.

But the look in his friend's eyes had hurt so much more than harsh words or a knife to the kidney. This was something that Remy wouldn't let go; this was something that had altered their relationship forever.

Even though Francis was sure Remy had already put two and two together. How else could Francis have survived being trapped in a re-forming Hell, if the Morningstar hadn't saved him?

And for that save, Francis owed the former right hand of God and failed conqueror of Heaven. Where had the Almighty and all His angelic legions been as Francis lay dying upon a transforming, hellish landscape? Nowhere. It had been Lucifer who had found him—saved him—lifted him up and made him whole again.

What fucking choice had he had but to once again swear his allegiance to the Son of the Morning?

He'd known how it would go over with Remy, so he'd kept his mouth shut. There was no easy way he could ever have explained himself.

Dude, yeah, not sure if I mentioned this, but Lucifer is my new boss. Let me tell you about his kick-ass benefits package.

He could see that going over like a fart in an iron lung.

But Francis couldn't leave it alone, couldn't let what he had with the former Seraphim wither and die. As much as it killed him to admit it, their relationship meant something to Francis.

And that was why he had to talk to his friend now, whether Remy wanted to hear it or not. Francis was going to come clean about everything that had gone on and was going on.

Francis hoped it would be enough to get him back in Remy's good graces, but one never knew when dealing with the former soldier of Heaven—turned—private investigator. He could be a little prickly sometimes.

Francis would just have to wait and see.

Wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible, the fallen Guardian angel stood and began to use one of the gifts that Lucifer had bestowed upon him—the ability to walk between realities, to go from here to there in a matter of seconds, even though his wings had long ago been taken from him. He thought of the foyer in Remy's Pinckney Street brownstone and stepped through the rip in the fabric of time as it opened before

him.

Francis sensed it immediately; something bad had transpired in his friend's home, and not too long before his arrival, by the feel of it. Instinctively he reached for the Colt pistol inside his suit coat pocket.

A dog was barking ferociously nearby, and Francis recognized it as Remy's dog, Marlowe. One didn't need to be able to speak the language of beasts to know that the dog was upset.

The heavy wooden door into the hallway was wide-open, so Francis began to move toward the sound of the frantic animal, gun cocked and ready to fire. The atmosphere grew even more tainted, a negative energy electrifying the air, telling him that whatever had happened was bad.

Really bad.

But nothing could have prepared him for what he saw as he turned toward the living room.

"What the fuck?" he said aloud, bearing witness to his best friend lying on the floor, dog tensed protectively over him, and a woman, cell phone caught midway to her ear.

"Oh my God," cried the woman, whom Francis suddenly realized was Linda, the waitress from Piazza. "Are you the police?"

Ignoring her question, Francis dropped to his knees beside his downed friend, the pistol disappearing back inside his jacket. Marlowe growled as Francis reached to check Remy's vitals.

"It's all right, pal," Francis said, and the growl turned to a pathetic whine.

"I'm calling nine-one-one . . .," Linda began.

"Put the fucking phone away," Francis snapped at her, and she recoiled as if slapped. He pressed his hand against Remy's throat. The coldness of the flesh beneath his fingertips and the widening stain on the front of Remy's shirt told him all that he needed to know.

"Give me the abridged version," Francis barked, ripping open his friend's shirt, sending buttons in every direction.

"He was attacked. . . . We were attacked . . .," Linda stammered.

"By who?" Francis asked, eyes upon the strange injuries.

"It was some sort of . . . thing," she said, trying to find more words but failing miserably.

Francis looked up at her and followed her gaze to a pile of what appeared to be bones smoldering on a greasy stain in the corner. "Is this it?" He sprang up from Remy's side toward the bone pile. "Is this what's left of the thing that attacked you? Did Remy do this?" he asked as he knelt before the remains.

"Yes." Linda nodded furiously. "He did that before . . ."

There wasn't much time. Francis reached for what was left of the creature's skull. There were still bits of skin attached, and he hoped that there might be enough inside its brainpan to read.

From inside his coat, Francis removed a knife with a blade so thin it looked as though it might be able to cut

between molecules. Linda was watching him, wide-eyed, and he wondered if he was going to lose her as he positioned the blade above the skull and brought it down with great force, puncturing the skull, like a straw into a juice box.

It wasn't going to be pretty, but he needed to know.

A brief blast of foul-smelling steam escaped into the atmosphere, and Francis wrinkled his nose in disgust.

But the knife found what it was seeking, as it sank into what remained of the attacker's brain, drawing up information and feeding it to Francis in a series of staccato images. In a matter of seconds, he knew about the demonic assassins known as the Bone Masters, how they'd been contracted to kill Remy Chandler . . .

. . . and how they had hoped to use the angel's female to lure him into the open.

Francis pulled the knife from the skull, gazing at Linda, who returned his stare with deer-in-the-headlights eyes.

The angel's female?

CHAPTER TWO

The Old Man had done something—sent Remy to someplace, someplace where he could see the price of his failure.

It had been like falling into a hole, the darkness so all-encompassing that it became the world, and the distance so deep and far that he forgot he was falling.

Until he hit bottom.

Remy landed in an explosion of pain. The world of cold primal darkness that had been with him for what seemed like an eternity was replaced with a jarring agony. From his internal workings, to his bones, to his every joint, muscle, tendon, and ligament—everything was screaming.

A painful reminder that he was still alive—

And under attack.

Remy opened his eyes, and immediately knew that he was in another place—*another reality*, familiar yet strangely different. Winged forms flew above him in a gray, smoke-filled sky. *Angels*, he thought, watching one of the shapes bank sharply to the left, wings spread to their full impressive span as it glided down at a breakneck pace.

But questions of where he was and what was happening would have to wait, for a hissing gout of flame rocketed toward him from the sky. Remy reacted even though his body cried in protest. He rolled across the rubble-strewn ground as the miniature comet struck mere inches from where he'd been, melting the surroundings to glass.

A spark of divine fire landed on the sleeve of his coat, the heavy material beginning to burn as the holy flame sought out the soft flesh beneath. Remy slapped at the fire before it could grow any hungrier, and what he saw on the back of his hand chilled him to the bone.

A tattoo of some kind appeared to be permanently inscribed upon his flesh. He did not know what the mark was or how it had gotten there, but could sense that it was a sigil of some long-forgotten power.

“Move your ass or you’re toast!” commanded a gruff, almost animal-sounding voice from somewhere close by. Remy didn’t have an opportunity to find the source of the command, but he did what he was told as spears of fire hurtled toward him.

Incendiary blasts struck all around him as he darted and weaved about the blighted landscape. So intent was he on avoiding the Heavenly fire that he did not see the body smoldering on the ground before him, and he tripped, falling onto his stomach, the air punched from his lungs as he hit. Scrambling to rise, he glanced at the corpse, recognizing the dead man as one of Samson’s children, somehow knowing that the Biblical strongman and his brood had once again come to his aid despite the near certainty of catastrophic failure.

The air was filled with acrid smoke and the heavy, dusty smell of something . . . *familiar*. It was that intimate aroma that froze him in place. *It can’t be. How is this possible?* he thought, his mind racing as he tried to process the overwhelming flow of information into his already addled brain.

An angel dropped from the sky, its powerful wings kicking up clouds of dust and dirt as it touched down before Remy. He stared, hypnotized by the creature he would once have called brother. It was covered in a thick coating of black ash, with fish-belly white skin peeking out from cracks in the filthy covering, but it was its eyes that told Remy a story he did not care to hear. The eyes were filled with madness, what divinity had once pulsed through its holy body having long since fled.

He wanted to ask it what had happened, what horrors had occurred to make it this way, but Remy knew that it was about to kill him.

Twin daggers with blades as black as the soot that covered its body appeared in the angel’s hands, and it lunged at Remy, eager to vent his body to the outside world.

Remy tensed the muscles in his back, wishing his wings into existence to evade the blades—

And nothing happened.

He did not have time to ponder this latest insanity. The filthy angel screeched something unintelligible as it thrust with one of the knives. Remy managed to leap back, the edge of the blade catching the front of his shirt and slicing across his belly.

The angel cried out as the scent of Remy’s blood perfumed the acrid air. The other blade was eagerly coming around for more of the same. This time, Remy caught the angel’s wrist and twisted it back behind it, pulling up savagely until the sounds of snapping bone and sinew mixed with the angel’s cries of pain.

The knife fell to the ash-covered ground, and Remy snatched it up. The blade felt wrong in his grip, as if the weapon did not care to be held by anyone other than its owner. The intense burning sensation came next, causing Remy to drop the black-bladed knife to the ground as he gazed at the blistered flesh of his palm.

The angel started to cackle as it came at Remy again, still gripping the other knife, one arm now useless and dangling at its side. On reflex, Remy again called upon his wings, and again he could not summon them. The horror of his new reality grew even more oppressive as he braced himself for the angel’s further assault.

Something huge and incredibly fast suddenly moved past Remy in a blur, landing upon the angel and driving it back to the dirt. The air became filled with the sounds of growls and screams of pain, which grew louder

and more intense until silenced as the monstrosity standing upon the angel's blackened chest tore away its throat.

Remy stared with equal parts wonder and horror at the great beast that had taken the angel. Two sets of memories—the old and the new—struggled for supremacy, and he thought his skull might split.

The beast's body was huge, the size of a great jungle cat, with short, black fur covered in filth. The color tickled his memory, and he remembered a part of his life filled with the love and loyalty of an animal named . . .

It spun its large square head around to face him, its muzzle shiny with the blood of the once divine.

"Marlowe," Remy said aloud as he looked into the face of the demonic hound.

"What did you call me?" the animal asked, its fleshy lip peeling back in a ferocious snarl. "You're never to call me that!"

And that was when Remy felt it all slide out from beneath him, his brain unable to handle it anymore, deciding that this would be the right time to shut it all down—

To drop the curtain.

To fade to black.

• • •

Heaven had the most distinctive of smells.

Everything else Remy had experienced since leaving the Golden City paled in comparison to the scents of Paradise.

Madeline had once asked him what it was like to be in Heaven. At first, he'd been speechless, unable to find words suitable for the human mind to comprehend.

"Okay, we'll make this easier," she'd said. *"What's it smell like?"*

And he'd given it a shot.

"You know how you feel when you walk past a bakery and smell the freshly baked bread, or that delicious aroma of a home-cooked meal, or even the wonder of a freshly brewed pot of coffee?"

He recalled Madeline's magnificent smile.

"Imagine all the wonderful feelings and sensations created by those awesome scents." He'd paused, watching to see if she was doing just that, and the twinkle in her eye had told him she was. *"All right, now multiply all those feelings by a million, and then a million more, and then a hundred million more."*

She'd told him that it must be wonderful.

And he'd remembered that it was—before the war, before he had abandoned his place of creation.

He'd told her that, and then they had made love with a passion far more intense than ever before, almost as if

she was attempting to sate a hunger that could never be satisfied, and he trying to recapture a taste of what he'd abandoned so very long ago.

But all it had done was remind them each of what they would never have.

Now, deep in the darkness, Remy was again reminded of the glories he had left behind, the distant memories stirred by an all-too-familiar aroma.

Even deep within the clutches of unconsciousness, he could smell Heaven. The scent had caught him off guard as he'd tried to defend himself against his angelic attacker. Although tainted by other, more pungent odors, such as fear and despair, at the core of it all, Heaven was there.

Drifting in the air, Heaven was there.

The smell drew him up from the darkness, where he became aware of a strange stinging sensation in his lower body. He gasped, snapping his eyes open to the most insane of sights. The giant doglike animal stood by Remy's side, his monstrous head lowered to Remy's bare midsection, a tongue as thick as Remy's forearm lapping languidly at his stomach.

"What the Hell?" Remy managed.

The beast stopped licking, and his massive tongue returned to his mouth.

"You're awake," he growled. "About fucking time."

The dog moved away from him, dropping his enormous bulk to the ground with a heavy sigh.

Remy looked down at his stomach, at where the dog had been licking.

"What the fuck were you doing?" he asked, touching the tender spot with his fingers. It was still wet and quite sticky, with a nasty stink coming from the area.

"I'll let you die from infection next time," the monster dog said indignantly. "Believe me, the taste of your pus is not something that I enjoy." The beast put his large face down between equally enormous paws. "And fuck you very much."

Remy then noticed the additional tattoos, across the taut muscles of his stomach, snaking up his sides and down his bare arms.

"When did I . . .," he began, struggling to decipher the meaning of the markings but coming up with nothing.

"When did you what?" the beast asked, watching him with curious, blood-tinted eyes. "The sigils? What, did you bang your head or something?"

Remy remembered his wings, or lack thereof. He twisted his head so he might see where they should have been. "My wings. What's happened to my wings?"

"Your wings?" The dog rose to all fours and cautiously approached. Remy could see the animal's coppery hackles rising as he sniffed at him. "Are you all right? Maybe that blast took more out of you than I thought."

Remy almost asked about the blast—what exactly had happened—but decided to wait. "I'm fine," he said instead, getting up from the blanket he was lying on. He could see he was inside a tent, and he was suddenly

desperate to head outside for a look at the world in which he now found himself. A world whose very atmosphere smelled of Heaven.

He found a shirt in a pile on the floor next to him. It was torn and bloodied, but he put it on anyway.

“You don’t seem fine,” the great dog said, continuing to study him.

Remy was saved from replying as the flap of the tent lifted and a dark, bearded man stepped inside. Remy knew at once the man was also a son of Samson.

“What is it?” the demon dog asked.

“You need to see this,” the man said, ducking back outside.

“Stay here,” the dog ordered Remy as he pushed his massive bulk through the flap and outside.

Remy followed, ignoring the command.

The sky was filled with billowing gray clouds that roiled and moved through the air like protozoa viewed from beneath a microscope lens, and Remy wasn’t sure if it was day or night.

The camp appeared to have been set up somewhere inside the crag of a mountain, the edge of the encampment looking down onto a sprawling and unfamiliar desert landscape. But it was the sight beyond the desert that sent a deep, icy chill down the length of Remy’s spine, for now he knew why the air was filled with the scents of his former home.

In the distance were shapes that at first glance seemed to be another great mountain range, but the longer he looked upon them, the more familiar they became.

The reason the air of this place was filled with the smells of Heaven was obvious, for it was Heaven—or at least a portion of it—that Remy saw sprawling across the landscape far off in the distance.

It seemed that Heaven had fallen from the sky.

CHAPTER THREE

The angel’s woman.

The words were like a spear to the heart. It was Francis who had first noticed the attractive waitress named Linda Somerset, notice that had quickly transformed into a kind of obsession with the woman. That had been totally unlike him. Sure, he’d had human women over the centuries, but, with the exception of Eliza Swan, they’d been little more than playthings.

Linda Somerset was the first woman he had taken note of since Eliza, and he had even gone out of his way to point her out to his friend Remy Chandler.

Francis suddenly felt an odd sense of anger and betrayal wash over him as he looked down on the body of someone he’d thought had been his friend. *What the fuck were you thinking?*

But he would never get the chance to ask that question if he didn’t move quickly. Francis could barely sense

the presence of the Seraphim's life force. It wasn't much, but it gave him hope.

"He's alive," Francis said to the woman. "But I'm not sure for how much longer."

"We have to do something," Linda said. "We can't just let him die."

"No, we can't," Francis said, pushing past his tumultuous emotions.

"What are we going to do?" Linda asked, panic in her eyes. "Is there someplace we can take him . . . somebody we can call?"

Somebody we can call.

Francis rose to his feet, taking his cell phone from his pants pocket. He scrolled through his contacts, looking for the number he hadn't used in quite some time.

Physician.

He touched the number and put the phone to his ear, listening as an answering machine picked up.

"This is Francis . . . Fraciel," he added, using his divine name just in case. "Call me back. It's a bit of an emergency . . . a matter of life and death. Thanks."

He hung up, turning to look at Linda, who was now sitting beside Remy, gently brushing the hair from his face, her gaze filled with love and sorrow. Francis felt a wave of anger and jealousy begin to rise within him and quickly tamped it down. Now wasn't the time for this.

"Who did you call?" Linda asked.

"Someone who can help," Francis replied, knowing that time was of the essence and hoping that a return call would come.

Before it was too late.

• • •

His true name was Assiel, but he hadn't been called that in a very long time.

Darnell rhythmically dragged the broom over the old linoleum floor, picking up the wisps of dust that had formed since he'd last swept the hallway of Five South.

To anyone who was watching, it appeared that Darnell—*Assiel*—was just doing his job, keeping the floors clean at Saint Joseph's Nursing Home, but in fact, he was listening, attuned to all two hundred and thirty-two residents. Darnell knew every man and woman who called this place home. He knew their aches and their pains, and he knew when it was time for them to abandon their deteriorating shells and rejoin the source of all things.

It was quiet here on Five South, the nursing home's hospice unit. There were seven residents on the floor, all at various stages of dying, but one was closer than the others, and she called to him now.

Candace Ransley did not ring a bell or call out his name, but she summoned him just the same.

Darnell stopped outside her room and glanced down the hall to see if the nurse or any of the aides were watching, and, finding that they were otherwise occupied, he stepped in.

It was dark in the room, the curtains drawn to keep the sun away. The strains of fifties doo-wop played softly from a radio on the nightstand. Candace loved doo-wop. She'd often asked Darnell if he'd listened to it as a child where he'd come from—he'd told the residents that he was an immigrant from Nigeria. Occasionally he wondered if those he looked out for here—his patients—would have been in any way comforted to know where he really came from.

Many of them believed in a Heaven, but the reality might not have been as comforting as they wanted to believe.

The war was never far from Darnell's mind, the atrocities he'd seen—and participated in—always there to remind him of his fall from grace. But he had paid the price for his betrayal of the Almighty, first serving time in the hellish prison of Tartarus, and now the remainder of his penance amongst humanity, where he hoped to do some good.

And eventually be allowed to once again bask in the glorious light of the Creator.

But did the Heaven that Darnell remembered even exist anymore?

He stood at the foot of Candace's bed, clutching his broom, listening to the sound of her labored breathing. As he watched her, he could see how far her sickness—cancer of the lungs—had progressed. It would only be a matter of minutes before her physical form finally broke down and ceased to function.

Minutes normally plagued by pain, fear, and loneliness.

Normally.

Are you ready, Candace? Darnell thought. Ready to leave this moldering shell and join with the stuff of creation?

Her eyes slowly opened, and she looked at him. In response, he allowed her to see him.

To truly see him.

She watched him with tear-filled eyes as he moved around the side of the bed and placed his hand above her chest, his thoughts urging her to not be afraid. Beneath the cancer he saw what the Lord God had given her and all the others that made up humanity: a spark of the divine.

A piece of Himself.

And, wearing the guise of Assiel, Darnell performed the task assigned to him as a healer. He drew the fire of life that humanity called the soul up from beneath the mire of sickness and out of the frail, rotting husk that could no longer sustain it.

Candace sighed as the spark left her, and then she was still, a look of contentment upon her once pained features.

Assiel held the flame in his palm, a part of him not wanting to let it go. Of all the things that the Lord of Lords had given His human creations, this was what Assiel coveted the most.

This was what had so long ago swayed him to the beliefs of Lucifer Morningstar.

He watched the fire dance above the palm of his hand, holding it there with his will. What an amazing gift He had given them.

Candace's soul felt the pull of the source upon it and began to panic, struggling to be free of his will. Slowly he released his hold upon it, watching as the flame leapt from his palm to disappear in a flash, leaving the material world to join with the Angel of Death, and eventually the stuff of inception.

Assiel returned to his human guise, taking one more long look at the empty casing that had once held something so wonderful before leaving the room as a song about a teen angel serenaded Candace Ransley's corpse.

Outside the room, Darnell began to casually sweep again, working his way back up the hallway.

"Hey, Darnell," a young nursing assistant greeted as she passed him on her way to Candace's room.

He smiled and nodded, counting the seconds until she left the room in a hurry, rushing by him to the desk to report what she had found.

After using a dustpan to pick up what he had swept, Darnell wheeled the gray barrel past the nurses' station to the elevators. It would be quitting time soon, and he would return to his residence and to the other patients whom he had acquired in the tenement where he'd chosen to live.

Mr. Daron was quite close, and Darnell wondered if tonight might be the night.

As he waited for the elevator, he took out his cell phone and saw that there was a message. He wasn't supposed to use his cell on the units, but curiosity got the better of him, and he punched in the code for his voice mail.

The doors to the elevator opened before him as a familiar voice spoke in his ear. It was Francis—Fraciel, to those who had known him in another time.

"Have a good night, Darnell," the nurse called out as he stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the lower level.

He managed a smile, but it quickly dissipated as soon as the doors slid shut.

A good night? He seriously doubted it, if Francis was to be any part of it.

• • •

The Archangel Michael lay upon the cold stone floor of the mountain monastery, pieces of his divine armor strewn, twisted and bent, about him, glistening like dew in the cold Eastern European sun.

It had come upon him so quickly, lifting him up with such force that he had not had the opportunity to react, the intensity of the interaction stripping the armor from his body. He lay there, naked in his human form, his perfectly muscled body shivering.

It took the archangel some time to recalibrate, to remember where he had been and what he had been doing. He had been contemplating his place in the world of man and had concluded that his legions were needed here. Even though there now existed a binding treaty, he suspected that the Morningstar would soon find a

way to further exert his will upon the Earth.

And Michael, in service to God and Heaven, would have none of that.

He had been considering his options when the Almighty reached out to him.

It had been too long since he and the Lord God had last communicated, and he had forgotten the intensity of such interaction. One moment he had been there, in the abandoned holy sanctuary, and the next, he'd been violently torn from reality and in the Presence.

In *His* presence.

The memory of what he'd just endured caused his tremors to worsen, and for a moment he felt a kindred spirit with the holy men and saints of old who had lived in this monastery, imagining that this was how they must have felt when they received His blessed word.

Using the ancient stone wall for support, he slowly rose to his feet, collecting his wits as he steadied himself. The archangel wove a suit of clothing from the elements in the air to cover his bedraggled body. But it did not stop his trembling, for it was not only the experience that wreaked such havoc upon him, it was the message that had been delivered.

Michael suddenly realized he was no longer alone but surrounded by the legion of archangels that served him, who were watching him with dark, curious eyes.

It was his second in command, Satquiel, who finally had the courage to approach. "Master?"

Michael braced himself and turned to face his second.

"He has spoken, Satquiel." The reverence in his tone was enough to drive his legion to their knees with bowed heads.

"And what did He say, my master?" Satquiel asked, eyes averted to the stone floor of the monastery chamber. "What has He asked of us?"

Michael could not speak the words. They were jagged and sharp in his throat, threatening to cut and render him speechless as they were uttered.

After a time, Satquiel raised his head to look upon his commander, eyes questioning his superior's state.

Michael wrestled with the message, his mouth attempting to wrap around the malevolent words, afraid to set them free.

"The Lord God commands," Michael finally began, his booming voice so loud in the enclosed room that it shook bits of loose mortar from the walls. But he continued to struggle, fighting the words that he had been charged to proclaim.

"What does He command, Michael?" Satquiel urged, his eagerness a balm, drawing the malignant words from Michael's mouth. "Tell us."

"That we forgive," Michael stated at last. The words took his strength as they spilled from his mouth, and he dropped to the floor.

“Who, Michael? Who does the Almighty wish us to forgive?”

The name left his mouth like a stream of noxious bile.

“The Morningstar,” Michael stated, feeling a bit of himself begin to wither and die. “We are to forgive Lucifer Morningstar.”

• • •

Simeon remembered how he’d first come to entrap the angel.

He’d been attending the wake of one of his children sometime in the early forties. It had been late summer in the South, and the heat had been terrible.

He recalled the image of his son lying puffy in his quilted casket, one of the hundreds of children he had sired as he’d wandered the planet pretending to be a part of humanity. This one had lived close to ninety years, according to the undertaker who’d greeted Simeon at the door.

Simeon hadn’t told the dark-suited man who he actually was, for he looked no older than thirty years, thanks to the touch of that accursed Son of God. He’d chosen instead to say that he was just a friend from a very long time ago.

He had known next to nothing about this child of his, not even the mother, but sensing the death of something that had once been a part of him had drawn the forever man there.

How many times had he done something similar to this, bemoaning the fact that something that he’d had a part in creating was no more, and at the same time jealous that they’d had the opportunity to leave the world behind, to escape the confines of Earth and join with the Creator in eternity.

Something that had long been denied him.

As he’d stood above the coffin, staring into the face of the dead man, he’d felt the atmosphere in the room change, as if something of great power had been drawn to his moment of woefulness.

“Who’s there?” Simeon had demanded. He’d turned toward the back of the viewing room, where the air seemed to shimmer, and touched the rings that he wore on each hand—one giving him power over the demonic, the other the angelic. “Show yourself.”

“That’s it,” the forever man had said, practically giddy as the angel of Heaven took shape, ensnared by the power of the ring. “Don’t waste your strength. Solomon was very thorough with the magick he employed.” And Simeon had held up his right hand, showing off the silver ring that adorned his finger, the one that gave him control over God’s winged messengers.

The angel had continued to struggle, attempting to disappear from view, but the magick of the ring kept him there.

“Why are you here?”

“I was drawn to your emotion,” the angel spoke haltingly, as if trying not to speak, but the words forced their way out anyway.

“My emotion?” Simeon had begun to pace amongst the chairs that had been set up for those who would

come to pay their respects.

“I have never sensed anguish so vast,” the angel had said. “Sorrow so deep. It drew me to you.”

Simeon remembered smiling with little humor. “Let’s say I’ve had ample time to accrue more than my fill.”

The angel had looked at him strangely then, tilting his head in that birdlike fashion they had a tendency to do. The Heavenly creature had yet to realize what he was actually dealing with.

“And you came to me to do what exactly?” Simeon had asked. “Soothe a troubled nature with a divine touch upon my furrowed brow?”

“I certainly could bring you some peace—yes,” the angel had agreed.

Simeon had laughed, a short barking sound. “It would take far more than that to assuage my tortured feelings,” he’d said with a snarl. “In fact, I doubt that all in Heaven could quench my wrath.”

He had walked toward the angel then, weaving his way through the chairs, feeling the rage growing within him—a rage that could never be satisfied. For he had been denied the joy of Heaven, had had it painfully snatched away as he was returned to a life eternal by the touch of the holy man from Nazareth.

“I am an emissary of God; let me help you . . .,” the angel had stammered.

But Simeon had simply raised a hand, cutting off the angel’s words. “Bleed for me,” he’d said.

The angel had tilted his head left, then right. “I don’t . . .”

“Bleed for me,” Simeon had repeated, putting the power of Solomon’s ring behind each word.

The angel had struggled, but it was all for naught. The winged messenger of God extended one of his long, muscular arms, pulling back the diaphanous sleeve of his shirt to expose the pale, marblelike flesh, his gaze begging the forever man to reconsider.

But what would have been the fun in that?

Reaching across with his other hand, the angel had begun to dig the razor-sharp nails on his fingers into the exposed arm, grimacing as he ripped bloody furrows in the bare white skin.

“Isn’t that something,” Simeon had said, placing his hand beneath the drips of blood raining down from the wounds.

“Why?” the angel had asked pathetically.

And again, Simeon had given him that humorless smile, recalling a similar question he himself had asked of the Son of God so very long ago.

“To show that I could.”

A sound from the entrance to the room had distracted them then, and Simeon had turned to see the undertaker standing there.

“I thought I heard voices in here,” the middle-aged man had said, not yet noticing that he was in the presence

of the divine.

Simeon watched his face, waiting for it to sink in.

“Oh my,” the undertaker had said dreamily, his eyes fixed upon the winged being.

“Be not afraid.” The angel’s voice had sounded like the first notes of the most beautiful of songs.

“Oh no,” Simeon had said, his gaze going from the angel to the undertaker. “I think he should be afraid.” He’d strode over to the man, raised his hand, and wiped the blood of an angel on the undertaker’s cheeks.

The man had simply stood there, stunned beyond movement. “Please . . .,” he’d managed.

Simeon looked back to the angel. “You heard the man,” he’d said. “He’s begging you.”

The angel had tensed, his wings flapping furiously as he’d tried to shrug off the spell that had hold of him.

“Do it,” Simeon had commanded. “Kill him.”

And the angel had flown across the room, pouncing upon the defenseless undertaker, tearing him apart in a show of preternatural strength.

That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship between Simeon and Satquiel.

A friendship that had continued to this day.

• • •

“To what do I owe this unexpected visit?” Simeon asked the angel Satquiel, crossing his legs as he reclined comfortably in the wingback leather chair. He held a snifter of brandy, moving his wrist in such a way that the caramel-colored liquid swirled about, coating the inside of the glass.

The angel stood before the large window that looked out onto one of the Vatican’s many gardens, this particular one devoted to roses of every imaginable color.

Simeon’s associates in the Vatican had given him this office study to think and to collect his thoughts. If only they realized how hard he was trying to destroy everything that they believed in, but for now what they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

“The Lord God has spoken,” Satquiel said, arms crossed behind his back as he looked rigidly out upon the rose garden.

“Has He now?” Simeon said, taking a sip of his brandy. “And, pray tell, what did the supreme being have to say?”

Satquiel appeared to grow even more uncomfortable, his body twitching uneasily.

“Michael has received a special message from the Lord God,” Satquiel said, turning his head from the garden view. He appeared to be concentrating on a patch of deep shadow in the corner of the room, near the floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

“Go on, Satquiel,” Simeon urged as he turned the ring of Solomon on his right finger, wanting to distract the

angel from the pool of darkness.

The angel turned, visibly shaken by what he was about to relate. Simeon leaned forward in his chair, ready to hear.

“Lucifer Morningstar,” Satquiel said, his voice trembling.

“Yes?”

“The Morningstar is to be forgiven his indiscretions,” Satquiel at last said, the words spilling from his mouth like vomit.

“The deuce you say,” Simeon reacted, slowly bringing his drink to his mouth and draining the remainder of its contents in one gulp.

“Rather than involve the forces of Heaven and Hell in another war that would most assuredly spill over to Earth and humanity, the Almighty has decreed that the Son of the Morning be exonerated from his crimes against Heaven.”

Simeon reclined farther into the chair, the gears inside his brain already beginning to turn, the repercussions of this decree immense.

“My, my, my,” Simeon said, the scenarios that he was imagining too numerous to count.

“Michael,” Simeon stated, capturing Satquiel’s attention.

“Yes, what about him?”

“How is the archangel taking the news?”

“The Creator has spoken. The Archangel Michael, as well as us all, will bathe in the glory that has been bestowed upon us with His holy words and prepare to carry out that which has been—”

“How is Michael doing?” Simeon asked.

Satquiel’s posture sagged. “Not well at all,” he said.

“Wouldn’t think so. Can’t even imagine God’s number one commander against the forces of evil kissing and making up with the adversary. Ouch.” Simeon paused, continuing to let the information wash over him.

“Poor bastard. Must be so hard for him . . . hard for you all, really.”

“You have no idea,” Satquiel said. “But God has spoken. We have no choice . . .”

“I get it, and there’s that whole working-in-mysterious-ways thing He’s known for.”

The angel stood before him, the troubles that he’d just related appearing to have taken their physical toll upon the divine creature.

“It is for the good of us all.”

Simeon smiled. “Of course it is,” he said. “That’s what a loving God is all about.”

Tired of the angel, and wanting to think further about the situation, Simeon ordered Satquiel away.

Needing another brandy, he rose from his chair, approaching the bar in one of the room's other corners to help himself.

"Did you hear?" Simeon asked as he poured.

He looked toward the patch of darkness where the angel's attention had been drawn earlier. The black moved like liquid, and a shape, followed by three others, emerged to join him in the study.

Constantin Malatesta stood just outside the shadow, while Simeon's three demon lackeys moved to the opposite side of the room.

"The sound was a bit distorted within the shadow," the Keeper agent of the Vatican said. "Did he actually say that God is ready to forgive Lucifer?"

Simeon could not help himself and began to giggle. No matter how long he lived this wretched existence, the unexpected happenings of the day never ceased to amaze him.

"He did," the forever man answered, taking a sip from his fresh glass of brandy.

"Perhaps there's hope for us all, then," Malatesta said, suddenly doubling over in pain as the thing that lived inside of him—the Larva—again tested the constraints of his body.

"Hope isn't something that the infernal really care to hear about," Simeon told him.

Beleeze, Dorian, and Robert watched in amusement as the Vatican sorcerer struggled with the diabolical entity that had possessed him since childhood. Simeon's demonic helpers didn't really care for the newest addition to their dysfunctional family and enjoyed his suffering whenever possible.

Malatesta slowly straightened and from the look upon his face Simeon could see that the Larva had once again regained a modicum of control.

"Personally I've always believed hope to be overrated," the Vatican magick user said, his words tainted by the malevolence of the demonic parasite. "It's so easily taken away."

The Larva smiled behind the mask of Constantin Malatesta.

"So here's the question," Simeon then proposed, the wheels inside his mind spinning even faster, tossing off sparks of fire that only served to ignite more thoughts on the situation. "How do we best use this to our advantage?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Something moved in the sky above the ruins in the distance.

It writhed like smoke, rising up from the crumbled citadels and towers, but it did not drift as smoke would upon the heavy winds that moved across the bleak desert landscape. It collected en masse, like a swarm of locusts, flying over the desert, heading toward the mountain.

"We need to get out of sight," the demon dog announced.

Samson's son was instantly on the move, the dog right behind him, using his large paws to pull down the tent.

"Must have been another scout we didn't see. We'll head to the caves and hold up there until the Filthies get tired of looking for us," the dog said, his paws far more dexterous than Remy would have believed.

Filthies.

The word exploded in his brain, images like jagged pieces of shrapnel tearing through soft tissue, memories flowing like blood as he turned his eyes to the dark, living cloud spreading over the desert toward them.

Remy blinked away the nightmarish vision to see the great demon beast staring inquisitively.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" the beast asked.

"Those are angels," he said, squinting his eyes, now able to see the twisted mockeries of something once divine as they approached, their disease-ridden wings beating the dust-filled air. "What happened to them?"

The dog stiffened as he stared at him.

"What do you mean, what happened to them?" the demon hound asked gruffly. "*This* happened to them." The dog looked around at their blighted surroundings. "The world is fucked, and so are they. Are you sure that you're all right?"

Remy knew that to answer truthfully would have added another wrinkle, so he decided to play it safe and keep his mouth shut until he had a better idea of what was going on.

"I'm good," he said, the swarm of Filthies even closer now. "We should get to the caves."

The dog hesitated, but only a moment, then spun his muscular body toward a rocky incline. "Take the tent," he ordered over his shoulder.

Remy snatched up the pieces of the disassembled tent and followed the animal down an embankment where others of Samson's brood were quickly heading toward a mountain wall, surrounded by some heavy brush. As he drew closer, Remy saw the jagged crack that resembled a bolt of lightning. He was the last to enter, careful on the unstable, rocky terrain down into the earth. The passage grew uncomfortably smaller as it reached another crack that bisected a wall of stone and led into a much larger chamber.

Remy's head buzzed with what he had just seen above, the bizarreness of this unfamiliar world wreaking havoc on his perceptions of reality. Was this all some sort of twisted hallucination, or was it—as he suspected—something far, far worse?

Setting the tent down upon the ground, he turned toward the gathering, searching for the demon dog, when he was struck savagely from behind, driving him to the floor of the cave.

Remy found himself gazing up into the sneering face of the dog, his eyes blazing as if LEDs had been placed inside his large blocky skull.

"The smell is just a little off. . . . So is the taste," the dog growled, bearing his tremendous weight down upon Remy's chest as he lowered his snout closer. "Almost began to think it was just me, but then I saw the look on your face when you saw the Filthies swarm, like you'd never seen such things before."

The dog's breath was awful, and saliva dribbled from the corners of his mouth onto the Seraphim.

"So who the fuck are you . . . and why shouldn't I eat your face for deceiving us?"

• • •

Francis could feel the intensity of Marlowe's eyes upon him as he knelt beside his friend, the dog's gaze pleading for him to do something—*anything*—to bring his master back.

"I'm working on it, pal," Francis said, looking away from Remy's pallid face and into the Labrador's deep brown eyes. Marlowe whined mournfully, moving closer to where Remy lay, the side of his black muzzle now pressed to Remy's cheek.

Francis knew at once what the dog was doing, the physical contact perhaps allowing Marlowe to share some of his strength with that of his master. It was as good an idea as any, Francis thought as he reached down to take hold of Remy's hand.

Linda appeared in the doorway, arms filled with pillows and a blanket she'd retrieved from the bedroom upstairs. "Is he . . ."

"The same," Francis said. "Marlowe and I are just trying to help him out is all."

"This will make him a bit more comfortable," she said, kneeling beside Marlowe, gently lifting Remy's head, and sliding two pillows beneath. She shook the blanket out over him and then knelt there for a bit, watching him. "I feel like I should be doing something, but I don't . . ."

She started to cry again but sucked it up, wiping the tears away.

"This is fine." Francis tried to calm her. "All we can do is wait and hope the physician gets back to us soon." Just in case, he pulled his phone out again and checked for messages. There were none.

The silence in the room was deafening, and he felt his flesh begin to squirm, his muscles twitch, desperate for action—any action. Francis was used to dealing with things in a more physical fashion, but his predilection for violence had no place here.

He was about to look at his phone again, just for something to do, but Linda interrupted.

"He's an . . . angel," she stated, appearing to have some difficulty getting the last word out.

"He is," Francis confirmed. "A Seraphim, to be exact."

"From Heaven . . . He's an angel from Heaven that has come to Earth."

"It's a little more complicated than that, but yeah, basically that's it."

"And you're an angel?" she asked, watching him with a combination of fear and fascination.

"Yeah, but I'm of the fallen variety."

"I thought that fallen angels were bad."

"Who said I'm not?" The admission stirred more emotion in Francis than he would have expected after all

this time. “I made some bad decisions a long time ago, and I’m paying for them now.”

“Is Remy fallen, too?” she asked, reaching out to gently run her fingers through his hair.

“Not at all,” Francis said, impressed with this woman. Most humans would have been quivering in a pool of their own piss by now. “Remy is one of the good guys. He came here by choice—couldn’t quite stomach the politics after the war and was looking for some peace and quiet.”

“The war?”

“The legions of God against the Morningstar and his armies.”

“The Morningstar,” she repeated, the meaning starting to sink in. “You mean like the Devil. . . . He’s real?”

“Of course he’s real,” Francis said, unable to keep the irritation from his tone. “Why is it that you can accept that he . . . that we’re angels of Heaven, but not the existence of Lucifer?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “Wishful thinking?”

“If it makes you feel any better, organized religion has had a field day with his story. Responsible for all the evil in the world? Not even close,” Francis explained. “Sure, there were some pretty heavy doings with the Big Man upstairs, but very little fallout ever made it here to Earth.”

“But the Bible says . . .”

“The Bible says a lot of things, but not much of it is all that accurate.”

Linda looked as though she’d been slapped.

“Look,” Francis said. “The Bible was written by a bunch of guys trying to explain what they understood of God’s glory and the ills of the world. It’s a helluva lot easier explaining why a guy would slaughter twenty innocent people in a McDonald’s when there’s a supreme boogeyman to lay the blame on.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Linda said.

“Happy to set things right for you.”

“You say that he’s one of the good guys,” Linda said after a moment, looking down at Remy again. “I knew it the first time I met him. . . . It just came off him in waves. I didn’t know how to describe it at the time; I just knew I’d be safe with him . . . that he would protect me.” The tears started again, pouring from her eyes to spatter upon the floor beside Remy’s head. “Who’s going to do that now?” she asked, looking imploringly at Francis. He was about to tell her that he would gladly do that for her, but then his phone vibrated.

“Is it the doctor?” Linda asked, the expectation nearly palpable.

“Yeah.” Francis stood and stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “I’ve gotta go get him.”

He headed for the kitchen but stopped. “Stay with him,” he said, turning back to gaze first at Linda, and then at Marlowe. “And you keep them both safe.”

The dog woofed as Francis stepped into the kitchen and out of sight, opening a passage to the physician.

• • •

Linda leapt to her feet, wanting to know if there was anything she should be doing before the physician arrived, but the kitchen was empty; Francis had already gone.

She had no idea how he had disappeared so quickly, but the air appeared to be strangely unsettled in a corner of the room. She moved her hand through the area of turbulence as it dissipated. *Angel stuff*, she thought.

She turned to go back to Remy and caught sight of Marlowe through the kitchen doorway, still sitting loyally by Remy's side. It broke her heart to see the dog so distraught.

But there was no use fretting over something that she could do little about. She had to keep things positive. Right now, Remy seemed to be holding on. She only hoped it wouldn't be too long before Francis returned with the physician, and then they would know.

Good or bad, at least they would know something.

She returned to the living room, staring at Remy's prone form. If she didn't know better she would say that he was just catching a little nap.

Do angels even sleep? She tried to recall if she'd ever actually seen Remy sleeping, but her memories drifted back to the last time they'd made love. She couldn't help but smile. How loved she'd felt since he'd come into her life.

The tears came again in scalding torrents, and Linda rushed down the hallway to the first-floor bathroom.

She turned the water on full blast, then caught her reflection in the mirror above the sink, horrified by the puffiness of her eyes and the blotchiness of her complexion. If Remy should awaken now and see her, she thought, he'd probably scream and crawl back into his coma.

Marlowe joined her, sitting down on the bath mat outside the shower stall.

"I wouldn't want to be alone, either," she told him. "Let me wash my face, and we'll go back to him together."

The dog's tail thumped twice in response, and Linda bent forward over the sink, splashing cool water onto her face in the hopes of somewhat rejuvenating herself.

Then a sudden sound made Marlowe bark, startling her. Standing upright, face dripping, she listened. Marlowe stood in the bathroom doorway at attention, growling softly.

She wasn't sure what the sound was, but thought she heard the creaking of a door hinge.

"Francis?" she called out, grabbing a hand towel and drying her face as she cautiously left the bathroom. "Francis, is that you?" she asked.

Marlowe was ahead of her, growling, the bristled fur on his back somehow darker than his normally black coat. He stopped outside the living room entryway, barked once, and then rushed into the room.

"Marlowe!" she cried, running to the doorway and stopping short. A man stood over Remy, and the Labrador sat next to him, staring balefully up at him.

“Hello?” Linda said tentatively.

The man slowly turned toward her voice, his face scratched and bruised as if he’d recently been in a fight, his eyes filled with emotion.

“I’m too late,” Stephen Mulvehill said, his voice quivering as he dropped to his knees beside the body of his friend.

“God forgive me. . . . I’m too late.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Francis stepped onto a street that looked like something out of a postapocalyptic nightmare.

It took him a minute or so to remember that he was in Detroit.

“What a shit hole,” he muttered as he began to walk the blighted city neighborhood. Miles of abandoned city blocks, the only apparent life being weeds that pushed up through the broken blacktop and swarms of rats and roaches that skittered about in the darkness of the empty buildings.

In a way an apocalypse had happened here; it was just of an economic kind.

He wasn’t sure exactly why places like this, abandoned places, places that had once pulsed with life but were now dead, drew the fallen angels of Heaven. The Denizens, as they were called, having served their time in the Hell prison of Tartarus and now completing their penance here on Earth, seemed drawn to these desolate, hopeless places like lice to a healthy scalp.

The Denizen known in certain circles as the Physician was no different from his penitent brethren.

A ragged dog emerged from an alley, its snout pressed to the ground as it tracked what it probably hoped would be its next meal. It stopped when it saw Francis and studied him with dark, bottomless eyes. It looked as though it would turn tail and run when he spoke.

“I’m looking for Darnell,” Francis said in a language the animal could understand. “I’m looking for the Physician.”

The dog hesitated only a moment before tossing back its mangy head with a woof and heading back the way it had come. Francis did as he was told and followed.

At the end of the alleyway, the dog turned right and trotted through three city blocks before stopping in front of yet another dilapidated tenement building, only this one had a former angel of Heaven sitting on its cracked front stoop, sipping from a bottle of cheap whiskey.

“Fraciel,” the Denizen acknowledged.

The dog continued on its way, occasionally pissing on random objects that littered the deserted streets.

“I’d ask if I could have a sip,” Francis said, nodding toward the bottle, “but I’m in a hurry.”

“I told you I didn’t want to ever see you again.”

“I thought you were joking. What would a life truly be without a little me every now and then?”

“Whenever you come calling, trouble follows like a bad smell.” The Physician was going to take another swig from the bottle but stopped and locked his dark gaze upon Francis. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“I need your skills.”

“My skills?” Darnell asked, then laughed. “The last time you needed my skills, you had a hole in your stomach so big I could put my whole hand into it. You don’t look hurt to me now.”

“It’s not me; it’s a friend.”

“A friend?” he asked incredulously. “I didn’t think you were the type.”

“Not something I’d like to get out,” Francis said. “Will you help?”

Darnell seemed to consider the question, while Francis thought of options in case he refused.

“What’s in it for me?” Darnell finally asked.

“Let’s just say a nice thank-you card might be showing up in your mailbox. Do they even still deliver mail around here?”

The fallen angel shook his head. “Stopped the same week they cut the power and water.”

“Bet the rent is good,” Francis said. He studied the front of the tenement, noticing ghostly faces in some of the windows, peering out at them.

“Can’t complain.”

“Will you come with me?”

“How bad?” Darnell asked as he slowly screwed the cover back on his whiskey bottle.

“Bad enough that this could be a waste of both our time.”

• • •

The demon dog pressed down upon him with all its monstrous weight.

“Who. The fuck. Are you?” he growled, the stink of his breath like a slaughterhouse on the hottest day in August.

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