

Tears of Heaven

# **Tears of Heaven**

**By**

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**Wild Child Publishing.com**  
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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to Porter, Tristan and Xavier. The angels in my life.

## **Chapter One**

### **Variation Under Nature**

*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days – and also afterward – when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.*  
Genesis 6:4

June 14, 223 BCE

She stood tall, proud, strong, beautiful, wearing only heavy shackles, in the warm sun. A bright sheen of sweat made her olive skin glisten and sparkle. She was almost completely devoid of hair, a point that Aeschylus, the slave-master and auctioneer, was demonstrating even now. He ordered her to lift her arms and open her legs so that all could inspect this fine specimen of femininity.

Damascus, Dami to his friends, didn't know all the tricks of the slave trade, but hair could be removed, paints and tinctures could be used to hide scars and wash over the average. So the features of the slave girl didn't particularly strike him.

Still, there was something about her, something that reminded him of . . .

Carefully and casually, so as to not draw attention, he hefted his money pouch tied to his broad leather belt, and opposite his short sword. He weighed its likely worth against the likely worth of the girl and knew he was already outbid.

"Aeolus," he whispered to the man next to him. The short, stocky man didn't turn away from the bidding, but he

did cock his curly head to one side to let Dami know he listened. "How much have you?"

"For her?" Aeolus shrugged. "*You'd* have to pay *me*."

Aeolus laughed at his own joke, which to Dami always sounded like a cross between a cough and a bark.

"Come now, how much?"

"Look at her," Aeolus said, as he unfolded one arm from across his broad chest and gestured with his thick-fingered hand. "She has no hips, at least not enough for one or two babes, and her breasts are not even a half handful. A child will starve trying to suckle. There's no meat on her, and what there is looks to be field muscle. She has nothing to give a growing child warmth. She's not worth a shekel for birthing."

"I don't want her to give children," Dami replied.

"What good is a slave girl except for children? Oh sure, you love them at your whim, but when they grow older, what's the point? If they haven't given you daughters to marry or sell, and sons to make you immortal, you're just wasting your seed."

"Pah," Dami replied, now slightly annoyed. "You have no soul, man."

"Sold it," Aeolus replied, with another barking laugh. "Kept getting in the way. Got a good price for it too."

"And drank it on a single cup of vinegar-wine," Dami retorted. "Come now, Aeolus, I know you won well on the horses last night, and you've been lucky at the dice cups all week. You're carrying half my profits."

"I'd have all your profits, if you could hold your drink," Aeolus replied. "But I don't mean to part with any of them until that plump little thing comes up; she'll bear five or ten babes with ease, and not a one will ever starve. And I mean to have me a horse as well, so stop asking."

“Fifteen shekels?” Aeschylus cried in mock exasperation. “Is that all I’m bid on the fine, the fair Water Lily? Come now, she will keep your bed warm at night, and during the day too.” He turned her around and slapped her rump. “See, firm and ready for the right man to set his plow. Now what am I bid? Give me good bids for Water Lily!”

“Seventeen,” a voice cried out.

“Nineteen,” another replied.

Dami caught sight of the girl again. Where most slaves cowered, watched the crowd and followed the voices, to see what manner of men might own them, this girl didn’t seem to pay any attention to the process. She held her head high and haughty, and except for the chains at wrist and ankle, she looked for all the world as if she owned the place. As if she didn’t care a whit that there wasn’t a stitch of clothing to cover her, or that she even needed it to be out in public.

Heavy chains, too, Dami noted.

“What would a sailor do with a horse?” Dami asked, but Aeolus ignored him. “Her name is Water Lily. That’s a good omen for sailors.”

“Twenty shekels,” a new voice sang out.

“Aeolus . . .” Dami began again.

“Zeus’s left ball!” Aeolus swore. “Stop your crying. You sound like a mewling calf.” He pulled his leather money bag free from his belt and shoved it hard into Dami’s stomach. Dami grunted, half in surprise and half in jest.

“There’s thirty shekels in there,” Aeolus said. “See that I get something back.”

“Aeolus . . .” Dami began with a huge grin painted on his face.

“Shut up,” Aeolus cut him off. “You owe me it all back and interest, may the gods feast on your liver.”

He began to make his way through the crowd in mock disgust. “What would a sailor do with a horse?’ Blight-bitten, mewling, whining . . .”

Dami smiled at Aeolus’ retreating form.

Horses.

*I’ll never give it over for horses, Dami thought. Smelly beasts, no good for sailing men.*

“Twenty-four,” a now familiar voice raised the last bid. Dami looked over to see Dreskin, the butcher, shoot a nervous look at Aeschylus and back at the girl.

*He’s in over his head, Dami thought. He got caught up in the bidding, and now he’s hoping someone will outbid him and save him the coin.*

There was silence for a time, and Dami, an old hand at such auctions, held his breath. In his chest, his heart hammered as he prepared to save Dreskin and win the girl in one move. He stroked his chin as if he was considering a bid, and watched Dreskin. Sure enough, as the silence deepened and Aeschylus waited with a practiced patience, Dreskin began to look around him, desperation clear in his eyes.

“Twenty-five,” Dami shouted. Dreskin deflated in relief.

Aeschylus looked to Dreskin to see if he would enter another bid, and Dreskin put on an impressive show of considering the slave girl.

*She’s no good for breeding, Dami thought at Dreskin. Come on, give over.*

“Turn her around again,” Dreskin requested, and Aeschylus motioned for the girl to turn. At first, she didn’t move, but Aeschylus placed his hand on his waist where his short whip was shoved into his belt, and she began to turn around slowly.

Dreskin stroked his bearded chin, but Dami wasn’t worried. Dreskin was obviously relieved, and probably for the same reasons that Aeolus hadn’t wanted the girl. Now

Dami had to be patient, look disinterested in whether Dreskin raised the bid or not, as if the girl was another piece of chattel up on the block.

Finally Dreskin shook his head at Aeschylus.

“No?” Aeschylus asked the small crowd. “No more? She may not have much, but they say that hard women birth hard sons. Sons that will tend your goods, and fight in coming wars. No, none? Come, come good men.”

Twenty-five shekels was a months’ pay for some of these men, it was two months for others. No one was going to risk that much money on a girl so skinny and proud. It would take too much time and effort for her to learn her place and act the proper slave.

“None,” Aeschylus said, and paused. “None. None. The deal is done!”

He raised up his hands, dropped them both to point at Dami and then pointed to a table where Aeschylus’ moneychanger sat. Dami gave a slight bow of his head, and began to move through the men who still looked up to the slaver’s block. Aeschylus motioned, and a Nubian, easily a head taller and a stone heavier than Dami, came forward and took the girl by the chains.

Dami approached the table. The man sitting there looked up.

“Twenty-five shekels,” the man said, as he began to tally. “It’s another shekel if you want her robed, and another three if you want to keep the chains.”

He looked up at Dami, as the Nubian brought the girl toward them, still naked and glistening in the sun. The moneychanger leaned forward and motioned Dami to come closer.

“This one,” he said. “I suggest you keep the chains. I’ll give you a good price for them. They were made for her special.”



“Ha,” Dami laughed. “How much trouble can one slip of a girl be?”

“I jest not, good sir,” the moneychanger replied. “The chains are twice as heavy as Aeschylus uses, and that includes the men for laborers. Why would he waste good iron on a girl?”

Dami paused at that. The initial offer he’d considered to be a ploy to separate more of his money, and Aeolus’, from the pouch. The Nubian slave-guard brought the girl to a stop near the table, but he kept at arm’s length from her.

The girl caught his gaze, and bright hatred of him glowed there. Not of him personally. She gave the same look to every man who dared to meet her eyes. No, she was . . . angry.

*Angry enough to kill? Dami wondered. Don’t drop anchor in a port you can’t get back out of.*

“Two shekels for the iron *and* the robe,” Dami responded without taking his gaze from the girl, “*and* you deliver her to my ship.”

“The iron alone . . .”

“You said yourself that the iron is more than you would use for even the men,” Dami responded. “They won’t serve you future use.”

“Fine, four shekels for robe, irons and delivery,” the man replied.

“Two shekels, twelve,” Dami replied.

“Three shekels, and I’ll see the robe isn’t flea-ridden.”

“Done,” Dami replied. “But if I see a single flea . . .”

“Do you need it counted for you?” the moneychanger interrupted, eager to get past the implied threats and move on with the business.

“No thanks,” Dami replied with a grin. “I probably couldn’t afford the fee.”

*And you might be able to really cheat me,* Dami thought. Men who couldn't read and couldn't count were always at a disadvantage against those who could. It was simple enough to miss a few numbers, or slip an extra coin or three out of the mix.

He opened his pouch first, and emptied seven shekels onto the table. Then he dug into Aeolus' pouch and counted out twenty-one more. The moneychanger weighed each coin against one of his own, then deposited them into an iron-bound hardwood box.

"What ship?" the moneychanger asked.

"The *Wavedancer*," Dami replied. "She's berthed off the Sumar quarter."

The moneychanger gestured to the Nubian, and the big, dark skinned man moved off with the girl.

Dami pulled an extra shekel from Aeolus' pouch and placed it on the table. His finger held the coin firmly against the rough wood.

"A nice robe," Dami suggested, "and she's there before sunset?"

The moneychanger looked up at Dami, down at the shekel and over toward where Aeschylus was extolling the virtues of his latest piece of flesh. He reached out and took the shekel, sliding it into his tunic.

"A pleasure, sir." The moneychanger nodded. "A pleasure."

\* \* \* \*

November 2, Present Day

"Throne be damned," the rogue hissed.

The fight was not going well. Del should have brought Marrin. Ahadiel had told her to bring Marrin, but that only made certain that she wouldn't.

Del gasped as the rogue landed a solid punch into her stomach and ribs. The air whooshed from her lungs. He followed with a stab of his fingers into her right arm. Cold-filled pain suffused her shoulder and caused it to spasm painfully. She spun away, awkwardly. Her right arm felt like it had been shattered, pulverized into pudding, useless as gelatin. The cold-forged iron spike she'd been holding dropped from useless fingers and clattered to the floor. The rogue looked at her with brutal menace in his eyes and flame licking around the lids.

It would have been a good trick.

If only it was a trick.

The flames were all too real.

Fortunately, Del didn't suffer from the same fears that mortals contended with. A rogue divinity hissing heresy and spouting fire, literal fire, around his eyes would have left a mortal quivering in terror until the Last Judgment.

She'd seen it happen.

"Leave now, little half-breed," the rogue said. His voice had a sibilance that surrounded her, whispering in both of her ears intimately. "Leave, and I will not kill you. Stay, and I will make your pain a torture. I will see you last for days upon days, and I promise you abuses you could not dream."

Del said nothing.

People think they want to meet an angel, but they really don't. The awful truth is that meeting an angel is the scariest, most life-altering moment of any mortal's short existence. Angels have always had their voices raised in songs of praise and their wings dipped in rivers of blood. When the Throne needs a mortal slain, or an army felled, an angel is sent. When a city or nation needs to be leveled, and

the ground sown with salt for a thousand years, an angel is the destroyer.

Flood, fire, famine, disease, pestilence and death are conjured through an angel.

Angels should be a human's worst nightmare embodied.

Rogues were an order of magnitude worse. An angel was a messenger of destruction, operating under orders from the Throne. Rogues had no direction, no channel for their power. They sought only dominion through the most direct means possible.

"Go, little girl," the rogue gestured with his right arm, the one where she'd managed to drive a spike through his wrist.

It would have been stupid to engage the rogue, or really any opponent, in conversation. Witty banter was for the movies. Errol Flynn and John Wayne could while away the hours as they faced a bad guy and spouted catchy one-liners.

In the really real world, Del knew better than to take time out of her busy schedule.

She still held a second cold-forged iron spike in her left hand. She wanted to drop it and reach for her last SIG Sauer .45 behind her back. Most melee weapons against a rogue were nearly useless. Unless it was the right weapon. She shifted her grip, stepped into the rogue with speed no mortal could, and stabbed with enough power to lift the rogue off its feet. Rogues might be strong, but the laws of physics were stronger. The foot-long spike punched into the rogue's left shoulder and only her fist on the weapon stopped it.

The Host takes care of their own.

Even if they have to hire it done.

When the rogue landed, he immediately lashed out with inhuman strength, and this time Del was thrown off her feet. She held onto the spike caught in the rogue's arm, and her own shoulder jerked painfully. Not for the first time, she wished she was even the lowest form of immortal.

A mere angel could shrug off the pain that now threatened to overwhelm her.

One of the higher choirs, a Principality or even a Grigori .

..

Pain washed over her vision and bright red sparks danced in front of her eyes. When she thought her shoulder would come clear of its socket, the rogue gave ground. It wasn't much, and even in her current state, Del wasn't certain it would be enough, but it would have to do. She clumsily seated her feet on the ground, uncertain of the positioning, gripped the spike firmly, and threw all her weight backward. She thought that she would bend in half before the rogue was thrown. His body slammed hard enough into the floor that ceramic tiles popped and shattered, cutting around them like shrapnel.

She didn't waste the time she'd gained. Del dropped her knee down hard on the rogue's chest and caved it in. The rogue's eyes went from slightly stunned to pain-filled and angry. The Host may not have mastered, or had even an understanding, of most emotions, but anger, righteous or otherwise, was right up their alley.

Her right arm hung useless, but since her left was dominant, it didn't matter. She jerked the cold-forged iron spike free of the rogue's shoulder and slid forward on his chest, so that his head rested between her knees, while the balance of her weight rested on his shoulders and immobilized his arms. Her more than powerful thighs clamped down on his jaws and seized his head.

In any other context she would have thought they were doing a porn scene.

In this context, she almost wished she were doing a porn scene. It would have been less painful, except to her dignity.

There were things even Del wouldn't do for money.

His arms flailed, powerful but useless. He tried to claw at her, to gash huge bloody rends in her legs. All he could manage was to tear the floor with ear-shrieking scratches. Now, desperation entered the mix in his eyes.

Desperation was something only a few divinities truly understood.

About one in three knew it intimately, and every one of them was a rogue.

“Omnia glorium Solii,” she spoke the words as she brought the cold-forged iron spike up above her head. She couldn’t help but say them. They were automatic, a natural force, like gravity. *All for the glory of the Throne.*

She brought the spike down, hard and fast, slamming it between her knees. It went into the rogue’s right eye, destroying the *chakram*, out through the back of his skull, through the ceramic floor and stopped two inches into the concrete. The rogue’s head was pinned to the house’s foundation.

*Whoa*, Del thought, and shuddered from the force she’d exerted.

“It is finished,” she intoned aloud, the words flowed out of her without conscious effort.

Power flowed out from the rogue’s body into the air and the earth, and partly into her. Power, like a strong wind danced all around her, grabbing at her clothing and her hair. She rolled off the rogue, and pushed herself away awkwardly with her feet, until her back met a wall. Then she stared, cradled her injured right arm, and gasped for breath.

There was no lightning show or gaping black hole in the floor with the cries of the damned reaching out of Hell itself. Those, Marrin often observed, were only mortal theatrics, a way to visually comprehend the inconceivable. Mortals always had a tough time with intangible concepts. Lust was often mistaken for love; visual beauty was equated with

internal worth, and wealth with wisdom. Death was a skeleton wearing a robe and carrying a scythe.

What did a skeleton need with clothes?

The release of power abated. An almost peaceful silence, in a strange contrast to the titanic fight, replaced it. She glanced at the room, which might have been a kitchen. Holes the size and shape of flying bodies could be seen in almost every wall of the abandoned house. Del was amazed the building, condemned for some time now, still stood after the beating she and the rogue had dished out to each other. Perhaps, it was a testament to the builder who might have believed or hoped his work would stand and serve forever.

The Fallen proved that nothing does.

Thirty seconds had passed since she drove the spike into the rogue's head and destroyed the necessary *chakram*. She'd destroyed some of the house's foundation as well. In that time, the rogue changed from a fierce creature the size and shape of Andre the Giant to a representative of the Lollipop Guild.

Not one of the larger reps either.

The rogue's body grew smaller and smaller, more compact, squat and less recognizable. Now, it was the size of a basketball, now, the size of a grapefruit, now, a walnut. Smaller and smaller, until Del could only make out a dust mote that contracted further still.

Then, with a pop no louder than Orville Redenbacher's best, even that vanished.

The iron spike clattered to the ground and steamed slightly.

She left it there. By morning it would crumble into dust.

"Why would anyone want to meet an angel?" Del asked the emptiness.

She pulled her two SIG .45s from the rubble of the house, checked their loads, and returned them to her shoulder

holsters. Carefully, she made her way to the waiting Jeep Cherokee, and managed to open the door on the first try. It took a little longer to start the Jeep with her left hand, longer than she liked. The sirens were definitely headed in her direction.

Using her left hand, she put the Jeep in gear, switched the lights on, and pulled calmly away from house. Just another day at the office. She caught a brief glimpse of her own face as she looked in the rearview mirror and paused to inspect the damage.

“Burn,” she swore.

Most people thought that she was of Asian descent, but most people were wrong. The epicanthic slant to her eyes and her dark hair supported that conclusion, but that was where the similarities ended. Del dyed her hair from its shockingly snowy white to its current dark brown. Her eyes were a blazing blue that lovers commented on constantly to the point of annoyance, and her skin was almost dark enough to place her as African. Also, she was taller than an average woman, and much taller than almost any Asian woman she'd ever met. Over the last two centuries the mortals had started to catch up to her. Better diet, easier living and access to greater breeding selection had seen to that.

Evolution at its finest.

She glanced again in the mirror and sighed. Her nose was probably broken, and at least one eye would be puffy for the next couple of days until her body healed. Bruises were starting to darken around her throat that matched the rogue's fingers, print for print. It still amazed her that internal injuries, really anything major, would be healed within hours, or days at worst, while external, superficial and completely aesthetic injuries might take days or even weeks.



It was as if her body mocked her for being a half-breed, and made certain she remembered it at every opportunity. A final glance confirmed that the bruise to her eye was growing and would be swollen and black by the morning.

“Damn.”

She didn't notice Ahadiel until she was stopped at a red light.

“You may put away your weapon,” Ahadiel said. His gaze was focused on hers, and the same uncomfortable shiver trickled through her spine as she looked into his pupil-less depths. Deep, dark blue that swirled the longer she stared.

Ahadiel was near perfect. He was dark-skinned, a color that always reminded her of a Hershey's chocolate bar. His was well-formed and looked as if he worked out every day, though Del knew he didn't. Even had he needed to, his duties would have prevented it. He was half a head taller and a good hundred or more pounds heavier. His head looked close-shaved, but he had no need for a razor, a haircut, or even a shower and deodorant. He looked exactly the same today as he had two hundred years ago, and exactly as he would two hundred from now.

Right down to the half-smile which always seemed to signify that he was in on a joke the rest of the world would never know.

*Weapon?* she thought. Her mind locked down on the thought, and she looked down at her left hand.

She was obviously more exhausted than she realized.

The SIG was cradled in her left hand and cupped by her lap. It was aimed directly at Ahadiel's nose, her finger curled around the trigger. She didn't remember thumbing the safety off, but as she changed the focus of her eyes she could see that it was. Slowly, calmly, she thumbed the safety back on and slid the SIG back under her right arm.

“I wish you would just call,” she said. The rush of exertion overcame her, and she slumped back into her seat. She needed sleep and nothing more strenuous than lifting a glass of *absinthe*. In her current state, her right arm wouldn’t be able to manage even that.

“That . . . technology,” Ahadiel said the word with as much scorn as she’d ever heard from him, “does not work for the divine.”

“Exactly,” Del replied. Although the same problem affected her as well. There was something in their make-up, those crafted by the Throne and their offspring, that caused phones to give nothing but a feedback loop of ear-piercing static. It didn’t matter if it was an analog landline or a digital satellite mobile. If Del put her ear to the thing, she’d be as deaf as Quasimodo for a good hour.

“I came to offer you my touch,” Ahadiel said. He lifted perfect fingers toward her.

For a moment, she hesitated. Ahadiel was more than simply a beautiful creature. He was perfect. His skin was flawless, and his body the epitome of trained and toned, without being muscle-bound and cumbersome. She could admit to herself that there was an attraction, if only physical, for her. But that was not what Ahadiel meant.

“Don’t,” she said the word with as much command as she could muster, pleased that her voice didn’t crack. The blood in her veins lit on fire as she spoke the syllable. Her body reacted to the thought of another conflict, though she didn’t have enough energy left to fight.

Ahadiel looked from her hand to his, closed his fingers and dropped it to his lap. Two perfect chocolate hands, almost good enough to eat. If he’d been mortal, she’d have been well past tempted by now.

“I trust the rogue is banished?” Ahadiel asked, though it sounded more of a statement.

“Have I ever failed?” Del replied. Her voice was tired again as some of the heat in her blood ebbed away.

“Yes,” Ahadiel replied. “You have, and on more than one occasion.”

“Rhetorical question.”

“Such questions do not make sense to me. You have failed, otherwise why broach the subject?”

“Go to Hell.”

Ahadiel smiled, broadly, with perfect, brilliantly white teeth, the color they try to make them in toothpaste commercials.

“You asked,” his voice trailed off and his face lit up with his smile. “Where is young Marrin?”

Del almost laughed. The idea that Marrin could be called young was ludicrous. It was like calling Mt. Everest short, or the Grand Canyon shallow. While he was younger than Del, it was only by a thousand years or so. In a lifespan such as theirs, that meant that he was the college-age nephew to her recently graduated, and now working in New York, auntie.

But it was not the same for Ahadiel.

To him, who had seen the First Light of the Creation, all things that did not date within a millennium of the Beginning were “young.” He counted his age in eons, epochs.

“I sent him out for milk,” Del replied, and let the sarcasm show plainly in her voice.

“You would likely not be in this state if he had come with,” Ahadiel responded, almost mothering in his chiding.

Del wasn’t certain if it was the adult-like tone or the slow manner of his speech that annoyed her most.

Behind them, a horn honked its annoyance. Del looked up. The traffic light was green, and she pressed the accelerator harder than she should have. Ahadiel slammed into his seat. She smiled to herself, glad to see him thrown

even a little off by the sudden movement. It reminded her that while the Throne might be infallible, Its servants were not.

“The Throne is pleased with your recent successes,” Ahadiel began again.

“Aren’t we all,” Del replied. “I even cleaned my room and did all my homework. Do I get an ice cream?”

“We would like to offer you another job.”

He said the statement simply, almost as if he was asking her to take a left at the next light. As if she would accept and that would be the end of it.

“By ‘you’, I’m guessing you mean ‘you guys’ or the more proper ‘y’all’?”

“You have been more . . . successful since Marrin joined you,” Ahadiel replied.

“I don’t like him.”

“Yes, you do. You like him very much. You like him because, in this vast world, he is one of the few you can call kin. You like him because he is younger, and in some ways less mature, less experienced than you. You like that because it gives you the opportunity to teach. You like to teach your skills. It has given you a sense of self and of generation, something forbidden you. Also . . .”

“Fine, fine,” Del interrupted. “I like him. It’s you I hate.”

“That is, at least, more honest, if not more accurate,” Ahadiel responded with that same, slow, paced voice. “So, you will take Marrin for the job.”

“I haven’t said I will take the job. I haven’t even recovered from *this* job,” she said, as realization hit her. “That’s why you offered your touch, isn’t it? The job has to be done now, doesn’t it?”

Del slammed on the brakes and pulled the Jeep to the curb, jerking both of them when she stopped abruptly. Horns sounded all around them, but Del paid them no heed.

“Goddamnit, Ahadiel!” she yelled and slammed her good hand against the steering wheel hard enough to bend the plastic and the metal underneath. Ahadiel actually winced at the blasphemy, as if Del had slapped him. His smile disappeared and his gaze narrowed and hardened.

“Calm yourself, Omedelia bar-Azazel,” Ahadiel warned, the words sounded like a growl. “If you grow angry you become . . . unreasonable. I assure you that I can be most . . . unpleasant if you persist.”

The play of power in his voice trickled over her skin like cold spring water. Gooseflesh followed as the syllables reverberated in her ears. The feeling was similar, and at the same time completely opposite, from the power of the rogue as it spoke to her; like water so hot, or so cold, that initially the senses can’t discern the difference. It, also, was not a pleasant sound, but the rogue’s voice was like that of a bully, and one who is not afraid to fight, but wants to fight to prove himself. Ahadiel’s voice was like that of a parent who is about to lose patience with a disobedient child.

A disobedient child warned many times.

But Del had faced the anger of divinities before, faced them and lived.

“My name,” she said slowly, carefully, almost in mockery of Ahadiel, “is Del.”

It was a small distinction, but one she clung to. Ahadiel looked at her for several quiet moments. His hard gaze met hers with an intensity she had rarely seen.

Slowly, so slowly, like the melting of ice, he smiled. The moonlight lit up his dark skin so that it glowed. The absolute beauty of the divinity sitting in her Jeep struck her to her core. What felt like an electric current passed through her, and she shook. The vibration travelled from her center, out to her arms and legs, and down to her fingers and toes. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted and gave her a warm

shiver. An instant longing rose in her, the mix of lust and love for the creature, unbidden and unchecked. Everything about him was wonderful, was perfect, was worthy of her love, was worthy of her body. He was the embodiment of her deepest desires made flesh and presented to her. She wanted to unwrap him, and started to move toward him to do so.

Something interrupted her movement. The seatbelt, doing its job, held her outstretched arm six inches from his shoulder.

That obstacle allowed her mind to reassert itself. Not much, but enough that she could make the attempt to clamp down on her runaway emotions.

She struggled to keep herself from unclipping the belt and falling forward in abasement before the power, before *the* Power. The need to acknowledge this, to worship its Source in the most basic of ways nearly overwhelmed her. This was the feeling that many great men and women had felt before her, the near rapture of presence that a servant of the Throne could bring to bear.

Bring to bear, and use to command.

Mortals were, almost without exception, unable to resist. Queens and kings, emperors, and the mighty, had all fallen to their knees, to their faces, and made themselves humble in this Power's presence while they writhed on their bellies in the dust. Some mortals even longed for the sensation, the engulfing, mind-numbing, ego-shattering experience that would bring them a step or two closer to their version of deity.

But those who had felt the Power knew it for the scariest moment in their short lives. The loss of self, the loss of will and control, was something that could break all but the strongest or the most humble. It would reveal the soft core of a great man, or the hard steel of a small child. It was the true understanding of being infinitely small within an

infinitely vast universe. A universe that was ordered and controlled, but was so large and complex that even the simplest rules could barely be grasped. It held a full-length mirror up to the soul, and the walls came tumbling down.

The hand of the Throne was truly a mighty force.

*Burn all angels*, Del thought, and the momentary rebellion helped steel her mind.

“You are strong, for a mortal,” Ahadiel said slowly, and Del felt the weight of his Voice. His gaze moved across her skin from her smallest toes to the ends of her black hair. It was as if she were naked to the inch, fleshless, and he saw her soul, bare, exposed, fragile.

The desire he invoked made her *want* to be naked and to bear her soul to him.

Almost.

It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Her experience with the divine and her heritage hadn't made her immune, not by a cannon shot. It did, though, help her resist. As a big man might be able to take a bite from a rattlesnake and not suffer more than a day's worth of weakness, so too Del could absorb the power that radiated from Ahadiel, and hold her soul just outside his total influence.

Ahadiel hit a light switch and the feeling left her.

She shuddered as if cold and could still feel the ghost fingers on her arms, legs, chest, back and face. A lover's caress from only moments before. She could even feel them inside her, deep, as if Ahadiel still touched her on a level no mortal could ever reach. A level no mortal could even know except for the presence of the Divine.

She closed her eyes, ignored the instant warning her mind cried out, and focused on breathing. Slowly, in through her nose, then even more slowly out through her

mouth. She counted, paused, and counted again, as she'd been taught.

In a few more moments, when she regained her composure, she opened her eyes to find Ahadiel smiling at her with that same in-joke smile.

"You are one of the strongest," Ahadiel complimented her.

"If you ever do that again . . ." Del began, but wasn't certain what threat she would actually be able to follow through with. Ahadiel, cocked his head to one side and looked curiously at her, as if he too wondered what she would say.

He was amused.

"If you wish me to work for you, you *will not* do that again," Del said lamely. It didn't feel like much of a threat. The Throne could hire any gun it wanted, and had on occasions when she refused the job or couldn't finish it. But, after a few months or a few years, even a few decades, they always came back to her. In the end, she still owed Ahadiel, and they both knew it. Plus, she had a singular advantage over most of her competition.

She and Marrin both.

Ahadiel nodded slowly and reached into his jacket. Warning bells went off instantly. Del pulled the SIG again, smoothly, effortlessly, as if it leapt from the shoulder holster into her waiting hand.

This time she remembered thumbing the safety off.

The sudden movement caused Ahadiel to stop. He went completely and utterly still. Not even breath stirred in him. It was an impressive trick that Del had only seen a few times. Usually, it preceded an equally impressive display of swift and unstoppable violence. Her gaze caught on the black leather strap over Ahadiel's right shoulder that she hadn't noticed until now. Whether it was a pool cue case, an



architect's blueprint tube, or even a musician's instrument case, Del didn't know and didn't care. Ahadiel and his kind never went anywhere without a blade. Even the Fallen had their edges. To Del, the weapons were appropriate in the hands of immortals, as if the use of modern tools of war were improper, anachronistic.

"Do you really think . . ." he began, then shook his head. "You do, do you not? But you would. Your paranoia has kept you alive."

"It's only paranoia if no one is out to get you," Del said automatically, her focus never moving from her target. The gun in her hand didn't waver.

"It is," Ahadiel said, "too . . . confined to wield a blade in this carriage."

That didn't assuage Del's concern. Even without a sword, Ahadiel was stronger than any mortal. He was stronger than Del, or Marrin, or almost any combination thereof. He could bench press her Jeep for warm-ups, and he was well within grabbing distance. If he got his hands on her . . .

*Time and a place*, Del told herself. *Time and a place.*

Ahadiel wasn't here to kill her, or one of them would already be dead.

She nodded and allowed him to pull an archaic, soft leather bi-fold from his pocket and place it on the dash. It was about eight inches by four inches of tooled leather worked in an obscure pattern that may or may not have meaning. A clasp that was certainly of the purest silver and leather tie-down completed the archaic look of the thing.

Del stared at it as if it were a serpent.

"The fee is standard," Ahadiel said. "It will include exclusion from the List for an additional five years."

The List.

Capital "L."

He didn't need to say more.

She nodded slowly but kept the SIG trained on his head. Briefly, she imagined emptying the magazine into that perfect face and watching it explode. There would be no blood or brain matter, only flesh and the smell of fresh flowers. It appealed to her darker nature in a way that no mortal could understand.

“I see what you are thinking, Omedelia,” Ahadiel said calmly. “Though spent and injured, the battle-lust is still strong in you, as it was in your . . .”

He let the thought trail off, but Del finished it for him.

“As it was in my father.”

“As it was in your father,” Ahadiel said. Del wasn’t certain if he was capable of pity or remorse, but his voice managed to convey the emotions. She closed her eyes a second time, but no warning bells went off in her head now. Without looking, she thumbed the safety on and holstered the SIG.

“Is everything on the dash?” she asked.

“Not quite,” Ahadiel replied.

Del’s eyes snapped open and locked on Ahadiel’s, only to stare into the endless black depths.

“The Throne does not want any . . . issues with this task,” Ahadiel said without any prompting.

“I work with Marrin only,” Del replied. “You *know* that. Even *that* is a concession.”

“Not this time, Omedelia,” Ahadiel replied.

“My name,” she said, “is Del.”

Ahadiel looked at her and gave a partial shrug. Perhaps he’d been among the mortals for too long.

“Not this time,” he repeated in exactly the same tone of voice. “The importance is too great, and I understand you need the . . . fee.”

“Burn,” Del replied again, but she didn’t mean it this time. “Burn in Hell.”

“Hell is not tangible. I could no more burn there than freeze,” Ahadiel replied. “I will leave you with the packet. But understand, if you do not take this . . . this *job*, the Throne will never offer you another extension from the List.”

“You wouldn’t,” Del replied, astonished. If there was a tale of a servant of the Throne lying, she didn’t know it. Rogues and other Fallen, certainly. They rebelled against everything and lies were a small consolation for the price of that rebellion.

But a servant?

Whether it was out of loyalty, or simply the manner of their creation, Del didn’t know. She’d met a few who could play on perspectives, so that the truth heard was not the full truth. The truth depended on other knowledge. But an out-and-out lie was outside her experience.

Ahadiel had told the truth.

No more jobs. No more exclusion.

What did she have? Maybe twenty years saved up? Maybe thirty? Money wasn’t a problem, but if she turned from hunter to prey . . . There wasn’t a safe hole on, off, or under the Earth. She might hide for a year, perhaps two, if the Throne didn’t consider her a high enough priority.

If her name didn’t appear at the top of the List.

But only a few days measured by a life as long as hers. A death sentence and a last meal.

Another gun, or a pair, or perhaps she would rate an entire team, would appear and she would be finished. Oh, she would fight, to be certain, but as the mark, all the Throne truly needed was to point. Maybe not for the first assassin, or even the third, but the Throne would have her.

The Throne had always had her.

“I would not Del,” Ahadiel replied. “I like you, though you lack respect and should know better. This comes directly from the Throne. You are probably the best at this work,

which is why you have enjoyed exclusion. The Throne knows that you can be replaced, even if it is inconvenient to do so.”

“Replaced?” Del asked. “Replaced by who?”

Ahadiel didn't respond. He looked down at his hands folded in his lap, then up at her eyes. He turned to open the door to the Jeep and gave her the perfect shot at his back if she wanted it. She focused on the spot where his neck met his shoulders, where nine rounds would tear his head free, and her finger tightened on the trigger. Ahadiel pulled the door handle and cracked the door and paused.

*Shoot him, spike him and finish him*, her mind screamed. *You've done it before!*

It would be so easy.

What worked for a rogue, worked for the Loyal. Destroy the *chakram* beneath the eyes and he would be banished from the Earth for a generation.

Ahadiel opened the door and a brief cold wind blew at the leather tie of the bi-fold on the dash. The motion was caught in her periphery, and her stare flicked to it for the barest of moments. When she looked back, the Jeep's door slammed shut.

Without even a flutter of his long-coat, Ahadiel was gone.

## Chapter Two Struggle for Existence

*We saw the Nephilim there.  
We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we  
looked the same to them.*

Numbers 13:33

June 14, 223 BCE

“Twenty-nine shekels?” Aeolus made a furious face but he wasn’t truly angry with Dami. He needed to yell and rail against his friend from time to time, and this was the perfect moment.

He had, after all, handed his captain the money.

“Twenty-*nine*,” Aeolus continued. “Great Mars’ nipple, *twenty-nine* shekels. There aren’t two of her under that robe, are there?”

The girl stood at the bottom of the gang plank, now covered in a rough, but serviceable, brown robe. Her chains were still attached, so the robe was more or less wrapped around her. She clinked with every move.

“Bring her aboard,” Dami cried to the big Nubian. He looked up to where Dami and Aeolus stood, then down at the moving water under the dock. *Wavedancer* bobbed ever so slightly up and down to the rhythms of the ocean.

“No,” the Nubian responded. “No ship.”

Dami looked to Aeolus and shrugged.

“Are all Nubian’s afraid of a little water?” Dami asked.

“Clearly he’s heard of you,” Aeolus scowled.

Dami moved easily toward the gangplank, his body swayed with the slight motions of the ship. It was an easy

task after so many years spent on the sea, but to the rare traveler, it often proved difficult, if not impossible, to master. Dami smiled as he made his way down, careful to keep the railing in easy reach should he need it. A little lost pride was nothing compared to a short fall into vastly cold waters.

"I'll take her," Dami told the Nubian, and he visibly relaxed. Dami held out a fist of small coins, not even a quarter shekel. The Nubian gave Dami a small bow and made the coins disappear.

"You listen, Sahib," the Nubian said. "You listen to Rajeef. This one," he indicated the girl, "she no woman. She has parts, but she no woman. *Maskin xul.*"

Dami nodded.

"My thanks for your concern," Dami replied.

"*Maskin xul,*" the Nubian warned again. "You heed and you live, Sahib."

The Nubian made another small bow, turned and was lost in the crowds on the docks.

Dami turned to the girl and again, his breath was taken away for a moment. Even clothed in the rough robe, she was still a sight. The gaze of her pale eyes locked onto his with an intensity that almost made him reach for his short sword. Then he chided himself for a fool.

*She's a woman, Dami thought. Not a big one at that, and she's in chains. What could she possibly do?*

"Do you have a name?" Dami asked.

"Do you?" the girl replied, her tongue all acid.

"Aeschylus called you Water Lily, but I doubt that's your real name," Dami said.

"And I doubt Whoreson is yours, but that's what everyone seems to call you."

Anger flashed in Dami briefly, but he was too used to the jibes of Aeolus and the other sailors to take it to heart. Instead, he looked calmly at her and met her cool gaze with

his own. It was an old trick, one he'd learned years ago when training dogs. If a man could stare down a dog, when the dog turned their gaze away first, the man would establish dominance. The dog would associate the man's scent from then on with that of the dominant.

This slave girl was no dog, but she was still a slave, bought and paid for. He wouldn't vie for dominance with her at every turn.

The silence deepened, and Dami shifted lightly from one foot to the other. The girl continued to meet his stare almost without a blink. She stood as if rooted to the spot, and her gaze never wavered. The sun had almost finished its decent, and it cast an eerie red light on the both of them.

"Oh, bring her aboard, for the love of the gods," Aeolus interrupted, and both Dami and the girl turned to the booming voice of the sailor.

\* \* \* \*

"Put this on," Dami said, and laid out a clean tunic and leggings. The girl raised her hands to him, and the chains clinked as she looked from the shackles to Dami and back again.

"No, no," Dami said. "You tell me your name, and I'll consider removing some of your irons."

"Why don't you beat me and get it over with," the girl responded. "Or do you lack the stones to hit a woman?"

"No," Dami replied with a smile. "I have the stones."

"You'd hit a woman?"

"If a woman hits me, I *will* hit her back," Dami replied. "If a woman pulls a knife, I *will* stab her, and if she pulls a sword, I'll gut her like a fish."

"Whoreson."

“More true than you know,” Dami replied. “Now, put this on so you don’t freeze to death. The nights on a boat can be mighty cold, especially if you’re not used to it. The water steals the heat from the air, and Neptune’s chilly breath can give you a night cough.”

Dami looked around the small storage room that stood off from his own cabin. He’d cleared the old flotsam out, and a pallet stuffed with fresh hay laid down. Two smallish portholes would let in enough light to see during the day, but right now provided none whatsoever. Dami opened a ring that was stapled into the wall and secured the lantern he held there.

He checked it twice to be certain.

Fire aboard ship was practically a death sentence to most crews. Dami had seen it in the past. An oil lantern left unattended in the wind, a candle that wasn’t properly secured to its staple, or a dozen other foolish, absent-minded mistakes that set flame to dry timbers and oiled sailcloth and left a ruined hulk surrounded by drowned corpses.

If only there was a way to get light without the heat; a safe way to make the darkness bright and not risk fire. Some magic that would keep the ship safe and secure.

Dami sighed, checked the ring and staple one more time, and turned back to the girl.

“Put that on, and make certain the lantern is out before you leave,” Dami said sternly. “No one will be able to get to you here if a fire starts. You’ll either burn, or drown, and one is as bad as the other.”

He didn’t wait for her reply. He turned on his heel and left the small storage room.

“Zeus’ left ball,” he cursed under his breath.

“Married this morning and already wish you were dead,” Aeolus chuckled. “Serves you well and right.”



From a cabinet, Dami pulled two wooden cups and a clay jug wrapped in hemp line. He poured a draught into each and passed the second cup to Aeolus.

"She could drive a man to drink," Dami said and downed his cup.

"Aye," Aeolus said. "But so long as you're buying the wine, who cares?" He sipped at his own cup, then looked up at Dami with appreciation. "This is Athenian."

"The last of it too," Dami replied. He filled his cup again, and this time slowly sipped the contents.

"This almost makes up for the money I lost to you."

"You haven't lost it. I always pay my debts."

"An unprofitable philosophy," Aeolus noted.

"That's why I keep you around," Dami replied and his grin returned. "Otherwise I'd owe the usurers in every port."

"Aye, aye you would, and don't think I won't keep reminding you."

"Here, have some more to drink," Dami said with a nod of self-assurance. "You'll forget."

There was a loud pounding at the door to the small cabin, and the two men looked toward the sound.

"Paetur?"

"Aye, Captain," the man replied on the other side of the door.

"Come in, lad, come in," Dami said.

A tall, thin, wiry man with a touch of grey in his beard swaggered into the room. His eyes were oddly different colors. One was pale blue and the other deep brown. Some men thought it an ill-omen and refused to sail with him. But he had a mind for numbers and an uncanny ability to recall, down to the yard, the measure or the dram, exactly what was in their holds. He held a thin clay tablet in a wooden frame, with Phoenician chicken scratch that only he, Dami and Aeolus could read. It was the cargo list for what they'd

shipped and taken aboard. He passed the still wet clay to Aeolus.

“Kiskus has taken his cargo, and we’ve started to load the stocks from Abadnai,” Paetur said. “The water skins are full, and we have provisions for three to four weeks, depending.”

“Excellent,” Aeolus said, and held his hand out for the clay tablet.

“Paetur,” Dami asked. “You didn’t stock those nasty dried apricots again, did you?”

Paetur looked to Aeolus, then back to his captain before he shrugged and nodded.

“Scurvy, Captain,” Paetur said by way of explanation. “Unlike other crews, we’ve only had two or three cases, and those have been from men who didn’t eat the apricots.”

“You sound like a Socratic,” Dami chided softly. “Scurvy is a plague of the gods, sent to those who don’t perform the proper sacrifices. Besides, you know what happened to Socrates.”

“He rose in fame and renown, and is recognized as the first, best source of insight into questions of truth?” Paetur chided.

“Talked himself to death,” Dami replied with a laugh.

“Llyrd?” Aeolus asked as he scanned over the tablet in his hand. “Where did we find two-hundred gallons of llyrd?”

“There were Tartars looking for horseflesh,” Paetur replied. “I traded them copper and some silver. About half what we can sell the llyrd for without much effort.”

“Romans will pay plenty,” Aeolus said without looking up. “We can get three or four times the profit there.”

“*Wavedancer* doesn’t port at the peninsula,” Dami said.

“Why, Dami?” Aeolus asked. Dami looked from Paetur to Aeolus.

“You know why,” he replied.

“Pirates? Again with the god-cursed pirates?” Aeolus said. His fist thumped heavily against the table for emphasis. “The Roman fleet has them at bay.”

“Yes, yes,” Dami replied. “At bay around the peninsula, but in open water *Wavedancer* doesn’t have the draft or the sail. Those Cilician pirates aren’t known for letting crews go. They take the stores, burn the ship and sell the crew for slaves. Not a pleasant way to retire.”

“Risk, Dami,” Aeolus said, his voice incredulous. “Risk much to gain much. That llyrd will pay for the trip twice over, our crew can winter *Wavedancer* somewhere nice, Carthage, for instance. Or perhaps even Rhodes. We’d be able to take on spices and silks from there, and we’d be rolling in the silver this time next year.”

“No, Aeolus,” Dami replied. “I’ll not put *Wavedancer* and the crew at risk for profits. I leave that to devils-may-care like Barthus. You want to tempt Hades and Poseidon in the same toss, feel free. *Wavedancer* sails to friendly ports whose navy protects the trade lanes. If Rome isn’t careful, they’ll end up dried up and deserted. I hear their grain barges from Egypt were all taken last season.”

“Damn, back to Greece again?” Aeolus said.

“There’s nothing wrong with the Greek isles. We have good contacts, in safe ports and . . .”

“And we only get cheated a little?” Aeolus interrupted.

Dami turned to Paetur and gestured with the inventory tablet. “Say something, will you? Or hit him. Before I do!”

“The captain is right,” Paetur said to Aeolus without a look at Dami. “The risks do increase with the profits. Probably ten-fold. Perhaps I was wrong to take on the llyrd and mount the three new Iberian oxybeles fore and aft. I’d heard that llyrd was selling for hard gold, sistersii and not talents, and the Cilicians weren’t good with flames in their sails.”

*Iberian oxybeles? Those are damn big crossbows. Dami's thoughts danced. Flames in their sails? We'd talked about them, and how to run the pirates that surround Rome, but I didn't give the order for new . . .*

He let the thought die as he looked from Paetur to Aeolus. The only other crew aboard *Wavedancer* who could order such a purchase was Aeolus. The whole plot was laid out before him. Paetur found the Tartars, who only barely knew what their stock was worth, and didn't care so much as long as they could get horses. Aeolus knew where the best deals were to be found in any of the major or minor trade-ports, and they both would have known that Dami didn't want to run the pirates.

It was a clever ploy, and one in which he'd been outmaneuvered. Both his senior crewmen had as much pointed the rudder toward the peninsula, and tied it in place. Damn the rocks, shoals, shallow ground, gods, and all the pirates in the world.

"This is mutiny," Dami said, forcing his face into a frown. "You know that, right?"

"Mutiny is such a harsh word," Aeolus replied. "Think of it as a return on your investments."

"Investments? I have no investments," Dami responded.

"Yes, exactly," Paetur joined in. "So twice nothing is still nothing, and if we don't break through the pirates, that's what you'll have."

"Why is this sounding worse and worse all the time?"

"Because given the chance, you'd pay twice as much for half the quality."

Dami put his hands on his head, then threw them open in mock pleading.

"Oh, ye gods, why have you abandoned me?" he asked. "Why do you cast me to the feet of brigands who steal my money, pirate my ship, and sell me to the slave traders?"

Aeolus cupped his hands, creating an echo in his voice, and said, "Because you are the greatest fool that the gods love."

"And a whoreson to boot," Paetur added.

Dami lowered his hands and looked at his two friends.

"We have pitch?" he asked. "We have blunt and barbed broad heads for the bows? I won't even ask if the keel was sounded as I asked."

"All is ready," Aeolus replied. "I sounded the keel myself, and the rudder has new rigging. We'll have to make do with the old cloth for the sails, but it's only been up for two or three seasons. It will hold a while yet."

"Fine, fine," Dami said. "You know I don't love you anymore."

"You don't love me any less, either," Aeolus replied with his bark of a laugh.

November 3, Present Day

Del awoke to a shaft of harsh sunlight that knifed from the ceiling directly into her eyes. It shattered what would have been a perfectly dark room, made “bright” and “cheerful” and “open” by the sunroof. As she peered blearily away from the terrible brightness, a brief moment of disorientation was replaced by the realization that she lay where she’d fallen on the floor last night. She tried to roll over and the dull aches throughout her body flashed into angry pain as every muscle screamed its abuse.

Something thumped and splashed liquid onto the rug. Her hand sought and found the now half empty bottle of Spanish absinthe.

“Burn,” she swore, but her heart wasn’t in it.

Where she didn’t ache, her body tingled or throbbed from lack of blood flow. Numb and abused, every sinew was strained and pulled taut.

She made it to her knees before she saw the man.

Though her mind was still fogged with sleep, her body was trained, and before she was fully aware, the two SIG .45s were in her hands and aimed at him. He sat very still on her couch, not more than five feet from where she now knelt on the over-large Persian rug stained with expensive and illegal alcohol. The smell was nauseating as she moved from passed-out flat to hyper aware shooter’s kneel.

She kept both guns trained on the man, but such a position was mostly for effect. A double-hand hold, straight-thumbs on one gun would give her the proper support she needed to aim and shoot quickly and consistently. A gun in each hand gave support to neither and made it impossible to sight. But it looked damned impressive.

“What does the other guy look like?” the man said calmly, his voice deep and husky.

He remained very still.

When Del didn't respond, his mouth pulled back to reveal a perfect smile and what must have been capped teeth. No mortal had such white teeth naturally. The smile that played on his face was only slightly marred by a momentary lapse of nervousness when his eyes focused for a blink on the two SIGs.

He hadn't expected her to move so fast.

That was good.

His extreme confidence already annoyed her.

He seemed of average height, a little shorter than her, but it was hard to tell with him sitting. He weighed perhaps one-eighty or one-ninety. He looked Persian, though whether Turkish or some variant, she couldn't tell. He had black hair, close cropped, yet stylish. In each ear, he sported a golden hoop. An additional diamond stud was thrust through the top of his right ear, and glittered from the inside of the lobe. He wore blue jeans with a tight, dark shirt tucked in that showed he probably could bench press Del for warm-ups. An unbuttoned suit jacket covered him in a manner that suggested he knew his tailor's entire family on a first name basis. The shoes were a medium tan and looked comfortably expensive. She couldn't tell if he had a watch on or not, but there was the bulge of some concealed weapon under his left arm and a slight but telltale bulge of a second concealed weapon on the inside of his left ankle.

Neither weapon was easy to make out, which meant that his tailor was very, very good at his work.

It also meant that the man was very, very financially set. Well cut clothes that could also hide firearms were never cheap.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I heard you were good, but that seems an exaggeration."

He began to move forward on the couch and Del tensed.

“Don’t,” she said, her fingers already tight on the triggers. The man instantly froze.

“I’ve been sitting here for the past half-hour . . .”

“Don’t say, ‘If I wanted you dead, you would be.’ It’ll annoy me,” Del interrupted. “It’s your mistake to leave me alive. Annoying further isn’t in your best interest at this point.”

The man looked taken aback, and the nervousness returned underneath his perfect smile.

“I asked, who are you?” Del said. Several locks of her hair fell around her face, but with the two guns in her fists she couldn’t move them back into place.

“And I was going to explain,” he said, “that if you’d bothered to read your brief, which you dropped on the floor, you would know.” The smile was still perfect, but the eyes were no longer as warm.

Del didn’t care. He could sit on her couch and look daggers at her until the Rapture; it wouldn’t change the fact that she held the guns.

“Can I move now?” the man asked.

Del nodded. “Slowly,” she ordered. “I don’t take kindly to strangers who break and enter without an invitation.”

He arched an eyebrow. “And what about those *with* an invitation.”

The warmth returned to his eyes, and his gaze ran up and down her body. She wasn’t uncomfortable with his looks, and his obvious intentions, but she was annoyed. He was being coy and didn’t respect her . . . though, given her state, she could hardly blame him.

Or perhaps she looked better than she felt. She smiled back, and had the sudden urge to find a mirror and some cosmetics fast. It was a compulsion that she would rather have done without. A compulsion born of her breeding, and so, out of her control.



*Damn you, Father,* she thought.

The Throne had beat her to that.

“If I shoot you in your right arm, can you still use the left to draw?” she asked. The smile never slipped from her face.

His smile became forced, and he stopped moving. His gaze found hers and locked, now hard and unyielding. At the least, the man could distinguish a legitimate threat when he heard one.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m equally proficient with either hand.”

“Good,” Del said and nodded. “Now understand. This entire loft is soundproofed. If a Howitzer went off up here, no one would hear it. If you don’t start giving me some answers soon, I’m going to put a rather large bullet through your right shoulder.”

“Hollow-point?” he asked.

She looked over his clothes again to be sure, but couldn’t detect the trace outline of body armor. Even the extra-thin stuff they had started marketing to bodyguards and high powered executives should have been apparent to her trained eyes.

Though at this range, it would’t matter.

Either the man was certifiably insane, or he was entirely too confident.

“Burn. Are you serious?” Del replied. “Are you actually thinking of getting into a pissing match while I have *two* guns on you?”

“You drew first,” he said simply. “I haven’t made any aggressive movements . . . yet.”

The threat in his voice was plain, and she almost shot him right then.

*He* had broken into *her* apartment. She *was* justified in killing him. The police weren’t going to care how well-dressed a corpse he was with all the concealed weapons.

Breaking and entering, a tear or two, perhaps a few hours of telling the same story to fifteen different officers and then the coroner would pack him up, and she'd toast him over dinner.

"Black Talon," Del answered at last. The lie was easy enough, and nearly true. She *owned* Black Talon and had used it in the past. It was illegal in most states, and almost as illegal as the depleted uranium loads she also kept.

It was certainly illegal in Michigan.

It just wasn't in either SIG.

"The hell you say," he replied, and the shock was obvious.

"At this range, I figure you'd never use your arm again."

"Not if I'm fast enough," he replied.

"You aren't."

Del almost thought the man would rush her. She centered her vision on the man's chest and sighted the guns to the target. Three shots there would stop anyone, and she had twenty-two leveled at him. At this range, unless he was better than he looked, she couldn't miss.

Del was one of the best, and she wouldn't risk running into that many bullets.

He couldn't be that much better than her . . . could he?

Ahadiel said she could be replaced. Was this the man Ahadiel meant? Was he that good? So much so that the Throne would consider Del expendable?

*What in hell is your game?* she thought.

The muscles between her shoulders tensed, and her knee grew numb by the moment. If he didn't decide soon, she'd have to decide for both of them.

Her way was going to be much bloodier.

Her finger began to squeeze on the trigger.

"Since this is such a nice couch," the man said, "I would hate to get blood on it. Yours or mine."

He smiled in a way that Del didn't like at all, but he sat back, spread his arms on the back of the couch and remained that way, unmoving.

"Don't make me ask a third time who you are," Del said softly, letting a practiced amount of menace into her voice. It was generally enough to frighten any mortal on the wrong end of her guns into submission.

Not all, but most, which was good enough for her.

"I have to move in order to answer your question. Is that all right?"

Her finger squeezed a little tighter on the two-pound trigger even as her legs started to protest their position, sending shots of pain through her knees and thighs. Was he good enough to take her?

*Burn it*, Del thought.

She adjusted her aim, and something in her look must have told him what she intended. His body tensed even as she squeezed the trigger fully. The report from the SIG was enough to deafen anyone in the room and left a slight ringing in her ears. Smoke from the powder drifted lazily upward in a stream of sunlight from a well-aimed hole, blackened slightly around the edges.

The man looked from the hole in the couch to Del, his gaze filled with anger and enough fear to please Del no end.

The hole was only an inch from where his left bicep rested on the back cushions.

"Jesus Christ on a *burning* pogo-stick," the man yelled. "What *the rutting hell* is wrong with your head?"

"I really liked that couch too," Del said conversationally. "I had it custom made."

Del jerked with more motion than required to emphasize that her guns were trained back on the man, and was even more pleased to see him stiffen, adrenaline likely pumped in

his veins with no release. Either he hadn't believed she would actually shoot, or he wasn't that much better than her.

She wasn't about to take a chance on which.

"Go ahead and move," Del said at last. "But your story better be damn, damn good, or I'll be paying the fine William & Sonoma folk plenty to build a replacement. Blood stains leather."

His gaze met hers and searched for a moment, but Del held herself firm. She ignored the shooting pains and alternate numbness in her legs, and waited for him to make up his mind.

Either way, things would play out as she wanted.

Whoever held the guns generally made the rules.

The man moved his right hand off the back of the couch and into the breast pocket of his suit jacket, slowly and carefully he pulled out a familiar looking leather bi-fold. The silver clasp and leather tie down looked untouched, but with such items there was no way to be certain. Normally, Del wouldn't have been concerned, but if this man was not a man . . . if he was Nephilim . . .

Del returned the SIG in her right hand to its holster under her left arm, all the while careful not to look away from the man.

"Drop it to the floor and kick it across the room," she said.

This time there was no argument.

He nodded and dropped the bi-fold. With the toe of his expensive shoe, he shoved it. It moved easily across the Persian rug but jerked to a halt when it hit the hardwood floor.

Now, Del stood. She rose as smooth and graceful as she felt, which wasn't very much. Her eyes stayed focused on the man, gun still trained on his shoulder. She took the two steps to the bi-fold, stooped and found it with her right hand

without her focus leaving the target. She moved to one of the overstuffed high backed chairs that matched the couch and sat down. Her gun hand rested on one of the arms of the chair, with the barrel still pointed at the man.

While both of her hands were trained almost equally in the use of weapons, in all other things, her left hand was dominant. She could juggle razors in either hand, but ask her to write "Del was here" with her right hand and it would come out as chicken scratch.

Awkwardly, she loosened the tie and flipped the bi-fold open.

A number of documents attached to black and white photos sat inside. She pushed these aside until she found the one that looked like the man sitting in front of her. The document was written out by hand, in a firm, easily read script that wasn't in any "known" language. Easily read for her.

There were men and women who would give their left arm to see the words, let alone know what they said. But this was not a language that could be learned.

Either you were born with the ability, or you weren't.

Del was.

It was part of why these bi-folds hadn't gone out of use when human knowledge started to catch up with the history of the Throne. Codes, ciphers and languages could all be broken. But a language that required a genetic predisposition to see, let alone read, was the perfect codex for passing information.

Another *gift* from her father.

*Bastard*, Del thought. But that wasn't true.

Her father had known who created him.

She rifled through the hand-written report, a basic dossier from the Throne. His official name was Jaccob Smalls, though, like Del, he had many legal aliases and many

AKAs, enough that she skipped down the file until she found his parentage.

“Lugh?” she said as she caught site of the name, and peered at the man in front of her, no longer certain about him. “As in the High King of . . .”

“Yes,” Jaccob interrupted. “It’s nice to see you’re well read. But, as you’re probably aware, it’s far more complicated. I’d rather not talk about him, if you don’t mind.”

She nodded, and almost smiled smugly before she caught herself.

“Can you put the guns away now?” he asked.

For the third time, Del almost shot him. Some of it was out of spite. Some of it was a mean streak made a mile wide by her having to deal with Ahadiel, and now Jaccob. But some of it was because she had pulled her guns on two people in the last twelve hours and hadn’t shot either of them. Del was a big believer in not drawing a weapon unless she was going to use it. Thanks to her father, she was very capable of using almost any weapon in Creation, and probably anything removed from Creation as well.

But mostly, Jaccob was too damn sure of himself, and Del really wanted to wipe that arrogant smile off his handsome face.

“How did you get in here?” she asked instead.

“The door was open,” he said with a shrug. “You were passed out on the floor. I must admit, it wasn’t the best impression to give a new partner.”

“We’re *not* partners,” Del retorted, acid dripping from her voice. “I have a partner already. I’m *forced* to work with you, but let’s understand something. I already don’t like you and this isn’t *Lethal Weapon*. We aren’t going to become best friends. I’m never going to come over for a barbecue, and I don’t want to look at pictures of your kids. We have a

job to do. After that, you can go back to your tailor and buy a new suit and matching shoes. Okay?"

"If I say yes, will you put away the gun?"

"Make me happy, and I won't shoot you."

"Do you want me on my knees as well? Should I wear a collar?"

Del sighed heavily.

"Don't take offense, Smalls. Just get out. No, don't say anything. Get your expensive ass off my couch and get the hell out of my apartment."

Jacob looked at her a moment, and Del saw the steel enter his eyes. She 'd pushed him too far, and she knew it.

It was another gift of hers, one she acquired all on her own.

"*Lethal Weapon*, fine. I'm not your friend, and I don't want to be," Jacob replied. "I'm your contact, your guide, and your resource for Salt Lake City. You don't like me? That suits me. I don't *burning* like you either. But this disrespect and bitter anger routine is played out. You want to *rutting* hate yourself, your parents and everyone around you? Knock yourself out. But *burning* don't point a gun at me and expect me to like it."

He rose smoothly from the couch, ignored Del and her guns at his back, and strode to the door. Del followed him, at a discreet distance, the SIG still trained on his back, but no longer ready to shoot him. He paused at the door but didn't turn around.

"We have a busy day," he said. "I'll be back in three hours. Make sure the other one is with you when I get here." He sniffed in her direction, "And take a shower."

He started to walk through the door.

"This time, knock," Del said to his retreating form, "and if the door doesn't open, *don't* come in." She grabbed the metal door and slammed it hard behind him. Wood in a

wood frame would have shattered. But Del was also a big believer in reinforced metal doors in a metal frames attached to reinforced metal studs, inside her reinforced, sound-proofed walls.

Was it too much?

Some things she'd learned from experience.

She turned the three deadbolt locks in succession from the top corner of the door to the middle, the bottom corners, and finally the three along the hinge-side of the door. It was overcautious, since anyone who could get through the first three deadbolts probably wouldn't have much trouble with the hinge-side. But it effectively made a solid barrier against most determined intruders and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Being an assassin for the Throne didn't really leave her a lot of time to discuss the 144,000 mortals already eager to get back there first.

Nothing said "no, thank you" like the turn-click of six deadbolts.

Once the door was secured, Del holstered her SIG and slid down the door until she sat on the floor. She leaned the back of her head against the cool metal of the door and closed her eyes. She must have been more tired than she'd thought to not at least close the door, let alone lock it.

*Was he lying? Is he the replacement?* The concern was real, but the questions had no answers.

Now that the perceived crisis was over, she could once again feel every bruise and scrape that ran over her body from the previous night. She was fortunate that she wasn't mortal, or she may have suffered a concussion and worse. Going toe-to-toe with a rogue was a lot like trying to arm-wrestle a steamroller.

They don't know the rules and they don't stop.

Attacks that would leave a mortal in a pool of their own blood barely phased a rogue divinity.



The Throne turned out high-quality products, even if they did rebel.

Her body healed faster than a mortal's; it was capable of taking more punishment, and could stand up to greater amounts of exposure to heat, cold and pain. All *gifts* from her father. But she felt very mortal right now. Even the few hours of sleep she had caught, after she passed out on the floor, hadn't helped much.

And now Jaccob.

*What will Marrin think of our new guide?* she wondered.

The word sent a chill through her. It spoke of trust and reliance that she'd long ago given up as detrimental to her continued existence. Ahadiel knew this, and so the Throne knew it as well.

But the Throne didn't care what Del liked or didn't like.

The Throne's interdiction made abundantly clear, likes or dislikes, failure or success, *she existed* so long as she was useful.

She opened her eyes and looked down at the leather bi-fold still in her hand. She viewed the photos and the handwritten reports like a 1940s spy thriller. She took a deep breath, let out an audible sigh, and started to look at the documents more closely. In her mind she figured she had about an hour to familiarize herself with the assignment, perhaps she would need another hour to shower, dress, and clean her weapons.

*Weapons first*, she thought. *Weapons and a drink.*

She pushed herself to her feet and walked around the couch, paused and put a hand on the new black-rimmed hole through the brushed burgundy leather. Her finger couldn't push into the entrance hole, and apparently the bullet had hit something solid inside the couch's interior, as there was no exit hole.

“That was not bright, Del,” she told herself. “Not bright at all.”

Leaving the couch, she moved through what served as the dining room and casually dropped the bi-fold on the table, before she entered the kitchen proper.

The apartment was really an overlarge, clichéd loft on the top floor of what should have been a condemned building. She’d bought the entire top south side of the complex, and removed all the walls except for the areas designated as the bathroom, the two bedrooms and her weapons closet. It was far more room than she needed, but it ensured that she had the space for her personal training needs, gear, and a small army if necessary.

It also reduced the number of hiding places for an intruder to use.

As Del entered the kitchen area, she grabbed a tumbler from the rack and another triangular bottle of sickly green fluid from the adjoining cabinet. She poured a half measure of the green liquid into the glass and began to swirl it around inside, pausing now and again to hold the glass to her nose and inhale.

When did she acquire the habit of drinking absinthe? Part of a fad sometime in the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> century? No, Del’d drank it long before then. She’d been in good company at one time with her consumption. Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, and Pablo Picasso had all partaken of the Green Goddess. But the good came with the bad, and that stupid drunk Jean Lanfray stabbed absinthe in the back on his way into the crime books.

Absinthe, like Black Talon ammunition, was now mostly illegal.

Illegal because of fools and those who listened to them.

She was surprised the mortals hadn't banned Twinkies after a similar line of defense pointed to them as the cause for a death. As if mortal lives were worth so much.

Slowly, she spun the liquid around the glass. It clung and receded from the rim like fingers drawing down the surface. She shipped it from Spain a crate at a time. Sometimes U.S. Customs stopped the shipment and sometimes they didn't. She wasn't certain it was worth a hundred dollars a bottle, and not for the first time wondered about her strange obsession with the only liqueur to ever be uniformly banned by almost every world nation.

Perhaps it appealed *because* it was banned, or perhaps *because* of the bad reputation.

She drank a half bottle every night, and three or four when the mood took her.

The mood took her more and more often.

Slowly, she tilted the glass, and let the sweet liquid slide over her tongue as it started a long, warm journey down her throat. The alcohol hit her first. Then the more potent ingredients started to make her fingers and toes tingle. After a moment, the sensation passed. Her body worked too fast for most mind altering substances to have a lasting effect. The downside was that it took a particularly potent alcohol or drug to drown her sorrows.

Potent enough that her system suffered even worse.

But working for the Throne ensured that, even at a hundred dollars a bottle, she could keep herself in absinthe for life.

Del opened a second cabinet and pulled out a rectangular hardwood box. She moved back to the dining area and set the box and the absinthe down on the table. She'd never been one to use the dining table for anything but work, but it seemed inappropriate to not have one.

Norman Rockwell swore by them, and that was good enough for Del.

Opening the box, she pulled out an oil-stained, though waterproofed, cloth that covered a good section of the table. She put one of her three SIG .45s on the cloth. The other two she would rather have loaded, dirty and not need them, than broken down, cleaned and useless.

She took a seat and began to break down the first SIG in preparation for cleaning.

As her hands moved in accustomed patterns, she sipped slowly at her drink and wondered about Jaccob. In her mind, he looked capable. From what little she read in his dossier, he was reasonably competent. But he had always been in the employ of the Throne, and that kept him exempt from the list.

Del always fought against complete obedience to the Throne.

Not the wisest choice, but it was *her* choice, and that made the difference.

Marrin would like him, she was sure.

He liked everyone, and vice-versa. At times, it drove her mad. They could hardly go to the store, or any other public place, and not be greeted warmly by someone Del had never seen before and likely wouldn't see again. How he found the time and the energy to maintain such vast and varied relationships was beyond her. The number of people she considered warm acquaintances could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and still have room to spare.

Her friends would take half as many digits.

She finished the first SIG, slid the magazine home and pulled the slide back to chamber the first round. She thumbed the safety on and replaced the SIG in its shoulder holster under her left arm. Confidently, she picked up the next SIG, dropped the magazine onto the table. She cleared

the chamber, caught the round in the air and replaced it in the magazine.

In comparison with mortals, who bred and birthed like rabbits, there were only a few like her, half-breeds born of disobedience and lust. At their peak, the Nephilim might have numbered in the thousands.

But only at their peak.

Now, the few who remained were forbidden to reproduce.

Forbidden to seek fame or glory.

Forbidden to stand out in any capacity that the Throne didn't order.

They grew sparser with the passage of each century.

She finished the second SIG and slid it back home under her right arm, feeling better with the comforting weight of the two guns balanced in their familiar places. She picked up the third SIG, the one with the scratch that marred its matte black barrel. She ran her finger over the scar where the titanium barrel was exposed. For a brief moment, she thought about repairing the damage, but it would take a good 24 hours to set permanently, and she didn't want to be one gun down.

"Not if we're traveling to Utah," she said to herself in confirmation.

"We're going to Utah?" Marrin said.

Del shook herself but didn't move. That, in itself, struck her almost to the core. She would pull a gun on almost anyone else, no matter how well she knew them, but she didn't even jerk at Marrin's silent entry. Her lack of action scared her.

No, scared wasn't a strong enough word.

It frightened her just short of terror.

"Stop coming through the back door," Del responded.

"The front door was locked, and I thought you might be sleeping after last night."

“I wish,” Del replied. “But what good is a *secret* back door if you’re always using it?”

Marrin was at least seven feet tall, with long dirty-blond hair that ran almost to his waist, but was pulled tight against his head and gathered at the nape of his neck in, of all things, a multi-colored scrunchy. He wore a green hooded pullover and loose khaki pants tucked into the tops of black combat boots. Over everything, he wore a London Fog long coat that was specially made for his height. The coat stopped at his ankles. In one hand he carried a plastic grocery bag; the other held a gallon of milk.

“You really bought milk?” Del asked.

Marrin looked from her to the milk container and back again.

“Have I missed something?”

“Ahadiel asked where you were, I told him you were out buying milk. I didn’t know I was right.”

“Ahadiel came here?”

“No, he manifested in my Jeep.”

“Should I ask?”

“No,” she said with a sigh as she finished cleaning the last SIG. The debris from the chemical discharges and the dust acquired from her last battle were gone. She moved an oiled brush one last time over the moving parts, slipped a magazine into the stock, and snapped the chamber closed and slid the weapon into the holster at the small of her back.

“That bad, huh?” Marrin asked.

He moved into the kitchen and started to put away the groceries. When he returned, he held a tumbler filled to the brim with absinthe. He set it down hard on the table, the alcohol sloshed over the edge and spilled onto the table top.

“Burning hell, Marrin?” Del said, as she tried to push back the chair. Marrin grabbed the back of the chair and shoved her into the table. The combination momentarily

pinned her. The spilled absinthe ran toward her, and started to drip.

“Aren’t you *thirsty*?” Marrin asked. “Had a long night? Or a long morning? How about you just woke up? What’s the excuse for a 9 a.m. happy hour?”

“Marrin, I’m not in the mood.”

“Good, there’s *another* reason to drink this poison,” he said, the sarcasm plain in his voice.

“Marrin . . .”

“Well, drink up, Del,” he said and held the back of the chair with one hand and picked up the tumbler. He shoved it into her face, and spilled more down her front, pressing the crystal tumbler painfully to her lips.

“Damnit, Marrin,” she said as she pushed his arm away, meeting resistance.

“No, damn you, Del,” Marrin yelled. “We’ve talked about this, we agreed . . .”

“*You* talked about this,” Del yelled back. “*You agreed*. I nodded and smiled. It was the easiest way to get you off my back. I stopped the needles, so this is all I have left.”

Marrin growled, a low, deep sound that emanated from his core. He thrust the tumbler in his hand back toward her face.

*That’s enough*, she thought. She grabbed the table in both hands and shoved, sending it skittering across the floor, leaving trails in the hardwood. It stopped several feet from the nearest wall, giving her plenty of room to stand. She rose, grabbed Marrin’s wrist, twisted and the crystal tumbler shattered with a splash on the hardwood floor. Marrin twisted back. Marrin’s strength was impressive, easily a match for her own. He slipped his wrist free of her grip, reversed his hand to grab her wrist, then stepped slightly behind Del and pushed her arm up behind her back. He shoved her forward roughly, and she was forced to take

several steps until her thighs smashed against the side of the table. She found herself bent over the table, with Marrin's full weight behind her, the front of his thighs pressed against the back of hers.

"Fine," Marrin said, and pushed her arm a little further. "I agreed. So here's how it's going to go . . ."

Del hooked her leg around Marrin's ankle, pulled with her foot, and twisted her body at the same time. Marrin was unprepared for the movement. He started to spin and fall at the same time. Rather than hold Del's arm and break or dislocate it, he let go. Del counted on this. She smiled as she completed her twist and brought her fist into Marrin's stomach, thrusting him down hard against the floor

The air whooshed from Marrin's lungs, and he grunted.

Del dropped a knee into his stomach for good measure, because she was angry. The second blow landed harder than the first, but there was no air to knock from him. His face crinkled in a grimace of pain. She grabbed Marrin's throat, curling her fingers around his windpipe as she brought her face close to his.

"Do you see what just happened?" Del asked. Marrin's bugged eyes streamed tears as he tried to regain focus and gasp for air. She laid the lightest kiss on his cheek. "You weren't willing to commit. You lost."

Something hard shoved into her left kidney and she grunted. She didn't have to look to know that Marrin had pulled his gun.

She squeezed his throat, and the soft flesh yielded to the pressure.

Marin, in response, managed to cock the hammer with his thumb.

Del didn't know why, but even on an automatic, where it wasn't necessary, that sound was scary. Even to her, having heard it uncountable times in similar situations, still it traced



unwanted lines down her spine. The hairs on her neck rose and her hearing tunnelled, waiting to hear the sound of the hammer fall.

She calculated how hard she would have to squeeze and how hard Marrin would have to squeeze.

She released Marrin's throat and rose smoothly to her feet.

"I teach, you preach," she admonished. "I don't think we're ready to switch."

"Apparently not," Marrin said and coughed.

Del moved to the table and began to pull it back into place.

Marrin stood and rubbed at his throat while he stared at her.

"Speak," Del told him, "I pray you, speak."

"Would you have killed me?"

"Some teacher I would be, eh? And some preacher you would be if I didn't listen, at least in part." She picked up the pieces of broken glass and moved into the kitchen.

"But would you?"

Del looked up and met his ice-blue eyes with her own, almost identical.

"Yes," Del responded, and dropped the glass fragments into the trash.

"But we're friends."

"We know each other," she corrected. "We're friendly."

"I saved your life!"

"Good of you to recall it," Del said back sarcastically. "And I could have taken yours. Even?"

Marrin looked at her as if he searched her face for some sign of jest.

He found none.

"You'd kill me?" Marrin sighed resignedly. "We've fought together. The bond of battle. I've proved my loyalty . . ."

“Loyalty?” Del interrupted. “Loyalty? From a Nephilim? That’s rich. That’s tonic for the soul sold from the back of a traveling wagon! Do you have anything that will cure all my ills and improve my lifespan, while making me rich and happy with lustrous hair?”

“I’m no mountebank,” Marrin said, hurt in his voice.

“No, Maid Marrin, you’re not. But the last circle of Hell is reserved for traitors, since loyalty is so easily broken. Should I give examples? Brutus, Benedict, Judas . . .”

“The Nephilim are not traitors.”

“Traitors. Children of traitors. It’s the same to the Throne.”

“So what’s the recourse? Stand as a single fortress, alone in the night? What is life without love, what is love without trust, and trust without loyalty? Easily broken? Of course it is. Such beauty is always fragile, and can only be protected by constant investment. Investment from both.”

“Pah-shaw,” she said and waved her hand dismissively. “Pretty words. Keep your loyalty. Keep your beauty and keep your investment. I prefer mutual funds.”

Marrin searched her face again, and this time smiled.

“No you don’t,” he said slowly, softly, his voiced tempered and sincere. “Your walls are high and thick, well-guarded. But all mortals, all of the Throne’s creatures seek love, faith and hope. We are made to love, to have faith, and to believe in something bigger than ourselves. The Throne gives us *choice* as well. Choice to break hearts, break faith, and betray hope. You have the need, as the smallest child needs her mother.”

“Do you really think me so naïve, Maid Marrin? We are not creations of the Throne. We are a mistake. We are the biggest ‘oops’ in cosmic history. A joke on your precious loyalty. Our parents ignored their duties, and we are the misbegotten result. The Throne has never embraced us, or

why would the Interdiction and the List be held over our necks like a guillotine's blade?"

"Really?" Marrin argued. "Really? Do you truly believe that the Throne doesn't know every spark before it was clothed with flesh? That the Throne didn't personally place the light within your life?"

"The Throne was otherwise occupied while our parents played at being mortals and foreswore their appointed tasks to screw their brains out. Not that I blame them too much for wanting a little nookie. It's hypocritical of the Throne to give them the equipment but not a license to operate, and then ticket them for every moving violation in the book."

She paused, with a wry smile. "Our . . . *spark* was part of an automated line, some assembly required. The Throne is senile. Only after, when we began to appear as giants among the precious, fragile mortals did the Throne realize the error. We pay for the sins of our parents, or we die in the attempt. The Throne doesn't care which."

Marrin shook his head sadly.

"You're wrong, Del. The Throne loves . . ."

"Shut up," Del yelled. "Shut up or I will shut you up."

Marrin smiled, but he closed his mouth.

"Know this, Marrin-bar-Enkidu. Never forget this. I will kill you. If the time comes for any reason, *any reason at all*, I will pull the trigger and send you back to the Throne. It doesn't matter whether you've played the part of Ephialtes or Leonidas, Brutus or Marc Antony. I will spill your loyal blood and walk away from your corpse. Do you understand?"

Marrin still smiled, his eyes alight.

"I said, *do you understand?*"

"Yes, Del. I understand."

The smile remained, which disconcerted her, but she chose to ignore it.

“Good,” she sighed, and breathed deeply as if she’d been in a fight and finally won where she’d thought to lose. Her hand pressed against the heavy wooden table and supported her weight.

“But you should also understand,” Marrin said, his voice still quiet and warm. “It *does* matter. Reject your true self all you want. You can only be what you are.”

“The unwanted bitch of an outcast bastard?” Del frowned and looked down at the shattered remains of the tumbler. “Good thing I started life with a chance at the White House, eh Maid Marrin?”

Marrin smiled back and moved into the kitchen.

“You know, I hate when you call me Maid Marrin,” he said as he put away more groceries.

“It hadn’t occurred to me,” Del lied.

She sat back down at the table, and picked up Ahadiel’s bi-fold. Slowly, she read each report and reviewed the indicated pictures. Marrin cleaned the floor, brought her food on a plate and a glass of ice cold water. Del was never certain how he was able to get the water so cold without ice-cubes. Marrin hated ice in his drinks. He said he didn’t like to strain liquid refreshment. He also didn’t like straws unless he ate fast food, and then he needed two.

*And they say I’m broken*, Del chuckled at the thought.

After a rough hour, she stood, and drained the last of the water.

“You should read these,” Del indicated the papers and photos scattered across the table top. She walked out of the kitchen and into her bedroom without waiting for Marrin’s response.

A four-poster king-size bed, with a tangle of sheets that hadn’t been properly made in at least a month, dominated the room. Even though Marrin offered to clean the room,

Del had forbidden him entrance. She could hardly keep him out of the rest of the place, but her bedroom was sacrosanct.

It was her only refuge since he'd moved in on orders from Ahadiel.

Del walked to the two huge walk-in closets along the wall. The first closet held rows of clothes, carefully hung on cedar hangers, and neatly arranged. Most of the clothing was dark in coloring, black or variations. She did have an entire section devoted to more "feminine" fashion that she tried to avoid like the Black Plague. It was straight animosity toward the "gifts" bestowed on her father by the Throne. She was driven, compelled to buy these things, and she longed to wear them. It was in her nature, like hair color or breathing, but she fought her own desire. A small victory, every time she put on black BDUs.

She took victories where she could find them.

On the floor, scattered pell-mell, were various discarded pieces that formed a jungle of cloth that might have daunted even Ponce de Leon, though she doubted it. Driven by the tales of *El Dorado* and the Fountain of Youth, more than any other mortal before or after him, he'd bordered on the wrong side of obsessive.

The fool.

The rich, famous, and now dead fool.

*Much good all that fame and fortune did you, Frenchy,* Del thought.

She moved to the second closet and stood for a moment looking over the contents. This was Del's self-dubbed War Room. On the right, she stored various boxes of ammunition, mostly for her favored SIG. The stores included jacketed hollow-points, spider-split, standard solid, and her semi-legal Black Talon and equally illegal armor piercing. There was also a small stack of about a dozen spare magazines. On the left, several rifles of different makes were

housed in individual cases and placed on separate shelves. Rifle ammunition sat next to the weapon's case in a neat stack of boxes. Each rifle had a loaded magazine with a chambered round and a second magazine stored inside the case.

Del would rather buy new magazines every six months than be caught without a loaded weapon when she needed it.

One half of the back of the closet had a clothing bar that sagged a little under the weight of three bulletproof vests. The other half of the closet held a large gilded box with a slanted top. The top was a split lid, like the double doors to her closets. A faint glow peaked through the seams of the box, as if it housed its own light.

She groaned as she unclasped her shoulder holster and shrugged out of the harness. She hung it next to the ammunition and pulled out the spent magazines. She reloaded each magazine and returned them to the harness. Walking back out of the War Room, she stood again before the other closet and began to strip off her dirty clothing. The pants were salvageable. They needed a good wash, but would survive. The shirt was beyond ruined and instead of tossing it on the pile on the floor, she tossed it near a trash can that was already home to a collection of crumpled McDonald's drive-thru sacks.

She picked up the SIG and holster that normally rode at the small of her back and moved from the bedroom to the bathroom. She set the SIG on the edge of her Japanese-style standing tub and turned on the hot water faucet. In minutes, the room filled with thick steam and Del sank gratefully into the tub. Her tortured muscles relaxed in the near-scalding water. She dunked a large washcloth into the hot water, placed it over her face and sunk down until only her head remained above the water.

The job that Ahadiel gave them was a fairly standard hunt-and-kill. The only trouble this time there was not one but three rogues.

Agrat, Astarte and Jenoa.

Agrat and Astarte were female.

Female rogues were always worse than the males, always harder to deal with. Only the Throne knew why for certain. They could be more vicious, more cunning, more strategic. Certainly, female rogues were more manipulative. Not always, but enough that Del was even more unhappy about the assignment.

Agrat, Astarte and Jenoa.

Three rogues, two females, one male and all of them working together.

*Not good, Del*, she thought.

But the fun didn't stop there. The rogues and the children were in Salt Lake City.

She sighed, and her fingers moved unconsciously across her stomach to find the long, almost straight scar above her left hip. Then up to a set of three, round, puckered scars under her left arm. She could never quite reach the criss-cross scar beneath her right shoulder. They were the mementos of the last three times she'd been to the land of Brigham Young. Fifteen years ago, after her last trip, she began refusing any assignments that would take her back, no matter how simple. There was something about a bastion of religious zealotry that made everything harder, more dangerous.

Or maybe it was just Salt Lake City.

Three rogues, a guide she didn't like, and all wrapped up in her least favorite city.

"Burning Mormons," Del said, her voice muffled through the washcloth. She breathed deep, let out an exaggerated sigh and got to the business of taking a long, hot bath.

**“Burning angels.”**