

Chronicle of Life

Book two of

Chronicles of the Horsemen

Eerste druk/First print © 2026 Vincent C. Poinet

Coverfoto/Cover photo: Sandra Aljarrah

ISBN: 9789465380551

Derde editie, uitgegeven via Brave New Books

Niets uit deze uitgave mag verveelvoudigd en/of openbaar gemaakt worden door middel van druk, fotokopie, microfilm, internet of op welke wijze dan ook, zonder schriftelijke toestemming van de auteur.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, by print, photocopy, microfilm, internet, or any other means without the written permission from the author.

Vincent C. Poinet

Chronicle of Life

Book two of
Chronicles of the
Horsemen

Prologue

*Henchmen to the Judges of Souls,
To save all souls, unthanked, unmourned.
Three of them, both living and dead to be,
Reaching out towards their humanity.
Rejected and reviled by the ones their own,
Their souls fractured by wounds their body unknown.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 2:06 –

Alexander Stevens had done truly remarkable things for someone his age. At not even twenty-five years old, he had learned how to wield the powers of the soul. He had spoken with a god and the walking dead. He had travelled to other worlds and stormed an angel bulwark to free the three Horsemen imprisoned there. He had fought Malachi and Hashmalim and had held his own against thirty Cherubim for quite some time. He had stood in the way of an Archangel, and lived to tell the tale.

His latest opponent stymied him, however.

He stared at the door in front of him – a regular, white-painted door – and felt himself sweating with apprehension. The palm of his one remaining hand felt moist. It didn't help that he was wrapped from head to toe in thick clothes despite summer being almost upon them. He was all in black, from the jeans and t-shirt to his knee-height epauletted coat. He used a hat to hide the way his black curly hair had turned a very stark white. Tinted glasses concealed the multi-coloured luminous veins running through his brown eyes.

He checked his gloves, ensuring they obscured the fact that his left arm ended at the elbow. He stood like that for a moment, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he tried to find the nerve to face the dragon beyond the door. If he still had a pulse, he was sure it would be racing like a horse right now.

He looked over his shoulder, trying to reassure himself. Then he turned back to the door and rang the doorbell before his courage could desert him.

At first, nothing happened. Then he heard shuffling and the rattling of locks being undone. His enhanced hearing told him there were quite a few more locks than there used to be.

Finally, the door swung open, revealing a thin, frail-looking woman in her fifties. She looked at him once, then threw herself at him with a cry, pulling him in an iron hug that would have pressed all air from his lungs. If he still had them, that was. As it was,

Alexander was glad that his clothes were thick enough that she didn't notice the lack of a heartbeat.

For one moment, he allowed himself to relax in her comforting embrace. He hadn't known her touch for some time, and there had been times in the past few months when he had been sure he would never feel it again.

'Hello, mother,' he said, with a smile so wide that it threatened to leave his face altogether. He kept his voice low, so the reverberating quality of his words was almost unnoticeable. He grabbed her shoulders tenderly and ended the hug. 'It has been some time.'

His mother was shivering in his arms. 'My beautiful boy,' she sobbed, tears dripping from her eyes. Her voice trembled as if undecided between happiness and grief. 'What happened to you? Where have you been?'

'Perhaps we should go inside,' Alexander said. 'There are things we need to talk about.'

'We should get Cybele,' Anya and the mother of Alexander's best friend, Breanna. 'She needs to hear this as well.'

'No need,' Alexander answered. 'Bre has already gone to talk to her and explain the situation. She's all right, mother. We both are.' He gently but firmly steered his mother back inside.

'Thank God,' his mother breathed, wiping tears from her cheeks as she preceded him to the kitchen. 'After you two disappeared without a trace... and then the police found your dad's car next to a burned-down house in Luik...' She clasped a hand to her mouth, stifling a sob. 'We feared you were both dead.'

El above, Alexander thought, cringing at his mother's distress. He and Bre had known that it would cause their mothers no end of grief when they had hared off on their self-made quest. They had tried to contact them during their imprisonment at Tyne Cot, but had failed. Then they had had to go in hiding across the world, and then the Wild Hunt had come... it was only logical that they had been assumed dead, after such a long period of time.

The global earthquakes ravaging the realms these past few months had already exacted a high toll in blood and lives. The dust had only just begun to settle on the lootings and murders that had followed in the wake of the third quake. What were two more corpses to the pile?

He looked more thoroughly at his mother and didn't like what he saw. She had always been thin as a scarecrow, but now she looked positively ghoulish, her eyes sunk deep into shadowed sockets, the lines of her face turned razor-sharp. When she hugged him, he could count all of her ribs. Alexander doubted that she had had a proper meal since he had vanished and felt guilty all over.

'I'll make you something,' his mother sniffled, marching over to the stove.

'That isn't necessary,' he said.

‘Nonsense!’ his mother cried. ‘You look thin as a reed. Wherever you’ve been, I’m sure that you haven’t had a proper meal. And I’ll get a bath running, so you can relax and lay back before you go to bed.’

Alexander sighed as he followed her through the living room. To call his mother overprotective was an understatement, but he didn’t want to be trapped by her smothering again. So he intercepted her before she could take the stairs. ‘I’m not staying, mother,’ he said, gently taking hold of her wrist. ‘I’m just passing through to explain things, that’s all.’

His mother looked at him with disbelief. ‘What’s this nonsense?’ she said at last. ‘You’ve only just returned! Why would you... Where have you been?’

‘I’m staying with some people, mother,’ he said, gently leading her to one of the seats in the living room. ‘We’re working on something... something important.’ He scraped his throat to explain – and found that his voice failed him. How could he tell his mother, who got skittish when he crossed the street, that he was about to take part in a war? A war between two celestial armies that would see every human’s soul reaped as fuel if he and his didn’t stop it? How was he to tell her that the very Apocalypse was about to take place, here, now, and that he would be at the forefront of the battlefield?

As he fumbled for words, his mother turned to the blaring tv – she must have been watching the news when he arrived. Alexander looked at the screen as well, listening to the news anchor.

‘This video has only just been released,’ the anchor said, his face smoothed in a mask of professional concern. ‘Taken by an anonymous witness, these are the first images that might shed some light on the series of mysterious killings that have been reported all over the world. I should warn you: this footage is quite disturbing.’ The newsreader was replaced by the shaky, unsteady image from a handheld camera. It showed two blurs whirling around each other, too fast to see what they were. Then the video slowed down, and the blurs resolved into two pale men, one with golden hair, the other with silvery white curls. The bright-haired one sported a set of wings, a spear and medieval-looking armour, whereas the other was clothed all in black and wielded a glittering sword. They attacked each other, the video showing each of their moves to good effect up until the swordman buried his blade in the spearman’s stomach. His hapless opponent sank to his knees, bursting into flames as he hit the ground. The pale-haired man stepped back from the burning pile of twisted bones, then turned around and walked out of the frame. For the second, his eyes were clearly visible to the camera. His irises seemed to give off light, tinted with all colours of the rainbow. The video paused for a second to zoom in on the eyes – the only clearly visible feature of the man’s face – then the screen flashed back to the anchor.

Alexander could feel the blood pounding in his ears, only catching fragments of what the newsreader said afterwards. ‘... considered a reckoning between rival doomsday cults... terrorists with prosthetics, hyped up on drugs, possibly armed with incendiaries... governments ask to immediately notify the police when...’

He thought they had been cautious. Evidently not enough, if footage like this existed.

His mother turned off the television and turned back to her son. 'See the kind of mad world we live in nowadays? First the quakes, and now this wave of cult violence! How can you think of abandoning us, when people like the Patchwork Man are about? What rubbish.' She reached out and put a tender hand against his face, not noticing how the nickname the world had given him made him cringe. 'No son, you're staying here, where you belong. You...' She trailed off mid-sentence, her eyebrows meeting in a puzzled expression. Alexander followed his mother's gaze to the hand still pressed against his face, to the thumb which brushed the jugular vein in his neck.

His jugular vein, which no longer pulsed with blood.

His mother brushed her thumb across his throat, confusion making way for concern and then for panic as it descended to his collarbone. 'Show me!' she said, the look in her eyes feverish as she grabbed his coat and unbuttoned it. Alexander moved to pull her off, but she took his shirt in a surprisingly strong grip and ripped it open.

And backed away with a mournful cry as she saw what lay underneath.

Alexander's chest was pale and bloodless, his skin stretched taut over the hollow in his ribcage where his heart and lungs used to be. It was held in place by the iron thread stitched through his upper body. His mother looked from the luminous rippling of red, yellow, green and blue energies through the stitching to the television with tears in her eyes. 'What... what is all this? What have you done? You're like *them*....'

'Mother, I...' Alexander made the mistake of reaching out. His glove shifted when his mother shied away from his touch, revealing the scintillating soul appendage that had replaced his left hand. His mother screamed again, louder, and backed away into the kitchen. 'Get out of here, demon! Leave me alone!'

'Mother, it's still me!' He lifted the spectacles so that she could look into his eyes, forgetting for a moment they had also changed. She hissed like a cat backed into a corner. 'Don't call me that! Get out of here! Leave me alone! YOU ARE NOT MY SON!'

Alexander followed her into the kitchen, his hands lifted to show he meant no harm. 'Listen, if you want me to go, I will go. But you need to listen to...'

'No! Go away!' His mother yelled, cringing against the counter. '*Padre nuestro, qui estás en el cielo, libranos del mal...*'

She is praying, he realised, feeling as if he had been stabbed in the gut. *Praying in Spanish, like my father used to do. Praying like I'm some kind of demon that she needs to be delivered from.* He lowered his arms, looking at his mother as if seeing her from a great distance. 'Fine,' he heard himself say. 'If that is your wish, I will leave you in peace.'

He turned to go, then grunted in surprise as something hit him in the back. He whirled around and touched his lower back, tracing the knife that stuck from his flesh. He moved to pull it out, but was hindered when his mother suddenly jumped, clawing at him with her bare nails, yelling, 'get out of my son! Get out of my son! Leave his body alone!'

He fended her off with his soul appendage, the transparent fingers looking ephemeral as he forced his mother to back off. Then, with his other hand, he pulled out

the knife, body fluids dripping down on the neat kitchen tiles. He wasn't really injured. *Animus*, the healing power of the Ensouled, was already knitting the flesh back together.

Alexander looked from the knife to his mother, huddling hysterically on the other end of the kitchen, like a feral animal.

His mother.

His mother had just put a knife in his back.

His mother had just tried to kill him.

A wave of vertigo washed through him, rocking the Room that was his mind, shaking the very foundations of his world. He dropped the knife from nerveless fingers; he could no longer bear to touch it. 'Goodbye, mother,' he said, turning away. 'I promise you will never have to see me again.'

With those words he strode out of the house, leaving the last vestiges of his old life behind.

Breanna Mervilde sat astride her motorbike on the curb in front of her mum's house, peering through the curtains at the shadow within. Her mother must be reading a book in her favourite chair with a hot cocoa. She often did that to unwind after work. Breanna's hands clenched on the steering handle; her distress actually caused a tiny spark to erupt from the phantasmal bike, but it went unnoticed by the pedestrians passing her by. Nor did they notice the way the vehicle shimmered ever so slightly, or the wisps trailing from it – the residue of the dead souls it was built from.

Breanna didn't care about being inconspicuous at the moment. All her attention was focused on the confrontation she was about to have with her mother – the story she would have to tell, the scoffing and disbelief it would be met with. Until her mother realised that Breanna wasn't trying to play some elaborate prank. Until she would believe Breanna when she said that she, the daughter of a nurse, had taken uncountable lives – and had enjoyed it. And that she was going to continue doing it.

I can't face her, Breanna thought, tears coming to her eyes as she looked longingly at the shade in the window. She pressed her forehead against the steering wheel, berating herself for a coward. Her back began to throb at the thought. Even after being healed multiple times, the place where soul constructs had burrowed into her skin and had torn open her lungs still felt tender. *El help me, but I can't face the disappointment in her eyes.*

The sound of a door being opened shook her out of her gloomy thoughts. She looked up to see Lex leaving his mother's house and march up to her. His coat was ruffled, and he wasn't wearing his shades, so she could meet his gaze head-on. A shiver ran through her Attic, the mind palace she had constructed in her head, akin to Lex's Room. She knew he was still Lex, her best friend, her partner in innumerable shenanigans since childhood. But ever since his transformation – ever since he had been forced to become a half-human, half-Reaper hybrid to survive – she could no longer read what lay behind his

eyes. Once, they had been sparkling with the joy of being alive. Now they were flat and inscrutable, looking at her as if from far away.

‘How did it go?’ Breanna asked, when it was clear he wasn’t going to speak.

Lex looked over his shoulder at his mother’s house. ‘I will never come here again.’ There was a note of finality to his words.

‘But...’ Before Breanna had the time to think of what she wanted to say, Lex had already summoned his own, smaller motorcycle. Without another word, he raced off down the streets.

Breanna hesitated for a moment, glancing at her mother’s house for a last time. Then she put her bike into gear and hurried to catch up with her best friend.

Part I

*The wrath of the ones on high being roused,
For the sun of one their own being doused.
The Judges of Soul to roam once more,
To protect the charge to which they swore.
Men broken to cure their kin's ignorance.
Forever taking their soul's innocence.*

– The Scripture, Reck. 3:18 –

Chapter 1

The grass rippled as Breanna landed her bike. She dismounted and dismissed the vehicle, then turned to look around her. Tyne Cot Cemetery was a graveyard for soldiers who had fought during WWI. It was built on top of five war bunkers, one of which was located underneath the giant cross in the middle of the graveyard. The white gravestones surrounding the cross stood in rigid lines, like soldiers at attention.

Every brick of this place remembered the war, including the shards of soul energy that clung to it, making it a Sanctum. And now that it was being used as the headquarters for the fledgling human-Ensouled alliance, Tyne Cot would know war once again.

Breanna turned to make a comment to Lex, only to find that he had gone on ahead without her. She huffed in annoyance and followed him, catching up just before he reached the sulking figure seated at the base of the cross.

‘Hello, Merriphen,’ Breanna said, trying hard not to let her dislike of the Reaper show. Merriphen had been one of those who had believed humans inferior to the Ensouled Reapers and their ancestors, the Horsemen. Until she, Lex and Koen had mastered the very powers that made an Ensouled and used them to save the bacon of every Reaper and Horseman in Creation. Merriphen claimed to have dismissed his bigoted views, yet there was still a distinct arrogance in his bearing as he looked up at Lex and her.

‘Are they waiting below?’ she asked him.

Merriphen grunted and nodded curtly, then turned away without a word. Bre shrugged to herself and followed Lex down a metal ladder that led them to the command bunker beneath the cross.

This place had been empty once. The Ensouled had no need for trivialities like food, sleep or clothes, so there was no need to decorate their quarters. Now, however, every inch of the concrete walls was covered in maps depicting every part of the world. Half a dozen Reapers stood in front of the maps, putting coloured pins on them or otherwise conferring amongst themselves. The various colours of their soul energies – red, blue, green, yellow or a mix thereof, depending on their ancestry – illuminated the room, giving it a spooky vibe.

‘Vetha,’ a multi-faceted voice spoke, catching the attention of a stern woman clothed in blue-red energies. ‘Bacia has detected a harvester group of about two dozen angels in Iraqi airspace. Send Ahimoth and Achmetha to support her.’

‘Immediately, Eldest,’ Azmavetha replied formally. She wrung herself past Breanna and Lex without a word as she hurried outside. Ever since Dullahan Al’Grave had been reinstated as general of the Ensouled war efforts, Reapers sprang to obey him as devoutly as they had reviled him before. As firstborn son of Chloros Al’Grave, uppermost of the Horsemen, he didn’t look all that different from his kin. He sported the same white hair, pale skin and luminous colours flickering behind his eyes. He was the only Reaper

who dressed in rider's clothes instead of caretaker's blacks though. But the most obvious difference still remained the detached head that he held snugly beneath his armpit.

He was also the only one besides Alexander who knew how to speak to others telepathically, making him invaluable for coordinating their forces across the world.

Breanna cleared her throat, revealing her presence.

The man standing next to Dullahan looked up from the pile of newspapers he was rummaging through. He smiled when he saw her, giving both her and Lex a companionable slap on the shoulder. Professor Koen Finet was almost twice as old as Breanna and Lex, but they had all been forged together in the crucible of their shared experiences; his missing left earlobe could attest to that. The three of them were the only humans in existence who had successfully integrated the Ensouled powers of the dead without ripping their own souls apart. That made them unique – a dangerous concoction that might just be their only shot at winning the war against the Archangels.

'Find anything in there?' Bre asked, nodding to the pile of newspapers. Koen had been a college professor, specialising in diplomatic history. Which made him the perfect choice to figure out the political situation in a world ravaged by three global earthquakes.

Koen shook his head, frustration evident on his face. 'There is still too much chaos after the last quake,' he said. 'Most countries are just consolidating their grip on what they have left with curfews, martial law and the like. No one is looking beyond their own borders – no attempts at all to coordinate on an international scale. There's barely any news of other countries in these papers.' He tapped a rolled-up newspaper against his leg in vexation. 'I have no idea yet which nation to approach.'

That was Koen's foremost task at the moment: figuring out to which leaders they were going to reveal the existence of the Ensouled. With whom they were going to share the truth of the human soul and afterlife, and how all of humanity was now threatened by the internecine wars of the Archangels. A heavy truth that had to be doled out sparsely; otherwise, they risked fracturing humanity instead of uniting them beneath the Horsemen's banner.

'How about you?' Koen asked. 'Did you speak with your parents? How did it go?'

Breanna winced, reminded again of her cowardice. Lex and her going back to their mothers had been a test case of sorts, to see how humanity would react to these revelations. Revelations that would change their outlook on the world, the soul and life and death itself. 'Um...'

'Badly,' Lex said in a flat, business-like voice that lacked its usual spark. 'Humanity is not ready to know of this – it will destroy their minds.'

Breanna opened her mouth to ask Lex what the hell had happened between him and his mother, but Koen's sigh of frustration preceded her.

'Damn it,' the professor growled, slapping the newspaper in his hand. 'We can't keep going on like this. The attacks are getting bigger and more frequent – we need the human armies on our side to survive this.' He shook his head. 'Well, we'd better go tell

the bosses.’ He dropped the newspaper on the table, leading Breanna and Lex back outside.

‘I still think it’s irresponsible,’ he muttered as the three of them crossed the lawn. ‘The four of them are titans of Creation, the very avatars of humanity, and they’re acting like a bunch of immature children.’

‘Give them a break,’ Breanna said. ‘They’ve been cooped up in Michael’s prison for more than two thousand years, being tortured all the while. They deserve some relaxation.’ The sounds of metal banging on metal filled the air, getting louder the closer they got to the back of the graveyard.

‘They have some strange ideas about what’s relaxing,’ Koen grumbled as the three of them entered one of the arenas.

And barely managed to dodge the green blur shooting straight at them.

‘Good one!’ the man laughed over his shoulder, as he stopped right in front of them by digging in his heels, dragging furrows in the ground. The green pools of energy that were the Horseman’s eyes shone with mischievous joy. He turned around and twirled the syringe he was holding between his fingers. ‘You’ll have to do better than that, though, Bel!’

‘I’m just warming up, Path!’ the lithe woman behind him grinned. Bellicosa Al’Hate, Horseman of War, was suffused with red soul energy as Pathogenos was with green. Though she was dressed in army fatigues, whereas he sported the spotless coat of a hospital doctor. She wielded a thin blade of bloodred energy in her right hand, beckoning with her left. ‘Come and see what else I got!’

‘Later, perhaps,’ Pathogenos, Horseman of Plague, said with a rueful smile at the humans. ‘For now, it seems the outside world has come calling again.’

Bellicosa pouted like a child but relented, letting the blade dissipate into thin air. ‘Fine,’ she sighed, looking up at the arena wall. ‘Oi! Get your butts down here!’

She was looking at two roaring dervishes of power, one blue, the other yellow, that had been smashing against each other alongside the circumference of the arena wall. As she called out, they came to a stop and resolved themselves into Limos Al’Bile, the Horseman of Starvation, whose hollow cheeks and yellow energies gave his body an unhealthy pallor. But it was the other one, Chloros Al’Grave, who drew Breanna’s eye; his sheer presence commanding immediate attention. With his stark, angular face, uncompromising iron gaze, marble-white skin and scintillating blue scythe in his hands, the Horseman of Death was not someone you would want to meet alone in a backwater ally. Or on the battlefield surrounded by an army, really. None of them were.

They were the Horsemen, the four strongest Ensouled in Creation, their power a match for none but the Archangels themselves. Progenitors of all Reapers, they were as old as mankind itself. They were also known as the four Soul Judges, who each could vote whether human souls deserved their afterlife in Elysium. Twice they had spoken already, and it was said that the Third and Last Judgement would be cast at the Resolution: the final war between heaven and hell, Michael and Azrael.

The war that was about to begin, with mankind right in the middle.

‘What news do you bring?’ Chloros asked gravely, looking at the humans. Once, the Horseman would not have deigned to address them; would have considered them inferior to any of his own kind. And yet, Breanna could not help but wonder if his recent shift in attitude towards humans was a genuine conversion or forced upon him by his kin. With the other three Horsemen freed after millennia-long imprisonment by the angels, Chloros was no longer the only one calling the shots.

Breanna forced herself to meet those endless pools of blue energy that seemed to tear at her soul. That was no exaggeration: without the anchor of a physical body, a Horseman would absorb every human soul, living or dead, inside themselves, without even meaning to. Like a black hole gobbling up a planet.

‘It’s not good, I’m afraid,’ she said. ‘The world outside is one big mess. People are suspicious and afraid. Trying to explain things to our parents was...’ Her voice caught a bit. ‘...a failure.’

Koen cleared his throat. ‘We’ll need time to analyse their excursion,’ he said to the Horsemen, causing Breanna to squirm uneasily, ‘to figure out what went wrong, then search an alternate avenue of approach.’

‘We don’t have much time,’ Lex interjected in that odd toneless voice. ‘Humanity is starting to realize that there is more going on than just the earthquakes. They believe it’s rival doomsday cults, but even so, we’re going to have to be careful from now on. They know what we look like... They have footage.’

‘If that’s true,’ Koen said, into the shocked silence that followed those words, ‘then we have not a moment to lose. If we don’t make our presence known soon, it’s going to be done *for* us. If that happens, we won’t be able to control the message. It would be catastrophic if the human armies were to believe *us* the monsters.’

‘Aren’t we?’ Lex whispered softly, then chuckled as if to himself. The hairs on the back of Breanna’s neck stood up straight at the alien coldness in that otherwise so familiar voice.

The Horsemen has so far only been listening intently – imagine, a Horseman keeping silent before a human! – yet now Bellicosa spoke up. ‘If I understand correctly, it is better that we take action – any action at all – instead of waiting.’

‘Umm...’ Koen exchanged a quick glance with Lex and Breanna. They all knew that the Horseman – Horsewoman? – of War had a tendency to... *rashness*... when she acted. Usually accompanied by a lot of people dead. Breanna wondered if that was what caused Chloros to give her the cold shoulder. Everyone knew that he and Bellicosa had been close – like, making-babies close. But since they had saved her, Chloros seemed determined not to acknowledge her existence. He didn’t speak directly to her and gazed through her like she wasn’t even there. Bellicosa, amazingly, didn’t react to his snubbing with the fire and fury that she acted with as a matter of course. Instead, she tried to keep out of Chloros’ way with downcast eyes. Pathogenos and Limos seemed aware of the friction between the two, if their furtive glances were any indication.

The Four Horsemen might act all buoyant at their newly regained freedom, but the tension between them was palpable enough that Breanna could cut it with a knife.

No wonder Koen chose his next words carefully. ‘No, that’s not true at all. We’ll still have to approach this carefully. Choose the right time, the right person to reach out to...’ He trailed off as Dullahan suddenly marched into the arena. Everyone turned to him, askance; the firstborn Reaper hadn’t been outside the bunker in months. The look on his face was uncommonly distraught.

‘I’ve just had a mental cry for help from Tasia,’ he said, addressing Bellicosa, his mother. Even though he and his father had called a truce, they were still on terse ground. ‘She spotted a large party of angels – almost thirty, she says – chasing someone through the Seal. She says...’ He swallowed, his Adam’s apple oddly bobbing up and down under his armpit. ‘She says it’s Hep.’

The tension went up a notch, with Horseman, human and Ensouled all exchanging dismayed looks. Hep. Better known as Hephaestus, Greek god of fire and craftsmanship and the sole survivor of the Elohim race. A millennia-old being who had occasionally fought alongside the Ensouled. He had played a role in freeing Chloros from angel imprisonment long ago and, more recently, had helped save the other three Horsemen from the same fate. He had forged the adamas knife that Breanna was bonded to.

Breanna remembered him as a short, hairy, sweaty guy with smoke coming out of his ears and who felt more at ease with his mechanical toys than with living creatures. He was a friend, a comrade in arms; even if he was slightly mad, that was hardly unusual for the company she kept these days.

‘We have to save him,’ she said, turning pleadingly to the Horsemen. ‘Please let us go. We owe him.’

‘We all owe him.’ The Horsemen were not even looking at her, already summoning their steeds. The other Ensouled joined them, called there by Dullahan, and quickly created mounts and vehicles of their own. ‘We’ll *all* go.’ Bellicosa put her leg across a blood-red horse that had to be the biggest, most badass phantasm that Breanna had ever seen. She looked at Breanna over her shoulder, showing her teeth in a foreboding red smile. ‘You coming?’

Alexander was farming.

He walked his field, the smell of the freshly ploughed earth soothing as he scattered seeds around him. The sun was bearing down on him, forcing him to wear a broad-rimmed hat so that he wouldn’t get a sunburn. Even so he enjoyed the heat on his broad-muscled back. He was alone on the farm, but in the back of his mind, he was aware of others: the Buddhist monk meditating in the monastery, his mind emptied of worries. The potter, enjoying the way the wet clay sculpted to his hands. The dentist coming back home to flop on his couch alongside his wife with a sigh, finally relaxing after a stressful day at work. Alexander was them all and more.

He could still feel his body, somewhere at the back of all the souls he was channelling. It was soaring through the sky at breakneck speeds, the wind pulling at the

tassels of his coat. He was still aware of it, yet it felt distant. It went through the motions like a sleepwalker.

That was alright. If he returned to his own body, he had to return to his own soul, with all the memories and feelings accompanying it. And he couldn't afford that. So he plunged himself as deeply as he could in the most tranquil souls he could find, to insulate himself against himself and the gut-wrenching look in his mother's eyes. So that he could function.

Alexander was out of seeds. He brushed the last grains off his hands and looked up as someone suddenly came down the road. The man walked up to him, dressed in a ragged soldier's uniform. Alexander sighed, his sense of peace broken. He let go of the soul and reluctantly returned to his Room.

His Room had changed a lot these last few months, up to the point that it was barely recognisable even to himself. Oh, the overall layout was still the same: a cosy kitchen with ever-shifting paintings on the wall depicting his moods. But now those walls, which had once been solid and unblemished, felt precariously fragile, riddled as they were with cracks.

The Room was only in his head of course. A mind palace, a visual representation of his own thoughts and feelings, so that he could get a handle on them. A technique he had been learned long ago, to cope with the death of his father. As it turned out, it also helped a human to wield the Ensouled powers without them tearing his body apart. Something that he had passed on to Koen and Breanna, spawning their Library and Attic.

The wounds in his soul, caused by his monstrous undeath condition and, more recently, his mother's horrified rejection of him, had changed the place. The only thing that kept the walls from crumbling and letting the grey fluid of the Conceive wash his consciousness away were the cards representing the dead. Previously, these had been locked away in little boxes, as he had learned from the psychiatrist long ago to do with his feelings. Now, however, they were the only thing keeping his Room together. They stuck to the mental projection of his self like overgrown leeches, clinging to his chest and limbs. Once this would have worried him, as this would have left his soul exposed to the near-death that the Reapers called snapping. But he had been channelling souls for long enough now that he had no longer any trouble telling his own soul and the others apart. The connection between his soul and body was safe.

Tentacles of cards emanated from his mental self, swaying gently through the air like an octopus in the ocean. The ends of the tentacles were burrowed in the cracks in the walls, coating them like blood clotting to stitch a wound. The cards rippled and whispered in a steady rhythm as they went about their job, sort of like the heartbeat he no longer had. The cards felt like a giant hand trying to keep the cracked eggshell of his mind from shattering altogether. Or perhaps crushing it themselves.

Alexander reached out to the voices, trying to reach for another life to submerge himself in. Before he could, however, he felt a hand on the shoulder of his physical body. He jerked, and...

... looked straight into Breanna's crystal blue eyes. They were pinched together in concern. Once, that would have bothered him, and he would have tried to assuage her fears. But now, with the lives of dozens of people roaming in his mind, he didn't really feel like he knew the girl. She was a stranger to him – part of a soul that he couldn't allow himself to feel. So he dealt with her unease as he would with a stranger's: a polite nod, but without any special warmth behind it.

'What is it?' he asked, and that was without any feeling as well. Something seemed to flicker behind Breanna's eyes, as if his words hurt her. He didn't know why.

She let it go, however, instead pointing far to the left. He looked past the other participants of the Wild Hunt – a bunch of luminescent shapes soaring through the air on a wide variety of mounts. And beyond them, the Mesopotamian Marshes – a tepid hot mess of fertile greenery and reeds, most of it drowned in water. It was a site fraught with history, part of the Fertile Crescent that had housed some of the earliest human settlements. Chief amongst them had been Eden, the township binding people together in some sort of trade cooperative that was unique in its openness to others, human or otherwise. Until the Archangel Azrael got it in his head to raze it as part of his fell scheme to massacre all of humanity. And while mankind had survived thanks to the intervention of the Ensouled and the Archangel Michael, Eden had not.

Many things had gone up in ashes there, alongside the tree that the Elohim, the ancient gods, had gifted to Eden. The dream of angelic unity, for one, as Archangel fought Archangel. The Battle of Eden had been the catalyst for Michael's madness, which prompted him to proclaim human's sinful nature at fault and announce a crusade on their souls. The Horsemen, Reapers and Elohim barely managed to stop them during their so-called Horsemen's Rebellion. But the cost had been steep: the Horsemen had been imprisoned, and the Elohim wiped out almost entirely.

Now the Horsemen were free again, in no small part thanks to the aid of Hephaestus, the last remaining member of the Elohim. But the dead could not be resurrected, and Michael's madness had not been stopped, only postponed for several millennia. Now that the Seals, the portals between realms that were damaged in the Rebellion, had finally begun to heal, both Michael and Azrael could reach the human world again. And so were free to reap mankind's souls once more, to use them as fuel as they reignited their civil war. All of that had begun here, in this miserable bog whose cloying smells made Alexander's nose itch.

Eden was significant for another reason: it housed the Seal connecting the human realm of Phusikon to the Elohim's domain of Metaphusikon. Which in turn connected through another Seal to the angelic world of Ecclesia, from where all of Michael's ilk were currently terrorising mankind. Alexander could see Eden's Seal down below – it seemed to widen with each earthquake that preceded the opening of another Seal. Whereas

before it had only been visible with *Perceptio* as a circle devoid of ambient natural energies, it could now also be seen by the naked eye. It appeared as a rift, a split in the skin of reality which extended upwards for about nine feet and was about as broad as your average highway.

When Alexander turned his mount, he could see past the spiderwebbing crack into the subterranean cave in Metaphusikon that it led to. Crossing that threshold would tear every atom of Alexander's body apart, to be transported across the Conceive, the space between worlds. Then they would eventually be reassembled in Metaphusikon. Dullahan had explained that the Seals didn't really lead to new worlds – rather, they reconstituted bodies to perceive a different modality of the same one. The Seals, the Gan Ceann claimed, were translating the flesh to those other modalities by dint of existing in multiple at once. Alexander didn't really understand the details, nor could he be bothered to at the moment. His attention was aimed at the angels currently racing away from the Seal.

There were about three dozen of them – Malachi, by the look of their ordinary leather armour, though Alexander saw two who wielded the sceptres of Hashmalim. They flew just below the cloud cover, below Alexander, Bre and the rest of their Hunt. They circled a spot on the ground, shrieking as they threw spears from sufficiently high up not to fear reprisals. They reminded Alexander of craven vultures, nipping at their victims from a safe distance until they were too weak to fight back. The angels didn't notice they were in danger of being outflanked.

Alexander pinched his eyes, sharpening them with Perception as he studied their supposed prey. There were two of them: one was a regular black man in bright yellow-white robes. The other was some sort of mechanical golem, twice as high as the man and thrice as wide – a confusing contraption of moving yellow metal limbs, steaming pistons and wheedling sprockets. It looked like a low-budget steampunk movie director's worst nightmare. Alexander didn't see Hephaestus anywhere until the machine turned. Then he saw that where the golem's head should be was some kind of small dome of glass, shielding a cockpit full of levers and a familiar diminutive burly shape.

As Alexander looked on, a tongue of fire shot from the end of the golem's raised arm, which was open like the barrel of a bazooka. It was followed by a whistling sound and an explosion. The angels all easily managed to dodge the grenade, however, their aerial nimbleness far superior to such sluggish projectiles. The shrieks that they directed at Hephaestus had a distinct mocking tone – like cats playing with their dinner.

The cats were about to get their comeuppance, however. Chloros, forming the tip of their diamond formation, yelled something inaudible and summoned a wicked scythe of scintillating blue energies to his hand. The rest of the Hunt followed suit, creating weapons of form and coloured light. Breanna created her twin knives, vicious-looking with serrated edges like metal teeth. To the right, Koen brandished a man-height staff. Alexander's hand-and-a-half was something of an oddity amongst the arsenal, as it was the only weapon comprised of all four Ensouled colours. A side effect of being stitched back together by all four Horsemen. Even amongst the Hunt he was an anomaly, only surpassed by Dullahan, who flew next to his father wielding his three-tailed whip. It was

soon put to good use, the razor-sharp knives at the end of each tail cutting bloody furrows as the Hunt fell on the angels' flank.

To call it a battle would be somewhat of an exaggeration. The angels were completely surprised by the unexpected assault and so were slow to respond. Besides, the Wild Hunt numbered almost as many Ensouled as there were angels, which gave them quite the advantage.

Alexander barely had time to raise his Ensouled weapon and disembowel the angelic foe before him. He looked up to see Bellicosa cleave another one in two with her gargantuan blood-red broadsword; Limos was beside her, vivisecting one of the Hashmalim with two yellow cleavers. Pathogenos, somewhere to the right of the formation, dispatched another one by putting a greenish syringe needle through his eye. The shrieks of anguish were horrific to hear.

Then it was over, the entire squad torn to shreds in mere moments by Ensouled powers. *Serves them right*, Alexander thought, as he watched the burning corpses fall towards the ground – angels had a tendency to self-combust upon death. *They terrorise those that they know can't properly fight back – let them have a taste of their own medicine for once.*

Another thought followed on the heels of that one. *Would their mothers be proud of them?*

Having dispatched their foes, the Hunt sharply turned towards the two they had rescued. They had already begun their landing approach when Hephaestus lifted his golem's hand in a warning. 'No, stop!' the Elohim shouted. 'Behind you!'

Alexander had only just enough time to sniff with Perception. The smell of angelic sunlight hung thickly in the air, even with them dispersed, but it was normal for those sensations to linger a bit.

Then the shadows around the Hunt deepened as something enormous broke through the cloud cover and bore down on them.

Alexander had just enough time to wonder what the El was happening before he struck the brackish water of the bog with a bone-jarring impact, and everything went black.

Chapter 2

Breanna avoided the collision by the narrowest of margins, banking so brusquely that she flew almost horizontally through the air. She swept her white-streaked hair out of her eyes, then looked around. The attack – for that is surely what it must be – had scattered the Wild Hunt like a cat startling pigeons. About half of them were wheedling around wildly like Breanna herself, uncoordinated and confused. The other half had been hit by whatever the El had struck them, thrown into the marsh waters with a resounding smack. At least they had had time to encase themselves in a protective cocoon of *Soliditas*. Even so the impact seemed to have knocked most of them out cold. Breanna's heart wrenched in her chest as she saw oxygen bubbles rise to the surface where Lex and Koen had fallen. Ensouled didn't need to breathe – it was more of a redundant reflex to them – but the sensation of eternally drowning was... unpleasant, to say the least. But Breanna didn't have time to pull her friends out of the bog; all of her attention was aimed at their surprise assailant.

It was an angel, for sure – the pale skin, white-blond hair and amber eagle eyes were a dead giveaway. But of a kind that Breanna had never seen before, as none of the angels she had fought so far had been big enough to rival a city block. His size was truly mind-boggling, close to a hundred feet in height and about a third that wide. The giant's eyes were like flaming meteors, illuminating the savage look on his face. His hands and feet were about as big as an average-sized flat. He was dressed in supple leather armour that must be the nightmare of every animal rights activist, riveted with metal plates for reinforcement. *Three* pairs of wings sprouted from his back: one pair at the shoulders, a second one below the ribcage, and a third at his side, just above his hips. They fluttered faster than an ordinary angel's, buzzing like Creation's largest hummingbird. On his back, Breanna noticed several regular angels riding along. All in all, the overall impression was one of a particularly bad-tempered flying aircraft carrier.

An Ophanim, Dullahan's voice suddenly said in her Attic, answering her unspoken question. The elder Reaper was rallying the Ensouled that could still fight alongside his father. Bellicosa, Limos and Pathogenos had landed and began to pull their fallen kin ashore. *A caste led by the Archangel Uriel. They are also known as the Wagons, because their prime characteristic – their size – makes them uniquely suited as transport for other angels. In battle, though...* Dullahan's voice trailed off as the Ophanim lifted the spear in his hand, which was about as big as a fully matured oak tree. The angel squinted his eyes as he stared at the little pinpricks of Ensouled buzzing around him, then aimed straight at Dullahan and threw.

... in battle, Dullahan continued in Breanna's mind, while his body was swerving away from the projectile, *they serve as the angels' heavy artillery*. The spear fell into the soggy march with a splash and a thud, where it stood quivering upright in the ground. The Ophanim grunted and reached over his shoulder to the quiver of spears on his back. His

movements were sluggish, however, perhaps impeded by the gravity, which was heavier here than in his home realm of Ecclesia.

How do we play this? Breanna wondered at Dullahan, as the swarm of Ensouled shattered to dodge the second spear.

Ophanim are strong, Dullahan replied. *Freakishly so. Far more dangerous than Malachi, Principalities and Hashmalim. Not as big a threat as the Cherubim, though. Ophanim are brutes, but they're also notoriously dim – they can be outwitted.*

Can we surround it? Breanna asked. *Make sure that it doesn't run or kill anyone?*

We could put a circle of Ensouled around it, yes. But why would we want to do that? The Reaper cast a glance at his father. *We've got all Four Horsemen here. An Ophanim might be strong, but they are like chaff before the unbridled power of the Ensouled.*

I want the practice. Which was true, but it also didn't do justice to the red-hot coal of fury that burned in her stomach. This guy had hurt Koen, had hurt Lex. Monster of epic proportions or not, she was going to *disassemble* this punk. She didn't say so, but Dullahan seemed to get it anyway. He gave an understanding nod, then let loose a barrage of orders at the other Ensouled. Soon the Reapers moved, several of them taking to the air so that they formed a dome formation around the Ophanim, more or less containing it. Dullahan was at the top of the dome, hovering straight above the giant angel, simultaneously attracting and repelling the ground with *Gravitas*. Chloros and Limos joined the other Horsemen in shielding Hephaestus and his unknown companion from the ensuing battle, alongside their foundered kin. That left Breanna alone to deal with the giant angel.

Breanna looked her foe up and down, sizing him up, how he moved, the chinks in his armour. She also took stock of herself: the souls in the Attic of her mind were vibrant, her tank of Ensouled powers topped off. For a second she considered a time bubble, but no; the energy expenditure was too much, and she doubted that she could dispatch him in those stolen shards of time. She would just have to whittle him down to size the usual way, one knife cut at a time. Ordinary knife cuts would have to do, as Breanna was painfully aware that she had left her adamas knife at Tyne Cot.

The Ophanim's head turned around, looking at the Ensouled encircling him. His pursed lips and canon-wide frown showed he understood the danger and was looking for a weak spot to break out. Breanna attacked him before he could do so, propelling herself upwards with a combined burst of Gravity and Speed and slashed at his cheek. Her knives dragged twin grooves in the Ophanim's flesh, both of which immediately began to spew golden ichor like small mountain brooks. It was no more than a scratch on such a ginormous body, but it still served to draw the angel titan's attention towards her, as she had meant to. The six-winged creature trained his eyes on her. She suddenly felt very, very small and very, very vulnerable beneath such a giant's scrutiny. Even so she didn't let up, zipping around her foe's slow bulk and slashing at him from all sides like a persistent mosquito, and doing about as much damage. The cuts served to annoy the angel though; he threw his head back in a bellow of outrage so loud that it caused Breanna to

stumble. He tried to snatch her out of the air, but even without *Velocitas* she was faster and more nimble. Then, the other angels launched themselves from his back, and she was forced to flare her souls, channelling *Perceptio* to sense their movements in advance and *Velocitas* to stay ahead of them. The horizon turned around and around until she could no longer tell up from down as she flew through the impossible tight spaces between their respective attacks.

A spearpoint deflected from her *Soliditas* armour; she grabbed the weapon by the shaft and used it to pull its owner in a tight overhead turn that ended with the female Malachi in question being impaled on her own weapon. Breanna used the leverage to throw her hapless victim at the Ophanim's face as she self-combusted. The Wagon deflected the flaming corpse in time, but in doing so sustained burns on his left hand. The light of the explosion dazzled him, forcing him to avert his eyes and giving Breanna the time to deal with three more angels in quick succession. Then the Ophanim had recovered, and Breanna had to dodge hastily to the side to avoid another massive spear from smashing her to pulp. *Nothing to be worried about*, she thought, as she banked sharply around the massive Ecclesian's side until she was right behind him. *This simpleton's reflexes are too slow – I'll easily cut him down to size*. She landed on the Ophanim's exposed back and began climbing up to the nape of his neck, intending to see if the bastard could survive with his carotid artery laid open. Her progress was impeded, however, by the remaining angels travelling on the giant angel's back. She met her foes with outstretched blade, but the titan's huge wings acted like a massive propellor, threatening to suck her backwards. She put one of her knives through a wing joint to stay in place, causing the Ophanim to growl in pain and fury. With the other knife, she fended off about a dozen angel attacks. *Perceptio*-enhanced senses allowed her to intercept each one before they occurred, but the uneven footing caused a moment's stumble. Her opponent took full advantage by slamming a spear shaft into her face. She shook her head, then decapitated the offending angel with a sweeping strike with her knife that made the others retreat a bit. She used the moment's respite to touch her bloody mouth, feeling two teeth jarred loose, already being healed through *Animus*.

Okay, perhaps there *was* reason to be worried.

Alexander sputtered as he returned to consciousness, vomiting up the mud and filthy marsh waters that had seeped into his throat. His vision trembled around the edges as he looked up at the face above him. Pathogenos, the Horseman of Plague and, ironically, the biggest expert in the healing powers of *Animus*, withdrew his hand. Upon seeing Alexander awake, he nodded brusquely and moved towards another fallen Ensouled. Alexander crawled up from the ground on his elbows, feeling his insides rail in protest. He lowered his head and spewed forth another stream of tepid marsh culture. He continued heaving until his stomach felt empty, then pulled himself to his feet with an effort. His

vision swam, and he would have fallen to the ground again if a set of hands had not steadied him from behind.

‘What happened, Koen?’ Alexander asked, once he saw who had caught him. The professor shook his head and draped his hand across Alexander’s shoulder, the two of them supporting each other in equal measure. He jerked his head to the line of Ensouled in front of them, shielding them from what was behind: an angel of truly gargantuan proportions. Alexander recognised him through the memories of Sachael – the angel whose essence he had absorbed – as Judah, a member of the Ophanim caste. He must have hidden in the clouds, counting on the other angels to mask his smell from Perception. The titan’s face was wrenched up in a furious grimace while his hand reached behind him and slapped at something on his back. The movement gave Alexander a momentary view of the Ophanim’s back, where he could discern Breanna hanging on for dear life. Alexander reached out with his Room, casting a bridge of cards to Breanna’s Attic and roping in Koen’s Library as an afterthought. *Bre?*

Lex! Breanna sounded like a disjointed chorus of images, sounds and sensations in his mind. There was a slight undertone of disorientation as Judah shifted, jostling her.

Are you alright? Alexander asked, his eyebrows raised as he studied her precarious position. *Do you need us to step in?*

Nah, I’m fine. Breanna’s mental voice was filled with bravado, but the panting, anxious undertone gave the lie to it. *This is nothing, really. Just a little joust amongst friends, like a small spat or a... kerfuffle! Yes, that’s what it is! A kerfuffle.* She kicked an angel who got too close in the face, then yelped as the Ophanim shook his shoulders. She had to grab the knife with both hands to avoid getting thrown off. *On the other hand, the more, the merrier! Come and join the party!*

On it, Alexander said. He and Koen prepared themselves, summoning their Ensouled weaponry and cocooning themselves in *Soliditas*. Before they could engage, however, Judah reached up and tried to grab Breanna. She managed to twist away at the last moment, but in doing so, the Ensouled knife loosened from the wing joint. The drafts created by the Ophanim’s wings caused her to tumble head over heels down his back with a startled cry. She disappeared below the armoured skirt, that was the only thing covering Judah’s waist and groin.

Yikes! came her somewhat smothered mental voice. *That guy’s poor wife!*

Koen cursed and lifted his staff. Before he could engage, however, Breanna came back into view, crashing to the ground in a crumpled heap. Several angels launched themselves from the Ophanim’s back with triumphant shrieks, raising their spears to skewer Breanna now that she was dazed.

Alexander reached out to Breanna, more than sixty feet away – and kept reaching out, the soul construct of his left hand elongating to grotesque proportions, until he felt his fingers close around the collar of her shirt. Then, he shrunk his fey limb rapidly back to size, pulling Breanna out of danger by reeling her in like a fish.

Even the monstrous has its uses, Alexander reflected.

Breanna groaned as she ended up beside them, but then took Koen's outstretched hand and got back to her feet. *Thanks for the save*, she said. Then she crunched up her nose in disgust. *El, but you two reek!*

Alexander touched his wet hair and mud-soaked clothes and shrugged. *I'll shower when we're finished here.* He turned to the Ophanim and his attendants. In his Room, he began compiling and analysing the joint bodily sensations of Bre, Koen and himself, using them to plot a concerted attack. The only other time he had used this trick was when they had faced off against a Chimaera, a rabid Elohim creature. He wondered if Judah would fall for it as easily as the Chimaera had. Based on Sachael's memories, Alexander sincerely doubted it. Even so, he took the microsecond it took to bundle his plan in an amalgam of images, feelings and sensations more viscerally translated by the human body. He sent it across the mental bridges to Breanna's Attic and Koen's Library, both of whom immediately exploded into action alongside him. His two friends stayed on the ground, weaving out of the way of the giant spear, which would otherwise have flattened them like a pancake. Meanwhile, Alexander launched himself into the air, shaping his left appendage into a hook to grab hold of a wing joint and swing himself onto Judah's back. He immediately began attacking the angels still aboard, using the hook to steady himself as he fought with his hand-and-a-half. The angels were fast, but that didn't matter; he might not be the master of *Velocitas* that Breanna was, but he knew an alternative. He did as Dullahan had taught him, wrapping his body in several small interweaving *Gravitas* fields, subtly modifying the gravitational forces working on his body. It felt very strange, and looked even more bizarre, the way his limbs were moving at odd, unnatural angles as the Gravity fields pushed and pulled at him. But it was effective nonetheless, as he managed to tear through the entire force in mere seconds, as if they were made of sand paper. As soon as he had kicked the last smoking corpse out of his way, he turned his attention to the buzzing wings. He marshalled his thoughts, sensing Koen and Breanna move on the ground as he did so. He then split his appendage until he had close to fifteen tethers, marvelling at the ease with which he did so. Not too long ago, he had struggled to shape even the barest phantasm. He had come a long way since Merikh had first forced his souls upon him.

Alexander reached out, attaching two tethers to each wing joint and plunging the rest into Judah's back, trying very hard to ignore the outraged bellows of their foe. He breathed in deeply, steadying his nerve. *Are you ready?*

We are, Koen affirmed, his mind betraying the strain of the immense burden he and Breanna were lifting. *Hurry*, Breanna added. *This shit is heavy.*

Alexander gave a nod that they couldn't see, then began shortening the tethers. Soon, the Ensouled chains, each link as thick as a man's wrist, were stretched taut as they pulled at the wings, constricting their movement. He gritted his teeth and shortened them even further, his left arm trembling as he fought the Ophanim's massive muscles. Another foot, each inch felt. The wings faltered even more. Only the supporting tethers in Judah's back kept him from being torn apart by the tension.

Another two inches.

Judah was bucking like an enraged bull. Even reinforced with *Soliditas*, Alexander's muscles began to tremble, every sinew crying out against this outrageous treatment. He cried out in pain, his composite voice hoarse as he flared his Virtues.

... and the six wings came to an abrupt stop, the tendons snapping with the sound of breaking violin strings – if violins of such magnitude could be envisioned. The Ophanim fell to the ground, a stone the size of a mountain screaming bloody murder. He hit the marsh with such an impact that all the water in his vicinity retreated. At only five feet, it wouldn't have been deep enough to drown him anyway.

What *was* able to discomfort him, however, was the head of his own spear, the one he had thrown before. Breanna and Koen had furtively recovered it during Alexander's struggle to bring him down, using massive amounts of *Soliditas* to hold it up at an angle right below their foe. The point burrowed straight through Judah's belly, bursting from his back like an ichor-soaked flag pole. The Ophanim bellowed in pain, then sagged down on the shaft, his eyelids drooping. Alexander dissipated the tethers and put his hands on his knees, feeling his strained chest muscles expand to their fullest. He ran a trembling hand through his hair, grimacing as he smeared out the slick mud in it.

Koen frowned at their fallen foe. 'Isn't he supposed to burst into flame?'

The Ophanim suddenly jerked awake as if hearing the professor's words, nearly throwing Alexander off his back. Judah gnashed his teeth as he turned his baleful stare at Koen and Breanna. 'Little pests,' he gurgled, lifting his hand. The spear kept him pinned to the ground, but he was still fully capable to smash two puny humans into pulp. Especially if they were standing right in front of them, pinned into place by those man-height orbs.

Then Judah's eye exploded in a mess of puss, ichor and flesh, the angel's giant head rocking back twice as twin bullets burrowed themselves through the eye socket into his brain, one after the other. Alexander looked sideways at Hephaestus' golem lowering his smoking bazooka arm. 'I've wanted to do that for a long time,' the fire god muttered from his cabin. 'I hate Ophanim – strong as rock, and twice as dull. No spark of inventiveness at all.' He looked at Alexander. 'Down!'

Alexander had only just enough time to see the angelic flesh catch fire before realisation struck. He quickly threw himself to the side and into the bog, submerging himself. Moments later, the water above him became alive with a storm of white-golden flame, roaring away mere inches from his face. The conflagration washed over him, searing his flesh even through the water. It only lasted briefly though. The harsh light went away as quickly as it had come and the bog went dark again, allowing his body to relax.

Then the water began to boil, and he screamed.

Chapter 3

Koen pushed himself back to his feet with an effort, grimacing as he saw the mud-caked mess that his clothes had become. *Another set down the drain*, he thought sourly. At this rate, this war would cost him a fortune in attire. He refused to do as the Reapers did and clothe himself in phantasms.

Besides, the mud might very well have saved his life. The moist layer had acted as a barrier that had protected him from the towering inferno of the Ophanim's death throes. He smelled a bit burnt, and his skin red as a lobster's, but otherwise he felt okay.

He looked around, taking stock of his surroundings. Small shimmering fires had set parts of the marsh vegetation alight in a wide circle. At the heart of the circle lay the Ophanim's carcass – an impressive pile of bones. A shiver ran down Koen's spine as he realised that, unlike the previous angelic deaths, this one couldn't possibly be misinterpreted as a reckoning between cultists. The human authorities would come soon – they couldn't but notice an explosion of such magnitude – and they would see that these remains were not of this world. He had to fashion the alliance between humans and Ensouled, and he had to do it soon, before the humans drew their own errant conclusions.

A retching sound made him look sideways, just in time to see Breanna pull a drenched figure out of the bog. Alexander looked even more wretched than himself, a marsh spectre only vaguely recognisable as human. Breanna supported him as he got back to his feet, stumbling like a newborn foal. The two of them hobbled over, joining him in looking at the mass of melted bone in silence.

'So...' Koen finally said, scientific curiosity getting the better of him.

'Oh, it was massive,' Breanna said, sensing the question. 'You could hold Conclave under there.'

'Kind of puts a different spin on the angels' social hierarchy,' Koen mused. He referred to the rigid boundaries that divided angelic castes, which forbade interbreeding of different kinds. It disturbed Koen to know that there was a rational argument to be made for the Ecclesian emphasis on caste purity.

'They're bastards even so,' Dullahan said, walking over with a heavy stride from where the Reapers huddled around the Horsemen.

'Please tell me this guy was, like, the last of his kind or something,' Breanna said.

'Not even close,' Alexander replied. His access to Sachael's memories gave him more recent knowledge as to Michael's forces. 'Latest estimates put the Ophanim caste somewhere around two thousand.'

Koen looked back to the titanic corpse, his courage sinking in his shoes at those words. *Two thousand* of those? They stood no chance. He glanced at Breanna, who cast a dejected look back. Alexander, on the contrary, had delivered his statement in an utterly flat voice, as if it evoked no feeling in him at all.

Dullahan seemed to sense their mood. ‘Those are worries for another time,’ he said. ‘Come. It’s time to greet our guests.’ He led Koen, Alexander and Breanna back to the other Ensouled and Hephaestus. The fire god of old had climbed out of his golem – a burly, diminutive guy dressed in nothing but an apron, the hair growing everywhere making him reminiscent of a bear. His skin was sweaty and steaming at least as much as his machine, his eyes burning coals of fire that trained themselves on the Hunt before him.

‘Greetings, Elohim,’ Al’Grave said. He and the other Ensouled bowed their head slightly, with their hands folded in front of them. It had the feeling of an ancient rite of times long past. ‘The blessings of El be upon you. Be welcome to the realm of Phusikon. Our Sanctum is your Sanctum.’

‘Aye, thanks for the save,’ Hephaestus said, answering the Horseman’s formality with a casual nod that fell just barely short of irreverence. As god of craftsmanship, he was very good with machines. People? Not so much. ‘Those angels have been a real nuisance for days now. Oh, hi guys,’ he added, giving Koen, Alexander and Breanna an offhand wave. ‘I’ve heard your alloy has proven strong.’

Koen gave the Elohim a friendly nod; mostly, though, his attention was occupied by the black-skinned companion of the fire god. The man looked around forty, though his exact age was difficult to judge, with his head shaven clean. The yellow-white dress he wore was recognizable to Koen’s souls as a boubou, a traditional West-African garb. Despite his appearance, Koen knew this wasn’t an ordinary man. His blank disconcerting eyes attested to that, glowing a faint translucent white, devoid of any colour. They darted from left to right as if unable to focus, yet Koen noted that the man had no trouble moving around. When he channelled Perception, Koen did not detect a mortal soul on him, but something else: a congealed mass of ambient natural energies, like a knot in the handkerchief of Creation. He had only seen such a thing on one person before – Hephaestus. Which meant that this was an...

‘Elohim,’ Breanna whispered, looking as shocked as Koen felt. He had thought all Elohim destroyed during the Horsemen’s Rebellion, with Hephaestus being the sole survivor. Koen was dying to ask this man some questions. But before he could, the other Ensouled turned their attention on him.

The entire Wild Hunt, exchanging warm greetings with Hephaestus but a moment ago, fell silent at once. They all stared at the unknown Elohim with wide-open eyes and mouths agape. There was none of the jubilation they treated Hephaestus with. On the contrary, several of them put a step back, as if the god carried an infectious disease. The Horsemen were no better: every muscle in Limos’ and Pathogenos’ bodies clenched up, like tigers preparing to jump. Bellicosa seemed rooted to the spot, her red energies paling so much that they appeared almost pink.

Chloros Al’Grave’s reaction outdid everyone else’s. He looked at the Elohim for one moment, in such an ominous way that the hairs on the back of Koen’s neck came on end. ‘You,’ he hissed at last, from between clenched teeth.

Then he threw himself at the god.

Limos and Pathogenos sprang into motion before Chloros had put more than a foot forward, grabbing their sibling by the shoulders to keep him from the Elohim's throat. Chloros resisted, struggling against his kinsmen with such ferocity that Breanna instinctively put a foot backwards. Every line on his face screamed open hatred at the dark-skinned man. 'Of all the ones who died,' the Horseman spewed, spittle flying from his lips. He wrestled himself an inch closer to the god, 'you were the one who *deserved* it!'

The Elohim stood quietly, undisturbed by Al'Grave's outrage. 'I'm sorry for your pain,' he said at last, his albino eyes somehow looking straight at the Horseman of Death. His face displayed such compassionate grief that Breanna didn't doubt the sincerity of his words. 'I share in it. But things happened as they had to – as they were fated to.' He looked sideways to a trembling Bellicosa and bowed his head, communicating something beyond Breanna's understanding. The Horseman of War swallowed, an oddly uncertain look on her face.

Chloros continued spouting a veritable torrent of insults at the god, venting his spleen so loudly that Breanna covered her ears. 'What's going on?' she shouted at Dullahan. 'Who is this guy, and what has he done that Al'Grave wants to tear him a new one?'

'His name is Orunmila.' Dullahan shouted back, huddling his head beneath his armpit against the verbal onslaught. 'He's an Elohim – an Orisha, a spirit of the West-African Yoruba people. They believe that he's an emissary sent by Olodumare, the supreme Creator, their version of El, to help them flourish.'

'How?' Koen asked, his eyes glued to the spirit god, who remained perfectly composed beneath Chloros' abuse.

'He's considered a sage, lad.' Dullahan replied. 'The Orisha of wisdom, thought, knowledge, divination even. It's rumoured that he can see into yer nogging and peer into the future.'

'Bullshit,' Breanna said flatly. 'There's no such thing as prophecy; that would mean that the future is fixed and that we have no free will. The future can't be glimpsed – it's made, by our own agency.' This was getting outrageous. She already had trouble reconciling fire gods and the like with a scientific view on the world, but oracles? No way. She was no one's tool, least of all the future's. Koen and Lex's faces showed tacit agreement with her words.

'Creation is a wave,' Orunmila stated abruptly, silencing Chloros' tirade. He didn't look at Breanna or otherwise appear to acknowledge her, but it was clear that he was responding to her words. 'A wave, consisting of billions upon billions of currents – the thoughts and intentions of all. As those thoughts become actions, they shape the possibilities of the future. Those who know those currents, know those possibilities.'

'That's sophistic nonsense,' Koen said with a scoff and a shake of the head. 'Seeing the future is a scientific impossibility.'

‘Oh?’ Orunmila asked, his smile showing gleaming white teeth. ‘And was it not one of those scientists, Pierre-Simon de Laplace, who posited a Daemon? A hypothetical creature that, knowing the precise location of every atom in Creation and every natural law working on them, would be able to calculate the future?’

‘Well, I...’ Koen sputtered, floundering in the face of the god’s argument. Orunmila’s smile broadened, and he lifted his arms to his sides. ‘I am no Daemon. I don’t see atoms – I see but thoughts. But that is enough to see some ways that the wave may flow.’

Breanna turned to Dullahan. ‘Please tell me this joker is kidding,’ she said. ‘Where does he even come from? I thought Hep here was the only Elohim left in existence.’

‘I found him on my way here,’ Hephaestus interjected. ‘Fleeing from the angels, just like me. I didn’t know he was still alive – I thought he had perished with the others.’

‘I hid myself away,’ Orunmila replied. ‘Until the time the wave indicated I would be needed again.’

‘So you’re a coward,’ Breanna sneered.

‘I fight,’ the Orisha answered, unfazed by the accusation. ‘When my actions can act as a current to shift the wave from less desirable possibilities, I help. I already aided you in freeing the three Horsemen.’

‘Didn’t see you there,’ Breanna said, disbelieving.

‘My body does not need to be there,’ Orunmila said. ‘I am everywhere. In every head, every mind. And while I can’t plant false thoughts into someone’s head, I can listen. And I can, on occasion... nudge. Like suggesting to a certain god to put a roll of iron tread in the rosewood box they will gift to their old Reaper friend.’ He cast a meaningful look at the stitches keeping Lex’s body together. Hephaestus frowned at the Orisha, clearly hearing about this for the first time as well and not appreciating being manipulated that way. Lex, on the contrary, went stark pale. ‘You did this to me?’ he whispered.

‘I can do more than that,’ Orunmila continued as if Lex hadn’t spoken. ‘I can, on occasion, refresh a mind’s past, helping them to recall a memory. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about, Ms. Mervilde.’

‘Me? What are you...’

‘We are humans,’ Orunmila interrupted, still with that maddeningly enigmatic smile. ‘And humans are not quitters.’

Breanna paused mid-sentence, her mouth shaped in an astonished o as she looked at the Elohim. Those words... she remembered them. Lex had spoken those words, back when their newly acquired Ensouled powers had been killing them. And it had been those words that had come back to her, down in the bowels of the Gilded Halls. If not for those words she would have given up and failed to rescue the other Horsemen. The Ensouled would have been sucked dry of souls, Lex and Koen would have died, and mankind consigned to extinction as everyone in Michael’s path was destroyed. All of this averted because of a speech Breanna had suddenly recalled.

‘Breanna?’ Koen asked. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I...’ She studied the Elohim’s face, trying to detect any falsehood. She saw nothing but peaceful sincerity, however. ‘How can you even do that?’ she asked the Orisha. ‘Aren’t Elohim powers limited to a specific region? I’m not Yoruba!’

‘That might have been true once,’ Orunmila said. ‘But the atrocity committed on me and mine left many power vacuums. As the sole surviving god of knowledge, I now see everyone’s thoughts.’

‘Breanna? What is he talking about?’

Breanna swallowed, trying in vain to regain some of her composure. ‘If what is fellow is saying is true, we owe him. Big time.’

‘You owe me nothing,’ Orunmila said placidly. He looked sideways at Breanna, that absent gaze meeting her own for the first time. ‘Other than the continuation of the more preferable currents I have steered us into. To do that, I...’

He trailed off, his composure suddenly lost as he grabbed at his throat as if he was having trouble breathing. The Orisha began spasming, foam appearing at his mouth. The milky orbs gave of a distinctly ominous gleam as he pointed with a trembling finger at the three human Ensouled in front of him. His head jerked back, and he shouted at the sky as if the words were wrenched from him with pliers:

*Of souls walking, three shall be
the axis turning Creation’s destiny.*

*One the Herald, the Heir, the Dragon-Hearted,
Liberation its sword, to throw itself upon it.
Men forsworn will bow before the Protector of Men.
The Messiah, to chain in words,
named thus from childhood.*

*Second the Changeling, the Twiceborn, the Traitor
who shall drown itself in a golden sun.
Consort of Wickedness, Kinslayer besides,
to forestall Judgement in ancient souls.
Abomination, and last of its kind.*

*Third the Doctor, the Mender, the Builder of Bridges,
who shall coerce the realms in Justice unending.
Quick-tongued Emissary whose Hand is Death
and shall suffer death worse than death.
Archivist, Architect, and Anathema to All.*

*Alone, their deeds shall break all bonds and traditions,
their fury to grind an army’s bone to dust.
Their pain shall bridge the seven planes anew,*

their acclamation to shake the very heavens.

*Entwined, they will reveal the Madness of Ages,
the Plan of Evolution laid bare to their hearts.
To, in the end, do away with the Nightmare of El Itself,
creating Paradise to last thousand times a thousand.*

The Orisha sagged after that last word, and would have fallen if Azmavetha hadn't caught him in time. She looked at him as if she were holding a nuclear warhead. So were the others, for that matter; uneasy murmurs passed through the crowd of Reapers as they stared from Orunmila to Breanna, Koen and Lex. Even Dullahan looked rattled. 'The Prophecy of Three Souls Walking,' the Eldest murmured, looking at his three pupils with a mixture of fear and something else. Could that be... awe?

'That,' Breanna said, forcing the words out with an effort, 'was just *fucking* awful.' It felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. 'And I'm saying that as someone who had to listen to Sephtis' poetry for months.' Her deceased Reaper mentor had had an unfortunate tendency to spout bad verse. She eyed Orunmila nervously. 'Does he often go off and spew senseless drivel like that?'

'It's not senseless drivel, lass.' Dullahan said grimly.

'Then what is it?' Koen asked with a frown. 'And what is this "Prophecy of Three Souls Walking"?''

Dullahan didn't reply immediately. His head bobbed up and down as if swallowing a nervous lump. The Eldest, the fearless general of the Reapers, afraid? 'I've explained to ye about local Pantheons,' he said at last. 'How the Elohim of one region gathered together to govern the natural laws of that place. Seldomly, however, another kind of Pantheon occurred. This Pantheon consisted of all the Elohim who controlled the same aspect of nature all over Creation. Aeons ago, such a Pantheon was held by all the Elohim of foreknowledge, prophecy, divination... every god who could catch but the barest glimmer of the future. Pooling their respective magics, they created three artefacts: the Spool of Life, which spins each one's life thread; the Tapestry of Fate, woven from those threads; and the Scripture, a book that contains all known prophecies, all the might-have-been's and might-still-become's.'

Breanna whistled. 'The power of such a book....'

'It was taken,' Dullahan growled. 'During the Horseman's Rebellion. Michael has it, probably using it to cement his rule over the other Archangels. But several of those prophecies are well known. Twisted versions of them have ended up in the Bible, the Quran, the Torah... in virtually every religion. There are those, however, that are not known to mankind. The Prophecy of Three Souls Walking – the one Orunmila just recited – is one such. It refers to a critical phase in the age of conflict between Michael and Azrael – the war that is currently being reignited.' The Reaper looked at Breanna, Lex and Koen and gave them a sad smile. 'I should have known. Ye three are even more important than I thought.'

Breanna blinked, a chill running down her spine at Dullahan's words. 'Wait, what?'

'It's no accident, Orunmila speaking this prophecy when he was looking at ye.' Dullahan snorted, shaking his head. 'Typical. We always assumed that it would be three of us – *three souls walking* – who would fulfil it. No-one considered that it might instead refer to three *human* Ensouled.'

Breanna shook her head vehemently, denying his words. 'That can't be about us,' she said. 'It can't be! It's just words. It doesn't mean anything! It....' She broke off, her mind a knotted jumble of thoughts and feelings.

One a monstrous traitor, she thought, replaying the prophecy in her head. *One who shall die a death worse than death, whatever that means. And one who shall fall upon its own sword. That can't be us! It can't end like that. I won't let it end like that!*

Before she could protest further, however, Koen spoke up. 'Why doesn't this... narration use any personal pronouns? It talks about *this one*, not about *him* or *her*.'

'The original text was written in an archaic form of the Elohim language,' Dullahan replied. 'One already ancient when the angels first became sentient. The pronouns used refer to an uncertainty as to the exact gender of the subject.'

'So it could refer to three men as easily as three women,' the professor said, relaxing a bit. 'It might not be about us at all.'

'It very well might be,' Dullahan countered. 'A fit as ye have just witnessed often come upon an oracle god when facing the ones prophesised.'

'It might have been transmitted wrongly – an error in translation!' Koen pleaded.

'That doesn't happen with true prophecies,' Dullahan said implacably. 'Their meaning translates themselves beyond mere words. Face it, lads, there's nothing to be done. Ye can try to run from it all ye want; if it applies to ye, it will happen.'

'We'll just see about that,' Breanna muttered, turning her attention away from Dullahan and back towards Orunmila. The Orisha had recovered enough to stand on his own, his poise once more one of complete serenity. He ignored the humans, acting as if nothing untoward had happened. Chloros, on the contrary, looked at him with hatred renewed, moving his hands as if he wanted nothing more than to throttle the god.

'Oh for El's sake,' Dullahan muttered. 'Oi! Not that I'm not all for, like, killing one of the last specimens of the species we were allied to. But there'll be some nasty human authorities on the way here, looking for someone to bugger for all the ruckus. Perhaps we should skedaddle and continue this party somewhere else.'

'You are right, most sagest of souls,' Orunmila said, with a slight bow that actually left Dullahan taken aback. 'I can already sense their thoughts closing in. We should avoid those particular currents – the encounter would be... unfortunate.'

The Hunt took his words as a command, shaping their various mounts. 'We are not done here, blackguard,' Chloros growled as he mounted his giant scintillating steed. Limos kept a watchful eye on his elder kinsman from beside him, as if afraid his fellow Horseman would renew his attack.

‘Indeed we are not,’ Orunmila replied in a maddening unflappable tone from the back of Pathogenos’ horse. ‘Through thought and memory, I have shifted the currents of the future to one more agreeable to us all. New currents are coming into play, however, and errant futures are quickly multiplying. To steer us past those rapids and towards the future we all want, it is required that I intervene again.’ His pearly gaze fell on Al’Grave, who looked back with a look of mulish frustration. ‘We need to speak, so that you might find the right currents.’

Limos and Pathogenos exchanged a look at those words, and Bellicosa, astride her blood-red horse, actually seemed to pale even more, giving the Orisha a look of... if Breanna hadn’t known her better, she would say Bellicosa was afraid.

‘Well, that’s put the cat amongst the pigeons,’ the Gan Ceann murmured as he put his head back on his shoulders and fastened it with several clips. ‘When a god of foreknowledge calls upon ye, there’s a sign that shit is about to hit the fan, big time.’

Breanna nodded, agreeing whole-heartedly. She found the whole thing revolting, though she was less revolted by this so-called prophecy than by the notion that this Elohim had been rooting around in her mind, playing her like a fiddle. *Is he in there even now?* Breanna wondered. *Does he know what I think?* It felt wrong to her – a violation of privacy more viscerally than rape. Orunmila and everything he stood for went straight against her free, independent streak. Why even bother doing something if it was already determined anyway?

‘It’s all balderdash, all of it,’ she murmured to Lex and Koen, who agreed with mute nods. Her voice lacked conviction, however, and she knew that her two best mates were also turning the words of the prophecy over in their heads. Before she could ask what they were thinking, however, the Hunt launched themselves into the air, using phantasmatic cables to lift Hephaestus’ golem.

Breanna knew one thing for sure as the whole ridiculous troupe travelled back to Sanctum. She would *not* let these verses become reality. If not to stick it to predeterminism, then at least to save her friends from the horrible fates outlined.

Chapter 4

Koen watched as the Four Horsemen convened in private with Orunmila, far enough away for their words to be intelligible. They stood in the centre of the graveyard, in front of the Cross of Sacrifice. Chloros was speaking at the moment, underlining his words with empathic cutting motions. The Horseman of Death had had hours for his rage to cool during their journey from Iraq to Tyne Cot. But this fury still simmered beneath the surface, tugging at the tenuous bit of Chloros' self-control. His gestures only served to emphasise the sheer tranquillity of the Orisha's soft-spoken responses, however.

The other Horsemen badgered their kinsman from the side, as they had been doing for half an hour. On occasion, Limos cast a vile look at Breanna, who had the good grace to look abashed. She had tried several times to listen in on their conversation.

Koen didn't need to hear the words to know that they were all trying to talk Chloros into something - something that Orunmila had told them, and that Chloros didn't like. Koen could empathise; he himself didn't very much like dancing to this enigmatic god's fiddle, even if he could respect him for the diplomatic way he had brought his message. What *was* Orunmila saying to the Horsemen? Was he trying to manipulate them towards a more desirable future, as he claimed he had done before?

Koen shivered, thinking about the ominous words the Orisha had spoken -he refused to call it a prophecy. He didn't believe such outrageous claims as seeing the future, although he couldn't deny the truth behind the god-spirit's words either. Natural laws *were* indisputable, meaning that enough knowledge of them *could* grant one gleanings of the future. The scientist in him was at war with his more emotional side, who didn't want those words to apply to himself and his friends. And yet, even while trying to deny them, he couldn't help but measure the verse against the three of them, wondering which of the three each of them was. *The Emissary*? That sounded like it might be him – he was a professor of diplomatic history, after all. But then there was that part about *the Abomination* – his parents had called him that, long ago, when he had revealed his true nature to them. That's why he had never told anyone that particular secret again, not even Alexander or Breanna.

Or could he be this *Herald*? Herald of what? *Too little context*, Koen thought. *Too many unknowns*. There was no point in trying to understand the words – time would tell whether they actually came true.

Koen forcibly wrenched his mind away from the future and refocused on the challenges of the present. He turned to Alexander, who stood mutely beside him. 'What do you think they're talking about?' he asked the youngster, who replied with a silent shrug. The lack of interest in that gesture worried Koen. Ever since his two former students had returned from their parents, there had been something off about Alexander. The change was slight yet profound to someone who knew him. In his time as Alexander's teacher, and during their months of being Ensouled together, Koen had gotten to know

him quite well. He was a modest young man who was most comfortable standing in the shadow of others. But who also had an inquisitive young mind that marvelled at the world and soaked up knowledge like a sponge. The self-effacement was still there, but the spark of wonder seemed to have dimmed, buried beneath the cold remoteness of Alexander's multi-coloured eyes.

Koen swallowed as he met the sheer flatness of that gaze – it was like Alexander wasn't really *there*. It felt like his body was just going through the motions with the aloofness of a sleepwalker. It reminded Koen of his earliest days as an Ensouled, before he had learned the full extent of his powers. He had been something of a soul addict back then, submerging himself in the past lives of others for days on end. Only Breanna appealing for his help had brought him back to his senses. Was the same happening to Alexander now? And if so, how did they shake him out of it? He looked sideways to Breanna, but the helpless frustration in her eyes told him she didn't know either.

'Probably about the army that's on its way,' a rumbling voice interrupted Koen's train of thought. He looked down, startled to find the small, burly shape of Hephaestus standing beside him. He had almost forgotten the fire god in all the commotion about Orunmila. 'What?'

'You asked what they were talking about,' Hephaestus said, leaning against one of the gravestones. 'That's likely it.'

'There's an army coming here?' Breanna asked, perking up in alarm.

'Oh, aye. A big one, too. Half a million angels at least. My spy devices have detected all castes but the Cherubim. That's why I came to Phusikon – to warn you.'

Koen thought back to the mountain-sized Ophanim. Of course. He should have known. Such a one would never be deployed for covert terrorist attacks, like the other castes had been until now. It had to be an outlier of some bigger force, a vanguard or something the like. It meant the conflict with Michael was entering a new phase, leaving cloak-and-dagger behind as it became open warfare. *We aren't ready*, Koen thought to himself, his mind wheedling in panic. *I'm not ready! Mankind is as fractured as they come right now – we need time to bind them together in a common cause*. It didn't seem like they were going to get that time.

'Bollocks,' Breanna said, grimacing as realisation struck. That summed up Koen's feelings quite nicely.

'We'll stop them, lass,' Dullahan promised, as he joined them. The optimism in his voice sounded false, however. No doubt he had the same misgivings as Koen.

'Of course we will,' Breanna said, but her cheerful tone also sounded forced. She was a smart girl, if somewhat mercurial. She knew very well that without a miracle of some kind, that army would cut a bloody swathe through Creation. 'My, my, but Chloros really hates that guy, doesn't he?' she remarked, nodding towards the huddle of Horsemen. The light of the noonday sun refracted off Chloros' teeth as he spat at Orunmila, every line of his body bespeaking violence. 'What's his beef with him?'

'I don't know,' the Gan Ceann admitted, rubbing his chin with one hand as the other held his head. 'None of us Reapers do. Something happened just before the