



SKY^{OF} SHADOWS

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To Lindsey,

Who inspired “Ariana” with her personality and music.

To my readers,

DISCLAIMER: The following book you are about to read is a major revision of the original novel. The characters and main story remain the same, however, the changes lie in the novel's tone, writing style (this version is written in third—person perspective instead of first-person) and much of the dialogue. I have decided to overhaul “Sky of Shadows” largely because of much constructive criticism that has been given, and the radical differences between the light—hearted, almost cheesy nature of the first book and the darker, more grounded themes of the sequel. I am also changing it because my writing has evolved in the six years since I first published the book, and I believe I can give an even better experience to my readers with this version. I hope you all enjoy it.

Respectfully,

—Tyler Craig Nixon

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Prologue

Pain's Transcendence

The first thing Benjamin Blake heard when he regained consciousness was a loud thumping in his ear. The throbbing pain returned to his side, where the bullet had ripped through him. Blood leaked from his wound, pooling around him as he lay on the ground, soaking his abdomen and falling from his eye sockets in small streams that reached his chin. A roaring fire burned behind him; the heat on his back battled the icy feeling in his chest as he struggled to remember why he was even there in the first place, writhing about on the rotten wooden floor.

Then it hit him, the reason for his agony: to save someone. To save her.

To save Lilly.

Ben's cold, gray lips quivered as he slowly crawled to the doorway, where two shadowy figures were. He covered the gunshot wound with his arm, attempting to apply pressure so that he could reduce the bleeding, maybe give himself some time to save her. After all, he was the only one who could.

With a shaky hand, Ben stood on one foot, feeling the unsteady ground beneath him. The smoke that rose from his wound filled him with fresh energy, allowing him to rise and stumble out the door of the old, broken-down house as the flames continued its work in reducing it to ash. Mustering all the strength he had left, Ben lumbered out onto the sidewalk to stop the car from taking Lilly from him.

Ben grit his bloodied teeth. He was her last hope, one that would save her from the isolated life of cruelty that he knew awaited her if he failed.

“Bring Lilly back!” he cried, before feeling a powerful thump in his chest, followed by several weaker ones. He tried taking in a breath, but it did nothing. He cried out, feeling the energy drain from the wound. With every stride, his body grew more frail, his resolve crumbling.

It doesn't matter what happens to me, he thought. I need to save her. Keep her from...

His consciousness threatened to fade, the thrumming of the rain masking both the sounds of tires screeching and the slamming of a car door. Ben's friend Nathan ran up to him.

Nathan's eyes widened upon seeing the dark blood seeping through his friend's tainted white shirt. He desperately reached out to grab Ben's other arm, hoping to halt his movement, but was forcefully pushed aside.

“Stop, man!” Nathan tried again as the rain continued to fall. “We need to get you to a hospital! I'm calling an ambulance!”

Ben didn't care. He broke free from Nathan's grip and kept limping on, determined to keep going. The world around him began to whirl and twist as the pulsing sound in his ears quieted.

“I need to save her,” Ben said weakly, losing focus.

“Ben, we need to...”

“I can't let her take Lilly. I can't...”

The remaining words failed to escape his lips as he heard one final thump in his chest. Ben collapsed to the ground, coughing up blood violently, collapsing to his hands and knees before falling onto his back.

Damn it, Ben thought as he looked skyward, into the cold, cruel clouds. I'm sorry.

The unforgiving storm pelted Ben as he lay on the concrete. A large, shadowy figure came down from the clouds, expanding like an eagle spreading its wings, and wrapped itself around him. The sounds of rain gradually faded along with Nathan's voice. His vision blurred, everything vanished into a pitch-black void.

After that, Benjamin Blake faded from the world. He had failed.

Chapter 1

Arrival In New Eden

Ben floated aimlessly as his consciousness wandered the dark abyss, faint echoes of his failure taunting him. A young woman's scream rang in the background, joined by the eerie cries of others. A thousand wails tore through the void, endlessly accusing him.

The voices stopped. Out of the darkness materialized a pair of blazing, judgmental eyes belonging to a large, obscure figure. A ring of orange light with seven others erupted from behind it. The voices resumed their cries and groans of horror that grew louder and louder. The overwhelming howling made him feel like his very being was about to be torn apart.

No, stop! Stop! I don't want...

Something snapped. The sharp, sudden noise jolted Ben awake. A twig, the crunching of leaves. Footsteps.

The darkness faded as bright colors bled through the canopy and momentarily blinded him. Ben stared upward, his breath deep, meaningful, as if it were his very first. His vision blurred, yet he could see a shadow obscure the gentle sunlight. He blinked a few times, his vision refocusing as the shape took on form. Leaning over him was a golden-haired, fair-skinned young woman. Her curious azure eyes assessed Ben as he lay on the ground.

"Hey there, stranger! You okay?"

Ben sat up and took in his new surroundings. He was in a forest that teemed with life; the endless trees and their branches so vivid that it could have been straight out of a

painting. The air felt warm, welcoming. Birds sang while other animals rustled the thickets and bushes, chasing each other throughout.

“Uh, mister? Can you...understand me?”

Ben turned back to the young woman, whose vibrancy mirrored the forest itself; Bright, warm, brimming with life and energy. In her hand was a worn, sun-kissed, beautiful violin. He tried to break through the fuzziness in his brain to answer her. Instead, all that came out was, “Ummm...what?”

The young woman tilted her head, her eyebrow arched.

“No, ah...I’m okay. At least, I think so.” Ben’s cheeks flushed. “Sorry.”

“Hey, no biggie.” She shrugged. “Besides, you look like you’ve had one heck of a nap!”

Ben looked down at himself. He wore a set of faded and torn jeans, a navy-blue T-shirt, and a hoodie, all covered in leaves as if he had been lying there for hours.

“Seems like it,” Ben said, blinking.

“What’s your name, stranger?”

“Uh...” He scratched his head, attempting to recall the obviously important information. “Ben. Benjamin Blake.”

As the words left his mouth, Ben felt his skin burn hot for a quick second. A small leaf that had landed on his arm evaporated into ash. His eyes briefly narrowed.

“Ben, huh?” the young woman inquired, her voice brimming with every syllable. She shifted herself a step closer, reaching out for a handshake. “I’m Ariana Winters, but you can call me ‘Ari.’ Nice to meet ya!”

Though he initially hesitated, Ben returned her handshake; her petite fingers gripped his palm. She used the opportunity to pull him to his feet with a surprising amount of strength. He briefly stumbled before regaining his footing and brushing some leaves off. “Nice to meet you too, I guess.”

Ariana beamed, then eyed him. “So, what brings you to Leanoir forest?”

Ben paused, attempting to rack his brain for the name. “Leanoir...forest?”

Ariana nodded.

“Not sure I’ve heard of it,” Ben said as he ran his fingers through his jet-black hair as he turned, taking in the view once again. “What is this place?”

“Well, in a nutshell, it’s where loudmouth girls like me make music! Although, I must admit, a bit of an odd choice for a nap,” she said, her voice implying a slight nervousness. “Normally, I’m all alone out here.”

“Huh.” Ben blinked. “What state is this forest in?”

Ariana raised her eyebrow. “I mean...it looks to be in pretty good shape, as far as I can see.”

“No, I mean...” a groan escaped Ben’s lips, “...like, what ‘State?’ As in physical location?”

“Behind Riverglade village...in New Eden,” Ariana said, her eyes narrowing.

“Wait, what?” Ben’s eyes narrowed. “What’s ‘New Eden?’”

“Where you are now...?” Ariana blinked. “You must not be from around here, then.”

Ben paused for a moment. In his peripherals, he saw what looked like a rabbit, but with a long, twisted tail and blue ears that stretched along its entire body. If his already-lacking memory served, then he had not seen anything like it.

“Probably not.” Ben took one more glance around before settling his gaze back on Ariana. “Anyway, enough about me. What are you doing here?”

“I come here to practice my violin pretty much every day.” Ariana touched her chin as she explained. “At least, I was, and suddenly, you show up here, which is weird—”

Less than two sentences into Ariana’s rambling, and Ben already felt lost. As she continued on, he got a better look at her. She wore a green, V-neck shirt with brown pants, with her hair tied up in a curly ponytail with a fake bird...no, an actual bird perched in her hair. In her off-hand, she held the violin bow, casually waving it around as she talked. She looked like one of those obsessed tree huggers he had seen occasionally back home. Judging from her current non-stop rambling, he figured she was at least ten times as crazy.

Wait a minute...home? Where is ‘home?’

A flash of voices and memory struck Ben’s mind. The voices grew from a mere whisper to the terrifying sound of a gunshot. His surroundings disappeared as he lay in a puddle of blood on the cold ground. He could feel the pain from before, the life leaving his body. Images of a young, dark-haired girl being dragged away burned themselves into his psyche.

I was supposed to save her, Ben realized. But who exactly was she?

Ben closed his eyes, trying to dig further for the taunting truth. His mind became garbled, images passing through and quickly fading before he could recognize them. As he tried piecing them together, his mind punished him by throbbing even worse and forcing those precious answers further back into the dark.

No, no! I need them! Ben thought. *I need to know who...*

The vision faded as Ben felt a strange sense of relief flowing through him, like a gentle creek in the forest. The first thing that came back into view was Ariana, who had put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Air rushed back into Ben’s lungs, allowing him to control his hyperventilating with slow,

deep breaths until the loud pulsing in his ears had quieted down.

Ben met her concerned, azure eyes. Another series of images floated through his mind, this time, of Ariana. Her smile, her laughter, her tears flashing through, shards of ash and ember flying across. The visions stopped once she had lifted her hand from his shoulder.

“Are you okay? You were screaming.” She stiffened. “Wait. I’m not that annoying, am I?”

“No, that wasn’t from you, that was from...uh, something else,” Ben replied, staring at her warily. He wondered if she saw something, too.

“Oh.” Ariana beamed at him. “Well, okay! Glad I could help!”

Ben returned the smile, rubbing his slightly throbbing forehead. He didn’t exactly know, but before his brain attacked him, he was trying to remember something. Someone.

That’s right, he realized. I was trying to save that girl, but I ended up here.

“Did you see where I came from?” Ben asked.

“Well, I was kind of wondering that myself, ya know?” Ariana blinked. “Hold on. You don’t remember anything?”

Ben shook his head. His brain didn’t seem like it was going to give in soon, yet something was tugging at his gut. The longer he stayed still, the more intense it got.

“No, only that. I need to find and save someone.” He exhaled sharply, brushing his hand through his dark hair. “I just don’t know who.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Ariana frowned. “That sounds frustrating.”

You have no idea, Ben thought as he eyed the sunlit canopy. He had to find some sort of lead to recover his missing

memories. To do that, he needed to leave Leanoir forest. That much was certain. He glanced at Ariana. *Maybe she knows how?*

"It's okay." Ben took a deep breath. "Anyway, do you know how to get out of here?"

"There's a clearing not too far from here," she said. "Wait, are you leaving?"

Ben scratched his head. "Yeah. I mean, it was nice to meet you and all. I just need to find out what happened to me if I can. The sooner, the better."

"Oh. I see." Ariana frowned for a moment, looking to the side, as if to avoid his gaze. She returned her gaze to him and gave a half-hearted smile. "Well...good luck, Ben!"

He felt a powerful urge to take back his words, yet the same, urgent tugging sensation beckoned him not to, to move forward. Briefly returning her smile, he walked past her.

Without warning, Ariana spun around, reached out and grabbed his wrist. He froze, though it was more out of curiosity than bewilderment. His eyes met Ariana's as she paused, releasing his arm. "Oh. S-sorry, I..."

"You what?"

"...I thought, maybe, I can help?"

Ben arched an eyebrow. "How so?"

"I..." Ariana blinked, and her nervousness vanished as she smiled, hands on her hips. "I can take you to my village!"

"Oh." Ben pondered her offer, though his doubtfulness hadn't yet faded. "Anything there that can help me?"

"My father is the village chief," she replied. "He's pretty smart, so he might help with your memory problem."

Ben allowed himself to consider it for a moment. Assuming she was telling the truth, then it would be a decent

place to start. If not, then he would be right back where he was now. He sighed.

Better than nothing, I guess.

“Alright.” Ben took a deep breath before glancing back at Ariana. “Lead the way.”

“Great! Follow me!” Ariana grabbed Ben’s hand, guiding him through until they reached a clearing. The sunlight, now free from the forest canopy, blinded Ben as he stepped out into the field. It was then he saw the true beauty of the world before him.

In front of them were miles of soft, wheat-like grass that whipped around in unison as the gentle wind blew past. The oncoming night sky was a mix of blues, purples, and greens with what appeared to be another, almost transparent planet high in the atmosphere of beauty. The flowers in the fields reflected the planetary light, which hung in the air and filled it with an indescribable warmth.

A realization dawned on Ben as he caught his breath. Wherever this ‘New Eden’ was, it wasn’t on Earth. And neither was he.

Ariana tugged Ben’s arm, pulling him out of his trance. They walked for a few minutes before arriving at a wooden bridge that crossed a small creek. Ben stared down into the shimmering, crystal-clear water below to see a few fish swimming around. He arched an eyebrow as he stared at Ariana suspiciously.

“Don’t tell me this is your ‘village’...?”

“No, doofus. I just wanted to introduce you to some friends of mine real quick.” Ariana chuckled as she set her violin case against the bridge. “That’s alright, isn’t it?”

“I’m not really in the mood for jokes,” Ben said, pursing his lips.

“Oh, come on! It’s just a detour, promise!” Ariana quickly jabbed him, then hopped on the railing, beckoning for Ben to

do the same. He reluctantly complied, swinging his legs over and lightly kicking the boards with the back of his feet.

“So, if I recall correctly,” Ben started, “you said these fish are your...ah...friends?”

“Yep!” Ariana beamed and pointed to one of the smaller fish. “That one is Robert, or Bob for short. He always comes to say hi.”

Ben folded his hands in his lap, trying to look as interested as possible even though his patience wore thin. He drummed his fingers against his knuckles as Ariana pointed out another fish.

“See him, right there? That one is Zachariel. He’s named after my stubborn father because somehow he inherited his attitude,” she said with a huff. “Occasionally he’ll...”

The fish erupted from the water, splashing Ariana in the face. It quickly spun around in circles, as if celebrating. Ben couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Do that?”

Ariana pursed her lips and pushed him from the railing into the creek. Ben stumbled, trying to land on his feet, but fell into the water back-first. Recovering himself, Ben stood up, his only clothing now soaked. He glared at Ariana as she giggled mischievously, her fingers on her mouth.

“Oops,” she said.

Ben sighed, shaking his head. Then he had an evil idea and started chuckling.

Fine, he thought. She wants to waste my time?

“Something funny there, giggles?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

With a grin, Ben responded by yanking her off the railing and into the creek below.

Ariana squealed, landing butt-first in the water. After the splash subsided, he looked at her again; she was sitting with her upper torso and the tops of her knees sticking out of the surface. She flipped her soaking wet hair out of her eyes.

With a satisfied smirk, Ben offered his hand to help her up, but was mercilessly pulled back down. They tumbled, splashing the other repeatedly as the creek became the battleground; its poor inhabitants darted away to avoid becoming collateral damage.

Ben finally threw his hands up, guarding his face. "Okay, okay! You win. Sheesh." He crawled out of the creek, fighting the gentle pull of the waters. With a huff, he carefully laid back on the soft rocks as the water lapped at his feet. "I don't know if anyone has told you, but you're a little competitive."

"Am not!" Ariana huffed indignantly. "Not competitive. Just bored!"

"That's even worse." Ben rolled his eyes, standing to his feet as he stretched. The sun was setting; the fading light glistened off the creek's waters as he gazed skyward to the inevitable night, allowing himself to pause and take in the wonders of this 'New Eden.' He glanced at Ariana, who was now at his side. Her electric-blue eyes met his gaze, her expression softening from her haughty, playful demeanor. Her lips formed into a soft, warm smile.

"Everything okay?"

Ben drew in a sharp breath, his eyes widened. His surroundings lit up around her, as if his currently aimless world had a purpose again. The more he stared, the more captivated he felt.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He turned to avoid her gaze. "Just a bit wet."

"If ya say so." Ariana chuckled and lightly socked him in the arm, before pausing. "Say, do you mind if I show you one more thing?"

Another thing? Why not just take me to the village, like you promised?

"I don't know, Ari." Ben paused, staring back at the oncoming night sky. Ariana gently placed a finger on his lip.

"Just one?"

Ben hesitated. Much as he hated to admit it, he was enjoying this. He didn't want to lose himself so much that it would detract him from the truth, and yet he felt tempted. Ariana had promised to help him and that was something he intended to hold her to.

Even if she's bluffing, he thought, she may be the only lead I have.

Sighing, Ben turned to look at Ariana, whose eyes continued to plead with him.

One more thing won't hurt, I guess.



The pair had arrived at the hill that overlooked the flowing meadow. Atop it was a large tree, with an overhang that held the fading sunlight at bay. Ariana set her satchel against the side and sat down beside it, curling up her knees to her chest and resting her chin on them. She patted the ground next to her, smiling.

Ben sat down with her, letting one leg stretch out and curling the other one in, resting his elbow on it. He looked at Ariana. "So, what exactly did you want to show me this time? Also..." he gave her a pleading stare, "...don't tell me it's more fish."

"No, doofus. There's not even any water around." Ariana pointed to the horizon. "I brought you here because I wanted to show you the best part of my day."

Ben looked across the meadows. The setting sun illuminated the grass as it gently blew in the soft, ethereal wind. He smiled, if only slightly. "It is kinda pretty."

Ariana smiled back. "I come here just about every day to watch the sunset; it's pretty much my routine. I like to just sit here and watch it, the way the rivers glisten and the wind moves the meadows like a chorus of angels, just kinda locks me in a trance, ya know? Takes me out of my thoughts."

Ben nodded. If he wanted, he too could lose himself in the realm's beauty. Everything around him seemed so vibrant, full of life. It seemed to him to be a paradise of sorts, where someone like Ariana could live innocent, happy, and carefree...and perhaps someone like him.

Makes me wonder.

"Hey, Ariana?" he asked. "What's it like living here?"

"New Eden?"

Ben nodded.

Ariana paused for a moment, her brows furrowing together in deep thought. "Well, there's really not that much to it. I mean, there's my village, my dad, my friends..."

"You mean the fish?" he asked, allowing a hint of sarcasm to permeate his voice.

"Yeah." Ariana smiled sadly. "I...don't really have that many real friends."

"Wait, what?" Ben's eyes widened. "I'm surprised. You seem so nice."

Her cheeks flushed red. "It's more than just that. But it's okay." She glanced at her violin case, removing the instrument, and gazing at it. "That's why I always just go practice in the forest, ya know? Me and my trusty violin."

"I'm sorry." The wind blew the hair out of Ben's eyes as he exchanged looks with her, frowning. "I didn't know living in a place like this could be so lonely."

“Sometimes it is. But you know what?”

“What?”

“You’re the first person I’ve ever gotten to share this view with,” she said. “Nobody else has ever been out here with me, not even my dad.”

He blinked. “Really?”

“Yep.” Ariana nodded. “Now that you’re here, I don’t feel so alone.”

Ben looked at her as the sun continued to set, the powerful light illuminated her face. She returned the gaze, their eyes locking as the connection from before returned, stronger than ever. As he stared, he felt something: a sense of comfort, familiarity. Beneath that was something else: a strange longing that, for reasons he couldn’t explain, felt wrapped in tragedy.

As if reading his mind, she asked, “Not to be weird or anything, but back in the forest, when I grabbed your hand, I felt...something.”

Felt something? Ben wondered. He pretended not to know about it, instead opting to hear what she thought. “Like what?”

Ariana shrugged. “I dunno, like maybe we know each other. I know it sounds weird, but that’s what it feels like to me. What about you?”

“I honestly don’t know. If I did, then why would I forget? Why would you?”

She smiled, a hint of sadness touching her lip. “Maybe you’re right. Something about you just seems so...”

“...familiar?” Ben finished for her.

Ariana nodded. Deep inside, Ben found he agreed with her. What if the memories that his mind denied him were supposed to be forgotten?

Is that what I'm here for? Ben wondered. *Am I just a blank slate here?*

Leaning back against the tree, Ben's eyes drifted to the stars that were now shining across the black. Ariana held the violin in her hand, lightly plucking the strings. He had just noticed, but there were also what looked like drawings, such as flowers, fairies, and angels.

"Hey, can I see that?"

Ariana nodded, handing him the violin. "Be careful with her. Ole Betsy isn't used to being held by untrained hands."

Ben chuckled. "You named this thing?"

She pursed her lips. "Why not?"

"Fair enough." He turned the instrument over in his hands, feeling the neck, the scroll, even daring to touch the strings themselves. Years of use manifested as worn edges which stood in stark contrast to the rest of the curved, faded wood. "I'm no musician, but I'd wager you're pretty good."

Ariana blushed sheepishly. "Just a little."

"Will I get to see you play soon?" Ben asked, a hint of excitement in his voice.

"You know?" Ariana leaned over to him and gazed into his eyes. She winked. "You just might."

Ben smiled, losing himself in Ariana's azure eyes. Then he frowned.

No, I can't.

He quickly broke the stare, handing her violin back to her and mustering the will to stand. He couldn't...no, he wouldn't allow himself to get sucked in. Not while he still needed answers.

Ariana's eyes widened in alarm. "Where are you going?"

"I'm sorry, Ariana, but I need to go." Ben turned around sharply. "I can't be wasting time here."

She immediately stood, gently grabbing Ben's hand. He froze, paralyzed by her gaze. Her expression saddened; her lip curled into a frown as her eyes pleaded with him.

"Aren't we going to the village?"

"I don't know." Ben's eyes narrowed. "Are we?"

"I wasn't trying to—"

"—then why the detour?"

"I'm sorry." Ariana hesitated. "I just wanted someone to enjoy all this with for once. Given that connection we felt earlier...well, I was hoping you would be that person."

Ben's glare slowly melted into a slight frown. Everything Ariana did now made sense, from grabbing his hand, showing him the fish, and seeing the sunset. Things she had all done herself, but never with anyone else.

Her gaze falling, Ariana returned Ole Besty to her case and began to walk away. "I know you've gotta go, so I understand if you don't want—"

"—I'll go with you," Ben said.

Ariana blinked. "You will?"

"Of course. And for the record..." a small, warm smile formed on his lips, "...I enjoyed the view, even if you are a bit weird."

Her eyes widened for a moment as she looked down to hide her blush. After a moment or two, Ariana returned her gaze to Ben, hand on her hip with a confident smirk. "Well, a promise is a promise. Ready?"

"Ready when you are." Ben nodded, the slightest hint of a smile stretching across his face.

She slung her violin case over her shoulder. "Well then, what are ya waiting for?"

Ben nodded as he made his way down the flowing meadow with Ariana, further into the strange, beautiful world that awaited him.

Chapter 2

New In Town

Ariana Winters reached the outer fence with the mysterious stranger from the forest. She stopped, turning to him. “Do you mind holding Ole Betsy for a second?”

Ben nodded and took it as she gracefully vaulted over the fence. Once she was over, he handed it back to her as he struggled to climb it, despite it being only up to his waist. Ariana sighed.

Didn't know he was such a slowpoke, she mused, but if he doesn't hurry, he's going to make me late and Dad will ground me for the next year.

“Come on, we’ve got to go! The festival starts in a few hours!”

“Wait, what?” Ben protested as he struggled to climb. “What about my—”

Ariana winced as Ben fell from the fence. He recovered with a groan and brushed himself off.

“Nice,” she teased.

Ben glared before walking with her again. “You said something about a carnival or something?”

“It’s the Glimmering Moon Festival,” she explained as she sidestepped a bush. “The moon eclipses the planetary body in the sky, but instead of casting a shadow, it makes the moon extra bright and beautiful.”

“Huh,” Ben said. “And that’s cause for celebration?”

“Our ancestors thought so. Once they reach their alignment, the elders select a—” Ariana smirked, perhaps with too much confidence, “—a certain talented individual. They perform for the entire village, sort of like a welcoming ceremony for the eclipse.”

“Talented individual?” Ben asked. “I imagine that’s you?”

Ariana grinned. She wanted to brag, yet she wanted it to be a surprise for him—almost a decade’s worth of her talent refined by hard work. As far as she knew, nobody else in the entire realm could do what she could do.

After all, she thought, Ben certainly surprised me back in the forest. It’s only fair I return the favor.

Ariana beamed and gave him the short answer. “You’ll see! Just be patient!”

“If you insist.” Ben gave a defeated sigh. “Wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to happen today, anyway.”

I wonder what he means by that? Ariana wondered as she pursed her lips.

I think he’s talking about Robert and Zachy, the voice in her head pointed out. It is kinda weird, to be honest. Not to mention pathetic.

“Shut up,” Ariana growled out loud.

Ben’s brows drew together, his eyes narrowed. “Um...okay?”

“No, not you, sorry. I have a rude voice in my head that I talk to sometimes,” she blurted out.

“Oh. Alright.” Ben stared at Ariana warily. “That’s...fantastic.”

Ariana faced forward as she felt her cheeks warm. Since her early childhood, the voice had been with her. Sometimes, it offered strong, motherly guidance. Other times, it was like a gnat in her ear, always whispering its sarcastic, mostly unhelpful advice.

It's hard enough making friends, Ariana thought, her lip twitching slightly. This stupid voice always makes it worse.

Ariana's mind briefly flashed to her childhood, remembering how nobody would play with her, the crazy, quirky girl who was the village chief's daughter. It carried into her teenage years when her desire for friends ached harder than ever before. Yet she could never figure out the secret to being a socially acceptable person and thus accepted her fate as the village wallflower. Eventually, she had turned to her trusty violin and Leanoir forest, neither of which had ever rejected her.

Ironically, that was what made me popular with everybody, Ariana thought. After her first festival performance, everybody wanted to be her friend and get to know her. She had reveled in it at first, at the attention and love she was getting. And yet, it was all shallow. People loved her talent, not her soul.

If anything, it made her feel more alone than she had ever been.

And now, meeting Ben. Her lips tightened. *It must be a sign, a second chance. If I want him to be my friend...*

She slowed her walk and exhaled, as if to expel her lonesome past from her soul. *...all I have to do is not to drive him away, like the others.*

But what about your promise? the voice asked. *What about his memories?*

Ariana looked behind her and saw that Ben was still walking with her, his earlier confusion gone, his gray eyes ablaze with curiosity. She smiled at him reassuringly as he slowly smiled back.

I'll get to it eventually, she told the voice before scratching her neck, pondering the mysterious 'Benjamin Blake.' When she thought about it, it felt kind of strange that she was dragging a random guy that she had found in the forest to her

house. She hadn't exactly planned how to break the news to her father.

Hey, Dad! I found him in the forest! Can I keep him?

Ariana shook the begging notion from her head as she saw the first set of buildings and dim lamplights at the start of the village. She looked over her shoulder at Ben. "We're here!"

When they arrived at the looming stone gate, she pulled Ben over to a few people in town that she knew to introduce him. He didn't open up to them like she had hoped, instead opting to hide his angular face in his shoulder—length black hair.

Maybe he isn't a people person or something, Ariana thought.

They continued to walk down the gravel sidewalk. The light from the streetlamps flickered and danced, a reflection of the festivities. People rolled out their wooden carts, pitching their homemade crafts, products, and food. They waved as they recognized Ariana, no doubt in anticipation of her upcoming performance. She smiled and waved back.

Ben spoke up, "So where's this person who can help me?"

"You mean my father?"

He nodded.

"Don't worry, we're almost there." She turned to him and smiled. "I'll introduce you guys. Just be polite, and maybe he won't throw you out."

"Throw me out?" Ben's eyes narrowed. "Of what?"

"Me and Dad's house. Duh."

For a moment, Ben fell silent. "Why—"

"—because the goal is to stay there with us, doofus. Not to be rude or anything, but you don't seem to have anywhere to crash."

“Are you sure your dad would be okay with that?” Ben asked, his skin paling. “Bringing a random guy over to spend the night?”

Ariana laughed dismissively. Clearly, Ben didn’t know much about her father. He may have been stern, yet he was always fair. It didn’t matter who it was.

Remember those guys who asked you out after your first performance? The voice asked. *When he threatened to vaporize them?*

Oh, Ariana realized, I forgot about that.

“Well, dad is a pretty accepting guy, Ben,” Ariana said, trying to give him a reassuring answer. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Truthfully, Ariana had no idea how her father would actually react, but she had to have faith that it would go well...for Ben’s sake, at least.



Ben and Ariana finally arrived at her house—a humble, dark wood building threaded with a fine line of flowing elegance and sharp robustness. Full-grown vines blossomed over the structure, interspersing the earthy colored wood with vibrant flowers that he found relaxing. It reminded him of a greenhouse more than an actual abode. Maybe Ariana and her father were obsessive gardeners, or hippies. As far as he was concerned, the latter was far more appealing.

He hesitated as Ariana reached for the door. As far as he knew, her father possibly being able to help was a step in the right direction. At the same time, he wasn’t sure exactly what would happen if this lead turned out to be nothing but smoke.

Would I be stuck here? Ben looked back. *What about her?*

Ben exhaled slowly. He knew he would likely have to go if he figured things out. It made him feel guilty to leave Ariana behind despite her efforts to help him.

It makes me feel like I'm just using her or something.

The door to the house flung open as Ariana called into it. "Dad! I'm home! We have a guest!"

Ben watched as a tall figure made its way from the back of the house. His dark skin glistened like a million diamonds as he passed into the daylight. He wore a white and grey tunic, trousers, and a bronze belt with glowing symbols and a sword. From his back stretched two even mandibles covered in white feathers with a faint glow, like a small, gentle flame. Ben's eyes widened; his jaw hung open.

Ariana's father was an angel.

"Greetings." Ariana's father evaluated Ben with narrowed eyes. "My name is Zachariel, Chief of Riverglade Village. And you are?"

Ben continued to stare before Ariana nudged his side. He took a deep, shaky breath, struggling to regain his composure, though all that came out was a shy, half-hearted greeting.

"Uh...hi."

Ariana rolled her eyes, grabbing Ben by the neck. "Er, what he means to say is that he's honored to meet you!"

The angel eyed his daughter. "And what is this stranger's name, pray tell?"

"Uh..." Ben stumbled across his words. "B-ben. Benjamin Blake, sir."

Zachariel paused as he assessed him, his eyebrow arched. He grabbed his hand, shaking it as he studied him. "Nice to meet you, Ben. I'm sure there's much we can learn about each other."

Ben's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Ariana suspiciously. She beamed and gave him a reassuring thumbs-

up. His legs tensed as he considered taking off in the opposite direction, away from the sudden insanity of the crazy violin girl with fish for friends...and an angel for a father.

“Relax,” Zachariel said, though a hint of suspicion tinged his voice. “You have nothing to fear, so long as you have nothing to hide.”

Do I have something to hide? Ben wondered. After a moment’s consideration, his brain offered no answer. He ever so slightly shrugged. *Well, I guess I can’t hide anything when I can’t remember anything. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt me.*

“Oh! I forgot to mention something,” Ariana said, perking up. “Ben has amnesia and nowhere to sleep tonight. Can he stay with us?”

The three of them stared at each other; the angel’s previous easygoing expression vanished. Whatever fragile understanding Zachariel and Ben had come to, chances are Ariana’s little suggestion had shattered it to pieces.

Zachariel’s eyes narrowed. Cold, unforgiving authority took over, the easy smile falling to a hard, flat line. He turned to Ariana; his eyebrow arched as he gave her a questioning look. Ariana’s expression remained steadfast, determined. Her father sighed, firmly placing his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “Ariana and I are going to discuss this. Privately.”

She rolled her eyes. “Dad, come on...”

“If you would please wait here for a moment, Mr. Blake.” He removed his hand as he gestured for Ben to stay put outside. “I promise this won’t be long.”

Ben sighed as the door slammed behind him. He spun and took a glance at the village from the cottage’s hillside view. People were walking about, carrying various things, and helping to set up what he assumed to be the ‘Glimmering Moon’ festival that Ariana was going on about earlier.

It seems fun, I guess, Ben thought, But I'm not sure I can afford the distraction or looking like a threat, especially to the one person who supposedly can help me.

Ben exhaled and closed his eyes. He tried to recall the brief flashes of his past from the forest, but his forehead ached. The memories blurred as his mind danced behind his eyelids, as if purposely denying him...and taunting him.

Damn it, Ben thought as he shook the fuzziness from his head. Instead, he leaned in closer to the small cottage, pressing his ear against the door as he focused on the ongoing argument between Ariana and Zachariel.

"You find him in a forest, take pity on him because of his supposed memory loss, and now you want him to stay...with you?"

"Yes, Dad!" Ben heard Ariana argue. "He has nowhere to stay!"

"I get that, Ariana, but you don't know if he's telling the truth or if he'll hurt you. You, of all people, know what's out there."

"He won't hurt me, Dad. He's not a demon."

"You don't know that. Look, the fact remains that you don't know where Ben is from. Or even if he's—"

"—He needs help," Ariana protested. "I promised I'd help him!"

"I'm perfectly okay with helping him, Ariana, but I'm sure he can find somewhere else—"

"Please?"

After that, no other noise erupted from them. Based on the silence, Ben figured Ariana had deployed her begging look. Apparently, it worked on angels, too.

"Ugh. Fine." Ben heard the angel say. A moment later, the door to their cottage flung open as Zachariel and Ariana walked out. "You can stay for one night. After that, I'm afraid

you must figure out another arrangement. Perhaps an inn or something.”

“Of course! Thank you, sir,” Ben said, as a strange burning sensation erupted across his hands. He instinctively rubbed them together hastily to make it go away, like scratching an itch.

Zachariel stared suspiciously and nodded. “Certainly.” He stood to his full height, cupping his hands behind his back. “Besides, you need my help, apparently.”

“Yes, sir. Well, like Ariana said, I have a memory issue. She said you might help me.”

The angel’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see about that. Let’s take our conversation elsewhere, shall we?”

Ariana tried to walk with them. “Hey, wait! I wanted—”

Zachariel turned around. “Don’t you have to get ready, Ari?”

Her cheeks flushed. “It doesn’t take that long. I can—”

“—go. Now.”

“But—”

“Ariana Marie Winters!” Her father’s eyes narrowed; his voice deepened. The two stared at each other for a moment before she broke eye contact and stared at the ground, gripping her forearm.

“Yes, sir.”

“We won’t be gone long, I promise.” His expression softened as he sighed. “Look. Get dressed, do the warmups and we will meet you at the festival later.”

Ariana nodded slowly, avoiding her father’s ethereal eyes. Zachariel sighed before leaning in, whispering to her. Her eyes brightened up as she shook excitedly, skipping back into the house.

Ben arched an eyebrow. “What did you tell her?”

“I just provided an incentive.” Zachariel shrugged. “Ariana wants time to get to know you.”

“She does?” Ben blinked. “Huh. Alright.”

The angel nodded briefly and strode down the gravel roads of Riverglade village with Ben close at heel, his wings held, his hands clasped behind his back. The streets were busy—not exactly teeming at the brim—but still lively as the entire town anticipated the upcoming festivities. Banners and lanterns with various moon and star patterns adorned the small buildings. Many people wore sparkles on their clothing, as if to mimic the moonlight.

As they walked past a dark alleyway, Ben could have sworn he saw three sets of glowing red eyes staring at him. He squinted to get a better look, but they disappeared.

Zachariel cleared his throat, pulling Ben’s attention away from the alley. “I noticed you don’t have the aura of a demon, but something is off about you. So, I am going to ask...” His eyes narrowed, his voice became edged and threatening as he loomed over him, his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Who are you really?”

Ben’s heart thumped faster. “I-I don’t know, sir. All I know is my name—”

“How convenient,” Zachariel coldly remarked.

“—and that I was trying to save someone before, but I don’t know who.”

The angel paused, his intense gaze never wavering. “Save someone?”

Ben nodded quickly. “Yeah, someone close to me, I think. Got a few flashes in the forest, but—”

“You ‘think?’”

“—I mean, I try to remember, but my mind doesn’t let me. It’s like—”

“That’s not helping your case, Mr. Blake.”

“Look,” Ben said as he grit his teeth. “I’m not trying to hurt your daughter or anything. I mean, she’s great and all, but I don’t even really wanna be here, wherever this is!” He looked him in the eye, man-to-angel. “With all due respect, sir, I just want to know what the hell is going on.”

Zachariel stared at Ben steadily, the dark expression fading. “You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?”

Ben nodded.

The angel let out a quick grunt of what sounded like disappointment. “Well, if that is true, then I suspect you don’t know how you got here, either.”

“Honestly, I was hoping you would know,” Ben said with a shrug. “Or that maybe you had some angel magic to help me remember or you know...something. Anything.”

Zachariel shook his head. “Unfortunately, no.” His left wing briefly fluttered. “As much as I wish I did. That’s not my specialty.”

So, Ariana bringing me here was pointless, after all.

“Back to square one, I guess.” Ben said, grimacing.

The angel scratched his beard. “Not necessarily. There might be someone who can. A friend of mine, but she’s up in the mountains. Back on Earth, she specialized in that sort of thing, helping people confront the things that they had tried to forget. If you like, I can point you in her direction in the morning.”

Ben forced a smile to convey gratitude. “Thank you, Sir. Anything helps at this point.”

“Well, it’s not a guarantee.” Zachariel sighed as he straightened his posture, clearing his throat. “Anyway, I’ve stated earlier, I will allow you to stay with us tonight—”

“—I mean, I’m grateful,” Ben said, interrupting him. But wouldn’t it be better for me to find a hotel or something?”

“Ideally, yes.” The angel rolled his eyes. “But Ariana insisted on it. She didn’t want you to feel unwelcome.”

Wow, Ben thought, *either she has no idea, or she’s trying to get me killed.*

“I’m sorry.” Ben’s cheeks flushed. “I wasn’t keen on it either. I don’t want you to think I would ever try to make a move on her or hurt her or...”

The angel shrugged. “Don’t worry. That activity that you’re surely thinking about is almost impossible in New Eden.”

“Almost?” Ben stupidly asked.

Zachariel glared at him. “That subject aside, Ariana seems rather comfortable with you. I find it strange, considering that she has known you less than a day. She has never been particularly good with people, even after becoming the village celebrity.”

“Really?” Ben arched an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

“Ariana is...unique, particularly with the way she engages people, though it often sets her apart in many ways. Some good, others not so much. Being my adopted daughter certainly doesn’t help, either.”

“Huh,” Ben said. “You’d think that she would be best friends with everyone.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I mean, I know she’s a little crazy and whatnot...”

Zachariel’s eyes narrowed.

Ben paled a little. “...but at the same time, she’s sweet. I don’t think any other person would have wanted to help and offered me a place to stay as she did. Her personality is...I dunno, pure. Innocent. Full of life.”

The angel paused momentarily, a warm smile forcing his stern expression aside. “She truly is a special girl. The fact that

she connects with you in a way that she hasn't with anyone else" Zachariel glanced at Ben. "Well, I hope it will be a good thing. For her, and perhaps even for you."

"Makes it weird that she was the one to find me, doesn't it?"

The angel assessed him for a moment. He looked forward and shrugged. "It certainly does. It almost seems like you were intentionally placed there. Needless to say, I'm...concerned."

Ben studied his shifting feet to avoid the angel's piercing gaze. "I don't blame you. Although..." He glanced at the angel, "...Ariana seems familiar, like I already know her. Earth, maybe?"

Zachariel froze in his tracks, grimacing. "That is impossible."

"What do you mean?"

"She never made it out of the womb."

"What?" Ben's breathing stopped; his eyes widened as he processed the revelation. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

The angel nodded sadly. "Such a shame. She would have been one more light for that cursed world. Regardless, I brought her here and raised her. Aside from her tragic beginning, she turned out quite beautifully."

As Ben thought about it more, he smiled. "Hard to disagree with you there. I don't remember much about Earth yet, but something tells me it isn't all that great. Her being in an afterlife like this? She's probably better off."

Zachariel eyed Ben with an arched brow. "What gave you the impression that New Eden is an afterlife?"

Ben glanced at Zachariel's wings. "Well..."

The angel chuckled. "No, unfortunately, New Eden isn't quite what you would think. I'd consider it to be more of a second chance rather than an afterlife, but that's not entirely true either. The people that are brought here by us angels

typically had short or tragic lives, sometimes both. That aside, I do what I can to ensure my citizens have as happy an existence as I can grant them.” Zachariel sighed, melancholy in his voice. “This place—while well protected by the other angels and I—isn’t exactly free from the vices and evils that consumed the Earth. My duty is to follow the Creator’s will and try to guard my people against any potential danger.”

“Danger?” Ben asked. “People can still get hurt? Or die?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Zachariel’s jaw visibly tightened, then he relaxed it. “But we can discuss that in further detail later. For now, all we need to worry about is the festival and getting you ready for travel tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” Ben said with a nod. “Anyway, I appreciate everything you and Ari are doing for me.” He looked around at the now-ongoing festivities. People scoured the streets excitedly with their friends, partners, and sometimes children. Smiles adorned their faces as the upbeat music echoed from the town square. He smiled.

“It almost seems like a shame to leave.”

Zachariel nodded. “Certainly. Perhaps once you’ve figured out your—” His shimmering ethereal eyes suddenly narrowed and focused in on Ben’s right shoulder.

“What?” Ben blinked, then followed the angel’s gaze just in time to see a bright light erupt into a small but aggressive blaze.

Ben’s eyes widened. He was on fire.

“Woah! Crap, crap!” The flame grew as Ben tried to smother it by aggressively smacking it. He dropped to the ground, rolling around in the gravel until it finally extinguished. Ben’s chest heaved as Zachariel stared down at him.

“I’m okay, I think.” Ben sat up, shaking himself out of shock and regaining his focus. He scanned the immediate area, his eyes searching some of the other townsfolk who had

stopped, their brows furrowed in concern. "Did someone get me with a torch or something?"

The angel continued to assess him, his eyes darting up and down. Finally, he inhaled. "Actually Ben...maybe you should stay here for a few more days."

A few more days? Ben thought. *Is he serious?*

"Uh, are you sure?" Ben asked, standing to his feet quickly and brushing himself off. "I don't want to impose or anything."

"You won't, rest assured."

"But you said that tomorrow..."

Zachariel sighed, then looked him square in the eye. "Look, Ben. I know you want to leave, but I promise your stay here won't be too long."

Ben's jaw clenched. "Why?"

"There's something I need to...investigate," Zachariel said. "I think keeping you close is my best option."

"I think..."

"I insist," the angel said, ending the argument with the two simple words.

Ben dipped his head, opting not to argue further. "Yes, Sir."

"Don't be too downtrodden now. It won't be a complete waste." The angel said, his voice carrying a confident yet hesitant encouragement. "You may even remember a thing or two."

Ben avoided Zachariel's gaze. The angel placed a hand on his shoulder as he exhaled sharply.

"Why don't we go find our seats?"

Reluctant, Ben nodded and looked forward to the town square. The Glimmering Moon Festival was about to begin.

Chapter 3

Beauty of Music

After a few minutes of gently pushing through the eager crowds, Ben and Zachariel finally made it to the town square. On the side stood a large, mighty oak that overshadowed much of the area. From its branches hung several lanterns—each lit with a different color flame—draping decorations, colored tinsel, notes, carvings, and other objects too small for him to identify. From the path to the town center, the ground transitioned from loose gravel to solid cobblestone, with a few parts decorated and written on as if a festival tradition. At the base of the tree was a large, engraved rock wrapped in the firm embrace of the roots as the rest of the circle expanded out from it. As Ben took in the enchanting sight, he also noticed something.

“This is technically a town circle, not a square,” he remarked in the angel’s ear.

“Hilarious,” Zachariel said as he lightly shoved Ben away. “Now, go sit down. Don’t give me an excuse to use my sword.”

No argument there, Ben thought as he briefly stumbled. Better to shut up and find my seat than be shish ka bopped by an angel.

Zachariel broke off from him and sat in the back, on a humble yet distinct chair that belonged to the village chief. Ben sat next to him on the cold, stone-laden ground, tucking in his knees and resting his chin on them. Despite being in the center of a sea of noise, he had never felt so alone...and frustrated. His answers seemingly lay with some person far off in the mountains, at least until Ariana’s passive-

aggressive angel dad had randomly decided that his stay in Riverglade had been extended involuntarily.

Why the sudden change? Ben wondered. *Why flip-flop from not trusting me to insisting that I stay longer?*

Ben glanced around, then noticed the burn mark on his shirt. Zachariel had only changed his mind after he had caught fire.

Maybe it's a safety thing. Zachariel might think I injured myself or something. Ben felt underneath it, only to find his skin perfectly fine. Slightly rough, a little sensitive, but intact. *Guess I got lucky. I didn't even feel it. Now, I'm basically a prisoner because some dude with a torch probably brushed by me without paying attention.*

"Hello, stranger! You a newcomer?"

Ben looked up, his train of thought derailed. A young couple had sat next to him, accompanied by a small dog that hitchhiked in their picnic bag.

"Uh, yeah," Ben answered. "Got here yesterday."

"Oh, so you haven't been to one of our festivals before?" the boyfriend asked. "It's well known across New Eden, but not everyone gets to see it. You must be from another village."

Ben shrugged. "Nope. All of this is still new to me."

"Ah." The boyfriend nodded. "That means you haven't seen Ariana yet."

"Well." Ben glanced over to Zachariel, whose angelic eyes briefly crossed his before looking forward. "I've met her, yes. I heard she's pretty good on the fiddle."

The man and his girlfriend laughed as the dog yipped. Ben briefly reached over and petted it.

"Oh, trust me," the boyfriend said. "She is the best part of the festival, hands down! Every year she steps it up, it's never the same thing. It's fresh entertainment, every time."

Ben raised an eyebrow, withdrawing his hand from the dog. "Yeah?"

The woman nodded, peeking over from her spot. "Other villages may have fireworks, or dancers, or some other fancy show. None of them have her, though. The way she plays on that violin?" Her eyes glistened in wonder. "It's incredible. It's like she was sent from The Creator himself!"

"She's that good, huh?"

The couple smiled excitedly and looked forward as Ben delved back into his thoughts. He had never heard her play before, at least, not in the way the famed musician herself described it. Even if he was confined to the town, at least there was entertainment courtesy of Ariana, the crazy violinist.

Ben glanced over into the crowd on the opposite side of where he and Zachariel sat. In front sat three girls, all of whom had their eyes fixed on him. The one in the middle flashed him a confident, hungry smile. Ben arched an eyebrow.

Suddenly, all the noise died down. Everyone faced forward as the light from the planetary form in the sky illuminated the circle, the lights from the multi-colored lanterns shone brighter. Ariana walked gracefully into the light, her violin and bow at the ready. She wore a pure white dress that almost seemed to glow from the light above. Under it, she wore a set of dark, tight jeans with a pair of black and white sneakers. Her hair was tied into a cute, curly ponytail, her azure eyes glittered.

Ben sat still, his breathing slowed. His muscles tensed as his gaze met hers, and for a moment, the two locked eyes. Ariana smiled at him as she broke the stare, moving her bow to meet the strings of her violin. She paused for a moment before drawing it across slowly, emitting a beautiful sound that seized his heart from him, quickening his pulse.

Zachariel leaned over, smirking as Ben stared. "Now, this is the good part."

Ariana sped up her performance, the song's beat becoming quicker and cheerier, her bow a mere blur. She danced as she played, each motion tied to a note she played; her feet constantly shuffled and shifted, the slender, graceful movements in sync with the beat. Her smile was bright, haughty, almost mischievous. Ben felt his chest pinch tight, his vision becoming narrowed and focused on her.

She met his eyes, smiling as he watched her. For a short time, she never broke eye contact, even when she was dancing. Her body twirled and twisted, her bow gliding up and down the strings, her fingers dancing and left hand shifting across the neck of the violin as she continued her graceful dance, never once missing a note or going out of tune.

As she played, the lights departed the surrounding lanterns and danced around with her, following her movements like moths drawn to a flame. Her bow lit up as well, leaving an afterimage of her from each dance move she performed until Ariana's light illuminated the entire town square.

Ben stared in amazement, his chest heaving as he took in the incredible sight. How could someone have such mastery of two insanely difficult talents, much less be able to integrate them in a flawless, artistic manner? However, the best part for him wasn't the music, the light, or the dancing itself. It all seemed to be but an outlet for her, a conduit to show the world how beautiful her soul truly was.

She leaped onto a nearby rock and back off again, briefly striking and grinding the strings of her violin with her bow. Her feet paused for a moment, but her music kept speeding up; his heartbeat intensified with the tempo. Finally, the song took a dramatic and beautiful decline, slowing its pace until she finished it with an elongated note. A loud cheer erupted from everyone as Ben stared, awestruck. The lights returned to their respective lanterns, burning brighter than ever before.

Zachariel elbowed him, smirking. "Not bad, eh?"

Ben continued to stare, unbothered by Zachariel. "That was..."

"Great? See, I told you wouldn't want to miss—"

"...beautiful. Ariana is so..."

Ben stopped mid-sentence as he felt the angel's eyes stab into his. He avoided Zachariel's gaze, hiding his face in his long hair to keep the angel from seeing his reddened face.

Ariana concluded her performance by taking a graceful bow. She ran over to Zachariel, giving her father a quick hug. As she pulled back, the angel quickly smiled at her to hide his last death glare aimed at Ben.

"Did you like that one, Dad?"

Zachariel laughed heartily. "I sure did. I'm surprised you got the light fairies to help. Normally, they are stubborn little creatures."

Ariana blushed sheepishly. "I wanted it to be a surprise. I helped one of them out the other day, and they felt they had to thank me."

Her father nodded, pride gleaming in his ethereal eyes. Ariana turned to Ben, her voice heightened. "So, how was it? Was I good?"

Ben quickly glanced at Zachariel, whose intense eyes were fixed on him. Finally, the angel's expression relaxed. He sighed and made a quick motion with his hand to let him know it was safe to express his opinion. Ben exhaled, letting the excitement rush back into him as he turned his attention back to Ariana. "Is that a trick question? I've never seen anything like that before! The way you danced and played, and...and the lights!"

He really hadn't. It was so mind-blowing that he had to remind himself to breathe.

Ariana beamed at him before turning to her father. "Hey, Dad? Can me and him have a minute? Like we talked about?"

“Of course, Ari.” Zachariel blinked, his eyes lowered. “I’ll be...ah, mingling.”

Ariana threw another quick hug around him. “Thank you, Daddy. I love you.” She quickly kissed his cheek and grabbed Ben by the hand, leading him away towards a bench on the outskirts of the town square. They both sat down as Ariana let her hair tumble down to her shoulders with a smile.

“So, ya really liked it, huh?”

“Yeah, you weren’t kidding about being talented.” Ben nodded, smiling. “The townspeople were right about being hyped. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Ariana giggled and whispered in his ear. “This is kinda awkward, but...” She moved next to his ear and whispered into it. “...I’ve been working on that song forever. If it’s okay, I wanna dedicate it to you.”

Ben’s eyes widened in surprise as he heard the words. While he couldn’t recall, he was sure that he had never seen a dancing violinist before, much less had a song dedicated to him.

“Are you sure?” Ben asked. “You barely know me.”

“That can change,” Ariana said with a gentle smile. “If you want it to.”

“I...I would,” he said, his cheeks slightly warmer. “So, do you have a name for it?”

Ariana pondered it for a second, then shrugged. “Actually, I don’t.” She nudged him. “Do you have any ideas?”

Ben shrugged as well. “Eh, not really. Sorry.”

Ariana frowned. “Aw. We’ll think of something later down the line!”

“You think so?”

She held out her hand and closed all her fingers except for her pinky. "Pinky promise? Every song needs a name!" she babbled cutely.

Ben brightened up and locked pinkies with her. "Promise."

She smiled at him as the sound of instruments began playing from the band that had just arrived. In an instant, Ariana was on her feet, pulling Ben up as well. She led him to the dance floor, where she put Ben's right hand to her waist and elevated his left in the air.

"Whoa! What are you doing?" Ben asked, surprised.

"Just go with it!"

Before he could even process it, Ariana led him in a session of haphazard dancing. Though he fought and stumbled at first, his body soon joined in the ebb and flow of the crowd, and he found himself smiling, even laughing.

I'm...having fun?

Dancing with Ariana was like playing and chasing a childhood friend around a tree, only they were in front of each other, and music blared, egging them on. They spun around in circles constantly, both laughing uncontrollably. Ariana took a few missteps just to irk Ben, and he got a small revenge by spinning them around faster.

"Woo hoo!" Ariana shouted over the loud music.

"Hey, you're supposed to be leading, Ari!" Ben said, feeling vertigo overtake him. They were laughing so much at the ridiculousness of it all that he was sure they would both die from lack of air.

As they spun around, Ben let himself lock eyes with her. He couldn't believe that this Ariana was the same quirky girl who had found him in the forest.

Is this what she is really like? Ben wondered. *If so...*

Ariana smirked at him as she broke the duo's spin and twirled around before ending back up in Ben's arms.

...how was I so lucky to meet someone like her?

At Ariana's behest, Ben took the lead. They danced reasonably well as a pair, their movements somewhat in sync when the beat was slower. When it sped up, however, all bets were off. She locked arms and spun him around, sending him whirling into the crowd at the foot of Zachariel.

"Uh...hey." Ben hesitantly looked up at him. "Long time no see."

The angel stared down at him. "Oh, so you wish to dance with me, huh?"

Uh oh, Ben thought. He immediately got to his feet and tried to make excuses.

"Well, you see...I'm, uh..."

"Do you?" the angel demanded, wings fluttering.

Ben froze and stood silently.

Zachariel broke his bearing and burst into laughter. "Learn to take a joke, Ben. You can go back to dancing with Ariana...so long as you behave."

Ben nodded quickly and ran back to Ariana. She giggled so hard that she could have given the Pillsbury Dough Boy a run for his money. Though his face burned at first, he eventually laughed at himself and grabbed her hand to resume their dancing, the strings and drums playing to the side dragging them into euphoria.

The music sped up, soon starting to outpace them. Ariana tripped over Ben's foot and landed on her butt, taking him down with her.

"Ow! Hey!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to...ow!"

They stared at each other for a solid minute before they burst into laughter. Ben almost wished that this moment, the time he spent with Ariana, would never end. He frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Ariana asked, concerned.

“I...” He managed a smile. “...nothing. I’m glad you invited me here, is all.”

Ariana smiled as Ben stood up to his feet and helped her. They left the dance floor again, both plopping back down on the bench. “That was fun! I also didn’t know you could dance!” She elbowed him in the side lightly. “That was pretty good, Ben!”

Ben shrugged. “The funny thing is, I didn’t know I could dance either.”

Ariana blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah. I hadn’t even smiled in a long time until I came here and met you.” Ben said softly, letting the thought slip from his mouth.

Ariana turned her head away, and he could swear she was blushing. She looked back at him and asked, “Wait a minute. You said you haven’t smiled in a long time. How would you know that if you have amnesia?”

“I don’t know how, but I can feel it. Like, I can feel that I’m from Earth. The rest is still blurry, like a camera lens that refuses to focus. Know what I mean?”

“Sort of. I don’t know what a camera lens is, and I don’t know much about Earth. Zachariel tells me I’m from there too, but it doesn’t seem like it.” Ariana frowned. “By the way, I’m sorry if it seems like I don’t care about your past. I really do. I just...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ben smiled. “You’re not the only one.”

Ariana beamed and straightened her posture. “Besides, as your duly elected friend, it’s my job to help you get your memories back!”

“Duly elected?” Ben chuckled. “Who elected you?”

Ariana gave him a confident smirk, jutting her chin in the air. “I did.”

“I guess that settles it.” Ben laughed, looking back at her as she returned the stare. “Looks like you and I are...”

Ben never got to finish his sentence. Ariana was now latching on to him, hugging him tightly. She released him and grabbed his wrist.

“Come on, there’s one more thing I want to show you before the night ends!” she said, gripping his wrist tighter as she grabbed her violin case.

Ben used his free hand to scratch his head. First, Ariana showed him a bunch of fish. After that, the sunset. Next, she introduced him to her passive-aggressive angel father, who undoubtedly desired to vaporize and reduce him to ash.

God only knows what this girl will do next, Ben thought, then dismissed all the doubtful thoughts with a shake of his head. In the end, Ben smiled, going along with her gladly.

Chapter 4

Sea of Stars

Ariana lightly gripped Ben's wrist as they walked up the gravel path, the eclipsed, gentle moon lighting their way. The woods they were now in were on the other side of Riverglade village, opposite the forest where she had found Ben. It was much less dense, allowing her to guide him with relative ease.

A smile touched Ariana's lips as she thought about her first day with Ben. She was proud of herself for finally making a new friend and not scaring him away like the others.

Even so, something about Ben is different. He doesn't feel new, she thought. More like someone I've known forever.

Her mind flashed back to earlier in the day. Despite having just met Ben, she felt like some invisible force was pushing her to him, beckoning her not to let him out of her sight. When he tried to leave, Ariana's body seemed to move on its own, reaching out.

But what was it? Ariana wondered. Was it really something else? Or am I just lonely?

Then Ariana remembered grabbing his hand. At that moment, she saw something. Flashes, maybe even memories, had flooded her mind, all of them of the mysterious Benjamin Blake. They passed too quickly for her to decipher, but the strange feelings from those visions remained. Though she couldn't quite identify them, Ariana was certain of one thing: meeting Benjamin Blake was no accident. They had crossed paths for a reason.

“Some party, huh?” Ben said, breaking the silence.

Ariana smiled. The last few hours were probably the most fun she had in her teenage life, even beating her first Glimmering Moon performance. Also, there was the fact that she had now found the perfect dance partner, despite his actual dancing not being up to par with hers.

“Yep. I had fun tripping over your feet and falling on my butt.”

—“And I had fun being thrown to your dad and being asked to dance. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Oh, hush. You know it was funny.”

Ben chuckled. “Okay, maybe a little. But seriously.” He glanced at her violin case. “How did you learn to do that? Dancing while playing?”

“I suppose I started doing it while practicing in the forest, where I found you,” Ariana explained. “At first, all I did was practice, practice, practice. Piece after boring piece. I got good at it but couldn’t feel what I was playing like something was missing.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “What was it?”

“Passion,” Ariana said. “I wanted to feel like I was making art, not just playing a tune everyone has heard a million times. I got frustrated, even wanting to quit at one point.”

“But?”

“But then, I saw something. I noticed how the birds sang while they flew, how the entire forest seemed to move, almost in rhythm. So, little by little, I moved as well. First, I just swayed back and forth, then my feet and whole body moved like my surroundings.”

“So, it came to you naturally?”

Ariana bit her lip. "Not really. I kept missing notes, popping strings, and occasionally falling when I tried something more complicated. I just experimented until I got better and better until I got where I am now."

Ben's eyes widened. "How long did it take you to perfect it?"

"Well, I wouldn't say perfect." Ariana blushed sheepishly. "It's a constant work in progress if I'm honest."

If that's what you wanna call it, the voice teased. Ariana shook her head to rid herself of it.

"Well, I'd like to think you're pretty close. You and Ole Betsy absolutely shredded it tonight. No wonder you carry it around with you."

With a warm smile, Ariana reached back and patted the case affectionately. Despite its age, Ole Betsy had never failed her, always staying in tune despite being used so much.

Well, another successful festival, girly, she thought, smiling, *especially this one. Thank you for helping me to impress my new friend.*

"I know it sounds kinda pathetic, but Ole Betsy has always been there for me," Ariana said. "I guess you could say that she's my first real friend."

"That's the part I don't understand," Ben started. "Everybody at the festival loved you. They were excited. You were the talk of the town."

"Well, now they do, at least. It wasn't always that way." She avoided his gaze.

"Why is that?"

"Do you remember what I said at the tree about how I'd never had someone to share the view with?"

Ben nodded.

Ariana opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated. An image of her younger self flashed through her mind, lonely and isolated. She had felt displaced, alienated, like a stranger among everyone, even though Riverglade was supposed to be her home.

“It was rough for me during my first years in New Eden. I wasn’t socially adept. Every group I had tried to become a part of rejected me because I wasn’t like them. Also, having the village chief be my overprotective dad didn’t help. After a while, I just kinda gave up and became the village social outcast.”

“I’m sorry, Ariana.” Ben frowned, his gaze falling.

“It wasn’t all bad.” Ariana beamed, an attempt to purge that sadness from her soul. “I still had my dad. And Kira.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Kira?”

Ariana nodded. “Yeah, she’s an angel too. A good friend of ours, always there for us. Heh, she even taught me to play the violin.” The memories surfaced as her voice trailed off. All the time Kira had spent with her, patiently teaching her how to hold her instrument, stay in tune, play vibrato, etc. But to Ariana, it was more than that. Kira was there for her on her worst days when she felt like giving up. She was also the one who first witnessed her new talent, seeing Ariana dancing and playing in the forest. Ariana smiled. “I guess you could say she’s like a mother to me.”

“I’m glad you still had somebody.” Ben chuckled. “So, am I gonna need her stamp of approval, too? When do I get to meet her?”

“Well...” Ariana scratched her chin. “...hopefully soon. She doesn’t live in Riverglade, just comes to visit sometimes.”

“She doesn’t?”

“Nope. Kira is up in the mountains, managing a village of her own.”

Ben's eyes widened. "Wait, I think Zachariel said something about that. He told me that there was someone who could help with my memory problem and that she specialized in this kind of stuff."

"Really?" Ariana raised an eyebrow. "Huh. Does sound like her, I guess."

"Yep. Your Dad said he would take me over there personally in a few days, so I guess I get to meet Kira after all."

"A few days?" Ariana blinked. "Oh. I see."

Ben smiled, though his gray eyes appeared sad. "Yeah. I was supposed to leave tomorrow, but your dad changed his mind and decided to keep me around for a bit."

Ariana's brows drew together in surprise. "Wait, what?"

"Yep," Ben confirmed. "Just out of nowhere, he basically grounded me."

"Wow." She whistled. "Dad must really like you then, huh?"

"No, not even close," Ben said with a chuckle. "Something set me on fire, so it's probably just for my safety or something. I'm okay, though."

"You were on fire?" Ariana asked, a worried look crossing her face before being replaced by a puzzled one. "Then why didn't he send you to the village doctor?"

"Oh." Ben froze, looking down. "I didn't think of that. I mean, it's not even that bad."

"Can I see?"

Ben nodded and spun around for Ariana to inspect the blackened hole in his shirt. She couldn't see well, so she felt underneath, running her hand across his skin. It felt warm... a little too warm, perhaps. But smooth, intact and burn-free.

"I guess you got lucky." Ariana stepped back as Ben faced forward. "It is kinda weird, coming from Dad. I would have

thought that he would have kicked you out of town the first chance he got.”

Ben scoffed. “Maybe he does like me after all.”

“He’d better,” Ariana said. “Otherwise, I’m gonna have a talk with him.”

“Ha.” Ben snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Ariana blew raspberries as they walked onward, the gravel path crunching beneath their shoes. She glanced over at Ben, who she could barely see because the woods were so dimly lit.

“So, uh...where are we going now?” he asked.

“We’re almost there. Wait—” Ariana squinted, focusing on the light ahead, “—we are there. Come on!”

Grabbing Ben’s wrist, Ariana led him through the rest of the woods until finally they broke free of the dark and made it into the gentle caress of the moonlight. She looked back just in time to see Ben’s eyes widen, the storm within them illuminated by the sight before him.

The unbroken blue of the ocean stretched before them. Waves reached toward the moon as though trying to be part of the light before falling back and rolling onto the white sand. With each wave of the shifting water, a blue glow flared to life, like the breathing of a slumbering creature made of enchanted light.

Ariana smiled, setting down her violin case and removing her shoes. She rushed into the wake, blue luminescence appearing next to her ankles. Ben followed suit, dipping his feet into the ocean.

“What is this, exactly?” He looked up. “Is it the eclipse doing this?”

“It’s a phenomenon that occurs every year around the time of the festival,” Ariana said as she nodded. “The moonlight penetrates the water’s surface and illuminates all

the tiny sea creatures below, making the ocean a perfect reflection of the night sky.”

“It’s incredible.” Ben looked down, the shifting light from below crossing his face. “How did you find it?”

“Kira was the first one to show me. She brought me out here when I was about ten. She told me about all the local legends surrounding it, how the lights were the souls of those who had passed on from New Eden returning to visit. Very few know about it, but those of us who do call it the ‘Sea of Stars.’”

“That’s a cool name,” Ben noted. “Maybe next festival you can do a show here or something. People would love that.”

“I feel like too many people here would ruin the vibe.” Ariana shrugged and scratched her head. “So, I probably won’t do a show here.”

“What if you did one for just me?” Ben asked. “An encore?”

Ariana’s eyes widened, her cheeks flushed. “Uh...sure!” She waded onto the sand, opening her violin case. She brought the violin up, quickly tuning it before returning to where the water barely reached her ankles.

Okay, girly. Relax, the voice told Ariana. *It’s just an encore.*

Ariana took a deep breath, bringing her thumping heartbeat under control. She lifted the bow to the strings, her fingers in the third position on the neck of Ole Betsy. She drew the bow across, her fingers dancing across the fingerboard as she moved.

The water around her feet created a little more drag than usual, but she adapted and quickly learned to move in it until she was comfortable. She smiled confidently.

Alright. Let’s do this.

Ariana looked directly into Ben’s eyes as she danced around more actively, her body in sync with the waves. Unlike

the raw and haphazard dance in the town square, this one was about grace and flow, being part of the ocean. She let the push and pull of the sea guide her, her music following suit.

As she twirled, her foot hovered above the water, caressing its surface with a gentle touch, while the bright luminescence trailed behind like a loyal puppy following its master. She splashed, whipped, and frolicked across the shallow tides, her bow crossing up and down the strings until she brought her song to a close. The waves behind her roared as if from a crowd of applause.

Ben clapped, smiling. "Wow...that was..."

Ariana stepped back out of the water, brushing her brine-sprayed hair out of her eyes. "It was what?"

"Epic."

She laughed as she placed Ole Betsy back in her case and walked back out to the shallows. "Epic, huh?"

"I mean, yeah," Ben admitted. "Do you know what else is epic?"

"What?"

Ben darted over and sent a barrage of illuminated seawater to Ariana's festival outfit, which she had worked on for hours. She froze for a moment before she looked back up at him.

"Oh, no, you just didn't."

He grinned. "I did."

Ariana chased him into the water, splashing him as he guarded his face. Flashes of blue, glowing ocean flashed across the surface as they fought. Eventually, Ari splashed Ben into submission, forcing him to declare his defeat once more.

"You really ought to finish what you start," Ariana said with a smirk. "I will have you know I am very protective of my performance outfits."

“Little late for that,” Ben joked. “Anyway, I didn’t ruin it, did I?”

She glanced down. Her dress was wet, a lot of the sparkles came off, but it was still salvageable. Hopefully.

“I guess I’ll find out later. Maybe I’ll make you fix it.” Ariana glanced at Ben, who bent over to pick something out of the water.

“Ooh, what did you find?”

“It’s...a seashell,” he answered, gazing at it intently.

“Yep. You’ll find lots of those around here. Even—”

“She loved seashells.”

Ariana paused. For a moment, nothing could be heard but the crashing of waves on the shore. Her friend’s beautiful gray eyes were fixed on the horizon, tears rolling down his face. She frowned, stepping closer to him.

“Ben?”

He avoided her gaze, continuing to stare out at the sea. “She feels...so far away.”

Who is he talking about? Ariana wondered, before it suddenly hit her. When he had come to New Eden, all he could remember was losing someone. Someone close to him, special even. Whoever that person was, the pain in his eyes made it clear that he missed her dearly. Her eyes widened.

“You mean...?”

“I don’t even know her name. All I remember is failing her.” Ben dipped his head. “And yet, I get to enjoy this?”

Ariana frowned. The night had been so fun that she had forgotten about his missing memories, the person he had been trying to save. Her promise.

Can you imagine how he feels? the voice in her head told Ariana, *being thrown head-first into a new world, knowing he can’t even remember the name of someone he loves?*

Ariana's lips curled. As much as she hated to admit it, the voice was right. More than anything, she didn't want to see him hurting.

You're right, Ariana told the voice. I need to be there for Ben. No matter what it takes.

Her gaze drifted down to his open hand. For a moment she reached for it but hesitated. Instead, she placed it on his shoulder.

"Hey, you've had a long day. Why don't we head back?"

Ben didn't move at first, the fist with the seashell clenched tight, the night's breeze shifting his hair from his eyes. With reluctance, he nodded and let it slip from his palm into the ocean; the once-bright sea was now devoid of its gleaming light. Lonely.

As they walked on the beach, Ariana grabbed him and drew him in for a hug. At first, he didn't move. Finally, Ben's hands made their way around to her back as he returned it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into Ben's ear. "I'll help you find her. I promise."

"Thanks, Ari." Ben's voice threatened to crack. "That means more than you'll ever know."

Ariana broke the hug and smiled at him reassuringly. She returned Ole Betsy to her case and strapped it to her back. The pair returned to the village, both ready for a good night's sleep.

Chapter 5

A Good Soul

The dim lamplights of Riverglade caught Ben's eye as they finally made their way out of the forest; his shoes crunched the gravel as he walked. The streets were near-empty. There were still a few carts rolled out, and a couple of banners hung, but for the most part, the villagers had cleaned up. The soft light illuminated the road, casting the inner town in shadow. With the festival and eclipse over, he wondered what day-to-day life would be like in Riverglade.

I suppose I'll find out, Ben thought as he glanced up at Ariana. She looked back at him. A small, encouraging smile stretched across her face. Ben returned it.

Maybe I'm supposed to forget my past, he considered. *Maybe I'm dead, and this is paradise for me.*

A grimace formed on Ben's lips. He felt guilty for thinking it, knowing that person, that someone, was still out there. He needed to find her, whoever she was, even if it meant leaving paradise behind. His mind drifted back to the ocean, where a silver of memory had finally returned to him.

First thing I remember, and it's useless. Part of him wished he had kept the shell. Maybe it would have given him more memories?

Ben's chest tightened. On the one hand, he was glad to have remembered at least something. On the other, it was such a painful reminder of his failure, torturing him with possibility. He bit his lip.

Why am I here and not her?

They arrived back at the cottage. Ariana opened the door to find Zachariel sitting at the table, coffee in hand, staring daggers into them.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry, Dad. We got held up a bit.”

“Where did you go?”

“The Sea of Stars.”

“Hmm. Beautiful scenery. Not everyone gets to see it.” Zachariel sipped his coffee. “That being said, you didn’t honor our agreement. You were to be back here by the time the eclipse ended. Two hours ago.”

“Actually, that’s my fault, sir.” Ben exchanged a quick glance with Ariana. “I, uh...I asked her to play another song. Took a bit longer than we expected.”

Zachariel’s stare shifted to Ben and intensified. He placed his mug on the table. “Ari? Why don’t you go get ready for bed?”

Ariana opened her mouth to protest but opted not to argue. She turned to Ben and mouthed ‘sorry’ before disappearing into the back room.

The angel sighed and gestured for Ben to sit. Ben complied, folding his hands in his lap. The two avoided each other’s stare for an eternity as the air between them thinned. Ben took a deep, slow breath once he realized he had been holding it.

Finally, Zachariel spoke up. “Ben, do you remember me telling you that New Eden isn’t an afterlife?”

“Yeah. You said that people can still die here, right? That there was constant danger.”

“Do you know why?”

“Not really. I...wait...” His brows furrowed together. “...I overheard Ariana mention something about demons earlier.”

The angel nodded.

Ben stared in disbelief. "Demons are real?"

"Dark, sadistic monstrosities. They fear the darkness, and yet, they relish it. They will ultimately be erased, so in their minds, it makes them free to do whatever they wish." Zachariel's eyes lowered. "Unfortunately, this includes taking others with them. Corrupting them or destroying them, to ensure they join them in oblivion."

"You think I'm one of them?"

Zachariel shook his head. "No, that I've ruled out, I think. As I said earlier, your aura isn't demonic. But it isn't quite...normal."

Ben bit his lip as he felt frustration burn away his earlier nervousness. "What? Do you think I'm not human or something?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you've ruled out me being a demon, right?" Ben threw his hands up in exasperation. "Then what's the issue?"

The angel studied him carefully. "You show up exactly where my daughter practices violin every day, devoid of memory, save your name. A bit too convenient, if you ask me."

"So, you don't trust me." Ben ran his fingers through his hair as he leaned back. "I get it. I'm some weirdo who shows up out of nowhere."

"It's not just that, Ben. I—"

"—Not to be disrespectful, sir, but if you don't trust me, then why am I being kept here?"

Zachariel hesitated, his hand gripped his forearm.

"You said yourself that I wasn't a demon. And if it's about that fire thing, then I'm fine. No burns, nothing like that. All this is doing is—"

“Enough. I don’t know what it is, but there’s something more to you. You could be a trojan horse and not even know it, or maybe you’re the most skilled liar I’ve ever dealt with. Of course, there’s always the possibility that you are telling the truth, though the circumstances aren’t exactly reassuring.”

“So—again—if I’m a potential threat, why keep me here?” Ben asked, scoffing. “Why not send me away from Ariana and the village?”

Zachariel stared into his coffee mug. “Experience has taught me to keep a potential threat close, so it can be dealt with, if necessary. I believe there is even a proverb for it.”

Ben’s jaw clenched. The silence hung between them as the angel leaned on the table and ran his hands through his slightly grayed hair.

The angel sighed. “Look, Ben. I want to trust you. I want you and Ariana to have a healthy friendship, and I would love to help you regain your memories and find who you were trying to save. All I ask for is a few more days. That’s all.”

“...and for me to prove you wrong. About being a threat.”

Zachariel nodded and sipped his coffee.

Ben exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. “Alright. Fair enough, I guess.” He opened them as a thought came to mind. “You’re afraid of demons harming the village or Ariana, right?”

“That is correct.”

“But why are they here?” Ben asked. “If angels guard it? I mean, wouldn’t they stay away?”

The angel’s brows drew together. “It depends on the demon. Some obey their masters as lap dogs. Others take the reins themselves and make their own demented decisions. It’s a perverse thrill for them.”

Ben considered it. Everything in New Eden so far seemed so peaceful, so safe. The people in the village looked like they

could go about their day without even so much as a single thought given to their safety.

“Huh,” Ben said, brows raised. “Good thing you guys are on top of it.”

“As much as we can. Can’t say the same for Earth, however.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed. “What makes Earth different?”

“Earth, once the crown jewel of creation, is a lost cause. We pointlessly attempt to protect humans from demonic influence, but it rarely ever works. Few angels remain that aren’t eventually killed.”

Ben stared in disbelief. “Angels can die too?”

“Unfortunately.” Zachariel grimaced. “I lost many of my brothers and sisters to that hell. No matter how vigilant we were, or how valiantly we fought, it didn’t matter. They’re gone now.”

“I’m sorry.” Ben frowned. “I didn’t know.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“So, you’ve lost people too.”

“Indeed. Do you remember the feeling?”

Ben avoided his piercing gaze. “I do, Sir.”

“So, you understand. Good.” Zachariel leaned in, his eyes fierce and penetrating as his voice lowered into a growl. “I know I am overbearing to you, paranoid, and untrusting. I understand my methods may frustrate you. But believe me when I tell you, I will not lose her to demons or anything else. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Ben dipped his head. “I’m sorry. I should have considered all this before we went—”

The angel’s glare faded as he sighed and straightened his posture. “That being said, I’m not blaming you, Ben. At least, not for tonight. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Ben arched an eyebrow. "You're not?"

"No." Zachariel shook his head. "I just got a bit worried, is all. Allowing her to go with a stranger was...difficult, to say the least."

"I should have just—"

The angel held up his hand, cutting him off. "As I said, it's fine. Besides, for you to take responsibility for my daughter like that and return her unharmed..." He glanced at Ben, the hostility fading slightly, "...that proves I can at least begin to trust you, I hope."

"Either way, I probably won't be around to get her in trouble anymore," Ben said. "I'm sure you'll be happy."

The angel scoffed, rubbing his neck. "To tell you the truth, I wouldn't be surprised if it were the other way around. Memory or not, at least you seem to have a level head on your shoulders. Even here, that is rare."

"Funny thing to say to an amnesiac."

A reluctant smile came to Zachariel's face as he took another drink from his mug. "The issue lies with Ariana. In recent years, she's become more willful. It can be rather taxing." He sighed. "This puts me at my wit's end. There's only so much an angel can do, much less one who isn't even her real father..."

"I mean, you say that—" Ben began, "—but look at her. Ariana is an amazing person. Shouldn't you take some credit for how she turned out?"

Zachariel's eyes widened. He took another sip. "Thank you, Ben. I appreciate that."

Ben smiled. "Besides, you know Ari loves you if she named a fish after you."

The angel nearly spit out his coffee, barely downing it. "She did what?"

“Yep. Over in a little creek near Leanoir forest. Says that it has your attitude. It even splashed her in the face.”

“Ha. Snarky girl.” Zachariel laughed heartily. Once the angel had regained control of himself, Ariana emerged from the back room, clad in polka-dot pajamas.

“What are you two laughing about?” she demanded.

“Oh, nothing.” Zachariel lifted the mug to his mouth once again, eyeing Ben, who had to stifle his laughter.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment before she relaxed. “Hmm...well, at least you’re getting along. Anyway, I’m about ready to hit the sack. Ben?”

“Yeah. Been a weird day for me.” Ben glanced at the angel. “You got an extra sleeping bag anywhere?” He looked around the small kitchen and dining area. “Do we just try to push all this to the side so I can lie down? Or maybe I just sleep outside?”

“No, doofus. There’s a spot on the floor in my room.”

Ben froze, his eyes briefly meeting Zachariel’s. “Uh...”

The angel met his gaze and hesitated. “Ariana, I think it would be best if...”

“Dad, there’s literally nowhere else he can sleep.”

“Yes, but we can figure—”

“—But didn’t you promise he could stay with us?” She tilted her head and pursed her lips. “Besides, didn’t you teach me that hospitality was the ‘angel’ way?”

“I...” The angel sighed deeply, rubbing his temple. “Fine. But keep your hands to yourselves.” He removed his hand and stared at Ben as if to say, “Touch her, and I’ll kill you.”

Ben paled. Ariana beamed at her father. “Okay! Goodnight, Dad!” She grabbed Ben’s wrist and yanked him into the room, closing the door. He instantly moved, putting a few feet between them. She rolled her eyes.

“You’re such a chicken,” Ariana teased as she plopped on her bed. “You know he can’t kill you, right? Angels are forbidden from killing humans.”

Ben glanced at her. “You sure he can’t find a loophole?”

“Even if he does, I’ll protect you.”

“I’m definitely going to wind up holy barbeque then. It was nice knowing you.”

“Holy chicken,” Ariana quipped, correcting him as she threw him a spare pillow. Ben placed it at his feet and laid on the old wooden floor, which was surprisingly comfortable, just the right combination of rigidity and flexibility. Ariana settled on her belly, facing Ben as her legs kicked back and forth.

“So, what were you guys talking about in there?”

“Uh...” Ben interlocked his fingers behind his head as he pursed his lips. “Not much, really.”

“Oh, come on. At least tell me something.”

“Well, he said you were a devil child. Staying out late with strangers, sacrificing them, serving them to...”

“Oh, hush. I’m not that bad.” Ariana blew raspberries.

“Nah, I’m kidding.” Ben chuckled. “He did say you were getting more independent and adventurous. He’s worried about it.”

“I’m almost eighteen, for Pete’s sake,” Ariana reasoned. “I can’t always be his little girl, ya know.”

“I can understand that,” Ben said. “Doesn’t mean that it won’t be hard for him.”

“Yeah, I know.” Ariana frowned. She turned herself around, laying properly on her bed. “Speaking of age, how old are you? If you can remember.”

Ben shrugged. “Seventeen, I think. I would have been turning eighteen in December...if...” His mind blanked out

before he could finish his words. "I don't even remember, honestly. It's all a blur."

"I'm sorry, Ben." Ariana frowned. "I meant what I said earlier about helping you find your past and that girl."

Ben gave her a half-smile. "Thanks, Ari."

Ariana returned it and turned over in her bed. "Night, night, Ben. Sleep tight."

"You too," Ben said, trying to relax. It was now the end of his first day in the strange world of New Eden. He realized he was enjoying being with his new friend and her passive-aggressive angel father. It also worried him.

Am I getting too close to them? Ben wondered as he glanced at Ariana, who was now sound asleep. *If I wind up having to leave, then what's the point?*

Ben looked at her again before he closed his eyes and fell into the nightmare.



Zachariel had finished his mug of lukewarm coffee, placing it gently on the table. He stepped to the door and quietly opened it. Ariana was sound asleep in her bed; Ben was passed out at the opposite end of the room, near the window. Zachariel chuckled.

"Ha. Good kid," he remarked with a reluctant yet satisfied smile, closing the door and exiting his cottage. His gut told him that Ben wouldn't hurt Ariana despite his suspicions. And yet, something bothered him about the boy.

So you say you've ruled out me being a demon, right? Then what's the issue?

Zachariel sighed. He wasn't exactly sure either. Yet, when he looked at Ben, occasional images of demons standing over the bodies of his fallen brothers forced their way into his mind,

evil grins stretched across their ragged faces. He gripped the hilt of his blade, his jaw set.

If I see that same smile, Zachariel told himself, I'll kill him on the spot.

He paused, shaking the idea from his head. It wasn't very angel-like of him to consider murdering someone, much less his daughter's newfound friend. The feeling of shame weighed on him like a pack on a mule.

"Sorry, Ben." Zachariel stared back at the door. "I know you're just as lost as I am."

For a moment, Zachariel considered his own words. He thought back to Ben's aura the moment they met. Beyond the uneasy feeling it brought him, he felt something else—a buried light from his time with Ariana. Deep down, he knew Benjamin Blake was a good soul.

Well, hopefully, I can frighten him into staying that way. For his sake, if anything.

Granted, Ben did show up under mysterious circumstances, in the exact spot where his daughter just so happened to practice her violin every day. His left wing twitched.

Curious, Zachariel thought, considering all inhabitants of New Eden are brought here by angels. Why is he the sole exception?

As his train of thought continued, the image of the earlier fire on Ben's shoulder came to mind. Despite the multitude of torches and other possible sources, none of them were even remotely close to him. Against his deepest instincts, he decided to keep him in Riverglade a few days longer, his curiosity once again getting the better of him.

"Either way," Zachariel said to himself. "I suppose it's time to investigate."

A stiff breeze blew by as Zachariel stretched his wings, inhaling sharply before tearing into the night sky. He kept to

his usual route, starting at the center of Riverglade and making his way outward as he kept an eye out for any intruders to the village, demonic or otherwise.

All clear, Zachariel thought as he directed himself toward Leanoir forest, which was to be his first subject of investigation. Within a few minutes, he had landed just outside and had begun to walk through the brush. The forest, while bright and enchanting during the day, now seemed lifeless, dark. The branches reached out like twisted, spindly hands. He was glad that Ariana, despite her rebellious spirit, had never ventured there at night.

After a few minutes of walking, Zachariel finally arrived. A relatively spacious area where his daughter had come to practice and dance almost every day, almost without fail. He glanced down, seeing a pile of crunched leaves with a hint of Ben's aura. He reached out to it, but his wings went rigid.

Something isn't right, he realized. *This feels...ominous.*

He paused before kneeling and placing his hand on the ground. Instantly, several visions flooded his mind of pain, suffering, fire, and brimstone. Finally, there was a darkness, out of which materialized a pair of blazing, judgmental red eyes. Everything in the vision was instantly consumed in one fell swoop, pulled into the clutches of death itself.

Zachariel pulled himself away, his breathing heavy as the terrifying visions stopped. A bead of sweat dripped down his face. His hands shook as he took a moment to collect himself, finally bringing his ragged breathing under control.

What was that destruction? he wondered. *Those eyes?*

In all his years in the wars on earth, facing countless enemies and monstrosities, Zachariel had never once felt fear. He had always braved the forces of darkness and endured pain, loss, and suffering, never allowing himself to submit to it. Yet, in the vision, what he saw truly frightened him, and he couldn't figure out why.

And what of Ben? What is his role in all this?

Zachariel briefly glanced back at the spot where Ben had been found, the eerie feeling creeping back into him. He would remind himself morning to ban Ariana from returning, at least until...

Suddenly, a twig snapped behind him. His wings went stiff again; his senses heightened as he instinctively drew his blade. Another weapon met his, a crude, twisted mockery of a sword. Wielding it was a shrieking demon, grinning so wide and wicked that the Fallen One himself would pang with envy.

"Poor angel," the demon said. "Is that fear I see in your eyes?"

Zachariel bared his teeth, breaking the blade lock and swiping at his enemy, who leapt a few feet back. He readied himself, holding his sword with both hands, pointing the tip towards the demon.

His eyes narrowed as he assessed his foe. This demon was an underling, nothing he hadn't handled countless times in past wars. Zachariel smirked.

"Not of you, imp," he said quietly, hoping his calm would agitate his foe.

The demon hissed, beginning to circle Zachariel. "Believe me, Angel. This world will fall."

The angel kept opposite his foe. "And what makes you think that?" He asked tauntingly.

"You'll see," it teased with a wicked grin.

Zachariel's eyes narrowed as the demon screeched and leapt after him. Its ragged, torn wings flapped as its jaws dug into his vambrace. The metal sizzled as the venom in its fangs burrowed into it. Zacharie tore the demon away, kicked it back and discarded his ruined armor. He frantically felt along his arm for any bite marks, for any sign of infected tissue, but luckily found none.

Good, Zachariel thought as he sighed in relief. Otherwise, I might have had to amputate it.

“Aw, I missed.” The mocking frown on the demon’s face twisted into a snarl, teeth bared and dripping with venom. “Next time I won’t.”

The demon leapt forward, claws extended, bat-like wings spread. Zachariel inhaled sharply, whispered a quick incantation, and soon his sword was ablaze with holy fire. He waved it, expecting his opponent to cowardly retreat the way demons usually did. It still lunged at him, unfazed.

Zachariel’s eyes widened as he barely sidestepped the demon, slashing it through the abdomen and slicing it in half. It vanished into dust as he glanced at his still-burning sword.

That should have worked, he thought. Demons avoid holy fire as if it were a plague. They know it will damn them to oblivion. He glanced at the pile of dust that used to be his foe as it blew away in the wind. *Did this one have a death wish? Or was it merely braver than the others?*

Kneeling next to the dust, Zachariel allowed himself to take in the remaining demonic aura, hoping for clues, but froze. The aura in the visions felt utterly different from that of his now departed foe, far more menacing than anything he had ever experienced, enough to make him feel truly afraid. But why?

Suddenly, his eyes widened. The death, the chaos, and the purging fire. None of it felt like it had come from the Fallen One, nor did it feel evil. It was, however, dark. Dire. Sinister. Judgmental. The thing in his vision wasn’t demonic, he realized.

It was divine.



Ben felt weightless, formless, the ominous silence numbing him as he drifted through the dark. A light burst forth, then faded. Shapes manifested; noises filled the void, his

surroundings forming a narrow alleyway littered with trash and a stench that most would find unbearable.

His gaze drifted to the end of the alley, seeing something—a person, he realized, a shadow cast over them. Ben ambled over, narrowing his eyes to get a better look.

“Who are you?” Ben asked the figure. The figure stepped out of shadow. It seemed as if Ben was looking in a mirror, a perfect reflection of himself.

“You’re late,” Ben’s doppelgänger said, his voice gravelly, eyes staring daggers into him.

Ben blinked in confusion until he heard a gruff voice behind him. “Sorry. Had to finish up an earlier sale. Some boss wanted a very special service, courtesy of my best girl.”

The other man, whose eyes were locked with his counterpart’s, stepped forward. He was a grubby, disgusting human. A pathetic excuse for a beard infested his neck and jaw, a loose cigarette hung out of his mouth, a tattered suit stretched across his chubby body.

Ben’s eyes widened as he backed a few feet away from the pair. *Is this a memory?*

His counterpart dipped his head, hiding his expression. “I don’t care. I just need some, uh...company. Looking for a very particular girl, too.”

“Oh?” the other man said. “What kind?”

“Young. Dark hair like mine. Half-Native American.”

“Huh. Indians are rare these days, even half-blooded ones.” The disgusting man took a puff of his cigarette. “We might have one, though. Came in last we—”

The dream doppelgänger’s eyes lit up. “Where?”

“Over by...hey, wait a minute.” He leaned forward, getting a closer look, nearly dropping his cigarette. “Aren’t you...?”

Ben's counterpart screamed, lurching forward to attack the pimp. He was met with a swift kick to the gut, leaving him on the ground, clutching it.

"Oh, I see now." The man smirked. "No wonder you want her so bad."

"Where...is...Lilly?" the other Ben hissed.

Lilly? Ben wondered. *Is that her name?*

The pimp grabbed dream-Ben by the neck, lifting him up. "Fat chance, kiddo. Like I said, Native Americans are rare, young ones even more so. She'll fetch a pretty penny to the right customer."

Ben's counterpart gripped his attacker's wrists, squeezing them desperately.

"What are you, stupid? You think you can—ah!" the grubby man screamed, dropping Ben's counterpart as he clutched his wrists. "You burned my hands, you punk!"

"Go to hell," Dream-Ben growled, reaching into his jacket.

The man's brows furrowed in fury. "Oh, now I'm—"

He never got to finish his sentence. Ben's dream counterpart had drawn a shiv from his jacket and dug it into the gut of his attacker. The man doubled over, spitting up blood as he fell to the cold ground. Ben's twin limped away while the pimp bled out.

"You know what, kid?" The disgusting man grinned, his mug soaked with blood. "I hope you find her. I really do."

"I will. Count on it."

"I hear they have a thing for bruises and pain."

His doppelgänger froze. He slowly turned around, teeth grit, eyebrows furrowed, and face darkened. Sprinting over to the man, dream-Ben began to mercilessly kick him, digging

his worn boots into the blood-soaked knife wound repeatedly while the man screamed.

Did I really do this? Ben wondered. An eerie feeling crawled up his spine as horror seeped into him.

His counterpart had switched from the man's gut and was now stomping his face into the ground viciously until the man stopped moving. The loud sounds of the city faded away. His surroundings vanished, replaced once more with the darkness.

Did I kill someone?

Chapter 6

A Child At Heart

The darkness snapped away from Ben as he sat up, face drenched in sweat, the revelation from his nightmare still fresh in his mind. The name of the person he was trying to save was ‘Lilly.’

Ben glanced around Ariana’s room. The night before, he hadn’t paid much attention to it other than the twin-sized bed and a comfy-looking chair in the corner. Now that the morning light had crept in, he could finally see all the fine details: faded musical notes that danced across the walls, a few loose sheets of paper with what looked like outfit designs on them, and books stacked on the chair and by the bed, on which Ariana slept peacefully.

Images of himself kicking the man to death flashed through Ben’s mind. He wanted to tell himself that it wasn’t real, that it was nothing more than a nightmare. Yet, he could still hear the man’s screams and remember the feeling of his bloodied boot trampling him, over and over. Above all, rage and guilt tore at him like a wild animal ripping its freshly caught prey.

It must be real, Ben decided. But even then, there was still the matter of the mysterious Lilly. How important was she that he would kill someone in pursuit of her?

Another disturbing thought breached his mind. *What if that man wasn’t the only one?*

Ben clenched his jaw. Despite not having Zachariel’s total trust, he had felt like he had made progress, establishing an

understanding between them. But what if the angel was right? What would he do if he knew the truth?

What would Ariana think of me?

Ben stood, forcing the breath he held from his lungs as he made his way into the dining room. At the counter stood Zachariel, wings held in tight as he prepared his coffee.

“Good morning, Ben. Did you sleep well?”

“I, uh,” Ben struggled to find words. “Yeah. Like a baby.”

“Ariana didn’t keep you up, did she?”

“She tried.” His face flushed red. “I mean, not like that. I stayed away from her like you said, I swear.”

“I know, Ben.” Zachariel rolled his eyes. “I saw.”

“Oh. Right.” Ben shook his head and straightened. “Anyway, did you sleep good too?”

Zachariel paused for a moment. “I...don’t sleep.” He began to brew. “Angels don’t rest like you humans do.”

“Huh.” Ben glanced back at the door to Ariana’s room. “That makes two of you. Must be all the coffee.”

The angel chuckled. “Certainly. Although I must say, she was like that even when she first came here.” He raised an empty mug, offering him some of the coffee. Ben accepted.

“Hey, you said yesterday that people come here from Earth, right?”

“Yes, they do.” Zachariel paused, eying Ben. “Why do you ask?”

“I...” Ben inhaled. “I was wondering if anyone had ever, uh, gone back?”

“Hmm...” Zachariel faced Ben and handed him his drink. “Not to my knowledge, unfortunately. If people leave New Eden, it’s because they pass on.” He sipped his coffee, eyes downcast.

“So, I’m stuck here?”

“I didn’t say it was impossible. Your situation is not like the others.” Zachariel glanced out the window as he took another drink. “I understand how frustrating this is for you, but I’m doing what I can. I may have even found a lead back where Ariana found you.”

“Leanoir Forest?” Ben’s eyebrows raised. “Find anything useful?”

“Not particularly.” The angel stiffened. “More concerning, if I’m honest.”

“Oh.” Ben slumped back in his chair. “Well, I don’t know if it helps, but I had a dream last night. Finally learned something, I think.”

Zachariel’s eyes lit up. “Oh?”

“I know her name. The girl I was trying to save. ‘Lilly.’”

“Interesting,” Zachariel replied, placing his mug on the table as he leaned in. “Is there anything else? Anything potentially useful?”

As the words departed the angel’s mouth, the image of his dream-doppelgänger kicking the man to death quickly flashed across Ben’s vision once more. His jaw tightened.

“No, not really,” Ben lied. “It was all kinda dark. And blurry. Not much else.”

“Are you sure?” Zachariel’s eyes briefly narrowed. “Nothing...ominous? Frightening?”

Ben tensed. Could Zachariel tell that he was hiding something? He exhaled, forcing steadiness and calm into his voice as he spoke the words.

“No, sir.”

“I see.” The angel eyed him. “Well, it’s a start. Keep me updated in case you remember something else.”

"I will." Ben nodded obediently, maintaining his composure.

Zachariel returned the nod. "I'll see both of you later. And..." the angels' gaze shifted, "...do keep out of trouble, Ari?"

Ben's eyes widened as Ariana rested her elbow on his head. "Will do, Dad!"

The angel rolled his eyes before exiting the cottage and tearing into the sky. Ariana made her way around the table to the counter, where she poured a bowl of cereal.

"For a loudmouth, you sure know how to sneak up on someone," Ben noted as she poured the contents out and followed it with milk.

"Eh. It's not that hard. With you, anyway." Ariana shrugged as she pulled out another bowl, gesturing to Ben with it. "Want some?"

"Sure, why not." Ben sat patiently as Ariana filled the bowl and gently slid it over to him, the metal spoon shifting around the rim as it came to a stop in front of him. She fetched her own and sat where Zachariel had been only moments ago.

"So," Ariana began. "Lilly, huh?"

Ben glanced at her for a moment, before munching on his breakfast, his eyes downcast as he shoveled the food into his mouth. "Yeah. Not much to go on. Like your dad said, it's a start."

"But you didn't tell him the whole thing, did you?" she asked, her voice slowly shifting from her normal upbeat tone to one of concern.

"I..." Ben ate his food slightly faster. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Last night, when you talked in your sleep," Ariana said. "You said you were going to kill someone."

Ben froze, dropping his spoon to the table with a metallic clatter. His chest tensed up; his body trembled. Ariana reached across and placed her hands on his.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." Her azure eyes bore into his. "I just—"

"You remember how I said I was trying to save someone?"

Ariana's eyes widened; her mouth curled. She nodded.

"The ones that took her, they weren't good," Ben continued. "They kidnap people and sell them off to others who do horrible things to them," Ben explained, his throat feeling dry. "So now she's..."

"Ben—"

"It's my fault, Ari," Ben said, his voice on the verge of breaking. "I failed her, and now she has to suffer while I'm in the afterlife or whatever this place is. I'm no better than them. I—"

Ariana cut him off, squeezing his hands. Slowly, Ben's breaths steadied. She loosened her grip and smiled encouragingly. "Just breathe. I promise we're gonna find her."

"I'm sorry." Ben frowned. "I just don't deserve this, is all."

"Don't say that." Ariana smiled gently at him. "You're a good person, Benjamin Blake. Don't let those thoughts getcha down, okay?"

But I'm a killer, he wanted to say. Ben wanted to lay it out plainly for everyone to see, that he was a murderer and a failure. Instead, all that came out of his mouth was a simple 'okay.'

"Good!" Ariana beamed, then finished her cereal with three swift bites, before eyeing Ben's soggy breakfast. "You gonna eat that?"

Shaking his head, Ben slid her the bowl. She grabbed it, then began to speak again. "So, there's a music shop downtown that I really like. I was planning on visiting today."

“Oh. You gonna pick up something?”

Ariana nodded as she shoved another spoonful into her mouth. “Yep! I’m getting an instrument today. Probably a good used one if I can find it.”

Ben’s eyebrow arched. “I thought you already had your violin?”

“I mean, I do, but...” Ariana blushed. “It’s not for me. I’ve always had this stupid little dream of starting a two-person band and going on tour all around town.”

“So, you need another bandmate,” Ben theorized.

“Exactly!” Ariana brushed some of her hair behind her ear. “I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go with me?”

Ben met her eyes for a moment, in which the fire of her dream burned bright. He avoided her gaze. “I’m sorry. I don’t feel like going out today.”

Ariana finished her cereal, then shifted it to the side. “Aw, come on! It’ll be fun, I promise! Besides, it’s not good for you to sit around by yourself all day.”

“I don’t know, Ari.”

Ariana leaned in, and her azure eyes widened as she pursed her lips cutely, tilting her head. “Please?”

Ben sighed. He slowly rose from his chair as Ariana grabbed his wrist. She pulled him from the cottage out into the hilltop overlooking Riverglade. Now that it was daytime, he could finally see the entire village in all its glory. The stone circle where Ariana had performed served as the heart of town. Walkways stretched, intersected, and eventually faded into gravel as they reached the outskirts. The buildings varied in their styles and structures; some were standard brick and mortar, others showcased their unique architecture, perhaps inspired by their previous lives on earth.

Ariana pulled Ben from his thoughts into the lively, loud village. It was far less packed than it was at the festival; the

walkways were clear, minus the occasional conglomeration of townsfolk socializing or children playing. Everyone else appeared to be working, manning their shops, or cleaning. The people who saw her waved and congratulated her on last night's performance. Ariana waved back as they continued to walk.

"You must get this all the time," Ben noted.

"Eh, not too much," Ariana said. "People mostly leave me alone. It's not like I'm a celebrity all the time."

As they walked by, Ben noticed the couple with the dog from the festival sitting at a nearby table. Their eyes widened briefly before the boyfriend winked and gave them a thumbs-up. Ben felt his cheeks burn.

The next thing he knew, Ben and Ariana were in front of the music store. Haphazard splotches of paint covered the brick building almost completely, minus a few plain spots in the shape of musical notes.

Within the next minute, they had both stepped inside. Ariana waved to the owner and began handing Ben various instruments for him to try. Crowds cringed at his trumpet, cats screeched at his piano, and finally, the owner asked him politely, but inarguably, to stop.

His cheeks flushed and his lungs winded, Ben returned the instrument to the store owner, who rolled his eyes as he cleaned the mouthpiece for what seemed like the millionth time. Ariana sighed.

"Geez." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "No offense, but I might have to give up on that band dream of mine."

"Sorry. Just not my thing."

"Well, anyhoo." Ariana rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "I guess we can try again tomorrow. Did you have anything you wanted to do today, Ben?"

"I'm pretty beat. It feels like—"

Ariana snapped her fingers, interrupting him. "Oh, I got it!" She grabbed him by the wrist, waving to the store owner as she dragged him out of the music shop and onto the street. A few blocks later, they were in front of an outfit store.

"More shopping?" Ben asked, exasperated.

"Oh, come on, it's the last stop today! Promise!"

"Do I have to go in there?"

Ariana paused, the excitement drained from her face as she released his hand. "Not if you don't want to. I just figured..."

"You figured what?"

Her eyes fluttered; her lips pursed as she glanced away. She looked back up and smiled at Ben sadly. "It's nothing. I'll be a few minutes, anyway."

"Are you sure? If you really want me to—"

"—It's fine. I've just got to pick up something. A surprise for you, actually." A half-smile touched her lips. "Just don't go anywhere while I'm gone, okay?"

Ben nodded as Ariana bit her lip and walked into the store. He exhaled slowly.

She sure knows how to keep someone busy, Ben thought. The noises from his nightmare briefly echoed. The man's screams and Lilly's cry for help rang in his ears.

Then again, Ben looked at the shop to see Ari moving rack to rack, inspecting the different accessories. *Maybe that's the idea.*

"Hiya, cutie!"

Ben spun around, finding a tall girl only a few inches away. At her sides were two similar girls, makeup caked on their faces. He took a wary step back, his spine tingled.

Why do they seem familiar?

The lead girl walked around, eyeing him. "So, this is the village stranger, huh?"

The second girl nodded as she studied Ben. "Sure is. Everyone says he's from the forest...that he came here without an angel."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"Oh, you know." The third girl grinned. "Small town. Word gets around fast. Nothing's a secret, ya know?" The way she talked was like Ariana, but something was different. It was spiteful, taunting, almost a mockery.

"Do I know you?" Ben asked.

"Oh, sorry. We forgot to introduce ourselves." The lead girl placed her hand confidently on her hip. "I'm Alexis. The other two are Marge and Bailey."

"I don't remember seeing you around."

"Oh, trust me, you wouldn't. We're..." The one Ben assumed to be Bailey made quick eye contact with her cohorts, "...travelers, I guess you could say." She flashed him an unnervingly perfect set of teeth.

"Huh." Ben eyed them, his brow arched. "So, really, you're village strangers, too."

The third one, Marge, beamed, but something was off. Her smile seemed welcoming, but her eyes appeared hungry. "Then that makes four of us. Anyhoo..." Marge inched close to him. "What are you doing out here all by your lonesome?"

"Waiting on my friend." Ben briefly glanced back into the shop but couldn't see Ariana. His shoulders sank. "At least, I hope so."

"Wow." Alexis rubbed her chin as she shook her head. Her eyes seemed to pity him. "That's rude."

"Yeah." Ben's brows furrowed as he thought of Lilly. "Sure is, considering I'd rather do something else than waste my time standing here."

“And what would that be?” Bailey asked.

“I...” He hesitated. “Nothing.”

“Hey, now.” Marge placed a reassuring hand on Ben’s shoulder. “We care, Ben. You can tell us.”

Ben paused. Something was off, and yet he ever so slightly felt at ease. Against his gut, he opened his mouth to speak. “I’m looking for someone. Someone named Lilly.”

“Hmm.” Bailey touched her chin. “Someone close to you, I take it?”

“Yeah. I haven’t been able to get anywhere with it, though,” Ben said. “The angel here forbade me to leave, and he won’t tell me why. So, I can’t really do anything about it.”

“That sucks.” Marge frowned. “But who says you have to stay? Why shouldn’t you be able to leave? It’s not like the angel is gonna smite you for leaving.”

“That’s...a good point.” Ben pondered it for a moment. “But my friend. She said—”

“—the same friend who’s shopping instead of helping you?”

Ben froze, the blatant words cutting through the fog of denial. Creepy stranger or not, she had a point. He glanced at the shop again, then pursed his lips.

“Yeah. That one.”

Alexis smiled and leaned in. “Tell you what. Me and the girls are leaving soon, anyway. You can tag along if you want, and we’ll help you find who you’re looking for.”

His eyes lit up. “Can you really?”

“Better than your so-called ‘friend’ can, anyway.” Bailey smirked. “We’ll at least put in the effort.”

“Yep!” Alexis leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “So, how about it?”

Ben paused as he considered it. For as long as he had been in Riverglade, it had been nothing but delays in his quest for answers. Zachariel had first promised to send him to someone who could help him, before unilaterally confining him to the village. Not only that, but at every chance that damn angel got, he treated Ben like a threat instead of a person. Ben's jaw clenched tighter the more he thought about it.

On top of that, Ben thought, there's Ariana. Always distracting me with pointless crap like this.

"Okay, you're right." Finally, Ben looked up at the girls. "Screw this. Let's go."

Alexis smirked, placing a hand on Ben's back and gently pushing him away from the store. A voice erupted from behind them.

"Ben? Hey...wait! Where are you going?"

All four heads snapped in the shout's direction. It belonged to a red-faced Ariana, who was now stomping towards them. Alexis nudged her cohorts and giggled.

"Uh oh." Alexis glanced at Ben. "We didn't get you in trouble, did we?"

Ariana finally caught up to them. Bag in hand, she eyed Ben, then the girls. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting something?"

"Yep. Only trying to help our little friend here," Alexis said with a scoff as dry as dust. "Stick around, and you might learn a thing or two."

The other two girls giggled, their laughs high-pitched and unnerving, like a pack of hyenas.

Ben watched Ariana's jaw tighten as she turned to him, grabbing his wrist. "Come on, Ben. Let's go."

"You're not listening." Ben yanked his arm away. "They can help me."

"Ben...we said we would help you," Ariana protested. "Dad—"

“—is keeping me here against my will. You promised to help me, but what are we doing out here exactly? Shopping? Or trying to distract me?”

Silence fell upon the street as the two locked eyes. The glare on Ariana’s face melted into disbelief as her lips curled.

“I just didn’t want you to feel down.” Ariana broke the stare and studied her shoes. “I just figured—”

“He’s right, you know,” Marge said with a smirk. “What kind of friend are you?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she lured him in because of her cute little schtick with the violin,” Bailey added.

Ariana’s brows furrowed as she glared past Ben. “You don’t know a thing about me.”

“Oh, come on, everyone here knows about you.” Alexis chimed in. “It’s kind of easy when you put yourself out there like that, ya know.”

Ariana’s glare hardened, though her lips ever so slightly quivered. “You assume too much.”

“Do I? Hmm.” Alexis turned from Ben and paced around Ariana, cupping one arm across her slim figure and the other touching her chin as her haughty eyes sized up the poor girl, as if she were nothing more than a meal. “You’re not hard to figure out. The village mascot who puts on a cute show enough times to be adored...”

“Go away.”

“But beneath? A jealous, immature...”

“Stop,” Ariana warned.

“...childish little girl. One who doesn’t understand a thing about the real world...”

“I said—”

“—Not that it’s your fault, of course. It doesn’t help to be a freak with an angel for a fa—”

“Shut up!” Ariana screamed. “Just go! Just leave me alone!”

Alexis smirked. She collected her cohorts as they walked down the alley, away from the pair. She turned back towards Ben and winked.

“Keep our offer in mind. Okay, cutie?”

Ben stared as they turned a corner. Ariana stood beside him, her fists clenched and her chest heaving rapidly. She fell to her knees and sobbed.

“Hey, I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” Ben’s voice trailed off.

Ariana sat up, cupping her hand to her mouth as she continued to cry. “Ben, just go. Please.”

“Ari, don’t listen to them.” Ben shook his head. They’re...”

“No, they’re right.” Ariana looked up at him, tears falling as her heart shattered in her eyes. “You said it yourself. I’m not good enough to be your friend. I’m not good enough to be anyone’s friend.”

“That’s not true! I—” Ben reached out to help her up but was shoved away. She stood to her feet, her hand gripping her forearm.

“If you want to leave, then do it. I won’t tell Dad.” Ariana turned and began to briskly walk away.

As she stormed away, Ben stood, helplessly watching. He swiftly kicked a trash can down the brick street and sank against the wall, his fingers running through and gripping his hair.

“Way to go, idiot.” Ben crossed his arms and rested his head on them. Whatever he did, he was sure that his friendship with Ariana Winters was now over.



In the three hours since she had come home, Ariana had cried herself to sleep, her musical note pillow soaked with tears. Now, it was morning, and her room was empty, save for her. Ben was nowhere to be found.

She dug her face back into her pillow, so frustrated that she wanted to scream and suffocate herself. For once in her life, she had finally had a chance. A chance to make a friend, and she had blown it to smithereens.

Ariana went to dig her face further but felt something underneath. Her hand gripped something soft, and from beneath the pillow came a familiar stuffed rabbit.

“Oh...” Ariana smiled softly, hugging it tight to her chest. “Hi, Mr. Peter. I thought I lost you.”

The rabbit said nothing in return. Ariana frowned, remembering the girl’s words from earlier, the one who was flirting with Ben.

A jealous, immature, childish little girl.

Whoever that girl was, she was right. Ariana was childish. Her whole life, it seemed, she was always behind in every way. When they wanted to try makeup, she wanted to play a game of tag. If they gossiped or talked about current events, she didn’t hold interest. Ariana was different, damningly so.

But that’s not the only thing, is it? The voice in Ariana’s head asked.

Please, I don’t need this right now, she told it. *Can you leave me alone for once?*

You won't admit it, but you're too self-centered. The voice cut deep like a blade. *It's always your desires, feelings, and dreams above everyone else's.*

Ariana's lips quivered as she clutched the rabbit. She bit her lip as the words reluctantly slipped from her mouth.

"You're right."

From her time as a young girl to now, Ariana always had a burning desire to stand out from everyone else. Be it her dazzling outfits, her theatrics, or her music and dancing, her zealous drive to be the center of everyone's universe had always held her captive. Even when she had become the pride of the village and gained all the attention she desired, it wasn't what she expected. While it was fulfilling in the moment, Ariana found she felt more like a painting to be admired or a simple product to be enjoyed than an actual person with thoughts, dreams, and feelings.

The village mascot, the mean girl's taunt echoed, cute enough to be adored, but truly loved?

Ariana had tried using her newfound popularity to make friends, but it didn't take. They cared for her talent and looks, but not her hobbies or crafts, nor would they join her to watch the New Eden sunset. In the end, any friends she attempted to make slowly faded away into their lives, away from her.

Including Ben, Ariana thought. She felt the urge to cry but couldn't. Exhaustion had taken hold and squeezed the pain from her soul.

"I guess I'm doomed, huh?" she asked her rabbit. It said nothing in return, the faded button eyes staring blankly ahead. As lifeless as they were, it almost seemed like they pitied her.

Ariana grit her teeth. For a brief moment, she wanted to tear the stuffed animal to shreds, or throw it out the window and forget about it. Instead, she nuzzled it under her chin.

"I'm sorry," Ariana whispered as she placed the rabbit on her pillow and pulled the blanket up over its legs, tucking it in. She rose from her bed, left her room to grab some of her comfort food, and stopped in her tracks.

At the table, sound asleep with his head in his arms, was Ben.

Her eyes widened. Ariana slowly crept closer to him, briefly rubbing his arm. Ben slowly lifted his head, blinking his stormy gray eyes as he looked at her.

"Oh, hey, Ari." Ben paused for a second to stretch. "I, uh...I tried to come talk to you, but you were asleep."

Ariana paused, allowing herself a moment to process. After a minute or two of silence, she finally managed something resembling words. "Oh, yeah. Me too."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"No, no...I..." Ariana's cheeks flushed as she rubbed her forehead. "I'm sorry. My brain is sorta fried right now."

Ben chuckled. "Don't worry, I get it. Trust me."

"Anyway, I wanted to apologize." Ariana pulled up the other chair and sat next to him. "For running off and leaving you alone in the street."

Ben waved his hands. "Hey, hey, don't worry about it, I get it. I was an ass. Those girls were a bunch of bit—"

"You don't have to say it like that, but yeah." A wry chuckle escaped her lips as she looked to the side. "I appreciate the sentiment, but they were right."

“Right about what?”

“That I’m childish, immature.” Ariana took a deep breath as she pursed her lips. “And selfish. The reason I don’t have any friends is because I’ve never put them first, you included. It’s not that I didn’t care, but I was just...I dunno, oblivious, I guess. Being the village angel’s perfect little daughter hasn’t helped either.” She sighed. “I can see why they had enough of me. Honestly, I’m surprised that you’re still here. I thought you would have gone off with those girls or something.”

“I’m not gonna lie. I was tempted,” Ben admitted. “But it wasn’t worth losing you over it.”

“But I haven’t done anything to help you. I even distracted you from it, and not for your sake, either. I let what I wanted get in the way of what you needed.” Ariana’s lip curled as she dipped her head. “I was a terrible friend. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, you said you would help. I still plan to hold you to it, even if I gotta be patient about it. Also...” Ben avoided her gaze. “Maybe I need to be a better friend, too. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be here, so I guess we should try to enjoy it while we can.”

“Yeah, there’s that too.” Ariana gave him a half—smile. “When you leave, I’m gonna miss you, ya know. A lot.”

“Same here.” Ben gently smiled at her. Then his eyebrows furrowed in deep thought. “Say, you still have that band dream, right?”

Ariana nodded.

“Is that music shop open today?”

“Every day except for Sunday.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

Ben paused for a moment, rubbing his chin. "Do they have any bongos?"



Ariana and Ben spent the next few hours touring the town, disturbing the peace with their violin-bongo duet. Surprisingly, he knew how to throw down a good beat, enough to keep her on track. Many townspeople neglected their errands in favor of their impromptu performance, clapping along. At one point, Ben had opted to switch instruments and dance around like an idiot, scratching away at the strings while Ariana and their audience practically died with laughter.

They took a bow as the crowd dispersed. The pair collapsed against the wall as Ben's stomach growled.

"So, what's for dinner?" he asked.

"Well, let's see." Ariana gestured to a few places down the street. "We have a fancy restaurant, a café, and a sandwich shop."

"That's it?"

"Yep. What are ya craving?"

"I dunno." Ben scratched his head. "What are you in the mood for?"

Ariana pondered the question. Variety in Riverglade was sorely lacking, and the only thing resembling a solution was either keeping her choices on rotation or selecting them at random.

"Well, I guess I haven't been to that restaurant in a while." Ariana pulled out her patchwork wallet. The painfully minimal

amount of money crammed into it demanded otherwise. She sighed.

Sandwiches it is.

After pulling Ben to his feet, Ariana marched him down the street and into the shop. Within a few minutes, orders were placed, and the pair were seated upstairs on the patio. A large, vine-covered wooden frame with dimly lit lanterns covered the rooftop, providing shade from the setting sun.

Ben unwrapped his sandwich and munched nonchalantly, while Ariana propped her feet up on the table and took a shark-sized bite out of hers. Ben raised an eyebrow.

“Jeez. I thought I was the hungry one.”

Ariana pursed her lips, removing her leg from the top of the table and lightly kicking him in the shin. “Hungry and homeless if you don’t watch it, doofus.”

“Ow.” Ben’s eyes shot wide open as he exhaled, rubbing his leg. “Okay, fine. Sorry.”

“I’m just messing with you.” She beamed. “Ya know, something friends do.”

“Normally friends aren’t violent with each other, doofus.”

“Oh, hush. I didn’t even kick that hard.”

Ben leveled a judgmental stare at Ariana, though his bearing shattered as he chuckled. The sunset illuminated his captivating gray eyes as a warm smile touched his lips.

For a moment, Ariana couldn’t stop staring. She felt her cheeks warm, unsure if it was her or just the setting sun. Her stomach fluttered, her heart pulsed erratically.

Ariana couldn’t help but just stare as he munched on his sandwich. She wanted to enjoy this moment, but she knew

deep down that it wouldn't last forever. He would recover his memories eventually, but what then? Would he try to leave both her and New Eden to find this 'Lilly' person who he cared so deeply about? Would she be friendless once more?

The crunching of Ben's sandwich wrapper finally shook Ariana from her thoughts. An evil idea came to mind as she crumpled up her own wrapper, then leaned back in her chair, holding onto the table with her legs to keep from falling over.

"Catch!" Ariana flung it at him, hoping to take her friend by surprise. Ben reached out with inhuman precision as he caught it with a haughty smirk...but found it was on fire.

"Oh, oh, no, no!" Ben fumbled with it for a moment, trying to put it out. Instead, he only made the flame bigger. He fell back, accidentally flinging the wrapper into the wooden frame above, hitting a lantern and setting it ablaze. Ariana briskly ran to the top of the stairs, called the owner, and shouted.

"Fire!"

The owner came running up with a garden hose, saw the flames, and joined Ben's ongoing attempts to put them out. The three of them struggled for a minute until a large wind came and extinguished the flames with a single gust.

Ariana turned around slowly and braced for the inevitable scolding she was about to receive. Her Dad, Zachariel, was hovering nearby, arms crossed with an icy stare.

"Umm." She beamed nervously. "Hi, Dad."

Zachariel raised an eyebrow. "Looks like you and Ben got yourselves into a bit of trouble today." Her father turned his attention to the scorch marks on the wood. His eyes widened as his stare shifted to Ben.

“Ben...?” Zachariel asked, his voice measured and deep. “That fire. Did you...?”

Ben paled as the angel continued to burn him with his glare. Ariana stepped in front of him defensively. “Actually, it wasn’t him, Dad.”

Zachariel’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll discuss this downstairs.” He motioned for them to leave, so they met him at the entrance of the sandwich shop as he glided down, his spread wings casting cold shadows over them both. He landed, then crossed his arms once more.

“So, tell me exactly how this is your fault, Ari?”

“Uh...too much hot sauce?” She beamed innocently.

Her father glared at her. Clearly he wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“I...” Ariana sighed. “I threw my sandwich wrapper, and it caught fire from one of the lanterns.”

“...and you’re telling the truth?”

“It was an accident,” Ariana protested. “I didn’t mean—”

“Even accidents must be paid for, Ari. It’s not the first time the village has had to deal with your antics.”

The townspeople gathered and looked at them. Loud whispers echoed around them as Ariana felt her cheeks flush red.

Thankfully, her father noticed. “I think you and Ben should spend the rest of the day at the house” He looked at the horizon. “It’s almost nightfall, anyway. I’ll be there in a few hours. I need some time to sort this out.” Tucking his wings in, he walked away and conversed with the store owner.

Ariana hung her head in defeat and headed back to the house with Ben in tow. When they arrived, she flung open the door to her room and plopped down on the bed. Ben moved the pile of books on her chair and sat down, apparently feeling the weight of her father's scolding, though Ariana had received the brunt of it.

"I'm so dead," Ben mumbled under his breath.

"Hey. Lighten up." Ariana crumpled up a rejected outfit design and threw it at him. It bounced off his head harmlessly, and his attention snapped back to her. "I covered for you, so you're gonna be just fine."

"I didn't ask you to, but...thanks." Ben smiled, then looked at his hand as he rubbed it.

"You didn't get burnt, did you?"

"That's the thing," Ben said, "I didn't. That wrapper wasn't even on fire until I caught it."

Ariana briefly played the scene over in her head. As far as she could recall, Ben was right. It was on fire before he had accidentally flung it up into the rafters.

"Weird." She scratched her chin thoughtfully. "You sure it wasn't the lantern?"

"Pretty sure. Either way, I just hope it doesn't happen again. I'd hate to burn down this weird-looking house."

"I suppose it could use a remodeling," Ariana joked.

Ben chuckled and moved from the chair to lie on his pillow. After a few hours, he fell asleep, despite the multitude of idiotic jokes that she told him to prevent it. None of them worked. Ariana cursed and laid back on her bed.

Ugh. I hate being a night owl, Ariana thought with a huff. Suddenly, she heard a soft mumble coming from Ben. Her eyes widened as she remembered he talked in his sleep.

Alright, she thought, *now I get to see what weird things you say tonight.*

Chapter 7

Pain of Remembrance

Ariana watched all night as Ben tossed and turned in his struggle for sleep. At first, he mumbled strange, indiscernible words. His face twitched and contorted.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Are you okay?”

Ben continued his mumbling for another hour before his words erupted into screams. He curled into himself, turning, his face contorting as he demanded his ‘Lilly’ back.

Ariana leaped from the bed and knelt next to Ben. She hugged him close to her chest and rubbed her fingers through his hair, trying to calm him. Smoke rose from his arms, his skin warming steadily. Despite the discomfort, she tried to ignore it and kept holding him. His body began to shake violently, as his fingers dug into his abdomen.

I have to stop it, she thought desperately, her breaths quick, shallow. But how?

Come on, Ari! Think! the voice in her head cried.

Ariana rocked him back and forth as Zachariel came running to the door. “Who’s that screaming?” His eyes widened. “What happened to Ben?”

“I...I don’t know.” Ariana rasped through tears. She couldn’t bear to see him in pain. “Please, Dad. Help him.”

Zachariel knelt and placed his index and middle fingers on Ben’s forehead, muttering a quick incantation. Ben screamed even louder.

“It’s not working!” The angel growled, his fists clenched. He briskly stood up, wings fluttering. “Stay here, Ari. I’ll go find—”

“—Dad, wait,” Ariana whispered as she cradled Ben. His screams had faded to short gasps; the shaking was subsiding. The smoke from his body dissipated, the heat with it.

“Ariana,” Zachariel said, his voice lowered. “Keep doing that. It’s working.”

She obeyed, rocking him back and forth as she soothed a song into his ear. “Calm your wonderful soul. The angels have you tonight. Oh, calm your painful heart...”

As the notes left her mouth, Ariana’s skin tingled. It was the song Zachariel sang to her as an infant. Something about the words, the way they were said always stirred something in her soul.

Thankfully, sleep came to Ben as she drew her song to a close. Ariana smiled sadly and set him back down on his pillow and brushed her fingers through his hair, this time barely whispering the lyrics.

Zachariel sighed. “Stay with him and make sure he sleeps alright. If necessary, we can bring him to the infirmary tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Ariana said, her voice shaken. “I tried to—”

“It’s alright.” Her father raised his hand and slowly lowered it, a reminder to her to keep her voice down. “He must have had a flashback. Not a pleasant one from the sound of it.”

“He lost Lilly to some bad people.” Ariana admitted, almost regretting her words. It felt like she was betraying him, telling Zachariel the part of his past that he entrusted to her alone.

Zachariel’s eyes widened. He shifted his gaze to Ben, and a look of pity crossed his face. “I see. So that’s what he was hiding.”

Silence filled the room as Ariana avoided his gaze. Eventually, her father turned around to leave, but paused in the doorway. "Keep him here. I'll return in the morning after my patrol is finished."

Ariana nodded. With that, Zachariel walked out of the house, extended his wings, and flew away. With a sigh, she looked back down at Ben. He seemed calm and restful, something that eased her heart more.

Good thing too, she thought. I don't want him to be in pain. Not now, not ever.

With her gaze fixed on him, Ariana squeezed his still-warm hand. She wanted to stay with him, to be his source of comfort, his safe space like she had just a few minutes ago. Not only that, but she wanted moments like that to last forever.

But why? Ariana wondered, her jaw tightened. She didn't exactly know. Either that, or she refused to admit the true reason to herself. Something about him, she decided, made her drawn to him, though she couldn't narrow it down. What was it? The pain in his beautiful eyes that made her heart ache? The kind smile that often crossed his lips despite it?

Poor Ben, Ariana thought with a frown. You don't deserve any of that. You deserve to have a calm, happy life with people that love you even if it's with that Lilly girl and not me.

As the thought passed into Ariana's mind, she gripped him tighter. As horrible as it was, she secretly hoped that he would stay with her, that his past wouldn't matter anymore and that it would just be the two of them for as long as they lived.

I don't want to let him go, she admitted to herself. I know it's selfish, but I just can't.

Ariana sighed, continuing to rub her fingers through Ben's hair. The calm, tranquil look on his face suggested he was enjoying it, which lightened her heart even more.

“Hey Ben?” She smiled and bent down to whisper into his ear. “I...”

Suddenly, he began moving around, mumbling once more. This time, it was a name.

Her name.

“Ari...Ari. Hey, beautiful.”

“Oh,” she whimpered, her cheeks becoming rosy. For once in her life, Ariana was at a loss for words. Other people have given her that same compliment, but she never really registered it, nor did she care what they thought. But for Benjamin Blake to call her something like that, something so daring as the word ‘beautiful,’ suddenly it mattered the entire world to her.

Her room faded, replaced with the sunshine on Ben’s handsome face, when he had laughed as if his pain never existed. All the adventures that they had shared the days before flowed into her mind.

The light in Ariana’s vision twisted and fluttered until it formed into a multitude of shapes; the leaves and trees of Leanoir forest. She walked her way through the brush, violin case slung over her shoulder as she silently debated the length that her closing vibrato should be for her song at the festival.

Ariana slowed to a walk to her usual spot in the forest, looking forward to practice. She unclipped the case, pulling out Ole Betsy and tucking her under her arm. She tuned the violin, rosined her bow, and prepared to draw it across the strings.

That is, until she noticed someone lying on the ground.

That’s odd, Ariana thought, taking a cautious step back. Aren’t these woods usually empty?

Against her better judgment, she scooted closer. She tilted her head, wondering who the mysterious person was. She bent over to get a better look at him, her blonde hair falling over her left shoulder.

The person was a young man with medium-length black hair, an angular face, a pronounced nose, and light skin with reddish-brown undertones. He wore a navy-blue shirt with jeans ripped at the knees and plain, unassuming shoes. The sunlight passed over his rigid face, softening it.

Wow, the voice in her head teased, *he sure is cute, isn't he?*

Ariana moved her violin to hip level and poked the person with the bow. He didn't budge. She lightly kicked his foot, yet he refused to awaken. His chest heaved up and down, ruling out death as an explanation.

"Huh. Weird."

After pondering it further, Ariana approached him slowly, but soon stepped on a twig, snapping it. The stranger's eyes fluttered open. He stared up into the tree line blankly, not noticing Ariana. She leaned over him and looked into his eyes. They were gray, like the beautiful storms that occasionally blessed Riverglade village with a light, lonely rainfall.

Ariana froze. Not wanting to make the situation even more awkward, she decided to start the conversation. "Hey there, stranger! Who are you?"

The stranger stared back at her and replied, "Uh...what?"

Her eyebrow arched. A few words later, she learned his name.

Ben, he had said. *Benjamin Blake*.

The name echoed as the memories fast-forwarded to where the pair were having their splash-war at the river. Ben had gotten up from the stone-covered shore and stared into the beauty of the New Eden sky.

This all must be so new for him, she thought.

Ariana paused once she saw his face. He looked lost, worried...almost lonely. The mere sight of it made her heart sink.

“Everything okay, Ben?” Ariana asked with a disarming, gentle smile, stepping closer. He initially faced her, but then turned away, his dark hair blowing in the ethereal wind as he focused on the horizon.

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine,” he said. “Just a bit wet.”

Ariana frowned. She knew it was a lie.

Maybe you can cheer him up somehow? The voice in her head suggested.

Worth a try, Ariana told the voice. She stepped closer and lightly socked him in the arm. “Say, can I show you one more thing?”

“I don’t know, Ari. I—”

Ariana placed her petite, string-imprinted finger to his lip. “—just one?”

The imagery shifted once more, this time to the festival. Ariana and Ben were seated on a bench outside of the party.

“By the way, I’m sorry if it seems like I don’t care about your past. I really do. I just...”

Want to be your friend.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not the only one,” Ben replied with a smile. Ariana’s eyes widened.

Does he mean what I think he means?

Only one way to find out, girly! the voice said.

Ariana took in a quick breath, mustering all the confidence she could, “Besides, as your duly elected friend, it’s my duty to help you get your memories back!”

“Duly elected? Who elected you?” he asked, chuckling.

Her chin jutted out as she allowed herself to radiate confidence. “I did.”

“That settles it.” Ben smiled warmly. “Looks like you and I are...”

Unable to hold back anymore, Ariana latched onto him tightly, almost crying happy tears. Benjamin Blake was now her first real friend.

But that wasn't it. Ariana didn't quite know what, but there was more. She had first felt it in the forest when she touched Ben's hand, a strong passion that made her ache for him in a way she didn't understand. As they spent more time with each other, be it their street performance or their meal on the rooftop, that feeling only intensified.

After flashing through all their memories together, Ariana brought herself back to reality. She was still sitting next to Ben, still running her now-trembling fingers through his jet-black hair.

It was then that she finally realized something that she had been hiding from herself. All those years, she felt something missing, a longing for someone. And now that he was there, she couldn't help but entertain the selfish idea...no, the hope that maybe he was brought to New Eden for her, an answer to her lifetime of loneliness and prayer.

Ariana lowered her head and stared lovingly down at him. Part of her wished he would wake up, so she could lose herself within those stormy gray eyes of his. Then again, she also wanted him to stay there and sleep peacefully, so she could continue gazing at him and rubbing her fingers through his soft hair.

She again bent down to whisper in his ear. "Ben, I know we just met but I think I'm..." She hesitated. He was asleep, but it seemed he could hear everything she said. She paused for another minute or two, trying to phrase in her head what she was trying to say. Finally, she took a deep breath and exhaled, mentally preparing herself for the earth-shattering words.

Ben's eyes fluttered open. Upon realizing that Ariana was sitting next to him, he slowly turned his head toward her, confusion evident in his expression.

"Uh, morning," he said, mystified.

Ariana froze, her eyebrow twitching. Suddenly, she had lost all courage, the least of her now multitude of worries. How much did he remember? What was he going to think? Did he feel the same for her? Was her hair messed up? Did she look attractive? Was breakfast ready?

Ben looked around. Noticing her lack of movement, he waved his hand in front of her trembling eyes, trying to draw her out of her trance. "Hello? Anyone home?"

Leaping onto her bed, Ariana pressed her back up against the wall, accidentally causing Ben to smack his head against the floor.

"H-how much did you hear?" she stuttered wildly.

Ben blinked, rubbed his head, and looked back at her. "Hear what?"

"Umm...nothing." Ariana sighed in partial relief, yet struggled to hide her shaking as she climbed down. "Nothing at all."

"Uh..." Ben arched an eyebrow as he assessed her, "...okay, I guess."

Ariana stared back, then froze upon inspecting herself, her slender form clad in her outrageous polka-dot pajamas, that, for some stupid reason, that was suddenly embarrassing for her.

"Get out!" She demanded, pushing Ben out the door. "I'm not dressed!"

"You're wearing pajamas..." Ben remarked, his voice trailing off.

"Exactly! So, can you please get out?" Ariana finished shoving him out the door and slammed it shut. She ran to her dusty, wood-rimmed mirror, messing with her hair to make sure that it looked good, among other things like the nails and skin. Everything had to be perfect.

After a few minutes of struggle, Ariana finished with her hair. She picked up her outfit designs from the floor and opened the door to her closet, sifting through all her clothes, pulling out a set and holding it in front of her mirror. She growled.

The rejected outfits flung from her hands onto her bed over and over as she tried to picture herself in them mentally. As she threw the last bit, she noticed something on the floor—the bag from the store, the same day the girls had tried to lure Ben away.

Ariana's cheeks burned. It was an outfit she designed in her head especially for him, unknowingly for this very moment, though she hadn't had time to sketch it. She pulled the clothes from the bag and donned them. It was a red V-neck shirt with sleeves that extended no farther than her elbow. On her lower half, she wore a gray, frayed skirt that reached the knees. Under the skirt, she wore black, skintight pants with ankle-cut tennis shoes. She grinned.

Perfect! Now about my hair again.

She worked feverishly at it, straightening some parts and braiding others. For an hour, she worked at it tirelessly, making sure every single detail was perfect. Once she had finished, she gave one final, grandiose look in the mirror.

Ariana sighed nervously. She didn't look half bad, but the goal was to impress. Either way, she hoped it would be enough.

Enough for him.



Zachariel had just landed in front of the cottage when he heard a loud slam. He opened the front door and ducked through the doorway to see Ben waiting just outside Ariana's room, a look of bewilderment affixed to his face. He didn't notice the looming angel behind him.

So, he's awake. Good.

"Good morning, Ben." Zachariel said, clearing his throat. "I see—"

Upon hearing Zachariel's voice, Ben spun around and paled. "Hey, uh, I swear nothing happened. Ari just started freaking out and gave me the boot."

The angel arched an eyebrow. "She kicked you out?"

So much color had drained from Ben's face that his skull was nearly visible. "I-I don't know. I woke up, and she just jumped away from me like I was the pla—"

Zachariel's eyes narrowed. "You didn't do anything to her, did you?"

"No, I didn't." Ben shook his head, scooting out of the way. "I swear to God."

"Be very careful with that," the angel warned, his stare cutting into the boy.

"I'm serious, sir," Ben said with an exasperated sigh. "One minute, I'm asleep. The next, she freaks out about me hearing something, acting all embarrassed and saying she's not dressed despite her pajamas..."

"Enough." Zachariel held his hand up. "Sit down. I'm going to talk to her."

Ben obeyed as the angel reached for the door and opened it, passing through to see Ariana standing in front of her mirror. She was inspecting herself at all angles, making even the tiniest of adjustments. It seemed as if she were trying to achieve perfection with her looks—something Zachariel knew was uncharacteristic of her.

"Ariana?" Zachariel tapped her shoulder to get her attention. She twisted to face him, azure eyes blinking in surprise.

"Dad! Um, I didn't hear you come in!"

“Sorry to intrude, Ari.” Zachariel briefly glanced at the mess that was his daughter’s room before returning his attention to her. “What’s going on? Why the sudden obsession with how you look?”

“Oh. It’s...it’s nothing Dad. I’m just trying on some dresses!” She laughed shakily and gave a nervous half-grin.

Zachariel knew that wasn’t the case. He had seen enough on Earth to understand what she was going through. Crossing his arms, he stepped closer. “What’s going on, honey? You’ve never acted like this before.”

“I...” Ariana sighed, sitting down on the bed. “Well, I don’t know.” She shrugged one shoulder and tilted her head, her blonde braid tumbled down. “I was comforting Ben, making sure he slept okay and everything, especially after last night. Then, he...”

“Ari, did he harm you?” Zachariel’s eyes narrowed. “Even in his sleep?”

“No, nothing like that.” Ariana bit her lip and turned from her father. “He called me beautiful.”

“Oh.” Zachariel faced forward, and for a moment, silence hung between them. “Maybe I should kill him, after all.”

“That’s not funny,” Ariana growled.

“I know. Sorry.” Zachariel dropped his smile, interlocking his fingers and resting them on his knees. “This does sound like serious business. It seems you have a crush on our mysterious guest.”

Ariana’s cheeks flushed red. “Just a little.”

He tightened his hands together, sighing. “It hasn’t even been a week yet. You know he won’t be here much longer.”

“I know, I know!” Ariana stood, facing the window and gripping her forearm. “All this time we spent together since I found him, I just...”

“You just what?”

“I just can’t help it.”

“Okay.” Zachariel nodded sadly. “Ask yourself this, Ariana. Have you really fallen for Ben?”

Ariana nodded longingly. She studied her shoes to avoid eye contact.

Zachariel grimaced. He had never expected to become a surrogate father in the first place, but never once had he regretted raising her. Even so, this was a day he so feared for so long.

Now that it had arrived, he had a promise to keep.

“Ari,” Zachariel said, placing a hand on her shoulder, “look at me.”

Ariana complied, though her eyes glistened ever so slightly. “What if he doesn’t like me back, Dad?”

“I...” Zachariel paused, his jaw clenched. More than anything, he wanted to tell her to do everything she could to forget him and move on. He wished for her to continue to enjoy her life, free from the pressure and pain that came with so-called ‘love.’ And yet, as much as he desired it, the words never slipped from his mouth. He knew that no matter what he said or did, Ariana’s mind couldn’t change once she had her heart set on something. All he could do now was caution and teach her so that she could avoid her mother’s mistakes.

“There’s no proper way to make him like you back,” Zachariel said, his words carefully measured. “Just show him the real you and he’ll eventually come around. If not, it’s far from the end of the world.”

“I hope so.” Ariana frowned. “But I appreciate the advice, Dad. I don’t know how I’d do this without you, ya know.”

“Of course. I only want the best possible life for you, Ariana.” Zachariel felt his throat tighten. “That is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Thank you, Dad,” Ariana said as she rose from the bed. Zachariel smiled as she pulled away, gazing at her in her outfit. For a moment, he glimpsed her as a young child again, showing off her latest creation.

Hey Dad! Like my dress?

“That’s a new one. It looks beautiful.”

“Oh, right. I didn’t show you this one yet.” Ariana blushed. “I made it for Ben.”

Zachariel chuckled. “It would be quite hilarious to see him wear that.”

Ariana’s face turned a darker red. “Not what I meant.”

“I know, I know.” Zachariel allowed himself a moment to recover. “So, I assume you and Ben are going back out into town today?”

“I think so.” Ariana’s smile faded. “I’m worried about it, though.”

“Why would you be worried?”

“Last time, there were these girls. They kind of ruined my day with Ben.”

Zachariel’s eyebrow arched. “What girls?”

“Alexis, Marge, and Bailey, I think.”

Strange, Zachariel thought. He knew everybody in the village personally, and yet he had never heard of any girls with those names.

“I wouldn’t worry about it.” Zachariel smiled encouragingly. “Now go have fun, Ari. Remember not to burn down any restaurants this time.”

Ariana wrapped her arms around him and gave him a warm hug. “I love you.” She released it, then skipped out the door and shut it behind her.

Zachariel sighed as he sat on her bed in silence, giving himself time to accept the inevitability he had dreaded for so long: that his little girl—who he had protected and raised since infancy—was falling in love. He briefly glanced at Ariana’s pillow, seeing her stuffed rabbit tucked in under her blanket.

“It’s hard seeing her grow up, isn’t it?” he asked.

The rabbit’s button eyes stared ahead blankly. Zachariel sighed.

I suppose it had to happen sometime, he thought somberly, but who were those unknown girls Ariana mentioned? Travelers? Visitors? They aren’t residents. Unless...

Suddenly, Zachariel’s wings went rigid, his eyes widened.

Oh no.

He hurried out of the room, exiting the cottage as he screamed for Ariana. Unfortunately, she was now out of both sight and earshot.

Zachariel grit his teeth. He needed to meet their new ‘visitors’, and deal with them—or else his village and daughter would pay the price.



Ariana stepped outside of her room and stood, her hands firmly at her side. She grinned nervously. “Um, hi Ben!”

Ben sat in his chair, eating cereal. He didn’t seem to notice her, his eyes staring down at his food. Ariana uttered a small growl.

Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea, Ariana thought.

Come on, girl! the voice encouraged. You’ve got this!

Mustering her courage, Ariana spoke louder. “Good morning, Ben!”

Ben startled, nearly jumping out of his chair. His spoon clattered to the floor.

Idiot, the voice told Ariana as she winced. *You probably woke up the neighbors with that blow horn you call a mouth.*

"Oh. Hey Ari." Ben spun around. "So, what was that all about?"

Ariana blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You sort of freaked and kicked me out of your room."

Oh. That.

Ariana twiddled her trembling fingers. "Oh. I was just having a girl...err, problem." She laughed nervously. "You know, private feelings and..."

"Oh, wow." Ben's eyes widened. "I didn't know that even happened in New Eden." His face flushed red. "But if you're moody, or uh, hungry. Then I won't judge you. Promise."

The air of awkward silence hung between them. Clearly, they were not talking about the same thing.

Ariana pursed her lips as she looked over at Ben's breakfast. "Is that cereal?"

God, I hope so.

"Yeah, it's good. Very flaky." Ben gestured to the empty chair. "Do you wanna join? I can make you some."

"No, I got it!" Ariana replied quickly. "Just let me get a bowl real quick." She hastily walked over to the cabinet as she grabbed the bowl and box. Her shaking hands betrayed her, and random flakes spilled all over the counter and floor.

Relax! the voice said. *You look like an idiot right now!*

Ben got up from his chair. "Hold on Ariana, let me help you with that." As he got up, she turned around sharply, bowl in hand, and accidentally poured half of its contents on his shirt.

Ariana covered her mouth with her free hand. “Oh, Ben, I’m so sorry! I—” She bit her lip hard. “I really didn’t...”

Ben stared at his shirt, then burst into laughter. He put the bowl on the counter as he smiled at her.

“Why don’t we get breakfast out in the village or something?”

Her cheeks burned so hot that she felt like her skin would melt off her skull. Ben blinked, slowly waving to regain her attention.

“Oh.” Ariana shook her head. “Sorry. Yes.”

“Huh. Are you sure you’re alright?” he asked, gazing worriedly at her. “If it’s too much right now, we can w—”

“Umm, yeah!” she lied. “Totally fine.”

“Oh. Alrighty,” Ben said as he pulled her towards the entrance to the cottage. “Let’s go, then.”

Ariana nodded quickly and ventured out of the cottage with him. She was walking skittishly at first, but stopped, reminding herself that she needed to look confident. To be confident.

Come on Ari, you can do this. Just like you do at the festival.

She straightened her back, perked out her chest, and attempted to do just that. Then, she tripped on a loose cobblestone, lost her balance, and almost fell on her butt.

Ben turned to her, his eyebrow arched. “You okay, Ari?”

Not like that, girly, the voice in her head said.

Ariana pursed her lips. As annoying as the voice was, it was right. Stupid thing usually was.

“Yeah, I’m alright! Don’t worry about me!” She beamed at him reassuringly.

Ben raised an eyebrow and turned back around. The pair sat down at a table in the shade of the oak tree that hung over part of the town square. The gentle sunlight bled through as they engaged in small talk for about an hour. Eventually, Ben broke the silence with the golden question.

“So, what was that whole thing about? Earlier when you kicked me out of your room?” Ben inhaled sharply, his lips pursed, like he was trying to dance around having to say the words. “You said you were having ‘girl problems?’”

Ariana’s eyes widened as she finally realized what Ben was referring to.

“Oh! No, not that.” She scratched her head nervously, feeling stupid. “Not that type of girl problem.”

Ben sighed in what appeared to be relief. “Ari, are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting kinda weird.”

“I...” Ariana sighed. “Well, I was struggling with some feelings, actually.”

“What do you mean?”

Well, Ari, the voice said, might as well fess up that ya like him.

“I kinda...”

Another voice interrupted her. “Hey, cutie!”

The pair turned to face the voices. To both Ariana’s surprise and chagrin, it was the annoying Alexis girl and her cohorts. She had hoped that maybe Alexis had gotten mauled by a wild animal.

“So, did you reconsider our offer?” Alexis asked. “We’re actually leaving the village here in a bit.”

Ben hesitated, took in a sharp breath, “I’m good. Besides...” He eyed Ariana with a smile, “...my friend here promised to help me.”

“Oh, come on, you know she can’t do anything for you! We—”

“—I’m fine, thanks,” Ben coldly remarked.

“Are you sure?” Alexis’s expression shifted to a deadly glare; a forked tongue protruded from her lips. “Last chance, cutie.”

Uh oh, Ariana thought. Forked tongue. Not good.

Well, if she got mauled by a wild animal, the voice in her head said, the poor thing probably lost.

Ben sighed, turned to Alexis, and promptly gave her the finger.

“No.”

Alexis sprouted a pair of demonic wings, her eyes turned blood red. Her body thinned until it was nothing, but gray, ragged muscle stretched over inhumanly sharp bone, the corners of her mouth stretched to reveal a hideous jaw filled with jagged teeth. Claws extended from what used to be her fingers and dug into Ben.

Ariana paled. “Ben!”

With a surprising strength, the she-demon lifted Ben and hurled him into a building a fair distance from the town circle. A low growl emitted from her throat, bloody claws snapping together.

“Marge, find and distract the angel! Bailey, go get the boy!”

They nodded with a triumphant hiss as they flew off into the Riverglade, sending the townsfolk fleeing for their lives.

Ariana attempted to run after him but was blocked by Alexis. The she-demon turned towards her as an evil grin stretched across her leathery face.

“This little brat is mine.”

Chapter 8

Hellfire's Awakening

When Ben had regained consciousness, every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire. His eyes shot open, the pain sinking in, along with the realization that he was halfway buried underneath a pile of rubble. Small trails of blood trickled down his chest from three holes in his shirt.

How did I get here? Ben grunted as he shoved some bricks off his body. He grunted, finding that his right shoulder had become dislocated. With a clenched jaw, he forced it back into place.

Not far in front of him, a ragged creature landed, bat-like wings tucked in. Its skinny body cast a long shadow as sharp claws slid out from its fingertips. It flashed Ben a twisted smile.

Oh. Right. One of these ugly things threw me into a building.

Ben finished digging himself out as he scrambled to his feet, blood seeping from his lips. The demon inched closer.

"Nowhere to run, cutie," it hissed.

"Cutie? What do you..." Ben's eyes narrowed in disgust. "Gross."

"Come with me. Now."

"Go to hell," Ben snapped.

Her wide, ragged mouth curled, pushing aside her wicked grin. She leapt at Ben, claw outstretched. He barely dodged, ducking under her swing as he skittered out of the ruined building.

Ben continued to sprint, his breaths labored as he darted around several corners. He tried to make a break straight for the town square, where he last saw Ariana, but found a panicked crowd of people in his way. The demon was still hot on his tail. He cursed.

Can't go that way, he realized. Otherwise, I'll be leading this demon right to them.

His eyes darted frantically towards the town square, where he glimpsed Ariana battling for her life. Reluctantly, Ben sprinted away, drawing his pursuer with him.

Please, Ari. Stay alive.

Behind him, Ben heard the demon's ragged wings flap, its claws occasionally scratching the ground as it tried and missed him. He kept up the chase, ensuring his movements were erratic and unpredictable as he rounded the buildings to lose his attacker.

Come on, come on, Ben thought. Back off already!

As Ben continued to flee, he heard the desperate cry of a child ring out from inside one of the buildings. His eyes widened as he dared to stop and look back.

"Mom! Dad! Someone! Help me!"

The demon stopped chasing him. She froze and hovered as she listened. A sadistic grin carved itself onto her already twisted lips.

"Oh, my," the demon teased. "Poor child. Someone should go help him."

Brows furrowing, Ben listened for the source of the noise. It was coming from the building next to him. He ducked inside and slammed the door in the demon's face as he shoved a chair under the doorknob. The ugly creature he assumed was Marge or Bailey slammed against the door repeatedly.

Ben spun around. "Hey, kid! Where are you?"

Slowly, the child came out from behind a large chair. He was a young boy, roughly six or seven years of age. Auburn, curly hair sprung from atop his head.

"H-hi, mister," the kid said. "You're not a demon, are you?"

"No, of course not!" Ben knelt next to the kid. "My name is Ben. I'm here to help, okay bud? What's your name?" Behind him, the door shook as the demon continued to slam against it.

"Billy," the kid said, hugging Ben tight. "I need help. I can't find my mom and dad."

"I'll help you find them, but first we need to get out of here, okay?" Ben placed a reassuring hand on the kid's head as he frantically searched the empty room. "Is there another way out?"

"No." Billy shook his head. "Just that door, where the monster is."

"Okay, here's what you're gonna do." Ben glanced behind him. With each blow from the demon, the wood of the door splintered and cracked. He grit his teeth and faced the boy once more. "You're gonna hide when the demon comes in, then when I distract it, you're gonna run, okay? Just run as hard as you can."

The kid nodded. "Okay, mister." Obeying, Billy ran and hid behind the chair again, his innocent eyes peeking from behind.

Ben looked around the room for anything that he could use to fend off their attacker. He found a small table and broke off one leg into a large stake. A screech rang out from behind the door, followed by the flapping of wings.

Then the door shattered to pieces.

Raising his makeshift weapon, Ben prepared to attack, but found that the demon wasn't there. In its stead stood Zachariel, his sword raised.

Ben sighed with relief. "Okay, good. There's a kid—" He tried to step forward, but a sharp blade pressed against his throat, silencing him. The angel glared at him.

"Where. Is. Ariana?"

"Town square." Ben answered quickly, raising his hands. The angel moved forward, pressuring the blade closer. "The first demon was there, and she attacked. We got separated."

Zachariel's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was running from the demon and then I heard this kid screaming for help. He's right h—" Ben spun around to find that Billy was now gone. "—here?"

"I don't see a child," Zachariel noted, his voice still firm.

"I..." Ben blinked, confused. "Unless he slipped out when I wasn't looking."

Zachariel continued to eye him before finally removing the blade from Ben's throat. "Fine. We need to go find her." He grabbed Ben by the shirt and shoved him out into the street, "Town square is..."

The angel stopped, his grip on his blade tightening. Atop two opposite buildings sat the other two demons, Marge and Bailey. They stared down, heads tilted. They flexed their claws and flapped their wings, as if vultures waiting to tear into a fresh kill.

Ben raised his wooden stake defensively. "I take one, you take the other?"

"Don't be an idiot." Zachariel's sword suddenly brimmed with fire. "You know they will kill you. I'm going to distract them while you run to find Ari."

"Distract them?" Ben asked. "Are you sure one of them won't go after me?"

"No." Zachariel's brows furrowed. "So, when you run, run fast."

Ben inhaled slowly; his legs tensed. "Okay. Count of three?"

The angel nodded.

"One...two...go!" Zachariel lunged into the air after the demons, slashing. The first met his challenge, a blade of her own clashing against his. The second demon broke off and chased after Ben.

Ben ducked her first attack as he sprinted toward the town square. He glanced back, seeing the demon only a few feet from him. Straining his legs, he bolted even faster and turned into an alleyway, attempting to shake her. She kept on him like a dog nipping his ankles, nearly catching him.

Come on, come on. Ben's heart raced as he darted down the dimly lit alleyway, urging himself to move faster. The demon landed behind him, claws scraping the stone as she skidded to a halt.

"Nowhere to hide now," she hissed.

Ben looked forward again. She was right. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. It was a dead end. He cursed as he spun around, trapped. If he wanted to get out and save Ariana, then his last option was to fight. He faced the she-demon, teeth bared.

The demon smirked. "Oh, so you intend to fight, don't you? Good. Make this enjoyable for me."

Ben lunged forward with the wooden stick, the sound of splintering wood echoing through the air as his makeshift weapon shattered. The demon nearly sank her claws into him as leapt back and rolled. Blood dripped from his shirt, and his vision blurred.

"So close." The demon grinned. "Next time, I won't miss, cutie. Stand down."

Ben's body suddenly felt hot, like lava flowing down a mountainside. His blood boiled, heated by rage as smoke

started rising from his wound and hands. The demon's eyes widened.

"So, the master was right," she said as she continued to inch forward.

Master? Ben shook the thought from his mind. Right now, he didn't care what she was talking about. All he wanted to do was to take her down.

With a scream, Ben lunged forward after the demon, gripping her spindly arm, his other fastening on its throat. The wings flapped erratically, its body wiggling loose from Ben's weakening grip. The demon grinned evilly as his hand slipped from the neck; she opened her jaws and bit down hard on his left shoulder, sinking her teeth deep into his skin.

Ben's arm felt like it was being devoured by acid, as if it was melting from the inside out, causing him to writhe in agony. Instinctively, he used his free right arm to manifest a full flame. Shadows erupted from his bite wound and intertwined with it, turning the core of the flame black and the rest a dark red.

Tearing the demon from his arm, Ben slammed her to the ground. The demon's bony leg felt cold and clammy in his grip as she struggled to crawl away. As he pulled, the thin but strong ligaments gave way, snapping one after the other.

Ben felt the demon's writhing body beneath his leg as it screeched in agony. For a moment, the demon morphed into someone else. The pimp who had sold Lilly. A voice echoed in his head.

Kill.

Ben bared his teeth, his brows furrowed. He raised his foot and dug it into the demon's neck.

"Argh...I'll-I'll kill you! I—"

He stomped again, this time harder. Her other leg separated from the rest of her body as it disintegrated.

“N-no...please...”

With each stomp, Ben ground the demon into the earth until it was limbless. He wanted her to feel every second of pain, if it could. He wanted it to burn.

He wanted it to die.

Kill.

Finally, he raised his foot one last time. The demon screamed as Ben smashed its head, shattering it into dust. He exhaled, a low growl emitting from his throat.

Ben opened his eyes and looked at his hands, now ablaze with the black and red flame. The shadow and fire danced until he clenched his fists. He felt renewed, powerful, like he could annihilate any demon. A plethora of them, even.

Suddenly, a scream echoed from the town square nearby. Someone Ben recognized.

Ariana.

His body trembled as the fire reignited and spread from his hands.

If she lays so much as one finger on her...

Ben released that building rage in a bloody scream, his body now covered in the dark flames, his eyes blazing red.

Kill.

Ben glared in the scream's direction. *No, I will save her. Whatever this is—this hellfire—will see to that.*



Ariana was getting tired of dodging Alexis' attacks, which seemed to be never-ending. Her claws were like curved, sharp knives, ready to rend her to pieces.

Ariana dodged, watching the she-demon instead dig them into the picnic table where she and Ben had been sitting previously. She almost fell, but her years of dance practice came to her aid as she regained her balance.

Come on Ari! You got this! the voice in Ariana's head said.

Yeah, I just have to keep focused and keep from being torn to pieces, Ariana thought between breaths as she dodged attack after attack. She noticed a nearby chair from one of the other tables and decided it would make a decent offensive weapon.

After missing yet another swipe from the demon's claws, Ariana manifested what little courage she had in a war cry, picked up the chair, and shattered it across the she-demon's face.

"Ha!" Ariana spat. "Take that, you—"

Alexis towered over her, with sunken, beady eyes glaring, dashing both her taunts and hopes. Ariana stood, her courage fading as she held the remains of the chair, before dropping them and backing away. The demon raised its claws, and Ariana squeezed her eyes shut, prepared for the oncoming death blow that was sure to happen.

It didn't. A large plume of black and red smoke erupted from the side, dragging Alexis across the town square. The arm that was about to strike Ariana was lying on the ground, separated from the demon.

"I'll kill you! I—"

The demon never got the chance. Ben had put her in a headlock, shifted his grip, and finished her with a twist of his arms; the snap was so loud it might have echoed across the whole town. A few curious villagers came out of hiding to see the demon's body dissipate in front of him, leaving Ben the victor.

I can't believe it, Ariana thought. *Ben's alive! I—*

As Ariana moved in for a hug, she paused, struck by the unfamiliar color of his eyes. Instead, they were an insidious, glowing crimson.

A cloud of black smoke encircled Ben like an asteroid belt. It lingered in a spiral column of soot and ash as if bound by his own personal field of gravity, wrapped in an aura of dark power. His head slowly turned to look at Ariana. When he saw her, he flashed a wide, sadistic grin. She paled.

The smoke dissipated. Ben's eyes returned to normal, and he collapsed onto the street, unconscious. Ariana immediately ran over to him, her breaths quick and shallow. She flipped him over on his back and pressed her ear against his chest. His heartbeat was there. A very faint, irregular rhythm, but there, nonetheless.

Ariana sighed with relief. Fortunately, Ben wasn't dead, but something about him had changed. The smoke, the flames, and above all, the way he had killed it. It was...effortless. Merciless, even.

Kill. The word that Ben used in his nightmares, calling for Lilly, stuck in her mind. A shiver crawled up Ariana's spine like a spider up a tree, possibilities crossing her thoughts, each more terrifying than the next, but none more so than the one that held her in that moment.

Was Dad right? Ariana wondered. Is Ben dangerous?

Behind her, she heard the flutter of Zachariel's wings, then his approaching footsteps. He walked to her side and knelt.

"Sorry I'm late. I only just vanquished that first demon." Zachariel froze upon seeing Ben. "What happened to him? Is he okay?"

"He saved me, Dad," Ariana said, stuttering. "But..."

Zachariel looked over at the pile of dust that had once been the she-demon and back at Ben.

"How did he do this?"

“I don’t know. Ben flew over and grabbed the demon...” Ariana stammered. She had no explanation for what she saw Ben do. It was scaring her as well.

Zachariel’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, he ‘flew’ over?”

The words failed to escape Ariana’s lips. Soon, she noticed other people crowding around his unconscious body. Her chest tightened, and her jaw clenched.

“Dad, can we please get him back to the house?” Ariana asked her father. “There are too many people here.”

Her father nodded, then looked at the crowd and stood to his full height. “All of you need to leave.”

The people stayed put, their eyes ablaze with curiosity.

“Now!” His wings stretched to their full eighteen-foot wingspan, acting as a barrier.

They scrambled back to their houses, wanting to avoid Zachariel’s wrath. Ariana didn’t blame them, she had faced it before and wanted to avoid doing it again at all costs.

Zachariel collapsed his wings and turned his attention back to Ben. He picked him up off the ground and rushed back toward the house, kicking the door open as he carried him to Ariana’s room, setting him on the bed. He spun to face her.

“Alright, I need to know what happened. Right now.”

Ariana took a deep breath and explained what she had seen, starting with Alexis tossing him into the building.

“...And right as she was about to claw me, this cloud of black smoke appeared, taking her across the square. When it cleared, there stood Ben with a bunch of smoke. Then he passed out.”

Zachariel’s mouth hung open. “He killed the she-demon?”

She nodded. "Yeah, broke her neck. I could probably have heard it across the entire town."

"He must have put a lot of force into it." Zachariel eyed the unconscious Ben, putting his hand on his chin as he incoherently whispered, "...but that fire from before...the restaurant. Was I right?"

Ariana interrupted her father. "There's one more thing, Dad. Ben looked...different."

The angel's eyes narrowed. "Different how?"

"His eyes were red and..." Ariana hesitated. "He had this evil smile, like he wanted to hurt people."

Her father froze. He spun and hastened out to the front of the cottage. With his hands clasped together, he bowed his head and whispered under his breath. The two beams of light pierced through the clouds and illuminated the ground below. As they faded, Ariana could see that they were two of her father's angel comrades, Kafziel, a messenger, and Daniel, a healer.

Zachariel quickly shook both of their hands as he explained. They nodded and walked into the back room. Daniel beckoned for Ariana to scoot back as he examined Ben.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Ariana asked, craning her head above his shoulder.

Daniel pressed his aged, precise hand against Ben's head. "I don't know. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but it almost feels like something is invading him, not unlike a virus."

"Invading?" Zachariel asked.

Daniel nodded. "Yes, although I don't..." He froze as he pressed his fingers to Ben's wrist.

"What is it?" Kafziel asked.

At first, Daniel didn't answer. He traced his fingers up Ben's arm, his eyes narrowing. He lifted Ben's sleeve to find a large, pulsing bite mark, a black venom spreading.

Daniel exhaled sharply. "Of course. One of the demons bit him."

"A demon bite?" Zachariel's eye widened. "Can you remove it before it gets too deep?"

The healer nodded and placed his hands on the bite, muttering an incantation. Ben briefly shifted and reached for the angel's throat. Daniel barely avoided it. His glasses flashed and nearly fell from his nose.

"No good," the angel said, his chest heaving. "He's already drawn from it."

Zachariel grimaced. "How long does he have?"

"I'm not sure. Not long, I imagine."

Ariana's gut sank. "Until what?"

Daniel's eyes lowered. "Until he becomes like one of them. A demon thrall."

For a moment, Ariana struggled to breathe, her chest tightened. The surrounding voices seemed to fade as she focused on Ben. She felt tears form.

Why did it have to be him?

Her father placed his hand on his sword, drew it from its scabbard, and stepped towards Ben. Ariana quickly put herself in his way.

"Ariana..." Zachariel's eyes narrowed. "...move."

"No," she growled.

With each step forward, he leaned in closer. "You heard Daniel. The infection is already taking root. I don't want him to hurt you. Or worse."

"You know he won't. He's the one that killed the demons, Dad."

Zachariel scoffed. "How do you know he won't kill you next? Or a villager?" He inhaled sharply and looked his

daughter in the eye. "I appreciate that he saved your life, but the only thing I can do is put him down before he hurts you or anyone else."

"Not necessarily, old friend," Daniel carefully interjected as he briefly exchanged looks with Ariana. "He still seems to be far from that point. I'd venture to say that he's still human, and therefore protected from the angel's blade under the code."

"Have you ever known a human to wield fire, Daniel?"

The angel's eyes lit up. "Fire?"

Zachariel nodded. "On three different occasions, yes. The first two could have been coincidence. The last one, however, proves my theory once and for all. He can generate it, manipulate it. Use it."

"That would explain his abnormal body temperature." Daniel glanced back at Ben as he lay motionless on the bed. "I've never known a human to do such things. Perhaps he isn't one."

Ariana's eyes widened. *Ben isn't human?*

"So, we don't know what he is," Kafziel concluded. His young, impatient eyes narrowed.

"Indeed." Daniel pushed his glasses back to the bridge of his nose. "Although our old commander might have some idea. Perhaps you should pay him a visit, Zachariel? He still mans the archive."

"I would love to." Zachariel's eyes lowered. "But I can't leave the village and Ariana undefended."

Kafziel nudged him. "What, you don't trust us to handle it?"

Zachariel hesitated. "I do, it's just—"

"In all our years in the war on Earth, we fought together. Bled together, had each other's backs." Daniel smiled, placing

a hand on his friend's shoulder. "So trust me when I say your village is in excellent hands."

Her father froze for a moment or two, then exchanged looks with both of his angel comrades. He nodded and gestured towards Ariana. "Walk with me."

Ariana followed Zachariel out to the front of the cottage. He spun to face her. "As you heard, I will be gone for a little while—"

"How long?"

"It's about half a day's flight from here, hopefully one at the most. I am leaving you and the village in their hands and Ben in yours. If he wakes up, and neither Daniel nor Kafziel is around, you are to notify them immediately."

The wind howled as Ariana watched her father spread his wings. "And if he wakes up? What if he's...not himself?"

Zachariel paused and drew something from beneath his tunic. He tossed her a knife. She reached out and caught it.

"If worse comes to worst, use that." Zachariel briefly turned and frowned at his daughter. "Now promise me you'll be safe. No matter what."

"I promise, Dad."

On that happy note, he flew into the night in a blur of flashing light. She sighed.

Well, then...that's just great. Dad wants me to kill him.

Don't be foolish, girly, the voice said, you know it's just a last resort.

Ariana examined the blade. It had a golden hilt and guard, with the handle wrapped in black leather. The steel of the blade seemed almost otherworldly, and the thin blue vein running through it pulsed with energy. Also on it was the name, written in the language of the angels.

Omega. The end.

The end of what? Ariana wondered as she sheathed the blade and loosely dropped it into her pocket. She walked back into the house to check on Ben, who was still out cold on her bed. Next to him knelt Daniel, who rubbed his chin in deep thought. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Sorry if I didn't say something to you earlier, Ari. It's good to see you."

Ariana briefly returned it and sat down next to Ben. "Thank you for sticking up for him earlier, Uncle Daniel."

The angel shrugged. "It's my job as a healer to preserve life. Besides, I hear he's a friend of yours."

She nodded. "I'm worried about him, though. I don't want him to die. Or worse."

He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "There's always hope, Ariana."

"I know." She sighed, then looked around. "Where did Kafziel go?"

"Already on patrol." Daniel chuckled. "You know messenger angels. They can't stay still to save their lives."

Ariana cracked a brief smile. "Do you mind if I stay with Ben? I know Dad would be worried and whatnot, but..."

Daniel smiled and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's best practice to keep young Ben in good spirits. It'll serve well to reduce the spread of the infection and dissuade him from using his fire should he wake up. Also..." Daniel pushed his glasses to the bridge of his nose. "...I know he's a dear friend of yours. I wouldn't separate you from him unless you were in danger."

Ariana blinked. "You don't think he'll hurt me?"

"No. Even if he does, I'm not far, and Kafziel could be here within seconds. Besides, I promised your father I'd keep you and the village safe."

"Right." She smiled. "Thank you, Uncle Daniel."

“Of course. I’ll be just outside the cottage if you need me.” Daniel gave her a reassuring smile before he walked out and shut the front door behind him.

Ariana pulled a chair from the kitchen table and set it next to Ben. She rested her hand on his and laid her blonde head on his chest. The faint, irregular rhythm of his heart pulsed against her ear.

She angled her head and looked at his face. Despite his outward calm, there was a hint of unease in the way he occasionally shifted. His face was rigid, like he was fighting something in his mind. Ariana raised her head and caressed his cheeks as she whispered.

“Ben. Please come back to me.”

Chapter 9

Solarity of Dreams

Shadows and silence surrounded Ben for what seemed like an eternity. He opened his eyes to the night sky stretched above him. Stars glittered against the unending midnight. In the inky darkness, the only other light was the reddened moon.

Ben stared skyward for what seemed like hours. Rising and falling on unnervingly calm waves as his body floated on an ever-expanding ocean. He reached, his arm outstretched to the stars, as he felt something drip down his face. Turning his hand, he focused on it, his eyes widening in realization.

It was blood, an ocean of it, in fact. It soaked his clothes, clinging to him like a second skin, the weight trying its damndest to drag him into the depths.

Ben snapped himself out of the trance, fighting the downward pull as he reached the white, crystallized shore, resting on his knees as he struggled to catch his breath.

The surrounding landscape was barren, wasted. Spires of twisted metal and ash stretched across, the occasional charred bones protruding from the blackened ground. He looked once more at his hands, the blood from before running through his fingers and down his arm. The longer he stared, the clearer he could hear the screams.

Please, no!

Everyone, run! Befo—

I don't wanna die!

Help me!

Ben gripped his chest, his throat tightened as he clamped his reddened hands against his ears before a bright flash erupted from the sky. As he looked up, he could see a strange figure made entirely of light, its form both beautiful and terrifying. An extensive series of shining rings adorned in an unknown language flowed from its back. Its judgmental eyes glared down at him.

Ben stared in horror as it grew even brighter, blinding. A flame whipped out from it, tearing across his vision until it consumed everything in his sight.

The light from the flames faded, but his surroundings had changed. In front of Ben was a small, weathered RV. It burned, almost as if with the same damning fire as before. A woman's scream echoed from within, begging for help.

Ben looked down next to him. Laying on the ground, wounded, was an unconscious girl with black, matted hair that stretched down to her mid-back. She was young, couldn't have been over four or five, but he recognized her immediately.

Lilly.

Kneeling, Ben pressed his hands against her forehead. A dark red streak remained when he removed it, the blood from his hands. He stumbled back.

What the hell is this?

Ashes and embers rose high into the night sky as people arrived from the nearby forest. They, like Ben and Lilly, were dark of hair, skin like clay. Feathers adorned some of them, some tied to clothing and others tied into the various braids in their hair.

The leader of the group first looked at the blaze, then back at Ben. He raised an accusing finger.

“There they are! Kill the Devil children!”

One of them pulled a weapon and aimed at the two. Ben jumped in front of Lilly. The white flash of the gunshot filled his vision, and soon, he found himself elsewhere.

This time, he was in a room full of people that looked like they were in their late teens or early twenties. They all sat around a small campfire in the middle of the room, conversing hushedly.

A girl with caramel skin and brown hair was muttering an incantation while bent over with folded hands. A prayer. Another person beside her, a blonde male in his late teens or early twenties, nudged her.

“Not right now, Cassie. We’ve got planning to do.”

Cassie momentarily stopped and turned to the girl next to her. “Lilly, shut Jess up before I smack him.”

As the girl turned to face him, Ben looked at her pale, gentle face. Her black, silky hair cascaded down her back, drawing attention to the scars that lined her cheek. Her appearance had changed since the previous vision, and she looked to be in her late teens now. Even then, there was no mistaking it.

If this is real, Ben thought as his eyes widened, *then she’s alive.*

Lilly smacked Jess as her dark brows furrowed, the light from the fire illuminating her gray eyes. “Leave her be, Jess.”

Jess got to his feet. “Alright, listen, I want to figure out how to survive this hellhole. The Guard wants us all dead, and honestly, I don’t think any of your religious crap will help us right now. We need to do something, not pray.”

“Cassie can do whatever the hell she wants.” Standing, Lilly glared at him. “It’s not harming anybody.”

“It’s annoying,” Jess said with a roll of his eyes, “not to mention distracting.”

“Still not your problem,” Lilly said, crossing her arms.

“Whatever,” Jess grumbled. “Just make it qu—”

Suddenly, the window on the side of the room shattered, and several armor-clad soldiers beached the room.

“We’ve found them! We found the freaks!” the one in charge shouted.

“Kill them all!” the leader commanded.

The one called Jess stood up and ignited a spark of black electricity in his hand, proceeding to fry the officer that had just barked the order.

“James!” Jess shouted to the third guy. “They’ve found us!”

James, a dark-skinned male in his mid-twenties, ignited flames in his own hands and attacked the invading soldiers. “Come on! We’ve got to get out of here!”

The battle faded from Ben’s vision. A voice erupted from behind him.

Ben...

He shook his head. Did someone just call his name?

Please come back to me.

Ben spun and looked at the nearby door, the outline illuminated by a blinding light. He walked toward it and grabbed the handle. The bright light engulfed him, bringing him out of the vision and back to reality.



Ben woke up to see Ariana resting her head on his chest and her hand on his. He sighed in relief that the horrifying things he had seen were only a dream.

Or were they?

When he looked at his hands again, he could almost feel the stickiness of the blood from earlier. To his relief, it was

gone, yet the image had burned itself into his mind. A world in ruins, an ocean of blood, and the terrifying thing that had unknowingly lingered in the back of his mind since he first arrived in New Eden. But what was it?

The judgmental eyes flashed across his vision, burning into him, the accusing voices becoming louder. It continued until he instinctively placed one of his hands on Ariana.

Ben shook himself out of it, the vision fading as he felt her steady breaths against his chest. He smiled tenderly and ran his charred fingers through her hair before gently shaking her shoulder.

Ariana blinked several times, then sat up straight. "Ben! You're awake!" She hugged him tightly, squeezing all the air out of him.

"Ari..." Ben wheezed. "You're crushing me."

She released him and sat back in her chair. "Oh. Sorry."

"I wouldn't worry about it. You give good hugs."

Ariana's cheeks flushed red. She shook her head and rested her elbows on the edge of the bed. "So, how are you feeling?"

Ben swung his legs over and stood up as he stretched. He also noticed that the pain from yesterday was gone.

"I feel great." He paused for a moment. "What happened to me?"

Ariana blinked. "You don't remember? The demon attack?"

"Wait, I remember something." Ben's eyes widened. "I was trying to get to you, then..."

Ben's mind returned to that moment in the alley after killing the first demon. That same feeling returned to him, one of power. Beyond that, it had filled him with something else.

“That’s right. Those demons tried to hurt you. I killed them.” Ben quickly clenched his fist, then slowly opened his palm. A dark flame grew around his hand as his eyes narrowed with sudden fascination.

“Ben.” Ariana’s eyes widened. “Please put that away.”

He ignored her, unable to take his eyes off it. “I can use this to protect you, the village. I can—”

Kill them all.

“Please. You’re scaring me—” Ariana reached for Ben’s arm; he spun and accidentally scorched her wrist. He quickly extinguished the flame as Ariana fell back, clutching her arm as her pain seeped from her quivering lips.

“Ari, are you okay?” He froze upon seeing the burn mark. “Did I...hurt you?”

“It’s not that bad.” Ariana avoided his gaze as she covered it with her free hand. “I’ll be—”

“—I’m sorry.” Ben moved away from her as he heard a thumping in his ears. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s alright. I can still—”

“Your dad was right, Ari.” His breaths quickened; his hands trembled. “I can’t even be near you. I need to go, I—”

Ariana crawled forward and placed her injured hand on his. He tried to pull away, but she held him firm. She met his quivering eyes with a soft, reassuring smile.

“It’s okay. I promise.”

As their eyes bore into one another, the door flung open. Standing there was another angel with his dagger drawn, his sharp eyes halfway hidden behind his glasses.

“Is everything alright, Ari?” The angel paused upon seeing the two of them so close together. “Oh. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Ben felt his face warm as he and Ariana exchanged a brief look. They scooted from each other and briskly stood to their feet.

"It's fine, Daniel," she said, her cheeks red. "You weren't interrupting anything."

Daniel arched an eyebrow before shifting his gaze to Ben with a warm smile as he sheathed his dagger and reached out, "Ah! Good to see you awake. My name is Daniel. I'm a friend of Zachariel's."

Ben shook his hand and returned the greeting. Daniel motioned for him to sit on the bed. "So, how was your nap? Restful, I hope?"

"I guess you could say that," Ben replied, his eyes narrowed as the angel examined him. "Where's Zachariel?"

"He will be out of town for a day or two. In the meantime, you and the village are under the care of Kafziel and myself." The angel slowly twisted Ben's arm as he inspected it. "How do you feel right now?"

"Good...I guess. Ever since I killed those demons and took a nap."

Daniel paused as he and Ariana briefly exchanged looks. "Yes...there's that, too. You caused quite a commotion yesterday with that fire of yours." His aged eyes flickered. "You saved Ariana too, but not without cost."

"What do you mean?"

Daniel's lips tightened as he lifted Ben's left sleeve. The blackened mark etched into his shoulder was the size of a fist. As it slowly stretched across his arm, several small branches protruded from it like fingers.

Ben tensed, and his eyes widened. "That's where—"

"—The demon bit you, yes. The infection spreads as we speak."

Infection? Ben wondered. His mind thought back to the fight when the demon had sunk her teeth into his arm. First came a painful, invasive sting. After that came the flames, and then the power he used to protect Ariana. But why? What good did it do the demon to infect him if it only resulted in her death?

Maybe it's a good thing, he thought. Maybe I can keep her safe that way.

His gaze flicked to her burnt wrist. It helped him before, but because of it, he had hurt Ariana. His brows furrowed.

"Alright. How do we get rid of it?"

"That's the bad part, I'm afraid. Other than amputation—which is impossible now since it has spread past your arm—it's only a matter of time before it takes you. In your case, that could be...well, dangerous. For Ariana especially."

Ben exhaled sharply in disbelief. *So, it doesn't matter after all. I'm still a danger to Ari.* He briskly pulled his sleeve down and clutched his infected arm. "How long do I have?"

Daniel avoided his gaze. "Hard to say. Though if I were you, I'd avoid relying on that fire of yours. Judging from your battle with the demons, I'd say excessive use of your abilities speeds up the process. At least this way..." He pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, "...you will have some time. Luckily, it seems to have spread minimally in the last few hours."

Ben scowled, jaw clenched. He glanced over at Ariana, whose wide, azure eyes never once moved from him. He turned back to the angel. "I shouldn't be near her. I shouldn't even be in this room."

"You're not under its influence yet, Ben. I think it's safe. For now, at least."

"I can't risk hurting her again. I'd never forgive myself if..." Ben's teeth grit as he shook, unable to finish his sentence.

Ariana dipped her head and hid the burnt hand behind her back.

Daniel placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He smiled. "We'll fix this, Ben. Have faith."

Ben finally looked back up, his eyes meeting the angel's. "And what if we can't?"

"There's always a way." Daniel beamed encouragingly, the way a doctor encouraging his patients would. The angel then stood to his full height and walked to the door. "I'll be just outside the house if you need anything." He glanced at him one more time. "I trust you, Ben. Do you trust yourself?"

"I don't know, honestly. But thank you for the pick-me-up." Ben allowed himself a small half-smile. "You're more upbeat than her dad. I'll give you that."

Daniel winked, his glasses hung on the tip of his nose. "Well, someone has to look at the upside." He waved and promptly walked out of the cottage. The door crept shut behind him.

Ben sighed and allowed himself to sink to the floor, his back resting against the bed. Ariana joined him, tucking her knees into her chest. She looked over at him and placed her burnt hand on his infected arm. Her sweet, forgiving eyes bore into his.

"I trust you too, Ben. With my life," she said. "Don't beat yourself up. Okay?"

He opened his mouth to protest, but didn't. Instead, he nodded slowly.

Ariana beamed at him, then withdrew her hand to inspect it as she whistled. "Now, if it was bad enough to where I couldn't play Ole Betsy..." she smirked, "...then you'd be in serious trouble."

Ben allowed a small smile to reach his lips. "You'd kill me faster than Zachariel ever would."

"No, but I'd have no issue beating you up over it." Ariana giggled. "But seriously, it's okay. I promise."

"I—" Ben paused, the smile fading. "If you say so, Ari."

Ariana frowned. She sighed. "Hey, Ben?"

"Yeah?" Ben replied, meeting her gaze.

"It's still a few hours until sunrise and we're stuck here for the time being. Wanna play a board game or something?"

"Well..." Ben pursed his lips.

"Well, what?"

Ben paused. He never really liked board games, considering he was never any good at them. He was sure even a three-year-old could beat him at checkers, given a chance.

"They're not my thing. I suck at games, to be honest."

Ariana gazed at him steadily and opened her eyes so wide that he could see his reflection in them. She tilted her head cutely.

"Please?"

Come on, you can resist, Ben told himself. Don't fall for...ah, damn it. One or two won't kill me.

"Alright, Ari." Ben sighed. "What game did you have in mind?"

"Well..." Ariana smirked at him as if he had fallen into a trap. "I like chess."



Out of five games, Ariana had beaten Ben at all of them, mainly because she was that awesome at chess and partially because he was straight up terrible at it.

Ariana had just toppled his king. As Ben looked back up; she gave him a cute grin, paired with puppy dog eyes.

“Wanna go another round?”

At this point, she figured that Ben might have given up. Surprisingly, he agreed. As many times as she kicked his butt already, Ben just kept persevering. As they were setting up the game pieces for what seemed like the millionth time, they conversed.

“So what happened after I blacked out?” Ben asked.

“After you killed that last demon, Dad brought you in here,” Ariana replied, moving one of her pawns. “He summoned Daniel and—”

“—That’s when he found out about the demon bite.” Ben finished for her as he moved his own pawn.

She nodded slowly. “Even before that, you...well, you scared me, Ben. I didn’t know you could be so...violent.”

Ben froze mid-move as he held his knight. He avoided her gaze as he placed it. “You’d be surprised, Ari. Besides, it wasn’t that hard to kill them. Honestly, I’d annihilate a million more demons before I let you get hurt.”

Ariana’s eyes narrowed. She could have sworn she saw his eyes flash red for a moment.

“Back in the town square...” she said, her hand ever so slightly shaking. “You had this look on your face, like you wanted to murder everyone around you. I almost thought you would. For a moment, I couldn’t tell the difference between you and the demon you killed. I’m not even sure how to describe it.”

“Ari.” Ben’s eyes met hers as he frowned. “I would never do anything like that.”

“Then promise me.” Ariana leaned in, her face inches from his. “Promise me you won’t use your fire ever again, Ben. I don’t want to lose you to it.”

Ben hesitated. "I—"

"—promise me."

"If I can help it, I won't. But if you're in danger, I'll do what I have to." His brows furrowed. "I won't lose you, either."

Ariana frowned and bit her lip. More than anything, she wanted him to agree, but she knew he wouldn't budge beyond that. She slowly nodded as she met his eye with a half-smile.

"Okay."

Ben's storm gray eyes held her gaze as he smiled. The more she stared, the more she lost herself. "You have really pretty eyes, Ben."

"I do?" Ben sat up and blinked. Ariana withdrew and silently cursed.

Just great, Ari, the voice in her head told her, way to ruin a perfect moment.

Shut up, Ariana mentally told it.

Ben looked back up at her. "Well, I like your eyes too. Very blue and energetic. They remind me of the sky here."

Ariana blinked a few times and looked away, her cheeks warm.

"Hey, Ari?" he asked with a smile.

"Yeah?"

"Can I see them one more time?"

She blushed harder and turned to face him. They held the stare for about a solid minute until Ben finally spoke up with a sheepish grin.

"I win."

Ariana's eyes shot open as she realized what he was doing. She didn't notice as he quietly moved her pieces to the side and used his own to topple her king. Her jaw hung open in disbelief. "Hey, that's not fair! You can't do that!"

Ben shrugged as he maintained his smug look. "Says who?"

"Um, excuse you?" Ariana shoved him playfully. "I demand a rematch, mister!"

I swear, this boy drives me nuts! But then again, this was the part of him she adored. His real self and not the monster she had seen earlier.

Ariana stood and chased him around the room, knocking over the chess pieces. She lunged forward and caught him, but before she could claim victory, he tickled her neck, causing her to collapse onto the ground in laughter. Ben had found her weak spot.

"Ben! No, stop!" Ariana laughed uncontrollably. "Please, I'm ticklish, stop!"

"Okay, fine," he said while laughing, moving to pull from her body. Her arms moved on their own, nudging his hands to rest gently on her sides. Their eyes met and locked, staring deep into the other as they blushed. She placed her hands on his chest, by his collarbone.

They stood, silent as they stared. The more she gazed at him, the more she felt something take control, almost an instinct. She closed her eyes and leaned in, causing him to back into her nightstand, accidentally knocking the lamp over.

Ariana squealed as the glass shattered, the light fizzled out. Both stood awkwardly in the dark, the moonlight shined through the rustic four-pane window.

"Um...sorry," Ben said, breaking the silence.

"It's fine. Do you think Daniel heard that?"

"Probably."

Sure enough, they heard a knock at the front door. Ariana pursed her lips.

"I'm gonna tell him you broke it," Ben joked.

“Not if I tell him first.” Ariana sprinted out of the room. “Ben did it!”

“It was an accident, I swear!” Ben shouted in defense as he ran after her. Ariana lunged for the door and swung it open, expecting to find Daniel. Instead, there was a tall stranger with long, jet-black hair and sharp, scarlet eyes. On his back, he carried a sword, complete with upper-body armor and a long, patchwork leather cloak.

Ben came out of the room next. “Mr. Daniel, I...” He paused, then pulled Ariana behind him protectively. The angel lay still on the ground, a few feet from the stranger.

“I heard there was someone here who can wield fire,” the stranger said as he stared blankly.

“What do you want with him?” Ariana growled.

The stranger leveled his gaze at her. His eyes narrowed. “This doesn’t concern you. He’s mine now.” With an icy glare, he placed one hand on the hilt of his sword.

“And nobody will get in my way.”

Chapter 10

Ancient Legends

Zachariel flew through the mountains in the cold of the night, occasionally dodging a bird or two. During his time in the air, he had further burdened his mind by allowing himself to imagine every possible scenario that could emerge from Ben's infection, as well as ways to avoid them. It was an unhealthy practice, but doing so kept him on edge and made him feel prepared. Despite his village being in Kafziel and Daniel's more than capable hands, he couldn't shake the feeling that leaving Ariana behind with Ben was a grave mistake.

Is this the right choice? He wondered as a vulture flew up next to him; the bloody remains of a fresh kill hung from its crooked beak. His jaw clenched.

Maybe I should have stayed.

Tucking in his wings, Zachariel veered off as the whipping, chilly wind bristled his feathers. He descended to a lower—and warmer—altitude, his eyes piercing the night as he searched. Finally, he had found it: the main archives, dug into the side of a snow-capped mountain, ancient wooden frames defiantly kept the tunnel stout and secure.

He leaned, pulled in his right wing, while stretching his left to catch the wind and slow him down as he turned. Once he was in the proper position, he spread both and angled them, slowing his descent to the stone walkway. He landed, shaking the grime and moisture from his feathers and tucking them to his back.

“Well,” Zachariel told himself, “time to figure this out.”

He entered the cavern, the dim torchlights brightened as he walked down the path, surrounded by cracked stone held at bay by the wooden beams. He immediately froze.

Wait. Something feels off.

An eerie feeling came to Zachariel as he heard a quiet, barely noticeable scraping. He didn’t detect an aura, nor did his wings stiffen.

Nothing ominous, he thought. Why does this feel...?

Zachariel briskly spun around just in time to dodge a strike from a blazing sword just like his own, its owner hidden in the shadows. He instinctively leapt back and drew his own shimmering weapon, but lowered it upon realizing who the attacker was.

“Gabriel...” Zachariel sheathed his weapon as he rolled his eyes. “You really have to stop doing that. It gets old.”

Gabriel quenched the flame on his blade as he slid it into the scabbard. He finally stepped out of the shadows. His long, silver hair shimmered in the dim light of the cave. “I couldn’t resist. I wanted to see if all those years as a village chief had softened your instincts as much as your belly!”

Zachariel smiled. During the war, it was an old tactic of Gabriel’s, used to both boost morale and help keep the angels under his command ready. Part of him missed the old days, and the other part never wanted to see them ever again.

“I’m always on edge, but that time is long past, friend.” Zachariel clasped his old commander’s hand. “We both live relatively peaceful lives. Or so I’m told.”

Gabriel shrugged. “I may take an adventure or two. But mostly, I keep to the books.” He sighed. “Not exactly the finest job for an archangel.”

“To be fair, you brought it upon yourself. Setting the Head Cherub’s robes on fire wasn’t exactly appropriate. Especially for...well, an Archangel.”

“He called our fallen comrades inadequate.” His friend smirked. “So to be fair, he brought it upon himself.”

Zachariel chuckled. “I’ll admit, it was hilarious. Anyway, I’d love to stay and catch up, but I’m afraid I’m here on urgent business.”

Gabriel arched an eyebrow. “Something happened?”

“Indeed. First, Ariana brings back this boy...”

“Ah! She’s old enough for that now, eh? It’s been way too long since I last visited.” Gabriel chuckled. “Either way, I’m glad to hear she made a friend.”

Zachariel grimaced. “With this particular boy, I’m not so sure. To my knowledge, he’s the only human to arrive in New Eden without an angel.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

His friend’s eyebrows furrowed. “If that’s true, then how did he get here?”

“Good question. He arrived exactly where Ari practices her violin. It almost seems—”

“—Like he was placed there?”

“Precisely.” Zachariel nodded. “I went there and investigated it myself.”

“What did you find?”

“Nothing much. I received a vision and was attacked by a demon shortly thereafter, though I made quick work of it.”

“A vision?” The archangel’s eyes narrowed. “What did you see?”

“It’s hard to describe it exactly. All I remember is death and fire.” Zachariel hesitated. “Also, there were these eyes. Filled with anger, judgment...wrath.”

“My fallen brother, perhaps?”

“No, it wasn’t demonic. More like a divine evil, if I had to put it to words.”

Gabriel paused and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Walk with me, brother.”

Zachariel nodded and joined Gabriel as he strode deeper into the caves. “Do you know of anything that might explain what I saw?”

“That’s the scary part. I don’t.” His friend frowned. “What about the boy? Did anything peculiar happen to him?”

“Ever since he arrived, if I’m honest. He appears to have amnesia. Can’t remember much save his name and someone he failed to save on Earth.”

“And he isn’t a demon? You’ve confirmed that?”

Zachariel’s jaw tightened. “No, not yet at least. Four days after his arrival, Riverglade came under attack by a pack of She-demons. One of them managed to bite him.”

“So he’s infected. Just like—”

“—Yeah. Just like our comrades back on Earth were.”

The air thinned as the two angels paused. There were horrors they had witnessed during the war on Earth that both knew were better off not being brought up.

“And what of the demons? I assume you took care of them?”

“I killed one. The other two were destroyed by Ben.”

The Archangel’s eyes narrowed. “How?”

Zachariel paused. From the hour he stepped foot into his precious village, he had known something was off about the

mysterious Benjamin Blake. The first night, he had mysteriously caught fire, despite no source even remotely close to him. Zachariel wasn't sure if he believed what he saw, so he forbade Ben from leaving the village. As time passed, Zachariel witnessed more bizarre occurrences—the restaurant accident, smoke rising from Ben's arms during his nightmare, and their battle with demons. While he hadn't seen it himself, his daughter had all but confirmed his initial suspicions.

"It's fire," Zachariel finally said. "He wields it. Weaponizes it. He killed the other demons with it."

"A fire-wielder?" Gabriel's silver eyes nearly jumped from their sockets. His brows furrowed. "That's impossible. They're all gone."

Zachariel's eyes snapped to Gabriel. "They?"

His friend clenched his jaw and beckoned for him to follow. They walked past a multitude of bookcases until they had arrived at the far section that was nearly buried in dust. Gabriel pulled a scroll from the cabinet, brushing it off with the tip of his wing and handed it to Zachariel.

Zachariel strained his eyes to read the faded, archaic text on the metal band wrapping the scroll. It read, 'Soraphim.' He glanced back at Gabriel, who beckoned him to open it. He obliged and slowly unraveled the aged parchment. His mouth gaped.

"It's practically empty."

Gabriel nodded. "That it is, I'm afraid. Not much is known to the rest of the host."

"And you?" Zachariel asked as he looked up from the scroll.

The Archangel frowned. "Yes. I knew them." He reached out, which made Zachariel step back in surprise. "May I?"

Zachariel hesitantly nodded as Gabriel placed his hand on his forehead. His surroundings vanished; his vision warped until it became nothing. A searing luminescence erupted from

the void, filling in the black with color and life. Time passed for him in an instant. The radiant heavens assembled before his eyes. His body was formless, but his spirit remained, observing, tethered to the Archangel's memories.

"Wait." Zachariel asked, "Is this...?"

Gabriel nodded. "I thought it better to show you. In this state, we will be one. My memories and emotions will feel like they are yours. What I am showing you is the beginning, as I experienced it."

Some of the light took on form and consciousness. The sentient flurries of light danced and chased each other across the cosmos, until eventually it formed the first of the angels, his ancestors. The first was Lucifer, the next was his brother Michael, and finally Gabriel himself. They all watched as the Creator's invisible, mighty hand slowly formed the Earth. The heavens evolved into the shining realm he had been taught about only in stories. It was like New Eden, but far greater than he ever could have hoped to imagine.

Such a shame I could never see it, Zachariel thought somberly.

Gabriel's voice echoed as he told his story. "Before the Fall, all in the universe was in harmony. The Seraphim, the Cherubim, and the other species of light, shared the heavens. Back then, there was no death, no evil. The Great Darkness had been banished by The Creator, and we enjoyed a painless, beautiful life. One of our favorite hobbies was exploring the vast universe, countless undiscovered realms at our fingertips. In one of our ventures, however, we discovered something that would challenge everything we thought we knew."

Zachariel watched as the younger Gabriel trotted through the ethereal grass with his brothers. The oldest, Lucifer, stopped them as he noticed someone standing out in the meadow with the shape of an angel, but without the wings. The figure's hair was dark, his eyes scarlet, not unlike a ruby. Gabriel and his two brothers knelt to avoid disturbing it.

“What is that?” The young Michael asked.

“The Creator’s secret creation, maybe? I think he called it...human?”

“No” Lucifer eyed the being, his eyes narrowed. “This...is something else.”

“How can that be?” Gabriel asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Lucifer said as he stood up straight, flexing his wings to their full span. The figure spun in his direction, eyes widened.

“Answer me, spirit!” he commanded. “I am Archangel Lucifer. Who are you?”

The being didn’t answer. Instead, he ran.

The three brothers gave chase, finally cornering him after a few minutes. As they pressed him for answers, he ignited a flame in his hand. Their eyes collectively widened, though Lucifer’s appeared to have a strange, intrigued hunger in them.

As Michael and Gabriel drew their swords, a voice cried out.

“Wait!”

They turned to find an aged woman. Silver hair flowed down her simple gown, her blue eyes glittered in the ethereal light. The woman seemed eerily familiar to Zachariel. The mere sight of her sent a chill up his spine and through his disembodied wings.

“Oh. I wasn’t expecting a visit from you angels.” The woman beamed at them. “I see you met my son.”

“Your...son?” Gabriel asked, lowering his weapon as he faced the woman. “Who are you? Are you an angel like us?”

“Not quite.” The woman laughed nervously. “My name is Ira. I’m a friend of your Creator.”

“A friend?” The curious Michael asked. “Where did you come from?”

“It’s...complicated.” Ira answered with a sad smile, her beautiful azure eyes downcast. “I’m afraid I can’t answer that.”

Gabriel tilted his head. “If you’re Ira...” He turned to her son. “Then who are you?”

“Oh.” Ira smiled gently, placing her arm around him. “This is Raziel.”

Zachariel continued to observe as Gabriel sheathed his sword and stepped closer to the young man, offering his hand. Raziel hesitated and stared at Gabriel warily. At his mother’s behest, he finally extinguished the flame and shook it, his grip tight and untrusting. Gabriel beamed at him.

“Pleasure to meet you, Raziel.”

Raziel’s eyes widened as he slowly loosened his grip. He finally smiled back.

Gabriel’s voice came forth once more. “We became friends, brothers even. Raziel and his mother brought us to their home, where there were hundreds more like him, living in isolation, far from the host.”

Ira and Raziel had led the three archangels to their small village and its people, only a short walk from where they were before. Their amazement grew as they watched each other wield fire in unique ways, crafting it into different shapes, sizes, and structures. Some were even skilled enough to have their flames mimic the brothers themselves, much to Micheal’s chagrin and Gabriel’s delight.

Zachariel’s form hovered close by as he watched the memory. Seeing others like Ben being so peaceful set his soul at ease...if only a little.

“We became close with Raziel, Ira, and the rest of their kind,” Gabriel continued. “Eventually, we had convinced them to join the host, and the mysterious beings were finally given a name.”

“Soraphim,” Zachariel concluded.

“They spread out from their home and roamed the heavens with us, though not all the Host welcomed them. Because of their unclear origins, some regarded them as abominations, creatures borne from the Great Darkness, and thus unworthy of paradise. Lucifer used this to his advantage.”

The vision shifted once more to where Gabriel’s younger self was striding down one of the golden hallways in Heaven’s Citadel. Memory-Gabriel stopped as whispered echoed off the shimmering gold walls.

“Come on, Raziel. If we have the Soraphim on our side, we can achieve—”

“—I’m not so sure, Lucifer. What if they don’t agree?”

Zachariel watched as he found Lucifer conversing with Raziel in a hushed, yet passionate manner. He seemed apprehensive, almost reluctant. The younger Gabriel in the vision walked up to the pair.

“Everything alright, brothers?”

Lucifer spun to face him. His previous expression slowly melted into a calmer one. “Just discussing the Creator’s newest...ah, art.”

“Ah.” Gabriel nodded. “Not impressed, I take it?”

Lucifer shook his head as his jaw clenched. “It’s more offensive, if you ask me. Especially to us angels.”

Gabriel chuckled. “The humans do seem rather boring for a masterpiece, don’t they? Not to judge, but I would have expected more from our Maker. I didn’t think beings made of dust would upset the host so much.”

“It’s not about that,” Raziel began. “It’s about their potential, their inherent ability. Simple as they are, they can decide their own purpose. They even rule the realm he made them in!”

Gabriel scoffed. “How does that make them special?”

“But that’s what you don’t understand, Gabriel!” Lucifer snapped; a fire burned in his eyes. “They can decide what to do with their life. You saw it in the Garden, they can choose between Life and Death! They could even bring in the Great Darkness if they so wished!”

“But why would anyone choose death? Or allow themselves to succumb to the Great Darkness?”

“Why would the Creator waste such a gift on his primitive creation when he could have given it to us?” Lucifer asked. “Why should we toil under him, singing praises and attending to our duties as angels while the humans can do as they wish? Why can’t we be free like them? Or all-powerful like our Creator?”

“Why would anyone want to be?”

Lucifer’s eyes burned into him, hot with rebellion and a darkness he had never seen before.

“I thought you two—of all of them—would be the ones to understand.” Lucifer shot a quick glare at Raziel. “But fine. I’ll do this, one way or another.”

The gold that surrounded them seemed to dim, the air in the room thinning. Gabriel blinked. “Do what, brother?”

“You’ll find out.” With one final huff, Lucifer shoved past them, his footsteps echoing down the hallway as he stormed away from the pair. After his brother was out of sight, Gabriel placed a reassuring hand on Raziel’s shoulder.

“Are you alright, friend?”

The Soraphim frowned, his eyes downcast. He looked back up at him. “I’ll be alright. I just have a big task to undertake.”

“What task?”

Raziel hesitated. “I’ll tell you later. For now, I must get back to my realm.” He held his hand out. “Till next time, brother.”

Gabriel clasped his friend's arm. Zachariel scoffed as the vision faded again.

"Was Lucifer always that way? Even back then?"

Gabriel's brows furrowed. "Lucifer has always had that pride in him. After the reveal of humanity, however, something in him snapped. I can't say for sure, but I think that was the moment we lost him. The rest, as you know..."

"Yes." Zachariel grimaced. "The Fall."

Their surroundings morphed once more, shifting to the moment that had changed everything. The host of angels had gathered near the council chambers as Lucifer climbed towards the Throne of the Creator. He dragged a young female angel up the steps by her wings while she struggled helplessly.

"Listen, my brothers and sisters!" Lucifer slammed the young angel to the ground and planted his foot on her back. "Our Creator has wronged us! He has chosen favor with the primitive humans instead of us, his firstborns!"

Michael and Gabriel forced their way to the front of the crowd. "Lucifer! What are you doing?"

Their older brother grinned down at them. "I'm only giving us what we deserve, Michael. Our freedom."

"But we are free!" Gabriel protested. "From the darkness, from oblivion!"

Lucifer snarled. "That's exactly what ensnares us, Gabriel. The pitiful creatures he calls a masterpiece can choose, so why not us? Why can't we take that power for ourselves? Why should we live under thrall of our maker, as nothing more than slaves to groom his ego?"

"And what of your ego?" Michael snapped.

The two brothers glared at each other. Lucifer's eyes slowly shifted from their former golden color to a burning red. "There is an alternative, my brothers and sisters. I have witnessed it, a power not from our Creator. We can use it to

take the Heavens for ourselves, to make a new universe in our image!”

“Stop,” Gabriel cautioned. “This is heresy.”

“This...” Lucifer smiled wickedly as his skin darkened to gray, his golden hair melted into black, his shimmering ethereal eyes burned into a dark crimson, “...is power.”

With a screech, Lucifer manifested a blade from thin air and dug it into the female angel below him. She fell limp on the steps, tears flowed from her eyes as she slowly faded into golden dust.

Zachariel’s eyes widened. The vision paused as present-Gabriel materialized next to him. The other angels who sided with the Fallen One were drawing their weapons and killing their brethren. Michael and Gabriel had drawn theirs in self-defense, watching the others around them either die or betray them.

“And so, Lucifer had taken the power of choice for himself. In doing so, he unleashed Death, the Great Darkness, back into our beautiful universe. We finally banished him and his angels from the Heavens, but when the dust settled, the cost was great.”

Their surroundings shifted to after the battle. Lucifer and his newfound minions were gone, but the Heavens lay in ruins. The streets of gold were scratched and burned; the sacred temple was desecrated. Those still loyal to the Creator mourned both for their fallen comrades and those who had betrayed them. Gabriel surveyed the damage with tears in his eyes as he turned to his remaining brother.

“How could we have let this happen, Michael?”

Michael grimaced. “I should have done something sooner, maybe try to convince Lucifer. The truth is, Gabriel...” He faced him. “I didn’t, because I’ve always been jealous of him. He’s always been the highest among us, closest to our Creator. Now that it falls to me...” His eyes lowered. “...I’m not so sure that I want it anymore. Especially after this.”

“We have a long and dark road ahead.” Gabriel placed a reassuring hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Just know that I will be there with you.”

The two archangels stood in silence until a messenger had arrived and briefed Michael.

“Sir,” he began. “We’ve run the traitors off from the Cherubim’s realm, though casualties were great. Ramiel is asking for a sustainment force to pursue them.”

“Where are they headed?” Michael asked. “To Earth?”

“No, Sir. They appear to be headed to the Soraphim home world.”

Gabriel froze and exchanged a quick, worried glance with his brother. “We need to go. Now.”

Michael nodded and faced the messenger. “Tell him to send every available angel he has. We will meet him there.”

The ravaged heavens warped and faded, replaced with a different set of ruins: the Soraphim village. The fallen angels had gotten there before the forces of Heaven could. As a result, they were wiped out, bodies of the men, women, and children strewn about, covered in ash, their homes reduced to rubble and ruin. Gabriel desperately searched the remains of their civilization but could not find any sign of his friend. The vision finally ended with him on his knees, sobbing, mourning Raziël and his people.

Zachariël’s eyes snapped open as he pulled away from Gabriel, tears in his eyes as well. The Archangel smiled sadly as he struggled to regain control of himself.

“That loss...what you’ve gone through...” Zachariël’s voice trailed off.

“I apologize, brother. I didn’t mean for the emotion to—
”

"It's alright." Zachariel rasped as he closed his eyes and breathed slowly. "I've known loss as well, but that was...different."

Gabriel nodded. "Raziel and Ira were dear friends of ours. His people were among the brightest souls I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. It was so heartbreaking to lose them."

"I know, brother. I felt it." Zachariel paused as a thought came to him. "You say they were wiped out, but how do you know for sure that none escaped? Wasn't Raziel's body nowhere to be found?"

"I had hoped that he would return to us, but he never did. After the massacre, The Soraphim were never seen or heard from again, although..." Gabriel frowned, "...sometimes I do search for him, if I'm honest. I once heard rumors of a Soraphim on Earth during the Great Flood but found nothing. Until I find evidence to the contrary, all I can do is hope or assume the worst. However, given this mysterious Ben of yours, it raises the possibility."

"One can always hope. We—"

A loud crack came from the entrance of the archive. Zachariel and Gabriel darted over, their shimmering swords drawn, ready to meet the potential threat. Instead of a demon, however, stood Kafziel the messenger angel, his body burned and bloodied, his thin wings nearly shredded. He attempted to kneel as a sign of respect for the Archangel but collapsed instead.

Gabriel dropped his sword and caught him mid fall. Zachariel sheathed his blade and ran over to him.

"Kafziel? What are you doing here?"

The young angel coughed up blue, ethereal blood. "Intruder...in village."

Zachariel's eyes widened. "Another demon?"

Gabriel helped Kafziel sit up. "No. Something else. After..." He coughed more.

“After what?” Zachariel shook him. “Answer me!”

Kafziel slowly turned his head toward him, “He’s after Ben. Powerful...fire.” The young messenger closed his eyes and fell limp.

Zachariel stood to his full height and rushed toward the exit. “I’m sorry, brother. I have to go.”

Gabriel seemed to be locked in a trance but snapped out of it and quickly checked Kafziel’s wrist. “He’s alright, he still has spirit flowing in him.” Gabriel grabbed him and put his arm around his neck. “I’ll take care of him and meet you later. Go!”

Zachariel nodded and dashed out of the cavern, into the air. He flew at such a velocity that even the fastest of messenger angels would have had a difficult time keeping up. He deviated to the left to avoid a cluster of birds, and then swerved back to his regular flight path. The mountains flew by in a quickened blur, like splashed paint on a canvas.

All that was left to do was haste toward Riverglade to protect Ariana...and pray to the Creator that he would be fast enough.

Chapter 11

Raziel

Ben stood near the doorway to the cottage as the stranger's dark eyes burned contempt into his. He kept Ariana behind him protectively, stepping back. As his jaw tightened, the sound of his heart thumping grew louder in his ears.

"Where is he?" The stranger broke the silence, his blade grinding against the sheath on his back as he slid it out. "I don't have all damn day."

Ben's hand grazed the coat rack beside the door, but before he could grasp it, a stranger's grip tightened around his throat. With a show of immense strength, he lifted Ben off the ground and hurled him against the wall.

"I'll ask one more time." The stranger finally pulled the blade free and held it against Ben. "Where is the fire-wielder?"

Ben moved the stranger's hand from his throat long enough to croak out his words. "I-I have no idea what you're talking about—"

The stranger tightened his iron grip. "Oh, I think you do. I don't waste my time on petty rumors unless they have substance. So now, you have a choice. Either show me your fire..." The man held the tip of the blade close. "...or die."

Ben looked over at Ariana. Flames licked at her skin, manifesting in a cage-like shape to keep her at bay. Each of her breaths was labored as she desperately tried to escape and come to his aid. He grit his teeth. Whatever happened to him, he had to make sure that she got away safely.

Closing his eyes, Ben tried to summon the fire, but nothing happened. His chest muscles tightened; his brows furrowed as he desperately attempted to remember how he did it the first time. He was facing a demon who was about to tear him to shreds and had bitten him. Then, it almost seemed like a reflex, an instinct. Was there a limitation of some sort? Could he not summon it himself?

Come on, damn it! Ben thought. *How do I use it?*

A thought came to Ben. Some time ago, he was in a similar situation. The pimp who had sold Lilly had him by the neck, the same way the stranger had him now. The same feeling, one of dread, of anger, filled him as his body heated up. He glared into the stranger's eyes, which seemed to waiver between contempt and the slightest hint of anticipation.

Kill.

Ben struggled but got his hands on the stranger's wrists. He reached within as his hands smoked rapidly. He glanced at Ariana one more time and told her to get ready to run. She shook her head in protest.

Promise me you won't use your fire again, Ariana had asked. The desperation in her eyes then was present once again, only a thousand times more intense.

I'm sorry, Ariana. Ben looked at her with a regretful frown. *But to save you, I'll do whatever I have to.*

Ben released his hands and called forth the fire from his earlier battle with the demons. Soon, the billowing flame filled his vision, searing into the stranger's face.

Yes, I got him! Ben thought as he grinned, *Now I—*

The fire rapidly degraded to ember and smoke as the stranger's unscathed face reappeared in front of him. He smirked.

"So, it is you, after all." The man gripped Ben's throat tighter. "You're coming with me. Do me a favor and don't resist."

Darkness crept into Ben's vision. He needed to break free, and quickly.

Ben felt behind him, running the flat of his palm against the cottage wall. He tensed his hands, blowing it apart, causing him and the stranger to fall back. He hastily tucked his legs, pressing them against the man, and sending him flying with a hellfire-fueled kick to the chest.

As he recovered, Ben rubbed his throat as the air rushed back into his lungs. His vision slowly cleared, and he saw the stranger standing tall, his blade at the ready.

"So you'd rather fight, huh? Fine." The man twirled his weapon and readied himself. "You're only delaying the inevitable."

As Ben lunged at the stranger, the man sidestepped, grabbed his wrist, and hurled him down the hill to the streets of Riverglade village. The stranger slid down after him, blade in hand. "For so long, I've searched desperately..."

Ben recovered and braced himself, lighting a flame in his palm. The stranger also lit one in his. Ben's eyes widened.

"...for another of my kind. Now, after eons, I have finally found what I've been looking for."

Ben slowly circled his foe. His gaze flicked to the side, where Ariana was checking on Daniel, whose body shifted. She sent him a quick thumbs up to let him know the angel was okay. Ben sighed in relief and faced the stranger once more.

"You say I'm one of your kind, but I don't even know who—or what—you are."

"We—" the stranger began as his brows furrowed, "—are Soraphim."

Ben shifted his feet, careful to keep his eyes on his attacker. "Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"No. But you will soon enough." The stranger lunged, the black blade closing the gap. Ben narrowly dodged by rolling

out of the path. He leapt after the man, who deflected Ben's kick with the flat of his blade and sent him hurling into a nearby picnic table.

"So this is what you want, huh?" Ben asked as he wiped the blood from his lips as he recovered. "To kill me?"

Ben's feisty words were met with another swipe of the blade that narrowly missed his neck. He blew the weapon away with his hellfire, disarming the stranger while locking him in an armbar.

"Got you, jackass."

The stranger smirked. "Not bad. But fight harder." He manifested a flame in his hand, which morphed into a knife. Ben broke away too late as the stranger slashed his abdomen. He fell to the ground with a thud, and Ariana's scream pierced the air.

Ben clutched his gut, his vision blurred and twisted. He could vaguely make out Ariana running toward him before being stopped by the stranger. The man recovered his sword and held it threateningly while he looked at the fading Ben.

"Come on, child," he growled. "If you want to save her, then fight. Show me what you can do!"

As the blade inched closer to Ari's neck, something inside Ben snapped, like it did for the pimp who had sold Lilly. His blood boiled; his teeth gnashed together as he felt the infection spread from his arm into the rest of his body. He heard that sinister voice in his head once more, demanding control.

Ben briefly tried to hold it back, but stopped. He couldn't beat him with his current power. He yearned for the same strength he had earlier when he killed both demons. His eyes closed briefly as he surrendered himself to it.

Shadows bled from the gash and encompassed Ben's entire body as the wound stitched itself back together. The dark flames grew larger and larger until they formed a

menacing, demonic armor. The smoke thickened and formed a protective shell around the new figure, the black and red flames flickering like molten lava. Ben screamed as he felt his own body being taken from him, infected by the darkness.

The stranger smirked. "There it is. The Nephilim Shell. Wait..." His grin slowly morphed into a scowl. "Something isn't right."

With a feral scream, Ben charged towards the stranger, striking him with a force that sent him flying. His movements were fast, vicious, indiscriminate, his vision a red blur. He swung at his opponent wildly, smashing walls, posts, anything the stranger used as cover. The townsfolk scattered like ants, their panicked screams filling the air as the battle raged on.

The stranger's eyes widened as he struggled to dodge Ben's strikes. Before, it seemed the stranger had him on the ropes. But now, something was different. Not only was Ben in control of the fight...he was enjoying it.

Ben froze as a thought came to him, the red in his vision partially subsiding. Sure, the infection was helping him win, like with the demons, but what would the cost be?

Am I going too far?

He leapt out of the way just as the man thrust his blade forward. Ben sidestepped and gripped his leg. A quick throw later and his opponent was airborne once more.

No, Ben thought as crimson filled his eyesight once more, *I'll do what I have to.*

Kill them all.

Gritting his teeth, Ben jumped after him, the path below shattering further as he instinctually formed a blade with his own blackened hellfire.

The stranger summoned armor similar to Ben's, though less sinister. The blade pierced through and shattered it, just barely missing the stranger's heart. Ben gripped his hellfire blade and kicked the man down from it, blowing apart the

cobblestone path below. The people of Riverglade scrambled in all directions, away from the battling Soraphim as their beloved village shattered to pieces before their eyes.

Ben landed a few feet from the stranger as he recovered. For a moment, he struggled, using his sword as a brace to lift himself from the ground. A bloodied, satisfied smirk stretched across his face as his eyes lit up.

“I knew it. Our kind isn’t doomed after all.”

Ben willed his ethereal armor to peel back, layer by layer, to expose his snarling face.

“I’ll ask you only once.” Ben lit another flame in his hand. “What do you want with me?”

The stranger’s scarlet eyes darkened as he scowled. “You.”

Ben returned it. “Why not just ask nicely?”

“I did,” the man snapped. “Since you insisted on resisting, I may as well see the extent of your abilities. I’m impressed...” his eyes flicked to Ariana, “...and yet, I am also disappointed.”

“And why would that matter to you?”

“It’s everything to me!” the man snarled. “My people fell to the demons because we weren’t strong enough. And now that I’ve found you...”

“I’m human!” Ben insisted, his voice briefly deepened to a growl. “I have a life outside of this world, and people I care about!”

The man scoffed. “Look at yourself, your fire, the Nephilim Shell you summoned! How could a human do that?”

Ben’s brows furrowed. “Then what about my life on Earth?”

“Oh, you might have been on Earth. You might have even lived a normal life without ever discovering your abilities, perhaps had a family. I can tell you: you may look human, but

you are not one of them,” the stranger said. “You know this. You’ve always known!”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Ben said, his voice trailing as his flames died slightly. “I...”

“We are both Soraphim, and together we will save our kind.” The man’s scowl faded as he stepped towards Ben, arm outstretched. “When we leave this place—”

“—again, why would I go with you?”

“Because I can help you find the answers you seek. I’ve been in the shadows, listening. I know about your missing past, the girl, all of it. Join me, and I’ll not only help you save our race. I’ll help you find the truth.”

Ben froze, considering his words. What if he was right? After all, they had similar abilities. What if he really could help him find his missing past and Lilly?

Ariana sprung from around a corner and ran out in front of Ben, spreading her arms protectively. The stranger stopped in his tracks and glared down at her.

“Ari!” Ben shouted. “Don’t! He’ll hurt you!”

“No! I’m not gonna let him take you!” Ariana exclaimed as she refused to budge. She looked the man dead in the eye. “He’s not going anywhere.”

The stranger glared at her. “And why is that?”

Her brows drew together, her body quivered slightly. “Because I won’t let you take him. You’ll have to kill me first.”

“Ari, move!”

The man scowled. “Get out of the way, girl.”

“No.”

The man raised his blade. “Last chance.”

Ariana met the man’s glare, her azure eyes steadfast. Ben could tell that she was frightened, but also that she wouldn’t

give in. This was the solid determination that he admired in Ariana.

The stranger bared his teeth as he held his blade aloft. His body quivered, as if unable to bring the weapon down on her. He cursed, sheathed it, and reached to shove her aside. "Fine. If you won't move, then I'll—"

The man evaporated into a puff of smoke, which moved and reformed about ten feet away. In his stead stood Zachariel, a flaming ethereal sword leveled at him.

"I've found you...Raziel." Zachariel stated with a fierce look in his eye.

So that's his name? Ben wondered as his armor faded almost completely.

Raziel narrowed his eyes and straightened his stance. "So you know my name."

"And your origin. I know about how your people were slaughtered." Zachariel glanced at Ben. "I can only guess why you want him."

Raziel glared at him. "Then hand him over."

"Ben is under my protection, Soraphim. Besides, you threatened my daughter." Zachariel muttered a quick incantation, allowing his blade to brim with holy fire as his brows furrowed. "I can't just let this go."

"Have it your way, angel. I will claim the boy." Raziel's scarlet eyes glowed. "Even if I have to go through you to do it."

Zachariel spread his wings to their full length in defiance. "Bring it, then."

The two sped towards each other as their blades clashed and clanged; the angel's ethereal metal reverberated against the crude black steel of Raziel's sword over and over as they exchanged swift, vicious, yet tactical blows. Raziel's swipe missed Zachariel's left wing by a hair's breadth, and Zachariel returned with a strike meant to cleave Raziel in two.

Zachariel leapt into the air, tucked in his wings, and hurled from above while Raziel stuck to the ground, fending off blows from the angel while trying to land a few of his own. Their moves were brash, quick, their blades a blur.

Finally, Zachariel landed a well-placed kick to Raziel's abdomen, sending him sprawling backward into a building close to the town square, which collapsed on him and encased him in rubble. The angel paused for a moment, his chest heaving as he caught his breath. He stood to his full height and closed his eyes, muttering the angelic language. A beam of light shot down from the blackened sky. As the light faded, a young angel appeared. Small, streamlined wings of light erupted from his back, like Kafziel.

Zachariel let out an exhausted sigh of relief. "A messenger. Thank the Maker." He whistled for him. "Over here!"

The young angel turned to Zachariel and, within a moment, had snapped to his location. He smacked his fist against his breastplate. "Quriel, Sir! Reporting for duty!"

Zachariel nodded as he gestured to his unconscious angel comrade. "I need you to recover Daniel. Get him to safety."

The messenger angel saluted and took off, taking the angel from Ariana's care and zipping off into the forest with him. A few moments later, he returned, his blinding speed sending a crack through the air.

"Anything else, sir?"

"Assist in evacuations, search and rescue. Also..." Zachariel turned to look at Ben, "...I need you to guide him out of the village and instruct him to go to the mountains. Kira is the angel there. She will tell him what to do. I will remain here and finish the threat."

"What?" Ariana's eyes widened. "Dad, no!"

Quriel smacked his breastplate once more and turned to Ben, gripping his arm. "Come on, Mr. Ben. We need to—"

“No! I’m not going anywhere without him or Ariana!” Ben turned to Zachariel. “I’ll stay and fight with you! I can fight...”

The angel spun to face him. “Absolutely not! Your power—especially that infection—is dangerous. You can’t stay here.”

Ben’s brows furrowed. “So? I can control it! I—”

Zachariel leaned down, his intense face mere inches from his as he gestured out to Riverglade. “—Look what your control has done here, Ben! Just look at my village!”

The absence of the moon’s light suddenly caught Ben’s attention, and he felt everything around him slow down. Fires from Ben and Raziel’s battle were roaring at an all-time high. The smoke clogged the atmosphere and blocked the horizon.

Ben turned and looked at the smoldering ruins of what used to be Riverglade village. The shops, the homes, even the sandwich shop they had nearly burned down a few days prior, practically gone. The soot-covered survivors struggled to free their loved ones from the rubble; some of them didn’t move. Many had left to head north to the neighboring village in order to reach safety. Only a few stragglers remained, looking for survivors. Some watched Ben intently with fear in their eyes as they passed by.

All this destruction...from me?

“So please understand, Ben...” Zachariel shook him out of it and stared directly into his eyes, “...you have to leave. For the village and Ariana’s sake.”

Before Ben could respond, a snarl erupted from the town square. Raziel emerged from the rubble, his flame armor shattered and incomplete. “You cannot run, child! I’ve come this far, and I will not lose you to anybody!” His scowl faded as the Soraphim’s eyes pleaded with him. “Please, Ben. You are the last hope of our kind. Come with me and we’ll discover the truth. Together.”

Ben froze. Despite his earlier battle with Raziel, part of him wanted to go. The thought of leaving Zachariel and Ariana behind weighed heavily on him, though he knew a choice had to be made. He looked around once more at all the damage his battle had caused and grimaced.

I've already hurt them and Ari enough, Ben thought. This will all end if I go.

Ben took a step toward him, but Ariana blocked him and gripped his shoulders. "No, no, please don't go with him. I don't want him to hurt you again."

"Ari...he's right." Ben stared into her azure eyes. "I don't belong here."

"Ben, no! I—"

"—Your dad was right." Ben frowned. "I have to go, Ari. It's the only way you'll—"

Before he could finish the sentence, bright red lightning shot down from the sky. The ground below where it had struck shifted and cracked, ripping the village apart. Several of Riverglade's citizens fell into the newly formed tear in the ground.

Everyone froze as a fifty-foot tall being climbed out and stood up against the dark skies. It was a completely blackened humanoid figure, blazing red eyes glared and horn-like structures protruded from the sides of its head, strands of shadowy bulk twisted into muscle that covered the entire beast. It opened its glowing mouth and let out a roar that darkened the already-dimming light of the moon to that of blood.

As people ran from their lives, the creature raised its foot, stomping and sending a shock wave that turned multiple people—men, women, and children alike—into blood stains that splattered the village. It rumbled forward, where the couple Ben met at the festival were trying to escape the rubble. Their desperate eyes met Ben's as they were mercilessly

trampled. The glowing red mouth of the beast twisted into a sadistic smile.

“It can’t be. Wicked Giants aren’t supposed to be here anymore.” Raziel’s gaze flicked to Ben. “No wonder. They must be after him, too.”

“Wait, what do you mean? Who’s they?” Ben shouted to Raziel.

Zachariel began pushing him towards the house. “Never mind him, just get out of here. Riverglade is not safe anymore!” He looked around at the wreckage. “In fact, the village itself is no more. Now run! Go!”

Quriel stepped up beside him and drew his knife. “Need my help with this beast, sir?”

Zachariel shook his head. “No. I want you to evacuate as many citizens as you can!”

The young angel nodded. “Copy that. Good luck, sir.” He sheathed his knife back in his gauntlet, smacking his fist against his chest one last time as he ran off to complete his mission.

Ariana ran to her father. “Dad, we need to go. We—”

“—No. You know my duty is to my village, Ari.”

“Dad...” Tears formed in her eyes. “...don’t.”

As he wiped the tear from Ariana’s cheek, Zachariel’s hands lingered on her shoulders while their eyes met. “You know the way to Kira’s village, correct?”

Ariana choked from crying, but she slowly nodded.

“Good. Grab what you can from the house and lead Ben there. Tell Kira about everything that has happened here.”

“But...”

“Don’t argue with me. I—” Zachariel frowned. “—I need you to be strong, Ari. For me and...” He hesitated, “...for Ben. Please.”

Ariana froze for a moment, her eyes pleading with him. She quickly threw a hug around the angel. "Just come back to me, Dad. Promise me."

Zachariel embraced his daughter tightly. "I will." He pushed her off and pointed to their ruined cottage. Nodding, Ariana reluctantly pulled away from her father. She grabbed Ben by the hand and ran back toward the house through the ash and ember-filled air. They arrived at the ruined cottage and scrambled for food and clothing to take with them, as well as her violin case. As soon as they exited through the hole in the wall, a large flaming ball of rock hurtled towards them.

"Ari, move!" Ben tried to push her aside, but she yanked him by the arm until they both tumbled down the hill. The rocks and bushes tore at their soot-covered skin.

As they recovered, Ben saw Ariana briefly turn around to see the wreckage of what used to be her home. Her room, her musical note wallpaper, her outfit designs, and all the memories associated with them were now gone. She stared, horror-struck, as a single tear made its way down her face.

Ben grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her along. "Ariana! Come on!"

Ariana complied, wiping her tear as she sped up. Ben followed her to the forest path that they had used to find the Sea of Stars. This time, they took a different route, a roughened one made of dirt instead of gravel, that led up to the mountains.

"Hurry!" Ariana exclaimed. "To the tunnel!"

Ben looked ahead and saw it, an aged tunnel dug into the mountainside. As he looked behind, the ground shook with the impact of another meteor; the force of the blast sent them spiraling into the cave. Ariana appeared to have landed safely, but Ben had tumbled into the tunnel and struck his head on a rock. His vision faded; his mind slipped into darkness as he heard Ariana's voice worriedly cry out his name.

The last thing Ben saw was her horrified azure eyes gazing into his, her gentle hand feeling around his head. Her voice faded as everything in his sight turned black and was gone.

Chapter 12

The Wicked Giant

Zachariel saw the explosion from the meteor sent far off by the beast. The shock wave rocked the ground and decimated a large part of the forest that he had sent Ariana and Ben into earlier. His instinct beckoned him to rush to Ariana's aid, but he knew better. His duty was foremost to his village.

Please be alright, he silently begged as he turned his attention to the towering monstrosity in front of him. The creature dug its shadowy hand into the ground and pulled up a chunk of rock. The monster's fiery breath illuminated the boulder as it prepared to hurl it.

With his blade at the ready, Zachariel charged at the monster. However, the Giant spotted him and countered his approach by chucking the fireball directly at him.

The meteor sailed past Zachariel's left wing, the tips of his feathers singed and caught fire. He blew the flame out with his right wing, but it cost him his flight. He tumbled along the ground, recovered, and drew his blade.

What is this thing? He wondered as the monster stared down at him and gave him the same hideous smile a demon would have. Zachariel's grip on his blade tightened as images of his dead comrades flashed through his mind.

A demon of some type? Maybe a possessed Nephilim? No... Zachariel shook his head and stared back up at his titanic opponent. *They're extinct. Wiped out in the flood.*

He spread his wings to their full length, catching the wind and shooting into the sky once again. He readied his shimmering blade as he floated in mid-air, observing and assessing the Giant for a weak spot. His aged eyes darted to all visible sections of his body, looking for an armor opening, but finding none.

No! There must be something! Zachariel thought frantically.

Manifesting a defiant war cry from his lungs, Zachariel lunged at his new opponent. He ducked, made a swift cut into the Giant's side, and then rebounded off a nearby rock to make another swipe to the neck of the creature, and finally a gash near the rib cage, causing it to clutch the wound. He tucked in his wings and rounded the ruined tree in the town square.

Finally, he thought. The next moment, Zachariel landed and rolled out of the way as the beast plunged its foot into the ground where he had been only a second ago. He flapped his wings and moved away, putting considerable distance between them.

Zachariel regained his footing as he heard a voice behind him. "You look to be having a hard time."

He spun. Behind him was Raziel, scarlet eyes burning. Zachariel responded to the Soraphim's taunt by swinging his ethereal blade at him. Raziel's own crude weapon met his; the opposing metals clanged and reverberated.

"Get..." Zachariel pushed Raziel off the blade lock, "...back!"

The angel slashed at him; the Soraphim dodged by dissipating into a dark smoke cloud and reappeared about twenty feet. Raziel sat on a pile of rubble, half-leaning on the hilt of his sword. "You angels are idiots. You know you can't take that Wicked Giant out by yourself."

Zachariel indignantly readied his sword and shouted, "Watch me!" before getting pummeled by a large, airborne rock.

Raziel scoffed. "I'm watching."

The rock had knocked him to the ground. He prepared to recover and engage Raziel and the beast, but he had already materialized above him and held his blade against the angel's throat.

"Now listen. Under normal circumstances, I would end this here and now..."

"Then do it," Zachariel snapped.

"Perhaps another day. However, these are not normal circumstances. Right now, there is a Wicked Giant trying to capture that boy. It will kill me, you, and even your precious daughter to achieve its goal. Now—"

Zachariel tried to retrieve his blade, but Raziel held his arm in place with his foot. "Stop fidgeting and listen to what I have to say!"

The angel's eyes burned into him. "Fine."

Raziel removed his boot from his arm and allowed him to stand. "I need Ben alive and well, and I'm assuming you want your daughter and realm in one piece. For now, we need to work together."

Zachariel glared for a moment at the man who had pushed Ben to wreck his village and threatened his daughter. He wanted nothing more than to drive his ethereal blade through him, but he knew he couldn't defeat the beast alone. He needed Raziel's help.

"Alright." Zachariel turned his attention back to the looming monstrosity that stormed ever closer. "How do we kill this...?" His voice trailed off as he failed to recall the name.

"It's called a Wicked Giant, and..." Raziel clenched his jaw, "...it's complicated."

Zachariel raised an eyebrow. "I take it you've faced one?"

"Yes," the Soraphim confirmed. "I barely survived."

"That's reassuring," he retorted. "So, you say that killing this thing is complicated?" he asked. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Y—" Raziel spoke, before his head snapped up in alarm. "Move! Now!"

A split second after, they both sprang back out of the way. In their place was a black, shadow-clad foot that had attempted to stomp them into the ground.

"I need you to distract it! Fly around and get it to fire a meteor!" Raziel shouted.

"Are you trying to reduce my village even further to nothing?" Zachariel shouted as he hovered mid-air. "What are you thinking, Raziel?"

"Trust me, angel." A large foot tried to crush him again, but he evaporated into a black cloud of smoke and partially reappeared on the roof of a still-standing building. "Just do it! I need to see if it has the same weakness as the one I faced!"

Zachariel nodded, gave a thrash of his wings, and sped towards the Wicked Giant, stopping on a loose-shingle rooftop a few meters away from the beast. He looked at Raziel and waved for him to get ready.

Raziel acknowledged. A plume of smoke erupted from his robes, encompassing him completely and forming a twenty-foot humanoid figure. Slowly, it turned into dark, misshapen armor made of hardened smoke, complete with a longsword and a shield at the ready. The churning orange flames shone through the cracks in the armor as it exhaled with a low rasp.

Zachariel briefly glanced at his sword and sighed. *Raziel can summon ethereal armor and he wants me to distract the beast. Wonderful.*

The angel shook it off and jumped into the air, flying towards what he knew was likely certain death.



Raziel watched as the angel took to the air to distract the beast. He had mostly formed the Nephilim shell, but he still needed to test his little theory about the Wicked Giant. For him, he hadn't seen or faced one since the days of Noah, back before New Eden had been repurposed into what it was now. He could only hope that this one was like the one he had faced before.

The angel was flying in a sped-up, irregular orbit around the beast, distracting it as Raziel had asked him to. Unfortunately, it had yet to light up another flaming projectile.

Damn it, Raziel thought with gritted teeth. Guess it isn't satisfied with just one foe.

Raziel flexed the frame of his ethereal armor and jumped off the roof, running toward it. He tackled its legs, knocking it back into one of the larger buildings, sending a shock wave that sent chunks of rock soaring across the besieged village.

The Wicked Giant roared in defiance as it tried to recover. Raziel cursed and jumped onto the beast's chest, pummeling it with his ethereal weapon, hoping to force the beast to use his main offensive weapon: the meteor. Despite the angel's protests, he needed it to transfer energy, the glow of which would reveal the hidden vein that the power traveled through, its location in the body unique to each beast.

Raziel continued to attack, his blade slashing wildly, and yet the damn thing would not give in. No ball of flaming rock came.

It's like he almost knows what I'm trying to do, Raziel realized. What if...?

The beast reacted before he could finish his thoughts. It grabbed his arm and sent him hurling through the air, crashing into a fountain. Raziel groaned and watched the Wicked Giant rise to its feet, slowly walking over to finish him.

He frantically glanced to the side. There stood the angel, ready to assault the beast once more. As he raised his sword to strike, Raziel held out his hand and mouthed "wait." The angel reluctantly halted.

Raziel turned his attention away from the angel and watched as the dark beast ever so slowly advanced. After each thundering step, he almost felt a sense of dread. His mind, however, was as focused and sharp as his sword. He knew he had nothing to fear. Simply put, before it had thrown him, he had figured out why it refused to throw any more projectiles: it was because it couldn't. The beast was running out of energy.

A satisfied grin stretched across Raziel's face. That meant that besides attempting to stomp on him, their massive opponent had one more move left. Based on his first battle with the beasts; they only reserved them for finishing an enemy, which gave him the advantage.

Raziel let his weapons clatter to the ground and clutched his shoulder in pretend pain, acting like a helpless child, which was normally beneath him. He met the angel's gaze and motioned for him to get ready.

The angel gave him a short, quizzical look, but shook it off and nodded. He readied his sword and let his wings slide behind him, preparing for takeoff and muttering.

When Raziel turned around, he could feel the weight of the Wicked Giant's gaze on his back. It stood about thirty feet away, glaring down at him with blazing red eyes. It formed a large war hammer made of shadow. The middle of its chest glowed a bright red.

“Now!” Raziel immediately stood up and shouted to the angel. “Go for the chest!”

The angel nodded and rocketed toward the chest of the great, lumbering beast, wings tucked in and blade aimed true. A quick swipe later and it was over. The red eyes flickered as it fell to the ground with a loud rumble that shook what remained of the village.

Raziel sighed as he grabbed his weapons, sheathed them, and reverted to his normal form. The remains of the Wicked Giant faded to shadow, leaving behind the long rotten corpse of the Nephilim it possessed so long ago. His eyes narrowed as he remembered his friend from the days of Noah.

Funny, Raziel thought, I thought Eliakim was the last? Where did this one come from?

Raziel shook his head and looked at his surroundings. The village lay in ruins, with the buildings and beautiful cobblestone path shattered to oblivion. The townsfolk he could see were all dead, bodies strewn about, splotches of blood nearly covered the ruins as ash and embers filled the air.

His jaw tightened. He had been reckless, so excited by the prospect of another Soraphim that he never stopped to consider the consequences. Even before the Wicked Giant, his battle with Ben had torn the village asunder, much like his own home during the Fall. It was because of this, against his deep, long held desire, he had helped combat the beast instead of pursuing Ben further.

That, and he couldn't bear to see another angel die at the hands of those damned beasts.

The angel returned to Raziel and landed, cracking the ground. He stormed over, grabbed Raziel by the neck, and shoved him against a wall.

“What was that thing?” the angel growled. “Why did it want Ben?”

Raziel grabbed the angel's wrist and kned him in the gut to get some distance between them. The angel held on to his tunic, drew his sword, and held it threateningly. Raziel did the same, then chuckled at their standoff.

"Well played, angel," Raziel said.

"My name is Zachariel," the angel hissed. "A name you won't forget once I'm done with you."

The two glared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Eventually, Raziel had to let his pride go one more time as he removed his blade from the angel. Zachariel slowly removed his as well.

Raziel shoved him away and dusted off his cracked cloak armor. "As I said earlier, that beast is what's known as a Wicked Giant. They are a race created by the fallen legions in order to help oppose the Creator. Specifically reanimated Nephilim corrupted by darkness. They were wiped out in the great flood and were supposed to be extinct." He glanced at the dissipating corpse.

"Where did this one come from?" Zachariel asked.

"I honestly don't know. As for me..." he stared Zachariel directly in his ethereal eyes, "Ben is one of my kind. I want to keep him out of angel and demon hands alike. His power is not for either side. It belongs to his people, and his people alone. Lucifer and the Creator be damned."

Zachariel didn't break the stare. "But the rest of Soraphim are extinct. Wiped out. Perhaps he's a descendant of yours...?"

"That..." Raziel said as he grimaced, "...is impossible. I don't know how or why he exists, but that he provides me with a hope I have not felt in eons." He clenched his fist as he eyed the angel. "He is the key to our salvation, so that the Soraphim may live again."

"But why do the demons want him so badly?" Zachariel tilted his head. "What exactly is your kind capable of?"

Raziel shrugged. As far as he was concerned, he had to capture Ben and hopefully find a female Soraphim. Once that was done, he could begin his race anew and guide them, with no tyrants like Lucifer or the Creator interfering with their lives.

But then again, Raziel thought, why does Ben's mere existence trouble me?

Raziel took a moment to ponder it. He had witnessed every member of his kind, including his mother, face the slaughter from the demons. He had walked through his village, seen every face. Only he had survived the onslaught.

So where did Ben come from? he thought. Is he some creation of the demons? Was he born of darkness like the old host claimed we were?

A few of the pieces suddenly snapped into place for him. As he delved deeper into the situation, he realized it was far more complex than he had initially anticipated. Even more important, he needed to find Ben before the demons got their filthy little hands on them.

"I—" Raziel did his best to hide his reaction, "—I don't know, angel. I suppose you will have to figure it out." He walked away and let himself dissipate into smoke.

Zachariel chased after him. "Wait! I still—"

The angel tried to tackle Raziel, but he might as well have tried to grab thin air. It was useless. But as of now, Raziel had questions, too. He continued to ponder the dilemma as he completely vanished, whisking himself away in the ash-filled wind.



After Raziel had disappeared, Zachariel was left standing, hand outstretched. Despite having a few of his questions answered, the Soraphim's response simply spawned a

thousand more. He grimaced, so frustrated that he felt like tearing the feathers from his wings, though he shook it off. Getting to Ben and Ariana before Raziel or the demons was crucial for him.

Zachariel sheathed his sword, the sound echoing through the desolate Riverglade village. Most of the buildings were rubble, and the town square was totally obliterated. Part of him ached to take off into the air after Ben and his daughter, but his duty as village chief bound him to look for survivors and render honors to the dead. These were his people, his friends. Zachariel knew all their names, their hopes and dreams, and their kindness.

Now they were gone. This was the price for his failure.

He spread his wings and sped around the town, searching. At one point, he had come across the sight of a person under a rock. Hopeful, he lifted it, but found the villager staring skyward, eyes glazed over. This was Sandra Hali, one of the best bakers in town, and one of the kindest souls in New Eden.

And Death had claimed her.

Zachariel eased the body to the town square, where he crossed her arms. Holding onto the tiniest hope of finding a survivor, he left to search.

He didn't. For an hour, Zachariel scoured the remains of Riverglade village, but only found bodies. The music shop owner, the village messenger, and so many others. Finally, he stumbled across a small arm sticking out of the rubble. He quickly uncovered it to find Shelly Marsed, one of Ariana's biggest fans from the festival.

Zachariel lifted the young girl from the rubble and gently wrapped her in a white cloth he found nearby. He gathered all the bodies in one place and tried to make them as restful as possible.

As he stood and mourned the loss, Zachariel caught sight of his cottage. It was partially intact, but still ruined beyond all

hope of repair. He stepped inside and walked to the ruins of Ariana's room. Her bed remained, a stuffed rabbit laid on it, next to her pillow. Zachariel picked it up and looked at it. It was gray, with black buttons for eyes, and a little mouth sewn in.

Mr. Peter, Zachariel thought as he recognized it. I gave this to Ariana the night I found her.



The unnerving death throes of the last demon sounded as Zachariel yanked his blade from its gut, vanquishing it to dust. He and his comrades had barely won a devastating battle with the demons not too long before. Their job was to hold the human hospital at any cost, and the cost was indeed great.

He looked around at his angel brethren, many of whom suffered grievous injuries. One angel had lost half of his wing, another had his arm amputated, no doubt because of a demon bite. He grimaced as he walked into the hospital to their main objective, a young woman named Alyssa Winters. Whereas other angels were merely soldiers, he was assigned to guard Alyssa since birth, for unclear reasons. Even so, he had come to enjoy it. She was a sweet, kind girl, a light in the life of others, including him. But in that same life, there was pain, darkness that chased her until eventually it manifested in her choices.

Now Alyssa was spiraling.

Zachariel frowned. In recent days, the demons had ratcheted up their assault on her soul, so much so that he had to call in his fellow angels to protect her, many of whom died in the brutal battle. Despite that, she was safe from demonic influence...for now, at least.

His brows creased as a thought came to him. The demons were normally cowards, retreating at the first sign of angel

presence and yet, something was different. They pursued Alyssa relentlessly, and he didn't even know why.

Dismissing the thought, Zachariel entered the worn-down doctor's office and found her. She was young, beautiful, and didn't look a day over seventeen. Her thin hand rested on her curved belly, which, even in the early stages of pregnancy, seemed far too great a weight for her small frame to handle. Her once-golden hair was faded, streaks of white shimmered in the dim light of the office, her sunken-in eyes hidden in the shadows of her bangs. On her gaunt face was a small frown as the doctor gave her the bad news.

"So?" Alyssa asked, "How does the baby look?"

The doctor eyed the sonogram sadly. "It's surviving, for now," she said. "Her vital signs are erratic, sometimes unstable." She looked at her, "Are you still taking...?"

Alyssa bit her lip and nodded.

"Oh. I see."

"Is there anything we can do?" Alyssa asked. "I don't want her to suffer because of me."

The doctor opened Alyssa's files and looked. "Well, she's still got a while before she's here.. If you quit now—"

"—then she could be born healthy?"

The doctor removed her glasses and bit them. "Can I be honest with you?"

Alyssa nodded quickly.

"There's no telling how the baby will turn out. She could have birth defects, mental illness, withdrawals as if she herself were addicted, or maybe even stillborn. I would consider maybe...sparing her of all that."

Alyssa's eyes widened, "You mean...?"

The doctor nodded solemnly. Tears flowed from Alyssa's eyes.

"I-I can't." She clutched her belly. "I-I already gave her a name. Ariana."

"I know, but—"

"This...this is me and Bryan's baby. We didn't mean for it to happen, sure, but I love him. I just...I can't."

"I understand." The doctor nodded slowly. "But you know what that means, don't you?"

Alyssa's azure eyes brimmed with tears. "Yes. It means I—" she inhaled slowly, "—I have to stop."

"Yes," the doctor confirmed. "If you have anything on you now, I'll throw it away for you. No judgment, okay?"

Zachariel could see the small plastic bag of white powder with a pipe in her jacket pocket. Alyssa kept one hand on her belly, the other in that same pocket.

"Come on, Alyssa," Zachariel whispered in her ear, hoping to the Maker that she could hear. "This is the only way you can heal. Do this for you and your daughter."

Alyssa gripped the pocket harder. The doctor raised an eyebrow.

"Do you have any on you?"

Alyssa looked up and smiled at her. "N-no. I'll throw the ones at home away, though."

The doctor's stare intensified. "Ma'am, don't lie to me. I've seen—"

"—thank you for seeing me. I've got to get back to my boyfriend, though," Alyssa said quickly as she jumped off the table and briskly made her way to the door. "I'll keep it in mind."

Zachariel grimaced as he followed her outside the hospital, onto the downtrodden city streets. He caught up to her and whispered again, "Come on, Alyssa. Throw them away. Please."

As if she heard him, she stopped in her tracks. Her eyes shifted to a nearby trash can. She pulled the bag out of her pocket and slowly walked over to it.

“Yes, that’s it.” Zachariel smiled. “You can do it. You’re strong.”

Finally, Alyssa dumped the bag into the trash and walked away, hands in her pockets. Her heavy breaths settled as she walked back to meet her boyfriend.

If Zachariel could have hugged her, he would have. Since childhood, he watched her struggle, both with her troubled life and her choices. And yet, he knew the girl with the beautiful heart was still somewhere deep within her. He hadn’t given up on her. He never would.

For the rest of her walk, Zachariel stayed with her, whispering encouraging words. Slowly, a warm smile came to Alyssa’s face.

As she rounded the corner, she suddenly froze. Her boyfriend, Bryan,—the only person she had learned to truly trust—was standing in another woman’s arms, their lips locked.

Once Zachariel had noticed, he narrowed his eyes. The other woman was possessed. He quickly drew his blade and chased her away from the woman’s body. He spun around. Bryan and Alyssa faced each other, the latter with tears in her eyes. Demon or not, Bryan had betrayed her trust, broken her heart. She turned away and ran as Bryan called her name.

Zachariel grit his teeth and desperately gave chase, knowing what she was about to do. He caught her as she dug through the trash can.

“Alyssa, don’t do this,” Zachariel begged. “He’s not worth your life or your baby’s!”

Alyssa sobbed as she dug obsessively until she finally found it. She moved into a dark, dead-end alleyway as she sat against the wall and dug in her pockets.

“Stop!” Zachariel cried, but it was too late. She loaded it into a plastic pipe, lit the bottom, and inhaled sharply.

Zachariel fell to his knees in front of her as he stared at the young woman, whose eyes glossed up as she numbed the pain away. A few moments later, she convulsed and clutched her stomach.

“No, no. Please, no...” Zachariel begged, hoping his cries would reach the Creator. “...please don’t let her...”

Alyssa stopped convulsing. A puddle of blood spread out from between her legs; her glossed eyes snapped back to attentiveness. She clutched her belly in horror.

“No...” she whispered. “Oh god, not my baby. Please, not...”

As Alyssa cried, the apparition of an infant materialized next to Zachariel, white-blond hair barely covering her head. Her cries echoed against the cramped walls of the alley.

Zachariel’s eyes widened. It was Ariana, who was supposed to be Alyssa’s first child.

He quickly scooped up the young spirit and looked at Alyssa once more. Her face streamed with tears, and yet she sat still, staring off into nothing, numb to the world. Zachariel gently clutched the baby to his chest, closed his eyes, and uttered a desperate prayer. A light appeared from the sky, and with it, his friend and fellow angel Kira appeared next to him.

“Zachariel? What’s going on?” Kira looked at Alyssa as her eyes widened in heartbreak. “Oh, no...”

“I need you to help her, Kira. She...is not well,” Zachariel explained.

Kira nodded, and she walked over to Alyssa. She knelt and assessed her. “I think I can help.” She glanced over at Ariana, who cried in Zachariel’s arms. “Wait. Is that...?”

“This little one was hers.” Zachariel grimaced.

As Kira frowned, another light flashed. Out of it came a young messenger angel. "I've come with news for the one called Zachariel."

Kira and Zachariel exchanged glances. "What for?"

The young messenger cleared his throat. "You are immediately required to gather the spirit of Ariana and take her to New Eden to raise her. Once there, you will immediately take up a post as chief in a village called Riverglade."

"I—" His jaw clenched. "—I can't just abandon my comrades to go live out a life of comfort. Reinforcements on Earth are sparse enough, as is! Tell whoever gave the order that—"

"—it comes directly from the Creator himself, so I wouldn't advise disobedience," the messenger angel snapped, before regaining his composure and standing back to attention as he closed the scroll. "Sir."

Zachariel sighed in disbelief as he looked over at Alyssa. It wasn't that long ago that she was an innocent young girl, her spirit shining like the brightest star in the sky. Over the years, however, he watched in horror as her life slowly turned her into the tragedy that she was now.

Most of all, he had failed her.

After a few seconds of silence, Bryan had spotted her in the alley and immediately knelt by her, checking on her and calling for help. Kira stood up and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"She'll be okay, Zachariel." Kira gestured to Bryan. "I'll guide him so that he finds her the help she needs. You take the girl and go."

Zachariel glanced one more time at Alyssa as Bryan lifted her in his arms and carried her back to the hospital. He partially tucked the infant into his tunic and held her tight as he spread his wings.

Ariana wailed as he ascended. The heavy rain fell, as if the sky itself were mourning the tragedy, two lights taken from the world far too soon.



Zachariel had just finished tucking Ariana into her new bed when he handed her a small stuffed rabbit, which—along with their cottage—was donated by the citizens of Riverglade village, the people he was now charged with protecting. She held it close to her chest as she slept peacefully. He sang her a lullaby.

Calm your wonderful soul. The angels have you tonight. Oh, calm your painful heart.

After she had fallen asleep, Zachariel sat next to her, pondering his failure with her mother. For years, he tried to guard her from demonic influence, and yet she still succumbed to it. Tears fell from his cheeks onto Ariana's bed.

What did I do wrong?

A sigh escaped Zachariel's lips as he watched the child of Alyssa as she slept peacefully, as if the events of the previous night had never even happened. How he wished it were so. If he could do it all over again, he...

Zachariel froze, his eyes widening in realization. In front of him was a second chance. This was his shot at redemption, a chance to ensure that the past tragedy of the Winters family wouldn't repeat itself. This time, he would stop at nothing to make sure that little Ariana didn't end up like her mother.

Above all, he would ensure that she lived a full, happy life...and that her heart wouldn't ever have to break.

The ruins of Ariana's room returned to his sight as Zachariel clutched the stuffed rabbit and tied it to his belt. He walked back outside to find his friend and former Commander Gabriel praying over the deceased of Riverglade village. The

Archangel looked up at him sadly as he approached. "I'm sorry, friend. Maybe if I..."

Zachariel dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "You had to take care of Kafziel. How is he, by the way?"

"Doing better. I summoned some healers to take care of him. What of Daniel?"

"I summoned Quriel to retrieve him. Also had him work on evacuating the villagers, but..." Zachariel stared at the covered corpses as he grimaced, "...he couldn't save everyone. Neither could I."

Gabriel stood to his full height just as he had finished lining up the bodies and registering their last rites. He gripped the handle of his sword. "Should I?"

"No. They were my citizens, and I failed them." Zachariel drew his blade and willed it to light with holy fire. He solemnly walked by each body and lit it, briefly whispering a prayer to each one. As he finished, he stared skyward with tears in his eyes.

Gabriel walked behind him and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I know how you suffer, but what's done is done. They're in the Creator's hands now."

Zachariel glanced at the dancing flames one last time as he slowly turned around. He and Gabriel spread their wings, tearing past the billowing smoke and into the night sky.

Chapter 13

Take Flight

The smell of freshly baked bread filled Ben's nostrils, bringing him out of darkness and back into reality. He reached up to feel his aching head; his fingers ran across the rough fabric of a bandage. As he blinked to regain his sight, the scent of lavender filled his nose, and he found himself lying on a small, soft cot.

Next to him was a dark-haired lady dressed in a navy-blue toga, wrapped in a slender silver belt embroidered with the angelic language. Two even, feathered mandibles stretched from her back as she baked and cooked, loaves of simple bread with small tins filled with soup lined the counter next to her open window, where several people—some of which Ben recognized from Riverglade—would come to the window and receive it. As soon as his brain fog cleared, he realized who the person sitting in front of him really was.

Could this be...?

"Oh. Hello, Ben." The lady turned to him upon realizing that he had woken up. She beamed. "You took quite a nasty fall there."

Ben sat up in his cot, swinging his legs over the side. "You're Kira?"

"That I am," Kira confirmed. "I was told via a messenger that you'd be coming here soon." Kira stopped her cooking as she spun on her stool. "I heard what happened in Riverglade, about your fight with the intruder, and..."

"Ari told you?" Ben asked. "About the village?"

Kira nodded slowly, her lips pursed.

"I see." Ben grimaced. His body stiffened. "Wait, where is she? Did she get hurt in that explosion, or...?"

"No, she's fine. A bit of a bruise here and there. That's all."

"She's okay?" Ben breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I couldn't forgive myself if—"

"—don't underestimate her," Kira said with a smile reminiscent of Ariana's. "She even carried you and her violin until I could arrive and take over for her."

"Ari...carried me?" Ben asked, blinking.

"Well, your feet were dragging along the ground, and she didn't do it for too long. I saw the townsfolk arriving, so I got there, but still." Kira beamed. "She's a tough girl. Just like I taught her to be."

"Oh, trust me. I know." Ben returned the smile. "She told me about you, back near Riverglade. I'm sure you're proud of her."

"That I am." Kira stood up from her seat. "How about we go see her?"

Ben nodded quickly as Kira helped him rise from his cot. She wrapped one of his arms around his neck as she used the other to fling the door open, passing into the light. It faded, and Ben's breath caught in his throat.

Not far ahead, Ariana was entertaining a group of children with her violin and dancing, a large bandage wrapped around her waist, one fastened to her forearm. Despite her injury, her body flowed, her feet shifted, the melody from her violin brought joy to her otherwise demoralized audience. Kira chuckled as Ben stared in awe.

"Ariana always had a knack for lifting spirits and inspiring people," Kira noted. "I'm sure this is much needed encouragement for the survivors."

“No kidding.” Ben watched in awe as Ariana finished one of her songs with a graceful bow. She stood up and briefly winced, before flashing a confident smile to the kids at her feet.

“Alrighty!” Ariana said, her pitch high. “Who wants to hear another one?”

The kids shouted in unison and crowded her shouting requests.

“Play ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star!’” one child demanded.

“Play ‘Stars Align!’” shouted another.

“Play ‘I’m okay, Ari!’” Ben interjected, smiling.

Ariana’s head snapped in his direction, her azure eyes lit up. “Ben!” She ran over to him and hugged him tightly, her grip squeezing the air from his lungs. He didn’t mind.

She broke the hug, stepped away, and looked at him from head to toe. “Wait, you’re okay, right? Nothing broken, or...?”

“A little banged up.” Ben gestured to the bandage on his head. “Other than that, not too bad.”

Ariana gave a small sigh of relief and smiled at him. Her beautiful blonde hair shone in the sunlight. “I’m just glad you’re—” she grunted, clutching her abdomen and wincing in pain. She fell to her knees as Ben broke away from Kira to check on her.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked worriedly. “What happened to...?”

“I’m okay, I promise,” Ariana said as she looked up at him. For a moment, the two were mere inches from the other’s face, their lips perfectly aligned and nearly touching. Ariana blushed as they scrambled quickly to their feet.

“Maybe we should get back inside?” Kira suggested with a chuckle.

The two sheepishly nodded, avoiding each other's gaze as they entered the cottage once more. Kira helped them both sit down on the cot. She briefly had Ariana lean back so she could inspect her injury.

"Is it still hurting?" Kira asked as she knelt in front of her, unwrapping her bandage and lifting her shirt to expose her abdomen. Ben noticed a couple of bruises on her side, likely from the blast they took near the tunnel. He glanced back up at Ariana, whose cheeks burned red.

"Ben," she whispered. "Stop staring."

His head snapped forward obediently as Kira had finished reapplying her dressing. She moved over to him and assessed him again.

"So..." Kira's eyes shifted back and forth between the two as she examined his leg, "How did you two meet?"

"Uh..." They briefly exchanged glances.

"Hmm?"

Ariana piped up to break the awkward silence. "I found him in a forest. Ya know, just napping. We became best friends after that."

"Oh. Interesting." Kira's expression hinted at a possible invasive question. "Anything else?"

The two shook their heads in unison, though Ariana's face was so red, Ben thought her head might have popped off from her shoulders into the ceiling at any given moment.

"Very well." The angel nodded, turning to Ben. "So, I hear you're a Soraphim."

"That's what the jerk who attacked me and Ari said." Ben shrugged. "So, I guess."

"I didn't think those old stories were true," Kira explained. "The Fall happened long before I even existed, so I've always dismissed them as rumors or fantasy. Until now, that is."

“Stories?” Ben asked. “Like what?”

“Is it true your kind can wield fire?”

“Yeah.”

“May I see it for a moment? I want to confirm something I was told earlier.”

Ben briefly glanced at Ariana. She sighed.

“If it helps, then...” Ariana hesitated. “I suppose so. Just for a second.”

Ben nodded and inhaled. He held up his arm, flexed his fingers, and allowed an orange flame to manifest. The angel’s eyes widened as she watched him manipulate the flame into a small, solidified dagger.

“You can transform it, too? Fascinating.” Kira continued to observe it until she noticed something. She grabbed Ben’s arm and rolled up his left sleeve. Her brows furrowed as she noticed the blackened veins stretching down his arm like tree roots.

“Ben,” Kira asked. “Can you remove your jacket, please?”

Ben obeyed and exposed the full bite mark to her. Kira’s eyes widened.

“I’m in a bit of trouble,” Ben said. “Do you think you can help?”

“How far has the infection spread?” Kira asked, ignoring his question as she examined the bite. “Is it already...?”

“In my chest? Yeah.” Ben confirmed as he extinguished it. “Daniel said it was too far in to amputate. And using my powers speeds it up, so—”

“—so we were hoping you would know of anything to slow it down,” Ariana finished for him. “Or maybe even get rid of it.”

Kira stood to her full height and scratched her neck. Her eyes darted all over, as if in deep thought. Finally, with her back turned to them, she sighed.

“No. There’s no known cure for a demon bite.”

Ben’s heart sank. Ariana looked at him worriedly. “Come on. There has to be something, right?”

Kira hesitated. “Do you remember all those legends Zachariel would tell you when you were younger? Specifically, the one about the Pool of Eden?”

“A little.” Ariana nodded. “I remember him saying that every realm had its own Garden, where the two trees were kept. And between those two trees is the water.”

“The tree of Life, and the tree of Death,” Kira confirmed. “What your father said is correct. The Garden in each one serves as the point from which the creation of that realm began. The pool between the two trees is sacred, holy water, blessed by the Creator himself.”

“What are you saying, exactly?” Ben asked. “I take a dip, and the infection is gone?”

“The infection...” Kira eyed him, “...or you. There’s no way to know for sure. If you’re already too far gone, it might just kill you as if you were a demon.”

The room fell dead silent. Ariana placed her hand on his comfortingly, turning to Kira.

“But you’re saying there’s a chance?” Ariana asked. “That we can save him?”

“It’s a longshot.” Kira smiled encouragingly. “But yes. The one for our realm lies in the far mountains, beyond the Sky City and villages in the North. If you like, I can make sure you find it.”

Ariana squealed with excitement and latched onto Ben. He blushed.

“Any chance is one worth taking,” Ben said. As Ariana released her grip, he remembered what Zachariel had said on the first day. “Kira, do you mind if I ask one more thing?”

The angel nodded. “Of course.”

“Are you any good with memories?”

“As it so happens, I am.” Kira cocked her head. “What specifically?”

“Like...if someone has amnesia?” Ben asked hopefully.

“During my time on Earth, my job was to help the poor souls face their trauma. Sometimes, I had to dig into their mind to help them release it.” Kira confirmed, though her brows furrowed. “I assume you are ‘this person?’”

“Yeah. Back on Earth, I died trying to save someone I cared about, a girl named Lilly. I’ve had dreams that filled in some gaps, but I still don’t know exactly who she is,” Ben explained. Ariana bit her lip and shifted uncomfortably.

“So you want me to recover them?”

Ben nodded.

“Alright.” Kira placed her hands on the sides of Ben’s forehead. “The transition may feel strange, at first. It should stabilize after a few moments.”

“Right,” Ben said as he closed his eyes, unsure of what to expect. “Let’s do this.”

The room around Ben twisted and disappeared, replaced by darkness. A small light hovered ahead of him, like a distant train oncoming. Before he knew it, it blinded him and replaced the darkness with bits and pieces of his memories. They all flashed by until, finally, they stopped. In their stead was a pair of large, red eyes that seemed to glare at nothing. Their judgmental gaze shifted down to Ben, then back to something else. A whirlwind of flame had whipped out from the eyes and consumed everything in sight.

Ben snapped back to reality. Kira was on the floor, her hands slightly burnt and smoking. Ariana knelt next to her, treating her wounds with one of the angel's healing oils she stored nearby.

"Wait. What happened?" Ben asked. "Did I...?"

Ariana's brows furrowed as she opened her mouth to speak, but Kira silenced her with a look. She turned to Ben and smiled. "It was an accident. I tried to access a memory, and you...reacted."

Ben's eyes widened. "I didn't mean to—"

"—hey, no worries. This one's on me. I should have figured, with the whole fire thing." Kira beamed encouragingly, then winced.

Ben stared down at his hands as the smoke died down. He glanced over at Ariana's wrist, which still bore the earlier burns. He bit his lip as he felt blood pulsing loudly in his ears. Briskly standing, Ben stormed the cottage door. Ariana sprung to her feet and tried to grab his wrist.

"Where are you—"

"—going on a walk," Ben said, cutting her off. Before she could reply, he had already exited the cottage and slammed the door behind him. The townspeople—including some of the injured refugees—stared as he rushed by them. He tensed, almost as if he could feel their judgmental glares burning into his back. To avoid them, he quickly pulled his hood over his head.

After a few minutes of walking, Ben found a nice, quiet spot to sit against the trunk of a large tree. As he sat, he curled up and rested his chin on his knees. He sighed as his fists clenched his faded, partially burnt jeans.

Ben looked up over the valley that the tree had looked over. It was beautiful. A multitude of beautiful trees blanketed the landscape in an array of red, yellow, and green. Birds soared above them, free. He smiled.

Then he noticed something in the distance. Beyond the valley, where he and Ariana had come from, rose a fading, yet still dark plume of smoke. Smoke he knew to be coming from the ruins of Riverglade village. He grimaced and tucked his head into his knees.

Why do people always get hurt because of me?



Ariana watched through the window as Ben stormed off, first through a crowd of people, then making his way to the outskirts of Kira's village. She opened the door to chase after him, but the angel had beckoned her not to. She sighed and reluctantly returned to her seat on the cot.

Kira finished applying healing ointment to her arms. Within minutes, the burns had disappeared. She turned back to Ariana and smiled.

"See? Like I said, no big deal. He didn't mean it."

Ariana frowned, looking out the window, hoping Ben would come back. "So he didn't do it on purpose."

The angel shook her head. "He was still locked in a dream state by me. There's no way he could have. Although he scared me a little."

"How so?" Ariana arched an eyebrow. "The fire?"

"Well, not quite," Kira admitted.

Ariana's eyes widened. "Did you see something?"

"I did, yes." Kira nodded. "Aside from pieces of his past, I..." Her voice trailed off.

"You what?"

The angel paused for a moment, her eyes wide. She closed them and inhaled. "It's probably nothing. As for his memories,

it almost felt like they were being externally blocked or something. I couldn't decipher much, but I did sense a lot of pain." She frowned. "He's been through a lot."

The memory of Ben lying on her floor, convulsing and screaming for Lilly, filled her mind as her teeth gnashed together behind her sealed lips. She paused for a deep breath and allowed it to pass.

"He really has. That girl? He must really love her." Ariana rested her back against the wall and tucked her knees to her chest. "Whoever she is."

Kira's eyes flashed as she scooted her stool closer and leaned in. "Ariana Marie Winters..." she began, her tone sharp, the way a mother's would be, "...is that jealousy I spot in your eyes?"

Ariana huffed and turned her cheek. "Nope."

"Hm..." Kira touched her chin in pretend deep thought, mocking her, "...you're not lying to me, are you?"

Ariana bit her lip. Kira chuckled as she playfully poked her.

"Oh, you totally are! Ha!" Kira clutched her abdomen as she laughed. "I never would have thought that you would ever have a crush—"

"—it's not important, though." Ariana interjected, her legs relaxing and sitting back over the side of the cot as she dipped her head. "All that matters is that I help him recover his memories and find that girl he was trying to save." She hesitated. "Besides...it's my duty as his best friend. Especially now, with everything that's happened. With the demons, with Raziel, with Dad..."

Ariana froze, unable to utter another word. Her throat felt like it had a rock stuck in it, air struggled to escape her mouth as tears flowed down her face.

“Dad,” Ariana rasped through tears as she remembered. Last she saw, he was about to face off against both a demon giant and Raziél. His chances of survival seemed slim.

Kira frowned. “Ari...”

“I don’t even know if he’s okay. I gave all my attention to Ben and abandoned him when he needed me most.” Ariana sobbed as she latched onto Kira. “I don’t want him to die. I don’t want Ben to leave. I’m gonna be all alone.”

Kira shifted from her stool to the cot as she held Ariana comfortingly to her chest. Slowly, the tears dried up, her throat cleared.

“Believe it or not, your dad will be fine,” Kira offered. “He’s been in tighter spots than this.”

Ariana looked out the window, seeing some of the wounded residents of her former village. She pivoted her gaze to avoid crying again.

“If I hadn’t brought Ben into the village...” Ariana began. “...then none of this would have happened.”

“None of this is your fault, okay?” Kira reassured her. “Blaming yourself is going to get you anywhere.”

“I know.” Ariana frowned. “It’s just kind of hard not to.”

Kira pulled back and smiled at her. Her eyes flicked down as she noticed something out of view on Ariana’s waistline, just below her back. She gestured to it.

“May I see that?”

Ariana took it out of its sheath and handed it to her. The blade glowed blue in the angel’s hands.

“I know this blade,” Kira said, tracing her finger along the spine of the knife.

“You do?”

“I was there when Zachariel found it,” Kira said, nodding. “It’s a specialized weapon, made by one of the long-extinct

races from the beginning, in response to the first major demon invasion of earth, along with others like it. This one belonged to Archangel Ramiel before he passed.”

Ariana eyed the weapon. “Looks like a regular knife to me.”

Kira smirked, uttered a brief chant. The ethereal blade suddenly brimmed with blue fire, pure and holy. Ariana nearly jumped off the cot in surprise.

“This is Omega,” Kira stated in the angelic language. “This blade, though small, can kill any type of demon with one simple stab. The problem is, few can get close enough to strike.”

“Don’t know many people that would want to.” The image of Alexis with claws extended filled Ariana’s brain. She shuddered.

“Oh, trust me. Knives are deadly instruments in the right hands.” Kira winked as she handed the blade back to her. “Did your father give this to you?”

Ariana nodded and sheathed the blade back in its scabbard.

“Your father is a smart man. I imagine he gave that blade to you just in case Ben ever completely went out of control. For self-defense, if anything.”

“Even if he did, I don’t think I could.” Ariana shifted uncomfortably. “I’d never forgive myself if I hurt him.”

“But what if he hurts you?” Kira asked.

“I still wouldn’t.”

“Why?” Kira’s brows furrowed with concern. “Is this because of your crush on him?”

“No,” Ariana lied.

Kira pursed her lips. "Ari, I know he's the first boy you've met that you developed feelings for, but he's not worth your li—"

"It's more than that!" Ariana said as she briskly stood. "Ever since I found him, there's been something about him I just can't shake. The moment I saw him, I just felt so drawn to him, connected. Every moment I'm with him, I'm more and more convinced that somehow, we were meant to meet."

Kia rose from her seat, eyes narrowed, the flat of her palm faced her as she urged calm. "Ari..."

"That's why, no matter what, I can't kill him. Or hurt him. The way I feel isn't just some schoolgirl crush." Ariana looked up at her surrogate mother. "I love him, Kira."

The angel's eyes widened in what seemed like horror. She brought her face close to hers as she gently placed her hands on Ariana's cheeks. "Listen to me. I know how you feel."

"No, you really don't. You angels can't even love like we humans do."

Kira looked taken aback. She swallowed and continued her words, ignoring the insult. "I just want you to be careful, Ari. You're a lot like your mother this way. She always loved your father incredibly hard. I just don't want to see you get hurt like—"

"You're really gonna bring up my mother now?" Ariana hissed.

Kira's mouth gaped open for a second. She sighed. "You're right, Ari. I'm sorry."

Ariana continued to glare at the angel, but it soon faded; She couldn't stay mad at her. Every time she had a talk with Kira, she always backed her into a mental corner and forced her to be honest, and yet, she would relate to her. All the times Ariana had needed a mom, Kira was there. Be it her early troubles in New Eden, their long nights learning violin, or even

now, when she knew Kira was just trying to protect her. Ariana frowned.

"I'm sorry, too." They embraced each other tightly.

The angel rubbed Ariana's back as they hugged, then pulled back and looked down at her. "So, I don't know about you, but we should probably go find your boyfriend before he gets into trouble," the angel teased.

"I mean..." Ariana blushed, "...he isn't. Yet."

"And why is that?"

Ariana shook her head. "Last time I tried to tell him how I felt, we got attacked by demons. Not a great track record so far."

"Oh. I see." Kira smirked. "Well, this time, you have me to back you up. I'll keep the demons off your back. All you need to do is to be brave. Okay?"

Ariana beamed. "You're the best mom ever. You know that, right?"

"Oh, hush." Kira opened the door for her, beckoning Ariana to exit the cottage. "Shall we go retrieve Mr. Ben?"

Ariana nodded and stepped outside. The townspeople were hard at work, continuing to take in refugees from Riverglade and supplying them with food, water and shelter. She felt her gut sink as she took in the sight. Guilt tore at her like a wolf at its prey.

I'll help, Ariana promised herself, but first, I need to find him.

You will, girly, the voice said. *He needs you, more than you know.*

"Where do you think he went?" She asked.

Kira shrugged and tapped one of the nearby townspeople, an old lady ferrying around a basket of used bandages.

"Hello! We're looking for a young man, dark hair?"

“The fire-wielder?” The man next to her asked, only to be interrupted by the woman.

“Oh, don’t you dare. Call him what he is.” The woman looked Ariana straight in the eye, as knowing of her connection to Ben. “He’s a demon. Did you see what he did to Riverglade? All the people here?”

“He didn’t mean it,” Ariana protested. “He was just trying to protect us!”

“Protect us?” The woman scowled. “Is that some kind of joke?”

Kira stepped in. “Whatever he is, we need to find him.” She inhaled slowly, rising to her full height. “So please...just tell us where he is.”

“Just outside the village,” the man said, his burning glare refusing to fade.

“Where he belongs,” the woman added with a hiss. “Whatever the reason you’re trying to find him, I hope that it’s getting rid of him for good.”

Ariana’s cheeks burned, but Kira gripped her arm and kept her back. The angel bowed briefly at the woman and turned to the village exit. As they walked, they continued to observe as the remnants of her village limped past the arch. She frowned.

“Is that woman getting to you?” Kira asked, breaking the silence.

“I—” Ariana bit her lip. “Honestly, yeah. I can see what they were saying. We don’t have a village, a home anymore.”

“Do you blame him?”

To even her own surprise, Ariana muttered ‘yes’ under her breath, drawing a raised eyebrow from Kira. She cursed.

“I mean, no. Ugh. I don’t know,” Ariana admitted. “Despite how I feel about him, I’m not blind. I saw him slip during his fight with that man and the demons. He

accidentally burnt me and you. At the same time, he wouldn't have done any of that if it weren't for that stupid demon bite. That wasn't his fault."

"Sounds like you two have a lot to talk about," Kira noted as they arrived at the arch marking the entrance to the village. Out on a far tree overlooking the cliff stood Ben, his eyes locked on the setting sun.

"I guess we do." Ariana frowned as she looked back at her. "Need my help with the villagers after?"

"Only when you're ready."

"Okay." Ariana smiled. "Thank you, Kira."

The angel brought her in for a long, tight hug. She beamed encouragingly. "Now go get him, girly."

Ariana allowed herself a smile as she began walking toward him, the sun falling from its peak in the sky. She called his name, saw his gray eyes flicker as he looked back at her. Her stomach fluttered; her chest tightened.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter 14

The Song's Name

The bright colors of the forest faded to black as Ben lost himself in his thoughts. One minute, he would force himself to relieve the moments in Riverglade, seeing the bodies, the broken howls of the destroyed lives and the utter hopelessness echoed in the coming night. The next, he would distract himself by attempting to judge the distance between his solitary cliff and the forest floor far below, wondering what the exact extent of his newfound healing ability was.

Ben shakily stood to his feet, taking a step toward the cliff. The gentle wind blew against him, as if to push him back. His mind raced as darkness crept into his vision, almost as if it were urging him to keep moving. While he tried, his body fought him by locking up against his will.

Come on, Ben thought. Just one more step and nobody else will have to get hurt.

Finally, his body eased, his mind blanked. He was ready. All he would have to do now is take a step and lean forward into the empty air.

Ben inhaled sharply and lifted his foot just as a soft voice called from behind him.

“Hey. You okay?”

He froze, quickly putting his foot back down as his vision returned. Ben spun to see Ariana, her eyes bright and alive in the light of the fading sun, her hand with the burnt wrist crossing her chest and gripping her opposite forearm.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Ben pursed his lips, staring off the cliff, which was just a foot in front of him. “Just uh...thinking, is all. Got a lot going through my mind.”

Ariana frowned. “Thinking about Riverglade?”

“Yeah.” Ben avoided her pleading stare by turning his gaze out to the distant, smoking scenery. He frowned.

Why did this have to happen?

A sudden, cool feeling on his hand snapped him out of his thoughts. Ariana gripped it with both of hers as her azure eyes bore into his. The striking light of the setting sun made her gaze brighter, as her lips stretched into a small, yet tender, smile. His stomach briefly fluttered as his breath left his body. She said nothing, and yet, Ben knew what she was telling him, just with her expression. She reached out with her burnt hand and gripped his.

The moment was interrupted by the rustling of leaves behind them. They spun to face the noise and found a small, dark bird. It flew down from the top of the tree and landed on one of the broken branches.

“Aw, look!” Ariana said, smiling.

For a moment, Ben thought back to the moment he first met her, back in Leanoir forest. The small, feathered creature in front of them seemed eerily like the first one that had perched in her hair.

“Think he wants to be friends?”

Ben leaned in closer to get a better look at it. The bird turned its head to stare directly at him. “I’m not sure. I don’t even know if he’s gonna stick around.”

Ariana giggled as she held her hand out gently to it. The bird hopped down onto her finger. He half expected her to

burst out in song and have her arms covered in a half-dozen more like a fantasy princess.

“Guess I’m gonna keep him, then.” Ariana turned to Ben. “What are we gonna name him?”

Ben scratched his head, unsure. A smirk crept onto his face.

“Eren,” he declared.

Ariana arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because he is free.” Ben met her confused gaze, realizing the joke was lost on her. The bird tilted its head at Ben as he sighed. “Just...never mind. You name him.”

The bird and Ariana exchanged looks. She smiled. “I like ‘Birdy’ better.”

Birdy chirped, seemingly in agreement. Ben rolled his eyes. With a swift motion, it launched off her arm and soared back up to the branch. It pecked at the silver birch, erratically at first, until the pulsing of the wood slowed into a steady rhythm. It ceased the thumping, hopping to the edge of the branch as it shrilled a tune, one that sounded familiar. In the back of his mind, he could hear the grinding of strings from Ariana’s violin, the nameless song that she had dedicated to him.

“Ari?” Ben asked as he looked at Ariana. “Isn’t this...?”

Ariana didn’t answer. Instead, she took his arm and wrapped it around her waist and elevated the other. She led him as they swayed back and forth. The shrill of the song quieted and slowed.

Before he knew it, Ariana had drawn him into her embrace, her arms wrapped tightly around him. For a minute, Ben stood in silence until he finally returned her hug. Warmth flowed back into his body, forcing the coldness in his soul out through his icy breath. The accusing voices in his mind were

muffled, replaced instead with the peace he found being in Ariana's embrace.

After a long moment in each other's arms, they slowly, reluctantly pulled away. Ariana brushed her hair behind her ear as Kira's call rang out at the village entrance. She spun to see the angel waving at her.

"I think she needs help with the refugees," Ariana said. "So, I should probably go."

"Right." Ben nodded, his cheeks warm. "Of course."

Ariana slowly turned and ran to the entrance, toward Kira. Before she got too far, Ben reached out and called her.

"Hey, Ari?"

She met his gaze, her azure eyes blinking.

"Thanks. For everything." Ben smiled. "I really needed that."

Ariana blushed as she sheepishly waved to him, running up to Kira and nearly tripping. She and the angel soon disappeared into the crowd, leaving Ben alone once more. He walked back over to the tree and leaned on it, staring into the night sky which had shrouded the fading smoke in darkness, focusing his attention on the shining stars and waning moon above. He appreciated the sight. To him, the moonlight felt like a beacon of hope. Despite the disastrous consequences of his presence in New Eden, that maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay.

That light, to him, was Ariana Winters.

Without warning, another high-pitched voice cried out. He spun to see the young boy from Riverglade that he had saved. Ginger, curly hair sprang from his head and whipped in the light evening wind. He waved eagerly with a smile on his face as he ran toward him.

"Billy?" Ben asked as the kid latched onto him.

Billy beamed as he released his grip from Ben's leg. His young, yet somehow unnerving, eyes bore into him.

"You made it out!" Ben knelt and ruffled Billy's hair. "Glad to see you in one piece."

"Yep!" Billy said with a smile. "Thanks to you!"

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you back in the village?"

"I saw you!" Billy's voice elevated even higher, as if he were Ben's biggest fan. "I just wanted to say hi and thank you for saving me the other day."

"Just glad you survived, bud." Ben smiled. "So, I guess you found your parents, huh? The demons didn't get them?"

The kid studied his shoes, his smile fading. Ben stared suspiciously. "You didn't lose them again, did you?"

"We got separated after the village got blown up." Billy frowned as he sat back against the tree. "I'm worried. I don't want them to die like the others."

Ben froze. As soon as Billy had said the words, the images of the ruined village that were previously purged had returned. The billowing smoke, bodies trapped and crushed by debris, a horrifying sight that would never leave him. How many of those people had been parents or children, just like Billy? How many families did he destroy with his recklessness?

"I'm sorry." Ben broke the silence, his voice rasped as he knelt next to him.

Billy blinked in confusion. "Sorry for...what?"

"I'm the reason you got separated from your parents both times. The first time, with the demons, they were after me. You and your family were just caught in the crossfire."

"But..." The child's brows furrowed. "Why would they be after you?"

"I can do things nobody else can," Ben explained, though he hesitated with his words. "Sort of—"

"—like a superpower?"

"Yeah, exactly." Ben nodded. "Only with me, people get hurt a lot." The image of Ariana's burnt wrist flashed into his brain. "People I care about."

The kid frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." Ben sighed. "Anyway, ready to go back to the village? More refugees are coming in. Maybe we'll find your parents."

"Aw, right now?" Billy asked, his voice brimming with disappointment.

Ben spun, arched an eyebrow. "Did you have an idea in that little brain of yours?"

"Actually." Billy blushed sheepishly. "I was wondering if you could show me your powers."

Ben's first instinct was to agree to his request without a second thought. Instead, he remembered what happened to Riverglade and hesitated.

"I don't know about that. I'm not supposed to use it."

"Why not?"

Ben tilted his head and scratched it as he struggled to find the words to explain it to a six-year-old. "Basically, I'm sick. The more I use it, the worse I get."

"You seem fine to me." The kid quickly inspected Ben from head to toe, doubt crossing his chubby face. "Come on, please? Just one?"

Ben sighed and rolled his eyes. He figured he may as well, if only for a second or two. It was like a golden rule with children: entertain them or prepare to face perpetual whining.

“Fine, but stay back. I don’t want you getting burned, too.”

Billy beamed and clapped his hands in excitement as Ben knelt in front of him. He closed his eyes and wiggled his fingers over his palm, then held it out and let fire spew from it. The embers danced around the main flame, like satyrs around a campfire. The kid’s eyes nearly popped out of his oversized head.

“Whoa!” Billy grinned. “That’s so cool!”

Ben chuckled. He may not have had Ariana’s magic touch, but he sure was good at keeping this munchkin entertained. It was also a welcome distraction.

“What else can you do?” the kid asked excitedly.

Ben extinguished the flame. “A few other things, I think. It’s probably not a good idea, though.” He glanced nervously at the nearby village. “I don’t wanna spook anybody, considering...well, you know.”

“Aw, come on!” Billy pouted. “We’re far out enough! People won’t know!”

Ben turned, looked at the village once more, making his best estimate for distance. He guessed he was about three-hundred feet from the entrance to the village, plenty out of sight and earshot.

Maybe if I keep it small, Ben thought as he shrugged. I guess just a little more won’t hurt. Infection shouldn’t spread too much if I don’t go overboard with it.

“Alright.” Ben turned to Billy and grinned. “What else were you hoping to see?”

“Um...” Billy touched his chin in deep thought, “Maybe you can shoot it?”

Ben really didn’t want to catch anything on fire, but the kid had a point. It really would be interesting if he could shoot

flames, even better if he could control them after. Perhaps something small to test his little idea?

He turned, pointed his fist at a small tree at the edge of the walkway. He focused his will on roasting it. Nothing happened. Ben sighed heavily. "Sorry kid. I tried."

"Aww." Billy frowned. "You're trying too hard. Try relaxing or jolting your hand out or something."

Turning back toward the tree, Ben shrugged, looking at his hand. *Worth a shot, I guess.*

Ben took a sharp breath, drew his arm back, and slung it forward. The flame balled up in his palm and barreled toward the small tree, reducing it to ashes. He grinned.

The two turned to each other in unison and gave each other a high five as they chuckled. An old couple making their way into the town heard their obnoxious laughter and greeted them with a stern, judgmental look.

Ben hid the flaming hand behind his back. "Ah...sorry! My bad! Didn't mean to bother you guys."

The couple went back to minding their own business, though it surprised him it was the laugh and not the burning tree that caught their attention. The husband rolled his eyes and pulled his elderly wife along. Ben faced Billy. "That was pretty cool, huh?"

Billy nodded ecstatically. "That was awesome!"

Ben smiled and chuckled at Billy's excitement. He was having fun entertaining the kid, although he wondered what else he could do. He remembered his fight with Raziel, how he had jumped high into the air.

Can I propel myself with fire, too?

Back then, when he let the infection control him, it seemed almost instinctual, like his body was on autopilot.

What would it take to make it happen at will? Would it be like shooting it?

Only one way to find out, Ben thought.

He turned to Billy, squatted down, and said, "Hey Billy, time for a piggyback ride!"

Billy's eyes lit up as he got on Ben's back, his tiny hands gripped the front of his shirt.

"Alright, Billy. Hold on!" He took a deep breath and then launched himself using the flames from his hands. After he was about twenty feet into the air, he extinguished them and fell close to the entrance to Kira's village.

"Whoa!" Billy shouted as Ben landed perfectly. The flames in his hands blazed to the ground like a rocket ship.

"You can super-jump! Do it again!"

Ben grinned and rocketed himself into the air once more, this time going about ten feet higher than before. Billy hung on for dear life as they descended, squealing at the top of his lungs in sheer, utter delight. Ben landed on a roof in the village, his feet cracked the wood as he skidded to a halt.

The kid snorted as he laughed uncontrollably. "That was awesome, dude!"

Ben chuckled too, pleased that he was mastering his new abilities. Ariana wouldn't have to worry about him losing control anymore, because soon—Ben clenched his fists as he extinguished the flames—he would be in control, not the creature she witnessed before.

His chest pulsated as he felt the infection spread, its shadowy roots burying into his body. He cursed.

Damn it. I probably overdid it. Ben looked back at Billy, whose eyes were wide, mouth gaped open in pure joy. It seemed a shame to ruin his fun, but he couldn't risk the

infection spreading further. Ben's shoulders sagged as he sighed.

"I think that's enough for now, kiddo. Are you ready to get off this roof and find your parents?"

Billy was focused on something else. A large blot of what looked like locusts headed toward the village. A sinking feeling in Ben's gut suggested that they were also coming toward him.

"Demons!" Billy shouted shakily in fear. Ben grit his teeth.

More demons? he thought. *Why the hell do they want me so badly?*

People in the village noticed, grabbed their children, and ran to safety. Some screamed in fear, others grabbed tools and prepared to fight. But with what happened at Riverglade, especially after Raziel and the Giant, they needed protection. No matter what, he was determined not to let Kira's village fall. As he went to light another flame, Ariana's voice rang in his mind.

Promise me.

Staring at the flame, Ben grudgingly let it extinguish. He turned, looking for an easy exit from the roof. He felt Billy quake with fear on his back. "Ben? They're coming!"

Ben patted his hand to calm him down, although he noted that his skin felt cold and clammy. "Hey kid, it's alright. We'll get Kira and she'll take care of them."

"They're coming too fast! Use your powers!" Billy exclaimed.

Sure enough, a demon dive-bombed toward them. Ben avoided the attack by sliding off the roof on his belly. The wood splintered and tore into his chest until the roof caved in completely. He grunted as he landed hard on the ground, just as the demon barreled through the wall of the home.

Ben spun and came face to face with the demon, its wicked smile only inches from him. It was smaller, skinnier than the ones he had fought at Riverglade. He grit his teeth. One by itself wasn't an issue, but the real problem was the innumerable horde of others just like it waiting outside.

It lunged; Ben instinctively summoned a shield made of solidified fire. It clawed, flapping its wings and attempting to reach over. He concentrated and commanded the shield to become a blade, which he then used to cut through the demon effortlessly.

Damn it, Ben thought. No choice now.

With a sharp intake of breath, Ben summoned a full set of ethereal armor, feeling its weight settle on his body. Billy was still on his back. Ben sprang back into the air, landing on a roof and continuing to sprint along. As the demon horde screeched toward him, he maneuvered and vaporized them whenever he could.

As he battled, exhaustion and dread crept into him like a parasite. For every demon he killed, it seemed like two more took its place. He knew couldn't hold out forever. He looked back at Billy, whose hands were desperately gripping Ben's bloodied chest.

"Hey, do me a favor, okay?" Ben said as he vaporized another demon. "I need you to get off and go to Kira. You know who that is, right?"

"I feel safer with you!" Billy protested, screaming as another demon launched at them. Ben ducked and stabbed it in the chest.

"Well trust me, it's a lot safer with her than it is with me right now!" Ben said, "Look, it was fun hanging with you, alright? But you need to be safe, and I have all that extra weight off my back. Deal?"

Billy nodded sadly. "Deal..." he said as he loosened his grip.

“Alright, on the count of three, I’m going to open my armor and you are going to run in between those buildings, hide, and find Kira once the coast is clear. You with me?”

“Alright.” Billy reluctantly climbed down his back and prepared to run. “I’m ready!”

As Ben opened the armor and let Billy dash through, he couldn’t help but notice the frustration in the kid’s voice. He ran fast for a kid his age; his little legs sprang across the village like a rat crossing a kitchen. Before he disappeared behind the corner, Billy smiled and gave Ben a quick thumbs up.

Ben returned it and continued to battle the hordes upon hordes of demons. They attacked viciously, endlessly, slamming into his ethereal armor with seemingly no end. He punched one, smashed another, and fried a third. Their pattern of attack was relentless, leaving him with no respite. One of them had cracked his armor enough to land a scratch on his face, though Ben had avoided further damage by leaping back. He desperately hoped that Kira was nearby, that Ariana was safe.

Even if I go down here, he thought, at least she can find her dad again.

Ben panted heavily, his vision twisted and blurred as his chest bled. His armor flickered, threatening to let one of the demon’s attacks land and kill him. He was losing.

Come on, keep fighting, damn it! Ben told himself, *Just don’t...*

His body froze against his will, his muscles tightened and locked into place by some unknown, invasive force. A demon struck and his armor shattered. The blow knocked him into a nearby wall. He tried to run, but his body seized up again.

What the hell is this? A large demon, horns like a ram with black, twisted skin, one Ben assumed was a leader, landed in front of him. It dramatically walked up to him, held his clawed hand out and grabbed him by the shirt, lifting him

up. The demon muttered something to his lieutenant next to him.

We have him. Let Aka Manah Know!

The demon released Ben abruptly. Through his bony chest pierced twin daggers, which spread apart and cleaved it in half. In its dusty stead stood Kira, her blades held in reverse grip, her knees bent, wings held back. A battle stance.

Ben grinned as he regained control of his body. Little Billy had come through.

“Ariana,” Kira said. “Grab Ben and get out of here. You’ll have to go to the Pool of Eden without me.”

Ariana emerged and knelt next to Ben, grabbing his arm. She yanked him to his feet, quickly embraced him.

“Where were you?” Ariana demanded. “I leave you alone for five minutes...”

Kira shouted over her shoulder at them as she decapitated three oncoming demons. “You both need to go now. And Ariana?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember what I told you.” Kira frowned. “Above all, stay safe. I love you.”

Tears welled up in Ariana's eyes. She briefly broke her grip on Ben to latch onto Kira, who tightly hugged her back with one arm, as if it would be the last time. The angel then pushed Ariana away. “Go!”

Securing her violin case to her back, Ariana grabbed his arm and ran sideways away from the battle, toward a path that led deeper into the mountains. They bolted out of the town, running as fast as their teenage bodies would allow. Suddenly, Ben remembered Billy.

“Wait Ari! Back at the village, there was a...”

“It can wait! We have to get away!”

“But...”

Ariana looked back with a tear-filled, desperate eye. “Don’t you get it? We have to run. We can’t let them take you!”

Ben grimaced. It seemed like they were always running, but then again, what good did fighting do? He looked back at the battle. Kira was vanquishing the demons efficiently, skillfully. But like his battle, more demons attacked, overwhelming her. With each passing moment, her defense faltered. One demon finally landed a scratch; the angel rebounded and split it in two with one of her blades.

Ben grit his teeth. Kira was an amazing fighter, but she couldn’t hold out forever. She needed his help.

“Ari, stop!” Ben demanded. “We need to go help Kira!”

“Kira can handle herself!” Ariana rasped between her labored breaths. “We need to get out of here and get somewhere safe, okay?”

“I’m not gonna let her die!” Ben threw off her hand and tried to run back, but Ariana had tackled him to the ground. Ben felt his skin grow hot, his brain and chest pulsed as the infection clawed into him, his armor formed.

Kill.

“Ben, stop!”

He broke free from her grip and held up his flaming hand threateningly. Ariana’s mouth fell open, and her eyes grew wide with surprise. Ben looked down at her burnt wrist, his jaw clenched. He let the flame extinguish and rose to his feet.

Ariana continued to stare, her eyes quivering. She shook it off and dragged him along, her face now hidden in her hair. Ben complied, jogging with her as their shoes churned the dirt path.

They broke into a run as they entered the darkness of the forest. Flashes of moonlight that broke through the black canopy dashed by them for hours until they were too exhausted to run any further. They found a spot by a large tree with roots as thick as the dark oak itself.

Ariana broke away from Ben and sat on one of the nearby roots, facing away as she gripped her forearm. He sank against the trunk and stared up at the night sky. The surrounding air was silent, save for the swaying of the dark trees in the icy wind.

“Ben,” Ariana began, breaking the quiet. “I know you wanted to help her, but right now, the most important thing for us is to get you to that pool. The infection is getting worse.”

Ben bit his lip. She was right; he had slipped and almost fried her out of sheer frustration, fueled by the demon bite. He wouldn’t ever forgive himself if he had hurt her. And yet, Kira’s chances at the village looked slim. Nobody else should have to die because of him.

“But what if Kira doesn’t make it?” Ben asked.

“And what if you don’t make it?” Ariana snapped. “What am I supposed to do? Just let you get taken over by demons? Or die?”

“Ari...”

“Do you know what it would do to me, Ben? If I lost you?”

Ben grit his teeth, turned around, and gripped her shoulders. “I’ve already cost you everything! Damn it, I’m a cancer in your life, Ari. Why can’t you see that? How much more will you lose before you realize that I’m not worth saving?”

Ariana froze, taken aback by his words. Ben loosened his grip and dipped his head, his voice softening. “You’ve lost so

much. Everywhere I go, death follows. I never wanted this. I never wanted you to lose any of that, your life, your dad, Kira.”

Ariana’s eyes glistened. “Ben, don’t—”

“This is all my fault.” His throat tightened as he choked. “I’m sorry.”

Ariana grabbed him and drew him in for a tight hug. Ben tried to pull away, but she latched onto him and held him in place. Gently taking his left hand, she felt his trembling fingers and looked into his eyes, now filled with tears.

“It’s done, Ben. I can’t feel anything about that right now because if I cry, I’m not gonna stop. Whether it’s your fault doesn’t matter, because you’re all I have left right now,” Ariana said as a gentle, forgiving smile stretched across her face. “So, let’s go forward to that pool together, so we can make all of this worth it, ya hear?”

Ben blinked as she gripped his wrist and led him further down the path until the canopy opened far into the full night sky, the waning moon now out in its full glory, accompanied by the stars. The stiff wind picked up, chilling him down to the soul. He looked at Ariana, who shivered and inched closer to him. It blew his mind that despite everything that had happened, here she was, by his side. Deep down, he was glad. He didn’t want to be alone.

The trees shook, taking Ben out of his thoughts. A flock of birds took off from the city of leaves high in the forest, dashing across the moonlight. The way they flew was erratic, yet...organized. Powerful. He thought back to the day he first saw Ariana dance, the day she had stolen his heart. His brows furrowed as an idea suddenly came to him.

“Hey, Ari?”

Ariana faced him, her violin case slung over her shoulder, the gentle light from the night sky illuminating her face.

“You know that song you played? From the festival?”

“Of course.” Ariana nodded. “What about it?”

Ben stared back up, seeing the last of the flock fade into the distance. The moon shone brightly once more. The insignificant shadows that blotted it out were now gone, and the comforting light had returned.

“Sky of Shadows,” Ben said.

Ariana blinked, touching her chin as she pondered it. She looked up and nodded; her smile as bright as the night sky itself.

“I like it,” she said. “So, it’s settled then. That’s the name of the song. Our song.”

And Sky of Shadows, it was.

Chapter 15

Angel's Ascendance

Zachariel saw the devastation from afar as he flew with Gabriel in the cold, cruel wind. Kira's village was in ruins, buildings shattered, scorched, some in flames. His ethereal eyes widened.

Oh no, he thought as he sped up his flying, please no. Let her be safe.

With precision, Zachariel flexed his wings and landed, skidding to a halt. He recovered, drew them to his back, and searched for Kira's house. After turning a corner, he finally found it, mostly intact, minus the collapsed porch. He knocked it aside and kicked the door open.

"Kira? Ari? Anyone?"

Zachariel frantically searched the small home. It was untouched by whatever had devastated the village. The twin cots lined the wall. The burnt bread sat atop Kira's stove, but still no sign of them. Fear burning within him, he flipped the cot over, and he stormed out into the cool night air, his eyes scanning the deserted street. A cry, a call for help, anything.

But now, it was just like Riverglade. Bodies lay strewn about, claw marks dragged across their clothes. Slamming his fist against a wall, Zachariel screamed.

Why does this keep happening?

Finally, he heard something. A groan, coming from a nearby oak tree Kira laid against, clutching her abdomen. He immediately sped over, Gabriel only a few feet behind him.

“Kira!” Zachariel knelt, assessing her from head to toe for injury. To his angst, he found a piece of demonic blade embedded in her side. As soon as he saw the wound, Zachariel tore a cloth from his tunic and pressed it against it, exchanging a knowing glance with Gabriel.

“Hey there, Zachariel.” Kira lifted her head and managed a feeble smile, though it threatened to fade along with the rest of her. Zachariel grit his teeth.

“Listen, Kira,” he said. “You’re going to be okay. We’re going to summon some healers.”

“They...escaped,” she rasped with a smile. “They’re alright.”

Zachariel sighed, half-relieved, but he still had to make sure his friend was okay.

“That’s good. Let’s just focus on—”

“—but the people...” Kira gestured to the bodies in her village. “I failed them.”

“Don’t worry about that right now, Kira,” Zachariel pleaded. “Focus on surviving.”

A tear fell down her scorched cheek. “I had no idea it would be this bad. I thought I could save them too, but...too much. So many.”

“You did your best. Honor them by staying alive!” Zachariel begged.

“You know, I...I had a little talk with your daughter. It seems she’s into boys now,” Kira continued, lightly chuckling, her eyes glazing over.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Zachariel said as he pressed his palm against her forehead. He could feel her spirit slipping away. He spoke quickly with Kira, trying to anchor her in the realm and keep her focused. “Okay, what did she say? Tell me, keep talking.”

Kira winced in pain, then opened her mouth to speak, but then closed her mouth and eyes, taking in a deep, broken breath.

“Stay with me!” Zachariel shook her, her eyes opened back up.

“She...said I was the best mom anyone could ask for. Can you believe that? You and me...we’re parents, Zachariel. We raised a beautiful girl.”

Zachariel stared as Kira squeezed his hand. He gripped it back.

“Do you remember when I first taught her violin?” she asked, her breaths becoming shallow. “How frustrated she got? And now look at her.”

Images of young Ariana immediately rushed to Zachariel’s mind. He pushed them out of his head for the moment and continued to put pressure on Kira’s wound. “I remember. We can have more times like that. All you have to do is just stay with me.”

“I wish I could.” Kira smiled at him. “I want...more time with you. With her. Us. Family.”

“We will. You just have to hold on.”

Kira grabbed his wrist as he went to feel her forehead again. “I love you, but you have to let me go. The Creator is calling me home.”

“But...”

“Thank you for being my friend.”

“Please Kira, no...” Zachariel begged.

“Goodbye.” Kira exhaled one last time and closed her eyes. Her body glowed until it became a large, white light. It dissipated, carried away by the wind until she faded for good.

Time seemed to stand still as Zachariel sat there, completely numb. A shrill scream erupted from his lungs, but

even that wouldn't do his loss justice. He was angry at the demons. He was angry at the Creator. Above all, he was angry at himself for not being fast enough.

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, he looked where Kira had just been, then back skyward. "Gabriel? Do you suppose Kira is with our Creator?"

"No one knows for sure," he admitted. "But I believe so. There has never been an angel so pure, so good as her. Our Creator would never condemn someone like her to oblivion."

"So you believe in the Final Realm?"

Gabriel nodded. "I do."

Zachariel froze as tears fell from his face. He glanced down at the hand that had held hers only moments ago, wishing more than anything he could feel it again. He remembered the times they had together, as she helped him raise Ariana, from his struggles with diaper changing to teaching him patience in her toddler stage, when she had a knack for knocking things over.

All those years, with her at his side when he needed it.



"Hey, Miss Kira!" then six-year-old Ariana said as she munched on her breakfast. "Do you want some cereal?"

Kira had just walked in the door, holding a large, wrapped package. She smiled and said, "No thank you, Ari. I brought you a present, though." She grinned and held up the package.

Ariana jumped excitedly. "You got something for me?"

Kira handed the present to her, which the young girl hastily unwrapped. When it was done, in front of her was a hard leather case. Ariana turned it over in her hands, inspecting it. "It's...a weird bag? Wait..." Her eyes widened. "There's something in it!"

Kira covered her mouth as she giggled and made eye contact with Zachariel. After that, she leaned over and helped Ariana unlatch the case. Inside it lay a brown violin and bow. Her eyes widened as she latched onto the angel.

"Thank you so much, Kira! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Ariana squealed in utter delight. Zachariel arched an eyebrow as he leaned to whisper in Kira's ear.

"It seems fitting, doesn't it?"

Kira turned to him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean." He inhaled. "Like her, it's a beautiful, but...er, tragic, instrument, no?"

"I'm gonna name it Ole Betsy!" the young Ariana declared as she brandished her new prize. "After my best friend!"

The two angels paused, then burst out in laughter. Ole Betsy was the name of an old cow just outside of the village that had taken a liking to her and thus became her "best friend". Kira elbowed Zachariel.

"I think she's gonna be just fine with that thing, Zachariel. You know I—"

Before she could finish, Ariana had pulled the violin and bow out and drawn the latter against the strings, producing a noise reminiscent of a bird screech. Kira and Zachariel both clasped their ears as the hiss came out.

Ariana slowly turned to Kira, a frown affixed to her puffy face. "I don't think it works right."

"Oh. I forgot to explain." Kira bent down to Ariana's height. "You see, it doesn't work by itself. They don't work unless they have someone like you and me operating it. Think of it as a tool; in the right hands, it can create wonders of sound."

Ariana tilted her head. "What do you mean by that?"

Kira held out her hands. "May I see it, Ariana?"

Ariana obeyed. The angel brought the bow up to the violin, inhaled sharply, and pulled it across. The sound that came off was beautiful and heart-wrenching, and soon a flurry of other differently pitched sounds like it followed. When she finished, she held them back out for her to take back. Ariana was too busy jumping up and down, clapping with glee.

“That was amazing!” the young Ariana exclaimed. “I want to play like that one day!”

Kira smiled warmly. “And what would you say to having me teach you?”

Ariana’s eyes widened. She clamped her mouth shut and nodded excitedly, her blonde ponytail fluttering with her head.

“Good.” She beamed. “But you have to promise me something, that you’ll be attentive, persistent, and, above all, patient. It will take years to master Ole Betsy, but once you do, and I’m sure you will, I know that whatever you create with it will be as beautiful as that sweet little soul of yours is.”

Ariana took back the instrument, clutched it to her chest, and nodded. “I will, Kira.”

The memory jumped forward to Ariana’s teenage years. She had become a talented violinist, and yet he had also seen her frustration. Despite her near-perfect intonation and accuracy, both Zachariel and Kira saw she wasn’t satisfied with what she saw as the boring pieces written by musicians before.

“It just doesn’t feel right, like I’m retreading old ground instead of charting a new path,” the fifteen-year-old grumbled as she ate her cereal. A few sheets of music were scattered on the kitchen table, some stained with what he figured was her blood, sweat, and tears that came from her hard work. Either that, or the milk she kept spilling.

Kira examined the music from the opposite side of the kitchen table as Zachariel watched, coffee mug in hand. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Is classical just not your

taste? I mean, you nailed that Paganini piece at the festival, and people loved it!”

“They didn’t love it.” Ariana wiped her mouth and pushed her bowl aside. “They clapped. That was it. No cheering, no nothing.”

“Okay.” Kira paused thoughtfully. “Maybe some contemporary? Zachariel brought a guitarist into the village the other day. Maybe he had something more modern?”

“No, that won’t work either.” Ariana frowned. “I don’t know. It feels like I should do something with my body while I play. I feel like a tree with my feet planted in one spot.”

“As far as I was taught, your feet are supposed to keep you from falling over.” Kira scratched her chin. “Maybe sway a bit more? That might scratch the itch.”

“Actually...” Ariana froze, her eyes wide. “I think I have an idea.”

Kira blinked. “What is it?”

Ariana didn’t answer. Instead, she ran back into her room and strapped Ole Betsy’s case to her back. She rounded the table and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll be back in a jiffy. I’m gonna see if my idea has any merit or not.”

“Oh.” Kira blinked. “I guess I’ll see you later?”

Zachariel nearly spilled his coffee as Ariana briskly hugged him and ran out the door. “Bye Dad! Bye Kira! Love you!”

“Well, then.” He took a sip from his mug. “I assume she’s off to practice?”

“You know her so well.” Kira smiled. “Oh, and by the way? Your tunic has a stain on it.”

Zachariel looked down. She was right. Some of his coffee had dripped down and spilled. He sighed as he placed the mug on the counter and dried it out with a nearby rag.

“I really wish that girl would just slow down sometimes.” He paused. “She’s growing up far too fast.”

Kira frowned. “I know. But she’s growing into a beautiful young woman. Even if she struggles to make friends.”

“I suppose I’m to blame for that one. Even after fifteen years, going out and about and mingling with the humans is...”

“...odd?”

Zachariel nodded.

“Oh, you’ll get used to it one day, even if you take another fifteen years,” she joked. “Besides, you adapted well to raising Ari, even if you are strict.”

He huffed. “I am not.”

Placing her hands on her hips, Kira arched her eyebrow. Zachariel sighed in defeat.

“Alright. Maybe I need to lighten up.”

Kira smirked. “Told you so.”

Zachariel chuckled and shook his head as Kira’s haughty expression morphed into her sweet, kind smile, one that had always bettered his days.

The memory changed once again, to the time when she had urgently summoned him to Leanoir forest. He tucked in his wings as he landed and tore through the brush until he found Kira, crouched behind a bush.

“What’s wrong? You said it was urgent.”

“Shh!” Kira silenced him, placing her soft hand over his lips and beckoning him to kneel with her. She directed his gaze forward, where about a hundred feet away, Ariana had stood with her violin at the ready. He arched an eyebrow.

“Why are we stalking my daughter, Kira?”

“Shush. Just listen.”

Zachariel turned his gaze back to Ariana. He watched as she inhaled sharply and drew her bow across the strings. A beautiful melody echoed throughout the forest.

“Sounds good,” he mused. “But why...?”

Finally, he saw it. His daughter began by swaying back and forth, getting comfortable with her movements, until she twisted briskly and leapt into the air without missing a note.

His jaw hung open as Kira smirked. As he continued to watch, he realized what she was trying to show him. Years and years of her training, and Ariana’s creativity, resulted in the beautiful sight before him.

“See?” Kira asked. “This is what she was trying to come up with for so long. She can dance and play at the same time!” She squealed excitedly, careful to keep her voice down.

Zachariel was at a loss for words. He couldn’t believe that this girl was the same one he had brought to New Eden all those years ago. His breaths became shallow, his heart swelled with pride.

Kira tugged on his tunic. “We did this, Zachariel. You raised her, and I trained her, and...” she began to tear up, fanning her face with her hands, “...I’m just so proud of her.”

Suddenly, Ariana stopped playing and spun. “Uh...hello? Anyone there?”

The two angels froze and exchanged glances. Slowly, they rose from behind the bush.

“Dad? Kira?” Ariana’s cheeks flushed. “You weren’t supposed to see that yet. It’s not ready.”

Kira didn’t seem to care. She ran forward and latched onto Ariana. “I’m so, so proud of you. That was so beautiful, you don’t even know.”

The embarrassment on Ariana’s face gave way to tears as she hugged her back. Kira quickly beckoned Zachariel to join, and soon the three embraced each other. His chest heaved as

a tear fell down his aged cheek. This moment, he decided, was one he wanted to last forever. Just the three of them, together in the comfort of Leanoir forest.

A family.



Zachariel stared ahead blankly as the memories faded. Gabriel put his hand on his shoulder. "Are you still with me, brother?"

He grudgingly pulled himself out of it. "Yes. I'm still here, but..." he took in a deep breath, holding back tears, "...I just can't believe she's gone. It's my fault."

Gabriel gripped his shoulder even tighter. "It is not. Kira did what she had to do in order to defend her village and Ariana. She made the ultimate sacrifice that all of us will eventually have to make." He frowned. "That aside, she's been a wonderful mother to Ariana all these years. I am adamant that she didn't regret a single moment of it."

Zachariel looked at Gabriel and managed a half-smile. Not for his sake, but Kira's. "I suppose so."

"Good." Gabriel removed his hand. "We need to go catch up to Ariana and Ben as soon as we can, before—"

Before he could finish, a loud crack had erupted, followed by a searing bolt of lightning that struck the ruins from the heavens. Out of it came a tall, armored angel with blue, glowing wings. From his head sprang slick, dirty blonde, neck-length hair, complete with a beard.

Gabriel bowed. "Archangel Michael."

Michael walked forward, clasping his fellow Archangel's shoulder. "Hello, brother. It's been a long time."

Gabriel nodded. "The same to you, Michael. Though I must say, I didn't expect such...well, firepower."

"I'm just as surprised as you are," Micheal answered simply as he looked at Zachariel, who was still kneeling where Kira had passed on. "Are you alright, brother?"

Zachariel met his piercing, yet concerned, gaze. He rose. "I will be. Thank you, Archangel." He bowed like Gabriel had done. "Though I would echo Gabriel's sentiments. Is the situation so dire that the Creator would send you to help us?"

"You tell me. Being pulled away from the war on Earth isn't exactly what I had in mind." Michael grimaced. "He said it was of utmost importance that I assist you."

"Right." Zachariel inhaled as he briefed him. "About a week ago, my daughter had brought an amnesiac named Ben into our village. Now, Riverglade is ashes and ruin."

Michael arched an eyebrow. "Was he a demon?"

"Not quite, but this boy is something else." Gabriel hesitated. "He's a Soraphim, brother. Apparently, they are not extinct. On top of that, a demon infected the poor boy. He's a ticking time bomb."

"You've confirmed this?"

Gabriel nodded. "There's more than that, I'm afraid. Ben isn't even the only one. It would seem our old friend Raziel survived the slaughter, after all."

"Raziel?" Micheal scratched his neck. "And I assume he's after Ben? Along with the demons?"

Both Gabriel and Zachariel nodded. Michael grimaced and spun, spreading his shimmering blue wings. "We need to go. Now."

Zachariel and Gabriel followed suit, and soon the three angels took off into the air. The wind blew under his feathers, lifting him ever so higher.

"Can you transport to their location, Michael?" Gabriel asked.

Michael shook his head. "I don't know where they are. Even if I knew, the areas in the north are heavily demon infested. It's impossible, at this point."

"Infested?" Zachariel asked. "How?"

"The demons have launched an attack on all the towns in New Eden, specifically in the north, near the mountains. Many creatures overwhelmed them: Wicked Giants, demons, all concentrated in one specific area." He looked back at them as the icy wind blew by. "This means that they have likely built a fortress."

A fortress, Zachariel thought. That would explain how so many demons attacked Kira's village.

Another disturbing thought came to him, *But how? How were they able to do it without any of the angels noticing?*

"We need to gather more angels to find and destroy it. If we fail, then they will continue to infect New Eden. We'll have no choice but to undergo a Mass Exodus."

"You mean abandon the realm?" Zachariel asked.

Michael faced forward, avoiding his gaze. "If we have to."

A chilly feeling filled Zachariel's chest, though he was sure it wasn't just the air. The mere thought of leaving behind the place he had called home for the last eighteen years filled him with dread.

Then again, he thought, Riverglade is already gone. Ari and I don't even have a home anymore.

"If I may, brother..." Gabriel began as he flew next to Michael, "You didn't seem surprised at the news of the Soraphim. Is there something you're not telling us?"

"Indeed," Michael began. "Ben and Raziel are not the only ones. There have been reports of them on Earth from several angels stationed there. Like you said, they are not extinct after all."

“What do the demons want with Ben specifically?” Zachariel asked. “Why are they targeting him?”

Michael shook his head as he veered to avoid a mountain peak. “I’m not sure. Even more reason to find him first.” The Archangel gestured and sped up his flight.

Zachariel nodded and did the same. Wherever he was, they needed to find Ben. Fast.

Chapter 16

Clash in the Forest

When Ariana awoke, she was still resting against Ben. They had found a place to fall asleep on the trunk of a gigantic tree with a nice, open view of the planet in the sky.

She smiled. It was the first time she could nap next to him, with no rules or Dad scaring Ben out of his mind. Her lips curled as she nuzzled closer to him.

Is he even alive? she wondered, *Or Kira? Last time I saw her, she was...*

“Ari.”

Ariana sat up at the sudden emergence of the voice. Kira’s voice.

“Hello?” She craned her head to search everything within eyesight. “Who—”

Slowly, a light formed right in front of her until it loosely took the shape of Kira, her body transparent, like that of a soul.

What is she doing here? Why does she look like that? Her eyes widened. The realization struck her like lightning. *No. No!*

Kira’s spirit smiled sadly as it hovered in front of her. “I know, Ari. I didn’t want this either.”

Ariana’s chest heaved rapidly. “No, you can’t be dead. Please, Kira. Tell me it isn’t—”

“I wish I could. I did my best, but there were too many.” Kira avoided her gaze. “I wanted to see you one last time, to tell you how proud I am and how much I love you. And to warn you.”

Ariana blinked tears from her eyes. “Warn me about what?”

Kira’s eyes lifted to meet Ariana’s, her gaze pierced into her with a deadly seriousness. “About the future. There will be an evil one with you, a deceiver.”

Ariana looked back at the sleeping Ben, snug in his tattered hoodie, curled up against the tree. She spun back to face Kira. “You don’t mean him?”

“I can’t say for sure. But his condition...? I won’t lie to you. It’s progressing far faster than it should. You should make for the Pool of Eden as fast as you can, and if not, if he loses control...” Kira’s ghost leaned in, “...you will have to kill him. To protect yourself and the realm.”

Ariana hesitated as he gripped her blistered wrist, a mark from when Ben had momentarily lost control. She turned, gazing at his sharp, handsome face. The times they had together before his demon infection flooded her mind. From the moment they met, all the way to their makeshift town-tour as a two-person band, and finally the minute she had realized that she had fallen head-over-heels for him. Her jaw clenched.

“I can’t, Kira,” Ariana declared. “I can’t kill him.”

The angel’s spirit grimaced. “Don’t say that. What would your father do without you? You know he would be devastated!”

Her ghostly image shimmered and faded. The two looked at each other longingly, for what they both knew would be the last time. Ariana reached out for Kira’s hand, but all she felt was the emptiness of the air slipping through her fingers. Her throat tightened as she desperately cried out.

“Please,” she begged. “Don’t leave me.”

Kira gave her one last gentle smile. Ariana stared with tear-filled eyes as the angel mouthed the words 'I love you' before finally fading away for good.

Ariana collapsed into the dirt as she wept. Eventually, she regained her composure and sat in silence, unable to process reality.

Kira, the woman who had loved and help raise her, was gone. Forever.

Closing her eyes, Ariana buried her face in her knees. As she heard a rustling noise come from right beside her, she instinctively spun around to face Ben. His body twitched, his face contorted as he muttered in his sleep.

Ariana crawled over and pressed a hand against his face. "Ben...are you alright?"

With a sudden jolt, Ben grabbed her hand, his eyes snapping open as he glared directly at her. They were blood red once again.

She screamed as he forced his hands on her throat and rocked her. Her vision twisted, blurred, and finally darkened.



"Ari! Wake up!"

Her eyes shot open to find Ben standing over her, his hands gently gripping her shoulders as he tried to rouse her. Once he saw that she had regained consciousness, he stepped back.

"You okay, Ari? You were screaming in your sleep."

Ariana froze. In her dream, Kira had passed on, coming to her as a spirit. Tears brimmed from her eyes as she leapt forward and latched onto Ben, sobbing uncontrollably.

She can't be dead. It was a nightmare, right?

“Hey, hey.” Ben pulled her in, hugging her tight against his body. He pulled away and stared at her with his concerned, storm-gray eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” She hesitated. “I had a bad dream. About Kira.”

“What happened?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“That she didn’t make it. That the demons—” she clenched the strap to Ole Betsy’s case tight in her hand.

“I hope not.” Ben brushed his hand through his dirty, matted hair. “But it’s like you said, right? She’s tough. She’ll pull—”

“Ben,” Ariana rasped; her jaw clenched. He met her gaze as she shook her head slowly. He froze, his eyes widened.

“So, she’s really...?”

She nodded as she allowed herself to cry. Ben immediately latched onto her and held her tight in his warm arms. Her petite fingers gripped the back of his torn jacket as she buried her face in his chest. He stood there with her, the weight of their shared emotions palpable in the air, until she had found the strength to pull away.

“I know what you said about not going back to help her, but...” Ben began.

She eyed him. “But what?”

“I still wish I could have done something to help. Anything.”

Ariana’s brows furrowed. “You know why you can’t. You’ll lose yourself to it.”

“Then I’ll use it sparingly, only when absolutely necessary.”

“You won’t use it at all, you hear?”

“Why not?” Ben scoffed. “Why can’t I protect those I care about?”

“Because when you use it, it takes you over even more. What do you think will happen if it does? At that point, it won’t matter whether you want to protect me, Kira, or anyone else. Because—”

“I’ll be no different than the demons,” he finished for her, his voice filled with a haunting intensity.

“Yeah.” Ariana frowned. “I meant what I said, Ben. I don’t want to see you become that monster again. Even if I suffer for it.”

Ben met her eyes, then hid behind his hair. The crisp forest breeze chilled her to the bone, the silence that hung between them even more so. All she could think about at that moment was keeping the boy she loved from turning into the wicked monster she had seen. She didn’t want to lose anyone else.

Finally, Ben pierced the ice-cold silence. “Okay.”

Ariana smiled gently and gripped his wrist, tempted to slide her hand into his.

Not the right time, girly, the voice said. Trust me!

She rolled her eyes and led him further up the path, her violin case slung tight across her shoulder. Her mind briefly flashed back to her conversation with Kira, who had encouraged her to be bold in her feelings with Ben. She’d wanted to, more than anything, but for now it would have to wait until he was free of the infection...provided they survived.

Even when we found the pool, she thought, what if it doesn’t work? Or if it kills him, like Kira suggested?

“How far do you think we are from the pool?” Ben asked.

Her brows drew together as she examined the path. Assuming the rest of it was still in one piece, it would be a relatively straight shot for them. Up north was the Sky City, considered the biggest metropolis in New Eden, suspended mid-air, surrounded by a large lake. Her initial plan was to barrel straight through it, however there was one problem:

Ben. If he lost control, the collateral damage would be far worse than both Riverglade's and Kira's village combined. That meant that going through Sky City was a last resort for them.

"Two, maybe three days. There's a city close to here, but..." she pursed her lips, "...I figured it would be better for us to go around. Either way, we gotta boogie."

"I get it. Towns, villages...not a good idea for me." Ben nodded. "Do you suppose anyone is coming after us?"

"That would be a yes," a voice growled from behind them. They both turned sharply and there stood Raziel, arms crossed and scarlet eyes blazing.

No, no, no! she thought, gripping Ben's wrist as they sprinted. *I can't let Raziel have him. Not when we're so close!*

"Run, Ben!" she shouted, and the pair ran deeper into the forest to lose their pursuer. They raced from the beaten path. Ariana's already tired feet threatened to fail her, or trip.

Eventually, she did. Her violin case nearly fell from her shoulder, but she kept it from flying and slamming into a large tree root. As Ben helped her recover, she tightened the strap around her torso to keep it fastened to her back. They prepared to run once more as Raziel materialized in front of them in a billow of dark smoke.

"This is pointless, girl," Raziel sneered. "Hand him over."

As Ben threw a defiant flame in his face, they diverted to the left and ran, trying to gain as much distance as possible. Ariana searched desperately until she finally located a large fallen oak, taking refuge within it. About twenty feet from her, Ben had slid into the shadow of a nearby rocky outcrop. She knew hiding wasn't exactly the best plan, but what good would running do if Raziel could just teleport?

Her veins pulsed in her ears as she held her quaking breath. Ben peeked over and motioned Raziel's direction to her as he mouthed 'stay down'.

Ariana nodded hastily, ducked back under the trunk, and mustered every ounce of self-control within her to stay as still as she could. For a moment, the forest was dead silence, not so much as a chirp from a bird. After that, she heard something: the snapping of twigs and the crunching of leaves, slowly making its way toward her. A cold sweat dripped down her forehead as she looked at Ben worriedly.

Ben briefly looked again, then back down, his teeth grit. He curled his fingers. The beginnings of a spark flashed in his palm.

Her eyes widened. Ben intended to fight.

'No!' she mouthed. He clenched his jaw and let the spark die down.

"I know you're here, Ben!" Raziel called, his voice as cold as the forest air. "No point in hiding. You know I'll find you, anyway."

Ben eyed her, his body still. Ariana's chest heaved with hushed, controlled breaths as she heard the leaves crunch but a few feet from her hiding spot. She inhaled sharply and held her breath.

"One way or another, we will rebuild our race. So why run from your duty? Why be so selfish?" Raziel taunted. "You would doom our kind for what? A human female? You know I can find a more suitable mate for you!"

Ben moved, but Ariana held her hand out and waved him off. He reluctantly complied.

"After all, it would be better than this little tramp!"

Ariana's brows furrowed. She didn't know what a tramp was, but the mere mention of someone else being with Ben made her blood boil, and she would not have it.

She sprung from her hiding spot to her full height and faced Raziel. "Now listen, you stupid—"

She froze. Raziel was directly in front of her, a smirk on his face and scarlet eyes blazing. She had been played.

"I knew that would work," he drawled. "You're so predictable."

"But I'm not."

Raziel spun in the voice's direction. Ben lunged at him, flame in hand, aimed directly at their attacker. He closed the distance with an inhuman speed, his fist a mere foot from the man's face.

In the split second between, a shield made of solidified flame rapidly materialized and blocked the strike. Raziel immediately gripped Ben's arm and flung him into a tree, which nearly shattered on impact.

Ariana used the opportunity to grab a nearby branch and pummel him across the back of the head with it. He scowled, slowly turning to glare at her.

She paled. "Uh oh."

He growled as he drew his blade and swung down; she flinched as she prepared for what would be her certain demise. It wasn't. His blade stopped a mere inch from her head. Raziel's arm trembled as he bared his teeth, his glare slowly softened to a scowl as he lowered his blade.

Her eyes widened. Just like before, in Riverglade, Raziel had chosen not to kill her.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Ben swiftly darted over and tackled him into the tree line. Bark and wood flew everywhere. To avoid a large chunk flying at her, she swiftly ducked and rolled, quickly regaining her footing to pursue them. She froze as she witnessed Ben staring Raziel down, shadow bleeding into the fire from his body as his ethereal armor formed.

Ariana's eyes widened. *No, no...please no...*

"Ben! Don't!" She ran forward, shouting. "You'll—"

Ben ignored her, his focus on the foe directly in front of him. His armor was almost completely formed, its body bestial, twisted, demonic. Ben's eyes brimmed with dark red energy, as if it were rage incarnate. The shadows crawled their way up his body; a strange symbol branded itself onto his forehead, lines stretching out from it and down his pale body like roots digging deep into the ground. Finally, the head of the ethereal armor finished forming, turning into a dragon-like face, with jagged teeth forming a twisted smile that would make even the demons deathly afraid.

Raziel's brows furrowed as he summoned his own ethereal armor. Ben's avatar barreled into him, pummeling him with balled-up claws and eventually shattered it. A blood-curdling screech came from the monstrosity as it forced its hand downward, trying to crush Raziel with its claws. He threw up a temporary shield and leapt back just in time for it to be broken.

Ariana stared, her breaths shallow, uneven. Her chest pulsed, the thumping in her ears grew louder. The words of Kira rang in her head.

If he truly loses control, she had said, you'll have to kill him.

Her shaking hand felt around her hip for Omega, which was still sheathed safely in its scabbard. Her fingers gripped the handle and drew the blade out.

"No." She slammed it back. "He's not gone. I won't do it."

Ariana faced back toward the titanic clash between the two twenty-foot figures. With each punch thrown, the trees trembled, causing a gust of wind that knocked her off balance. Her chest heaved as she struggled to regain her footing. The ground trembled beneath her as they continued their brutal battle.

Raziel appeared to be getting the upper hand. As Ben lurched forward to tackle, he ducked under and slammed his opponent into the ground. Dirt and chunks of rock shot out

from the newly formed crater and nearly struck her as she took shelter behind a large oak.

“You’ve stopped holding back, but it’s not enough!” Raziel planted a foot on Ben’s armor, his voice deep. “The girl holds you back!”

He raised his foot, but Ben had grabbed it, shattered it, and forced Raziel onto the ground with him. He jumped back as Raziel struck, narrowly avoiding the blow aimed at the center of his ethereal armor.

Ben’s avatar attempted to double back and strike but was promptly kicked in the head. The dragon-like face on Ben’s armor shattered as it fell back into a large, dead oak. Shadow bled out from the cracks as the beast’s eye blazed.

“You see, Ben...” Raziel began. “I can teach you how to reach your full potential. You won’t have to worry about demons, or anybody else bothering you ever again. We can live out the rest of our existence in peace and power!”

The beast that was Benjamin Blake looked up at him and flashed him an insidious grin.

“But you’re weak. You need to shed that weakness by following me!”

“Stop!” Ariana called, running out to them. “Don’t push him, or he’ll—”

It was too late. Ben turned, ripped the dead oak out by its root, and had forced him to the ground. He slammed it into Raziel’s armor, over and over, until it started giving way. Each strike was harder, more vicious than the next.

Finally, it happened. The chest of Raziel’s armor had collapsed, unveiling the weakness within. Ben raised the stake to deal the final blow.

Ari! the voice cried. You have to stop him. Now!

“Ben!” Ariana screamed.

The beast stopped in its tracks, the half-shattered head spinning to face her. It clenched its teeth, cracking some of them as it twisted into a hideous, demonic grin.

Ariana paled and hid behind a tree. A second later, the monstrosity was there, searching. She slowly, quietly crept away from the beast as more of Kira's words echoed in her mind.

What if he hurts you? What would your father do without you?

She quivered as the thought passed through her. Kira was right, and now she would likely die to the very person she had sworn to save.

No, Ariana thought defiantly. I won't die. I'll snap him out of it, and...

A shadow loomed over her, parting into jaws filled with jagged teeth. She felt a growl rumble above her. At that moment, her heart nearly stopped. The world around her twisted and warped, her senses faded away. Her body was taking mercy on her, given that she was about to be torn to shreds by the boy she loved.

Clenching her eyes shut, Ariana braced for the end.

It never came. Raziel had reformed his armor, tackled him away, and dug his ethereal blade in between the cracks of Ben's, tearing it open enough to expose him. He dug into the newly made gap, slamming into Ben and knocking him unconscious. The monstrosity shattered and faded as she stared, her breath held.

Raziel reverted to his normal form and slung the unconscious Ben over his shoulder. He took a quick look at Ariana, his piercing gaze lingering for a moment, before vanishing into a wisp of smoke.

It took her about thirty seconds to process what had happened. Raziel had successfully overpowered Ben and

finally taken him from her. Now she was all alone in the forest. She had failed.

“No...please no,” Ariana begged, a desperate prayer to anyone who would hear. “Bring him back. Please bring him...”

Suddenly, Raziel reappeared from behind, startling her. She attempted to run, but he had already grabbed her wrists and clasped his hand over her mouth.

“Listen, girl. I may have underestimated the situation,” he admitted.

Ariana's eyes remained locked on him, her chest tight as shock pulsed through her. She gathered her wits and slowly pushed his hand away from her mouth, allowing her to finally speak. “What did you do to Ben? I'll hurt you if...”

“It's not what I did to him,” Raziel said. “It's what the demon's did.”

“What do you mean?”

“As much as it annoys me to say it...” he looked her square in the eye, “...I may need your help.”

Chapter 17

Legend of the Soraphim

The last thing Ben remembered was spawning his ethereal armor and putting a beating on Raziel. After that, he teleported him to what appeared to be a strange old cabin. He couldn't make out much, given that his vision was blurry, but remembered him stumbling away and disappearing into smoke.

About a minute later, Raziel teleported back into the cabin, but this time with someone else.

"Ben!" a familiar voice cried out.

Ariana? Why is she here?

There was a sudden burning sensation in his chest, like someone had lit gasoline inside his organs. He convulsed, but then saw Raziel run over and pin him down to the ground. The darkness filled his blurred vision, tunneling to focus on the man who had attacked him and Ariana.

Ben's eyes narrowed. Right now, he hated him more than anything in the world. A voice in his head hissed, the words burning themselves into his mind.

Kill them all.

"Girl!" Raziel said. "Get his attention! I'll reduce the...argh!"

Ben's menacing growl reverberated through the air as he unleashed a torrent of hellfire, pinning him against the corner. He sat up and aimed his hand at Raziel to finish him.

Kill.

“Ben, no! Please.” Ariana grabbed his hand and forced it away from Raziel. “Listen, you’re better than that. You can beat this.”

Ben looked at her. His vision slowly came back into focus on Ariana. Her tangled hair fell across her soot-covered face; a minor burn touched her cheek to her eyes that were darkened from worry. Despite it all, Ariana was still the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

“Just focus on me.” Ariana placed her hands on Ben’s face. “Don’t think about any of that. Please, it’s okay.”

Lowering his hand, Ben obeyed. As the minutes passed, the rage and hate within him dissolved like ice under a warm sun.

Raziel recovered and assisted Ariana in holding him to the floor. He muttered an incantation in a strange, holy language. The burning pain in Ben’s stomach subsided, and the fog steadily cleared from his mind.

“Well, that was difficult,” Raziel mused as he clutched his wound. “Nice shot, by the way. You must have put some serious venom into it.”

Ariana turned to him. “He didn’t mean it! It was the—”

“Thank you for stating the obvious.” He eyed Ben. “We should go, now that we bought some time.”

Ben arched an eyebrow. “We?”

Raziel tried to stand but fell onto his knees. The wound in his side pulsed with the remnants of Ben’s hellfire. He sighed.

“Nevermind. I suppose we’ll be staying here.”

“There is no us, Raziel.” Ben glared at him. “Do you have any idea what that stupid fight cost me and Ari? We were so close. We would have been at the Pool of Eden by now.”

Raziel arched an eyebrow. “The what?”

Ben grunted and shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Enough of this crap. Ari and I are leaving."

"Fine. By all means, begone." Raziel dismissively waved them away with a mocking gesture. "Unless you want to know the truth."

Ben scoffed. "About what?"

"Our kind, the Soraphim. Why do we exist? What happened to us? What are we capable of?"

"And how does any of that relate to me?"

Raziel leaned in. "Because, like it or not, you are a Soraphim, Ben. Above all else, you have a duty to us to at least hear me out. You can continue to stumble along your little journey with no knowledge, or you can listen to me and have actual guidance for once."

Ben quickly exchanged glances with Ariana, whose azure eyes pleaded with him not to listen. With a sigh, Ben turned to sit in front of Raziel. Ariana reluctantly followed suit.

"Fine. Tell me what you know. Make it quick."

Raziel stood up and pulled a nearby chair to him as he gently lowered himself into it. "We, the Soraphim, were a fire-wielding race discovered by the Archangels, later inducted into the Host. Our true purpose remained a mystery, but the Creator graciously granted us a tranquil realm of our own. One day, an angel named Lucifer spread his ideas of anarchy, and many other angels followed him, especially one who would one day be called Aka Manah."

Something in Ben clicked. A memory.

We have him. Inform Aka Manah.

"Wait," Ben interrupted him. "Who is he? I overheard a demon say that name."

"He is an Archdemon," Raziel said with a grimace. "He specializes in deceit and evil intent. Before that, he was an angel like all the others, who shared Lucifer's ideals of

supposed freedom.” His eyes lowered. “In my younger years, I fell for those ideas. Ever since my people were inducted into the Host, we were regarded with disdain, treated as if we were abominations, creatures from the shadows. I wanted us to be free from them once more. In my foolishness, I...agreed to help Lucifer.”

“You joined them?” Ariana asked.

Raziel nodded. “Lucifer convinced me that the Creator was a tyrant that denied us free will and the right to do as we pleased, and likewise, I tried to convince my people. Despite their treatment they received from the beings in the Heavens, they refused to disobey the Creator. In return...” Raziel’s scarlet eyes shut, his jaw clenched, “...he and three other demons slaughtered them. They almost killed me, too.”

“Wait, they’re all gone?” Ben asked. “Wouldn’t there have to be a survivor? At least one?”

“You would think so. But as their leader, I knew every single one of them. Once I discovered the atrocity, I canvassed my village, counting every corpse, every innocent killed. But they were all gone.” He struggled with his words. “Even the kindest of them. My mother, Ira.”

Ben and Ariana stared at him steadily, the hostility in their eyes slowly faded.

“We...didn’t know.” Ariana frowned. “I’m—”

“I felt so lost. So angry. I was angry at Aka Manah for his betrayal, at the Creator as he stood by and did nothing!” Raziel scoffed, ignoring Ariana as he ranted. “All that infinite power, and yet, he ignored them while they died in agony. Damn him!”

Ben quickly exchanged looks with Ariana before turning back to Raziel. “What happened after that?”

Raziel’s eyes glistened in resolute anger. “After I found my dead brethren, I discovered that my ability to manipulate

fire had evolved. Now, I could truly weaponize it, even form it to whatever I desired. Take the Nephilim Shell, for instance.”

“What exactly is it?” Bed asked.

Raziel leaned back in his chair. “Think of it as a solidified version of your fire. Any shape, weapon, armor you can think of, so long as your mind and body have the strength to wield them. In certain instances, such as...” He paused, giving thought to his words. “...our battle. Your infection had overtaken you. In your blind rage, you held a full set of armor for the duration of the battle without exhausting yourself. I hoped your resolve was strengthening finally, but—”

“That’s why you kept provoking him?” Ariana questioned. “Even though you knew his demon infection gets worse every time he uses it?”

“I didn’t know, and yes. Our abilities as Soraphim manifest at their strongest when we face danger or great stress,” Raziel corrected.

“No kidding,” Ariana grumbled.

“So, where does it come from? The fire?” Ben asked. “Also, why the weird name?”

“I met a Nephilim who had been freed from demonic control on Earth. I noticed that when I spawned my armor, I was roughly his height. Also, that particular Nephilim was a good friend of mine, so I saw fit to grant him that honor. As for the fire...” Raziel looked at his palm and briefly lit a flame before extinguishing it. “Even I don’t know why we have these abilities. An angel I knew theorized that fire was our true form, that this human-like shell is simply that. A shell.”

“Alright,” Ben answered simply, more confused than before. “So, what did you do after that?”

“I killed two of the three demons that murdered my family and went to the battlefield to find Aka Manah and exact vengeance. But to my surprise, I discovered they had banished him to another realm—Earth, of all places. I spent most of my

time there searching for him. Eventually, it led me back to New Eden.” He eyed the forest outside. “Our home, before the slaughter. The realm originally gifted to us by the Creator.”

Ben and Ariana’s eyes collectively widened in shock. She stepped forward. “New Eden was your home?”

Raziel nodded as he continued to stare at the outside tree line as a cold wind shifted its way into the cabin. “I remember it, the dim lights, the sky above, all so peaceful. Some of us grew adventurous, traveled as far as these mountains, though at the time they were far smaller.” He grimaced. “And now, to see how time and the Creator have forgotten us. Every trace of us, gone. Erased, as if we never existed. I’m sure you can imagine how I feel.”

Ben’s eyes widened as a thought came to his mind. If New Eden was the ancestral home of the Soraphim, would that explain his mysterious arrival here?

But what about my memories of Earth? My death? Ben thought. *What about Lilly?*

“That’s terrible,” Ariana said, her lips curled. “I’m sorry you had to endure that.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but...” Raziel hesitated, “...this, I’ve learned, is the way of the universe. Life grows, dies, and gives birth to new life in a pointless bid to resist the inevitable darkness that awaits all of us.”

“Oblivion?” Ben asked.

Raziel eyed him, though not with hostility. His gaze didn’t carry his usual arrogance. Now, they held what seemed to Ben like despair.

“Yes. The Great Darkness, as some call it. The angels and Host call it ‘The Final Death.’”

Death. The word echoed in Ben’s mind, reminding him of the judgmental eyes and deathly fire in his recurring visions. A being, the rings of orange light with holy, evil scripture

embroidered into seven smaller ones surrounding the main. Below it lay a dead world, a sea of blood...with him in it.

Ben hesitated, briefly considering telling Raziel. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Ariana interrupted.

"What about the Final Realm? The Creator's land?" she asked.

Raziel scoffed. "A fairytale, if you ask me. I've been alive since the very beginning and I've yet to see anything remotely close to an afterlife."

"Then what is New Eden for?" Ben asked. "People come here from Earth. They live here, just like they did before."

Raziel rolled his eyes. "Correction, I've seen nothing indicative of a permanent afterlife. As you saw, people here still die."

Ben avoided his scarlet gaze as his jaw clenched. He felt tempted to throw another fireball at Raziel just for bringing it up. As if sensing the rising tension, Ariana asked another question. "So, if the Soraphim are gone, then why is Ben here?"

"Yeah." Ben blinked. "How do you know that I'm not your descendant?"

"Well..." Raziel paused thoughtfully. "I've had a few human partners over the eons..."

"And you called Ari a tramp," Ben joked.

"So that's what a 'tramp' is?" Ariana blinked, her brows narrowing. "Wow."

"They were my partners, not my playthings." Raziel rolled his eyes and continued. "Doesn't even matter, considering I outlived them all. Anyway, I tried to restart our race myself, but it...never happened." He scowled. "For so long, I thought I was doomed to be the last, until I found you."

"And how did you find me?"

"I never stopped searching. There were always rumors that more had appeared out of the darkness, as was theorized before. I investigated many of those claims but found nothing. One day, I had overheard a group of she-demons talk about their plan to capture and 'corrupt' a Soraphim. I was skeptical until I saw you snap the she-demon's neck myself."

Ben's eyes widened. "You were there?"

Raziel nodded.

"So you waited until after Dad left to go after him?" Ariana concluded.

"Of course. The two angels he left behind weren't a challenge."

Ariana glared. "They were our friends, you know. You nearly killed them."

Raziel glared back. "I don't kill angels, but I also don't tolerate those who get in my way, your father included. Although..." he scratched his chin, "...he has a resolve I've not seen in an angel since the beginning age. He's strong."

"Dad?" Ariana's eyes widened. "He's not...?"

"Dead? No. In fact, he and I took down that Wicked Giant, but not before your village became a smoldering wreck. Last I left him, he was still there. I would assume he's not far behind. All he needs to do is follow the chaos."

"Then we wait for him," Ben suggested. "We team up, and..." A pulse thrummed in Ben's chest, and he froze. He doubled over as he felt the demon influence once again creeping further into him. A few deep breaths and a clear mind later, he forced it back down into the depths. As Ariana placed her hand on him worriedly, Raziel's eyes narrowed.

"It would appear time is a commodity we do not have."

Ben grimaced. As much as he hated to admit it, Raziel was right. They had to get moving. His use of the armor in the forest had sped up the infection even further. Soon enough, in

Daniel's own words, he would be no different from the demons.

"Wait..." Ben paused as he stood to his feet. "Why do the demons want me? Why not go after you?"

"They want to corrupt you, turn you into a monstrosity like them." Raziel sighed. "That aside, I truly do not know. But let me ask you a question. What are you going to do when you finally give in to the darkness? How do you know you won't kill your precious Ariana?"

Ben's brows furrowed. "I would never hurt her."

Raziel opened his mouth to retort but didn't, turning to look at Ariana. Her eyes were wide, her lips pursed as she shook her head in protest. The two stared, as if sharing some unspoken words between them. He sighed in defeat.

"Either way," Raziel said. "What exactly do you plan to do about this infection? Demon bites aren't something that one simply purges. Yours is getting to the point to where even your body is—"

"Raziel!" Ariana begged. "Please."

Ben arched an eyebrow. "What about my body?"

Raziel and Ariana exchanged a quick look before their concerned gazes turned back to him.

"Ben," Raziel began. "Go look in that mirror over there."

Slowly, Ben complied, turning as a wary look came to his face. Ariana stared nervously as he walked in front of the faded, cracked mirror. Ben's fractured reflection stared back at him, but he noticed something. He was changing. Paleness had washed over his skin, his eyes now hollowed, and his hair marked with streaks of white.

The biggest difference was the infection. He rolled his sleeve up to see his arm nearly covered in it. The blackened roots stemming from the demon bite had invaded him to where it nearly stretched across his whole body. The dark

veins coursed and pulsed under the skin of his face. As he stared in horror, his half-gray, half-red eyes glared back.

“Oh, crap.”

Raziel nodded solemnly. “It has progressed farther than it should have at this point. I don’t know if there’s anything more we can do.”

“Actually, there is,” Ariana said. “Further up the mountains, past the Sky City, is the Pool of Eden. It can heal him!”

“More fairytales,” Raziel said with an eyeroll. “How do you know it isn’t a trap?”

“We got the information from a close friend. An angel named Kira.”

Raziel’s eyes briefly widened, as if he recognized the name. He shrugged. “I... suppose it’s credible.” He cleared his throat as he continued. “So, tell me. Do you really wish to bring him onto a floating rock crowded with people?”

“Our plan was to go around, but...” Ben turned to see himself in the mirror once more, “...we might not have time for that now.”

“So through, then.” Raziel nodded. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it is a bit of a walk from here. This cabin is a few miles before the mountains.”

“Wait just a minute, now,” Ariana started as she stormed up to Raziel. “You mean to tell me after all that walking that we did to get there, you teleported us all the way back here?” She growled. “Now we’re even shorter on time than we were before!”

“Yeah.” Ben glared at him. “Thanks, jerk.”

Raziel rolled his eyes and threw up both of his hands. “My apologies. I only wanted to capture you and somehow begin our race anew, but unfortunately, your little infection poses a problem. Seeing as how that girl...” he gestured to Ariana as he

spoke, "...is the only thing that can keep you sane, it's not worth separating you from her. If her little tale about this supposed 'Pool of Eden' holds up, we can cure this petty annoyance of a disease. On top of that, I'd rather not deal with you when you're out of control again. I can't even imagine what would happen if you squashed poor little Ariana here."

Ben resisted the urge to punch him and eyed him carefully. "What exactly are you suggesting? That we stay here?"

Raziel tilted his head in thought. "Actually..." he leapt out of his chair and grabbed them. They reappeared at the edge of a cliff. The rest of the landscape was filled with majestic mountains, their peaks reaching for the sky, while a massive landmass loomed above a serene lake. On the floating rock was a Venice-style metropolis, with a large spire erupting from the middle. A road extended to the landmass, allowing for travel. A rogue wind howled as Raziel, Ariana, and Ben gazed upon the city.

"...I was thinking we could stay here."

Ariana and Ben looked at each other, smiling. Finally, they were one step closer to ridding him of the demonic corruption once and for all.

Chapter 18

The Mass Exodus

Zachariel, Michael, and Gabriel had landed in the alcove of a mountain overlooking a small, peaceful town. An enormous crowd of refugees stayed on the outskirts in a makeshift camp as some of the townsfolk tended to those who needed it. Others mingled with the villagers, helping cook, clean, and anything else that the tiny village required to sustain their visitors. A few hundred of the refugees had packed their things and continued further north, forming a long trail of people that stretched as far as the next mountain.

Other than that, most of the people were going about their day, without a care in the world. It reminded him of Riverglade, just days before everything had gone to chaos.

Zachariel sighed with sorrow. His once beautiful village was gone. If it weren't for Ben, he would still do his simple patrols, mingling with the townsfolk, coffee in hand. Above all, he would still have his daughter with him, safe and sound. Now, Riverglade lay in ruins, any hope of a return to the life before shattered like the lives within it.

All because of Benjamin Blake.

I should have killed him. Then none of this would have happened.

He shook the thought from his addled mind as shame crept back into him. Despite the infection and its disastrous results, he knew none of it was truly Ben's fault. All the poor boy wanted was answers, and now he had become a victim of circumstance.

Zachariel hesitated. Even if Ben was innocent at first, there was still his demon bite. Why would the demons choose him as a target? Because of his fire? Surely it would be a boon to them, an out-of-control Ben would certainly wreak havoc across the realm and plunge it into chaos.

No, he thought, *there must be something else. Something more.*

Interrupting his troubled thoughts, Gabriel propped his foot upon a rock and gazed outward at the small village and the crowd outside it. "You know how I've always been the optimist, brother?"

Zachariel managed a smile. "Unfortunately."

Gabriel looked back. "I'm glad this village stepped up to help their neighbors. But this crowd makes for an excellent target."

"For a demon attack, you mean?"

The Archangel nodded. "It's a frightening thought, but..." He scratched his beard, "...what if that's what the demons are trying to accomplish?"

"Wouldn't be far from them, but I doubt it. They're planning something." Michael walked up, his intense blue eyes fixed on the town below. "But whatever it is, it has something to do with their new fortress."

"Agreed." Zachariel stared down at the village, seeing a young girl strum a guitar to the joy of the refugees watching her, much like Ariana would have. It almost made him smile.

Gabriel noticed and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll find her and Ben."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Zachariel grimaced. "I still feel guilty. I never should have sent her with him."

"You're worried about his infection?" Gabriel inquired.

"It's—" he hesitated, "—I don't know. There's just something off about the boy."

Michael arched an eyebrow. "Explain?"

"I'm...not exactly sure how to describe it," Zachariel began, trying to piece together his garbled thoughts like a puzzle. "Ever since he arrived in my village, I've had this strange feeling of dread. I didn't even understand what it was until—"

Something clicked. He thought back to Ben's first moments in Riverglade, when he had sensed the boy's aura. The feeling was barely discernible, as if hidden within him, but undeniably present. The insidious, uneasy feeling that nearly made every hair and feather on Zachariel's body stand on edge. He couldn't fully comprehend it until he had received that vision in the forest: the divine, judgmental eyes, the fire, the death.

"There's more to him than just his fire, or his Soraphim lineage," Zachariel said. "Beyond all that, he's part of something else. Something dark, dangerous."

"Dark and dangerous," Gabriel said, nodding as he touched his chin. "Such as?"

"I..." His brows furrowed as he did his best to recall the terrifying images, "...in the forest, where he had arrived, I received a vision."

"Of what?" Micheal turned from observing the village, eyeing him. Zachariel studied his superior for a moment before sighing.

"I saw death in measures I couldn't comprehend, countless lives eradicated by fire."

The Archangel's eyes flashed. "What else?"

"There was some kind of being, clouded in shadow. I couldn't make out much of it, but I remember the eyes. Evil, judgmental, yet righteous at the same time. Whatever it was, it came not from the demons or the Fallen One."

"And what makes you think it's tied to the boy?" Gabriel asked.

“When I’m near him...” Zachariel began, “...he almost feels like a bad omen. A warning. I don’t have any other way to describe it.”

“Strange.” Gabriel’s brows furrowed as he turned to his fellow Archangel, “What say y—”

Michael wasn’t listening. His eyes were wide, fists clenched, his shimmering blue wings rigid.

“What’s wrong, brother?”

Zachariel’s eyes widened. Michael knew something about the monstrosity he saw.

As if to confirm it, the Archangel finally replied, “There are certain things I am forbidden by the Creator to divulge. But...” He looked down at the village, a sense of urgency flashing in his eyes, “...if it is what I think it is, then the whole situation is far more dire than we expected. We cannot let the demons get their talons on Ben at any cost.”

Gabriel stood beside his brother and gazed down the mountain. “Maybe they passed through here? It’s close to Kira’s village.”

“It’s a start. Either way, we need to get moving.” Michael’s wings shifted around his body and melded together to form a brown cloak with a hood, hiding his armor. Zachariel and Gabriel followed suit and formed their own.

The three angels jumped down and began sliding down the mountainside toward the town, hopeful that they would finally get somewhere.



Zachariel and Gabriel sat on a bench in the middle of the town for roughly half an hour, monitoring civilians incognito, while Michael spoke to the angel in charge of the village.

As they sat quietly, Zachariel's mind wandered, and his restless spirit stirred. Every passing moment, he grew more worried, the horrifying possibilities flashed through his mind. Best case, they were both alive. Ben was still in control; Ariana was safe. Worst case...

No, he decided. I can't let myself believe that. She's safe. She must be.

Zachariel breathed deeply, doing his best to reassure himself and rid his mind of the unhealthy doom-and-gloom scenarios he had plagued himself with. As much as he tried, one thought stood apart from all the rest.

I had a duty to protect my village, but... he grimaced. I still wish I had gone with them.

To distract himself, he looked up and watched the townsfolk and refugees. The sea of noise with the strumming of the young girl's guitar eased him a little, reminded him of home, even if it wasn't there anymore.

He listened in further to their conversations, hoping for something useful: a rumor of a flame-wielding boy or a violin-toting girl. While he heard nothing he had hoped for, he recognized a name: Marge.

Zachariel blinked and listened in further. It was then that he heard the hissing voice of a teenage girl calling out to someone. "Come on, Bailey! Stop being slow! We have a job to do. Be ready to drop that beacon and get out of here!"

Bailey? That's one of the names Ariana mentioned, Zachariel thought, and they turned out to be...

"Demons." Gabriel stood up and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes widening in fervent anticipation. "I sense demons."

Like him, Zachariel also gripped the handle of his blade. Were they the same she-demons that attacked Ben and Ariana back at Riverglade? If they were, he wasn't sure how they could

have survived, considering that he impaled one through the chest. The other two were slain by Ben.

Are they survivors? Zachariel wondered as he searched the crowd, *or...?*

“Brother,” Gabriel whispered. “We’re close. Follow my lead.”

He nodded as Gabriel took the lead. If the two of them could get close enough while disguised, then perhaps they might take one alive.

Zachariel and Gabriel slowly crept their way toward the yet to be identified demons. One of them held a strange, gray and red box and hastily attempted to cover it with a loose rag.

Maybe it’s used to attract other demons, Zachariel thought, *or worse.*

In haste, he sped up his walking. The haphazard clack of his boots, despite the noise of the crowd, caused one of the hooded demons to look back, only her ragged mouth could be seen. Her ugly teeth grit as it spun around to alert her siblings.

Zachariel’s eyebrows furrowed. The demons had spotted them.

“Chase after them!” He forcefully pushed his way through the crowd, determined to reach the she-demons. Slowly, they morphed into their demonic forms; the faux shreds of human skin fell flat against the street as they desperately ran.

“Marge! Bailey! Keep them off my back! I need time to deploy it!” hissed the leader, which he assumed was ‘Alexis.’

Zachariel flung aside the cloak and formed it back into his wings, readying his blazing sword. With a swift strike, he vaporized one of the she-demons, then lurched skyward, attempting to come down on the leader. The remaining follower blocked it with her own curved weapon, giving the leader time to scramble farther away, just out of Gabriel’s reach.

The she-demon swiped her weapon across in desperation, looking to make any opening. As she swung her curved blade wildly, she made the mistake of jabbing at his chest. He leapt to the side and grabbed her arm, twisted, and snapped it to restrain her from attacking. Her curved blade clattered to the ground as she shrieked so inhumanly that, for a brief second, he considered putting her down on the spot.

Zachariel pressed his foot against her chest, forcing her to the ground, as he finally got a good look. There was no mistaking it. It was the same demon he had slain in Riverglade village.

“How are you still alive?” he hissed, holding the blade at her throat. The she-demon struggled under the increasing pressure of his foot, garbling in hate and frustration. He planted the blade in the ground about an inch from her face and angled it so it scraped her neck. “What are you doing here?”

She stopped struggling and looked up at him, her desperate look replaced with an insidious grin. “Only following orders, angel. Same as you.”

“And what would those be?” He let the blade cut into her neck just a little further, hoping the pain would make her more compliant.

She momentarily stopped struggling and glared up at him. “You’ll see soon. You can kill us all you want, but we’ll keep on coming. This realm will fall.”

Zachariel scoffed. “What makes you so sure of that?”

“Because it’s too late to stop us.” The she-demon smirked. “Besides, why ask when you already know the answer?”

The angel froze. “Ben. His infection...”

“Put him under pressure and he’ll crack. The more he uses that fire, the more he becomes like us,” she hissed. “And the angels shall watch as their precious humans die, including that brat Ari—”

That was enough for him. Zachariel finished her off by grabbing the blade and swinging it downward, decapitating the demon like a guillotine. With a forceful pull, he ripped the sword from the ground, wiping it with his cloak as the creature's warning filled him with unease.

So, they mean to use him. He sheathed the blade as he tried to piece together the demon's plan. *But for what, exactly?*

The demon's last words echoed in his mind, a chilling reminder of the countless lives that would be lost because of Ben's complete infection. Demons loved creating chaos, but surely, they wouldn't go through all the effort of corrupting the boy just for that?

Also, he thought, if his infection takes him, then where...?

Zachariel's eyes widened in a horrifying realization. The whole time, the demons had been systematically attacking the villages, killing who they could, forcing Ben, Ari, and the refugees north, concentrating them into one specific place, like pigs to a slaughter.

If they break him there, he thought, then that entire city will become a deathtrap.

"Michael! Gabriel!" Zachariel spun sharply as he ran up to them. "I know where Ben and Ari are going! We need to—"

In the split second before the ground beneath him gave way, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. The leader of the demons had slipped by his brothers and had finished activating her strange box. A loud crack filled the air, sending the three angels flying in separate directions. The force of the blast flung Zachariel into a nearby building, where he became ensnared amidst the scattered debris of stone and wood.

Zachariel looked up as the dust from the tear in the ground had finally subsided. A thirty-foot Wicked Giant appeared and brought havoc and mayhem upon the town.

No, he thought, *not again!*

He looked over to the left, where the village angel had been trying to free a trapped villager. He watched in horror as a flaming meteor decimated her, her body shattered into trillions of tiny particles of light.

Desperately, he thrashed about, trying to break free from his restraints, while people scattered in fear. The titanic monstrosity went to work, grabbing, crushing, stomping as many people as it could. Soon, the streets of the once peaceful village were bathed in blood, much like his own home.

Gabriel landed next to him, helping him up from the rubble of the building. They faced the beast and drew their weapons.

“Any idea how to defeat this thing?” Gabriel asked.

Zachariel faced forward, eying the beast. The last time he had come across one, it had taken both him and Raziel to defeat it. This time, however, there was still a crowd, plenty of innocents still left in the village.

“Maybe, but...” He grimaced as he looked at the townspeople, “...we can’t do it now. The beast’s weakness is only revealed when it attacks, and we want to prevent that.”

Gabriel’s eyes the fleeing innocents. “What can we do? Distract it?”

Zachariel grimaced. “For now.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

The two angels took off into the air towards the Wicked Giant, their swords held behind them, like a scorpion tail poised to strike. The beast’s blazing evil eyes met theirs as they dove in for the first attack.

It braced as the two angels dug their blades as deep as possible, dragging it across the tough skin of the monster. They broke off just as it swung wildly, attempting to smash them with its balled fist.

“Think we have its attention now?” Gabriel asked.

Zachariel observed it as he hovered, never taking his eyes from it. From its shadowy face came a hideous, twisted grin. It ignored the angels and continued to herd the humans further north, trampling any that couldn’t make it.

His ethereal eyes widened. The Wicked Giant knew what they were trying to do.

The angel dove once more, spreading his wings to catch the wind, his body a mere two feet from the bloodied ground. He struck the Giant’s heel with such a ferocity that it caused it to stumble. He tucked his wings in and slid to a halt about thirty feet in front of the giant.

Zachariel briefly glanced back to see it recover. He looked forward, seeing the townspeople flee north, to what he knew would only be a delayed death for them if the demons succeeded.

The blood-curdling scream of a child filled the air behind him. He spun around to see the young girl that strummed the guitar helplessly holding her hands up against the beast as it reached for her.

In that split second, his instincts kicked in, propelling him into action. He spread his wings and flapped them backward to give him a running start towards her, but it seemed as if it wouldn’t be enough. The Wicked Giant’s hand was a mere five feet from her, preparing to crush the child in its shadowy grip. At that moment, the image of the young girl briefly took on the form of a young Ariana.

No! he thought, I won’t make it!

The Wicked Giant’s hand fell limp about two feet from where the girl was, the beast’s horned head close to it. Its body dissipated into shadow as Michael landed next to the girl, his brilliant blue wings shining.

Zachariel sighed with relief. The young girl quickly hugged both Michael and Zachariel as Gabriel landed next to them, tucking his silver wings in.

"Thank you," she said, grateful tears streaming down her young, puffy cheeks, "Thank you so much."

"Of course, young one." Zachariel rested his hand on her shoulders. "Where are your parents?"

She frowned and gestured to a pile of rubble a few feet away, with a bloodied, feminine arm sticking out. His eyes widened in horror.

Even when we protect them, he thought somberly, we always fail and people suffer for it.

"I'm sorry, little one," he said, pulling the girl close. She silently cried as Zachariel stood to his full height, looking at Michael. The Archangel met his somber gaze with one of his own.

"How many are left here?" Gabriel asked as he looked around.

"Many fled North," he explained. "I assume they're going to the Sky City, which—"

"—the demon's next target." Zachariel finished for him. "Their plan is to push the refugees and Ben into the same place to unleash him. If they succeed, the entire city will become a floating deathtrap. We need to stop it."

"Agreed, brother." Gabriel nodded, turning to Michael. "What of the fortress? Or the Mass Exodus?"

"Do we even have the capacity to assault the fortress? Or evacuate the realm?" Zachariel asked.

"No, but I've already sent a messenger to Earth to request a few warriors from Heaven's legion, but it will take some time for them to disengage safely. We don't want to trade one objective for another unless absolutely necessary." His brows furrowed. "We still don't know where the fortress is. Even

under threat of death, the demons refused to tell me anything other than ‘the realm will fall.’”

“Unusual of them to be so stoic,” Gabriel noted.

“These demons...” he began as both Archangels eyed him, “...I’ve fought them before.”

“Where?” Gabriel asked. “Riverglade?”

Zachariel nodded. “The problem is, they should all be dead. I killed one myself, and Ben destroyed the other two.”

“Impossible.” Michael’s eyes narrowed. “You’re absolutely sure?”

“I’m certain. I faced down a demon in the forest where I found Ben. It too, was as fearless as these three, almost as if it knew it wouldn’t truly die.”

“You’re suggesting they can cheat death?” Gabriel inquired.

“Exactly, though I don’t know how.” He glanced at Michael. “Maybe that answer lies in the fortress?”

“Perhaps. Although, our priority is preventing the fall of the Sky City. We know they’re herding the humans toward it for some kind of assault. I assume the hidden fortress of theirs is the means.”

“But why?” Gabriel asked. “What does mass death gain them? They prefer corruption to destruction, don’t they?”

“I don’t know, but...” Zachariel grimaced. “...it seemed excited at the prospect of him losing himself to the infection. But why use him when they could simply overwhelm the Sky City?”

“Strange indeed.” Gabriel scratched his chin. “Why go through all the effort just to cause such an atrocity?”

“Because we’ve got it all wrong,” Michael began. “The end goal isn’t destruction and death. It’s completing Ben’s corruption and bringing him under their control.” He gestured

to the ruined village. "All this ruin? Assuming they succeed? Nothing but a means to test their new weapon."

Zachariel's eyes widened. "Then we need to get there as fast as possible." He looked forward to the path, to see only a few of the villagers and refugees left staring at them. "And we need to keep others from arriving."

Gabriel nodded. "I'll handle that, brothers." He knelt next to the girl that hid shyly behind Zachariel. "Do you have any other friends or family in the village?"

The girl slowly nodded.

He held his hand out with a gentle smile. "Let's go find them and make sure they're safe, okay?"

She smiled, grabbed her small, battered guitar, and grabbed onto Gabriel as he held her tight. He nodded and took off to keep the residents of the village from arriving at the Sky City before death could claim them.

"We should get going too." Michael spread his blue wings and tore into the sky. Zachariel followed suit, hoping they would arrive in time.

Chapter 19

The Sky City

Ariana, Ben, and Raziel finished their trek across the path leading up to the Sky City. The thin cobblestone climbed higher and higher until it touched landmass suspended mid-air above the glimmering waters far below. On it stood a crowded metropolis, the occasional spire pierced the sky and its clouds.

Despite all the travels she had undergone with her father and sometimes Kira, Ariana had never been there, to the place considered the jewel of New Eden. Visitors came from across the realm to witness its wonders; be it the various art shows, the street performers, or even the realm-famous orchestra, ‘Heaven’s Symphony’, of which she was a huge fan. Before Ben’s arrival, she had planned on one day doing a show at the open theater in the city center.

Ben huffed as they finally spilled onto the beginning of the city roads, crowded to the brim with people. He caught his breath as he glared at Raziel. “Dude. You couldn’t have teleported us just a little further?”

Raziel rolled his eyes. “I tried, but it’s hard when I’m injured.” He shot a glare back at him. “Besides, if I had exerted myself further, we might have ended up in the lake.”

“Ariana and I can swim. You probably would have drowned.”

“And you still would have wasted valuable time doing that besides climbing the path. Therefore, my decision was the best—”

Raziel fell over, clutching his abdomen as he coughed up blood. He lifted part of his tattered armor to reveal his wound, the charred skin slowly, desperately trying to pull itself back together.

Ariana knelt next to him. "Are you okay?"

Struggling, Raziel took deep, deliberate breaths, his body trembling as he attempted to rise. Ben wrapped his arm around his back, allowing him to lean against him. He sighed.

"I know we are short on time, but...I need rest," he admitted, almost grudgingly.

"So, we find somewhere to chill for the night, right?" Ben asked.

Ariana angled her head to look past the crowds and light-rimmed buildings, to the far mountains that towered even the tallest of the Sky City's spires. It was nearly dusk, the fading light from the sun cast a long shadow, the inner-city lights illuminated.

"That would be wise. With these crowds, it's easily half a day to the city center," Raziel said.

Ariana exchanged a quick glance with Ben, whose tired eyes pleaded with hers. More than anything, they need to keep moving, but it would do no good to wear themselves out even further. She sighed as she adjusted the strap for her violin case.

"Alright," she said. "Let's go."

They continued forward, their eyes darted across the cityscape, looking for any availability. Most of them were crowded with refugees from other villages, those that weren't full asked for an insanely high price, roughly three times the price of an inn in Riverglade.

"Sheesh," Ariana complained. "You'd think they would be a little understanding?"

"It's a city," Raziel pointed out. "The market runs rampant here. People don't know each other as well."

She huffed as Ben marveled at the metropolis while they walked. A small, cream-colored dog came running up and sat directly in front of her, staring. Ariana patted its head affectionately. "Aw! Cute doggy!"

Raziel rolled his eyes. "Scram, dog."

The dog gave Raziel a wide-eyed look, as if its pride had been violated. It uttered the word 'wow' in a quick, slightly hushed tone and took off in the opposite direction, back into the crowd.

The three of them walked again as Raziel sighed in annoyance. "Stupid mutt. Anyway, do you see anything?"

Ben craned his neck above the crowd. "Not so far. They all looked filled to the brim with people."

"Not a good idea, then." Raziel's brows furrowed in deep thought as he limped, "What street are we on?"

"Err..." Ariana briefly walked on her toes to see. "Nerriah, I think."

"See that older building just past the sign?"

Ariana stood on her toes to see it. She nodded.

"Go there. I know the owner." Raziel said.

They obeyed and helped him through the crowd, into the inn. The three of them passed under the aged wooden arch, into a humble store run by an old man. His eyes widened upon seeing Raziel.

"Ah! My old friend!" He came out from behind the counter and clasped his hand. Ariana and Ben exchanged a confused look.

"You have friends?" Ben asked.

"More than you," Raziel said. He turned to the old man. "I hate to bother you, Samuel, but..."

"You need somewhere to stay?"

Raziel nodded, dark circles under his eyes.

Samuel smiled. "Anything for you, old friend. This way." He gestured for them to go upstairs. They helped him tumble up the steps, until finally, they made it to the doorway.

Raziel looked forward. "We're here. Go inside and get comfortable."

Ariana bit her lip as she looked at the room, which was in a disappointingly shoddy shape. The walls were full of shredded wallpaper, parts of the wooden floor were torn up, and the bed looked uncomfortable. A spring broke loose as she touched the mattress.

"Or try to," Ben said.

Raziel broke free from their help and sat himself down in a chair in the room's corner. With a subtle gesture, he lowered his head, causing his hair to fall gracefully and shield his eyes from view. From that point on, he stood completely still, not even a twitch.

Ariana looked at Ben, gesturing to Raziel. "Maybe that's how he sleeps?"

"Probably." Ben shrugged. "Anyway, do you want the bed?"

"We can't share it?"

Ben's face flushed red. "Well...um..."

"Well, what?" Ariana asked, hands on her hips.

"I don't think it's a good idea," he admitted. "I'm sure even if we just sat on the same bed, he would probably kill me and ground you for life."

"He's not here, doofus." Ariana unstrapped her violin case and placed it next to the bed. "I don't get what the big deal is."

Ben sighed. "Ugh. Okay, fine." He took his shoes off and kicked them to the side of the room. "Zachariel is totally going to kill me once he finds us."

Ariana laid against the mattress, the inner springs digging into her back. Ben followed suit, though he laid on the edge, a good foot or two away from her. She raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t bite, ya know.”

Reluctantly, Ben scooted closer. He folded his hands together on his stomach, his arms tense.

“What’s making you so shy suddenly? Why is sharing a bed such a big deal?”

As Ariana turned on her side, she winced as a spring poked into her waist. She ignored it and focused on Ben’s increasingly red face, which he had now hidden in a pillow. He briefly removed it to look her dead in the eye.

“You mean you don’t know?”

Ariana’s eyes narrowed. “Know what?”

“Just...” Ben covered his face with the pillow once more, “...never mind. I’m just surprised your dad didn’t tell you about, uh, all that...stuff.”

She stared at him blankly, her soft hands propped her head up to look at him. “I still have no clue what you’re talking about. Why can’t you just tell me?”

Ben removed the pillow once more and took a deep breath. “Um, when two, uh...two people that like each other a lot. Some of them will find a bed and...”

“...kiss?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah.” He pursed his lips. “Sure.”

“Wow.” Ariana moved from her side and laid on her back, folding her hands behind her head. “That’s all it is? Seriously? I’ve seen people kiss in the street before. Doesn’t seem that big of a deal to me.”

Ben’s face was so red and puffy that the dark infection stretching across was nearly invisible. She could feel his body heating up.

Ariana sighed. "Well, don't worry, doofus. I'm not gonna kiss you."

Not unless he wants it, the voice in her head teased.

Oh hush, Ariana told it. She glanced over at Ben, whose redness subsided. He inhaled deeply, slowly, closing his eyes.

"Okay...that's good. That's..."

The next thing she knew, he was sleeping peacefully next to her, his warm arm touching hers. She turned over again, staring at his angular face, his dark hair spread on the pillow. Her eyes moved to his soft lips, and for a moment, she imagined what they would feel like against hers.

Ugh. Ariana shook herself out of it. *Jeez, I've got a dirty mind sometimes*.

Out from the corner, in the chair, she heard a chuckle. Raziel moved from his position of rest, his scarlet eyes digging into hers with a sarcastic smile.

"Well, that's amusing," he said.

Ariana felt her face flush red. Her arms itched to yank Ole Betsy from her case and smack him across the face with it, but she didn't. For one, she didn't want to wake up Ben. Two, she didn't want to waste her violin by smashing it against that idiot's head. She simply stared him down. "I really, really don't like you, and I hope you know that, Raziel."

"I'm aware. But the question is, does Ben really know how you feel about him?"

"You assume an awful lot, ya know," she hissed.

"Any idiot with a pair of eyes can see it. Well..." He snickered. "Minus Ben, of course. Though I suppose, in all fairness, he is distracted at the moment."

"By the infection, you mean?"

"Of course," Raziel confirmed. "What else?"

Ariana paused for a moment, thinking of the moment at the Sea of Stars. She remembered seeing him, ankle deep in the shimmering waters, tears streaming down his face.

She feels so far away. All I remember is failing her, and yet...I get to enjoy this?

"He's also looking for someone," Ariana said. "A girl named Lilly. He died trying to save her."

"Yes." Raziel dipped his head slightly. "I heard about her as well. Well, if we rid him of the infection, I promise I'll do my best to help him find her." He eyed the sleeping Ben. "Both of you have my word."

Ariana frowned. "You're really gonna take him from me, huh?"

"Saving the Soraphim race is my top priority. He is the only surviving one in existence that I know of, besides me. Considering that I cannot reproduce, the responsibility falls on him. The only remaining problem is finding a female of our kind."

She arched her eyebrow. "And what if you can't?"

"A female Soraphim would be best, but..." Raziel paused. "...I suppose I wouldn't mind a human or two diluting the bloodline. You seem quite attached to him, anyway."

"So, back in Riverglade, and the forest." Her brows furrowed in deep thought. "You could have killed me both times, but didn't. Is that why?"

Raziel avoided her gaze. "Not the only reason."

"What do you mean?"

"You...remind me of my mother," he hesitantly admitted. "Ira."

Ariana tilted her head upon hearing the name. It seemed familiar. "What was she like?"

“A lot like you, actually. Energetic. Kind. Stubborn as a jackass, but for good reason. But like the others, I failed to save her from Aka Manah’s massacre. I still see her in my dreams sometimes, whispering words and yet, I can’t hear her voice. I look at you, and it just...hurts. Like a cruel joke.” He dipped his head. “I...miss her. I’d give anything to hear her voice again.”

Poor Raziel, the voice in her head said. Try to cheer him up. Tell him his mother would be proud of him.

“Well,” Ariana began, carefully phrasing her words. “I don’t know anything about her, but I’m sure she would be proud of you if she were here today.”

“I...thank you,” he said, the hint of a smile touching his lips. “She was a mother to us all, in a way. We were all family, a clan. I want nothing more than to make things like the way they used to be, even if they aren’t the same.”

“So that’s why you want to restart your race.”

Raziel shot her a questioning look. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s more than just saving the Soraphim,” Ariana theorized. “You want a family again.”

“I...” Raziel grimaced. “I do. More than anything, I do. It’s also why I push Ben to be strong, because when the Soraphim are reborn, I don’t want to watch them die all over again.”

“I understand that,” Ariana said. “We’ve lost people too.” She paused for a moment and looked back at Ben. He slept peacefully, his hand mere inches from hers. Slowly, she reached and squeezed it gently.

“So, you said a female Soraphim would work best, but how are you going to find one?” Ariana asked. “Didn’t you have a hard time just finding Ben?”

“That would be ideal, but...” Raziel’s eyes lowered. “...I suppose I can drop it. Once we find this Pool of Eden and clear Ben of his corruption, the new Soraphim race can begin, and you and him will be the start of it.”

“Wait. You want us to have children...for you?” Ariana pursed her lips, standing to her feet. “I think that’s between me and him. Even if we did decide to, I’m not rushing anything for your ‘dream.’”

“No, I didn’t mean...” Raziel sighed and rubbed his temple. “I meant to provide a secure future for him, and for you. That...can happen in due time. When you two are ready.”

“Oh.” Ariana slowly sat back down. “Okay.”

“Sorry,” Raziel said, running his hand through his hair. “I should have clarified.”

“It’s...alright, I guess.” She paused as a thought came to her. “So, how are people made? Is it that thing Ben talked about? Kissing in bed?”

Raziel first arched an eyebrow, then chuckled. “Oh, that’s right, I nearly forgot. Your father never told you about...well, that.”

Ariana shook her head. Her dad never saw the need to talk about how people are made, but now Raziel had her curiosity.

“Stupid angels. Anyway, this is going to be amusing.” Raziel chuckled, leaned in, brandishing his index finger and using his other hand to make a small circle. “Now listen carefully. To make children, people...”



When Ben woke up, Raziel was still passed out in his chair, leaning to the side. Ariana sat on the edge of the bed, dark circles under her eyes, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She almost looked traumatized.

“Ari?” He scooted up and snapped his fingers in front of her face. “You there?”

In the room's corner, Raziel awoke from his slumber and slowly rose from the chair. It wasn't until he picked up a book from the nightstand and slammed it on the floor that she finally snapped out of her trance.

"Oh!" Ariana's cheeks flushed as she sheepishly brushed her hair behind her ear. "G-good morning, Ben."

Ben moved in front of her and felt her forehead. "You alright? You look like you haven't slept."

"Y-yeah, I'm fine!" Ariana sheepishly looked away from him, studying her shoes. She rose from the edge of the bed and hastily strapped her violin case to her back. "Umm...I'm going to go get some breakfast from the buffet downstairs."

"Oh." Ben smiled softly at her. "See you there, okay?"

Ariana gave another brief half-smile, her lips curving slightly before she hurriedly exited the room, her footsteps echoing down the hallway. Ben sighed, then turned to Raziel. "What the hell did you do?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Raziel said indignantly.

He glared at him until his bearing broke.

"Oh fine. She asked, so I told her the basics of the reproductive cycle, how other humans are made."

Ben scoffed. "Really, dude? You gave her the birds and the bees talk?"

"I didn't go into too much detail. Besides, her father should have given her that lesson long ago, but as you can imagine, an angel like him wouldn't know how to communicate it."

"It's still his job, not yours, you weirdo," Ben pointed out. "I'm sure it doesn't even matter in a realm where you can't even—"

"Not quite." Raziel cut him off. "You can, but like in the original creation, the two souls must be bonded in the eyes of

the Creator first. In other words, you must be married. Even with such stringent rules, there are ways around it.”

Ben stood in silence. “You know Ariana will probably never look at me the same again, right?”

“I wouldn’t count on it, though I suspect she still thinks of you the same as before. That aside, it’s not the explicit details she’s concerned about. It’s about how things will be in the long run.”

“W-wait.” Ben blinked as they approached the bottom of the stairs. “What do you mean, the long run?”

“Oh?” Raziel smirked. “You mean you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Raziel opened his mouth to reply, but he froze. His stare shifted across the room; Ben followed it to see Ariana, her eyebrows furrowed as she stared daggers into their former captor.

“Ah, never mind,” he said, pushing past Ben. “I’ll be outside whenever you two are ready to go.”

The door slammed shut. Ben pulled up a chair to sit next to Ariana, who was slowly munching on her cereal. She glanced up at him as a flake dropped from her mouth into the bowl.

“Sorry for whatever he said,” Ben said, his cheeks burning. “I don’t want things between us to be...awkward.”

“It’s okay, Ben,” Ariana said. She blushed as she twirled the spoon around in her bowl. “Awkwardness is a part of life, ya know?”

“I know.” He smiled. “Anyway, are you ready to push all the way through the city? The pool shouldn’t be that far beyond it, if what Kira said is accurate.”

With a nod, Ariana dabbed her mouth with a napkin while Samuel, the owner, graciously cleared away her bowl. She thanked him and rose from her chair, strapping her violin

and grabbing Ben's hand, interlocking their fingers. She noticed him staring at their joined hands and pulled away slightly. "Oh, that isn't too much for you, is it?"

"No, no, it's fine!" Ben smiled at her. "Awkwardness is a part of life, remember?"

Ariana beamed. Together, they walked out the door of the hotel and onto the street, where several people had gathered. Among them, he recognized someone.

Ben stopped mid-walk, craning his neck to see above the crowd. In the middle was a woman, about forty years of age, with long, shaggy brown hair that went to her shoulders. She wore an evil, sadistic grin that reminded him of a witch.

He froze. The mysterious woman was the twisted human trafficker that had tried to sell his long-lost sister, Lilly.



The crisp air chilled Ben as he strode down the sidewalk, hands in pockets. After all this time, he had finally tracked her down. Gretchen Granary, the woman who had masqueraded as his sister's 'foster mother' in order to sell her to the highest bidder. As a slave.

I never should have let them take her from me, he thought.

Ben took a deep breath. Both he and Lilly had a terrible life, ever since their escape from the vengeful tribe and the death of their mother.

Where is he? Where is the devil?

I'm not the devil, mommy...

I've seen it! I've seen what he'll do to our world! Give him to me!

The last thing he remembered was her warm corpse at his feet, then fleeing the reservation after being branded 'devil

children.' They kept running, alley to alley, state to state, anywhere the road took them. The only place they truly seemed to belong was on the streets.

Ben quickly checked his phone, seeing that his friend Nathan had responded. He was parked nearby in his car just in case things went south and Lilly needed to escape. Despite Ben's protests, he had insisted on being there for him the moment he finally found his sister.

He briefly smiled, grateful to have a friend like Nathan. Truthfully, he wouldn't need him. Gretchen was going to die, by any means necessary....and by his hand.

Devil children. Ben repeated the tribe's words in his mind as he lit a flame in his hand. *If that's what we are, then so be it.*

Ben extinguished the flame and kept walking as he rounded the corner of the street where Gretchen's house was, all while briefly pondering his strange power that manifested itself the day his mother died. The images of the burning RV flashed through his mind, the tribe's accusing fingers still pointing at him even if they were now nothing more than scorch marks on the ground. He never did figure out the origin of the mysterious fire, but he was grateful for it.

And now, Ben thought as he arrived at the house, once I save Lilly, I'll burn this damn place to the ground.

As Ben took a deep breath, he could feel the resistance of the worn, rotted door, almost as if it was fighting against being opened. He walked inside to find a mess, covered with beer cans, bags of white powder, and junk food slopped all over the floor. In the room's corner sat Gretchen, grinning coldly at him.

"I was told you'd be coming to visit." Gretchen eyed him. Her misshapen teeth made Ben's stomach turn into a knot. He clenched his fist.

"You know what I've come for. Give her to me and I'll let you live."

“Ah, that’s right,” Gretchen teased. “You’re a killer. They found my partner with his head smashed in.”

Ben glared. “Same thing that will happen to you if you don’t give me Lilly.”

Her sadistic smirk slowly morphed into a glare, her narrowed, ugly eyes met Ben’s. “Fine.” She pulled out a cigarette and called to the back of the house. “Lilly! Come out here, right now!”

Lilly came out of the hallway. She was about fourteen years old, with long, black hair like Ben’s tied in a ponytail. Despite being mostly concealed by a worn, long-sleeve T-shirt, a few visible cuts marred the surface of her skin: some more recent, others from the day they escaped their mother and the tribe. Her wrists were marked with deep purple bruises, resembling the imprints of someone’s fingers.

Ben ran over to her and embraced her as she stood, her body quivering. Slowly, her bruised hands hugged him back.

“I’m sorry,” Lilly said. “I tried to fight. They—”

Ben’s teeth grit as he spun, lit a flame, and held it threateningly at Gretchen. “What did you do to her?”

“Me? Nothing.” Gretchen smugly took a puff of her cigarette. “My customers, on the other hand...”

Ben arched his arm back to strike her with his burning fist but was stopped by Lilly.

“Please,” she began, tears in her eyes. “Let’s just leave, okay?”

Ben reluctantly put out the flame, his eyes fixed on Gretchen with a glare. He gently grabbed Lilly’s hand and led her out of the house.

“Oh, and by the way.” Gretchen called out from the corner, “If you ask nicely and treat her right, sometimes she gives it up for free.”

Something in Ben snapped. He pushed Lilly towards the door, who stumbled into it. He summoned the hottest flame he could muster and hurled it straight at Gretchen's face. The fire struck her, her face and hair suddenly ablaze. Ben grit his teeth as Gretchen rolled around, then grabbed Lilly's hand once more.

"Come on, run!"

Just as he blew open the door, Ben heard a clicking noise, followed by a loud snap of a gunshot. He felt a sharp pain suddenly erupt from his abdomen as he fell to the ground, his vision fading.

Gretchen came over and yanked Lilly from his grip. His sister screamed at the top of her lungs as she was dragged out of the door. She smacked her head against the frame, knocking her unconscious.

Fighting the pain and fog in his mind, Ben lifted his head just in time to see Gretchen drag his unconscious sister through the doorway. With a bloodied body and grit teeth, he forced himself back to his feet.

"Bring Lilly back!"



Reality pulled Ben back from his past, his nightmare, but did nothing to dull his hatred for that woman. He drifted through the crowd, shoving people aside, his eyes never wavering from his target.

"Ben," Ariana pleaded with him. "Don't..."

She tried to grab his arm, but he shoved it away. He went further in and covertly formed a blade in his hands using his hellfire, shaping the blade so that it would inflict the greatest possible pain, a cruel, jagged edge meeting the sharp tip.

Ben watched as she continued to laugh maniacally, which further angered him. She didn't deserve to laugh. She didn't deserve to live.

She dies today, Ben thought.

Kill.

Kill them all, Ben.

Ben raised the blade to strike her, but Raziel stood in his way.

"You need to go," he warned. "Now."

He glared up at him. "Get out of my way."

Raziel stared back with his scarlet eyes. "No. You're walking into a trap. It—"

Ben shoved him aside and ran through the crowd toward the Gretchen. He wanted to kill her, but first, he was going to make her suffer for everything she had done.

Before Gretchen could even tell he was there, Ben ran up to her and pummeled her with his fists, forcing her to the ground. He kicked her like he had promised he would, his boots digging into her fragile body like they had when he killed the pimp. She fell back against the wall as Ben grabbed her by the throat, his charred fingers digging into her windpipe. Gretchen looked up at him, her eyes widening with fear as she recognized his face.

Ben raised the knife, ready to bring it down. The night he had lost Lilly haunted his thoughts as he tightened his grip.

"Ben!" Ariana cried from behind him. "No!"

Ben ignored her and looked back at Gretchen. Her pupils were dilated from the sheer terror he knew she felt. He raised the knife once more to deal the killing blow.

"You promised!" Ariana pleaded. "You promised you wouldn't become that monster again!"

As he turned to look back at Ariana, their eyes met. She was in tears, a horrified look affixed to her face. She tried to cry out again, her voice a mere whisper, "Ben...please. I don't want to lose you."

Ben glanced at Gretchen, then at his knife. The horrified expression on the woman's face reminded him of himself, of the fear he experienced when he lost Lilly. As much as he hated her, he felt a strange sense of pity. He knew deep down that if he killed her, that he would be no better than any of the people who had hurt him and his sister in the past.

And I'd be a monster worse than any of them, he thought. Besides, I made Ariana a promise.

Ben lowered the blade and dropped it to the ground, watching as it evaporated back into smoke. He grabbed her by the shirt and glared into her terror-filled eyes.

"I really should kill you for what you and the others did to her, but I'm not like you, and I never will be again." Ben shoved her back to the ground and inhaled slowly, regaining control of his breathing as Gretchen stared up at him. "I will find her. I'll find her, and we will finally be free from people like you."

Finally, Ben walked away from the crowd and made his way back to Ariana. He gently intertwined his fingers with hers and led her out of the onlooking crowd.

"Such a shame, boy."

From behind him, Ben heard a hiss. He turned around to see Gretchen transform into a she-demon, leaping to attack. He almost summoned his ethereal armor in defense, but Raziel had leapt in the way and had run her through with his sword. She vaporized into dust with one last scream.

As Ben stared at the remains of the demon, Raziel rushed in front of them and said, "We need to leave this city now. Let's go."

Chapter 20

The Fall

Ariana gripped Ben's hand as they and Raziel made their way to the far end of Sky City, the image of him almost killing the woman fresh in her mind. She didn't know exactly who the demon was trying to impersonate, but she was glad that Ben had resisted and not become the monster she was so deeply afraid of.

Never, ever give up on someone you love, the voice said.

She smiled as his words to the demon-in-disguise echoed in her mind. *I'm not like you, and I never will be again.*

Ariana glanced over at Ben, whose head was hung, his eyes glazed, as if he were locked in a trance. She gently nudged him.

"Hey. Everything okay?"

"The woman the demon impersonated was a trafficker named Gretchen Granary," Ben explained. "She posed as Lilly's foster mom, but really she was pimping her out."

Ariana's eyes lit up. "Wait. You remember who she is?"

Ben nodded. "Lilly is my little sister. Gretchen was the one who killed me and took her."

Poor Ben, the voice said, *He really has had an awful life, hasn't he?*

"I'm sorry, Ben." Ariana frowned as she hugged his arm. "Do you know what happened to her? After, I mean."

"I honestly have no idea. But I know she's alive," Ben said with a half-smile. "So, that's something."

Ariana gazed softly into his gray eyes. "Is there something else bothering you?"

"I-I remember it. My past, my life on Earth, everything. And..." Ben hesitated, his jaw set.

"And what?" Ariana asked.

"I'm not a good person." He began, his eyes downcast, "I've killed people, Ari. Not just here, but back on earth, too. The tribe that Lilly and I are from? Our mother? All dead, because of me."

Ariana stopped in her tracks. "Like on accident, or...?"

Ben shook his head, his eyes downcast. Ariana released his hand and stepped away; her stomach twisted into knots. Before he had come into her life, her life had been peaceful, albeit lonely. People weren't dying left and right, and she still had a home.

Now, it was all gone. Because of him.

Turns out the boy I thought was an answer to my prayer is nothing more than a killer, she thought.

Ariana mustered the courage to look in his quivering eyes, filled with regret and horror. She frowned.

No, she realized. He never wanted any of this to happen.

Of course not, the voice said. You and I both know that isn't the real him.

"Ari..." Ben said. "I think you should leave me and Raziel and go find your dad. I—"

He stopped mid-sentence as she avoided his gaze and placed her hand over his heart. She felt it gently pulse beneath her palm, realizing it was in sync with hers.

"You say you were a killer, right?" she asked.

Ben didn't answer. Instead, he hung his head, turning away from her.

"So, who are you now?"

"I..." he grimaced. "I don't know anymore, Ari."

Ariana placed her other hand on his cheek, directing him to meet her eyes.

"I do. I may not know about who you were before, but that was a different life. The person in front of me now is the sweet boy who I found in the forest, the same one who danced with me and listened to all my dumb jokes. The one I will never, ever leave behind." Ariana slowly smiled. "So, let's find that pool so you can be him again, okay?"

Ben's eyes stared down into hers, taking in her words. Finally, he smiled back.

"Okay. Let's go, then."

After letting that evil win the first few times, Ben had finally struck a blow. He had resisted. To her, that was a sign of hope, a hope that Ben could finally be cleared of his infection and that they could try to go back home together. Deep down, however, she knew her life in Riverglade was over.

I don't even know if Dad is alive, Ariana thought somberly. So even if we fixed Ben, where would we go? Would we constantly be on the move, always pursued by demons?

Ariana turned to Raziel. "So, how did the demon know to take her form?"

"Because they've been watching him, even on earth," Raziel said from the front.

Ben arched an eyebrow as they walked through the street. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"The way everything is falling into place. I mean, think about it. First, you arrive in New Eden. Next, you're located and infected. Like clockwork, the demons attack Riverglade and the other villages, forcing them further north to here, all

the while pushing you to use your power to further your corruption. Once control over your abilities has slipped from you, it will eventually go to the demons. You couldn't have seen it, but you narrowly avoided it back when you chose not to kill the demon in disguise."

Ben's eyes widened as he stared down at his hands, which were pulsing with the black venom. "So, they want to control me? That's what the infection is for?"

"I don't see how it could be any other way," Raziel confirmed.

"Why would they force everyone out of the villages?" Ariana asked. "What purpose does that serve?"

"Demons are dangerously nihilistic by nature. They know nothing lies beyond the grave, and they relish in that fact by ensuring chaos at every given chance." Raziel's scarlet eyes narrowed. "But this is different. Tactical. They obviously intended for all these people to die, though I have no idea why."

"With another demon attack?" Ben asked.

Raziel shook his head. "No, with you. My theory is that the provocation was supposed to succeed, transform you completely, and render you their thrall. Earlier, we got lucky."

Ben gulped nervously. "How long do you think until my, uh...transformation is complete?"

"Not long," Raziel replied. "That means we need to hurry and get you to that pool. The sooner, the better, before you hurt Ariana or anyone else."

Ariana hesitated. She didn't want to be forced into a situation where she would have to use Omega to stop Ben. Even then, she doubted she could do it.

"Agreed," she added, speeding up her walking.

As if on cue, a small, red-headed child came out of the crowd and ran up to Ben.

Ben patted the child's head. "Hey Billy! Did you find your parents?"

Who is Billy? Ariana thought.

"No. I'm still looking." The child shook his head sadly, then smiled at Ben. "Can you help me find them? I think they're here somewhere!"

"Wait," Ariana interjected. "You know this kid?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah, I met him back in Riverglade when the first demons attacked, then in Kira's village."

Wait a minute. Ariana's eyes narrowed. *I knew all the kids in Riverglade. None of them are named Billy.*

Raziel stared at the child suspiciously. "Well, say your goodbyes, Ben. We can't afford to have anything slowing us down, so Billy will have to find his parents on his own."

Ben stood to his full height, his brows furrowed. "Oh, come on! He's just a kid. Look, I say we let him hang with us, at least until he finds his parents."

"Fine." Raziel eyed the child carefully. "Once we reach the edge of the city, he'll have to go, parents or not."

"Thank you," Ben said as he looked down at Billy. "How does that sound, bud?"

Billy slowly nodded, a weak smile on his lips. He gave Ben another hug and pulled back. "So, where are we going?"

"Somewhere," Raziel remarked coldly.

"Oh. Did I make him mad?" Billy asked innocently.

"Yes. You're annoying," Raziel replied, his eyes narrowing. "And you're stalling us."

"I'm sorry," Billy sniffled. "I didn't mean to! I just want to hang out with him! He's my friend!"

"What the hell, dude?" Ben knelt next to Billy as the child cried. "Are you a jackass to everyone you meet?"

Ariana and Raziel briefly exchanged looks. Something about this child wasn't right, and it seemed like Ben was the only one who couldn't see it.

Raziel rolled his eyes and motioned for them to continue walking. "Let's not waste time. We need to..."

The ground rumbled beneath them. An earthquake.

Wait, Ariana realized, the city is literally floating. What's going on?

Their heads snapped to the left, where they saw a Wicked Giant climb up onto the land. People in the city panicked, clamoring over each other to get away from it. As soon as the first had appeared, another rose from the rear of the city, then a third, and finally a fourth. Wicked Giants now surrounded all sides of the city.

Ariana, Ben, Raziel and the people were now like rats in a cage.

"Get to the exit!" Raziel shouted. "Now!"

They ran as fast as they could toward the rear of the city. Doing so, however, meant that they would have to go through the largest of the Wicked Giants, a towering plume of shadow and death that trampled anyone unlucky enough to be in stomping range.

The giants all flung meteors into the city, bombarding it and obliterating much of the population and the buildings. Bodies flew everywhere, blown in several directions by the force of the blast, as blood splattered the streets. However, the blasts seemed to be clear of Ben, as if they were trying to avoid him.

They're still trying to control him, Ariana realized. This was their backup plan!

She looked forward to Ben. He was giving Billy a piggyback ride to make it easier to carry him, but his clothes and his skin gave off smoke and a dark red aura.

Ariana's eyes widened. He was transforming again.

"No!" Raziel looked back at him. "Under any circumstances, do not use your Nephilim Armor! You know what will happen if you do!"

Slowly, the smoke and red aura around Ben faded. He continued running with Ariana, Raziel, and Billy in tow. They were almost on the path that led outside of the city, but the constant explosions and flying debris made the terrible moment last for what seemed like forever. The other three Wicked Giants were trampling the citizens as they fled. The buildings shattered into rubble as they pummeled their way across the floating landmass, toward Ben.

Ariana's case had caught on a three-foot-long piece of shrapnel from the wreckage of a fallen building, tearing the leather and sending her beloved Ole Betsy flying. She helplessly watched as it was smashed to pieces against an enormous chunk of debris from a falling building.

She froze for a second, but Ben grabbed her arm and forced her to continue running. Her body moved on its own, but her mind felt numb. That violin had been with her almost her whole life, a gift from Kira. Years of practice, mastering it, all the long hours she and Ole Betsy put in together.

Now, it was all gone.

She teared up, but then wiped them away with her sleeve. There would be time to grieve for Ole Betsy later. Right now, they needed to escape.

After a few minutes of sprinting, they arrived at the end of the city, near the exit, where the largest of the Wicked Giants stood in their way. They stopped about twenty feet from its muscled, shadowy legs.

As Raziel fully formed his Nephilim Shell, a sword and a shield materialized in his hands, ready for battle. He charged the beast, tackling its legs with a thunderous boom. It fell to one knee, attempting to crush him with its hand. Raziel dodged and pinned the hand to the ground with his ethereal

blade. He broke the giant's wrist with a mighty stomp from his foot, then pointed toward the exit.

"He's down! Go, now!"

Ariana and Ben darted between the Wicked Giant's legs, toward the mountains. At the end of the bridge, there stretched an ancient stone path, worn smooth by centuries of footfalls.

"Hey Billy?" Ben slowed down. "I need you to run from here on out, okay, buddy?"

The child slid off Ben's back and ran with them. When Ariana looked back over her shoulder, the elevated path cracked and broke behind them, chunks slowly falling into the water below, speeding up as more debris fell into the churning lake.

Ariana looked over at Ben and shouted, nearly tripping over a loose stone. "The path is collapsing!"

Ariana, Ben, and Billy bolted even faster than before, sprinting across the collapsing bridge as fast as their bodies would allow.

Thirty feet...twenty feet... Ariana counted in her head, hopeful. *The sooner we escape, the sooner we...*

It was too late for her. The falling path had caught up with Ariana, and the next step she took was on empty air.

Ariana fell for what seemed like forever, back first into the water. Her body collided with the surface, and soon she sank into the depths with all the debris.

Her life flashed before her eyes. She remembered when she first met Zachariel, when she got her violin from Kira, and meeting her best friend who she loved more than anything in the world, Benjamin Blake.

If this is the end for me, Ariana thought, then I'm going to die happy. I'm going to die with the thought of the good life that I had with Dad...with the love I shared with Ben.

She closed her eyes and prepared for the end, imagining Ben's smiling face and gray eyes staring at her one last time. In those happy moments, only one regret came to mind.

I wish I could have wrapped my arms around him. Bubbles erupted from her mouth as she exhaled the last of her breaths. I wish I could have kissed him and told him how I feel.

Suddenly, Ariana felt an arm wrap around her waist. She opened her eyes, her vision blurry, and could see the silhouette of the figure that grabbed her. As she was pulled upward, she felt the rush of water against her skin as they finally broke the surface, gasping for air and coughing to get the ice-cold water out of their lungs.

Ariana looked over at her rescuer. He had soaking wet black hair, and he wore a look of worry, his face strained, but his beautiful gray eyes still shined.

Ben held her in one arm and attempted to paddle to shore with the other. Her own arm felt limp, but she tried to help propel them as much as she could. The constantly shifting water made it hard to tell, but she saw they were close to the shoreline. They kicked, lunged, put everything they had to make it to land.

When they reached the depth where their feet could touch the sand, a giant wave came from behind, sending both flying onto the shore. Ben made it fine, but Ariana landed on her leg, the force of it causing her to jam her ankle. As she gripped it tightly, she cried out in pain, struggling to stay conscious.

Ben scrambled over to her. "You okay? What happened?" He saw her clutching her ankle and moved over to it. "Let me see it."

Ariana moved her hand, hyperventilating. "Is it broken?"

He pressed his fingers against her injury, feeling around for signs of broken bone. He shook his head. "Might be fractured, but other than that, it looks fine."

“Okay,” she said, her breath quickening. “We need to move.”

Ben nodded as he got on one knee and moved Ariana’s arm over his shoulder, helping her up; her injured foot hovering inches from the ground as they moved. Together, they limped over to a tree that was about fifteen feet up the path. They both sat down against the trunk, exhausted. Every inch of her body was freezing, though she was also sure that she was in shock from fracturing her leg.

Ariana took a few minutes to regain control of her breathing. Ben had used part of his abilities to warm both his body and hers. The two sat, clinging to each other, as the cold slowly melted away.

It’s a miracle we survived, she thought, but what about...?

She looked over at where the Sky City was supposed to be, but it wasn’t there. The large, empty space was filled with billowing smoke and swirling steam, rising from the ever-changing waters.

Ariana tapped Ben’s leg, turning his attention to the wreckage. His eyes widened as he slowly rose and stumbled back to the beach that overlooked the fallen city. She saw his body quiver, his fists clench, and tears fall down his face.

“They’re...gone,” he said, his voice trailed off.

“Ben,” Ariana began, pushing to reach him despite her injury. “This isn’t your fault, you know that, right?”

He turned to her; a tear reached from his eye to his chin. The waves roared behind him, pushing the belongings of the people to the shore. For a moment, her mind flashed back to that night at the Sea of Stars. Instead of light and life, however, now, there was only death in the water.

“How could it not be?” Ben asked, his breath becoming shorter, uneven. He hid his eyes in his soaked hair as he quivered.

Ariana limped up to him and slid her hand into his, placing the other on his cheek. The black venom that churned beneath briefly faded. She managed a soft smile for him.

"I don't regret meeting you, Ben. I want you to know that."

"But—"

"Shhh." Ariana placed her finger to his lips. "You and I are going to make this worth it, okay? I promise."

The waves continued to crash behind them as Ben stared down at her, his soft gray eyes bore into hers. He lost his resolve as he latched onto her.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

They sat there, embracing each other for what seemed like forever. Eventually, as night fell, the weariness that had been staved off by adrenaline returned, so they made their way back to the tree and sat under it. Ariana pulled him close, having him rest his head on her shoulder. She ran her fingers through his wet hair, and slowly, he calmed down.

Her leg still stung, but she bore the pain. She needed to. After all, they were so close. Only a half a day of walking and they would finally be there. No matter what, Ariana was determined to make it. For Kira, for her dad, for Ben, and most of all, for those whose lives had been lost.

A thought came to her mind as she tapped Ben on the shoulder. "Where's Billy?"

Ben shifted around, then said, "Not sure. I told him to run, then I dived after you." He frowned. "I just hope the poor kid made it out."

"I..." Ariana hesitated, thinking of the kid's strange, almost obsessive behavior toward him. "I think he will."

Ben frowned. "Yeah. I just couldn't forgive myself if—"

"Hey." She smiled, squeezing him. "He'll be okay."

Finally, Ben relaxed against her, looking up at her with a half-hearted smile. Ariana returned it, feeling herself passing into sleep. "Alright, get some rest. Tomorrow, you and I are gonna make it to the pool."

Ben nodded slowly, then drifted off. Ariana adjusted herself to where she could lie down and rest her head on a pile of leaves. She moved Ben to where he was on her upper chest, right under her chin. Even though he was asleep, he instinctively wrapped his arms around her. Darkness took her eyes, a strange, satisfied warmth took her body, which to her, was the greatest feeling in the world.

Ariana laid back and enjoyed it. It made her forget the pain in her leg, of losing Kira, and the fear of what happened to her dad. Despite the desperation of the moment, it almost felt perfect. It was just her and Ben.

Her mind flashed back to when she held Ben in her arms, after she had calmed his nightmares with her singing. She tried to tell him something back then, but he had woken up. He was fast asleep now, his head nuzzled against her neck like two birds in a nest, huddled close for warmth. She could now tell him what she meant to tell him all that time ago.

Ariana kissed him on the head and said, "I love you, Benjamin Blake. No matter what happens tomorrow, just know that I always will."

After she whispered those words to him, Ariana rested her head against the pile of leaves and let the sensation of his warmth lull her into a good night's rest.



A loud crash shook Ben from the peaceful darkness. He snapped upward, looking to see wooden chunks that had slammed onto the shore.

Ben exhaled, then glanced back down at Ariana, who was still slumbering. If Zachariel had seen this, would probably have obliterated Ben on sight. But right now, it was comfortable, so he didn't care.

I'd love to stay here, Ben thought, but we've got to get a move on.

Standing, Ben surveyed their surroundings. They were on a lesser mountain path, next to a tree that was close to the beach that overlooked the former Sky City. The main path was elevated, far from where they were.

He took a minute to examine it. They could get back to it, but Ariana's injury would make it difficult for them.

Hearing the waves lap against the nearby cliff and shore, Ben spun around. He walked over and overlooked the wreckage of the fallen city. The spire that was in the center stuck out of the water at a crooked angle, other tall pieces of building and rock protruded from the surface. He squinted to look closer, seeing a multitude of other objects floating in the water. His eyes widened in horror.

Bodies.

Ben's gaze remained fixed, his body shivering, as he fought to steady his breathing. How many must have lived in that city? A hundred thousand? A million? More because of the refugees? Ariana would never admit it, but what happened to the Sky City, and all the other villages, was his fault. The Wicked Giants and demons were after him, and because of that, an innumerable number of people had died, including Raziel.

Maybe we misjudged him, Ben thought. He gave up his life, his dream, for us.

A breeze blew past him, and the sun rose from the east. The spire from the wreckage pierced the incoming light and cast a long shadow on him and the people floating lifeless in the massive lake.

His brows furrowed, his fists clenched. The demons wanted to corrupt him, to make him into a weapon, and as a result, countless lives had been lost. A new determination filled him as he met the sun's incoming glare.

"I'm going to find that pool, and I'm going to get cured. I won't be a weapon."

Ben looked down at the wreckage. He knelt and touched the wet sand beneath him.

"I'll make this right somehow. One way or the other."

And I promise I'll make sure Ariana is safe, and with her father... Ben finished in his head. *I'll make things the way they were.*

Turning from the fallen city, Ben walked back toward the tree where Ariana was sleeping. He shook her shoulder. Her eyes slowly fluttered open.

"Morning," Ariana said as she tried to get up, but winced after putting pressure on her ankle.

"Are you okay?" he asked worriedly.

"Yeah." She managed a hearty half-smile. "I'm just surprised that you're up before me for once."

Ben chuckled and helped her as she shakily rose to her feet. They walked carefully onward, up the trail.

"How close are we?" Ben asked. "Kira didn't give you an exact location, did she?"

"No, but we'll know it when we see it," Ariana replied with an optimistic grin on her face. "It can't be too hard, right?"

"Okay." Ben nodded and smiled. "We're almost there. I can feel it."

Ariana smiled back. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's get go—"

They both looked ahead and saw the child, Billy, blocking the path. Ben sighed with relief.

“There you are, bud. Glad you made—”

“Where are you guys going?” Billy asked, cutting him off.

“We’re...you know, just taking a little walk,” Ariana lied, eyeing Ben. His eyes narrowed.

She’s trying to tell me something about him, Ben realized. He seems...different.

Billy tilted his head. “My family is that way. Can I go with you?”

“Um...” Ben looked at Ariana, whose eyes were wide. She leaned in close to his ear.

“He said he’s from Riverglade, right?” Ariana whispered. “I know all the kids there. He’s lying.”

“Demons!” Billy suddenly shouted in fear, pointing toward the sky.

Ben looked up. Sure enough, a horde of demons was flying at them, led by a familiar she-demon. He wasn’t sure how she survived having her neck snapped, but this time, he was going to make sure she stayed dead.

“Alexis.” Ben hissed, looking around for an escape route. All paths were blocked. Demons lined the jagged outcrops, leaving him with only one option. He put Ariana behind him protectively.

Damn it, he thought. They want a fight? Fine.

“Don’t!” Ariana screamed. “Remember what Raziel said!”

“Yeah, Ben! You’re awesome! Keep using your powers to protect us!” Billy shouted.

He summoned his full Nephilim armor to protect Ariana and Billy and readied himself for combat. After all, he had a promise to keep.



Ariana watched Ben summon his ethereal armor when suddenly everything went to hell. If they weren't in immediate danger, she might have smacked him for doing the exact opposite of what literally everyone had been telling him to do. Still, the idiot didn't listen.

Billy suddenly grinned, as if he had lured Ben into some sort of trap. Instantly, he changed form. A black cloud swirled around him, and he changed from a small child into a tall, slender, robed figure with a hood and a pair of demonic wings affixed to his back. His face looked human, only it was pale gray, gaunt, and held an evil grin that stretched across his rugged jawline. Spindly, sharp hands flexed from underneath the tattered sleeves.

"That's quite enough." The thing once known as 'Billy' raised his arm, and Ben was instantly forced down to the ground, on his hands and knees.

"W-what's happening?" Ben turned, his eyes widening. "W-where did Billy go?"

"Billy was nothing but a falsehood," the demon said. "My true name is..."

"Aka Manah," Ariana finished for him. This must have been the demon that Raziel had spoken about, the one that had killed his family.

The rest of the demons landed on the ground, hissing and cursing, but they remained in their spots, chanting in anticipation of the confrontation that was taking place.

"Very perceptive of you!" Aka Manah clapped sarcastically. "Well done!"

“What do you want?” Ben demanded, but soon his face was forced to the ground by another invisible force. “How...?”

“It’s simple, Ben,” Aka Manah began. “I sent one of my lieutenants to corrupt you. Since it flows through your body, and it has taken enough footing, I can control your every move. You are nothing but a puppet now.”

“Ben isn’t your puppet!” Ariana shouted, her teeth bared.

Aka Manah slowly walked toward her. She reached behind to inch herself away, but then felt something behind her, and realized she still had something in her cargo pocket.

Omega, she remembered. *A blade that can kill any demon.*

As Aka Manah leaned in, his eyes narrowed and a wicked grin formed on his lips. “Well, he is now.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Ariana said, reaching behind and gripping the handle.

“Threatening me now, are you?” he taunted. After that, aka Manah turned to the incapacitated Ben and said, “Be a good boy and transform into your full Colossus form, will you? You’ve got a job to do.”

Ben’s eyes widened as he convulsed, his body twitching and shaking, as if he were actively resisting the command. He groaned and bared his teeth.

“Stop!” Ariana’s mouth gaped. “What are you doing to him?”

Aka Manah flashed a set of wicked teeth. “Consider it a test, of sorts.”

Ariana watched helplessly as Ben grunted in agony. The armor raised itself up, first forming a dark, skeletal frame that shot up into the atmosphere, then, layer by layer, reinforced itself with solidified hellfire. The mountains shook as storm clouds formed around it.

It continued, creating a horrifying creature that cast a giant shadow against the mountains. As Ben peered at her

through the cracks in the armor, his once gray eyes flickered and turned a haunting shade of crimson with a series of sinister lines combining into an upside-down pentagram.

The armor finished forming, and Ben's transformation turned him into a towering, demonic figure. He stood at a staggering height of two hundred feet, with massive wings sprouting from his back. His face looked like a dragon's, elongated and with an evil grin like Aka Manah's on its face. Smoke steamed from the cracks in the armor, and the colossus gave a loud sky-tearing roar that nearly deafened her.

"Tell me, Ben," Aka Manah hissed. "What are you going to do?"

A terrifying silence filled the mountain path as Ariana stared in fear at the giant demon. A sentence uttered that caused all the hairs on her neck to stand straight up. The Demon Colossus stared skyward into the dark clouds.

"I'm going to destroy this world."

Aka Manah smirked insidiously. "Have fun."

The now-transformed Ben lumbered across the path and wrecked everything that it could get its massive hands on, fire billowing from the monstrosity's mouth. Screams echoed against the mountain range.

You must do it, Kira's voice told her. *You must kill Ben.*

Ariana shook her head. There was no way that she could kill him now, in his current form. Even then, she wasn't sure if she could muster the willpower to do it. She glanced over at the leader of the demons, who was now laughing triumphantly.

But if I kill Aka Manah with Omega, Ariana theorized, *maybe Ben will be freed from his control?*

Yeah! the voice in her head cried. *Go for it, girly!*

Ariana looked at the towering demon giant and imagined Ben hearing her words.

“Don't worry,” she promised. “I'll stop this. I'll save you.”

Aka Manah heard her whispering and gave her a curious look. Ariana tightly gripped the handle of the knife and leapt at the demon. However, Alexis had grabbed her, her talons wrapped around her waist and legs, and flew her away from the demonized Ben and her target.

“No! Go back, go back!” Ariana wailed desperately.

Alexis laughed maniacally and scratched her arm with her claws, dragging it slowly across her skin so that she would feel every agonizing second of it. Ariana shrieked.

“Shut up, girl!” Alexis hissed as she bludgeoned Ariana's head with her balled fist. Her body went limp as the demon flew her toward what looked like a large floating, black fortress. Her vision faded.

“I'm sorry, Ben,” Ariana whispered one last time before she gave into the dark.

Chapter 21

The Demon Colossus

Raziel awoke from his battle with the Wicked Giants. He was about twenty feet beneath the surface of the lake, looking upward at the sun as it made the moving waters shimmer. The occasional body or chunk of debris would pass over the light.

He felt himself sink further into the depths. If he wanted to survive, he would have to swim, to fight his watery grave, but he couldn't. Perhaps he was exhausted.

Or maybe because I failed to protect Ariana and Ben.

Raziel's mind shifted back to his time in the female angel's village. As he sank into the waters, he closed his eyes and could feel the chill seeping into his bones, a stark reminder of the promise he had made.

By the time Raziel had reached the village, it was too late. He watched in horror as the demon's blade rammed into the angel's gut. Her scream pierced the air as the ragged creatures howled victoriously.

The demon that had dealt the blow soon found itself vaporized by the searing heat of Raziel's fire. The one next to it tried to flee but was crushed beneath the force of his Nephilim Shell. Fear and horror stretched across their already

ragged faces as he brandished his blade and armor. His foot slid back to prepare for the attack.

It never happened. The remaining demons fled, clamoring over their own brethren to escape Raziel's wrath.

"Smart." Raziel sheathed his weapon as he looked down at the injured angel, her back now up against a tree. He briefly considered leaving but found that he didn't have the heart to, like back in Riverglade when Zachariel was forced to battle the Wicked Giant. He was no ally of the angels, but he wouldn't let one die if he could help it.

Raziel knelt next to her, assessing her wound, but grimaced. The demon blade had pierced too far, too deep to remove. At the rate the angel was bleeding, she would be dead within the hour.

"I...can't heal you," Raziel said, his eyes downcast. "This is beyond my capability. I'm sorry."

"I don't blame you." The angel smiled warmly. Blood seeped from her mouth. "Thank you for trying."

"What is your name, angel?" he asked.

"Kira," she said, her breathing slowly becoming more unstable.

Raziel eyed her wound again, then tore a cloth from his cloak. "Maybe if we keep pressure on it, you can summon a healer and—"

"That doesn't matter anymore." Kira silenced him, placing her gentle, slender hand on his shoulder. "Don't help me. Help them."

Raziel arched an eyebrow. "Help who?"

"Their names are Ariana and Ben. They are both precious to me. If you could, please protect them." She held out her hand. "Promise me."

He hesitated, but slowly gripped the angel's hand. Though he had his own plans for Ben, something deep inside his cold heart coerced him to agree.

Kira looked to the side. "There are angels coming, stranger. You should go."

Raziel rose, sheathed his sword, and looked at her one last time before dissipating into smoke.



I failed, Raziel thought, his cloak and armor dragging him to the depths. I failed to keep that promise.

The bubbles escaping his mouth slowed, the last of his air left his lungs as death crept into his vision. The black filled his peripherals until the gleaming light far above the surface was surrounded by the tunnel of darkness.

So, this is my punishment, he thought as he closed his eyes, for a lifetime of failure.

Raziel's stinging eyes stared upward, and for a moment, he thought of his mother, Ira. The kindest of souls gone because of him. His people were slaughtered because he couldn't protect them from Aka Manah's wrath. His former angel companions from the days of Noah, Levi and Abigail were erased from this plane of existence. Now, the girl would die as well, and his only shot at redemption, Ben, would be lost to the demons forever. Because he had failed yet again.

Perhaps I should let myself drown.

"Raziel," a voice called, pulling him out of his self-damning thoughts. "Fight it."

He opened his eyes. Above the surface of the water stood a glowing being, looking down at him through the surface, as if it were standing on the tide itself.

Who are you? Raziel tried to say, but nothing came out except a few bubbles of air.

The figure reached through the surface of the water, the glowing hand reaching for him. Raziel felt his heart thump, as if spurred by the mysterious being's gesture. His blood pulsed beneath his skin and filled him with a new determination. He used what precious little breath he had to swim and grab the figure's hand. Finally, he broke the surface. Air rushed into his lungs as he crawled onto a piece of floating wreckage.

He coughed the remaining water out of his chest and looked up at his rescuer, surprised to see that it was the angel Zachariel from Riverglade village. Next to him was Archangel Gabriel, his friend from before the Fall.

"Raziel! You're alive!" Gabriel embraced his old friend, causing him to wince from the pain.

Raziel looked at himself. His robe was in tatters, the armor beneath it cracked in multiple places. He even noticed a few chunks of his shoulder plate floating in the water.

"Yes," Raziel said. "It would appear I am."

"Good thing we found you and pulled you out in time," Gabriel said. "You could have drowned!"

The image of the glowing figure flashed through his mind, though it seemed unfocused, perhaps a byproduct of his time beneath the surface. But how long had he been under? Shouldn't he be long dead by now?

"You? No," he protested. "There was a figure here, one made of light. It pulled me out."

"Raziel..." Zachariel began, "...we pulled you out."

Raziel shook his head in confusion as another angel approached. His armor, blonde hair and glimmering azure wings made it impossible not to recognize him. He, along with Gabriel and Lucifer, had discovered him and his kind, back when New Eden belonged to the Soraphim.

“Michael,” Raziel greeted him, meeting his intense gaze.

“Raziel.” The Archangel returned the greeting in a tone matching his. “Where is Ben?”

With a furrowed brow, Raziel massaged his forehead, shutting his eyes tightly in an effort to recall the fragments of time that preceded his fall alongside the collapsing city. He remembered seeing them dart past the Wicked Giant to the safety of the mountains.

“They went further north, I think. They sought the Pool of Eden and said that it could clear Ben of the corruption.”

“It’s a bit of a risk, but it makes sense.” Michael nodded. “That must be where they’re headed.”

“There’s something else,” Raziel added. “They had a small child with them.”

“A child? Why do they have...?” Zachariel inquired, shaking his head. “Never mind. How did you find them?”

“I have my methods,” Raziel said dryly, earning an annoyed glare from the angel.

“What about this child?” Gabriel asked, “Where is it from?”

Raziel’s eyes lowered. “I’m not sure. He was extremely attached to Ben, though I suspect he wasn’t what he appeared to be.”

“Such as what?” Michael stepped onto the ruins of a tower that stuck out of the water. “A demon?”

“I believe so,” Raziel said. “I have no idea what they are planning now, but we assume they are still after him.”

Zachariel walked down the rock to the water’s edge, looking at all the dead bodies that were strewn across the surface. A wooden chunk floated toward him, and he fished it out of the water. As he held it up, Raziel realized it was a shattered piece of the girl’s violin.

The angel dipped his head and gazed upward at the sky. “We failed, Michael. All these people are gone.”

Michael grimaced as he turned north. “We will grieve for them later. We need to find Ben and that fortress. The Sky City may be gone, but there are still those who still live.”

Raziel glanced at the bodies in the water, thinking of how they lived, carefree and kind, only hours before. While he knew it was the work of the demons, part of him still felt responsible.

Yet another failure, he thought.

“Did Ben do this?”

Raziel turned his head to Zachariel, meeting the angel's eyes and seeing the fear behind them.

“Did he do this, Raziel?” Zachariel asked for a second time.

“No.” Raziel shook his head. “The Wicked Giants wiped out the city. I subdued one of them, but soon there was enough force put on the landmass that sent it falling into the lake.”

“So, Ben didn’t lose control?” Gabriel asked.

“A demon in disguise attempted it, but Ben resisted. Only after that did the Wicked Giants attack. They wanted to push him to his breaking point, to cause him to lose control. When the first attempt failed, they resorted to this.” Raziel gestured to the floating ruins.

“But why?” Gabriel asked. “How is Ben so different—”

Before Gabriel could finish asking, a loud roar erupted from the mountains, a deafening boom that shook the waters, making the ruins of the fallen city shift. The three angels and Raziel quickly spun to face it, seeing a colossal, dark figure rise, shadow and flame burning against the mountains.

“Oh, no.” Zachariel’s eyes widened. “That must be...”

Ben, Raziel finished in his mind as his eyes widened. Despite eons of mastering his abilities, of summoning his ethereal armor, never was he able to manifest his power in the same magnitude as the beast that Ben now was. He's not just a Soraphim. He's more, Raziel realized. And they knew. Somehow, they knew. This was their plan all along.

Raziel looked once more at the Colossus that wreaked havoc upon the villages in the mountains. Despite the distance, he could see an evil grin planted on the titan's face, one he had seen before, standing over the dead bodies of his fallen race.

Aka Manah.

"I know who's behind this!" Raziel exclaimed. "But first, we need to stop Ben. He will tear the entire realm asunder unless we get to him first."

"Agreed," Zachariel said. "Do you have a plan?"

Raziel had an idea perhaps, but a full, thought-out plan? No. However, if Ben's current form was an upgraded version of their ethereal armor, it would essentially have to work the same way, meaning that he could pull Ben out of it, like in the forest. The only problem was buying enough time to do so, but that was a problem for the battle ahead.

"Yes," he told Zachariel. "But we need to get there quickly, if we are to stop Ben from massacring everyone."

Michael and Gabriel nodded and flew off towards the mountains and the Colossus, but Zachariel stayed behind with him.

"Need a ride?" the angel asked, arching his eyebrow.

Raziel rolled his eyes. As much as he hated the angel, he couldn't form his armor at the moment, and swimming would be a massive waste of time. With a defeated sigh, he raised his

arms. Zachariel grabbed them and soon they were off, ready to face the Demon Colossus.



The shrill of birds and the voices of the townsfolk woke Ben from his slumber. He sat on an old wooden bench; the villagers walked by with their packs, crops, and animals, going about their business. The mountains towered nearby as their long-reaching shadows threatened to swallow the sun.

Huh? Ben thought, picking his head up from the back of the bench. *Where am I?*

“You awake, Ben?”

He blinked, and his surroundings came into sharper focus. In front of him was a child, roughly ten years old. Curly blonde hair fell down the sides of her head, with bright, innocent, azure eyes so wide they could have held all the hope in the world. As she clutched a small stuffed animal to her chest, Ben found that she also reminded him of someone.

Who is she?

Ben shook the drowsiness from his brain as he tried to recall everything that had happened prior, though it all seemed a blur to him.

What happened? he wondered. *Wasn't I supposed to...?*

Ben's forehead ached as he clutched it in confusion. The child in front of him grabbed his hand with a gentle, innocent smile.

“Let's go find Lilly. Okay?”

The girl pulled Ben to his feet and out onto the dirt path, into the rest of the village. The small wooden huts that they

called home ran up the hills and crags, crude and humble in their design.

I guess it doesn't matter why I'm here, Ben thought. I like it. It just feels...peaceful.

As they walked by, another child waved to Ben from his window. He smiled and slowly waved back, then leaned down to the girl as she led him by the wrist.

"How much further?"

"You tell me," the girl replied with a curious look. "You're supposed to keep track of her, aren't you?"

"I suppose so." Ben laughed. "I guess I just—"

The gentle mountain wind that egged them on stopped. A deathly silence filled the air, followed by a loud roar that nearly deafened him. After that, came a rumbling. The ground shook and trembled as the surrounding air thinned.

Footsteps.

Ben and the girl spun around. Behind the mountains to the south came a bright red glow; ash and ember peaked above and bled into the night sky. Finally came the colossus itself, easily towering against the now-burning mountains, a wicked grin affixed to its dragon-like face. Plates of transparent, ethereal armor made up its monstrous body, black smoke billowed out from the cracks, ragged wings pulled into its back. It turned its insidious gaze, staring directly at the village...and at him.

"Run!" Ben screamed, pushing the girl forward, but it was too late. First came the screams, then the searing flames that erupted from the beast as it stormed ever closer to them, faster than anyone could have expected. He watched as an old couple burned, reduced to black and white ash. Even more were trampled underfoot by the monstrosity.

Ben desperately urged the girl forward as he looked at anyone else he could hopefully save. Nearby was a young father, who held his wife and newborn in his arms. He sprinted toward them, arm outstretched. The father did the same, reaching out to Ben.

Come on, Ben urged himself, I can't let them die. Just a little farther...

He was too late. A whirlwind of flame took them. The hand that was outstretched soon was a shriveled, ashen shell of its former self, until finally nothing was left. His eyes widened in horror.

"Damn it, no!" Ben ran further, searching frantically for someone he could save from the hell that awaited them. Anyone.

Around him, the village flew apart in a flurry of flame and blood as the monstrosity howled in victory. Ben looked ahead to the end of the village, where the girl waited for him, eyes trembling with fear.

Wait, he realized. I can still save her.

Ben sprinted onward, grabbing the young girl by the hand. "Come on!"

The young girl didn't budge. He knelt next to her, his hands on her shoulders.

"What's the matter?" Ben asked, his breaths shallow and his heart thumping. "You'll die if you stay here. I—"

The girl shook her head; her shaking hand pointed to the beast in front of them. Ben turned to look closer, seeing something through the ethereal skin. His eyes widened in horror.

Is that...?

Ben's heart felt like it had stopped. The thing inside of the Demon Colossus was him.

Ben's hands trembled as he dipped his head. There was a reason he couldn't save anyone. He was the one causing all the death, destruction, and chaos that consumed everything in his sight. Tears streamed down his face as the young girl stared up at him with the same look of horror she had given the Colossus.

As it raised its foot and prepared to stomp, Ben looked deep into the girl's glimmering, tear-filled eyes. He latched onto her protectively as the beast's foot came down in a whirlwind of flame and darkness. When he opened his eyes, he found himself trapped in the monstrosity's body that Aka Manah had turned him into as it continued its rampage.

I don't get it, Ben thought. I was just down there. Why...?

Then he remembered. The village, the young girl, everything he had just seen. It was all in his head. The illusion of him trying to save everyone was nothing more than his mind softening the blow of the horrors he was being forced to commit. He clenched his teeth and quivered as his body and the Colossus moved against his will.

I never wanted this. Why? Why is this happening?

In the end, all Ben could do was watch as he thought of the lives below that he was damning to a fiery, horrifying death. The cries of the innocents rang out as the roar of flames silenced them forever. Down on the burnt, disturbed ground, he saw something. Among the bloodstains and ash, he saw the tattered remains of a stuffed animal, one he knew belonged to the girl.

I'm sorry, Ben thought one last time with tears in his eyes as the darkness took him once more.



Raziel didn't seem at all pleased that Zachariel had to carry him. For the entire duration of the flight, his face shriveled like a pouting child.

As soon as he had reached a mountain peak close to the Demon Colossus, Zachariel dropped Raziel onto it and landed nearby. Michael was already zipping around the monster, cutting, slashing, stabbing, looking for a way to crack open the armor and reach inside the chest where Ben was housed. Gabriel mainly distracted the beast, flying around its head and keeping its attention away from his fellow archangel.

Zachariel eyed the devastation below the beast. The villages were crushed underfoot and burnt to ash and cinder, a good portion of its inhabitants with it. Those who survived were desperately trying to flee but were met with the daunting realization that their only route to safety was a narrow passage between the towering mountains, leading them further north.

Toward the Fortress, most likely, Zachariel thought, clenching his jaw. Whatever demon had devised the plan, they certainly knew what they were doing. The whole time, they were after Ben, to turn him into the monstrosity that he was now. Now, the entire realm was slowly being destroyed, the people systematically slaughtered. It was an insidious plan, so cruel in its architecture. Above all, it had taken everything from him: his village, his life, and perhaps even his daughter.

Wait, Zachariel's wings went rigid. *Where is Ariana?*

"Raziel!" he called. "You said Ariana had made it out of the city, correct?"

"As far as I could tell, yes." Raziel grimaced. "Given that they succeeded in their corruption of Ben, I'm not so sure now."

Zachariel stared back at the Demon Colossus that was Benjamin Blake as it fought the angels. He couldn't believe his eyes as he stared at the creature before him, once his daughter's dear friend. And now, because of his failure to act,

his worst fears had come to fruition. Ariana was likely among the crushed bodies that lay at the foot of the beast.

No, I can't allow myself to think like that. She must be alive.

Zachariel drew his blade and slid down the mountainside, pushing himself off and tearing into the sky to join his angel comrades. Behind him, Raziel formed his armor and charged forward.

The first strike Zachariel made was at the ankle of the beast, though his blazing sword had barely made a dent in the demonic armor. It twisted and lunged at him. In response, Zachariel tucked his wings in and flew under the arm. As he did, he caught a brief glimpse of Ben deep within, using a large crack in the armor. His face seemed rigid, his expression passive. His eyes held upside-down pentagrams, a sign of the demon corruption that controlled him.

In that slow moment, Ben slowly turned to meet his gaze. The same eyes that held the demonic symbols soon shed tears. Zachariel dodged another strike and flew behind the beast.

Poor Ben, he thought. He didn't want this to happen, either.

Zachariel ducked, avoiding a fiery blast from the massive titan as he and Raziel regrouped a couple hundred feet away.

"That armor is too strong. I can't break it, even near the cracks," Raziel said. "But there may yet be a way."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

Raziel gestured to Michael, who continued to distract the beast. "He is the highest Archangel. If the legends are true, he is also the strongest. We can use that to our advantage."

"How so?" Zachariel inquired as he avoided a random chunk of debris.

“Momentum,” Raziel explained. “That beast has a giant pair of wings. Let’s put them to use, and get him to fly into the atmosphere, where...”

Raziel was interrupted by the foot of the colossus, which had attempted to stomp him into the ground, but he had dodged.

Zachariel, too, had to avoid the foot of the giant. He spread his wings and took to the air above it. Raziel never got to finish explaining his plan, but he had heard enough to understand it. First off, they needed Ben to fly high enough into the atmosphere, and to do that, they needed his undivided attention.

“Gabriel!” His voice echoed through the air as Zachariel shouted, trying to overpower the mighty roar of the titan beneath him. “I need you to make Ben angry!”

“Why would we want that?” Gabriel shook his head and glanced at Zachariel warily, as if he had gone insane. “Isn’t that the exact opposite of what we’re trying to do?”

“Just trust me,” Zachariel said, his eyes meeting his friend’s. Gabriel gave him one final questioning look before he descended below and hurled insults, slashing uselessly at the face of the Colossus. The beast retaliated by flapping its massive wings, sending multiple rows of trees and Raziel flying into the side of a nearby cliff.

That’s it, Ben! Zachariel thought. Use your wings!

“Michael!” Zachariel turned to the other archangel. “Fly up there and be ready!”

Michael nodded and soared into the sky, his blue wings a mere flash as he entered the atmosphere. Zachariel turned to Raziel, who had recovered. He tore off the rest of his shredded cloak and pulled out his sword, his scarlet eyes meeting the angel’s.

“Gabriel, now!” Raziel called. “Lead him skyward, toward Michael!”

Gabriel hurriedly complied and launched himself into the sky. To Zachariel's relief, the colossus stretched his wings, crouched down, then sprung into the air, tearing the ground below into millions of shards of debris. With each beat, the wings produced a deafening boom that shook the entire mountain range.

The Demon Colossus progressed further into the sky. It stretched its hand, reaching for Gabriel. Michael rocketed down from the upper atmosphere, hurling at the titan like a flaming meteor. He pounded the beast in the chest, sending a resounding shock wave that snapped through the air. It fell back to the ground, landing on its back with a thundering crash that cracked the mountains nearby. After the dust cleared, the beast lay on the ground, hand outstretched, not moving. The glowing eyes of the colossus faded completely.

Zachariel sighed in relief as the two angels landed next to him. "Alright, now we help Raziel extract the—"

He never finished his sentence. An inferno erupted from the dormant colossus, vaporizing everything in eyesight. They would have been destroyed too, had Raziel not jumped in and formed a protective barrier using his own fire.

Zachariel stared ahead, eyes wide as a silhouette walked through the whirlwind of flame. It was Benjamin Blake, eyes blazing with a stare that burned into them, even from a thousand feet away.

Raziel grunted as his shield dropped. He fell to his knees. The surrounding air was scorching. Ash and ember danced across the sky. The Soraphim stood and charged at Ben but was shoved aside and slammed into the ground. Ben raised his fist, forming a blade to finish him.

Gabriel darted over and tackled him, trying to restrain him. Ben slipped from his grip, pummeled the Archangel in the gut and attempted to stomp his leg. Michael and Zachariel joined as they tried to restrain him, even putting him in a headlock.

For a moment, Ben stopped resisting. Then he smiled wickedly.

“Die.”

The three archangels and Raziel narrowly avoided the new blast that erupted from him, jumping into the air. Zachariel landed in front of him, meeting his twisted gaze.

“Ben,” he begged. “Stop this. Please.”

With a glare, Ben locked eyes with him, the pentagrams in his eyes burning brightly.

“Just look at what you’ve done,” he began. “Look at all this. This isn’t you. It isn’t what Ariana would have wanted.”

“Ari...?” The glare finally faded; Ben’s expression softened. “I-I didn’t want...”

“Where is she, Ben?” Zachariel asked. “Where is Ariana?”

“I don’t...” Ben clutched his head, the demonic seals in his eyes glowing brighter, struggling to keep their control over him. “I don’t want her to—”

“Come with us.” Zachariel held out his hand. “We can find her. Together.”

“I can’t stop it.” Ben met his gaze as his body shook. He collapsed to the ground, the black venom in his body pulsing beneath his pale skin. “Please. You have to kill me.”

Zachariel gripped his blade. Now was his chance to do what he should have done the moment Ben had been corrupted. He wanted to press forward, plunge the blade into him, and end the madness once and for all. His body, however, would not let him move. Instead, he lowered his weapon. “Fight it, Ben. I know you can.”

Ben looked up, his eyes still conflicted as the corruption desperately tried to keep him subdued. With surprising speed, he charged at Zachariel like a thunderbolt.

The angel ducked to avoid his punch and socked him in the gut, sending him flying back. "Ben! Stop this right now!"

The corrupted Ben skidded to a halt as a large, hellfire-laden scythe materialized in his right hand. He glared at Zachariel, and soon the two clashed. His hellfire weapon twirled and swung wildly as he stepped back, dodging most of the attacks and blocking others.

With an inhuman scream, Ben swung the scythe down, the sound of metal slicing through the air. Zachariel quickly blocked and kicked him away, sending the ethereal blade clattering to the ground as it dissipated completely. Ben recovered from being thrown and glared at him, the upside-down pentagram in his eyes blazing as his armor began to reform. "You know what has to happen."

"I won't do it, Ben." Zachariel eyed him with pity. "We can still fix this."

"Ever since I came here, I've brought nothing but death. The villages, the people, the city, and—" The poor boy struggled with the words, "—Ariana, are gone. Because of me."

Zachariel stared as the flames engulfed Ben's body. Tears flowed from his blood-red eyes.

"I couldn't protect her. It's all my fault. I don't even know if she's still alive!" Ben threw a jet of flame at him, which Zachariel promptly dodged. "I don't want to hurt anyone else. I just want to die."

Zachariel felt his gut turn in knots as he heard the words leave his mouth. He knew how much pain Ben already was in, and the demonic poison was only adding to it.

Poor boy, the angel thought as he lowered his blade. He isn't even himself anymore.

Surprising him, Ben leapt forward, attempting to drive his fist into Zachariel's chest. In the split second he had to react, Zachariel raised his blade and plunged it through the boy, stopping him mid-strike.

“No!” Raziel shouted.

The demonic seal faded from Ben’s eyes. Zachariel withdrew the blade and caught him, helping him down to the ground. He looked at the wound, a few inches below his right lung. Enough for him to bleed out, but not instant death.

“I-I’m sorry.” Ben looked up at him, his eyes glazing over as blood seeped from his mouth. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Zachariel eyed his blood-soaked blade he had used to impale him. Ben slowly nodded, his breath shaky.

“Please.”

Gritting his teeth, Zachariel reversed his grip and raised it. The tip of the blade hovered a few inches above Ben’s face. He took a deep breath, inhaling the smoke-filled air as he prepared to strike him down.

Zachariel paused for a moment and looked Ben in the eye. In that second, he imagined the look of horror on his daughter’s face when the news would be broken to her, that he had killed the only friend she had ever truly had. He hesitated; his hand that held the blade shook.

I’m sorry, but this must be done, for Ariana’s sake and for the people of New Eden, Zachariel somberly thought. I’m sorry you weren’t given the chance to live a good life with Ariana, that fate had given you such a curse.

“May the Creator bestow his mercy on your soul, Ben,” the angel whispered as he lowered his sword to deal the killing blow. Raziel darted forward, knocked the blade from Zachariel’s hand, and kicked him into a nearby uprooted tree. Michael and Gabriel immediately responded by drawing their own weapons and pointing them threateningly at the Soraphim.

“What are you doing? Stand down!” Gabriel demanded.

Raziel held his blade defensively. “If you want to kill Ben, you’ll have to go through me!”

Gabriel lowered his weapon and took a step towards him, trying to reason with him. "As long as Ben lives, he endangers everyone here. Zachariel is right. He needs to be stopped."

Raziel didn't move. "He has been stopped. Since when have angels dealt the death penalty to those that were not demons?"

"The boy, as of now, is no different," Zachariel told him, recovering and gripping his blade.

"Ben is innocent. Innocent as the day Ariana found him!" Raziel spun to confront Zachariel. "Ask yourself this: how dangerous was Ben before he was bitten? How many people did he kill?"

"But the people that lost their lives in the villages—"

"Those people that died in those villages, they were the fault of the demons and no one else. So why kill him?" Raziel asked. "We have a chance to clear him of the darkness. Would your Creator also condemn the killing of an innocent?"

"What of my daughter, Raziel? She was innocent!" Zachariel snapped. "She is captured or dead because of him!"

"Ariana loved him, Zachariel, despite everything that has happened. He sacrificed the chance for revenge on one who had hurt him down on Earth in exchange for a promise that he had made to her."

"What promise?"

Raziel rose to his full height as he allowed his sword to drop to his side. "That he would remain who he was, and not the monster he thought himself to be. Whatever caused his transformation into the monstrosity we fought, it wasn't his choice!"

Zachariel paused, soaking in Raziel's words. He remembered Ariana's ecstatic face as she described Ben, the way they danced at the music festival, or their impromptu performance that he watched from a distance. Never had he

seen his daughter's eyes so full of life, then when she was with him.

He hesitated. Ariana had seen the good in Ben. Raziel has seen it too, and both were right. Ben wasn't evil. He never meant to bring all the destruction. He was simply a lost soul, not unlike the others who came to New Eden.

Zachariel let out a weary sigh before walking over to retrieve his sword. Raziel, assuming he was about to attack Ben once more, raised his own weapon defensively. The angel quelled those fears by sheathing the blade, picking Ben up from the ground instead. The poor boy's body was constantly twitching, the blood flowing from his wound.

The angel spread his wings. "We will bring Ben to the pool. We will try to cleanse him of the darkness—" he looked at Raziel as the Soraphim sheathed his own blade, "—and we will give Ben a chance. It's what Ariana and The Creator would want."

Raziel's face soon reflected his relief as Gabriel walked over to him, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You've made the right choice, angel. Ben will come out of the water a good person, and together we will find your daughter. That, I promise you."

Zachariel gazed skyward as the storm clouds had parted to reveal a ray of light that shone on a mountain close to where they were. With any luck, it would be the Pool of Eden that they sought.

Please, he begged the Creator as they took off into the air. Please tell me I have made the right decision.

Chapter 22

The Creator

Ben remembered little after Aka Manah's evil command, other than seeing Ariana's terrified face as the darkness took him, a sharp pain in his chest, and the feeling of weightlessness.

The next thing he knew, Zachariel and Raziel were lowering him into water. As he sank below the surface, his body twisted and convulsed, his mind doing the same. He felt the demonic corruption being ripped from his body, trying desperately to reach the surface. The shadows blocked the sunlight, like ink in water. For a moment, it shifted into a mirror image of him, only reversed, with ghost-white hair, blazing red eyes, and a demonic seal burned onto its forehead.

Who are you?

Ben's eyes met his counterpart's. As they floated in the waters, their gazes locked in an intense stare. A second later, it surfaced and fled, darting out of sight.

What was that? Ben wondered as he sank further. *Where am I?*

He heard voices. Ariana's, Zachariel's, the people of Sky City, among others. They called to him, blaming him, tearing him apart. In the chaotic voices, Ben saw something: the judgmental red eyes and blazing fire that he had seen so many times before.

Ben wrestled his mind from the chaos that gripped him, regaining the memories lost during his time under Aka Manah's control. He saw the villagers fleeing in terror, the

burnt bodies strewn about and smashed into blood stains. He felt the pain of being struck from the sky by the Archangel and witnessed Zachariel's blade hover an inch from his face, and a mere second from ending his life.

Wait...I did all that? I caused all that death?

The vision shifted again, to seeing Ariana's terrified face as he transformed. A horrible possibility formed in his mind.

What if Ariana is dead because of me?

"She's not dead, Ben," a voice said.

Ben looked around. He was no longer in the water; now his surroundings were shifting, formless and featureless. The environment focused until he stood in what seemed like an infinite puddle that was only a quarter of an inch deep. His vision sharpened, revealing two majestic trees standing tall amidst the swirling clouds—one radiating pure light, the other shrouded in darkness. In the water below, he could see the reflection of the cosmos.

As Ben gaped at his surroundings in confusion, a voice echoed again, causing every single hair on his body to stand on end. It was small, yet powerful. It had no distinction, like every single voice in the universe rolled into one.

"Hello, Ben," the voice said. Whenever it spoke, it seemed to echo off every single molecule of Ben's body, his very existence.

"Who are you?" Ben asked.

"I have many names," the voice told Ben. "But that is not why you are here."

Ben glanced around at the shimmering clouds, the water that stretched as far as he could see, off into the far galaxies. The two trees stood tall, powerful. He gazed at their branches, reaching far beyond his imagination could fathom. "So, why am I here?"

Immediately, the clouds around the place shifted as he observed his initial death on Earth once again. He had seen it before in his vision, yet he had a feeling that something was very different from what he was about to witness.

“Wait. What is this?” Ben asked the voice.

“Watch,” it told him.

Ben obeyed. After he watched his dream-counterpart fall to the ground, his friend Nathan had tried to resuscitate him, and it was then that Ben noticed a shadowy figure hovering over his corpse.

The figure knelt next to Ben’s fading body. “Finally. Now to see if the legend is true...”

Suddenly, a large beam of light penetrated the darkness created by the pouring rain, as Ben watched his body vanish in a blinding flash, taken by a fast, six-winged creature.

“What the? Ben? Where did you go?” Nathan said, his voice trembling.

“So, you want to play, Creator? So be it.” The figure snarled, before dissipating into shadows.

The scenery shifted around once more. Ben was now watching Ariana skip past him into the woods, humming a tune as a bird repeated it above her.

Wait, Ben thought. Ariana is missing, so why is she...?

It was then that he realized that this was when she first found him, back in the forest. It had only been a week or two, yet to Ben, it felt like a lifetime ago. He watched as his counterpart met Ariana for the first time. With a heavy heart, he gazed at her, feeling a lump in his throat, fully aware that he was to blame for everything

It changed once again. This time, he watched as Aka Manah forced him to transform into a giant version of his Nephilim Shell, something he called a “Colossus.” Ben’s transformed counterpart destroyed everything in its path as

Ariana was taken away by the she-demon he had killed in Riverglade. The thought of Alexis even touching her made Ben's blood boil. But at the very least, she was alive.

"I need to rescue her!" Ben told the voice. "You have to let me go!"

Everything around him spun as if he were in the middle of a storm. The clouds took shape until it formed a middle-aged man, with white, slightly curly hair stretching down the sides of his face and to the back of his neck. His skin had a sun-kissed, tawny hue, almost bordering on dark. Ben couldn't help but shiver as he looked into his eyes, which seemed to shimmer like a rainbow with an endless depth. On his back, he had a pair of white, bright wings that seemed to be made of light itself, stretching far behind him.

Fear took Ben as he stepped back. Slowly, the stranger's form shifted once more. His hair shifted from white to near-black, his clothes to a simple, slightly tattered robe. The infinite spectrum in his eyes darkened slightly.

"Peace, Ben," the figure said, his voice now a normal, humble tone. He smiled warmly. "I am here to help."

"Wait...you're the Creator, aren't you?" Ben asked him, his eyes widening.

"I am." The Creator met his eyes that gazed into his very soul.

"So where am I?" Ben once more gaped at his unbelievable surroundings. "Is this the afterlife? Or...?"

"You're not dead," the Creator said. "Nor are you alive. My realm is beyond life and death."

"How am I supposed to understand that?" he asked.

"You aren't," he told him. "You're here for another reason."

Ben clenched his jaw. Ariana was still in the clutches of Aka Manah and Alexis, and he needed to save her. He didn't have time to talk, even if it was the Creator.

"My realm is also timeless." The Creator said, as if he were reading his mind, "There are things you must know. Vital to your victory."

"I..." Ben ran his fingers through his hair. "...like what? What could I possibly do to make up for everything I've done? All the death I've caused?"

The Creator frowned. "You know it wasn't your fault, Ben. There are larger forces at work."

"Like you?"

"Yes." His eyes appeared brighter. "I am the one who had you brought to New Eden and took your memory until the time was right."

"Until the time was right?" Ben froze, then shook his head in disbelief. "But why? Why was I brought here, where I ruined everyone's lives? Why did you let me kill all those people, or even let me get infected in the first place?"

The Creator's eyes softened, their infinite depth staring ahead as the ethereal wind blew the mist from the infinite waters.

"I just—" Ben grunted in frustration, collapsing to the ground, his hands gripping his hair as darkness invaded his vision. "I just feel horrible. Just for being alive. None of this would have—"

Out of the infinity, he heard a familiar chirp. A small, dark bird flew down from the tree made of light and landed on Ben's arm. His eyes widened as he realized it was the same one who had hummed his and Ariana's song back at Kira's village. He briefly felt a strange, comforting warmth, the same kind he got when Ariana hugged him. The darkness faded from his vision as he focused on the small bird.

"Birdy?" he asked. "What are you doing here, buddy?"

Birdy fluttered away from him and onto the shoulder of the Creator, who petted it affectionately.

“This is Aromiel,” the Creator said. “He is among my most faithful creatures. He is the one I sent to retrieve you from the clutches of Death itself.”

Ben looked at the bird. It was barely the size of a normal human hand, so it was hard for him to understand how a small bird like that could have even lifted him, much less carried him, to a different realm. The Creator whispered to the bird, and soon after, it flew away and vanished in a small flash of light.

“Where’d he go?” Ben asked.

“To help Ariana,” the Creator said. “Considering where she is, she’s going to need it.”

“Wait, where is she?” Ben’s chest tightened. “What happened to her?”

“Aka Manah has captured her. In trying to attack him, she was taken by one of his she-demons, and now she is currently being held in their fortress.”

“Fortress?”

“Yes,” he said, “It serves as a hive for them, a forward base from where they can wreak havoc and terror. The Great Darkness also spreads from it, infecting the realm as we speak.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed. “How do they have a fortress in New Eden?”

The Creator grimaced. “The host isn’t what it used to be. My angel’s numbers are dwindling, their lives lost in protecting the souls of humans. The demons have no such limitation. They spawn far faster, and gain their victories by overwhelming their foes, spreading the darkness as well.”

“Aka Manah is their leader, I’m guessing?”

“Yes. He was once one of my angels, so he knows their ways, so much that he can evade them to conduct his operations in secrecy. By the time his plans are discovered, most of the time it is far too late.”

Thoughts of Aka Manah caused Ben's fists to clench. He had disguised himself as Billy in order to force him to use his abilities more. Eventually, he could control him completely. If he had listened to Raziel and Ariana, then maybe she wouldn't have been taken.

“Then I have to go now!” Ben told him.

“You need to be patient,” the Creator warned.

“No! I need to save her, dammit! Do you even know what it's like to lose someone? To have them taken from you before your very eyes?” His brows furrowed. “No, of course not. Why would you? You sit up here with all your power and do nothing while everything else goes to hell!”

The man's infinite eyes lowered. “Ben, please listen...”

“No, you listen! I...” His throat tightened, his hands shook as he clutched his chest. “I did this, okay? It was my fault that Ariana is suffering in that demon fortress and that her life that she had is gone because of me. I don't care what happens to me, I just...I couldn't live with myself if I lost her, too.”

The Creator put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Ariana will be saved, Ben. Rushing anything will not do you or her any good. If you refuse to heed my guidance, then both you and her will perish.” His eyes focused. “Everyone will perish.”

Ben stared up at him. Despite knowing it was impulsive, he couldn't resist. The more he thought about Ariana being in the demon's clutches, the more he wanted to rescue her. He felt his chest tighten as the possibility of losing her ravaged his mind.

"I just—" Ben sighed. "There's still so much I don't understand. I don't get why all those people had to die, or why I was brought here to ruin her life."

"There are so many things I wish I could tell you, but..." the Creator spun to face the two trees, focusing on their infinitely expanding branches, almost longingly. "...if we want to reach that end result, then the path must be followed. The pain may be unbearable, but you must endure, and above all, you must move forward, because while there is death and suffering in this world, there is also light. To fight the darkness, it must be embraced." He turned to face Ben once more, brows furrowing. "So fight, Ben. Fight for *that* future."

Ben froze, staring at the mysterious trees with him. There was something unnerving, yet hopeful, about them. His sense of awareness melted away as images, shadows, maybe even memories flashed between the two trees, brief visions of him and Ariana danced across the cosmos of the Creator's realm. The longer he stared, the more he felt possibility and vertigo overtake him.

What is this?

The Creator turned back to him, snapping him out of his trance. "But for now, you need to focus on the present if you want to save her. To do that, I ask that you trust me."

"Alright." Ben took a deep breath as he looked up. "What did you want to tell me?"

The Creator gazed at him. "It's about the contents of the demon fortress..."



Both Ariana's heart and leg were in excruciating pain. It was still fractured, and as far as she knew, Ben was dead or still rampaging as the giant monster that Aka Manah had turned him into.

Huddled in the cold cell, Ariana wrapped her arms around her knees, desperately trying to generate warmth. The stone she sat on was like a block of ice. She felt like she was losing her very soul, that she and Ben had come all that way for nothing.

To her, such a fate was colder than any prison in the entire universe.

As Ariana rested her forehead on her quivering arms, she could feel the tension coursing through her body. She wanted to cry, but no tears came. Despite all that happened, she had just felt too numb. A hint of regret wormed its way into her mind as she wished that she had some sort of comfort: her violin, her cozy room, or her father.

A lump formed in her throat when Ariana thought about Zachariel. How would he react if he found out that the demons had her? Or if they killed her? It would break his heart, and she couldn't bear to put him through that.

Ariana heard a small whistling noise. She looked toward the source and found a black bird with startling gray eyes resting on the windowsill near the corner of the cell. It was the same one they had met in Kira's village that had helped them decide the name of the song.

"Birdy!" she whispered gleefully, crawling to the window. She gave him an affectionate pat on the wings as she smiled.

Birdy hopped down to the floor of the prison cell as she picked him up, nuzzling him against her cheeks. Right now, she was glad for any comfort in the dark place that had trapped her.

He stood in her fragile hands, tilting his head at her as he chirped, as if he were asking what was wrong.

Ariana sat back against the wall and sighed. "Well...everything," she told him. "The demons won. They turned Ben into some horrible monster."

Birdy chirped at her once more, as if he were saying, "Go on."

"I don't even know what happened to my dad. I mean, now that I think back to it, if I had just listened to him, then maybe none of this would have happened. It's my fault that my village is gone." Ariana dipped her head, letting her golden bangs cover her face.

The bird whistled again, this time a little louder than before. She raised her head and looked at him, seeing that his little gray eyes had the same softness that Ben's did. At that moment, she imagined his kind face smiling warmly at her.

Fluttering his tiny wings, Birdy hopped on her shoulder, nuzzling his tiny head against her neck the way Ben had done after the fall of the Sky City. Ariana felt a sudden rush. Her pulse quickened as she imagined him embracing her. The cold that had tried to break her spirit before was now itself broken.

It emitted a tiny shrill, still rubbing his head against her. Ariana gently grabbed him and held him in front of her face, smiling warmly at him. She gave him a tiny kiss on his little forehead. "Thank you so much. I really needed that."

Birdy uttered another chirp as she gently hugged him close to her chest. After that, she held him in front of her. "Alright. I need to get out of here. Do you have any ideas?"

He lightly hopped around on her hands as a shrill, hissing voice erupted from down the hall. "What's that noise?"

Quick, girl! the voice said. *Play dumb!*

Ariana swiftly shielded Birdy, hushed him, and feigned madness while engaging in a conversation with an invisible presence. Alexis stormed in front of her cell and slammed against the bars.

"Who are you talking to, girl?"

Keeping up her act, Ariana 'introduced' Alexis to her invisible friend. "Hi Alexis! This is Bob! Bob thinks you look gorgeous today! You two should totally go out!"

“Okay...?” Alexis’s glare softened. The she-demon looked at Ariana with a slightly bewildered expression as she opened the door of the cell. “Come with me, girl.”

Ariana partially kept up the crazy act as she felt behind her for Birdy. To her dismay, he wasn’t there.

Yanking her by the arm, Alexis pulled her up from the ground, tying of ropes around her hands as she led her out of the cell. As they walked down the hallway, she heard a series of shrills erupt from a room. Ariana briefly stopped and peeked in, seeing a glowing pentagram on the stone-laden floor. It drew in dust from the five points and combined it at the center. Out of that came the demons, dragging themselves out of the ritual and back into being.

Her eyes widened. Was this how Alexis and the other demons survived being destroyed?

The she-demon shoved Ariana forward into the main room of the demon fortress. On a not-so-humble chair near the back of the room sat Aka Manah, with one of his legs propped up on the armrest. Beside the throne sat a cloaked figure, who had a set of blazing red eyes and a demonic seal burned into the figure’s forehead. It glared through the darkness of the hood.

Alexis forcefully sat Ariana down in a chair that was about ten feet away from the throne. She continued to play dumb and looked everywhere in the room, keeping her expressions random and unpredictable. Aka Manah saw right through Ariana’s act, staring at her with a bored look.

“Drop the act, girl. Some of my demons may be idiots, but there’s no deceiving the master of deception.” Behind her, Alexis shrunk behind the chair, probably feeling stupid for falling for Ariana’s ruse. “As ‘Alexis’ here may have told you, I have someone I want you to meet.”

The hooded figure stepped forward.

“Wait,” Ariana began, “who is this?”

She felt her throat tighten as the figure fully threw back his hood. To her horror, it was Ben. His hair was scorched to a pale, ashen white, and his blood-soaked eyes bore a permanent upside-down pentagram. He gazed vacantly, as though enchanted by a spell.

Ariana was shocked at first, but then she eased her mind when she realized it wasn't Ben after all. Of course, she didn't know that for sure, yet she had a feeling that whatever was in front of her wasn't truly the man she loved.

"This isn't him," she answered confidently. "Nice try."

Aka Manah's eyes darted between Ben's evil twin and Ariana as if he were studying their reactions to each other. He flashed a wicked smile.

"Interesting," the demon said, his spindly hands rubbing his pointed chin. "Your assessment is partially correct. This is indeed something else from him, and now it is under my control. So, test successful."

Wait, Ariana thought, if this isn't Ben, then what—

Aka Manah never gave her a chance to finish her thoughts. He indicated his female demon lieutenant with a spindly finger. "Take her back to the cell. Once there, she's all yours."

Alexis grinned wickedly and tried to yank Ariana out of the chair. At the perfect moment, Ariana's shift caused both it and the she-demon to fall. She quickly recovered her breath and ran back into the hallway.

"Get back here, girl!" Alexis screamed after her. "I'm not done with you!"

Ariana sprinted as fast as her injured leg would allow. The demon's claws scraped the stone not far behind her.

She finally exited the hallway and arrived on a spacious stone deck without any railings. When she peered over, she saw nothing but the promise of a long, scary drop to her death.

This thing is floating? Ariana thought, her heartbeat thumping in her ear as she panicked. *What am I supposed to do? Jump for it?*

Alexis lumbered her way out onto the deck, her claws dragging against the floor as she flashed her a wicked set of sharp, uneven teeth.

"I've got you cornered," the she-demon hissed. "Finally!"

"I mean..." Ariana gestured to the empty air with a nervous half-grin. "Not technically a corner. Heh."

Ignoring the snide remark, Alexis leapt at her, pinning her to the ground. She brought her face close, making her so uncomfortable that she considered just jumping off to rid herself of the she-demon's gnarly breath.

"And now..." the demon retracted a claw and traced Ariana's face, "to finish what I started."

Ariana sweated profusely as the claw slowly came back out of the demon's hand, leaving a small, gentle scratch on her face, as if she were simply toying with her. Alexis grinned widely.

"Time to die, little Ari."

A lump formed in her throat. The fact that she was about to die had just sunk in. No Ben, nor her father, to save her. She was alone.

Just then, Ariana felt something wrapped in leather slip into her hand. She peeked under Alexis to see that it was Birdy, who had retrieved Omega and fluttered his wings, now squawking to get the she-demon's attention.

It worked. Alexis looked behind her for the source of the noise, and Ariana raised her arms and jammed the blade into the she-demon's back, causing her to shriek and flap her ragged wings haphazardly.

"Yes!" Ariana cheered, trying to find Birdy. "Now let's find a way—"

Before she could even finish, something hard struck Ariana across the face. The next thing she knew, the wind was blowing past her, the ground racing to meet her.

Not knowing what else to do, Ariana slammed her eyes shut and prepared for the end.

The impact came. It was...softer than she expected, almost like a pile of feathers. She opened her eyes and found herself on the back of a large, six-winged eagle, which had come out of nowhere and scooped her from the rocky clutches of death below.

Gripping the eagle's neck tightly, Ariana could feel the power in its mighty wings as they propelled them straight up towards the fortress deck, where Alexis had sent her to her doom. Sure enough, the partially vaporized demon was still fluttering around, stamping her clawed foot as she tried desperately to yank the knife from her body.

The giant bird slid past the demon as Ariana rolled under, pulling Omega from the demon's body. Alexis spun with a hiss, arching her arm to claw her. Ariana took advantage of the opening and jammed the shimmering blade into the she-demon's chest. With one final agonizing yell of defeat, Alexis vanished into dust, though some of it made its way to Ariana's nose, causing her to sneeze as one defiant act of post-mortem revenge.

"Ugh. Bless me." Ariana used her shirt to wipe her nose before turning to the giant bird. "Um, I don't know who you are, but thanks. I guess."

The creature nudged her with its massive beak and chirped, tilting its head cutely. Ariana's eyes widened.

"Wait, Birdy?" she asked. "Is that you?"

Birdy nodded, snapped the ropes that bound her hands, and lowered itself for Ariana to get on his back. She felt her cheeks burn hot with anger.

“Seriously?” Ariana felt her cheeks flush in anger as she slid onto the massive eagle’s back. “You couldn’t have done that earlier?”

Birdy, or whatever his name actually was, rolled his eyes. It lumbered over to the edge of the deck and spread all six of its massive wings, catching the cold air in its feathers as it prepared for takeoff.

“Okay.” Ariana gripped the neck once more, her brows furrowing in determination. “Let’s go find my dad.”

With that command, Birdy caught the mountain wind and soared high into the sky as they ventured to find her father.

Chapter 23

Fighting the Darkness

When Ben regained consciousness, he felt the tickle of bubbles on his lips. He was back under the water where Zachariel and Raziel had dropped him. It felt like he was lying on a cloud, suspended and weightless.

He emerged from the water, his body tingling with a renewed sense of energy. He felt...pure, like he could run for days and vaporize a million demons. The voices and dark, murderous urges that had plagued him before were gone.

And now, thanks to the Creator, Ben knew what needed to be done.

“Ben!” Zachariel’s eyes widened as he noticed him emerge from the Pool of Eden. “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” Ben glanced at him and smiled. “I feel good.”

Zachariel sighed in relief as he clasped Ben’s hand and pulled him the rest of the way out. Their eyes met. The image of their battle and the angel’s blade a mere inch from his face flashed into his mind. Though it had healed thanks to the pool, the spot where Zachariel had run him through with his blade stung.

The angel frowned, as if he knew what he was thinking. His eyes lowered.

“Ben,” the angel began, “about before, I...wanted to apologize.”

“Don’t. I...” Ben frowned, “I killed a lot of people, didn’t I?”

"You weren't in control." Zachariel placed a reassuring hand on Ben's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself for it."

"Kind of hard not to, so believe me, I understand," Ben said, avoiding the angel's gaze. "Even more so, I agree."

Zachariel frowned. "Regardless of what you think, you're just a victim in all of this. You don't deserve death."

"They didn't either."

The angel opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped. Silence filled the crisp air until another voice sounded from behind them.

"I see you've woken up. Better late than never."

Ben looked past the angel to the source of the voice. Raziel was sitting on a rock, gazing outward toward the storm clouds that were forming in the far distance. Without his cloak, his armor was exposed, its surface riddled with chips, cracks, and breaks. He looked like he had gone through an oversized paper shredder and lived to tell about it.

"Raziel!" he said, amazed. "You're alive?"

"Yes." Raziel waved his hand dismissively. "I appreciate the concern."

"I never got the chance to thank you for giving me and Ari the chance to get out of the city." Ben smiled and gave him a pat on the arm. "We wouldn't have made it otherwise."

"For all the good it did," Raziel said callously. "The people of that city are gone. You were successfully corrupted and nearly died as a result, and Ariana is the demon's prisoner...if she isn't dead, that is."

"She's not dead," Ben insisted.

"How do you know?" Zachariel asked, uncrossing his arms and taking a step forward, his eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and urgency.

“Remember how you told me about the Creator, back in Riverglade?”

The angel nodded as Raziel’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, uh...when I was under, I met him. He said he had some information for me to pass onto you.”

“You met the Creator?” Raziel asked, his brows furrowed in disbelief.

“Yeah.” Ben nodded and faced Zachariel. “He wants us to attack the fortress and says that there’s something inside it that keeps the demons coming back.”

“Typical that he would leave the dirty work to angels, even with that infinite power of his,” Raziel sneered.

“That’s...actually a good point,” Ben said. “Why doesn’t he just blow them from existence?”

“We’ll never know that now,” Raziel scoffed. “Considering you missed the chance to ask him yourself.”

“His focus is on his people,” Zachariel corrected him. “He entrusted this task to us. For everyone’s sake, we must see it through.”

“I suppose.” Raziel sighed and rolled his eyes. “Anyway, you mentioned Ariana was alive. Is she in the fortress as well?”

“Yeah, he said he was sending this little bird to help her.”

Raziel arched an eyebrow. “A bird?”

“Yeah. I call him Eren, Ari calls him Birdy, but the Creator said he had a different name.” Ben scratched his head. “What was it? Caramel? Arrow...something?”

“Aromiel?” Zachariel asked, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Ben nodded. “Why? Know him?”

Zachariel touched his chin in deep thought. “He’s the highest among the Host’s creatures. I’ve never seen him in person, but the legends say he sits at the foot of the Creator

himself, doing his good work and singing praises, but above all, he is a guardian. So, if the Creator sent him to save Ariana..." He eyed Ben. "Then he will not fail."

"Alright, so Aromiel saves Ari. We pick her up, destroy whatever's in the fortress, and go back to Riverglade? So you guys can have your life back?" Ben asked hopefully.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Ben, but those days are long gone." Zachariel sighed wistfully. "The only thing we can do now is destroy that fortress and save those who still live."

"Indeed," a voice from the shadows said. "It's best not to waste any more time."

Ben spun to face the owner of the voice. It belonged to a tall angel, with blonde hair and a pair of blue, glowing wings. He had his arms crossed, like he was ready for any kind of fight that could be thrown at him. The angel's intense, piercing gaze bore into him with an unsettling intensity.

Ben paled. This was the one that had punched him from the sky when he was in his Colossus form.

"Michael." Zachariel nodded. "Any news?"

"Yes," Michael said, his eyes downcast. "My scouts have located the fortress, but..."

Gabriel arched an eyebrow. "But what, brother?"

"It is heavily defended." The Archangel inhaled sharply. "I don't see how we take it without great cost."

Ben watched as the angel's eyes collectively widened. Raziel's intense gaze met the Archangel's.

"But that is not for us to worry about. For us, the Creator declared the destruction of that fortress his top priority. He will lend us some help from those deployed to Earth."

Against his better judgment, Ben interjected. "Can I help somehow?"

All three angels spun to look at him. They turned back and conversed in another language. Zachariel glanced over at him one more time and sighed in irritation. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Raziel interrupted him.

“Ben is obviously clear of his demon corruption. Personally, I don't see what the big issue is.”

“He brings up a point, Zachariel.” Another angel that had just arrived said. “The boy seems to have more control over himself.”

“Gabriel,” Zachariel said, greeting him with a handshake. He then eyed the new arrival before glancing back at Ben. “You think so?”

“I don't see why not,” Gabriel replied, turning to the blue-winged angel once more. “What say you, brother?”

“If the boy really has control of it, then have him summon his Nephilim armor.” Michael's eyes narrowed, scanning Ben from head to toe, as if he were sizing up a potential adversary. “That would be the fastest way to test Gabriel's and Raziel's hypothesis.”

“Whoa, whoa, I didn't mean like that,” Ben protested. “I thought it was dangerous to use my abilities.” Last time he summoned the shell, Aka Manah had transformed him into a rampaging giant. Considering that it got Ariana captured and a few villages obliterated, he wasn't exactly keen on trying it again.

“The corruption is gone.” Raziel rose from his perch on the rock and approached Ben, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don't be afraid to embrace your power.”

Ben looked over at the three angels. Michael nodded his head in approval. Gabriel gave him a thumbs up, and Zachariel hesitated for a moment, before nodding his head as well.

Raziel returned the nod and focused on Ben. “Alright. Now summon the armor.”

Ben closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. He tried to imagine the armor forming around his body, but when he opened them, all that was there was a ring of smoke. He grunted in frustration.

"It's not working."

"That's because you're still afraid." Raziel eyed him.

"What do you mean?"

"To someone who hasn't mastered it, the armor typically forms to either anger or protectiveness," Raziel explained. "I noticed that when you summoned it against me, you did so to protect Ariana. But your anger, added to the demon's corruption, made you unpredictably violent. But now, even with its influence gone, you're still letting the infection get to your head."

"Okay." Ben narrowed his eyes. "So, what do I do about it?"

Raziel pulled his blade and pinned him against the wall. Gabriel and Zachariel attempted to jump in and stop him, but Michael held both of his arms up as he beckoned for them not to interfere.

"What are you doing?" Zachariel asked.

"Just wait," Michael said, eying Raziel carefully.

Raziel pressed the blade closer to Ben's neck, enough to make blood drip down the dark steel. "Form your shell. Now"

Ben closed his eyes, desperately trying to call forth the ethereal armor. For a second, he felt like he was back in the husk of the Demon Colossus, trampling and burning the innocents.

"I-I can't," he said, opening his eyes to push the images from his mind. "I don't want anyone else to get—"

Raziel released him from his iron-clad grip, sending him falling against the ground. His firm hand gripped his shoulder, a breath burned against his ear.

“Did you forget, Ben? What happened to her because of you?”

Ben froze. Images of Ariana’s burnt wrist, her destroyed village, and everything else burned into his mind. Ben’s eyes flashed as he felt his body heat up, like two sticks being rubbed together to create a fire.

“Right now, she is probably in chains, at the mercy of the demons,” Raziel taunted. “She’s where she is now, because of you. But it doesn’t have to stay that way. You can save her.”

Ben’s eyebrows furrowed. Raziel had a point. Ariana was trapped in the demon fortress, and now he could make things right by saving her. He owed it to both her and Zachariel.

“Before, you were chained by the infection, by fear. Now, you have control. It’s your power, Ben,” Raziel hissed. “Now, fight.”

The smoke that now billowed from his body ignited and gave way to flame. It erupted from him with a thunderous roar, forcing Raziel to stumble backward, as the rest of his armor emerged, forming an imposing eighteen-foot humanoid figure. Blue chunks of his new Nephilim Shell covered his body as white light erupted from the cracks.

Raziel smirked as he sheathed his blade. “Finally.”

Ben’s mouth gaped as the cut in his neck healed. His new armor didn’t feel sinister or demonic like the last one. If anything, it felt righteous.

When he looked back up, Raziel had already formed his own armor and summoned a sword and shield to go with it. Zachariel, Michael, and Gabriel had drawn their weapons as well.

“Been a while since we had a full-scale battle. I’ve been itching for some action ever since I was assigned to the archive.” The silver-haired angel said, cracking a wide grin. “What about you, brother? Feeling up to the task?”

"I'd prefer not." Zachariel said, stretching and rotating his sword arm as he looked at Michael. "But if it must be done..."

"It is," Michael said, nodding. "We must take this fortress by any means necessary."

"Well, I know you guys are angels and everything..." Ben faced them. "But there are only five of us. How are we going to take out all of those demons?"

"Oh, right." Gabriel smiled and turned to his fellow archangel. "You said we were getting help, correct?"

Michael nodded and dug his blade into the ground, whispering an incantation of some sort. Ben arched an eyebrow and leaned over to Raziel. "What is he doing?"

Before anyone could answer, Michael tore the blade from the ground and pointed it skyward. Blue and yellow lightning cracked through the clouds, illuminating the entire sky and transforming the three angels into warriors clad in battle armor. The lightning etched intricate symbols and shimmering veins of multi-colored light onto the plates, infusing them with a breathtaking, indescribable energy.

The Archangel slung the blade back down and screamed, "Come! Heaven's Legion!"

As the dark clouds parted, brilliant rays of light pierced through the gaps. Soon, they disappeared altogether, revealing hundreds upon hundreds of winged figures, all armed with blazing swords and shining plates of armor, ready to tear the enemy asunder.

Ben blinked in absolute awe, unable to process the incredible sight before him. He felt that now, with the corruption gone, and an angel army at their side, that nothing could stand in their way as they saved Ariana and what remained of New Eden.

Because now, the Calvary had arrived.



Zachariel looked onward and sighed with relief as Michael finally summoned Heaven's Legion. He was glad, because he did not feel up to fighting the demons with only four comrades. Even if it was two of his fellow angels and two Soraphim, one of whom was a rebellious and utterly insane rogue, and the other being a young, ignorant and confused boy. Even with two archangels at his back, he still felt no less dubious about the oncoming fight.

As Michael raised his blade, Zachariel readied his sword and spread his wings, preparing for takeoff. The command was given, and they all tore into the sky, soaring like bolts of lightning into the dark clouds.

He looked behind him to see that Raziel and Ben had formed a pair of burning ethereal wings on their respective armors. Michael led the legion, his wings a mere glowing blur as they cut across the churning clouds.

Soon, they were free of the storm that obscured their vision, and the fortress was in view. It was a gray stone castle with a sinister, twisted architecture to it. Sharp, evil spires erupted from the top and sides of the fortress, and like the Sky City, it was housed on a chunk of jagged rock and stone, suspended far above the ground. A multitude of smaller masses orbited the main one, creating a debris field that would have to maneuver through if they hoped to reach their target.

Zachariel looked closer. On each of the floating chunks stood a Wicked Giant, each preparing a flaming meteor. By the time he had opened his mouth to warn his comrades, a good dozen of them were vaporized into light and dust.

"Take cover!" screamed Michael as he ducked behind a large rock, the Legion following suit. Plumes of searing flame

and rock soared past them, decimating those who hadn't yet made it to shelter. Gabriel took refuge next to him.

"We've got to do something about those giants!" He pressed his back against the rock. "I—"

The barrage stopped. Zachariel exchanged looks with Gabriel before daring to peek out from behind cover. His eyes widened. Ben had formed a massive shield of azure, solidified fire, and was rallying the angels behind him as he pressed forward, closer to the Wicked Giants that guarded the fortress.

Zachariel's eyes widened. The incredible sight in front of him stood in sharp contrast to the horrors he had witnessed before.

Instead of fighting them, Ben was now leading them.

The Wicked Giants roared in defiance. Their meteors bounced off the shield harmlessly as he finally broke their defenses. The angels spread out and tore the giants asunder, finally clearing the path forward.

Gabriel cheered next to him as they broke cover and darted toward the fortress. They landed on another of the floating rocks, seeing the slain, shadowy bodies of the Wicked Giants slowly dissipate into smoke. Now that they were out of the way, they could finally begin their assault.

Raziel landed next to them, his cold-steel blade covered in demon dust. Ben followed behind him, his Nephilim armor shining, powerful, and righteous.

"So, what's next?" Ben asked. "We go after that thing the Creator was talking about?"

"Don't be stupid, Ben," Raziel said. "I'm not letting you anywhere near that fortress. I'll be the one to destroy it. Besides..." His brows furrowed. "I've got a score to settle."

"Come on, man!" Ben's armor flared with blue fire. "What about Ariana?"

The second the words had escaped Ben's mouth, they all heard a shrieking noise and looked forward to the source. There, a six-winged eagle was fleeing from a group of pursuing demons, with a terrified blonde girl clutching desperately to its neck.

Zachariel smiled, knowing that Ariana had been saved by Aromiel. The bird had done its job, but they still needed to eliminate the demons behind her.

"Aromiel!" he shouted. "Dive!"

Aromiel complied and pulled all six of his wings in, diving below them. He, Raziel, Ben, and Gabriel tore through and killed most with a few swings of a blade and a whirlwind of orange and blue flame.

After the demons had either passed or been shredded into dust, the eagle swung around and landed on the rock with them. Ariana laid her head against its neck, her hair a tangled mess. She looked like she was mere seconds from vomiting. The moment she saw him, however, she sat up, her eyes widening.

"Dad!" Ariana let out a joyful scream as he tightly wrapped his arms around her. "Y-you're alive!"

"I'm alive?" Zachariel gripped tighter, then pulled back to look at her. He brushed a loose curl behind her ear. "I'm happy just to see you, Ari! More than you'll ever know."

Behind them, Raziel let out a weary sigh. "This is very touching and all, but we need to get a move on. I have a demon to kill."

"You mean Aka Manah?" Ariana asked.

"Who else?" His scarlet eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Be careful. He has something that looks like B—" Ariana froze, her mouth gaped open as her eyes trailed behind Zachariel. He paused, then turned to see what his daughter was looking at. Ben was there, staring back at her. Both of their

eyes welled up with tears, slowly brimming with emotion. Ben released his armor, and they embraced.

“Ari,” Ben rasped. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“I thought I lost you.” Ariana said as her eyes azure glistened. Their eyes met once more, their faces inched closer to one another, as if for a kiss. Raziel interrupted it by clearing his throat.

“Again, very touching. But seeing as we’re in the middle of a battle, we can’t afford to waste more time.” His gaze turned to Ariana. “You were in the fortress. Did you see Aka Manah?”

“Yeah, he’s in a giant throne room in the center.” Ariana nodded. “Also, I saw something else. Close to it is another one where a bunch of demons came out of this weird circle thingy. They die, and they come back out of it.”

“They’re respawning?” Zachariel asked. “So they more or less have an infinite army?”

“Not for long,” Raziel declared as he summoned his ethereal armor once more. “You and I will—”

From the direction of the fortress, a thunderous cry of anger echoed through the air. Zachariel glanced over, seeing a large red Nephilim Shell with a plethora of demons behind it. As he focused, he realized it was Ben in the armor. Confused, he looked over at the Ben who was in Ariana’s embrace.

This is him all right, Zachariel confirmed, but then...?

The dark Ben in the red armor rammed directly into the rock they were on, shattering it to pieces. They fell for a moment before regaining their aerial stability. He and Gabriel darted from under the falling debris, Aromiel following them with Ariana on his back. Ben tried to form his armor mid-air but was grabbed and slammed into another nearby floating chunk.

Zachariel looked at Ariana, who regained her posture and set her sights on the two clashing Soraphim. She leaned

forward and ordered Aromiel to intervene. "Come on, Birdy! We've got to help Ben!"

He moved to assist them but found himself swarmed by a ragtag group of raging demons. By the time Raziel had joined him, the battling red and blue armors were already far away.

"Zachariel..." Raziel said. "We need to take out Aka Manah. If we don't stop him and destroy whatever is regenerating the demons, these armies will keep coming."

The angel looked around. The rest of Heaven's legion was locked in fierce battle. There were the angels fighting against the demons and imps, and Michael and Gabriel were preoccupied with a second group of Wicked Giants that attacked his regiment. They couldn't rely on them for help.

"Alright." Zachariel gripped the leather handle of his blade, knowing full well that he was in for the fight of his life. "Let's go find Aka Manah."



The fact that Ben had met his evil twin was pretty bad in Ariana's book. She wasn't sure exactly what it was, or how Aka Manah had gotten ahold of it, but to her, it was a manifestation of his darkest self. The one she had feared would take him over for good.

Solidifying her grip on Birdy's neck, Ariana beckoned him closer to the two dueling Bens. The dark one from the throne room appeared to have no trouble in trouncing his counterpart, flinging him across the field of flying rocks and debris.

As they fought, a bunch of demons tried to jump the good Ben and distract him, but Birdy dived in and grabbed them, flinging them up as Ariana slashed them with Omega. One of them foresaw it and positioned itself to ambush her from above.

Watch out, girl! the voice in her said, *demon above you!*

Ariana patted Birdy's head and told him to do a barrel roll. The demon instead ended up in the bird's claws, before he turned back upright and smashed the demon against a floating rock.

"Good job!" she told Birdy. "Now let's go help Ben!"

They sped over to the fight. The wind whipped violently as Ariana and Birdy flew ever closer. Both Bens were smashing the other against a rock, boulder, or whatever object they could find. The blows from his darker self were significantly more vicious and powerful.

Ariana and Birdy had finally closed in on the scene, only to find the two parties locked in a stalemate. The evil one slowly turned his head, his white hair flickering in the wind as he grinned insidiously at her, the same smile he had when he first killed Alexis back in Riverglade.

Ariana froze as Birdy tucked his wings in and narrowly avoided a jet of red and black flame. She shook her head, inhaled sharply, and directed the six-winged eagle in for another dive bomb.

Ben's evil twin eyed her and jumped out of the way, causing her and Birdy to have to grind to a halt, nearly falling over the edge. The giant bird's talons dug into the rock. The sudden jolt caused Ariana to slip down his feathery back and nearly fall to her demise, her right hand barely grabbing his wing at the last possible second. Her feet dangled; her arm felt like it was being torn from her socket as she desperately held on for dear life.

Birdy leaned over and picked her up by her torn shirt with his beak, placing her back on the safety of the small floating landmass. When she looked back up at the battle, her eyes widened.

Evil Ben was pummeling good Ben as savagely as possible, the chunks of his blue armor cracked beneath the blows. When it finally shattered, he grabbed him by his jet-black hair

with an evil smirk. Ben's eyebrows furrowed as he head-butted his opponent and attempted to put him in a headlock. His evil twin expected the move, twisted around, and kicked him to the ground as he summoned a hellfire blade burning with a sizzling, demonic energy. He raised it high, ready to deliver the fatal strike.

Before she could even think about it, Ariana had jumped and landed on the back of the evil Ben's armor, digging Omega into the nape. The evil twin shouted in agony as he threw Ariana from his back, raising a fist to smash her. With no avenue of escape, and no time to react, Ariana met the creature's eyes with a defiant glare as the blade fell.

With a swift motion, the other Ben seized the wicked one's ethereal sword and mercilessly drove it through his body, pinning him to a nearby rocky outcrop. Blood spurted from the mouth, the body twitching before the shaking subsided completely, smoke rising from it.

Ben sighed with relief, then turned to embrace Ariana, his warmth spreading to her. It felt comforting, having his arms around her once more, after she thought she had lost him for good.

"Ben," Ariana whispered as she nuzzled her head under his chin. "Don't leave me again. Please."

As Ben smiled and prepared to speak, the air filled with the eerie sound of twisted laughter from his evil self. The blood-red eyes were blazing, the demonic seal on his forehead slowly faded.

"No promises," it teased wickedly, head tilting. "You were meant for this, you know. To bring suffering."

Ariana grit her teeth and stepped forward, but Ben held her back. He exchanged a quick glance with her before facing his darker self.

"No," Ben declared. "I'm never going to become you again."

“I am you, fool.” The evil Ben laughed as more blood spurted from his wound and mouth. He stared him directly in the eye and he flashed him a set of bloodied teeth. “By the way, I never thanked you.”

Ben cautiously approached it, never breaking eye contact. Ariana felt the hairs on her body stand on end when it spoke.

“For what?”

The demonic seal on the evil Ben’s forehead disappeared. It smirked.

“For freeing me.”

The creature freed itself from the blade and leapt forward, causing Ben to quickly summon his blue armor defensively. In that instant, it disappeared into ash and ember, encircling him and turning his fire orange once more. After that, all traces of his evil counterpart were finally gone.

Ben collapsed to the ground, and his armor vanished like mist in the sunlight. Ariana knelt next to him and pulled him close, his bruised and bloody body safe in her arms before they met each other’s eyes. He tightened his warm grip on her.

“Ari,” he said, his voice breaking. “I’m sorry. For everything.”

She hugged him back and ran her fingers through his hair. “It’s alright. I’m just glad to have you back.”

As he let go and stood up, he reached out to assist her in getting up, since her leg was still fractured. They made their way over to Birdy, who was fluttering all six of his wings in irritation, like he was eager to leave.

“Hey, buddy.” Ben patted the bird on his head. “Got room for one more?”

Birdy sounded off and readied his wings for flight. The pair climbed onto his back, and Ben wrapped his arms around her waist, so that he wouldn’t fall off during flight. Ariana’s face burned.

They took off into the sky and soared toward the frightening fortress that Aka Manah had kept her in. "Alright Ben. Let me know if you see Dad or Raziel."

After circling the now inactive fortress a few times, Ben pointed to the deck that Ariana had escaped from not long ago. Out of the walkway came Raziel and Zachariel...only the latter was bleeding profusely from the chest.

"Girl!" Raziel shouted. "Bring that eagle down here now!"

They hurriedly complied and brought her dad onto Birdy. Ariana quickly examined him, finding he had a deep gash that had penetrated his angelic armor and ran him through completely. Her heart nearly stopped the moment she saw it.

"Birdy! Get back to the pool!" Ariana commanded, applying pressure to the wound. "Hurry!"

Ben looked at her worriedly. "Is he going to be alright?"

"I don't know." Tears fell as they flew across the clouded sky that brimmed with the light of the setting sun. She hugged him closely as she continued to press his wound. "Please don't die, Dad..."

Chapter 24

The Duel with Evil

Raziel was surprised that Zachariel had agreed to go with him—considering he had just seen his daughter, who was also in danger from the never-ending hordes of demons, for the first time since his village’s demise.

As he delved into his thoughts, Zachariel turned to him. “What is your plan, Raziel?”

“Simple,” Raziel began. “We enter the fortress, find whatever is allowing the demons to return, destroy it, and kill Aka Manah.”

“Really?” Zachariel asked. “No clever strategy? No elaborate tactic?”

“Not this time, angel. We find him and kill him,” Raziel told him as they landed on the deck. “This is required if we want to stop the demons from regenerating...and if I want the revenge I truly seek.”

“This is about revenge?” Both of them drew their blades, with Raziel leading the way. “What grievance do you carry against Aka Manah?”

“He killed my people because they would not disobey the Creator. I am here simply to return the favor.”

“And what will you do once you kill him?” Zachariel asked.

“Rebuild my race, starting with Ben,” he answered briefly.

“With who else?” Zachariel’s eyes narrowed. “Wouldn’t you need a female?”

"I...uh, I'm sure there's a female Soraphim out there somewhere," Raziel said. "She'll be found eventually."

The angel arched an eyebrow as Raziel avoided his questioning look. Before the Sky City had fallen, he had told Ariana that she could marry him and bear his children, the first of the new Soraphim. He never even bothered to consider what the girl's father would think of it.

Zachariel stared down into the darkness of the hall as they stood at the doorway. "Do you suppose Ben can hold his own against that creature that attacked him?"

"I certainly hope so, for his and Ariana's sake. He could hold his own against me, after all. In a fight, however, anything can change." Raziel eyed him. "I'm sure you and I are more aware of that than anyone else, considering our little alliance at Riverglade."

"Touché," Zachariel confirmed.

They continued to walk down the corridor, minding the shadows, the corners, staying on edge for any sort of ambush. Surprisingly, the fortress was practically empty, save for the occasional shadow that darted across the wall toward the exit.

"You know, Raziel..." Zachariel said. "I find it funny that a few days ago, you were trying to capture Ben and kill me and Ariana. Now you're helping us."

"Well, nothing's changed. I still want to capture Ben for our kind," Raziel said, "But in all honesty, I never wanted to kill you, or even Ariana, for that matter. She's far stronger and braver than I realized. Also..." He dipped his head. "...she is kind. She reminds me of my mother, in a way."

"Yes." Zachariel smiled. "She has a habit of doing that, growing on people."

"Then you're aware of her feelings for Ben?"

"Painfully."

"What are your thoughts on it?"

“That boy frightens me in a way even I do not fully understand. He’s a good soul, but his heart is tortured. Beyond that, there is something about him, a darkness, even before the demon infected him.” The angel hesitated. “I should never have allowed him near my daughter.”

“But you didn’t know,” Raziel argued. “Ben protected Ariana, and despite the demonic influence, not once did he use his abilities to harm her. The real problem was the demons constantly pushing him. As he tried to protect her from physical harm, Ariana tried to keep him from losing control.”

“They were trying to protect each other,” Zachariel concluded. “From different things.”

“Exactly.” Raziel cleared a cobweb with his blade. “I would give them a chance.”

“We’ll decide that after we kill Aka Manah,” Zachariel said. “More than likely, you’ll take Ben, I’ll take Ariana, and we will go our separate ways.”

Raziel shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

After walking a little further down the hall, they discovered the room with a pentagram enclosed by a circle in the middle of the room. Little imps chanted and danced around it as dust was drawn in from the stone-rimmed window into the points of the seal, combining in the middle to form the various demons.

“So, this is how they come back,” Zachariel whispered. “No wonder they seemed so fearless. They knew they wouldn’t truly die.”

The angel has a point, Raziel thought. This whole time, they weren’t just spawning. They were re-forming, like clockwork.

He stared down at the glowing seal on the stone floor as the forming demons clawed their way out. If he didn’t put a stop to it, not only would it overwhelm the angels, but New Eden as well.

Raziel's jaw tightened. How could he ever help raise a new generation of Soraphim with the same demons coming after them, over and over? How long before it overwhelmed them, too?

He motioned for Zachariel to enter the room, where they quickly dispatched all the imps and the demons. They made their way to a desk, where a book written in demonic runes sat, the severed, shriveled hand of an imp laid with it. He brushed it aside and showed the runes to Zachariel.

"They're using it to recapture their essence as they are vaporized. So really, however they're doing it, they're saving them just as they are about to die. I can't quite read it, but I think they put the incantation on a loop."

"Indeed," Zachariel said. "No way I'm just going to leave this here."

"Then I'll take the book. You destroy the seal."

In unison, they nodded and lifted their blades, poised to eradicate their respective targets. As the blows fell, the wall and part of the roof tore away to reveal a Wicked Giant looming over them.

Damn! Raziel thought. *Should have known they wouldn't leave it defenseless!*

As it raised its fist, Raziel charged and formed the upper half of his Nephilim Shell, forcing it away from the fortress.

"Angel!" he shouted. "Destroy them! I'll take care of this giant!"

Raziel formed the rest of the armor and continued to attack the beast. Blow after powerful blow, he forced it further and further away to give the angel time to complete their objective.

The Wicked Giant pummeled him back into the black stone, chunks of debris fell from above and bombarded his ethereal armor with a barrage of falling rock. He managed to

block another one of the beast's powerful blows, feeling the strain as his Shell started to fracture.

At this rate, it won't last long, Raziel thought as he bared his teeth. I need to finish this fight. Now.

Raziel freed one of his hands and tried to climb out, but the giant readjusted his grip and wrapped his large hand around his body, hoisting the Soraphim and his armor into the air, attempting to crush it.

Desperately, he searched the area where Zachariel was supposed to be, but he was nowhere to be found. The demonic seal on the floor was now broken and powerless. A wicked, familiar laughter echoed through the hall as blades clashed within the castle.

Aka Manah, Raziel realized. He must have ambushed him.

He looked back at his adversary as a wicked grin twisted its way onto its shadowy face, its hands tightening even further.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” Raziel hissed.

A large crack ran up the length of the armor as the beast strengthened its grip even further. If he didn't want to be crushed into blood and guts, then that left him with one option.

Raziel blew open the top of his armor and leapt out just as the Wicked Giant had crumpled up the remaining shards. He landed on the wrist, slashing the fingers of the other hand as it reached for him. As the beast reared its head, he took the opportunity to scamper up the arm and slash the monster across the nape.

With a groan, the Wicked Giant fell onto the side of the castle, collapsing the roof into the main throne room, where Aka Manah dueled Zachariel. The angel was significantly slower than he was, considering the difference in their styles and weapons. The Archdemon himself had a set of twin

blades, with jagged and curved edges, each sword about three feet. They were twisted and deadly. Exactly his style.

Both Aka Manah and Zachariel likely heard the crash, but neither of them looked, so as not to lose their advantage in their battle. Raziel couldn't afford to distract Zachariel for fear of costing him his life, so instead, he studied the fight for a way to ambush the Archdemon.

Raziel walked off the giant's hand and onto the floor of the room. In the split second that followed, he spotted an opening in Aka Manah's defense and penetrated with his black steel blade. The Archdemon saw the attack coming and expertly deflected the blow, twisting and locking both of their blades with his own.

Aka Manah smiled evilly. "Two on one, is it?"

Breaking the blade lock, Raziel's slashing attack was met with a swift block. He snarled as the demon blocked each subsequent strike, denying him the satisfying moment when he would die, when his revenge would finally be done.

"Whatever it takes to kill you."

Aka Manah scoffed. He held his blades against theirs, his ragged gray face showing little to no effort. "Huh. So that's how it is. Very well."

He removed his blade from the standoff, flying back and landing on the rim of his makeshift throne, "So, I'm fighting an angel and..." The Archdemon gestured to him with a mocking look on his face, "...who are you?"

"My name is Raziel," he began, pointing his sword at the demon. "The last name you'll ever hear."

Aka Manah spun one of his curved blades in his hand nonchalantly. "Doesn't ring a bell."

Raziel's eyes narrowed. "The lone survivor of the Soraphim massacre, during the Fall."

“Oh, that's right!” The demon grinned heinously. “You're the Soraphim who fell for Lucifer's ideas, and instead of warning your people of what was coming—like a good leader would do—you tried to persuade them to join him.”

Raziel's eyes widened, hands shaking, grip tightening on his blade.

“They refused and paid the price for your failure. Now tell me...” Aka Manah smirked, “...whose fault is it again?”

Brows furrowing, Raziel bared his teeth, lunging at the throne, and summoning his ethereal armor, smashing it to pieces as the demon zipped to safety. Aka Manah multiplied, his shadows darted around him, the strikes from the false blades as deadly as the real ones. They sped up, slashing, stabbing, until the armor finally shattered.

Raziel didn't see the attack from behind until it was too late. He spun, seeing the tip of the demon's blade coming toward him and trying to dissipate in a desperate, pointless bid to avoid it. He was rendered motionless, gripped by anticipation of the unavoidable. The attack finally landed, though covered in blood not his own.

With horror, Raziel realized that Zachariel had leapt in front of him and taken the blow in his stead.

Seeing that was enough to shake him out of it completely. In the split second before he screamed at the top of his lungs, he saw Aka Manah's blade protrude through Zachariel's back. The angel fell to the stone floor on his hands and knees, struggling to stay conscious.

In that terrible moment, every bit of rationality and self-control left Raziel. He had even forgotten his grief. All he wanted to do was tear Aka Manah to shreds and burn him from existence.

He charged, his black blade now ablaze with his Soraphim flame as he attacked the demon more viciously than even Ben would have, tearing through Aka Manah's shadows with an insane accuracy, reducing them to shreds of their

former selves as they dissipated. He continued to bombard them all, hoping to end the demon's insulting existence.

Finally, after he had erased all the silhouettes with his sword, Raziel found the real Aka Manah. He sprang forward and aimed it at the demon with a war cry.

"Yes!" The demon grinned wickedly. "Do it!"

Raziel screamed as he blew Aka Manah's twin blades from his hands and knocked him to the ground, impaling him with his sword. He forced the blade further into the stone floor, hoping, even praying that the demon could feel pain. The same pain he caused him.

Then he stopped. Raziel looked down at Aka Manah's limp body, his demonic wings and his limbs spread out, like a banner to a wall. Raziel's chest heaved as he glared at the demon, his body aflame with his white-hot rage.

"Impressive." Aka Manah's mouth twisted into a smile, his eyes hidden in the darkness of his hood. "But I'm not that easy to kill."

Raziel quickly bent down and attempted to grab the demon by the throat, but only found his torn, empty robes. Another of his shadows.

"No, no, no! Damn it!" Raziel smashed his fists against the ground, the force of his strikes causing the stone floor to crack repeatedly. "All for nothing!"

Aka Manah's unsettling laughter echoed throughout the fortress as he clenched his fists. Close to him, Zachariel laid on the ground. The demon blade that had run him through disappeared into smoke and shadow.

"Zachariel!" Raziel screamed as he helped the angel to his feet, his chest wound bleeding profusely. They stumbled back into the hallway as cracks formed in the castle walls. Together, he and Zachariel limped back through the hall. "Come on. Stay alive. We're going to find you a healer and get you back to your daughter."

“Raziel,” Zachariel rasped. “I don’t think—”

“Don’t start that. You’re going to live. You’ll be with Ariana again. Just move forward.” Raziel said through gritted teeth and strenuous effort. “Don’t give up!”

The building collapsed around them, small chunks of rock breaking and falling from the stone structure of the hallway that he and Zachariel lumbered through. They reached the deck that they had arrived on, looking up and seeing Ben and Ariana circling with the six-winged eagle.

“Girl!” Raziel commanded. “Bring that eagle down here!”

It landed, its claws scratching the stone as they slid to a halt. Ariana teared up as she saw the wound in her father’s chest.

“Birdy!” she screamed. “Get back to the pool! Hurry!”

With that command and the angel safely with them, they bolted into the sky and out of sight. Raziel stared as they faded from view, the guilt he had pushed aside creeping back into him.

Because of him, the angel would likely die. Ariana would lose her father.

Why do I keep failing? Raziel somberly turned to face the dark hallway once more. He failed at everything; it seemed. *If I had just pushed a little harder.*

Raziel looked at the crumbling fortress. The sunrise glowed brilliantly behind it as the angels continued their assault. He walked back into the hallway as the rocks fell from the ceiling and hit him, but he didn’t care. He soon found himself back in the throne room, his sword still sticking out of the ground where the demon had been. Raziel fell to his knees, feeling both the weight of his failure and the collapsing structure on his shoulders. As he looked down at Aka Manah’s robes, Raziel’s head filled with the eerie, insane laughter.

Aren’t you ever going to learn to stop getting people killed?

In that moment, his grief was replaced with unspeakable anger. A fire had lit within him, the desire to avenge Zachariel and everyone hurt by the demon.

“One day,” Raziel answered. “I will find you and kill you for good. That will be the last death that will ever be on my hands.” He pulled the blade from the ground and sheathed it on his back. “That, I promise you.”

As the sunlight finally pierced the domed roof, Raziel gazed upward. The superstructure crumbled as his brows furrowed.

“I hope you’re ready, you damn demon.”

The rest of the fortress collapsed. Raziel let himself turn to smoke and be whisked away wherever the cruel wind was destined to take him.

Chapter 25

The Purpose

Ben took his hoodie and pressed it to Zachariel's wound as Aromiel flew them back to the Pool of Eden.

"You're gonna be okay, you hear?" Ben said, trying to encourage the angel. "You're gonna get healed and you and Ariana can go back to the life you had, okay?"

Zachariel opened his eyes and smiled warmly as blood dripped from his lips. "I-I thank you, but that life is gone."

"Come on, man!" Ben said as he brushed some of his wind-blown hair from his face. "Don't say that. You're so close, you don't even know it. You and Ari are gonna be happy again, and I'm not gonna ruin it this time." He pressured the wound a little more. "I promise. Just stay with me."

"You know, Ben? I never wanted to admit it, but..." The angel coughed blood. "...you're a good man. I-I'm sorry for trying to take your life."

Ben forced a smile as he re-wrapped the blood-soaked hoodie. "Don't get all mushy on me now. You can kick my ass all you want, but you gotta stick around. For Ari."

Ariana turned, her breaths shallow as tears streamed down her face. She quickly wiped them, encouraging the six-winged bird to move faster.

"How far are we to the pool?" Ben asked, never taking his eyes from the angel's wound.

"I—" Ariana strained her eyes, trying to see through the billowing smoke from the battle. "I can't see it. Where is it?"

As they searched, they caught sight of two shimmering ribbons of light, one of them blue and the other silver. They were the two archangels, Michael and Gabriel, flying around and observing the damage left by the fierce battle. Ben waved to them. Gabriel zipped forward and came alongside. His silver eyes widened in horror.

“What happened?” he asked.

“He’s hurt,” Ben said. “We need to find the pool. Now!”

Gabriel nodded and led them, Michael not far behind. They swerved and ducked through the smoke that filled the dark sky until they finally found it. They landed, skidding near the edge of the pool.

Michael, Gabriel, and Ben carefully moved Zachariel from the eagle’s back and onto a nearby rock close to the pool. They dipped the angel’s hand in the water, and to their horror, nothing happened. The otherworldly power that was present in the pool before was now gone.

No, Ben thought, his heartbeat thumped in his ears. *Please, no...*

“It’s not working!” Gabriel shouted in frustration as he ran his hands through his silver hair. He knelt next to his comrade, his eyes quivering. “Who did this to you?”

Zachariel opened his mouth to speak, though nothing came out but a rasp as he struggled for breath.

“Was it Raziel?” Ben knelt by him. “Did he...?”

“No.” The angel shook his head as he looked down at his wound. “D-demon...did this.”

Gabriel nodded, his breaths quick as he took over pressing the wound from Ben, his free hand feeling Zachariel’s forehead. “Well, that doesn’t matter. We’re going to save you, old friend.”

“I’m...not making it,” the angel said as his brimming eyes looked at his daughter. Ben turned to Ariana, who was

hyperventilating as tears streamed freely down her cheeks. She scooted close to him and took his hand.

“Dad, don’t. We’re going back home, okay?”

Zachariel brought his hand up to her cheek and wiped some of her tears. Ariana’s eyes widened in shock, and she brought her own hands up and held on to his hand.

“Ari...” he began, tears streaming down his own face, “...our home is gone.”

“No, Dad...” Ariana said, lying her head on his chest as she wept. As she looked up, Zachariel reached into one of his pouches and pulled out a little stuffed animal. It was a rabbit, with black buttons for eyes, and a faded mouth sewn in. He handed it to Ariana, who took it and looked at it in shock.

“Mr. Peter?” she asked, grabbing the faded rabbit and clutching it to her chest.

“Being your dad was the greatest honor of my life. I’m so proud of you, Ari.” Zachariel smiled warmly, his eyes glazing over. “Be strong for me. I know you can.”

The angel turned his head to Ben as Ariana latched onto him tightly, crying into his neck. “Ben. I can see the pain, the darkness in you. But I-I also see the good. I want you to promise me something.”

Zachariel offered his hand. Ben gripped it tightly.

“Anything, Sir.”

“I want you to take care of my little girl for me. Protect her, make her the most important thing in your life.”

Ben’s hand shook as tears fell from his face. Everything that had happened was his fault. Nobody would have ever died if he hadn’t come to New Eden and ruined everything. And yet, here he was, being entrusted with the most precious thing in either of their lives. He choked as he struggled to get the words out. “I promise, sir.”

Zachariel nodded solemnly as he hugged his daughter one last time. "I love you, my sweet Ari."

"I love you too, Dad. Please don't—"

"Kira? Is that you?" His arms went limp as he smiled. "I'm coming home."

"Dad, no!"

With one final breath, Zachariel's body turned into light and was whisked away into the sky, his soul transcended beyond death. Ariana was left holding empty air.

After a moment of pure shock, her piercing scream filled the air as she clung onto Ben tightly, seeking comfort in his embrace. Michael and Gabriel stood, their faces downcast at the passing of their friend and comrade.

Pulling back slightly, Ariana scooped up some of the water, watching the last of her father's light fade away for good as it fell through her fingers. "What am I going to do now?"

"I don't know, but..." Ben inhaled deeply in a futile attempt to control his tears. "I'm going to take care of you, and make sure that you are safe...no matter what it costs me. Okay?"

"Ben..." Her glistening, azure eyes met his, her cheeks still soaked. "I..."

From behind came a thousand twisted, eerie screeches. They both spun to find an entire horde of demons blotting out the setting sun as they dived toward them.

Ben turned. "Michael! Gabriel! We got—" He froze. There was no sign of the angels, as if they had vanished into thin air. He turned the other way, to find that Aromiel and Ariana were gone too.

"Damn it!" Ben stood to his feet and attempted to summon his ethereal armor. The flames roared from his body, expanding, burning as a strange orange light erupted behind him and filled his vision.

The light faded, and Ben found the surrounding scenery had changed. In front of him now were two trees—one light, one dark—their trunks crossing, branches reaching out and intertwining in an endless dance...or a battle. Below that was the familiar, shallow water. The stars and galaxies shimmered and reflected in it, stretching as far as his eye could see. Ariana sat next to him, her eyes wide as she stared in both wonder and confusion.

Ben's heart skipped a beat, his breath quickened. He was back in the Creator's realm.

"Hello again, Ben," a familiar voice said. "Welcome, Ariana."

Ariana latched onto Ben's arm and hid behind him. "Who said that?"

Ben's vision briefly blurred as the two trees shifted closer to them. Out of the tree of light came a glowing being. It shifted into a tan-skinned man with long, white hair and infinite eyes, ribbon-like wings of pure light stretched from his back. His cosmic gaze flicked to them.

"You're..." she stuttered with the words, "...the Creator?"

"I am."

A wind whipped past them, rippling the never-ending water, shifting the branches in the two trees. Ben stood with Ariana close behind him as he stared at the man in disbelief.

"What am I doing back here?" Ben asked. "We destroyed the fortress, didn't we?"

"Yes," the Creator said. "You succeeded."

"You..." Anger surged through Ben, his fists clenching, "...you call that success?"

"Ben..." Ariana warned.

"We did as you asked, but why? Half the realm is destroyed, the people, some of the angels, and even her father

is dead!" Ben growled, ignoring her warning. "So much loss. For what?"

The Creator continued to stay silent, his eyes downcast, shimmering in the light of the surrounding cosmos.

"You said that you're the one who brought me to New Eden. But why? So I could slaughter innocents and ruin lives?" Ben clenched his jaw, then continued his rant. "What the hell was the point of it all?"

The Creator met his eyes as Ben seethed. His infinite gaze turned to Ariana.

"I brought you to New Eden so you could find her."

The two of them quickly exchanged glances. Ariana's face reflected confusion and blatant shock, whilst Ben was filled with horror.

"Her dad died...so I could find her and ruin their lives?"

"He died because he sacrificed his life in Raziel's stead." The Creator grimaced. "I can't share what was on someone else's mind at the time of their decision. In the end, Zachariel's thoughts were his own."

Ariana froze, her grip on Ben's arm tightened. "He saved Raziel?"

The Creator nodded solemnly.

"Can you bring him back?" She stepped past Ben, tears in her azure eyes. "It shouldn't be a problem for you, right?"

"I'm sorry. I cannot," he said simply, his voice itself heavy with grief. Ariana's lips quivered, her jaw quivering.

"Why not?" Ben growled. "Otherwise, what's the point of that infinite power of yours?"

"The path," the Creator began as he looked up, almost longingly, at the twin trees. The branches, a mix of light and dark, seemed to engage in a slow, endless battle as they

stretched and intertwined. "It must be followed. No matter the pain, nor the suffering."

Ben knelt and hugged Ariana tight, trying to comfort her. It wasn't fair that she should lose so much. Her home, her father, her life, all gone because of him. He slowly rose and faced the Creator.

"I should have been the one to die," Ben said, his fists clenched tight.

"Ben, no!" Ariana protested. "Don't—"

"I just don't understand," Ben continued. "You said I was sent here to meet her, but why?"

The Creator closed his eyes, and the scenery around Ben warped until he found himself amid his previous vision, the one with his grown-up sister and her comrades, Jess, James, Sean, and Cassie, as they all died in brutal, horrific ways, their bodies broken across a ruined cityscape. Lilly alone had survived and was facing a large monstrosity that looked like a black Nephilim Shell encased in twisted metal.

Ben shook himself out of it, finding himself back in the timeless realm with Ariana. "What was that?"

"Why ask that, which you already know?" the Creator asked. "They are like you. All of them."

Soraphim, Ben thought, *so Raziel was right all along.*

The Creator continued. "I want you to go back to Earth. Find them and prepare them for the coming storm."

"What storm?" Ariana asked, a look of blatant shock affixed to her face.

"One that will tear the Earth asunder. It will come steadily, and take its time, but I assure you, with each blast of the trumpet, it will arrive. And with it, shall come Death itself."

Without warning, Ben was hit with another vision, the same one he had before. Countless bodies strewn about, the blackened earth, the blood-red ocean, and finally, the eyes.

The judgmental eyes and burning fire that had plagued him throughout his entire time in New Eden.

“Wait...” Ben said, his hand outstretched. “...that thing in my vision. You saw it, right? Is that the storm?”

The Creator nodded, though his eyes seemed almost apprehensive.

“So, I find the others, and we stop whatever that thing is, right?”

“It—” the Creator hesitated, “—it is something that must be overcome, yes. Choices must be made. Understand that it will all make sense...in time.”

Ben looked at Ariana, then back at the Creator. A violent, whipping wind came from the void, pushing the low mist that initially glided along the ground until it swirled around the twin trees, coming to rest between the light and the dark.

His eyes widened as he realized what it was. A way back to Earth, to his sister and fellow Soraphim.

“The paths are not set, the future unclear, but in spite of that, you must move forward,” the Creator said, gesturing to the newly formed doorway. “Are you ready to make that choice, Ben?”



Ariana watched as the Creator gestured to the strange portal between the trees. “Are you ready to make that choice, Ben?”

Ben hesitated, his fists shaking with indecision. After what felt like an endless wait, he finally broke the silence with his words.

“Alright. I’ll do it,” Ben said, stepping forward to the portal, reaching out before Ariana cried out. He turned around

sharply as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Ari?" He asked. "What's wrong?"

Ariana latched onto him tightly as she choked on her tears. She didn't want the last person she loved in her life to leave her behind.

"Please," she begged. "Don't leave me. You're all I have left now."

"Ariana..." the Creator said, his voice soft. "It's okay. Make your feelings known."

"Feelings?" Ben's eyes widened. He looked first at the Creator, then back at her. "Ari...?"

Ariana stood up straight and gazed into his lovely, storm-gray eyes. The memories flooded through her mind like a raging river, from the moment they met in Leanoir forest, through all the hardships they faced together, to now. Every second she spent with him, she realized, had led to this moment.

Time seemed to freeze. Ariana locked her glistening eyes with his, her will crumbling under his beautiful, loving stare. She was losing the courage to tell him what she had hid from him for so long.

Suck it up, girl! the voice in her head encouraged, *tell him the truth!*

"Benjamin Blake..." Ariana began, taking a deep breath as she slipped her hands into his, "...I love you. I don't want to spend a second more away from you. So please, don't leave me. I need you."

Ben's eyes widened; his mouth gaped open as if he too came to that same realization. Smiling, he gripped her hands, staring into her tear-filled eyes. They embraced, holding onto each other so tight that nothing in this world or the next one, nor the one after that could separate them.

They loosened their hug as Ben wiped the tears from her cheek, the ethereal wind blowing his dark hair from his face so that she could gaze directly at him.

“Ari,” he said. “We experienced so much together. Despite all I’ve done, you stayed with me. I wouldn’t want to leave you. Never again. I promise.”

As Ariana buried her head into his shoulder, she felt his warmth and looked up at him, finding solace in his eyes. She inched her nose close to where his was until they touched.

Finally, their lips collided. Time moved again as they kissed, their arms wrapped tightly around each other. They broke off the kiss and looked deep into each other’s eyes. Despite everything they had gone through, all the loss, death and heartbreak, they had each other.

So that’s why I met you, she thought with a smile, for this moment.

“Can I go with him?” Ariana looked at the Creator as he stood in front of the doorway. “Whatever he has to do, I’m not going to let him do it alone.”

The Creator stepped forward. He laid a hand on each of their shoulders, his firm stare meeting Ben’s.

“The things that will happen beyond that door will test you. Your soul will feel pain unlike anything you have felt before.” He turned. “But you will be there for him. You will be his rock, as he is yours. Whatever you face, you face together.”

“We’ll do our best, uh...sir,” Ben said, taking Ariana’s hand with a smile. “I’ll make all this worth something in the end.”

“Right.” Ariana smiled warmly as she squeezed his hand. “We’ll do this. Together.”

“Now be strong. Both of you.” The Creator gazed, brows creased as if a father watching his child leave home for the first time. “It is good to see you two together again.”

The ethereal wind whipped through the air, causing them both to stare at him in confusion. Slowly, they turned back to him and nodded.

The Creator smiled. He moved aside and gestured for them to enter the door. Ben and Ariana took a tentative step forward, looked at each other, and stepped through. There was a bright flash of light as they were whisked away by some unknown force. Time and the cosmos blew by in a whirlwind as they held on tight to each other, ready for whatever the coming storm would throw at them.

Now, Benjamin Blake and Ariana Winters were headed to Earth.

Epilogue

The Journey Begins

Ben opened his eyes to a blue sky, the white and gray clouds slowly trudging across it. He looked to his side, where a blonde, beautiful girl laid in the meadow next to him, her hand intertwined with his. It was then that he realized who it was.

Ariana, he thought, her name is Ariana.

The moment he laid eyes on her, everything that had happened came rushing back into his head. Untold death and destruction, families torn apart, all at his hands. But there was also more, those crucial moments he had spent with her: the dancing, the battles, and finally, their kiss in the Creator's timeless realm.

Ben froze as he remembered why he was sent back. He had to find the remaining Soraphim and his sister, Lilly.

He knelt over and started shaking Ariana, whose eyes fluttered open and glittered in the gentle sun. She sat up, a few pieces of golden wheat sticking out of her hair. Her eyes widened once she saw him.

"Ben," she began, gripping her chest. "We're here. On Earth."

"Yeah," he said, giving himself a moment to take it all in.

"That means we have to find your sister, and the other Soraphim..."

"I know, but first..." Ben reached for her and hugged her tight to his chest. His heartbeat thumped in his ears. It was the

first moment of peace that they had in forever, and for the moment, he just wanted to sit there with Ariana in his arms and enjoy it. After an hour in each other's embrace, they released each other with a gentle smile.

"Well, I guess we have a job to do," he said, not wanting the moment to end.

Ariana's smile morphed into a frown. She must have felt the same.

"I know." A low growl erupted from Ariana's stomach. "Can we get something to eat first? I don't think I've eaten anything since the Sky City."

Ben nodded and instinctively checked his pockets. To his surprise, he found a few dollar bills, different from what he remembered. As he reached deeper for change, he felt something. Sharp, slightly jagged, and smooth, all at the same time. He pulled it out to find it was a seashell, the same one from the Sea of Stars. Ben swallowed as he clenched it in his fist, holding it to his chest.

No matter what, he thought, I will find you, Lilly. We'll visit the beach again one day.

Inhaling sharply, Ben stood and offered Ariana his free hand. She smiled and rose from the ground, interlocking his hands with hers. They walked down the endless road to a building in the shimmering distance. The fields of wheat fluttered in the wind on either side as the breeze gently egged them on.

Ben glanced at Ariana as they walked. Her green shirt was torn, her matted blonde hair tumbled down her shoulders. She stared at the setting sun, the tall, golden grass dancing in the wind. It reminded him of Riverglade, though he was sure that Ariana was thinking the same thing. He knew that deep down she was grieving, scared, and more anxious than she had let on. Beneath it all, however, her eyes sparkled with joy and her smile radiated happiness as she stood there with him.

His lips curled up. He was glad that, despite what they had gone through, that they had made it together. She loved him, even when he was losing himself to the demonic infection. The truth was, Ben loved her back...more than anything.

Ariana stopped in her tracks as she gazed over the golden fields as the day faded, slowly giving way to the darkness of the night sky. A gigantic mass of black clouds rumbled in the distance. Her smile slowly melted into a frown.

“Hey, Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“We really are alone, aren’t we?” she asked, her lips curled down.

Ben paused, meeting her frightened gaze. He turned to look at the storm clouds that were forming and saw a ray of light pierce the darkness. From that light, somehow, he knew that the Creator, Zachariel, and Kira were watching over them.

“No,” Benjamin Blake said as he brought Ariana’s hand up to his lips and kissed it. “We are not alone.”

END OF BOOK ONE



TYLER CRAIG NIXON was born in Tampa, Florida, and raised in Lakeland, where he currently lives with his wife, three dogs, and a cat. He has all sorts of hobbies, from art to writing, and even some model building. Tyler served in the United States Navy from 2015 to 2019 and is now in the US Naval Reserves as an Electrician's Mate.

Author's Notes

So long story short, my original book sucked. It had many problems, cheesy dialogue, and lack of in-depth writing knowledge chief among them. Those who read it were merciful enough to tell me it was “good.”

I'll give myself a bit of a break, though. I was seventeen years old and was, at the time, irrevocably in love with Ariana's inspiration, Lindsey the dancing violinist (I won't say her full name for copyright reasons. Also, as unlikely as it is, I'd prefer not to get sued by her lawyers.) I was like many teenagers, depressed, moody with writing as a means for which I could describe my angst at the world.

Then along comes this internet sensation with her music, her dancing, and above all, her adorable personality. I was smitten right then and there, so I decided to honor her in the best way that I could: by having her as a character in a poorly written novel, with a generic name that somehow, to my knowledge, nobody else had used before.

And so, I wrote the book, spent a day editing, and threw up the damn thing on a self-publishing website, with a poorly edited tree as the cover. Big mistake, though I didn't know it at the time.

Fast forward a bit. I design a decent book cover and make it Amazon exclusive. Surely that will help the sales and reviews, right? Nope.

For years, I ignored the glaring flaws. For one, it was in First Person (which isn't so bad by itself but is a terrible idea when you have four separate POV's), and second, while the story was salvageable, it was executed *horribly*. I still cringe thinking about the cheesy dialogue.

So, after writing the slightly better second book, I join a writing Discord called “The Fellowship of the Ink.” I reworked my first chapter, converting it to third person, and submitted it, expecting heaps of praise just because I spiced it up a bit. Nope. It got *destroyed*.

They weren’t jerks about it. In fact, they helped me restructure the incredibly flawed first act, which, as you know, is vital to a reader’s interest. Over the course of a year, using their advice, I tore down the entire book and started from scratch, which is the final product you have just read. This time, I took my time, edited the living heck out of it, and had my friend Elizabeth be my main beta reader. Unless she’s an Oscar-worthy actress, she said she loved it. Hopefully, you did too.

Anyhoo, I write this to express the importance of patience, perseverance, and of course, reading. The only way to become a better writer is to read a lot of books and write as often as you can. Whatever you do in the interim, such as taking a course or watching lectures from other writers like Brandon Sanderson (whose lectures were instrumental in helping me fix this book). It’ll take time, a lot of revising and editing, but you’ll get there.

Whether or not you enjoyed it, I sincerely thank you for reading *Sky of Shadows*, and hope you’ll be around for the sequel.

—Tyler Craig Nixon

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Next up are Stacin and Kassidee. I'm not so sure that any of us are friends anymore, and that's my fault. But I thank them anyway for being fans of the first book and being the good friends that I didn't deserve.

After that, comes Gregory and Rogers, my buddies from the USS Mahan. Those dudes had the audacity to lie about my first being good, but it truly helped. I miss you guys.

Now comes the second set of thanks. The first goes to The Fellowship of the Ink, who had me throw my book into the fires of criticism to help me forge it into something better. This includes Ayrton, Jodie, John, Dusty, Lillian, Gal, and Dan the sports man. I learned a lot from you guys, and I appreciate the hard lessons you helped me learn.

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Finally, I want to thank Lindsey the dancing violinist, who inspired Ariana. I know you'll likely never read this book or know about its existence, but I hope she did your soul justice.

Coming Soon: Book Two
A BROKEN WORLD