

Chronicle of Judgement

Book three of

Chronicles of the Horsemen

Eerste druk/First print © 2026 Vincent C. Poinet

Coverfoto/Cover photo: Sandra Aljarrah

ISBN: 9789465318783

Uitgegeven via Brave New Books

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Vincent C. Poinet

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Book three of
Chronicles of the
Horsemen

Prologue

*Dead ones raised at ritual's call,
to roam the worlds while high ones fall.
With living coerced to march as one,
beside souls walking, below sky's pall.
Butcher's slayer drowned in gold,
her mind adrift, her fate untold.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 13:21 –

Creation had changed.

It always did, of course; if there was something Chloros has learned in over six thousand years of being the Horseman of Death, it was that nothing was forever. Creation was always in an eternal state of flux, like the Djinn always said. Nations came and went. Civilisations, people... all were ephemeral, like breath on a mirror, gone in the blink of an eye. Some of the dead souls that he was composed off still remembered when the wheel was a big thing; next thing he knew, mankind was lobbing nuclear bombs at each other like they were water balloons. As Orunmila would say, the wave that is the future is always in motion.

Chloros didn't quite know what to think of the latest headings of that wave though.

He lifted his head to look around the room from where he leaned against the wall, observing the other people present through the orbs of blue light that served as his eyes. Limos and Pathogenos where there, his fellow Horsemen, their yellow and green souls mirrors of his own blue ones. Hephaestus, Elohim of fire and crafts looking less than godly the way he sat sweating in the waiting chairs. All of them staunch allies who had proven themselves over and over again.

But besides Hephaestus sat Orunmila, Orisha of prophecy, who had manipulated the Horsemen more than once through his foreknowledge of the future. Always to their advantage, as far as Chloros could tell, but still. The Elohim's pale, unfocused eyes were inscrutable; who knew what sort of secret nefarious agendas lurked beneath them?

And what to think of Daniel, who lurked in another corner of the room? The last angel of the Grigori caste, recently offered a commission by Gabriel in his Golden Dawn. Chloros still didn't know what to make of the Dawn. A whole faction of the Heavenly Host, quietly hidden in angelic society for thousands of years before breaking off from their tyrannical Archangel overlord Michael on the eve of the Apocalypse. Led by Gabriel, one of their very own Archangels no less. As if one Archangel going rogue had not been

enough. It had been Azrael's betrayal at Eden that had Sundered angelic unity and had begun Michael's descent into madness. The same madness which had led him to declare a crusade upon all human souls, to use them as fuel in his final Reckoning against Azrael's Hordes of Hell. Which had then in turn sparked a war between Michael, the Elohim, and Chloros' Ensouled, to the detriment of the last two. All of that, because of one Archangel's backstabbing. Did they really need more of that? Oh, Gabriel might claim that he supported their views, that the birth of his half-human son Isu had opened his eyes. But was he not the patron Archangel of the Principalities, the angel caste of liars and deceivers? He had betrayed Michael; how long, Chloros wondered, before he would turn his coat once more?

Chloros' gaze wandered until it fell on the two soldiers who guarded the room. The humans looked oh so proud in their neatly starched MCOA uniforms, but they shuddered as they felt his scrutiny, looking away. It had only been a few months since their species had learned the truth of their own soul and afterlife, and the role the Ensouled played in both. Most humans didn't seem to know what to make of it. Their reactions to the Ensouled were diverse, ranging from revulsion to outright veneration. It would take time for humanity to make up its mind and shift its worldview accordingly.

Still, Chloros had no problem knowing the thoughts of these particular soldiers. He could read them on his face as clearly as if they had said them aloud. *Abomination. Unnatural. Freak.*

To be fair, Chloros *was* a freak. A conglomerate of dead souls stuck together by some quirk of El's laws, he had to wear a corpse to walk around. He didn't have his own flesh, nor even his own soul; his identity existed in the *summum* of the collective, the sum total count of those dead souls whose sins he burned for energy. Thus purifying them for their journey to Elysium, what humans knew as heaven. A necessary task, yet hardly an enviable one. And the gaunt angles of his face and his foreboding black undertaker's clothes hardly made the thought more palatable for those poor humans.

Chloros gave the soldiers an unnerving smile, allowing himself to enjoy their obvious discomfort as they tried to hide beneath masks of professional disdain. He chuckled to himself as he turned away. They didn't understand – humans never did. You couldn't hide your feelings from a Horseman. There was no mask, no disguise strong enough that it couldn't be pierced by the seething mass of lives and perspectives that was eternally wailing at the back of Chloros' mind. Millions, billions of souls – artists and kings, cobblers and smiths and beggars and psychologists and priests, each one channelling their own unique thoughts and outlook on Creation through his head all at once. The human mind was but a laughably primitive abacus compared to the complex supercomputer that was the Ensouled's.

Even more complex than before, ever since the Battle of Stonehenge – where he and his brethren had raised the dead from their grave to fight for the Ensouled cause of justice. He could sense them even now: a latticework of a gazillion small cords, each one connecting him through the *Conceive* to one of the walking undead. An army that would follow their every beck and call, resurrected by a Djinnish ritual, roaming the human plane

of the Phusikon. These forces – people had taken to calling them the Animated – were steadily gathering at the Seal of Eden beneath the oversight of Bellicosa. Being the Horseman of War, she had the matter well in hand.

Which left it to Chloros and his two brethren to stay here and make sure that the MCOA didn't muck things up even worse than they already had.

Chloros' gaze turned towards the far door, behind which, he knew, lay the reason they were all here. The payload that the MCOA had secured in the aftermath of the Battle of Stonehenge.

The Ensouled had objected – how they had objected! Alexander in particular. The cargo in question belonged to the Ensouled, and none other. But while mankind was in chaos, Richard Walter, the High Marshal of this newly formed Mondial Coalition of Otherworldly Affairs, was another affair entirely. His mind was as firm and unyielding as adamas, refusing to be diverted from its course even beneath the combined pressure of Ensouled and Elohim. Chloros scowled as he thought back to it. Mankind might be the newest player in the interplanetary arena of Creation, but they had had some early successes. Chloros worried that it might cause Walter to grow too big for his breeches. He had demanded a meeting with Chloros several times already, like he was a dog to be summoned instead of their ally! If left unchecked, the MCOA might very well grow into an institution as dangerous and power-hungry as Michael's tyranny of Ecclesia. Chloros eyed the ASE-rifles in the soldiers' hands, especially designed to kill angels, and wondered: how long before they built weapons specifically to murder his Ensouled?

Whatever the case, on the cargo in question the Ensouled had been forced to concede. As Walter had pointed out, the huge amounts of uncontrolled power being emitted could indeed be the prelude to an explosion of mind-boggling proportions. There was no room safer to contain such an explosion but the panic room of Walter himself. The sturdy metal and concrete construction of the room allowed it to contain most blasts both inside and out. And if an explosion *were* to make its way through, its position at the top floor of the concrete skyscraper that served as the Coalition's headquarters left them high enough to shield the city below. So the Ensouled had been forced to swallow their pride and follow the helicopter transporting it, so they could at least keep an eye out. And now here they all were, pacing to and fro in front of the door at the MCOA's invitation, waiting to see on which side the coin would fall. Each one eyeing the others with tense, distrustful looks.

This better not take much longer, Chloros mused, as he counted the interminable seconds by tapping his orichalcum ring. *Otherwise this powder keg will explode in our faces and we'll all butcher each other before we can even start on Michael.*

Alexander stood with his arms folded on his back and looked at the two men in front of him with barely restrained annoyance.

The two could hardly be any more different. One was slight and tender, even smaller than Alexander himself. The other was young, huge and muscled, his clothes reminiscent of a biker thug. His bald head sported tattoos that gave off a soft multi-coloured light – the same kind of sigils that coated Alexander’s own flesh, flowing around his body in an organic-looking way. Their eyes were the same as well, with luminous multi-coloured veins trailing through a pale white. The brute remained silent as the other man voiced his complaints, calmly meeting Alexander’s gaze above crossed arms.

The elder, on the other hand, cringed where he stood, his pet wrinkled between his hands as he made his case. He barely dared to look at Alexander, and small surprise. Alexander’s black epauletted coat hung open, the black t-shirt below low enough to show the Ensouled tattoos that ringed his upper body. The soul appendage that replaced his left hand was visible as well, gleaming prismatically.

Not so long ago, Alexander would have been ashamed of these hallmarks of who and what he was. He would cover them up, in fear that mankind would see him for the monster that he had thought he was. No longer though. Ever since Stonehenge, he proudly showed his inked flesh. Let the world make up their own mind about him; he was done accommodating them either way.

When Alexander couldn’t take it anymore, he lifted his hand, cutting the elder off.

‘Let me see if I understand this,’ he said, trying very hard to keep his frustration from bleeding into his words. They were already fey enough as they were, sounding like they came from a dozen throats at once. He pointed at the elder man. ‘You were just gardening when an angel tried to jump you. And then *you*,’ the finger moved towards the thug, ‘turned up to intervene.’

The thug, better known to Alexander as Dieter Claes, gave a single taciturn nod. ‘By flattening it beneath this man’s own car?’

They all looked sideways for a moment, at the car wreck that lay overturned in the middle of the still smoking ruins of the front garden. A pair of scorched wings was only just visible from beneath the crumpled metal.

‘And now *you*,’ he finished, pointing back to the elder. ‘Want compensation for the damage.’

The man’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down nervously as he swallowed, but then he nodded firmly.

Alexander sighed and put a hand to his forehead, feeling like a horde of buffalos was migrating through his skull. He turned to the woman beside him. ‘*This* is why you called me away?’ he demanded, very much trying not to unload his sour mood on her. Things tended to get a little... messy if he gave his temper free reign, these days.

Filipa shrugged, her curly hair the same tint as his. They were both dressed in long coats, though hers was cashmere while his was a stark black. ‘There is no-one else to settle this,’ she said, in her reverberating voice.

Alexander sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose to keep himself from screaming, the more so because she was right. The Grave Watch, the newly formed corps

of human Ensouled, was left rudderless since their mentor, Dullahan, had perished at the Battle of Stonehenge. They were all still fulfilling their basic purpose, protecting humans from having their souls reaped by Michael's angels. The last few months they had mostly been busy hunting the last few stragglers from Uriel's army. But there was no-one directing them, no-one making the calls. It was only now that Dullahan was gone that Alexander realised just how much the old Reaper had done for them.

He suppressed the wave of loss that threatened to drench his mind with an effort and turned towards Dieter. 'Why didn't you just use your hammer?' he scolded.

Dieter shrugged.

Alexander closed his eyes for a moment, reining in his impatience with a supreme effort. 'Very well then,' he said at last, through gritted teeth. 'You will compensate this man for the value of the car from your personal funds. We will not reimburse your garden though,' he added, turning to the elder. 'This is war – you would do well to remember it. Our priority is your lives, not your begonias.'

With those words he turned on his heels, ignoring the gratefully bobbing head of the man, and beckoned for Filipa and Koen to follow him. 'Was it really necessary for me to deal with this in person?' he asked Filipa, finally letting his sour mood leak through – there was no fooling a common member of the Grave Watch anyway. 'I could have settled this from afar.'

Which was true. The minds of all Alexandrians were connected through the Grave Song, a web of telepathic channels that allowed them to know what each of them did and felt. It gave them an unprecedented level of coordination, like the way they now walked down the street: their movements in perfect concert, making for quite the eery spectacle as they knew utterly where each other's flesh would be. When Alexander closed his eyes, he could see himself through Filipa's if he wanted. Or he could look through Samita's, who was halfway across the world mopping up the mess that Uriel's invasion had left in the Middle East. It would have been easy to observe this case through Dieter's senses and communicate his ruling mind-to-mind.

'You know why,' Filipa said, as she began to move her hands, moulding souls into a horse of translucent light. 'People need to see someone in charge of the Grave Watch. Not a Reaper, or a Horseman, but a human. Someone they can understand, they can relate to. Someone they can trust and rally around when the war is on and we're knee-deep in bodies.'

Alexander nodded, though it left a sour taste in his mouth. He had heard this before. No few Alexandrians had been toying with the idea for a while now, to vote from amongst themselves a so-called Phylarch: a leader to direct them, who would precede them into the fray of the Apocalypse itself. The word originated in ancient Athens, where it was used to describe the elected military commander of one of their cavalry tribes. Alexander was not fooled though; the *Phylarchoi* of old had been *rulers* of their tribe as much as they had been generals.

Alexander wouldn't have minded the idea so much if he hadn't a sneaking suspicion that *he* was the prime candidate the Grave Watch had in mind. After all, he fit

the bill admirably. The Patchwork Man, who had saved hundreds of people all across the globe. Who had told the world the truth of Creation on camera, then had proceeded to single-handedly turn the tide at the Battle of Stonehenge. Or so the media would have you believe. Even Orunmila's thrice-damned "Prophecy of Three Souls Walking" called him a Messiah. El, the whole bloody Watch was already naming itself after him. Though Filipa might insist that their name was derived from the Alexander, the ideal of the perfect protector of mankind, Alexander knew better. No wonder that that man had been unable to meet his gaze.

No, he was the perfect figure for such a role. The more woe he, because he really, *really* didn't want it. He couldn't even rule his own mind these days, let alone that he could rule others. So he looked away from Filipa's pointed gaze as he mounted his own Ensouled bike, resplendent in blue, green, red and yellow light, and gazed upwards in the sky.

The world hadn't been the same, ever since the Horsemen had completed their ritual at Stonehenge. The consequences went beyond the Animated. The whole world had been wrapped in a blanket of clouds ever since; clouds that stretched all across the globe without even a single break in them. Dark, foreboding clouds, like the ones just before a storm, angry and rumbling with barely restrained violence. Except the storm didn't come, and the clouds hadn't broken; they just kept hovering there threateningly, casting a gloomy pall across the world as they hid the sun away.

Nobody knew what was going to happen – if this would pass, or if this would be a permanent change. Alexander couldn't help but shiver at the mere thought. The world had turned in a very depressing place in a short while. He supposed that's what you got for messing around with the fabric of Creation, Djinnish ritual or not.

Whatever the case, he and Filipa stayed well below the rumbling layer of black as they launched themselves into the sky. The clouds were inert as far as anyone could see, but no one, angel or Ensouled, had yet gotten it in their heads to pierce their gloom.

Below them, Dieter didn't even bother to fly. He just channelled *Velocitas* and ran off into the city. He left a dust trail on the road as he used the cumulative speed of several hundreds of dead. Onwards, no doubt, towards throwing more exploding cars on top of angels.

Alexander couldn't find it in himself to really care though. He veered to the right and set off, following his heartstrings, back towards the place that he had been longing to get back to ever since Filipa had so brutally torn him away.

Part I

*The sixth trumpet of Creation to sound,
as four angels of El at Euphrates are bound.
Tarnished gold below sends serpents to maim,
a third of Man's towers with brimstone and flame.
Two hundred million stand ready to march,
Souls living and dead, beside Phylarch.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 17:04 –

Chapter 1

Koen looked through the window, tapping softly against the glass as he studied the overcast sky. Walter's headquarters was one of those few skyscrapers high enough that it reached above the cloud layer, leaving the ground below hidden beneath the inscrutable black. Cut off from the world like that, it was easy to believe that they were all on their own, accountable to nothing and no-one, but the reverse was true. The decisions made in this room shaped the world, if not Creation.

‘Koen,’ Walter called, interrupting his conversation with the man in front of him to gesture for the ex-professor to come. Koen sighed, but then walked reluctantly over and sat himself down on top of the desk. He met the eyes of the visitor, a middle-aged Asian man. ‘Alright, so here’s what’s going to happen,’ he said, his souls allowing him to speak Korean for the benefit of the exchange. ‘Your country will join the Mondial Coalition of Otherworldly Affairs, just like all the others have done. You will grant us a fixed portion of your troops, to be trained, outfitted and commanded by us. Your military, civic, scientific and economic infrastructure will take our directions and put themselves on a war footing to help us combat the Archangel threat.’

‘You would turn us all into your slaves!’ the delegate from North-Korea objected.

‘Not slaves,’ Koen said. ‘Beneficiaries. Your generals will have a say, as will your government. The MCOA is not a dictatorship; it is a cooperative effort of the nations of the world, that we may weather the storms to come as one.’ And all beneath the benevolent leadership of High Marshal Richard Walter, the so-called Emperor of Man. Koen was smart enough not to say that out loud though.

The delegate leaned back in his chair and said nothing. He clearly needed more convincing. Koen sighed again, hating the next words that left his mouth. They made him feel like a bully. ‘I don’t know if you are aware, sir, but I’m the official liaison of the Ensouled to the MCOA. You do know about the Ensouled, of course?’

‘I... Well, yes,’ the diplomat fumbled, taken aback by this new approach.

‘Then you know what we can do. Tell me, sir, does your country have secrets?’ Koen leaned forwards, letting himself hover above the hapless man. ‘Do they have secret weapon projects? Are your spies tapped into the phones of their allies? Do they sabotage and blackmail and lie?’

‘I...’ the delegate said, his eyes shooting across the room like those of a trapped animal.

‘No doubt your country has many brave and loyal soldiers, who take such secrets with them to the grave,’ Koen continued. ‘Unfortunately, death is no bar to us Ensouled. And as High Marshal Walter has our wholehearted support, refusing his terms might tempt us to... air your laundry, so to speak. Starting with the launch codes of your nuclear arsenal, perhaps?’

The Korean blanched as the full import of Koen's words began to sink in. 'You wouldn't.'

'The Apocalypse is at hand,' Koen said evenly. 'There's very little I wouldn't do to prevent it.'

'Damn you,' the diplomate whispered, leaning back in his chair with a bitter, defeated look on his face.

'Damn me,' Koen agreed wearily. 'But at least this way you'll be alive to do so.' He stood up, suddenly no longer able to stand facing the man. 'He's all yours,' he said to Walter, as he turned back to the window. He didn't want to see how the High Marshal further addressed the delegate, capitalizing on Koen's words to subsume another country into his Coalition. The pitch black outside the window was a perfect reflection of Koen's soul; he felt dirty, like his skin was coated in grime. He had gone into the study of diplomatic history because he honestly believed that dialogue and cooperation were the building blocks of a brighter society. But this... this wasn't dialogue. This wasn't cooperation. This was bullying and threats and blackmail. It went against everything Koen believed in. And yet he had done it several times these last few months.

'Congratulations, Mr. Finet.' The words shook Koen out of his thoughts. He turned around to find Walter standing at his elbow with a glass of brandy in each hand. The delegate seemed to have left the office without Koen hearing it. 'North-Korea was the last holdout,' the leader of the MCOA said, as he offered Koen a glass. 'With them in line, our whole planet is united beneath a single cause. For the first time in history, we have world peace. In no small part thanks to your efforts, I might add.' He tapped his glass against Koen's, then lifted it in a toast. 'Koen Finet, the Bridgebuilder.'

Koen tried very hard to mask his feelings at the name the public had given him due to his role in the creation of Walter's empire. If he had not beaten Apsinthon, the rift that Azrael's false agent had created between the United States and the budding Coalition would have been insurmountable. Mankind would have found itself embroiled in a global civil war at a time when it could least afford to. Koen had prevented that by revealing Apsinthon for the fraud he was and then slaying him in a divine ordeal. As a result, the United States and their allies had fallen in line with the Coalition, only just in time to lend a hand during the Battle of Stonehenge.

Koen knew he should feel proud of what he had accomplished. How many people could say they single-handedly had influenced the course of human civilization in the way that he had done? He had defeated Apsinthon despite him being armed with an adamas blade, the Djinn metal that absorbed the energy from its victims to augment its wielder. That adamas was his now, taken from Apsinthon's corpse. He had had Hephaestus reforge it into the core of the new staff he now wielded across his back.

And yet, despite those victories and prizes, Koen couldn't help but feel unworthy of the public's praise. Because, while humans, Elohim and Ensouled had fought and bled en masse to hold the Archangel Uriel back at Stonehenge, *he* had been knocked out cold by his bout against Apsinthon. He knew such feelings of guilt were irrational, but there it was.

There was another reason he disliked being called the Bridgebuilder. It was a title found in the “Prophecy of Three Souls Walking”, a series of divinations made by Elohim who could see the future, about three beings who would change the fate of Creation. More and more, it began to seem like it applied to him, Alexander and Breanna, just like Orunmila had told them. And, while the things he had seen and done no longer left Koen in doubt as to the existence of true prophecy, he couldn’t help but feel every word of it coming true like another nail in his coffin. He disliked not being in charge of his own destiny.

‘And to you,’ he responded, by way of distracting himself. He lifted his glass to toast Walter in turn. ‘High Marshal Richard Walter, now truly the Emperor of Man.’ A moniker Walter’s soldiers had granted him in the wake of the victory at Stonehenge, and had found its way into the general public since then.

And yet, as Koen’s eyes met Walter’s over the rim of his glass, he couldn’t help but wonder at the other man’s ambitions. Sure, the Coalition was founded to protect the human world from otherworldly attacks against both body and soul. But that world was now being steadily smothered beneath a dark blanket of clouds. How long before the High Marshal decided that staying on earth was no longer feasible for the human race? How long before the Emperor of Man decided to try his hand at conquering instead of defending, to carve out a new human empire on another world? All with the best interests of mankind at heart of course.

He might even be right.

‘There is another issue to be addressed,’ Walter said, as he lowered his glass. ‘As to the jurisdiction of the Ensouled.’

Koen groaned inwardly. *This again.* With the imminent threat of Uriel’s invasion gone, Walter’s main focus had shifted from the war effort to the consolidation of his power. Which entailed defanging any possible rivals, starting with the Ensouled.

Koen let the brandy swirl around in his mouth to spare himself having to reply immediately. ‘As I have told you before, there are distinct groups of Ensouled. I’m not empowered to negotiate on behalf of all of them.’

‘I know. Which is why I want to meet with their leaders. The Horsemen, but also this Patchwork Man who I hear leads this Grave Watch nowadays.’

‘They are all quite busy with their duties,’ Koen said.

Walter’s brow furrowed in anger and frustration. ‘So you say. But they cannot be allowed to continue as they are, without oversight or accountability. Their powers are too vast – they need to be curtailed, for the good of all. It is...’

Koen would never know what it was. Before Walter had a chance to finish his sentence, a shudder suddenly ran through the entire building, setting the bottle of sherry on his desk trembling. It was followed seconds later by a looming siren, resounding all throughout the skyscraper. Both men started, their gazes finding each other as a thin layer of dust rained down on them.

They then drew their weapons and ran outside to join the soldiers in the hallways in finding the source of the disturbance.

Alexander burst through the door, his stride impatient as he marched into the waiting room beyond, Filipa in tow. Everyone looked up at their arrival, though their reactions varied greatly. Hephaestus and Orunmila gave him a wave and a wan smile by way of greeting. Chloros, on the other hand, merely lifted one corner of his mouth in a wry grin and cast the barest of nods his way. A small gesture, but more than the Horseman would ever have granted a human not too long ago. Daniel, by contrast, didn't acknowledge him at all. He just followed Alexander around with his golden eyes, the way you kept track of a rabid beast that might attack at any moment. Alexander had killed a *lot* of the angel's kinsmen at Stonehenge. Thousands of them, smiting Malachi and Seraphim and Hashmalim, and even the gigantic Ophanim, in droves.

Those had been Uriel's cronies, whereas the Golden Dawn was supposed to be on their side, but the message was not lost on them even so. *Ecclesians beware, there's a bigger bully in the play yard now.*

Alexander ignored them all, crossing the room in silence with Filipa. They walked up to the door on the other side, flanked by two MCOA guards. He only had to look at them for as long as it took them to recognise who he was. Then they almost fell over each other in their haste to unlock the doors with a lot of abject gestures of subservience. Veterans of Stonehenge, without a doubt. While the MCOA soldiers were a bit ambivalent as to the Horsemen and Reapers, they outrightly revered the Grave Watch that had come to their aid during their darkest hours. And none more than the one who had managed to wrestle victory from the jaws of defeat, in doing so preserving the small remnant of the MCOA that had lasted until then. These men owed him their lives, and they knew it.

Alexander cast them from his mind as he walked through the door and inside High Marshal Walter's panic room, however. The entirety of his attention was focused on the hospital bed in the otherwise empty room, and the one that occupied it.

His oldest friend, Breanna Mervilde.

Her face was slack, relaxed; she might seem peacefully asleep if not for the restless way that her sky-blue eyes twitched beneath closed eyelids. That and the occasional uncontrollable spasms that sent her whole body buckling violently. They had been forced to tie her limbs to different corners of the bedframe to prevent her from hurting herself.

Alexander looked down on her, his non-existent heart wrenching itself just as it did each time he saw her like that. An empty vessel in a hospital gown, sprawled senseless across the bed. A far cry from the usually so mischievous, exuberant spark that was his Bre.

Alexander carefully set himself beside Bre on the bed. He put a hand on her forehead. The flesh was hot to the touch, as if she was running a fever. Her entire body felt like it was burning up, in fact. White-golden light shone through her pale skin here

and there, illuminating her from within. It was as if a bonfire of angelic energies was raging inside of her, yearning to burst free, only just contained by the prison of her slender frame. A layer of sweat clung to her, drenching the bedsheets and causing her long white-blond hair to stick together.

The angelic inferno inside her also prevented the doctors from examining her properly. Medical scanning equipment couldn't compensate for the extreme temperatures and showed only gibberish, if it didn't break outright. Meanwhile, any catheter or needle they stuck into her flesh warped or fell apart beneath the fiery onslaught. After several days Alexander had dismissed all the doctors and appointed himself Bre's sole caretaker.

'We're wasting our time here,' Filipa hissed from between clenched teeth. 'We've got better things to do than playing nursemaid.'

Alexander didn't immediately respond. He cast a clinical look across Bre's body, alert for any signs of malnourishment. They had tried feeding her, but with limited effect; she was too senseless to swallow it. Still, whatever fey Ecclesian power she had absorbed seemed to sustain her in some measure. 'We're not leaving,' he said, as he took a washcloth from a bowl and began to wipe the sweat away. 'We shouldn't have left in the first place.'

'Look at her, Alessandro! There's been no change in her condition since the last time we visited. It's been *months* since the Battle of Stonehenge, and she hasn't improved or deteriorated in all that time. Who knows for how long she will be like this?' Filipa sighed, closing her eyes for a moment as she inhaled deeply. When she next spoke, it was with a clear effort to remain calm. 'Listen, Alessandro. You care deeply for your friend, and that is good. You should care for your friends. But she is just one person – one person you can't help. Meanwhile, there is an entire world out there, filled with people that you *can* help! Stonehenge has put the Grave Watch on the map. Mankind looks to us for reassurance, but without Dullahan we are left rudderless! The world *needs* you, Alessandro. It *needs* the Patchwork Man.'

Alexander sighed and shook his head. Not because he did not agree with her, but because he did. Whatever had happened to Bre when she struck down the Archangel Uriel, they didn't have the slightest clue what had caused it, nor did they have an inkling of how to help her. They could only wait and hope that she would wake from this slumber on her own. *If she ever did.* What if he went away with Filipa, and came back to find she had quietly slid away into oblivion?

But no; Alexander couldn't allow himself to think that way. Bre would wake up. She *would*. Otherwise, what was the point of it all? A Creation without Bre was not one he wanted to live in.

'We'll see,' Alexander said at last to Filipa. He had said those exact words multiple times already in the past few months, to try and delay having to choose and resolve the inner conflict in his mind. Filipa sighed as well, recognising it for the dithering excuse that it was, but then settled herself down against the wall with crossed arms and kept silent.

Alexander turned his attention back towards Breanna. He finished cleaning her up, then put a tentative hand on her forehead again and reached out with his mind...

Alexander entered his Room and looked up at the sprawling constellations of the Conceive.

Originally a psychologist's trick to help him cope with the loss of his father, his ability to build mind palaces inside himself had evolved far beyond that. First when it turned out to be the medium through which humans could safely channel souls, thus creating the first human Ensouled. His Room was no longer just a place where he went to hide and suppress his emotions – his unrequited love for Bre, for one. It became a place of training, where he broke the dead to his will and subsumed their skills, powers and memories.

As the technique had spread, others had learned as well. They learned to shape the Conceive, the Cradle of Dreams, the world between worlds that only humans could consciously manipulate, to build their own mind palaces. And so the Grave Watch had been born.

Then Stonehenge had come, and his Room had changed even more.

For months, Alexander had believed his Room would implode on him. That it would clench like a fist around his mental self and crunch him to death with the force of his own self-loathing. And yet, when the moment came, he had cast off the yoke – had decided it was the world that was wrong, not he. And the walls of his Room, instead of crumbling inward, had shattered outward and given birth to the Grave Song.

What was left was... well, it could no longer be called a Room. There were no walls or ceiling, for one. His mind palace was nothing but a singular plane of stone, serving as a floor for his mental self. There was no longer a barrier to keep the inscrutable white-grey oceans of the Conceive from collapsing down on his mind and extinguishing his self. His mind palace was wide open, with the fey stars inside the Conceive serving as his only source of illumination.

Alexander wasn't worried though. Form was ephemeral in the Cradle of Dreams, also called the Amorph. You didn't need a wall to keep the Conceive at bay. You needed will, and that Alexander had in abundance.

He turned his gaze down, looking out across the field. It was not completely desolate. Rows upon row of gravestones littered his mind palace. When he reached out and touched one of the stones, he could feel the dead souls buried underneath stir themselves. No longer did he use boxes to partition the dead from his mind. This would serve just as well.

The gravestones stood like an army at attention, all of them turned inwards to the centre of his mind, where a giant white marble cross loomed over them all. Squat concrete bunkers stood in each corner, remnants of a war long past.

To the casual observer, this was just a graveyard. But Alexander and the rest of the Grave Watch knew it for what it was: a perfect replica of Tyne Cot Cemetery, where most of them had had their training.

And now it was also the hub for the Grave Song that connected the mind of each Alexandrian. He could see it as he looked into the distance: hundreds of thin pathways of light, connecting some of the stars to the edge of his Cemetery. They seemed frail the way that they heaved softly in the primordial oceans of Creation. But they pulsed with a steady light, transmitting information from the Grave Watch all across the world to Alexander. Like the vibrating treads of a spider's web, with his Cemetery at the centre of it. Or the firing neurons of a brain. A Song every Alexandrian heard and sang together. A Grave Song that linked them all.

Alexander looked over his shoulder towards the base of the Cross of Sacrifice, below which he knew a fifth bunker sat buried. There he kept the part of himself that he didn't want to share with the others – his darkest secrets, which couldn't stand to see the light of day.

He was not here for that though. Nor was he here for the Grave Song.

Alexander walked up towards the edge of his Cemetery, where the field abruptly ended to make way for the Conceive. He peered into the fluid until he found what he sought, then lifted his arms and called upon his powers. The nearest graves broke open, tendrils of multi-coloured light coming out towards him. Gone were the times when his mind visualised souls as playing cards. Ever since Stonehenge, he saw them in their true form: raw, gaseous wisps of power, a record of people long gone whose sins empowered him. His mental self resembled more closely how he looked in the physical world now that it sported the same luminous hand and tattoos.

The tendrils wove themselves together into a new road at his command. Alexander stepped onto the bridge, confident enough in his Ensouled abilities not to fear it collapsing beneath his mental self. He left his Cemetery behind and began to walk amongst the constellations of the Conceive, the stars and suns and orbs of lights that signified souls and angels and Elohim in the physical world. He reached his destination at the speed of thought and mind: a distinct shape in the fey depths, pulsing in a harsh golden light.

Bre's Attic.

Alexander walked around the walls of the mind palace, but there was no entrance, no way to reach the mind of his best friend inside. He could barely stand being as close as he was; Bre's mind palace felt like a roaring furnace, exuding heat and fire all around into the Conceive. Not a good environment for an Ensouled, whose weakness for fire made them go up like dry timber.

Alexander could only just get close enough to see the innards of Bre's mind, illuminated from within by the golden light. He could see the blasted landscape of her Attic, bare except for the black silhouette of her mental self. She floated in the centre of her mind palace, unconscious to the golden light that was wrapped all around her, like a cocoon. Tendrils of gold sprouted from the chrysalis and had wrapped themselves all around her Attic like an overgrown weed, threatening to tear it apart. Alexander was reminded of the Ensouled tendrils that had nearly wrecked his own mind. But those had

been the result of his own self-loathing, whereas he had no inkling what was causing this.

Come back, Bre, he thought, staring at her mental self in helpless frustration. Come back to me.

Suddenly the road beneath Alexander's feet began to heave and buck violently. Alexander grimly managed to keep his footing with an effort, steadying his souls with a thought. There had been a surge in the currents of the Conceive, no doubt in response to his turmoil. He had been bottling up his feelings for as long as he knew, turning them inwards and locking them into little boxes in his mind. At Stonehenge, however, he had finally, for the first time in his life, unleashed them. Their sheer ferocity had bound Creation to his will and had given Uriel's forces a well-deserved whipping.

Now that the genie was out of the bottle, however, it seemed he had trouble getting it back in. This was not the first time in recent months that his unbridled emotions had caused a disturbance in the very fabric of Creation.

It was the first time it had happened around Bre's Attic though.

Alexander watched with dismay as the surge of white-grey energies crashed against the walls of Bre's mind palace, setting the whole thing shaking. Bre stirred inside her cocoon, buckling violently. The light of the golden tendrils intensified as if in response to her distress. She blinked once, then opened her eyes.

She was awake!

Alexander bonked on the walls of her Attic, to attract her attention. But the golden energy within seemed to build up to some kind of crescendo, the heat intensifying to such a degree that the whole mind palace was steaming. Nonetheless Bre turned on her side and looked at him. For one moment, their eyes met.

Then the cocoon ignited, and Bre's mouth opened into a soundless scream as she disappeared beneath an inferno of golden fire.

No! Alexander roared. He tried to move up to the walls, to force his way through, but the whole Attic burst alight, like a roaring bonfire. He could still sense her writhing form, somewhere in the middle of the onslaught of angelic flame. Bre!

Alexander prepared himself to jump in and save her nonetheless, consequences be damned, and...

... was ejected from the Conceive as someone forcibly dragged him away from her by the scruff of his neck. He looked up to see Filipa, her catlike face twisted in a mixture of fear and rage. 'Get back!' she hissed.

Alexander looked down to see Breanna writhing violently on the bed, her head thrown back as she screamed her lungs out. Her entire body pulsed with gold, her eyes beams of such intense light that it blinded Alexander just look at her. It was as if the angelic energies were straining to get out, to free themselves from the cage of her body.

Then she bucked again, with such ferocity that her back was nearly bent in two, and the gold in her burst aflame.

‘Nooooo!’ Alexander roared. He moved as if to jump in the conflagration that the hospital bed had become, but Filipa grabbed him below the armpits, using her Ensouled powers to keep him back. Alexander struggled against her, but to no avail. He was forced to watch in horror and desperation as Bre burned, her bones twisting and her flesh melting by the golden onslaught. He wept as he heard her wails of pain, louder and louder until he could no longer bear it, etching themselves upon his soul.

Then Bre exploded.

Alexander had just enough time to see a tidal wave of Ecclesian fire burst from his best friend, flying in every direction. Then Filipa threw him to the ground and jumped on top of him.

She grunted as the fire rolled over her, and everything turned golden for a moment. But then the light dimmed, and Filipa got back up, wiping a few stray flames away. The back of her cashmere coat was blackened, but the heavy wool seemed to have shielded her against the worst of the blast.

Alexander didn’t care, however. He jumped to his feet, his whole mind consumed with the thought of Bre. *Not her. Please, El, not her.*

He found the room in shambles, every surface black with soot. He sharpened his vision with Perception as he looked around himself, trying to look through the smoke. He nearly stumbled as he put a foot forwards. When he looked downwards, he found the smoking wreck of the bed, its metal frame a crumpled mess. His heart wrenched itself in his chest as he moved through the debris, dreading that he was about to find out whatever was left of Bre at any moment now.

Then he noticed a figure huddling in the corner. He turned and felt his knees get weak with relief as he found the naked form of Bre looking up at him, wrapped in her bedsheets. *Thank you, El*, he sobbed in the privacy of his mind, as he moved up to her. He didn’t know how she had survived the fire, but he didn’t care. All that mattered was that she was his best friend, and that she was alive, with him.

Then he froze in his tracks as the smoke began to clear and he really saw her.

The shape of her face was all wrong, with sharp, angular corners. Her eyes were different as well; it was as if someone had turned them in their sockets, so they were more inclined. Their icy blue colour had shifted to a glowing burnished amber, like two miniature suns looking up at him. And behind her...

Behind her, what Alexander had taken for bedsheets actually turned out to be thin protrusions. They clung to her back, drooping like banners at half-mast as the white feathers that sprouted from them covered her body.

Wings. Angel wings.

Four of them.

Chapter 2

Alexander was at a loss for words. His mind had short-circuited, the shock of what he was seeing before him leaving no room for conscious thought. He could only gape, utterly dumbfounded as this angel – this *Archangel* – wearing Bre’s face looked up to him in confusion. ‘Where...’ she croaked, then coughed, grabbing at her throat. Her voice sounded shrill, like nothing that Alexander had ever heard from Bre before. ‘Where am I? What is going on?’ She looked down at her hands, turning them over with a frown. ‘What has happened to me? I feel... different.’

‘Bre?’ Alexander asked tentatively, her plight breaking through the shock. ‘Bre, are you alright?’

‘Bre?’ She gave him a puzzled look. ‘I know that name.’

‘I... yes,’ Alexander answered, trying very hard to hide the surge of fear that clenched around his heart. She didn’t recognise her own name? ‘It’s yours, remember? Bre. Short for...’

‘Breanna,’ she whispered. She put a hand to her temple as she looked up to him, her face crunched up as if she was trying to recall something. ‘And you... you are Lex. My best friend.’

‘Yes,’ Alexander sobbed, relieved beyond measure. ‘It’s me, Bre. You’re here. You’re safe.’

‘No, I’m...’ She suddenly doubled over, grabbing her throat as she coughed again with renewed ferocity. ‘...hot,’ she finally managed, then spewed. A burning dart of gold burst from her mouth, narrowly missing Alexander’s head. It hit the wall beyond him, where it fell apart in a handful of golden flame.

Brea cradled her head with a groan. ‘Something is very wrong. My head...’ Her whole demeanour suddenly shifted, the tilt of her head changing to speak of utter pride and arrogance. ‘I know you,’ she snarled at him, every trace of friendliness gone. ‘The abomination who butchered my men. I should have roasted you like I did the Gan Ceann!’ She sprang to her feet and reached for him, a malevolent glint in her eyes that Alexander had only seen once before.

‘Bre!’ he shouted, jumping out of her reach. It didn’t cost him much effort; her movements were uncoordinated, impeded by the wings that dangled lifelessly from her body. ‘Your name is Bre, remember? We have known each other since we were eight years old.’

She blinked and stopped. ‘Lex?’ she said, as she lowered her arms slowly. The wretchedness and uncertainty of that voice tore at Alexander heart. ‘I don’t...’

‘What is going on in here?’ Alexander turned around as Chloros burst through the door, Hephaestus, Orunmila and Daniel in tow. He froze in his tracks when he saw Breanna, somehow going even more pale than he already was. ‘El, blessed Creator, please preserve us,’ he whispered. ‘What madness is this?’

Breanna had changed once more, turning a haughty look at the Horseman of Death. 'Chloros Al'Grave,' she said coolly. 'Still walking amongst the clay, I see. Does it not bother you to debase yourself like that? You are like swine rolling in the mud.'

'Stay back!' Alexander yelled before Chloros could react, holding up a hand. 'There is something very wrong with her. I think... I think she's absorbed Uriel's memories.' It was not an uncommon occurrence. If an angel got killed while harvesting a human, an echo of that angel's essence remained with the human in question for some time. Alexander himself had experienced the visions and violent mood swings that came with those angelic memories, as had Filipa.

'This is a hell of a lot more than just some Ecclesian ghost, Alexander,' Chloros said. He kept his eyes trained on Bre as he talked, as if he was afraid she would attack him if he looked away for a second. Alexander saw him move his hand to the side as if to summon an Ensouled weapon. 'How do we know this is still Breanna, and not Uriel reincarnated?'

'I spoke with her! She's still in there, Chloros. Just...'

Then a series of claxons went off all across the building, cutting off his words. Alexander looked over the Horseman's shoulder to see the two MCOA wardens, one of them with a finger on an alarm button in the wall. He then shouldered his ASE rifle and joined his comrade in taking aim at Breanna.

'No!' Alexander shouted, but he was too late. Breanna cried and covered her ears, but then saw the soldiers as well. In a flash of gold and pale flesh she had moved past the Horseman and into the waiting room. 'Bre, stop!' Alexander yelled, Chloros and he running after her. But she didn't listen to him. Instead she ran straight at the soldiers with a stride that was both angelically quick and horribly lopsided, as if she didn't know how to move her own body. She stood in front of them before they had the chance to fire a single shot, and for a moment Alexander feared what Uriel's ghost might make her do.

Then she went past them without a single of the soldiers' hairs touched, and burst through the doors on the other side of the room. Alexander, Chloros, angel and Elohim followed her into the T-section beyond, a windowed wall with hallways stretching left and right. Breanna had come to an abrupt halt in front of the window. 'What...' she whispered. Tears leaked from her eyes as she looked at her own reflection for the first time since she had awoken. 'No. This can't be.'

The sound of boots came from the right. Alexander turned to see dozens of Coalition soldiers appear, with Koen and Richard Walter at their head.

The High Marshal looked from Alexander to Chloros to Bre for one moment, taking in the situation. Then he pointed his finger at Breanna and cried, 'Shoot her!'

'No!' Alexander jumped between Bre and the soldiers, determined to shield her with his own life. 'Leave her *alone!*' he shouted, as he lifted both his hands at the firing squad by instinct. A wave of *Gravitas* burst from him unbidden, casting the whole group of humans backwards. Some of them collapsed to the floor, but others hit the walls and slumped to the ground, unconscious or worse.

The sound of breaking glass made Alexander looked up from his handiwork. He turned around to find Breanna jumping through the window. As he ran up to the shattered windowsill, he saw her gliding through the open air, her four wings outstretched like white sails, gleaming in the morning sun. In a matter of seconds she moved beyond Alexander's vision and was gone, swallowed by the endless sky.

Breanna's breath came in short pants as she tumbled through the air, trying unsuccessfully to keep her body level. Her mind was a confusing jumble, awash in fire and panic, blocking out every attempt at coherent thought. She wanted very much to deny what she had seen in the window, but she couldn't deny the reality of her situation. The four wings flailed wildly on her back without any sort of coordination, stark proof that what was happening was not some kind of twisted nightmare.

It was true. Somehow, she had become an angel. No, not just any sort of angel. An Archangel. She could feel it in her body, in the way that her heart beat in the centre of her chest instead of to the side. Her body felt alien, hot and off balance, as if she had gone through one of the Seals that divided the worlds and been cooked back together all wrong. She could sense it in the restless energies that permeated her flesh, urging her to move, to act. And she could hear it in the whispers at the back of her mind, luring her, showing her all sorts of things.

How had this happened to her?

First things first, Breanna thought, as she saw the floors of the skyscraper shooting by rapidly, the wind pulling at her face. She needed to stop her descent, or she was going to be nothing more but a pancake on the ground. Easy peasy, right? What else where wings for, after all, if not flying?

Or so you'd think. Turns out it wasn't so simple as that. Breanna tried to beat her wings, to arrest her fall and regain some altitude. The appendages obeyed, but the winds tore at them so that they acted like rogue sails pulling her every which way. She groaned, her stomach queasy as the world angled around her until the sky was beneath her. Then she was the right way up again, looking down on the tapestry of black clouds that was rapidly growing bigger below her. It was soon clear that she was missing something vital; the lifetime of experience that every angel had at sculpting their movements to fit the air currents.

Panic began to take root in her head. But as soon as it did, she could hear one of the voices in her head. *Breathe*, it said, in a soft whisper. *Relax. Extend your wings, don't just try to beat the winds into submission*.

It was all that Breanna had got, so she complied, relaxing her wings and just stretching them out to the side. The currents immediately grabbed hold of them, making them expand into four billowing sails. Her fall turned into a glide so abruptly that she grunted at the sudden strain on her wing tendons.

Breanna inhaled deeply, trying to slow down her wildly hammering heart. Her wing control was crude, her aerial skills tentative at best. But at the same time, the sensation overcame her of having done this countless times before.

Now that she was no longer plummeting to her death, she took the time to look around. She found she could appreciate the way her eagle eyes brought everything in a sharp, uncanny focus. She could see farther, and across a broader spectrum of colours. It gave her surroundings a sort of raw untamed beauty, like the painting of a pastoral scene. When she looked up, she found she could see the ultraviolet light of the sun, allowing her to stare directly at it. Her eyes drooped lazily as she felt the sunlight caress her skin, sending a sense of immense wellbeing through her whole body. It felt a little like taking a hot bath.

Yes, the voice whispered in her ear as she basked in the glow. Absorb the light. Let it nourish you, sustain you. And to think that the clay dolls had to actually consume things to stay alive! Further proof, if any were needed, of the inferiority of any that were not of angelic origin.

Breanna blinked, shaking her head with a frown. No... that was not right, was it? Where had that thought come from? It felt like there were two people in her mind. One was her. The other... the other knew instinctively how to fly and drink in the sun. He had lived for so long that Breanna couldn't possibly recall it all at once, only seeing it in brief flashes. Dark memories, of cackling with mad glee as she chased humans, plunging her spear in their backs or otherwise burning their settlements with lances of divine fire. She shivered in revulsion as she brought her hand towards her mouth and licked the blood from her lips.

Breanna gritted her teeth and scattered the visions with an effort. She had seen enough to put a name to the other presence, however.

Uriel.

Breanna gritted her teeth and shook her head, trying to break the cobwebs of the Archangel's words. The voices retreated a bit, but they were still there, at the back of her mind. It made her head feel crowded, suffocating her thoughts and preventing her from thinking clearly.

She wanted to flee – to run and hide from this ghost and this cage of flesh that was not hers. In her jumbled mind there was only one place that made sense, only one place that made her feel sheltered and safe. But she would need to get her bearings first to get there.

She looked down at the dark cloud layer underneath her. There was nothing for it; she would have to go through.

She angled her weight forward by sheer instinct, setting a steady decline of her altitude in motion. The clouds loomed closer and closer until she sank into them.

The whole world turned dark and lightless, the soothing sensation of the sun gone. Clouds surrounded her on all sides: huge towering cathedrals of black that made her feel small and insignificant. Breanna shivered; there was something ominous about these clouds. It felt as if they were pregnant with violence, mere seconds away from unleashing

their power and striking the world with rain and lightning and thunder. So what was holding them back?

Breanna crossed the cloud layer as quickly as possible. For a few seconds, all she saw was black. Then she was through, and the dreary world below unfolded below her eyes. Dreary, because not a single ray of sunlight pierced the gloom. Breanna could see well enough with her enhanced angel eyes, so she set a course, trusting to Uriel's stolen instincts to navigate.

It took her a few hours – hours during which she had to suffer through the Archangel's disgusting thoughts. He whispered to her of Ecclesian superiority and how all humans were but one step above animals. She tried her best to ignore them, but that was easier said than done: the thoughts felt like her own. More than once she caught herself nodding along with Uriel's words as their logic seemed evident to her. She tried to block them out and focus on her surroundings, but the effort exhausted her mind.

Eventually Breanna reached her destination: her home town, the city of Brussels.

She had known what to expect – Dullahan had explained, just before the Battle of Stonehenge. Even so it shocked Breanna to the core to see the burnt-out buildings. Charred husks that stretched as far as the eye could see, empty and desolate. There was not a soul in sight, living or otherwise. Uriel had been very thorough when he razed the city to the ground while Breanna had been away in the hell worlds. It was dead; there was nothing left.

Breanna felt tears prickle in her eyes as she looked out across the carcass of the place where she and Lex had grown up together. It hurt – more than she had thought it would. And yet, that was nothing to the hurt she knew was yet to come.

She launched herself into a steep dive, trying very hard not to miss her mark as she tried to land. Even so she touched ground five houses too far, almost twisting her ankle as she did so. There was definitely an art to Ecclesian life.

Breanna walked down the street, bracing herself against the flood of grief that the sights evoked in her. There stood the house where she and Lex had gone to steal apples. The apple trees were gone, mere stumps in a blackened patch of grass. There was the house of the elderly guy who had always waved at them in passing.

And there stood the house of Lex and his mum, where they and their mothers had convened so often. And where Anya Stevens and Cybele Mervilde had died in each other's arms.

Breanna hesitated on the threshold. It looked no different from the other razed buildings, burnt in the fires the Seraphim had set. Even so she longed to get inside, to see the place where she and Lex had made so many happy childhood memories. The corpses were gone, long since cleared away by volunteers, so she would be spared the sight of her dead mother. Even so she could not make herself go inside. She walked past and entered the house of her mother and herself right next to it, as wrecked as the others.

She didn't bother to look around. Instead she ran upstairs two steps at a time, until she came at the attic. She burst through the door and entered the room beyond, the rafters of her room all blackened and burnt. There was no trace of the colourful pictures she had

hung around everywhere to spruce up her room. Nor was there any sign of her art supplies, or any of her other belongings. The only thing that betrayed that someone had ever lived in this attic was the metal bedframe, all twisted and burnt.

Breanna collapsed on the middle, sobbing. She hugged herself and let loose a wailing scream, finally letting go of all the grief and other emotions she had kept inside.

Gabriel left his tent and scowled at the darkened sky.

He was not the only angel to do that. These strange clouds blocked the sunlight that his kind needed for nourishment, much in the same way as plants. To be deprived of it for months on end now left his rebels surly and bad-tempered. He could see it in the face of Endora, the First Archon of his Principalities and his right hand. There was a downcast cast to her mouth that had not been there before. ‘Here are the latest scout reports from Quinn,’ she said, handing him a stack of reports. Gabriel grunted and took them. It stung, the way he, patron of the angelic caste of scouts, had to get his reports second-handed. He had no choice though; the humans and Ensouled still didn’t trust him and his Golden Dawn enough to let them send their own scouts. No matter that they had rebelled against Ecclesian bigotry and the injustice of the angelic caste system. No matter they had slain and poisoned and burnt their own kind, to soften up Uriel’s army just before the Battle of Stonehenge. Or they that had butchered their kin in the hallowed halls of the Golden Citadel itself – as close to sacrilege as an Ecclesian could get. Gabriel himself had even sneaked into the personal quarters of Michael, tyrannical overlord and fellow Archangel, and destroyed the Scripture, the book that had kept him and his chained to the despot with knowledge of the future. But still the humans didn’t let any of his Principalities through the Seal. Fearing, no doubt, that they might make contact with Michael’s ilk to prepare and turn their coat once more.

Fat chance of that, Gabriel thought, as he flicked through the reports, grimacing at how many details the accounts of these human Coalition soldiers omitted. Still, he got the gist of it: there was no sign of an angelic presence in Metaphusikon at all. The world between Ecclesia and the human world of Phusikon stayed as empty as it had always been since the fall of the native Elohim.

He must be entrenching himself at the Golden Citadel, Gabriel thought, absently rolling up the papers and tapping them against the palm of his hand. Which made sense: after Uriel’s defeat and the havoc Gabriel’s rebels had wrought, he wouldn’t have any able commanders to spare to lead a second punishment army.

Nor would it have been wise to do so: the Coalition forces were by now thoroughly dug in at the entrance of the Seal. Led by Mildred Quinn, interim President of the United States and Walter’s right hand man, the human army showed a remarkable discipline for their kind. Gabriel had spoken with Quinn on several occasions now, and each time he had been impressed by the keen insight of the soldier turned politician. He had managed to swiftly and efficiently organise an army that numbered in the millions

without order breaking down. Gabriel could spot it in the far distance, beyond his own perimeter: a sprawling mass of tents, stretching far beyond the horizon in long neat rows. A blanket of soldiers so thick that the Mesopotamian Marshes below were almost invisible. It sat mostly drained, the soggy soil exposed by climate change and years of agricultural development. But nature still managed to make its presence felt to Gabriel's forces, through the cloying heat and the many insects that enjoyed the occasional nibble of angelic flesh. They needed to lay wooden floorboards in the camp by way of roads, and sand bags to keep the tepid marsh water outside the tents. All of which only served to worsen the morale of an army already in low spirits.

It didn't help that the Golden Dawn was camped a bit apart from the main force. They were farther away from the Seal than any other, yet still had the eery army of Animated behind them. Supposedly for their protection, but Gabriel recognised it for what it was: if they should ever switch sides again, these troops would fall on them from behind and slaughter them.

Gabriel shivered as he thought of the Animated. The result of the ritual the Horsemen had performed at Stonehenge, some of their souls had been crafted upon Creation's corpses. An army of the dead – millions of them, all tethered to the Horsemen's every whim. He could sense them in the distance: a seething mass of singular souls, with at their centre the vortex of scarlet power that was Bellicosa. They had been streaming in steadily for months now, from all over the world, obeying the clarion call of the Horseman of War. The ichor in Gabriel's veins ran cold if he thought of that Ensouled gleam of intelligence in their eyes. Though these souls did not seem to be fully aware – they did not speak, for one, or otherwise try to communicate – they were nonetheless capable enough to understand and follow orders. They moved in an odd, jerky way, as if they were pulling their bodies along. Their souls were not fused with their original bodies after all, making them strangers in their own flesh.

Gabriel might have felt sorry for them if they didn't discomfit him so. Or if he hadn't seen the angelic corpses amongst them. Not all Animated wore a human body, and ever since the Battle of Stonehenge, Ecclesian flesh was in ample supply.

Gabriel sighed and looked away, trying very hard to forget about the sacrilege done to the flesh of their kinsmen. Yet even as he did so, he abruptly felt something shift in the currents of Creation. His Principalities distinguished themselves from other castes by their inborn tracking senses, which allowed them to detect the energy signature of other entities a world away. It was that sense that had made them so uncannily good at hunting down Ensouled for all those millennia. And it was that sense that now suddenly went haywire at the back of his mind, as a tiny sun of gold suddenly blossomed into being out of nowhere. A sun that felt eerily familiar.

Uriel? Gabriel thought with dread.

The rebel Archangel looked at Endora, whose bleak expression echoed his. Clearly she had felt the power signature as well. As had any Principality in the camp. Feathers ruffled, unrest spreading through the rebel ranks like a disease when Gabriel's patron caste shared the news.

Gabriel and Endora immediately set to work, soothing the minds of their underlings with a few reassuring words. Whatever this anomaly was, it was definitely not Uriel. There were enough eyewitness accounts of the Butcher's demise during the Battle of Stonehenge. They would track down the source of this new trace, and they would find out the truth.

They all believed him; one of the benefits of a hierarchic society where all power was centralised around the Archangels. If you were one, you could do no wrong. They trusted you to have all the answers, to determine what was right and wrong. Even if you didn't, and unashamedly lied to their faces.

And yet while doing so, a thought couldn't help but haunt Gabriel's mind: what if it really *was* Uriel, come back from the grave? What then? Their betrayal of Michael was a well-known fact by now. The Butcher would surely come looking for them – even alone, an Archangel was still a force to be reckoned with, and Gabriel had never been as strong. His talents lay in other directions. He could see his worries echoed in Endora's eyes. She had staged the revolt that had murdered so many of Uriel's soldiers right before the Battle of Stonehenge – a fact that the Archangel was not apt to forget.

'My Lord!' The crowd had only just settled down as one of his scouts broke through it. He pointed at a speck in the sky that rapidly grew closer – close enough for Gabriel to recognise its distinct Ecclesian shape.

He frowned – there should not be any angels loose in the Phusikon at all. All of the enemy combatants were vanquished or otherwise bottled up at the other side of the Seal, and the Golden Dawn had been instructed to remain in this one place.

Then he recognised the energy signature of the angel, and instructed the perimeter guards to let him through with a wave of his hand.

'Well met, Daniel,' he said, as the last of the Grigori landed right in front of him.

'Well met,' Daniel breathed, gulping air hungrily with his hands on his knees. Gabriel frowned. Whatever had caused his newest lieutenant to abandon his post at Chloros' side, is must be of grave importance. Daniel didn't just look like he had just flown all the way from London without pause; he had also failed to make the proper form of address or signs of obeisance due an Archangel. Gabriel chose to let it slide, however. 'Why are you here?' he asked instead, waiting impatiently until the angel had recovered his breath.

'Grave news, my Lord,' Daniel panted. He looked around himself at the crowd that had gathered around him; as ringleader of the first ever angel uprising against the Archangels in Creation, Daniel had a near mythical reputation amongst the Dawn. 'We should talk in private,' he said.

Gabriel nodded and led Daniel towards his personal tent, offering him every courtesy as he listened to the Grigori's report.

They were back outside a few minutes later. Gabriel was dressed in his best armour, his battle sceptre below his belt, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice. The cast of his face was grim as he followed Daniel into the sky and set their course.

He had some hunting to do.

Chapter 3

Walter burst through the door of his own office, followed in close succession by Chloros, Alexander, Koen, Filipa and the Elohim. Coalition guards flanked them, their faces stone cold as they held their ASE rifles tightly. Their High Marshal was in as vile a mood as they, throwing himself down in his chair and looking up at the group assembled in front of him with a viper's eyes. 'Explain yourself,' he said, his words clipped short as if by a knife's edge.

Alexander's brow crinkled in confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

Walter's look darkened even more at his words. 'Explain why you *assaulted* my men, assaulted *me*.'

'That is what you wanted to talk about?' Alexander said, unable to keep the disbelief from his voice. 'Why I would not just let you shoot my best friend? You have got to be kidding me.'

'She's a clear and present danger.'

'You're talking about Bre!' Alexander yelled. He put his hands down on the desk as he felt his temper get the better of him, the wood creaking beneath his Ensouled fury. The soldiers that now flanked Walter exchanged discomfited glances; one of them touched some kind of pendant at his neck. 'She has fought beside us at the Halls, at Stonehenge! She is the sole reason your damned Coalition hasn't been wiped out by Uriel! She's my best friend, not the enemy!'

'And now an Archangel, apparently,' Walter rebuked, not convinced by either Alexander's outrage or words. 'The vessel of a power far too big to be contained, controlled or held to account for its deeds. Bad enough that we have to deal with Gabriel, but a newborn Archangel with Uriel's ghost inside her?' He shook his head. 'Such a threat cannot be left unmet. Seriously,' he added, looking at Alexander with slight exasperation. 'What else did you think we were going to do?'

'Honestly, I only came because Koen said the best way to find and help Bre was to smooth things over and coordinate with you,' Alexander said. He looked sideways at Koen, who had the grace to look vaguely ashamed.

'Oh, we *will* track this rogue Archangel down, have no doubt about that,' Walter said. 'And we'll finish the job you kept us from doing.'

'Like hell you will!' Alexander snarled, bowing low over the High Marshal. The whole desk was shaking now, papers and pens falling to the ground beneath the force. 'Try it, and you will know what it means to cross the Patchwork Man.'

'A meaningless title,' Walter scoffed. He turned towards Chloros. 'What say you, Horseman? Your kind has been abused for millennia by the Archangels. Will you join our hunt?'

Chloros hesitated before replying – long seconds during which Alexander fancied he could hear his heart hammering in his ears, despite no longer having one. 'If you are

resolved on hunting Breanna Mervilde,’ he finally said, ‘my Reapers will shed blood as well.’

‘Thank you,’ Walter said.

‘I wasn’t talking about hers.’ The Horseman’s gaze was fixed upon Walter’s, as to leave no doubt whose blood it then was they would spill. The High Marshal leaned back in his chair, anger and frustration clearly writ across his face. ‘You really want to go to war over *this*? A mere girl?’

‘We don’t want to go to war with you at all,’ Chloros said. ‘Until you give us reason to. Breanna Mervilde has always done right by me and mine. She is our friend and ally, and we stand by her. As Alexander Stevens said: cross us at your peril.’

Silence fell after those words; dangerous silence, pregnant with all sorts of danger as everyone stared at each other as if sizing each other up. Koen, perhaps sensing that violence might erupt at any moment, spoke up. ‘What I don’t get is how this happened,’ he said. ‘How does a human, albeit an Ensouled, just turn into an Archangel? That hasn’t happened before, hasn’t it, Hephaestus?’

‘I...’ the Elohim fumbled, a little surprised at suddenly being addressed. Then he gathered himself. ‘To my knowledge it has not,’ he said. The look on his face showed that he knew Koen was trying to lead the conversation away to another topic, in an attempt to defuse the tension before it would come to blows. He played along, reaching inside one of the many pockets of his smith’s apron and pulling out a misshapen lump of white metal. ‘This is the culprit, I believe. Part of it, at least.’

‘What do you mean?’ Chloros asked, intrigued despite himself. ‘What is that?’

‘The remains of Breanna’s adamas knife.’ The fire god shook his head, the look in his burning orbs of fire mournful. ‘It’s my fault, really. I should have warned her. The adamas can absorb any power it comes into contact with,’ he explained, when he saw the confused looks of the others. ‘Every power, no matter how big or strong. But the metal can’t just contain all of that within itself. It needs to be bound to a living receptacle, who can then use that excess power until it runs out – in this case, Breanna.’ He lowered the adamas, looking dispirited. ‘When Breanna struck Uriel, she created a link between the adamas and him. The knife couldn’t possibly absorb the sheer power of an Archangel all at once – it would be like trying to drink the ocean through a straw. His powers should have come gradually to her, in a manageable way, enhancing her steadily as he weakened. Hephaestus put the adamas back in his pocket. ‘She would have been alright – *should* have been alright – if it wasn’t for the fact that Uriel then touched Aviur’s stone at the heart of the Horsemen’s ritual, tearing most of his energy away just before Breanna killed him. The Elohim shook his head. ‘I think that touching that orb might have forged some sort of connection between the ritual and Breanna, through Uriel and the adamas. Aviur’s stone was essentially a program for redistributing energies on a global scale. Once it was complete...’

‘Uriel’s energies were redistributed as well,’ Filipa finished. ‘Into Breanna.’ She whistled softly. ‘Damn.’

‘Damn indeed,’ Chloros echoed with a sigh. ‘*If all goes well, you’ll have more than one army*,’ he said, folding his arms. ‘*More than an army*. Aviur’s words,’ he added by way of reply to the questioning stares. ‘Bloody Djinn are still as enigmatically slippery as ever.’ He sounded fond as he said it.

‘It’s a fluke,’ Hephaestus said. ‘A once in a lifetime event that cannot and should not be replicated. I will take this adamas back to my forge to put it to other use.’

‘And what will happen to Bre?’ Alexander asked, worried.

‘Hard to say,’ Hephaestus said, with a sigh that caused steam to erupt from his lips. ‘Her body seems to have made the shift successfully. But her mind... it could go two ways. Either she successfully integrates the power of Uriel into herself, thus becoming the first new Archangel since the dawn of Creation. Or...’

‘Or...?’ Alexander prompted.

‘Or she could be overwhelmed by it. She would lose herself – her memories, her identity. Uriel would essentially be reborn in her body.’

Alexander remained still for a moment. Then he nodded and turned on his heels. ‘I’m going to search for her.’

‘My troops will still hunt her down,’ Walter warned.

‘Let’s just see whoever gets there first,’ Alexander replied without looking at the Coalition leader. He then marched out of the office, Filipa in tow. ‘Are you with me?’ he asked her, as they walked down to the hallways.

‘Oh, I’m with you alright,’ Filipa said with a nod. ‘In fact, I think I know a way to track Breanna down.’

Breanna drifted listlessly through the day, haunting the rooms of her childhood like a ghost.

She told herself she had come here to lay low for a while, to have a secluded place where she could break in her new flesh while at the same time banishing Uriel’s ghost. Now that she was here, however, she was forced to admit the lie of that. Her choice had not been one of rational consideration. It had been instinct that had driven her to come home: a yearning for the love and affection she had always felt here.

There was none of that to be found, however. The house felt empty without her mother in it, and yet full of mementos that reminded Breanna of her. There was her very first painting easel, which her mother had bought for her when she was but a toddler. There was the espresso machine she had acquired as Breanna’s coffee addiction grew with her age. Breanna was under constant assault from beautiful memories turned into gut-wrenching agony by but one fact. *She’s gone. She’s gone forever.*

Breanna tried to keep busy, to keep those morbid thoughts from overwhelming her. First she went through her closets, in search of clothes to cover herself. Eventually she settled on jeans with a white top, and added one of her brown jackets more out of a sense of nostalgia than because it was necessary. It took her some time to figure out how

to accommodate her wings, if these useless feathered trains tracking dust behind her could be called wings. More like oversized feather dusters. After several attempts she succeeded by cutting twin slits in the back.

As she sorted through the clothes, she had also found her mother's nursing scrubs. She had had to avert her eyes to keep herself from crying. When she had looked down at her hands, she had found them flickering with golden light, as if trying to tear itself out of her flesh. Breanna hid her hands beneath her elbows and fled the room. If only she could have fled her flesh as easily.

Once she had clothed herself there was little else to occupy her mind. She cleaned up the house, but with everything burned or in rubble, that was quickly done with. She didn't need to cook or go looking for food; she quickly discovered that, while her stomach still functioned and growled in angry protest, she could easily go without. The sunlight she had collected on her flight proved far more effective at keeping her body nourished, despite the hunger pangs.

That left her with nothing to do, nothing to keep her distracted from her situation. Nothing to keep Uriel's memories at bay, as they endlessly battered against the gates of her sanity, trying to twist her thoughts his way. Breanna had caught herself multiple times thinking about how every race but the angels were vermin and should submit to the glory of Ecclesia. One time her hand had been on the doorstop before she could stop, ready to take off and hunt every last Ensouled, Elohim and human down. She could no longer trust her own mind.

She couldn't even use her Attic to fight back. Every time she tried to enter her mind palace, there was just... blackness. Like the Conceive just wasn't there. Further proof, if any was still necessary, that she no longer belonged to the human race. Only humans could influence the Cradle of Dreams, after all. Breanna supposed that she now looked like other angels: a bright bonfire of golden energy, like a roaring sun.

The loss of her Attic stung. It had been her refuge, her constant companion since she and Lex had been taught it at eight years old. Losing it felt like yet another tie to her old life was cut.

Every time she thought of the full extent of her plight, hopelessness threatened to drown her. Here she was, stuck in a battle of dominance over her own body with an entity vastly more ancient and powerful than she. It didn't matter that she had been the one to kill Uriel; that had been as much luck as it had been her. If not for the adamas Hephaestus had gifted her, or the Horsemen's ritual, she would not have been able to pull it off. Uriel, on the other hand, had millennia upon millennia worth of memories of being an Archangel, most of which had been spent slaughtering humans. How was she going to defeat whatever part of him that was left inside her?

She didn't go outside. There was no reason to. Brussels had become a ghost town, a husk of the thriving city it had been but a few months ago. There was nobody left. No life at all, besides her. The ghost of Brussels.

Besides, what would she do if she *did* meet someone? With her having a more than passing resemblance to mankind's worst enemies, that would mean trouble. At best,

she would be shunned; at worst, she would be hunted. She vividly remembered the way those Coalition soldiers would have shot her if not for Lex's intervention. She could no longer move in human society. She blinked back tears, trying hard not to give in to desperation. What kind of life was left to her, looking like this?

That was not even taking into account how alien this new body was to her. Her movements were all topsy-turvy, with her muscles constantly moving differently from what she meant them to do. This angelic body was balanced differently from her human one, causing her to trip over her own limbs dozens of times. Her heart beat faster; it felt strange for it to be located in the centre of her chest instead of to the left. She felt trapped in her own skin. She hated every inch of it; if she could have peeled it off, she would have.

She walked towards the bathroom, taking a set of scissors with her as she did so. Her long braid kept getting tangled up in her wings, so she meant to give herself a haircut. She put herself in front of the mirror and began to snip. She moved the scissors carefully around her head, fully aware that her lacking control over her own limbs could easily lead to an injury. Even so blonde curls fell steadily to the floor as she cut her hair short.

Once she was done she looked up at her own reflection. A stranger stared back at her. A stranger with a face that vaguely resembled her own, but it was different nonetheless. The edges were sharper and more pronounced, as if someone had cut the baby fat of her cheek and chin away. The hair came to just up to her ears, and the eyes...

... the eyes were twin suns of golden amber. Slanted eagle-eyes of a kind she had seen countless times before, closing them as she slaughtered her way through their owners. Or as she cut off their head.

Breanna sobbed, the scissors falling from her hand. She had thought that cutting her hair would make her feel more at ease, like she was taking ownership off this body. Instead the reverse seemed to be true. She felt like yet another thing that tied her to the old Breanna was gone. Every step took her further away from who she was, and towards... what, exactly? She dreaded to find out.

She suddenly couldn't stand looking at this creature in the mirror for one second longer. It needed to go away. She would make it go away. Breanna picked up the scissor and put it against the tendon of her right wing. She fully meant to cut these parasites from her body.

Something deep inside herself whimpered at the prospect of such pain, but that was nothing to the storm of protest that rose up from within Uriel's memories. The wings, the very sign of an angel's superiority! The hallmark of an Archangel, no less! Clipping those was be the worst kind of sacrilege that could be done to an Ecclesian.

Breanna's hand trembled beneath the mental onslaught. Finally, after a second – an eternity – she lowered the scissors with a frustrated cry, hating herself for her own weakness.

Then her hand ignited, and the scissors warped and melted as if in a roaring surface of golden fire.

Breanna yelped and threw the smoking lump of metal in the sink. She nursed her hand, checking for injuries. There were none to be found, however. This had not been the

first time since she had awoken from her coma that she had spontaneously burst into flame. And, like before, she marvelled that her skin showed no burns. Her hand was unblemished, only a little hot – a tingling, pleasant warmth.

Breanna closed her eyes and breathed deeply in an attempt to calm herself. It didn't work though; her frustrations just built and built, until she could no longer restrain herself.

She punched the mirror, shattering her hated reflection into dozens of pieces, then collapsed weeping on the floor. Pain lanced through her mind as the shards of glass cut into her fist. The cuts oozed an amber substance, like watered-down honey. It seemed angelic ichor now flowed through her veins instead of blood. She should know; she had spilled plenty of it.

She remained like that for some time, kneeling in between the broken glass. Then she forced herself to get to her feet. She had only just wrapped a bandage from her mother's first aid kit around her hand when she heard a muffled sound in the street.

Voices.

It seemed that she had been found after all.

Alexander dismounted, his Ensouled steed evaporating as his feet touched the ground. He sniffed the air, his senses sharpened with *Perceptio*. 'Oh yeah,' he said to Filipa, who landed beside him. 'This is definitely the right place.' The whole environment was positively *brimming* with angelic power, like a sun had landed to illuminate the corpse of Brussels from within. Alexander forced himself not to look too closely at the carnage. Brussels' demise had partially been his fault. Uriel's angels had lured him away with some bogey attack halfway around the globe, so they could sneak behind his back and put the whole place to the torch. And, while Alexander rationally understood he had been tricked and was not to blame, his heart still told him differently.

'I told you,' Filipa said. 'The system works.'

The system Filipa talked about was the quiet Ensoulment of a few dozen military and communication satellites, essentially adding their hardware to the Grave Song. This allowed the Grave Watch to tap into them at will, studying the world below through an Ensouled's eyes. Alexander could see it now, in his Cemetery: a phantasm that hovered above his hand, a perfect facsimile of the globe that showed the different energies in several colours. Grey for nature's currents, blue, red, green and yellow for souls, and gold for angels.

The map showed two main hotspots of Ecclesian energy. One was a seething mass at the Mesopotamian Marshes where the Golden Dawn was gathering. The other was a bright spot of gold that covered the entirety of Brussels.

Alexander's mental self spun the globe with a flick of his wrist, then zoomed in on the city. The golden hue was centred just where he had thought it would be.

He left his Cemetery and returned to the world of flesh. ‘She’s in there,’ he said, nodding towards the old home of the Mervildes. ‘Walter will be furious when he finds out that we’ve hijacked his satellites, you know,’ he added, as the two of them walked down the street.

‘If he finds out,’ Filipa said with a derisive snort. ‘How is he supposed to know? The satellites are behaving as they ought, and we’re not telling. Besides, look at the benefits. Now that it’s properly set up, no otherworldly being will be able to move across Phusikon without us seeing it. If someone, angel or otherwise, attacks, we’ll know immediately, and can react accordingly. The world will sleep sounder knowing we’re there to protect them. We should have done this ages ago.’

There was a smug undertone to her words, as well there should be. The whole project was her idea, quietly put into effect by the rest of the Alexandrians over the last few weeks. Alexander had not even known of it until now, occupied as he had been by Breanna’s plight.

‘Thanks for having my back,’ Alexander said. ‘I know you don’t agree with my priorities.’

‘I understand wanting to help a friend,’ Filipa replied with a terse nod. ‘Your loyalty does you credit, Alessandro. Let’s agree to first sort this Breanna situation out. Then you come with me and do the same with the Grave Watch.’

‘Agreed,’ Alexander said with a nod, though he couldn’t help but sigh in the private part of his Cemetery. This again. Honestly, if anyone should be the Phylarch of the Grave Watch, it should be Filipa Armando. She would lead them far better than he ever could – she already had, these last few months. So why did she continue to imply that it should be him?

All of those thoughts ran at the background of Alexander’s mind. Mostly, however, he didn’t overly care about the leadership of the Grave Watch, or Walter’s reaction to the usurpation of his satellites. His attention was firmly focused on Breanna, alone and afraid in the middle of this wasteland. He needed to be there for her, to support and help her.

He couldn’t help but shiver as they passed his old house. He vividly remembered the last time he was here, mere hours after the Sacking. The corpses of Merriphen and his mother Azmavetha had been outside; inside, he had found the bodies of his and Bre’s mother, together in a last embrace. It didn’t matter that his mother had reviled him, had decried him a monster. She was his mother; he had loved her nonetheless. And the thought that she was gone never failed to hurt.

Then he came at the Mervilde house, and his throat was squeezed shut entirely.

Bre sat waiting on the porch, her fists clenched to her side as she looked up to him. She looked bedraggled, with deep shadows beneath her haunted eyes, her cheeks hollow. All in all she looked sad and tired, a far cry from the vibrant girl he used to know.

‘Stay there!’ she shouted, once she had looked up and seen him. She lifted her hands to ward him off. One of them was wrapped in fresh bandages. ‘I’m warning you.’

‘It’s alright,’ he said, in his best soothing voice. ‘It’s me, Bre. It’s Lex. Your best friend. I’ve come to help you, to take care of you.’

Alexander moved forwards – carefully, as if he was approaching a skittish animal – but Bre snarled at him. ‘Not one step closer, Claywalker spawn.’ Her hands shimmered as if preparing to unleash heavenly fire. Then she blinked and she was herself again, the golden light dimming as she lowered her hands. ‘Please go,’ she whispered, in such a heart-wrenching voice that it gutted Alexander to hear it.

‘I’m not leaving, Bre,’ he said mulishly. ‘Do you really think I’m going to let you stay in this El-forsaken place? There is nothing for us here but ashes. We should...’

Filipa grabbed his arm, interrupting him as she pointed up in the sky with a warning cry. As he looked up, he saw two angels descend towards them, like swooping hawks.

Alexander swore and instinctively marshalled his souls to summon his half-and-a-half. The Ensouled construct fell in his hand with a reassuring weight. He berated himself as he readied the sword. He should have felt them coming, but his full attention had been on Bre.

Then they landed, in a fluttering of wings and feathers, and he recognised them.

‘Dear El,’ Gabriel whispered, looking Bre up and down. ‘It’s true.’ He tried to move closer, but Alexander jumped in between them. ‘Leave her be!’

‘I mean her no harm, Patchwork Man,’ Gabriel said, moving his hands to the side as if to show that he was unarmed. Alexander was not reassured though. The Archangel was decked out for battle, in impressive plate armour of some silvery metal. Besides, an Archangel was itself a weapon.

‘Feel free to kill those traitors, degenerate abomination,’ Bre hissed, with nods at Gabriel and Daniel, his companion. ‘It would be lovely if you slaughtered each other. It would save me the effort of having to do so myself.’ She groaned, putting her head in her hand. ‘I mean, let them pass, Lex. I want to hear what they have to say.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I can deal with him, no worries.’ Her voice was weary but steady; she sounded more confident than before.

Alexander didn’t like it, but he reluctantly moved aside, a thunderous expression on his face as Gabriel walked up to her.

‘Breanna Mervilde,’ the Archangel breathed, taking her in from head to toe. Then he paused. ‘It *is* you, right?’

‘Currently, yes,’ Bre said, still rubbing her head. ‘But I’m kind of in a forced co-housing situation at the moment. Can’t promise our pal Uriel won’t emerge and butcher the lot of you.’

‘I’m willing to take that risk,’ Gabriel said. He gazed in her eyes as if trying to read something in their amber depths. ‘He is no longer in charge.’

Bre snorted. ‘I’m not so sure of that. What do you want?’