

PART ONE
LITTLE GIRLS

1

"One of these days the sky's gonna break and everything will escape
And I'll know.
One of these days the mountains are gonna fall into the sea
And they'll know."

-Civil Twilight *Letters From The Sky*

It all started with a girl.

She sat across the booth from me nursing a glass of cheap red and smoking a clove cigarette. In Las Vegas it's illegal to smoke in a bar that serves food. That's why she always does it.

She quivered with the kind of pent up rage that just begged someone to say something about the smoke. Of course, it also helped to disguise the wisps that trailed up from the corners of her eyes. Cloves worked a lot better than tobacco to mask the hint of Teakwood and Cardamon in the air. Actually, she smelled a lot like a middle eastern spice market. Why does she have to be so sexy when she's pissed?

I knew better than most how quick she was to anger, but how had she managed to crank it up to eleven this quickly. When I headed out this morning she'd just turned on the shower. She was ready for war and the server hadn't even brought my coffee.

"You're going to fix this." Lilith. First incarnation of woman, second only to the divine feminine was not one to mince words. She shook a rolled up sheaf of printed pages at me as if she was about to swat my snout with it. I don't have a snout at the moment.

"Of course I am." It was always best to agree with her.

"Don't yes dear me, Raguel." She had me there. "You don't even know what I'm talking about."

She took a long drag on her cigarette and affected a slight underbite in order to exhale the smoke up in front of her face. Her eyes were smoldering but hiding them was second nature. She got pissed a lot. I'm sure it says something about me that I found her irresistible.

"You're right." Said I. "So tell me what I'm going to fix."

She looked into my eyes. Reminding me what a smoky glance really is. Her hands rested on the table between us. She wrung the pages into a tight tube and held it there.

"Sincerely." I said.

I took the cigarette from her hands and placed it between my lips so that I could cover her hands with mine. "Show me what has you so upset."

She breathed in deeply and unrolled the pages. She kept my right hand in her left and locked on to my gaze as she slid the flattened sheets toward me. If I didn't know her so well I might not have caught the significance of her holding on to me. She wasn't just furious. She was also grieving. This was going to be bad.

"I pulled this of the RJ site just after you left."

The headline seemed somehow sterile to me.

THREE LITTLE GIRLS FOUND IN GRISLY TABLEAU

Apparently the tableau was too grisly to be featured in photographs, or the scavengers from the Paper hadn't been able to get a good shot yet. The picture from the web showed a swarm of police bottlenecked at the entrance to the neon graveyard. The names of the girls were well known in the valley. For the past three weeks they had been the fodder for evangelicals and water cooler conversation. As I had feared, the end of their story was even more gruesome than the public speculation had been.

Sarah Johnston, Rebecca Smith, Leah Brooks. Each six years old. Each stolen from her bed while sleeping, a bible left on each pillow. A serial kidnapper had become a serial killer. Lilith hadn't found them in time. The article was mercifully short on details, though I'd know them soon enough. The girls were posed in a scene constructed from discarded neon signs. Along with the scene, a message had been constructed using letters taken from several other neon signs. I exhaled a heavy stream of smoke across the table and followed it until my eyes met those burning across from me.

"What was the message?" I asked.

Sweeper Sample

"Suffer the children."

A sooty, blood red tear blazed a trail from each of her eyes and fell to the table.

"He's not done yet, is he? They're not safe."

"No." I said and took her hands in mine again. "Not yet."

2

Things get left behind after a war. You see it all the time. Discarded mines destroy fishing boats long after the treaties are signed. Missile silos thought long empty are full of destructive power just waiting to be released and found by the last people you'd ever want to arm with a water gun. But that's your human legacy. Best to accept it and move on.

Our war was different. We're not beings of machines. Ours is the stuff of creation. But things get left behind in a war and someone has to clean up the mess. What can I say? It's a job. The stories are true. The nightmares are real. Man can dream up abominations far more dark and twisted than an angel could imagine. We're not built for it. Ours is the stuff of creation. What better way to prove man an unworthy and flawed creation than to take his darkest thoughts and make them manifest? It might have been a brilliant idea had it worked, but it didn't. The creator knew there were flaws and was amused by them. We made them to be flawed at his command. Don't ask me the punchline. He didn't bother to let us in on the joke.

We lost. And things got left behind.

In the lonely times, the ones so quiet you want to scream just to remind yourself that you have something to say, I try to convince myself that I was left behind too. That it was a mistake, but I know better. Denial is a human thing. I'm not human, I am Seraphim. Sometimes I think a state of denial would be a relief, but I'm not the sort to turn away from the things I find unpleasant. I made a deal. I accepted the job, and I'll do it with no regrets.

Perhaps the decision had more power because it was my first act of free will. I don't know. I just know that when weighed against my

other options it was the best choice. I was made to be a negotiator, sometimes a go-between, sometimes an enforcer, but first and foremost a cleaner-upper of really big messes. I can't help but be good at it.

Here's some perspective. I was created to clean up the mistakes of The Almighty. If you're thinking The Almighty doesn't make mistakes, that just proves how good I am at what I do.

I swung the Prius V left from Maryland Parkway and headed along Charleston toward Las Vegas Boulevard and wondered what manner of thing I'd be sweeping up this time. Whatever the thing was, it was an extrovert. You don't go biblical unless you want attention.

I still felt queasy and I didn't even have all the details yet. Before I'd made the turn onto Charleston I passed right by the park where little Rachel had been taken. It had been closed down almost immediately after a renovation. The city didn't want people messing up the pretty new features by actually using them. They said there was a problem with the homeless, but as I saw it. The ones who snuck into the park to sleep had been the ones walking the streets day and night looking for the little girls and passing out fliers. Nothing mobilizes the weak among us like some monster praying on someone even weaker.

Make no mistake. I can throw down with the best of them. The big seven never intimidated me. I was confident that once I found my quarry, I could do what needed doing. But children. None of us. Not even Sammael can contemplate cruelty toward the innocent, and you call him The Devil.

I made a right off Las Vegas Blvd and into the Neon Museum's parking lot. I hadn't been able to pick up a trail from the kidnappings, but the sort of heinous shit that went down in this place last night would leave a mark. A stain on the fabric of reality. I could use that to start hunting.

I parked next to the van that Cletus Monroe, the coroner for Clark County, usually called his meat wagon. There was no holding back a chuckle. In the days before the airwaves were ruled by procedurals, the van used to have CORONER printed along the side, just like it does in the real world. Now it's plastered with the letters C.S.I. made to look exactly like the main title theme of the television show. Leave it to Vegas to make a tourist attraction out of death.

I reached into the glove compartment of the Prius and fumbled around for my credentials. They're like Dog Tags and a badge of office all wrapped up in a pleasingly amorphous little package. My badge is an all access backstage pass of sorts. A little trick of the trade.

The talisman is forged from the same alloy as Michael's sword which ought to tell you that it all but screams authority. I've been told that at times it literally screams, but I've never heard it. The talisman is no more an actual badge than Michael's blade is an actual sword. Celestial stuff is cool like that. The talisman is what I need it to be. I know what you're thinking but this is not Dr. Who's Psychic paper. That's why I have the cases and the fake ID's. This is a celestial skeleton key. Sometimes literally. Sometimes it's like a titanium plated desert eagle from the abyss shooting forth rounds of angelic fire, but yeah, I can see where one might get confused. The only time I take it off is when I'm around Lilith. It gives her the fidgets and the last thing I want when I'm with her is a celestial cock-blocker hanging like an albatross around my neck.

As I mentioned, I have several flip cases I use sometimes along with a picture I.D. That associates me with whatever organization will get me where I need to be. I shit you not. I have to look when I get where I'm going to make sure I know where I'm coming from and grab the right stuff. When I pulled the Talisman from the glove box to check, the badge said N.S.A. That made sense. I wasn't surprised. That badge got the most disdain and the fewest questions. Besides, I've never come across anyone who's seen one.

I installed my limited edition Animaniacs sunshade between the windshield and the dash. In the parking lot with the AC off for less than two minutes and already the heat radiated off the body of the car. Sure it's Black, but the V is the closest thing I could find to a vegan SUV. One makes allowances for the sake of style and masculinity.

3

My car beeped it's lame farewell and the full heat of the day hit me. I suddenly remembered why wandering the desert is considered a punishment. The Asphalt gave off a smell like oil waiting to bubble to the surface. The heat had it's own warbling sound. It was an old, warped forty-five being played at seventy-eight speed on a gramophone with a broken speaker. If the Coroner's van was here, the bodies must still be here. The oven we lived in was supposed to hit a hundred fifteen degrees by two o'clock. Cletus better wrap things up quick before desiccation set in. I started walking before my shoes started to melt.

As I passed the Van I saw vehicles from at least three more agencies. Including Homeland Paternity. I hate those pricks. They're the kind of guys who expect porn star sex without offering a girl so much as a tissue to clean her face after the money shot. Next to their conspicuous unmarked was the even more conspicuous unmarked that could only be from the F.B.I. There was a van from a clean up crew, but it looked like they were sampling the free coffee in the gift shop. They couldn't do their thing until everyone else was finished. I wasn't worried. Most of the locals have seen me around enough to know they don't have high enough clearance to know who I actually work for. They draw their own conclusions and we get along well. Human assumption can be a valuable tool if you know how to work it.

I tend to dress in loosely woven collarless dress shirts and linen jackets.. When you've spent as much time in deserts as I have, you'll appreciate the importance of durable, lightweight textiles. I don't tolerate wrinkles, It's a minor enough use of my power to look freshly pressed at all times, and I can justify the indulgence. A crisp linen

jacket, smartly worn, screams excess. The haphazard way I wear fatigue pants that are custom made to match tends to make your average public servant think I spend more on my clothes than they earn in a year. I wear a leather explorers hat that that's older than this city but looks like it's only begun to acquire character, and I've been told my ensemble makes it appear as though I've just returned from some sort of covert operation in the Amazon. Sometimes I wish that were true. They have rain in the Amazon.

I approached the tour entrance to the boneyard and was greeted by the necessary cliché of crime scene tape. I made my way through like a clumsy six fingered man playing Cats' Cradle.

"Jesus, Ray! I just got the tape to stick."

I knew that voice well. Dan Marks is an oddity for a town like Las Vegas. He's a cop that didn't get stuck in the job while trying to be something else. He's not an amateur magician or an out of work ventriloquist. Dan is a cop because a cop is what Dan has always wanted to be.

He's a decent and capable young guy which is probably why he always pulls shit details like this one. I've never heard Dan complain. He knows a secret. Shit details usually yield the most useful information. I'd be willing to bet that Dan has some sort of master plan, but only time will tell.

"Sorry." I said. I made a show of replacing the tape, then moved over to the shady spot where Dan was nesting. "How bad is it?"

"Which, *it* do you mean?" asked Dan, "The crime scene or the cluster fuck?"

"Which one is worse?" I asked, playing along. The gallows humor was a clear indicator of his tension.

"You'd never know it from all the feds, no offense, but the scene... Hand to God, Ray. I don't have the words. With all the suits hovering around. It's like all the vultures got to get a taste." He took a long swig from his water bottle. Dan came prepared. "I don't trust these assholes, most of them wouldn't piss on a guy to put him out if he was on fire. And they're all waiting around doing nothing while they wait for permission to fart. We got to get this one. Don't know how he could do worse, but it feels like he's just warming up. Even I can see that."

"I trust your instincts, Danmy." And I did. If Dan has an ounce of ambition, he'll make detective before he reaches thirty.

"Now you're here, I know who's in charge. Anything I can do to help. I mean that. Anything." Dan looked around, then gestured

toward a path to the left. "If you go that way, you should be able to do your thing before the vultures see you and start behaving themselves"

"Thanks, Boss." I said. I turned to leave but stopped myself. I placed a hand on the young cop's shoulder, looked him in the eye. "You're the real deal, Danmy. We'll get him."

Dan relaxed visibly. I doubt he realized how tense he'd been, but he hadn't let it cripple him. That was good information to have. I gave the side of his shoulder a solid cuff and crossed the furnace between Dan's nest and the path he'd indicated.

I circled around a huge display of old signs, there were pieces of metal sticking out that looked like they might have been dangerous before the place had been turned into a tourist trap. Disconnected wires were rolled into neat piles and secured off the path. The ever present Vegas dust, puffed up in small clouds as I followed the path between the islands of retired neon signs. They seemed somehow sad and wilting in the glaring light from above and the desolate lot where they'd been laid to rest. Once sparkling and welcoming, a testament to hedonism, now they lay flat and uninspired like some lethargic death row inmate who's given up and only looks ahead toward the end.

I followed the path around as instructed. I could hear Dan's vultures squawking at each other in an effort to compare whatever vultures compare instead of penis size. I could tell by the direction of the voices and the smell that I was circling around behind the crime scene. The path seemed to take me off track, but I knew my young friend wouldn't steer me wrong. After another fifty feet or so, the path sloped up and around to the right. It led me to a slight rise behind and above the vultures. The vantage point afforded me a more or less unobstructed view of the scene. As the tableau came into view below me I wished that Dan had been less capable.

The glare from the fireball above did nothing to lessen the impact of the scene. It simply changed the dynamic to something more wasted and barren. Scarecrows instead of china dolls.

Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah had been posed on pole stands like child sized versions of those indistinct wooden models artists use in figure drawing classes. They had been dismembered, their bodies sectioned then wired back together. Their impaled forms had been run through and attached to a wide, round base half buried in the ground. Their hips and torsos were off center, as if to display the ability to swivel. Even from this distance it was clear that the parts that made up each figure were from different owners. I couldn't tell if the girls had been

re-assembled at random or if there was some sort of design at work. Cletus could help me determine that.

The girls' knees had been set in a kneeling position, though either their calves or feet had been attached backward so that their toes pointed skyward behind them. The heads had been impaled on the central poles so that they hung suspended above the neck. All three formed a perfectly straight line across. The Killer must have used a level to accomplish it. They seemed to be held in place by hands that seemed only loosely attached to the arms beneath.

Sara's head was attached with nine inch spikes driven through the hands and into the eyes. Rebecca's was attached in the same manner but with the spikes driven through the hands and into the ears. Two hands covered Leah's mouth. A single spike had been driven through both with such force that it had gone through the support pole and could be seen protruding through the once golden braid she always wore hanging down her back. See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil.

I wanted to scream, but who would listen. I wanted to weep, but feared I would never stop. I wanted to wretch, but I owed these girls my strength. I had to remain clinical, detached. The rasping breeze meandered across the scene and brought with it the overwhelming and cloying scent of congealing blood. The stench seemed to cloy to my nostrils and coat my skin. Why were there no flies? I didn't hear or see any flies.

I closed my eyes. I had to concentrate. Where was the blood stink coming from? When I opened them again I was able to look at parts of the scene I hadn't picked out before. The vision of the girls had been such an assault on my mind that they were all I'd been able to see.

Before each figure, I had to think of them as figures to avoid going mad, sat a cheap, five gallon plastic bucket, the kind you get for \$9.99 at Home Depot. Each bucket was filled to between a quart and a quart and a half of blood. The killer had been kind enough to mark the measurement on the outside in thick black marker. Along with the taunting words "Guess Who." Not a drop of blood was visible at the scene. The individual parts of each figure had been meticulously cleaned.

In front of each bucket was a grave. The plots seemed large enough for the figure displayed behind it, but they had already been re-filled with dirt and carelessly packed down.

Behind the entire tableau, as if to frame the scene in a round archway was the message: "Suffer The Children." I knew the reference

but found the usage here to be slightly off, out of context. What was he trying to say? I filed the question away for later. I heard raised voices from the scene below me. The vultures had moved beyond squawking and on to a preening sort of shouting match. Grey suited vulture Vs. Blue suited vulture.

"It could be three more victims," squawked Grey suit. He wore mirrored shades and the product he'd used to slick back his plumage was melting into a permanent stain on his expensive jacket. A hundred twelve degrees and he's sticking to the regulation jacket. I confer upon him the title of Dumb Ass and turn my attention to Blue suit.

This one at least has the good sense to take off the jacket and carry it over his shoulder from the collar loop. I'd be tempted to be more generous with his title but he displays a vocabulary consisting of four words that constitute his answer to everything. In my mind I name him Officer Parrot.

"It could be three more victims." Squawked Agent Dumb Ass.

"You don't know that." Parrots Officer Parrot.

"You're right. I don't know that." Agrees Dumb Ass, "Because you refuse to dig them up."

"I didn't say that." Says Parrot, forcing me to reconsider his title.

"While you're waiting for permission, we're wasting valuable time. The longer these girls are out here, the more evidence we lose." Says Dumb ass. I had to reconsider his title as well.

"You don't know that." Says Parrot.

I, in fact did know that, so I took matters into my own hands. I hopped down from the rise and headed straight for the closest grave, pulling Nitrile gloves from my pocket and snapping them loudly into place as I went. When I reached the mound, I rolled up my sleeves. Without a shovel I dug with my bare hands. The grave was shallow. It took only a few handfuls of dirt to find what lay beneath.

This one belonged to Sarah. She cared about it. Loved it. She wrote her name on the tag. Perhaps more telling was the fact that she had it with her at the end. As I took in the scene before me, I couldn't tell whether the teddy bear buried at the feet to each girl was meant to be an act of kindness or some sort of final monstrosity.

Had the killer let them keep their bears as a sort of comfort, or so they could be torn away later and used as a final cruelty. A hammered end cap that sealed childhood's demise. Each miniature grave was marked with a blood soaked cross of takeout chopsticks, staked upside down into the ground, their haphazard separation in vivid

contrast to the meticulous reconstruction of the small, defiled figures above them. Standing so close, Sarah's Teddy Bear in my hands it was even harder to think of them as figures, but I had to. Detachment would allow me to think clearly, see clearly. The figure behind me was not a little girl. Little girls don't come with interchangeable parts.

I clutched the stuffed toy close. Under the smell of dust and blood I could make out a hint of fabric softener mingled with some sort of lavender sachet. The inexpertly repaired left eye was coming loose. Had a button ever seemed so accusing? Could a mouth made of felt look beseeching? The bear wanted justice. I'm sure the other two would as well.

I spotted Cletus near the archway and headed in his direction. I made it half way there before Dumb Ass and Parrot stepped into my path. I couldn't tell if they were pleased to have a common enemy or if they were going to come to blows over who would send me packing. Parrot reached me first, but it was Dumbass who said, "Who the fuck are you and what do you think you're doing?"

"I, the fuck am Ray Guel, and I think I'm inspecting my crime scene. You're relieved."

"Like hell." Said Parrot.

"Hot enough, isn't it boys. You're relieved as well. I'll take it from here. I'll be liaising with the new office on Lake Mead. Be at your desks when I call."

"Wait a Fucking..." Dumbass was turning interesting shades of red. Parrot had the good sense to keep his mouth shut. I whisked my badge quickly across both sets of eyes.

"I don't think I will. It's pushing a hundred fifteen degrees out here. I've got flesh mummifying, blood turning to jello, and two more Teddy Bears to exhume, not to mention what looks like the ugly stepchild of a bullshit television procedural standing around waiting for craft services on the tax payers dime."

"You don't know that!" countered Parrot. His heart didn't seem in it and I didn't know what lack of knowledge he meant.

"I sure as hell know who gets to scrape the blood out of those buckets when it turns to into Aunt Edna's Thanksgiving garnish. I hope you brought a whole box of gloves gentlemen."

"We're not together, Sir." Ah. So Dumbass was with Homeland absurdity. That made Parrot, F.B.I. I should have tagged them earlier. Would have, but the scene was too traumatic.

"Well then!" I said, continuing in my best R. Lee Ermey. When ever I

think Drill Sergeant, I think of Lee Ermey. His performance in Full Metal Jacket was iconic. "I suggest you show me some stunning interagency cooperation and get your incompetent asses out of my Boneyard."

Parrot, silently reached his right hand into his pants pocket to give me his card.

"Don't you think I can find you if I want to? At your desks, gentlemen. You do not want me to have to hunt you down. Leave your papers with the officer on your way out. He might even care about your Bonifides."

I shot a look at Cletus who had almost coughed up a tonsil in an attempt to stifle a laugh. Your average person would probably find crime scene etiquette offensive. It's hard to explain. The more heinous the scene is, the funnier everything else seems to be. It's a coping mechanism.

"There will be a report." Apparently, Parrot thought I was intimidated by bureaucracy. He'd obviously never met Uriel. Do you have any idea how much bureaucracy it takes to negotiate the interplay of celestial spheres. Fucking novices.

When I said nothing, both suits turned on their meticulously shined heels and headed off to pick on a smaller fish. I wasn't worried. These idiots were no match for Danmy.

Before the suits were even out of site, Cletus' team went right to work doing what they should have been doing hours ago. I have to hand it to Vegas' crime scene folks. They know their shit. When most of the english speaking world thinks they know your job, it helps to be good at it.

Cletus Monroe stood watch over his people with the relaxed air of a patient professor taking the time to watch his prize students at work, which was exactly what he was doing. He was a tall man and fit. Cletus loves to hike the desert places. At fifty years old, he regularly boulders with enthusiasts half his age, most of them women. He's the only black man I've ever known that can somehow manage to exude the look of a healthy tan. He wears a fishing hat over his brilliantly shiny head. I once asked how he got it to gleam like that. He told me "Pussy juice and muff buffing."

I don't care what the beer commercials say. Cletus Monroe is the most interesting man in the world. Were I human, he would probably be my hero. He also happens to be a world class forensic pathologist and an excellent medical doctor. He's patched me up any number of

times and though he knows I'm not human, he's never questioned me about it. Perhaps most importantly, Cletus is my friend, even when I can't be his.

He approached me. The oversized fishing hat protected the world from the glare of his pate and emphasized his shaking head. I extended my hand to him. Instead of taking it, he used my arm as leverage to pull me into a manly hug.

"I know how hard this must be for you." Cletus spoke softly. His innate kindness seemed to loose the tension I'd been ignoring. I hugged him back. "But I'd be lying if I didn't feel a little better myself, knowing you're on it."

We released each-other before anyone got the wrong idea.

"It's kids." I said.

"I know." Said Cletus. "We'll get you what you need to find the bastard. Just leave a piece of him for me, will ya?"

"I'll do what I can," I said, "But this might not be my jurisdiction."

"What? This isn't freaky enough for you?"

"Freaky has nothing to do with it. If this is just some sick bastard, its not my Bailiwick."

"Don't use flashy words like that with us mere mortals. Sounds like an excuse."

"Hey, man. I want to tear this guy apart as much as the next public servant, but it just doesn't work that way."

"I'm just saying."

"I know, and trust me you're not the only one."

"Old lady giving you grief?"

"These are kids, Cletus. She grieves for each one lost, and they're girls, which makes it worse. I'm just glad the RJ showed some uncharacteristic taste and left out the details. If she got a look at this..."

"A whole new kind of trouble?"

"You have no idea."

"That bad?"

"You familiar with The destruction of Sodom and Gomorra? The part with Lot's daughters?"

"Yeah, but didn't they get him drunk and rape him?"

"Misogynistic propaganda. The rape of the angels was allegorical. His own girls were the last of his victims, he was the first to go, and the wife knew about it. That's how bad."

"You're shittin' me."

I didn't answer. My stare was all the answer he needed.

"Fuck." Said Cletus.

"Yup." Said I. "The scene is pretty straightforward but could you answer some questions for me?"

"If I can, but so far, what you see is what you get. The rest will have to wait until we sort it all back at the lab."

"Fair enough." I took in the horror from another angle. "You think this is the end of it?"

"No." Said Cletus.

"Yeah. He's just getting started." Said I.

"Fuck." We chorused.

4

You ever have one of those days when everybody knows exactly what they want from you, everyone expects you to know, and yet there seems to be some sort of moratorium on direct communication? Yeah one of those days, those mixed message days where no matter what you do at least one person, or person-like entity is going to be dangerously pissed off because you never got the decoder ring in your cereal box, the batteries were dead in your universal translator, or your Babel fish died of dehydration because you live in the fucking desert.

It started before I even left the house. I slept in because I knew Cletus wouldn't have any lab results until at least mid-afternoon. The breakfast conversation went as follows:

"What are you going to do?" Asked Lilith.

"Not sure yet," said I between forkfuls of fluffy omelette goodness. No one has ever accused Lilith of being a gourmet chef, but she can kick the crap out of some breakfast food. I'm sure there's a greater significance to it, but I'd rather just zone out on syrupy bliss. "What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should do whatever you think is best." She said, attempting to handle me by adding another waffle to my plate.

"So." I said. "How's about we salvage this wonderful feast and you tell me what I think is best?"

She sat herself across the table. She wore nothing but one of my old button down shirts. Even sitting, as she was, it made her legs seem very, very long. "I wouldn't presume to tell you your business." She said. She nibbled, piraña-like on a slice of bacon and somehow made it

look sexy.

"Sure you would," I said, smiling beatifically. I was on to her game. What is it about some women that makes you want to lose an argument in favor of the consolation prize to come? I wasn't ready to concede yet. "And I value your counsel enough to pay attention," I said, "But this is feeling like one of those do these jeans make my ass look fat questions."

She grinned at me over a forkful of disintegrated waffle. "I'm not wearing any jeans."

I grinned back. "I'm all too aware of that." Her eyebrows lifted in a way that's probably illegal in several states. Before she could go in for the kill, I raised my hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Look, I won't know anything more until Cletus' folks do their thing."

She looked displeased. I could tell I was about to get some sort of lecture about defending the least among us and championing the innocent. I was sure she also had a list of accusations ready to roll about Sloth and apathy. I headed her off at the pass.

"I have a list of freak shops to check out today. This seems a little overt for that sort. But maybe someone knows someone who knows someone..." She stared at me, trying to determine if I really had a plan or was just trying to placate her.

Lilith has trust issues.

5

When we met, we didn't like each other much, there was no reason to consider the idea.. She was the disgraced handmaiden of god and I was a glorified bounty hunter jumping back and forth between two planes of existence while I tried to track down her ex lover. I should rephrase. She despised me on general principals and all I knew of her was the propaganda. Suffice it to say, she was less than helpful.

But after our first meeting I couldn't shake the thought that with her exile, heaven had lost something essential. Lilith's banishment had made it possible for the kingdom to become stagnant and complacent. The best way I can describe it is that when she had been there the kingdom was technicolor. Her absence made it seem somehow colorized and unreal. Only upon encountering her again did the difference become impossible to ignore.

When we met for the second time we were both broken in ways that neither of us could have imagined possible. We were vagabond angels, Earthbound. Creatures of incredible radiance and beauty, dressed in the rags and scraps of tattered majesty. She'd had longer to adjust. Longer to piece herself together. Her strength allowed me to heal. She is the divine feminine. She picks up strays and heals the baby birds. Lilith always has been and always will be the mender of broken wings.

She drew strength from my need for purpose and my steadfast commitment to setting things right. She was unused to justice tempered with compassion. She was mistrustful of kindness. Lilith made it clear from the first that she didn't like me, that I was simply the least offensive of her suitors and the least meddlesome, yet she rarely left my side and never pushed me away.

Over time, each of us realized we were no longer alone. We had become our own unit, our own host, our own kingdom. After an existence marked only by war, grief, and loss; we understood. I took us millennia but we had finally learned what drives humans to love.

She snapped her fingers in my direction and spoke through a mouthful of mush. "Where'd you go? I lost you for a minute."

"Never." I said.

I shook my head clear of the memories.

"You could come with me." I said. "Should be amusing..."

"I'll pass. I don't feel like getting dressed today."

"Not fair."

"What?"

"Teasing me like that."

"Who's teasing?" She purred, stalking over to stand behind me. She circled my chest with her arms. "I won't send you into the trenches without an incentive."

She leaned down, bit my shoulder, grabbed the breakfast dishes, and placed them in the sink. She hopped up to sit on the counter and reached for me. A gentleman never spurns that kind of offer and neither do I.

There was the distinct possibility that I'd be spending a lot of time on the couch soon and I wasn't about to pass up any opportunity to be in Lilith's good graces.

6

So there I was, back out under the furnace and pulling into the parking lot of my third occult shop in as many hours. Everyone knows that Vegas is a strange town, but only the locals know the half of it. It might surprise you to know that Las Vegas has one of the more active New Age and Spiritualist communities in the country. We have everything here from energy healers to DNA crystalizers with a healthy smattering of Alien creationists in between. And when you consider the transient nature of the town on both a natural and supernatural level, you shouldn't be all that surprised. Vegas is a valley cultivated because of the natural springs that characterize the area. Most people don't stop to consider that aside from the transient morals which people associate with the town, This area was a crossroads before there were roads to cross. Not to mention the fact that just outside of town are still miles upon miles of desert, where people and other things aren't found, unless they want to be.

Honestly, the only thing creepier than how much empty space there actually is just fifteen miles from the strip, is the fact that the town was much safer when the mob ran it. The place really went to hell once the Mormon's took over. Which brings me back to the third occult shop.

In my time, I have seen people put their faith in some pretty weird shit. I've seen sacred metacarpals, holy washcloths, and strands of hair kept in vacuum sealed glass tubes, but I'm not sure if I'd ever sen anything quite as shlock as the "Holy Gong." The sad truth is that faith is faith, no matter what you call it. the most central precept of religion is always the least followed, "Do unto others" and whatnot. But the group I have the hardest time taking seriously are the community theatre pagans. The ones who make a show out of

everything and embrace every Toni and Tia, who are only there for the promise of open minded women and the feeling of being slightly naughty. The ones who make acronyms for everything and think it demonstrates some sort of superior enlightenment the rest of us are just too dim to grasp. You know, the ones who come up with shit like the Holy Gong.

All I wanted was a little information about anyone dabbling in dark magic. Instead I got the fucking gong. Apparently the community theatre pagans are able to glean the answers to questions based on the resonance of the gong. Clearly the force with which the gong is struck has no bearing. It was all I could do not to just run out and present them with a magic 8 ball.

"Seriously? A gong?" I was trying hard not to laugh. I needed answers.

"The holy gong." said the director of the Community theatre Pagan troupe. "We kick it old school here. I'm Randy."

"Sure." I said "Of course you are." I said. "Look, I'm looking for some information."

"Come sit over here." Said Randy Randy. He moved over to a section of carpet. It was squared in by four equal lengths of copper tubing. Each corner sprouted a long angular tube. All four met in a point at the top center of the square. "We shall sit beneath the pyramid of light, and there shall be fellowship between us."

"Yeah. Okay..." I said. The carpet was the kind of all weather affair from which all manner of stains could easily be removed. I seated myself and sat cross-legged across from Randy Randy. "Right." I began. "I'm looking for some information."

"You're him, aren't you?" Gushed Randy.

"That depends." I countered. "Him who?"

"Him." Said Randy. His baritone had adopted a just between us girls sort of tone, which could only be described as unnerving. "The guy who takes on the Spookiest of the spookies; the baddest of the badass."

"Im not sure." I said. "I'm just a guy with some questions. Anyone, new hanging around lately."

"This is Vegas man. People come and go, sometimes simultaneously." Randy Guffawed at the cleverness of his own joke. I wanted to grab him by the oversized and worthless leaded crystal he wore around his neck.

"Ha." I said with absolutely no amusement. "This one wouldn't have been one of your usual posers. This one would have been dark. You comprehend the actual meaning of dark? Of course not."

Randy Randy looked at me as if he were both afraid and offended at the same time.

"Anyone here who wasn't about the drama and the groping?"

Definitely offended. "We are here for an authentic spiritual renewal!" Randy gathered himself. "I shall consult the gong."

"Does the gong have eyes?"

Randy had already stalked over to the enormous hanging disk. It was displayed, shrine-like on the wall opposite the door.

"Really?" I asked. "Really?"

Randy grabbed the huge wooden mallet. It looked like nothing so much as an elephant phallus. He took a huge golf swing toward the gong. I wasn't having any of it. I snapped my fingers and just as the mallet struck the gong, the wood shattered into a shower of splinters. The gong remained silent and untouched. Randy's hands were unharmed. He looked at them as if at a miracle baby. Then he raised his eyes to me.

"There was this one guy." Said Randy, still awed and tentative. "He showed up right in the middle of laughter yoga. Didn't stay long. He seemed strange."

"Why?" I smirked. "Because he wasn't into laughter yoga?"

"Naaw," said Randy. "He just seemed. I Markso. Off. Felt sort of like two people in one body. Looked like he was arguing with himself. But Scared, you know."

"Laughter Yoga can be pretty scary." I said.

"No." Said Randy, shivering a little with the memory. "It was like he was afraid of himself."

"What did he look like."

"Average, man." Said Randy, searching his memory. Sort of looked like an English professor, but the kind you put right out of your mind after finals."

"So he looked, what? Educated?" I asked?

"Yeah, sort of." Said Randy. "But rumpled, you know? Like some really boring guy who lost everything and doesn't know how to tell his wife, so he's been sleeping rough." I raised an eyebrow, but Randy continued. "Or, you know, like some dad who just got booted out of his house for sleeping with the babysitter."

"So what are you saying He had that sort of Uncle Creepy vibe?" I

asked, trying to speak his language."

"Huh?" asked Randy.

"He looked like a sheep on the outside, but felt like a wolf on the inside?" I explained.

"Yeah!." Said Randy. "Like that."

"Did you see where he went. Did he give you any idea where he was headed?" I asked.

"No, man, but I don't think it was anywhere good." Sighed Randy. I didn't really see him go. I was too busy trying to keep the girls from leaving. "

"Of course you were." I mused. I tossed him my card and headed for the door. "If you think of anything else, let me know." Before I hit the street I turned. "And send me a bill for the mallet. I'll replace it with something a little less... Compensatory."

And into the furnace again. Three new age shops, and Randy had given me the best lead so far and it wasn't much. Crazy is crazy... I told myself. If I headed toward the seedier parts of town I'd have no problem finding a shopping cart full of the disenfranchised locked in heated arguments that only they could hear. So a guy that looked like a professor who played be my muse with his students. It might surprise you to know that there are at least fourteen colleges in Las Vegas, but really only two that might have the kind of professors that might be our guy. But that would be a red herring and I knew it. I needed the kind of professor who would go to Amateur night at a gentleman's club and claim he was there to support his competing students. I needed a different angle. I can find my way around pretty much anywhere, but I don't blend well in the seedier places. I just shine too brightly. Would you believe it? The darkest people in the darkest corners look upon me with mistrust.

I needed someone who could traverse the shadow city and get it's occupants to talk. I had to pay a visit to Sam. I wasn't looking forward to it. No-one can fuck with your mind like family.

7

So there are some things you should know before we meet the prince of darkness. Chief among them is that the entire sordid story of angelic lore ain't nothing but a family thing. Sam would be the first to admit that he has serious daddy issues. Two thirds of us paid the price for not knowing how to deal with the most passive aggressive of deities, and I'm not even including mankind in that number.

We're all related and there's no way around it, Celestials put the Dis in dysfunctional and the Strange in estrangement. Yet oddly enough, Sam holds no grudges and harbors the least amount of judgement.

Always willing to lend an ear and give an opinion without any investment in whether you take his advice or not. It's no wonder the humans think him the prince of lies. Humans need salvation or damnation. They don't know how to deal with the only angel ever to have free will. They need to think in terms of right and wrong and Sam just doesn't operate in that system. Of course that's why he's referred to as Satan. He's the personification of a rope long enough for hanging yourself.

As a being. He makes the choices that provide the most options down the road. The war was a function of his nature. It's important to note that before Michael went a'smiting with the sword of justice, it belonged to Sam.

Sammael is nothing like one would expect. He's certainly imposing and radiates a kind of understated authority, but there are no fangs, no forked tail, or cloven hooves. I mean, sure, he can appear any way he wants to appear, let's face it. Back before he got booted from the kingdom for the crime of being what he was created to be, he was the highest ranking archangel ever to smite a continent. He's still the most

powerful, but the thing about sam, the reason he inspired such fierce loyalty from his followers is that he doesn't lord his power over anyone. He's all about free will and choice. Of course, that usually means he has the uncanny ability to get people to do exactly what he wants them to do while convincing them it was their idea to begin with.

Sam owns a slew of strip club/coffee houses and can usually be found at whichever location is trendiest. I found him sitting at a corner table immersed in the New York Times crossword puzzle. He does it in pen because he sees it as an affirmation of his superior intellect. So there he sat, at the corner booth, looking like a three way cross between Moses, Socrates, and Zeus. His flowing mane of gray streaked hair and luxurious beard made him seem like someone you'd desperately wanted to speak with, but don't, because you're sure he's far too interesting to notice you. He really should do commercials for beer or Viagra, although he never drinks alcohol and I doubt he'll ever need Viagra. He didn't look up as I pulled out a chair and took a seat across from him.

"Can you believe this?" growled the prince of darkness. "Hella is now a word."

I didn't answer.

"Now even the New York Times is rewarding verbal laziness." He made as if to spit to his side, an old gesture from the desert dwelling days when sacrificing one's fluids to make a point was serious business. "What do you think? Which one has more style?" he picked up his steaming mug as if to toast me. "Now this, Raguel, is one hell of a cup of coffee! Or" he said, adopting a vapid tone. "Dude, Ray! That java is Hella Good!" He threw his newspaper down onto the table with disgust. "Gods be damned primates! Honestly, RayRay. I don't even have to work for it anymore. What's next Text Speak?"

This is how we roll. No greetings. No ceremony. We just pick up like we've been sitting there forever, bitching about the same things, because in essence, we have. It's a familiar starting point. Like finding the home place on a map. Don't be fooled. Some things never change. He knows I hate being called RayRay. He was testing me. Trying to find out what kind of business brought me to him and if he should be prepared for a fight. When I didn't rise to the bait, he extended his arm and snapped his fingers, a topless waitress with a body that could only belong to a succubus approached us and placed a plate of scones at the

center of table with one hand while placing a cup of coffee in front of me. I took the sugar and refused her offer of organic cream. I wasn't sure where it would have come from.

Sam pulled two cigars from his inside jacket pocket. He offered me one and shrugged when I refused. He held out his cigar to the succubus who bit off the end with dainty razor sharp teeth. Sammael sniffed the length of the cigar, placed it in his mouth and made a gun shooting gesture to me. A flame appeared at the tip of his index finger. He held it to the end of the cigar. As it began to glow, the prince of darkness puffed contentedly. He motioned for the succubus to leave. I admit it. She looked every bit as enticing from the back, even with the tail that curled up and over one shoulder as she swayed away.

The smoke swirled toward the ceiling as Sammael watched me. "So." He said. "As much as I might wish it, I gather this isn't a social call."

I watched him back for a long moment. Say what you will about Sam, and over the years you have gotten far more wrong than you've gotten right, but he has been and always will be the greatest of us. Maybe that's why he hurts the most. I could see it in his eyes. He wanted me to be there just to be there, he wanted me to be there to ease his loneliness, but he knew that wasn't my motivation. He knew that I, just like everyone else, was there because I wanted something and it hurt. That's why it's so hard to be around him. He hurts so much that it hurts me to be around him, because I love him and there's nothing anyone can do to help. What can I say. No matter what else he is, he's my big brother.

"I need your help." I said. Wishing I could have said something else, anything else.

"That's all?" Said Sam. He smiled then. "I thought you'd want a pony."

"Have you seen the RJ?" I asked.

"No." He said. "I read La Monde. Do you read La Monde?"

"No." I said. "I don't even read the RJ, but Lilith does."

"Really Ray? A domestic thing?" Sam laughed. It was a rich sound. Too honest to be believed. "You came here for my help with HER?"

"No." I said. He looked me in the eye. "Sort of." I backpedaled. "But not really."

"This ought to be good." Said Sam. He leaned back in his chair, expansively as if putting his arm around someone. Instantly the Succubus was in his lap, She nestled closely within the curl of his arm

and he held the cigar to her lips. She dragged on it suggestively and blew the smoke toward me.

"Hear that Darlin'" Said the prince of darkness to his minion of the month. "Little brother wants my help to placate my ex, I mean. His Wife."

Like I said, Ain't nothin' but a family thing.

8

"It's not like that." I said. "It isn't exactly about her."

"Not exactly?" He wasn't convinced, but as I see it, I was telling the truth. It wasn't about her. Sure, I probably wouldn't be running around town because of something that I probably couldn't do anything about, but still.

"So she saw something in the paper that got under her skin and sent you out to balance the scales." Sammael could be infuriating. I was certain he knew exactly what was going on, but I also knew he was going to make me work for it.

"It's bad, Sam." I took a different tactic. I'd appeal to his compassion. It could work. "It's kids."

"I know." He said. In his eyes I saw something like the rage I'd seen in Lilith's eyes the day before. Sammael doesn't tolerate acts of violence toward children and has been known to treat offenses quickly and decisively among his minions. When a child is preyed upon by a demon, you can bet your bottom shackle that that demon has gone rogue and will regret it. The reasons are simple. Children give Sammael hope. Even now. More than ten thousand years after the war. Sammael still hopes that he's wrong about humanity. No matter what stones they throw at him.

Sam does not condone cruelty. He doesn't know how to be cruel. That's the ultimate irony of his place in human mythology. Let us not forget that Sam led the offensive against the throne. He knew that we were not capable of the atrocities which might be necessary to win. That's why he pulled the weapons from the minds of humans. You have to understand where Sam is coming from.

Sammael, Satan, Lucifer. Whatever you call him, there's no

questioning who he is, which in itself can be fucking terrifying to contemplate. Think of it this way: If god is a black hole, Sam is the event horizon. The destructive power is not in the center, the eye of the storm, the destructive power that surrounds the eye. Now take that destructive, chaotic power and refine the chaos into adaptability. Then increase that power by an order of magnitude and you might have some basic idea of what makes Sam the sort of being he is.

Even so, as complex a being as he is, Sam was created with a deceptively simple purpose. He embodies the core concept of choice. Sam has never done anything to anyone that wasn't designed to present choices and options. True some times he only offers two paths, but there is always choice. Even Job was the product of his choices. How much simpler would things have been had he not been completely fixated on his own righteousness? Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean to imply that Sam is in any way, easy to anticipate. He plays the long game in a cosmic chess match that most of us couldn't visualize with a map and a compass. But he is also the closest to human of any of us. He was the template for free will, and he cares about consequences. The fact that he owns his choices doesn't make a wit of difference to the billions impact by them. Oh, and he loves a good irony.

Sam's eyes cleared and I could see that he had thought of another angle. "So." He said, setting me up. "You need my help to complete the top its on your Honey Do list."

"I'd be looking into this anyway." I argued.

"But not with enough urgency to ask for my assistance." Sam countered.

"Would I prefer to have more information before getting involved? Sure, but."

"If you had more information, you might see no reason to get involved at all."

"Sure but I might."

"Or might not."

"Alright, Fine! Lilith is on the warpath. You'd have to know her to see it, but she's already preparing to take matters into her own hands."

"So?"

"You didn't see the scene, Sam. This guy is just getting started. I don't know what we're looking at long term, but when this thing comes to a head. She'll tear this whole town apart to get to him. And she won't care about collateral damage."

"And she'll find some way to justify it to you on the outside while she destroys herself on the inside." Sam knew her every beet as well as I did.

"I'm not saying this thing is in my wheelhouse. It might not be, but if it is..." I shrugged.

"If it is," said Sam. "You might be able to talk her down off the ledge."

"I don't want this thing in my jurisdiction. But if it is. If she knows I'm running point, she might back off." I said.

"Because she trusts you." Said Sam, and there was a sadness in his voice that sounded very old and very deep.

I didn't reply.

"She can't know." He said quietly. "She doesn't trust me." There was something in his tone that agitated the succubus on his lap. She curled into him more deeply as if to distract him from whatever he was thinking.

"I have a lead," I said. "But there are those who will talk to you but won't talk to me. I need a go-between."

"You have someone in mind?" Sam sounded genuinely curious.

"I didn't." I said. I knew what was coming next, but I was ignoring the fact that I'd walked right into it. "No."

"But he's ideal." He started to smirk and the succubus in his lap made a sound that could only be described as a purr.

"I don't care." I sounded like a petulant child and I knew it.

"You said you need a go between," Said the prince of darkness. "Well... He goes between. Or around... Or under..."

"But he's a douchebag." I whined.

"He's colorful. And he can get you in anywhere." Said Sam.

"He's a douchebag." I said.

"He's available." Said Sam. "I'll ask if he's willing to help you."

9

The first thing everyone ought to know about negotiating with someone who has nothing to lose is that you are totally fucked from the get go. Bent over a barrel without so much as a stick of butter to make the experience less invasive.

So you can imagine that trying to ask the fallen for help is a less than pleasant proposition. Technically, Sammael could command them to help, but he has this obsessive thing about free will. He's more of a Sung tzu type, leading from the shadows and getting people to do what he wants by making them believe it was their idea. I can count on the fingers of one hand the times I've seen him actually issue a command. And that was in war-time.

And that's how I ended up pulled off interstate 15 somewhere between Las Vegas and Victorville. It is entirely possible that I've been unclear in describing how much I despise the desert. Cities in the desert are bad enough, but the desert itself. That sucks in a way that defies description. Perhaps in eras past there was a sort of pristine and cleansed feel to the barren places of the world, but in the twenty first century, any such romanticism is a pipe dream. Who knows what is buried out there? I would imagine many things are lost out there and few of those are pleasant. I have to admit. Matters weren't helped any by the fact that I was sitting there because a douchebag didn't like my car. The fallen can be a huge pain in the ass.

They're stuck on earth with no chance of redemption. Remarkably powerful beings with absolutely no ambition, no consequences and no hope. Think of those rich children who don't actually do anything except become celebrities simply for being who they are. Only the fallen don't reveal who they are. They just show up and make any

scene, good or bad, exponentially more than what it otherwise would have been. In other words the fallen are the anonymous shit-stirrers of the universe, and in a world of shit-stirrers, Azazel is the worst. Do not be fooled, He thinks of himself a stylish and cool but he's probably responsible for more of your problems than any other fallen. Azazel got booted from the kingdom for revealing the secrets of cosmetics. Yes. You read me right. He is the one who introduced the human female to make-up. As if that wasn't enough, He's also the one who taught human kind to make weapons. Curse him, Thank him. I don't care. He's still a douche bag.

I was waiting at what the sign called a "Picnic Area." Basically it was a rest area with nothing to rest on. I sat in the V and played some trivia game on my phone. Lilith was addicted to it. The modern world can be extraordinarily isolating. Even so, I think it says something about Lilith and I do so many things together even when we're apart. We always seem to be connected in some way, but neither of us seems to mind. I take the good news where I can get it.

You might well ask why I was waiting in such a terrible place. The answer is simple Azazel refused to be seen with me. I'll let you embrace the irony for a moment. I've said before that all heavenly creatures are, at least in some way, related. In many ways, Azazel could be considered that distant cousin only acknowledged when under interrogation. Most of us choose not to consider him at all, so his refusal to be seen with me was so ridiculous as to be offensive, which is exactly why he did it. His insistence on meeting me in the middle of nowhere was the angelic equivalent of pissing on my shoes. It was stupid, childish and quite possibly self destructive. It was pure Azazel. Did I mention he's a douchebag?

The block long Hummer Limousine pulled into the picnic area as if it planned to open itself as some sort of last chance strip mall. Techno-Bass music shook the fenders with an atonal buzz that kicked up the dust on the ground like a stampede of bison. All I could do was shake my head and wait for the dust storm to end before opening my car door and exiting the car to meet the prick of pricks.

When the dust finally settled, he stood framed by half naked and clearly drunk women and the opposite opening car doors of the great black whale. I couldn't help but notice he looked exactly like Bruno Mars in the Uptown Funk video. Hat covered bandana and all. He struck a pose arms wide as if he were about to do one of these chain walking dance moves but was hampered by his need to hang on to one

breast of a woman on either side. Azalea flipped his head back so that the hat moved away from his eyes. He looked at me, frozen, mid-thrust move, waiting for a response. Apparently I was supposed to be impressed. I wasn't. He let go of the opposing mammaries and stood up straight. I circled around the V, leaving the passenger door open and closing the door behind me as I climbed back into the driver's side.

Azazel herded the slop tarts back into the limo and walked the block to the driver's window, where he exchanged some words with someone I couldn't see. Then he walked over to my car as if it had been his idea all along. He somehow made it seem as though he was doing some sort of charitable work. The bastard. When I say Azazel is slimy, I'm talking about the kind of film that sits on top of an otherwise clean pool and smothers an entire eco system just by being there.

The smell of cheap knockoff cologne wafted toward me as he sat down in the passenger seat. Keep in mind, None of us has money issues, as it were. Compound interest is a magical thing, but leave it to Azazel to show up in a moving tribute to ostentation then soak his custom made clothing in cheap cologne. He sat in the comfortable bucket seat which I should mention, is heated for reasons beyond comprehension, and stared straight ahead like I was supposed to take his drink order or offer him a hot towel. I considered sitting there staring straight ahead as well, but I refused to give him that much control. I was not going to play along.

"So..." I said. "How you been?"

Azazel answered me with the sort of derisive sniff usually only uttered by 15 year old juvenile delinquents.

"So... Good then." I said.

"Inconvenienced." Said Azazel. He almost sounded like a grown up. When I didn't respond or move, he said. "Well. Go if you're going." He looked out the passenger side window, doing his best to be conspicuous about ignoring me.

I pushed the start button and, brought the V to life and coaxed it out onto the highway. I turned on the rack of police lights that flashed just beneath the top of the windshield. And sped down the road until I found a break in the median, where I and my official use vehicle could make a U turn. Sometimes I marvel at the inane things that humans choose to care about.

Azazel continued to hope I would mistake his pouting for some sort of righteous anger. It wasn't working. I intended to extend some sort of

olive branch, but what came out was. "Look. If you're going to be a dick about this, we can Stop the car right here and I'll find someone else. No-one forced you to agree."

"Sure." Said the original prince of poor judgement. "Whatever."

I can't stand it when people whatever me. I stopped the car. Decisively. Azazel had no time to prepare. Angels can do some pretty cool things, but if unprepared, we are as subject to the laws of gravity as the next biped. My douchebag of a passenger launched from his seat and slammed face first into the windshield, his cheap sunglasses shattered and his cocky hat pressed down over his nose, The only reason he didn't end up on the pavement was the custom windows. I was told they'll withstand a shot from a rocket launcher. I hadn't known whether or not to believe the claim, but the impact went a long way toward convincing me. I'm nothing if not diplomatic.

"Now take this as an object lesson." I told the Grigori who had formerly occupied my passenger seat. "This would not have happened if you had been wearing your seat belt. Buckle up Brah. It's the law."

Azazel groaned and tried to breathe through his nose. I eased the car back onto I-15 toward Vegas. About half way there, he managed to unfold himself and tilt his head back. He used the bandana from under his hat to apply pressure to his shattered and bleeding nose. It should have been an act, but I honestly couldn't tell. I couldn't tell if he imitated the human response out of habit, or if he had somehow moved so far from himself that he did not realize he could just will the flesh to knot itself. I tried not to care. At least he was occupied. We pulled into the parking lot of the Las Vegas Wetlands Park well after sundown.

I know. Las Vegas Wetlands Park? Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? Nonetheless few people know that most of the water flows from our sewers toward Lake Meade, through a swampy, marshy area known as the wetlands. So hey, why not capitalize on the ecosystem by creating hiking trails, coves, and a couple water churning bridges? It sounds much worse than it is. The place is actually pretty in a completely artificially manufactured sort of way. On the plus side; It gives the sort of nasties that dig swamps a place to do their thing. It was also the preferred site for a any number of ritualistic, demon worshiping wanna bees. The guy I was looking for probably wouldn't be a part of anything going down here. He was more of an extrovert, and his treatment of the girls demonstrated a meticulous and ordered mind.

Nonetheless, if anyone might have heard something about my

professor, it would be these people. They tended to be a tight knit group and huddled even closer when something happened that could draw attention to them. Mostly, there were the dark side of the poser coin I'd addressed with Randy Randy, only these nimrods would scatter as soon as they saw me coming and I needed to know if he had tried to reach out to them as he had at the community theatre pagan hangout.

We exited the vehicle and I fell in behind Azazel. At some point he had remembered he could heal himself, but he still seemed skittish and tentative in his movements. When he saw I meant to follow, He stopped me with a showing gesture. "Run along now." Said Azazel. "I have no desire to be in this shit hole, but since I'm here, I will not have you getting in my way."

I considered arguing with him but I had to admit he was right. I'd brought him out here, I might as well let him do what he was there to do.

"If you find out anything I'll meet you at Sam's later." I thought for a moment then added. "Azazel... Thanks." I took something out of me to say that, but I try to be fair. He just looked at me blankly and waited. I shook my head and walked back to my car. Before I had the seat belt on, my phone rang. It was Cletus. I tapped the phone on and raised it to my ear.

"Yeah?" I said

"Ray?" asked Cletus. He sounded worried.

"Yeah." I said.

"Ray, you'd better get down here." Said the M.E.

"You alright?" I asked. My first concern was for my friend.

"I don't know." Said Cletus. He was obviously shaken, but sounded otherwise intact. "This is some seriously twisted shit."

"What's going on?" I asked. I was growing more concerned by the second.

"Just... Get down here quick as you can." He said. "I don't know how long I can keep this under wraps."

Whatever had disturbed Cletus' cool, I knew I wasn't going to like it.

"On my way." I said.

"Quick as you can." Said Cletus. "No red lights."

10

It takes about forty minutes to drive from the Wetlands to the coroner's office. I made it in twenty five. Cletus was waiting for me as I pulled into the lot. He was smoking. That wasn't a good sign. He only does that when he needs something to keep him grounded, something to hold on to. I mentioned earlier how freakishly healthy Cletus is for a man his age. If he was smoking that meant he was afraid that he'd come apart at the seams. The last time I could remember seeing him smoking, was when he'd lost his son to the madness in Iraq. James had been a medic, blown to pieces while trying to keep a little girl's insides from becoming her outsides. Sometimes I wonder how humanity has made it this long.

When I reached Cletus, he offered me a cigarette. I could tell from the pack and the scattered butts on the ground that he'd been out here a while. I took one. What the hell? He didn't seem to be in any hurry to go back inside. I lit the American Spirit and dragged deeply. I exhaled a plume of smoke and was struck by an odd sensation. I stopped for a moment and took in the scene around me. The darkness of the night, the twinkling of the street lights. I looked over at Cletus and sensed that he had the urge to close himself off physically, to hug himself. As we stood there, we looked for all the world like men who should be huddling together for warmth. The scene was discordant. It should have been cold outside, we should have been two fellows sharing a companionable smoke in an attempt to gain shared warmth, but it was still a hundred degrees out there in the parking lot, even as it approached midnight. If Cletus was trying not to shiver, it was from something other than the weather. He flicked the butt into the gutter with an expert touch, separating the cherry from the filter in a shower

of sparks. I followed him through the building and back into the lab.

I could see the buckets from the crime scene sitting in the testing area. They had been emptied. Their contents transferred to sterile vials and beakers of various sizes. The blood looked somehow less offensive than it had as it sat in the sun the day before. I was surprised to see that there were additional flasks containing objects floating in preservative fluids. I looked to Cletus. I didn't know what had shaken him so thoroughly, but we had been friends long enough for me to be sure he would lay things out in his own way. He saw me noticing the containers and took a deep breath and started the tour.

"Obviously you've noted that we found more in the buckets than blood. But lets start with that."

"Ok." I said. "What can you tell me?"

"A lot." Said Cletus, "But Most importantly. None of it belonged to the girls."

I did a double take. "What?"

"All of the blood is male." Said Cletus. "From three different males." He took another breath and absently felt inside the pocket of his lab coat for the pack of cigarettes. "And they were brothers."

The bottom fell out of my stomach. "Brothers?" I whispered.

"If I had to guess I'd say they were triplets. He left us each of their mandibles. We're trying to run down DNA and dental records, but from the blood work, I'd say they were about the same age as the girls."

"We haven't had reports of any more missing kids." I said. "I mean, The girls dominated the news cycles, but we should have heard something if a set of triplets was missing."

"I know," said Cletus. "I don see how it could have gotten past us." He walked over to the vials which held the tiny lower jaw bone of each boy. "And there's another message. But damned if I understand it."

"Let me take a look." I said, and followed Cletus over to another table with three small jar-like vials. "What are these?"

"Maxillar canines." He lifted clipboard from the table. "That's where he left the message. One word etched into each tooth."

He handed me the clipboard. In a neat, evenly spaced grid were six words.

WE BUT
THE THERE
NEPHALIM SAW

* * *

"That N word sounds familiar." Said Cletus. "I can't imagine the time and care it took to engrave it on such a small tooth." He handed me one of the vials. The curve magnified the canine submerged within. "Look at that, The script looks engraved, spiraling all the way up along the ridge and ending just far enough from the root to be seen."

I looked at it. It looked like fine scrimshaw. The blood had filled in the softer parts of the tooth just beneath the enamel and stained the etching so that it was clearly visible.

"But there we saw the Nephilim." I said. Old testament. Numbers Chapter thirteen, verse thirty three. Right before the story of Noah. But also in the apocryphal scripture of Enoch. I wonder which he means."

"Come again?" Asked Cletus. Now that he had something to go on, he was intent on understanding. I wasn't sure how much I could or should say. This had gotten even more complicated very quickly. There were things I needed to know, but there were also things I couldn't say. Cletus is one of the smartest individuals I've ever met. Despite being handicapped by his human heritage. I knew he had suspicions, but could I afford to add to them? I was flying blind, but then, when you're flying blind you might as well at least try to aim upward. I decided to just roll with it.

"The old testament is a little unclear about the Nephilim. Whether they are literal giants or simply giants among men in the figurative sense is never explained, but we know they were intimidating."

"What about the other book? The Elmo thing?"

"Enoch. The book of Enoch." I wanted to chuckle, but not while holding a dead child's tooth in a jar. "Enoch is much more literal. His book is mostly about the angelic war and the aftermath."

"And?" Asked Cletus.

"And what?" Asked I.'

"What does he say about these Necrolytes?" asked Cletus.

"Nephilim." I corrected. "This is scripture, not B. Movies. According to Enoch, who was said to be the great grandfather of Noah, you know, He of the big boat?"

"Yeah, I heard that one." Said Cletus. "I think there was a musical."

"So according to Enoch, the Nephilim are the huge and extremely Psychopathic offspring of Angels and human women."

"And?" said Cletus.

"And that presents confusion, because Enoch says the Nephilim

were killed long before his book, but then How could they still be around to appear in the book of numbers?"

"That's not what I meant." Said Cletus.

"What did you mean, then?" I snapped.

"Which one is right?" demanded Cletus. We could be facing one hell of a shit storm here. If I'm gonna be on the right side of this thing I need good intel. So which is it Insane giants or gods among men?"

"Both." I growled. He had no idea the can of worms he was opening. He couldn't know. And yet I was angry with him for doing it.

"But it doesn't matter," I was shaking. "There are no Nephilim. They were wiped out."

"You're sure?" Cletus demanded.

"Oh, I'm sure." I said, if I had venom it would have dripped from my words as they fell from me.

"How can you be sure?" He demanded.

"Because I MADE SURE!" I shouted. "I destroyed them all!" The silence seemed to echo through the room once the words had been said. I realized I still had the sealed vial in my hand. I placed it gently back down onto the table with a whispered blessing and backed away.

And there it was. The truth. The beginning and the end all rolled up into a neat four word package that explains every action since. I destroyed them all. And set into motion the chain of events that would forever alter the balance between the terrestrial and the celestial. I had no choice, really, and if anyone blames me for either the action or what followed, no-one has dared today so. And in ten thousand years, you'd think someone would.

"Just so you know." Said Cletus. "The blood is a hundred percent human."

"Ok." I said. "Call me when you get anything back on dental records or DNA."

"Ok." Said Cletus.

"And I'd like to be there when the parents are notified." I said. "I may be of some help."

"When we locate them, you'll be the first to know." Cletus said. I was finally calm enough to see that he stood as far from me as possible while still being in the same room. He was speaking gently. The way one would speak to a rabid dog that might bite.

"Fine." I said. Then I turned on my heels and left.