

# PROLOGUE

LUCAN, IRELAND

APPROXIMATELY

THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO

IN THE BEGINNING, there were two.

The shimmering silver spilled as the Arch Angels passed through the fixed gateway. Eden took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of Earth's warm summer day as his bare feet patted down the fresh planes of green grass. He stepped from the apple tree's shade, and his white feathered wings rose up and out, fluttering against the gentle breeze.

Orifiel followed behind, turning up his nose as he entered the second dimension's atmosphere. The land underfoot was damp. Sometime before their arrival, water had fallen from above.

Mortals called it rain.

Cold, wet, uncomfortable drops that came down from the sky.

*And they drank it.*

Water and food—mankind required both of these things to keep their fragile forms functioning. It was an unfamiliar concept to Orifiel. In Styclar-Plena, the crystal had not only created his world and the beings that inhabited it, but it sustained their immortal lives, too. The crystal's light was all he and his kind needed to survive and flourish.

Unlike humans, the Arch Angels' forms were not weak. Created in the crystal's image, their bodies were hard-wearing. Here, in the second dimension, Orifiel had yet to find anything that could scratch, mark, or damage him in any way.

There was only one thing that could penetrate an Arch Angel's suit of white armor.

Darkness.

True darkness.

The same that had fallen upon Styclar-Plena the day the crystal began to fail.

That day, a rift had appeared in his world—in the first dimension—and Orifiel had traveled through alone, finding himself in the second dimension—Earth. It was in this second dimension that Orifiel learned of a way to quell the darkness and to keep his world alive. By moving the clean, light souls of mortals that were released in death across the planes, he was able to refuel the crystal and keep the darkness at bay.

That was the day Orifiel saved Styclar-Plena.

The first of the last of days.

"Is it far from here?" Eden asked.

"No." Using the power of thought, Orifiel concentrated on

the dipping branches and willed them to part. Here in the second, he preferred to touch as little as possible with his bare skin. The branches abided, and Orifiel pointed ahead, directing Eden away from the aging tree to a small clearing.

Eden hesitated, marveling at the red apples blossoming. He reached up and picked one. Taking a step forward, Eden, in quiet contemplation, pressed his thumb to the smooth, waxy coat of the sumptuous piece of fruit.

Hurried whispers came from the young of the land hiding behind the nearby bushes. The boy and the girl were well camouflaged, wearing fig leaves that covered the delicate parts of their naked bodies. They blended seamlessly into the setting as they spied.

Side by side, the Arch Angels strode across the land, the wind delivering the sweet scent of the roses growing from the ground.

“You like it here?” Orifiel asked.

“I do. What do you call this place?” Eden said.

“A garden.” Orifiel cast his gaze all around. The rose stems here had no thorns, and he thought then that they were like the friend beside him. “Then I shall name this the Garden of Eden. A tribute to you, my dear brother, for all that you have done.”

The children raced from tree to tree, following the winged beings, observing and listening to them with curiosity.

Eden smiled and, extending his hand, called out, “Come . . . tell me your names.”

The children froze and then ducked down low, nervous and unsure.

“The boy goes by Adam. The girl, by Eve.” Orifiel answered on the children’s behalf, taking a moment to smile reassuringly at the pair in the shrubbery.

“You know them, and they you?” Eden asked.

“They are harmless. Same as the elder mortals, the children are ignorant. Mankind’s understanding of things appears to be . . . *limited*.” Orifiel waved his hand dismissively. “The first time I came to this second dimension, the boy saw me enter through the gateway, having taken shelter from the rain under the branches of the apple tree. He did not try to run and so I asked his name, and he gave it. He thought me to be a servant of the God of light and so referred to me as an Arch Angel. I did not correct his belief.”

“A God of light?”

“Yes. Mankind worships the day and a God who commands their sun, for the light grows their crops. They fear the night and a Demon God they call Zherneboh, whom they believe wields the darkness.”

“*Zherneboh . . .*” Eden repeated curiously. “And *Arch Angel*? You took the name Adam gave you and bestowed it upon us?”

“Yes, I rather liked it. The mortals here call their offspring ‘descendants.’ Fitting, it also seemed, to adopt that terminology for the Angels we are creating ourselves, given the human race inspired the solution to our population problem.”

Eden nodded thoughtfully. “I am surprised the boy did not try to follow you through the gateway.”

“I told Adam that this tree holds the knowledge of good and evil and that what glistens within its branches must go untouched by man and remain concealed by the apples that grow and hang low. I forbid the fruit from being picked so that the gateway would remain hidden from view. To make quite sure he listened, I explained that should any man or woman disobey my will, their God of night would be given a physical form and would deliver a terrible darkness, bringing about the beginning of the end of this world.” Orifiel paused, searching Eden’s expression. As he anticipated, Eden’s lips turned down at the corners as he struggled to understand the concept of deceit.

“Hmmm . . .” Eden mumbled as he stroked the apple’s skin. He was about to ask more on the subject when something unfamiliar caught his attention. Eden tipped his chin and focused intently. The nearby river whooshed and spat as it collided with a rock formation.

“They call that a river—a natural stream of water. There are objects—rocks—that block the water’s passing, and the fight between the two causes that sound,” Orifiel explained.

“The *fight*?” Eden said.

“To fight, to *battle*, is to try to *defeat* something. The river is one force and it runs, hitting the opposing force—the rocks. For the water to get past, it will try to go under, to go over, and to find holes and cracks within the object. The water is clever;

it seeks a path to get beyond what stands in its way. *To win the fight.*”

Words such as *fight*, *battle*, and *win* were new to Eden, and he sighed heavily. “We have so much to learn about this world; we must do so quickly when we relocate here.”

Orifiel nodded, slowing his pace. He gradually fell behind Eden. Holding his hands behind his back, he rubbed his fingertips into his palms.

Searching the scenery, Eden paused. “Where is Malachi to greet us? I wish to see the structures he’s created, to see our new home.” Eden had no desire to leave Styclar-Plena, but he knew they must. It was not right to stay and continue as things were.

“He is not far. Come, walk with me a little longer.” Orifiel didn’t have to persuade his fellow Arch Angel to abide by his request.

Born into a perfect, peaceful world, the inhabitants of Styclar-Plena had never been exposed to things such as deceit. But unlike the other Arch Angels, Orifiel had frequented and explored Earth. He had seen the horrors this world had to offer firsthand. Horrors he had no intention of sharing with his kind, whom he wished to remain untouched and pure, just like their world.

Ahead, Eden came to an abrupt halt, startled by what appeared in front of him.

“Orifiel?” he said quietly. His wings fluttered as he observed the black fissure slicing through the air.

Orifiel stopped, too, and began to speak. “When I first traveled through the rift from Styclar-Plena, the gateway, as you know, became fixed. It seems the very moment I stepped through, another gateway opened and has also remained. But as you can see, it’s somewhat different in its nature.”

A cold chill crept up Eden’s neck as he studied the dripping ink. “Where do you think it leads?”

“I don’t think it leads anywhere.” Orifiel paused. “The light from the crystal creates life on Styclar-Plena, and we now know that in our world, without the light, the true darkness takes its place, erasing that life. That gateway is black, nothing more than a void. I believe it to be death.”

Eden glanced from the dark gateway to where Orifiel stood behind him, trying to comprehend what his leader was telling him. “Why has Malachi built our structures so close to something so *dangerous*?”

Orifiel’s answer came swiftly: “Malachi hasn’t.”

“I don’t understand.” Eden turned around fully now, his back to the rift.

“I am sure that you don’t. I am sad to say that today I am the river, and you, my friend, are the rock.”

Eden shifted his weight from side to side. “You do not mean for us to leave Styclar-Plena, then? We are not relocating to Earth?”

“No, Styclar-Plena is our home. Our only home.” Orifiel brought his hands forward, his knuckles cracking as he flexed them in readiness.

“But we cannot remain there. . . . The cry, it was so, so . . .” A tear formed and splashed down Eden’s cheek. “We cannot continue. You heard it—”

“Yes, I heard it. And, like you, I know what it means. But it changes nothing.”

“It does. It must. I will tell the others—” Eden retaliated.

“No. You won’t. The Arch Angels are my people. Stylar-Plena is my world. You will not take them from me because you heard it *cry*.” Orifel brought his hands to his chest and willed a spark of light to form within his palms. “But I will bestow upon you something else you do not understand. *My mercy*. I will spare you from having to hear another second of that sound.”

A white flame ignited, twisting between Orifel’s fingers as he entwined them together. Still, Eden remained fixed where he stood, unable to comprehend Orifel’s intention.

Orifel blew into the center of his palms, feeding the white flame so that it projected the energy forward. Parting his hands and flexing his fingers, Orifel commanded the countless dazzling crystal spheres to form into a set of slender, spiral curves. “I don’t suspect you have ever seen a serpent before.” Orifel’s words were easy, and he willed the crystals to create a cluster at the end of the coils, manifesting into the shape of a sphere. Meeting Eden’s eye, he finally said, “Good-bye, dear friend.”

Orifel clapped his hands together, and the crystal snake darted forward.

Startled, Eden stretched his wings and bent his knees,

preparing to jump, but he was too slow. The white inferno struck him above the eye, propelling his solid body backward, and the apple fell from his grasp, tumbling to the ground. Eden's wings wrapped around his form, covering his face and neck, as he flew through the air. His light rose to the surface, electrifying each feather and acting as a shield. But Orifiel did not need to strike Eden twice; the force of the first blow had catapulted him to the center of the dark gateway.

Eden whimpered in fear, but as his dovelike feathers melted, stripping back to their liquid keratin base, the sound transformed into a shrill shriek. As his face, neck, and shoulders were pulled through the dark gateway, ink overspread his form, shaping black quills, which tattooed his skin. His body lurched backward, and his white cloak darkened to soot.

Orifiel watched silently as his twinkling serpent broke apart, dispersed into millions of microscopic crystals, and faded away.

The dark gateway rippled and then pulsed inward as though it were swallowing Eden whole, before returning to the stagnant state it was in before Orifiel and Eden arrived.

Orifiel headed back the way he came, and the whispers from the children still hiding in the bushes fell quiet. Approaching the apple tree, he willed the branches to part and stepped toward the sparkling gateway. He took a moment to stretch his magnificent feathered wings, and a triumphant smile crept up the left side of his face, as he believed that he had once again saved Styclar-Plena.

In fact, unbeknownst to Orifiel, he had sealed its doom.

Dipping his toe into the rift through which he'd arrived, Orifiel allowed the coolness to rush over his foot. Moments before the gateway took him, a quaking roar tore across the land. Orifiel twisted his neck in surprise. Through the foliage, a cloaked beast pointed its talons at him from the depths of the Garden of Eden.

The river and the rock.

In the end, there would be only one.

# ONE

I WAS WEIGHTLESS IN THE WATER. There was nothing to be done now but wait for the tide to take me to shore.

Nothing happened.

Perhaps I had already washed up.

Perhaps I hadn't survived the journey to the third.

Perhaps I was dead.

As quickly as my thoughts turned over, so too did the realization that the word *I* had formed in my mind, and I knew then that I was still alive. In the nowhere, that empty space where I was trapped between life and death not long ago, I'd had to fight to comprehend the "I" that referred to my existence.

But I still knew my name.

*Lailah.*

I knew his name, too.

*Jonah.*

I struggled to see, but there was nothing *to be seen*.

Malachi had said that the third dimension existed in a state of cold, dark matter, which was nothing more than a void, just another version of nothingness. . . . But then, the Purebloods existed here as did their scavengers, so nothing had to be some *thing, some place*, surely?

And then I hit the rocks.

DISORIENTED, I was slow to react to the chill creeping up my neck. The ground was black ice, and I lay facedown, my cheek pressed against it. As I pushed myself up, my skin ripped, like Velcro being peeled apart. I flinched, but it was at the thought of it, not the sensation. Pain was a feeling I hadn't felt in so long it was almost forgotten.

It belonged to a girl who hadn't known her real name.

A girl who both sought out and hid from change.

A girl I'd said good-bye to.

Now, with my Angel and Vampire lineage joined in the perfect balance of light and dark, my gray being made me superior to anyone and anything to walk any of the worlds. No amount of darkness would be able to blind me from the truth of what was here.

And with that thought, the dark veil that shrouded my surroundings began to lift.

I bent my knees and stood, brushing an object as I did.

Caught off guard, I jolted backward on my unsteady feet

at the sight of a Pureblood Vampire. He loomed above me, his arm stretched out, with his razor talons pointed dangerously above curled claws. I raised my hand defensively, but a second later I realized he wasn't moving.

The Vampire was a statue, but he was no monument—he was a real demon.

At least he had been, once.

Present in body but not in mind, the Pureblood was frozen from the inside out—he had perished in this place.

I stepped around him, quick to continue on. Beneath my feet, the black ice shimmered like a dusting of stars in a night's sky. Around me, there was nothing more than the same, just a landscape of freezing, dead rock. But as I followed a line of cracks and splinters running into the distance, out of the ground a tower grew, giant and magnificent in its perfectly cylindrical design. The same speckles twinkled along the tower's exterior, twisting all the way up the building's curves. There were no windows or doors, no joins or seams, no evidence that it had been constructed piece by piece. Instead, it appeared to be formed from only one material, as though it had once been a lump of clay molded into this.

Whatever *this* was.

A massive cloud sat static, covering the peak of the tower, and elongated raindrops fell from it like stringy tar. Each drop was collected in a moat that circled the base of the astounding structure. In the river, the liquid churned clockwise at a sluggish speed. Two shoots branched out from the moat, allowing

the river to flow farther, but from here, I couldn't see where they went. Everything beyond the tower remained shrouded in shadow.

I shuddered at the bitter cold running the length of my fingers, but my attention quickly refocused. High above me, the sound of rifts opening rumbled through the atmosphere, and in this former vacuum where sound could not exist, now it demanded to be heard.

I tried to comprehend and make sense of it all.

Malachi, an old and wise fallen Angel, once known in Styclar-Plena as the Ethiccart, had told me to “bring the Arch Angels and the *worlds* they exist in to an end,” implying that the Purebloods had once been Arch Angels. That they were the ones who had fallen through to the third dimension and emerged as Pureblood Vampires; that it was not the fallen Angel Descendants, as Gabriel had once believed, who became Purebloods.

And Malachi had been right.

When I ended the Pureblood Emery, I was able to catch a glimpse of the form he once took—that of an Arch Angel—thus confirming what Malachi had said. I believed Malachi was also correct about the third dimension. Cold, dark matter might well be the makeup of this world, but whenever and however it had happened, a being created organically from the light of the crystal in Styclar-Plena—an Arch Angel—had ended up here and become the first Pureblood: Zherneboh.

After the Arch Angel arrived, this place that had once been a void wasn't one anymore.

As the rifts continued to form, the ground beneath my feet vibrated and then cracked. From over my shoulder, a rattle grew into a roar. Overhead, a round object flew out of the nothingness, tumbling over three times until finally it stopped midflight high above me. The creature's bulging throat weighed down its head, causing it to use care as it uncurled each bony limb. It rocked backward as though it were gaining momentum to catapult forward, but then stopped. The creature could smell me. It angled its face and then turned in my direction.

I would have met its eyes, if it had any.

A scavenger.

I had seen one before, and I knew the contents of what it was carrying—the dark energy released in death from a human in the second dimension. But for what purpose Zherneboh wanted it brought here to the third, I didn't know. I tried to focus on the space from which I'd heard the rumble of a rift opening, from where the scavenger had emerged, but I couldn't discern one in the darkness.

My instinct was to remain deathly still, but I had evolved beyond simple instinct.

I was no longer afraid.

I had given my life in exchange for Jonah's, balancing the universe's scales and equalizing out the equation. I hadn't come here expecting to be able to escape.

And with that thought in mind, as the scavenger plummeted and scuttled across the barren land heading for the tower, I followed. I looked to the moat, willing myself beside it, and with ease I traveled there by thought. I was perched next to its banks when, like a ball shooting out of a cannon, another scavenger whipped past my shoulder. It was moving so fast I expected it to collide with the tower, but an invisible force caught it midflight above the moat. The scavenger stopped and, curled tightly, began to ascend. As far as I knew, scavengers could not fly, but something was causing the creature to levitate.

As I searched for an answer, I realized that with every passing second that I was here—that I was accepting that *here* was in fact a place—the clearer my surroundings were becoming. Much like a photograph being developed in a dark-room, the image at the center was being exposed, allowing me to process the picture.

There wasn't just one lone scavenger being dragged up toward the thick cloud at the top of the tower, there were many. So many that I lost sight of the one I had been observing. The creatures were like magnets, each one being pulled in and up, narrowly missing the others that were dropping out of the cloud.

Next to me, a scavenger smashed into the freezing rock, causing a huge crater in the ground. It clawed its way back up to the surface, finally stretching out on all fours. This creature's

throat was not hanging heavy, and it darted with superspeed across the land, sniffing the air in search of another rift.

I didn't understand what I was seeing. Why were the scavengers levitating up toward the cloud? And why was rain falling into a contained river?

It struck me then. I was thinking about this all wrong.

This wasn't Earth—this was the third dimension.

That was no ordinary cloud, rain, or river.

The scavengers collected the dark energy released in death from a human, and that dark matter left the human form in a plume of smoke. The scavenger's throat was no longer bulging because it was now empty; it had just deposited that very smoke into the cloud.

And now that gas cloud was releasing tarlike raindrops into the moat. Why? My train of thought was interrupted as my skin rippled with a sharp, scratching sensation. My hands were beginning to freeze from the cold. The cold . . . the cold . . . *this world existed in a state of cold, dark matter. . . .*

Just like my hands, the smoke was cooling in the freezing climate. Only it was a gas, and so it was turning into liquid form—into the tarlike rain. And the rain was pooling into the moat, running into the river, but where did the tributaries go? What purpose did they serve?

Distracted once again by the bitter sting on my skin, I tried in vain to shift my weight. My hands were weighed down at my sides, and I had to concentrate to bring them to my face.

I flexed my fingers, and one by one, they cracked and broke. Wanting to devour me whole, the frost was not satisfied with just a bite and quickly spread through my veins. I had to think quicker. Gabriel had always been able to control his temperature, and now I knew that the Angels commanded their gifts simply by using the power of thought. And so I closed my eyes and imagined the ancient fireplace in the derelict house in Creigiau. I recalled the stifling heat as the logs burned next to me, scorching my skin. I willed the warmth to move out from my chest and through my body, until my hands grew hotter and my palms sticky.

My bones healed, and I was able to move my limbs once more.

There was no time to lose. I'd made a deal with the universe to reverse time, to exchange my existence for Jonah's, and now it was time to pay up. But if I was doomed to die here, then I would take this world and the Purebloods that inhabited it with me.

Speak of the Devil, and he shall appear.

"Zherneboh," I called.

On the ground, the scavengers stopped in their tracks. Every last one of them cricked their necks toward the sound of my voice.

But Zherneboh did not come.

I spoke his name again.

Still, he did not emerge.

I considered the moat of dark matter. It fueled the

Purebloods and their Second Generation Vampires. It even fueled me. This might be the third dimension, but on Earth, fuel was flammable, so maybe, just maybe . . .

Rubbing my hands together, I created some friction, generating the smallest amount of heat. The scavengers remained still, and as I regarded the hundreds of them before me, through the crowd one moved forward. Uncurling its spine, it stood upright, and though its shape was deformed, oddly, it resembled a person.

The scavenger had no eyes, but I was sure that it could see me. Maybe it was going to try to stop me? And then a strange thing happened. The creature tilted its head and, as though it were willing me on, nodded. I'd assumed that the scavengers had somehow been created here in the third, that they belonged to the darkness and knew nothing else. If they had been born here, then this was their home. Their task of moving the souls of mortals here would be their purpose. So why was this scavenger asking for death? Unlike me, he had a choice, and he was choosing to die.

Over the lone scavenger's shoulder, in the distance, the frantic flap of a raven's wings came into view. The scavengers dispersed, scattering into the depths of the land, but the one in front of me stood tall and absolute. It yawned, stretching its jaw down low, allowing the skin that covered the area below its orifices to tear. Fleshy, slimy tentacles spat from the hole, but this time the scavenger was not trying to suck up dark energy, it was trying to speak.

I stepped forward. Reaching up, I put my hand behind the scavenger's head and brought its face down toward my ear just as the raven that had caused all the other scavengers to flee swooped in a vengeful descent. The moment my skin met the scavenger's, the raven stopped. I hadn't intended to, but my will to hear the scavenger's message had been strong enough to distort time. The scavenger's slimy hand slid over the top of mine, and now its voice was crystal clear as it simply said, "*Please.*"

The scavenger's appearance may have been one born of children's nightmares, but its sweet plea was entirely Angelic. I remembered something else Malachi had said to me then: "Things are seldom ever what they seem."

My eyes shone, and I was able to see through the scavenger's translucent skin, beyond the darkness that had consumed him, to the face of a young and beautiful being.

I knew then *what* the scavenger was. Sadly for him—for all of them—*who* they had once been was surely gone, lost forever.

I considered his request.

The scavengers did not take human life as the Purebloods did, they merely mopped up the remains, and the fact that this one was asking for death told me that this existence had not been its choice.

I would honor his now.

So to the fallen Angel Descendant, I replied in a whisper, "Be free."

# TWO

THE FALLEN ANGEL LINGERED in the gray area between the past of what he was and the present of what he had become, and it was in that suspended state that I saw his smile. Having heard his plea to free him from this world, I let my hand fall from his and began to summon a glow from within me to fulfill his request.

But the moment my skin left his, time resumed.

Not as it should. It did not simply “play” but began to fast-forward, moving at rapid speed, while I was held on pause. All I could do was watch as the raven returned, spreading its wings wide behind the once-fallen Angel’s shoulders and sinking its jagged claws into his chest. The raven retracted its talons, and liquid from the Angel’s perforated form spewed onto the ground, merging with the black ice. As the last drop of dark matter drained from the fallen Angel, his form froze

and he turned into sparkling stone. The raven rose high in the air and hurled itself forward, smashing through the statue, obliterating what remained of the fallen Angel, including his smile, which fell away only when his form had turned to dust.

The raven beat its wings one last time before it shape-shifted into a form I was familiar with: that of a Pureblood.

The glow I had been summoning rose to my surface, and as it electrified through to my fingertips, I was brought back into sync with the speed of this world.

My gaze fixed on the Pureblood and the protruding lesion above his eye that marked him as one particular Pureblood: the Devil, Zherneboh.

With everyone I cared about safe in the second dimension, I didn't hesitate in preparing to destroy all Zherneboh had created, myself included.

I wouldn't even pause to take a breath; I had already given my last for Jonah.

I was ready.

In the second dimension, embracing my gray being had made me untouchable, but here in the third, I would need to divide if I were to conquer.

The only way I knew how to rid a room of darkness was to turn on a light. And so I called on my Angel abilities and flipped my inner switch. Bolts of lightning left my fingertips, joining together and amassing into a single sheet. But Zherneboh anticipated my action. As my light rushed forth, his

almighty force met it. Like an elastic band, my light snapped back and propelled me away. I stopped speeding through the air only when my back hit the invisible shield above the moat of dark matter.

Then I knew what had levitated the scavengers. I knew because I felt it. A pulley system began to drag me up, and no matter how hard I struggled against it, still I rose to the gas cloud above. Scavengers plummeted past my face, dropping one by one to the ground far below me, on the “down” side of the pulley that I was now riding up. As they met the black ice, they dispersed, scurrying away from Zherneboh, who towered above them. He followed my ascent with his steadfast stare, while I remained ensnared by silk strings I could feel but could not see—a fly caught in a spider’s web.

Zherneboh lifted his arms, and his cloak billowed below as he began to levitate all of his own accord. I’d entered his house through the front door, but not as the girl in shadow. She was gone. I was in control of my own soul. He couldn’t command me to do his bidding, which would leave him with one choice. The same one that Orifiel had been working toward since the day I was born—killing me.

He did not rush himself as he climbed higher to meet me, content perhaps that I was trapped. He reigned over this world; here, he held the home advantage.

But as I neared the cloud, a prickle of heat danced across my hands. Zherneboh may have caused my sheet of light to

recede, but he hadn't snuffed it out completely. Like the yellow flame at the end of a sparkler, my glow, though reduced to a flicker, still crackled through my fingers.

You only need a spark to start a fire. . . .

A smile twisted at the edge of my lips. Concentrating, I shot embers from the tips of my fingers. They hit the threads trapping me, sending an electric current through them.

In the blink of an eye, Zherneboh was level with me. But my thoughts were faster than his flight.

I added fuel to those embers and flames shot up, down, left, right. All around me, the web I was stuck within lit up, with me glowing in the middle.

Zherneboh fixed his eyes on my own, but I would not be distracted. My entire body warmed, the blood in my veins beginning to bubble, and I fanned the flames with the power of thought.

Rings of white light manifested one by one, starting at my ankles, encircling them like cuffs. More rings appeared in succession up my body—from my calves to my thighs to my waist and, finally, to my chest, where the halos spun with super-speed, multiplying and intensifying into blue flames of heat. By the end, my torso and my every limb were surrounded by rings that spun, silent but deadly, waiting.

Once again, I was the witch and this world was my pyre, but I needed it to burn out before I faded away.

The pulley system continued to draw me up, but the invisible silk threads began to lose their integrity. My white and

blue flaming rings whipped across and melted the threads, which began to drip. As the searing heat intensified, the threads began to snap, and bit by bit, they fell into the moat below.

I willed my rings of fire to spread, and high above me, my electric flames soared, meeting with the peak of the tower hidden within the gas cloud. Pieces of the tower enshrouded in charged rings of light spiraled down, smashing into the frozen rock below.

The tower must have housed the mechanism responsible for churning the liquid in the moat, for as the structure began to break apart, so too did the dark matter in the moat stop moving.

Though the pulley began to disintegrate, I tried to hold on to the strings keeping me in place. I needed to stay here. It was only from this vantage point, high above all that existed in this plane, that I could destroy it. The energy to maintain my rings of light was exhausting me, but still I kept on, focusing my light downward and setting the moat alight.

Both the moat and its two tributaries caught fire. The explosion blasted through the riverbanks, revealing what had been previously hidden.

The river was actually flowing out in the shape of a star. A star now ablaze. At each of the five points stood smaller versions of the tower behind me. But as the dark matter boiled at each of their bases, halos of light rushed up the cylindrical structures, only disappearing from view when they met with

the gas clouds that hung atop their peaks. One by one, they began to cascade like waterfalls of oil.

The world around me was falling to its knees.

The threads I was clinging to were about to give, but one final push was all it would take. I just had to find it in me to give it.

The only motivation I needed was hovering straight in front of me: Zherneboh.

He must have known then that I had no intention of trying to escape. Despite the halos spiraling around my body, he came in close. Grabbing the back of my head, he squeezed his thumb against the corner of my eye, his skin meeting mine.

My body stalled, and the halos became stationary. His negative energy was attracting the positive charge of my electric light, pulling it up toward him. The rings reabsorbed back into my skin, and my insides began to sizzle as Zherneboh's touch drew them up through my veins.

Like a lightning rod, he was pulling my strike to one single spot, preventing me from ejecting any more of the charged particles through the web.

But just because he was drawing out my light, it didn't mean I had to let it be smothered by his darkness when it reached him.

It was my decision; I could still choose to burn.

And burn I would—bright and brilliant.

I would not falter.

But then Zherneboh cried out. Only it wasn't the same cry I'd heard leave him on Earth. This cry did not belong to him. Never had I heard such a terrible sound. It surrounded and then engulfed us both, binding Zherneboh and me together with one single note. I spilled bloodied tears as I wheezed, but without knowing why. And as the note emanated from him, through me, I met Zherneboh's eyes, which for the first time told me a story.

The only story he had to tell.

One of rocks, rivers, and *revenge*.

The Devil was appealing to my duplicity.

I realized then that he was attracting my light to him, to buy him time to persuade me—not command me—to do what he had created me for: to end Styclar-Plena and to deliver Orifiel to him in the second dimension.

But then, from somewhere inside me, a tremendous thud hit my chest.

It silenced the cry and released my gaze from Zherneboh's.

The explanation of where the cry originated would remain a mystery. I was left ignorant of its importance and the rest of the message Zherneboh was trying to share, the reason he was at war. Without it, my resolve would not be weakened.

Surrounded once more by silence, my rings of white light looped around one another like an atom, creating a bomb inside me.

Zherneboh knew what was coming.

The tangled threads frayed and disintegrated, but

Zherneboh kept me suspended, struggling once again to imprison my gaze. Charged light rose within me, dragged toward Zherneboh's opposing force like a magnet. Zherneboh shook me violently as though he was trying to make me see sense, but as my head bobbed back, what I saw instead was a change in the previously dark sky. Swirling ribbons of luminous oranges and greens twisted like streamers on a curtain of red, creating the most beautiful aurora.

I was humbled that even here in the depths of Hell, I was gifted a glimpse of the heavens beneath which I would fall into my final sleep. . . .

But just then, the thud that had hit my chest and silenced the cry returned, stronger and louder than ever.

It came in bouts of three.

*Trump pump.*

*Trump pump.*

*Trump pump.*

The beat of a drum.

I remembered the bonfire erupting in the garden of the Henley house, how it seemed to melt the entire world around me. And a lone soldier was marching, calling out through the darkened wasteland. Calling out for me.

The scene below me unfolded in slow motion.

The star was smoking, the towers that had stood at its points had become molten, and a blazing ball of blue flame glided, forming a circle around the outside of the five points, connecting the rivers together.

Making his claim to this world, Zherneboh's signature swirled below me, spelling out his name in the form of an inverted pentagram.

Tens of thousands of scavengers flung themselves at the riverbanks, dismembering one another's limbs in a frenzied fight to drink the fueling substance before it evaporated. Nearby, the frozen Pureblood with whom I had been faced was smashed to pieces as yet more scavengers charged. But against the glow of the orange hue, I was enlightened. As I sought out the soldier I could hear but not yet see, I came to understand the meaning of the cloud, the rain, and the rivers.

On Earth, the Purebloods drank the blood of mortals with dark souls. From this blood, they would extract the dark matter that sustained their forms and grow their power when they were in the second dimension. But here in the third, they had created a never-ending supply. The science, the engineering, and the architecture all around me, manipulated and constructed, to create one thing . . .

A sea of souls.

And as I observed every last inch of Zherneboh's masterpiece, I convinced myself that far below me, there was nothing but death.

Just like the memory of the bonfire, I thought the beat of the drum was imaginary.

But then, there it was again.

My eyes searched the grounds below until . . . through the destruction and chaos, I found him.

To this being left behind, this lone soldier far below, I must have shone like a beacon—someone in the nothingness.

The figure, illuminated by a flare over his shoulder, strode across the barren landscape. The hood around his head slipped down, and he stared up, his eyes finding mine.

“Jonah,” I whispered.

The rumble of the rifts continuing to open silenced all sound. The light within me rose, heating Zherneboh’s hand, which was still pressed to the back of my head. If I was going to end the Purebloods and their world, I had to do it now, before they were able to escape through the rifts. But Jonah was down there, and he would be ended, too. I’d sacrificed myself to save him once, but to do it again, I would have to sacrifice the lives of the many I might save by not killing Zherneboh along with this world.

Jonah’s was but one life. One life in exchange for the many—*the greater good* . . .

But sometimes it’s for the good of the great.

And to me, there was no one greater than him.

Zherneboh and I were magnets, getting too close. In my neck, my veins swelled and splintered as my light—my internal bomb—rode up the side of my cheek. Drawn to Zherneboh’s clawed thumb, stripes of luminous white forked before flashing out of my left eye. A flare struck him, sending an electric shock down his hand and arm.

I screamed.

Static crackled in my left eye as my sight was taken with

that single sheet. Zherneboh fought to pull away, and I had to work hard to stop my light from leaving me. I had to get Jonah out first, even if it meant letting Zherneboh escape.

Finally, Zherneboh was able to break the connection, and he jolted backward. His form shifted into that of the raven once more, and he swooped. Springing from my shoulders, he used me as leverage to gain traction. The force sent me into a spin, and I somersaulted as I fell. The flight of the raven blurred across my impaired vision as it headed toward the dispersing cloud that had surrounded the peak of the main tower.

Unable to see light against light, the Arch Angels were unaware of the rifts between the first and the second dimension. And here in the third dimension, despite being able to hear them, I hadn't been able to see the dark rifts opening against the black. But now with an arc of autumn color swirling in the backdrop and no structure concealing it, the fixed gateway to the second was revealed.

Without Zherneboh's force attracting my own, my electric energy stopped rising and fizzed, waiting for me to detonate or disarm.

At first, I drifted like a leaf riding the breeze, a part of the autumn, but all too soon the wind dropped. I plummeted toward the smoking moat below me with no threads left to grab onto. But I didn't need them.

The same as always, Jonah was there to catch me when I fell.

He leaped through the air and met me, so when we landed

on the bank of the moat, I was pressed into his chest. Jonah planted his feet firmly into the ground, placed his chin to my forehead, and, with a sigh, murmured my name.

Smoke swirled around us, but Jonah tightened his arms around me, keeping me safe at the center of the cyclone.

“Up there,” Jonah said with a heavy breath.

Squinting, I peeked up from my refuge. High above us, and stretched out across the spectacle of luminous greens and burnt oranges, was the fixed gateway. A way home—but only for Jonah.

I had to finish what I’d started.

I locked Jonah’s arms in mine, and together we levitated into the air. I couldn’t risk meeting his eyes; I knew how easily they could change my mind. So when he rested his chin back on my forehead, I let him.

In line now with the fixed gateway, the world below us smoked in ruins, but it could be rebuilt. I had to obliterate what was left and seal the rifts once and for all.

I delayed, indulging myself for a final time by breathing in Jonah’s fragrance. Then, without warning, I thrust him away from me, aiming for the middle of the gateway. But as his arms slid down mine, he snatched my wrists and tugged me back to him.

My hesitation had been warning enough.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I didn’t have to explain myself. He knew me too well. Raising his finger to the middle of my lips and shaking his head, he quieted me.

“No, Lailah.” His eyes were the windows into his soul, and he dared me to peer inside, where, stripped bare, was his truth. “You stay. I stay. We live or we die together. There is no in between.”

Taking my hands up in his, he placed them on his chest and the *trump pump* of his heartbeat sounded in time with mine. “I always get the last word, do you understand? *Always.*”

It was nonnegotiable. He wasn’t leaving without me.

And so I willed my atom bomb to break apart and for the rings of light to disperse. I threaded my fingers through Jonah’s; and without a word, I led him back home.

# THREE

THE DARK GATEWAY SUCKED US IN, only to spit us back out into black.

I barely noticed.

In the shadows, I ripped my hand from Jonah's. I smacked it to my left cheek, trying to quash the simmering sensation that was vibrating under my skin. Dizzy and disoriented, I dropped to my knees.

"Lailah," Jonah said, bending before me and squeezing the tops of my shoulders.

I couldn't see him. My vision was blurred. He tried to pull me up, but I was too unsteady. I crumpled onto all fours. I took a breath and tried to claw my way forward, but my feet slid underneath me, and I hit a rectangular stone that rose up from the ground. Exhausted, I crawled on top and turned onto my back. I fought to find balance inside and out.

I possessed the abilities of both Purebloods and Angels, which made me more powerful than either race. By embracing my gray being, the mix of the two that lived inside me, I had set myself apart from the Purebloods and the Angels. This had allowed me to end a Pureblood here on Earth, but in the third dimension, I had to divide myself—to separate out the lightness from my Angel side—to stand a chance of defeating Zherneboh. But that meant the current of electric white light that had shocked him had also shocked me—my own dark side—and the damage was still sitting on my skin here in the second.

I breathed heavily as I stared at the rock above my head; the rift through which we'd entered the second had churned us out into a cave made of stone that shimmered like stars, just the same as the rock in the third had.

“Zherneboh . . .” I warned in a raspy voice. The Pureblood had left through the gateway only minutes before Jonah and I, which meant he couldn't be far.

“No, there's no one here. I'll get you out and into the sun in just a second,” Jonah promised.

My stomach rumbled in response to the word *sun*, as it had when I still had a hunger for sustenance in the form of food. I'd depleted most of my light energy, and Jonah knew I needed to refuel. I realized then how dangerous it was to split my soul in two. I needed to retain my balance of light and dark, not only to fuel my form but also to remain a greater force than my enemies. But then, when I'd made that choice,

the state of my soul hadn't concerned me; I'd had no intention of returning to the second. I should have been dead by now.

The scrape of heavy stone fighting against flint was as cruel to my hearing as a knife dragging across a bottle. But for every second it sounded, with every inch Jonah shifted the stone, more sunlight cascaded in from above. Stretching ever nearer to where I lay, finally the sound stopped and I was bathing in sunlight.

I no longer wore around my neck the ring that housed my crystal. I had left it for Gabriel. It didn't matter. I didn't need it. My skin warmed as a golden hue surrounded me. The sunlight sank through my skin, absorbing at superspeed, feeding my soul. Twinkling crystals exuded from my body as I basked in the sun's rays. Then, with a whoosh and a burst of light, I stopped glowing.

The light merged with my darkness, and once again, my soul was painted gray.

My vision was still hazy, and it took me a moment to realize that Jonah had taken himself out of the way of my light and was waiting aboveground. Now that we were out of immediate danger, half of me expected him to reappear, shouting, blasting me for undertaking a suicide mission. The other half hoped he might take me in his arms and tell me that he had come for me because he loved me, not because he couldn't bear to be alone in the darkness.

Staring down at me from what was now a rectangular

hole above my head, Jonah reappeared, his lower lip parted from his top, but no words came out.

“Jonah?”

In a flash, he was kneeling down at my side, and as he took my hand and pulled me up into a sitting position, he said, “It’ll be all right.”

I shook my head, confused.

Jonah’s Adam’s apple bulged as he swallowed, and he helped me up from the stone slab. Visible only because of the glow of the sun spilling in, to my far right the fixed gateway to the third dribbled with black ink.

The stone Jonah had shifted to allow the sun inside acted as an exit. I bent my knees and sprang up high, meeting the ground outside in a catlike position. Shadowed stripes criss-crossed over my skin as the sunlight strobed through wilting tree branches. The ground around me was covered in a carpet of fallen leaves. They lifted in the bitter breeze, twirling, before scattering through the air.

Gabriel had told me that the fixed gateways to the third and first dimensions were both positioned in Lucan, Ireland. And here on the Emerald Isle, it was fall, but it had been winter when I’d left through a rift in England. The shift in season didn’t make sense.

I inspected the world around me, searching for clues.

The aged tree the leaves had fallen from stood centrally, raised up as though it were a monument. The land around it

sloped dramatically from either side of its enormous trunk. A thin, light dusting of discolored topsoil spread as far as I could see. There was no grass nor any other plants; it was as though nothing else could grow here.

The structure we'd been catapulted into, housing the gateway to the third, was buried deep in the ground. It appeared to be constructed from the same material that made up the landscape of the third dimension. Worryingly, somehow someone had been able to manipulate cold, dark matter to form and freeze into this particular protective structure here on Earth.

The heavy hunk of rock shrouding the gateway had been cut to resemble a tombstone, one only visible from this exact angle. Someone had made a concerted effort to disguise what lay beneath it, and I highly doubted that that *someone* was a Pureblood.

In the distance, the land rounded off into a point. I strode toward that cliff's edge, gesturing for Jonah to stay. I needed time to collect my thoughts.

With my failure to destroy the third, nothing had changed since I went through the rift that morning. The Purebloods had survived me, same as I had survived the third, meaning no ground had been lost on either side. The only difference now, perhaps, was that I understood what Zherneboh wanted, and, to a degree, why he wanted it.

Anger twisted in the pit of my stomach. Everyone I loved would be safe now in a world without the Purebloods if Jonah had just listened to me when I'd told him not to follow. It was

my choice to exchange my existence for his, a decision he hadn't respected. Worse still, I owed the universe a debt. And I expected that when the universe came to collect, it would want interest.

A part of me wanted to forget all this, but all this was a part of me. And there was no escaping any of it.

Because of him, I had failed.

Because of him, the Purebloods were free.

I glanced back at Jonah. As our eyes locked, a thought—no, a *feeling*—surfaced that didn't belong to me, at least it didn't belong to me yet. . . .

*Because of him, I was afraid.*

Unnerved, I rubbed my bare arms. Jonah had stolen my ending, and in doing so, he'd taken me straight back to the beginning. What was I supposed to do now?

At the cliff's edge, I stared up at the sky, silently searching for an answer. Below me, waves whistled as they lapped at the base of the cliff, the river working hard to wear down the rock.

And, like the river, the answer was clear. I had no choice; I had to start all over again.

I turned and faced Jonah. His huge hazel eyes drilled into mine, refusing to leave me as I circled back to him. As I watched him watch me, a cold tingle came over me as though someone were walking on my grave.

In an all-too-familiar fashion, the scenery around me began to warp, and I halted.

As though an artist were sketching an outline with charcoal,

shapes were drawn against the autumn backdrop, morphing, one by one, into ghostlike silhouettes. Faceless bodies smudged together in small clusters, dotted around the oak tree's roots, ready to be colored into life.

The clouds above drifted and the river still whistled, but everything stretching down from the cliff's edge was still, simply *waiting*. The only thing untouched by the changing picture was Jonah, who remained with his foot perched atop the tombstone, regarding me with a puzzled expression.

Over my right shoulder, my name sounded, and I twisted around.

The scenery bounced.

I became unsteady as, outside my own skin, I watched myself begin to fall.

Just as in a dream, I woke before I hit the ground.

I knew immediately what I'd been given: a window in time. A vision, one not of the past but of the future. I swayed in place. It was oddly serene.

It was so quiet.

It was so still.

I heard her before I saw her. Screeching Jonah's name, she disturbed the tranquillity and yanked me back to reality.

The carpet of leaves sprang into the air as fast feet tore across the ground. She leaped onto Jonah's back, her arms meeting around his chest as she clung to him tightly.

Brooke.

Relief coursed through me. *She was okay.*

When Brooke had fled with Fergal, he was near death, despite my best efforts. I doubted he had survived. Despite his double-dealing and carefully crafted deceptions, I knew Brooke loved him, and I worried how she would cope if he died.

I had started toward Brooke when the smallest change in the flow of the river below caught my attention. I leaned back, and though the water undulated, whatever had caused it was now gone.

I made my way over to Jonah and Brooke.

“Lailah!” Brooke said, sliding off Jonah’s back. Stopping just short of hugging me, she glanced at Jonah with dipping eyebrows instead.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, not giving any consideration to her hesitancy.

“I sensed Jonah and came straightaway,” she replied, tucking the wayward strands of her red bangs back into her purple beanie.

“Straightaway?” I said, confused. “The fixed gateway opens in Lucan.”

“Of course,” she replied. “That’s where we are.”

“I know, what I don’t understand is how you got here so fast.” The rift Jonah and I had traveled into the third from originated in Henley. With the Irish Sea to cross, even with her Vampire abilities, she couldn’t have arrived here in Lucan in a matter of minutes.

“After you disappeared, we moved here.” She punched Jonah in the arm. “Thanks for leaving me, by the way.”

“I didn’t leave you for long,” Jonah said, scraping his hand through his messy dark hair.

Before I had a chance to interject, Brooke replied, “Three years might seem a drop in the ocean when you’re immortal, but a gal gets hungry! Thank feck, I learned how to feed before you did one.”

“*Three years?*” Jonah and I repeated in unison.

“Yes, three years. You won’t believe what’s been going on here, the world’s gone mad,” she enthused, as though she had the biggest piece of gossip that ever existed.

But before Brooke had a chance to tell us anything, heavy footsteps sounded, and all three of us turned in the direction of Ruadhan’s voice, which met me before he did. “Little love.”

I jumped as burly arms pulled me in from the side. It was then that I realized I hadn’t seen Ruadhan in my peripheral vision. He patted and then rubbed my back in a circular motion before parting from me. The lines around his mouth smoothed out as his smile receded, and his bushy eyebrows dipped.

I stroked my eyelashes with my fingertips. I couldn’t see anything out of my left eye, and long, lumpy lines ran the length of my cheek. Now I understood why Jonah had tried to reassure me and why Brooke had hung back.

I kneaded my fingers into my skin and began to tremble.

Jonah was quick to tug off his hoodie and wrap it around my shoulders.

“It’s cold,” he said, using the weather as pretext. He gripped my wrists, guiding my hands through the sleeves in a bid to stop me from clawing at my face any further.

Just as Jonah was about to slide the zipper up, the leaves that had been blowing around us dropped to the ground simultaneously. The river stopped whistling as though it had run out of breath. It was as if here on this hillside, unexpectedly and without warning, everything just died. Even Brooke, who had been shifting her weight impatiently, desperate to bend our ears with her chatter, said nothing.

Ruadhan was the first to break the eerie silence. “We best be on our way.”

Jonah turned toward the hole in the ground. “I should move the tombstone back—”

“Lad, there’s not enough time,” Ruadhan said, cutting him off. “Come.” He then curled his hand over mine, looking from left to right as if we were father and daughter about to cross a busy road. He stepped out first, a protective action that calmed me, and I squeezed the hand of the person who never let me down, thankful that he remained a permanent fixture in my life.

Dust rose into the air as we sped away, leaving the tree’s lost leaves, the river, and the rock to watch as we departed.

# FOUR

WE DIDN'T HAVE TO RUN FAR. Ruadhan led us down the hill through lush gardens at the back of a church. We followed the roadside for three miles, stopping just short of a detached house.

I retracted my hand from his and quickly backed up, bumping into Brooke as I tried to avoid being seen from the house's windows.

"Sweetheart?" Ruadhan said. He placed his hands inside his long tweed coat, ambling after me.

"He's in there, isn't he?" I said, standing on tiptoes to peek over the hedge bordering the front lawn.

Ruadhan smiled gently. "Yes, love. He'd have come to see . . . Well, he'd have come to meet you himself, but he can't keep up like he used to."

It took me a moment too long to realize what that meant. “Brooke said we’ve been gone three years.”

“Aye.”

“*Three years*, Ruadhan, and Gabriel’s still fallen?”

Ruadhan nodded. “He’s been waiting for you. I told him to prepare . . . that it was conceivable that you might not be able to return.” His small grin creased his cheeks.

“What, Ruadhan?”

“I should have remembered that Gabriel’s being wrong is the exception, not the rule. He told me *you*, Lailah, have always been inconceivable, that you make the impossible possible.” He stroked his stubble thoughtfully. “Belief is a powerful thing, and his belief in you never wavered, not for one second.”

Ruadhan delivered this news as though it was something I would be pleased to hear, when, in fact, he couldn’t have been more wrong. I hadn’t wanted Gabriel to wait for me. I’d let him go, hoping he would do the same. The conversation we’d shared before I went back in time, in which I’d spoken this intention to him, was one I remembered well, but for Gabriel, it had never happened. In the end, the only message he had received from me was short and without explanation. Worse still, Jonah was the one who had delivered it. But then, even if the words had left my lips, I’m not sure Gabriel would have listened. One thing I had come to know about Gabriel was that he’d never found a reason good enough to give up on me. Evidently, in the last three years, that hadn’t changed.

“Love, he’ll be waiting,” Ruadhan said. “They will all be waiting.”

“The Sealgaire?” I didn’t need Ruadhan’s confirmation. We were in Lucan—this was their home.

I breathed in as I studied the sizable brick house. A lawn with pretty flower beds bordering a wrought-iron fence spread out in front of the property. A paved path stretched up to a porch decorated with planters on either side of the royal-blue door. The lion’s-head door knocker could not have been less inviting—and it wasn’t because it was made of silver.

“Before we do anything else, we should talk,” Jonah said, coming up beside me.

The front door opened before I could answer Jonah’s request. Gabriel set foot on the porch, and his eyes locked with mine.

My lips pulled in a tight line, and I battled to retain my composure at the sight of him. I had made my choice; letting Gabriel go was just the first of many. The decisions I would continue to make would no longer include him. They couldn’t. Not as long as I wanted him to live and not as long as I wanted him to be free.

I bowed my head as Gabriel rushed toward me. Without a word, he wrapped his arms around the small of my back, bringing me in close. His cheek pressed against the top of my head as his fingers threaded through my short hair.

I didn’t pull away immediately. It was strange. Somehow, he didn’t feel as he used to. Maybe it was because that citrus

aroma that I had loved so much hadn't just diluted, it had disappeared. Maybe it was because he didn't sound as he used to, either. My ear was against his chest, and his heartbeat was not as I remembered it.

Or maybe the thing that was truly different was me.

My arms were pinned to my sides. I knew I was cold and empty beneath him; he knew it, too, as, with reluctance, he parted from me.

"Come, let's get you inside. Let's get you both inside," he said, offering Jonah an almost respectful nod.

I lifted my chin, and Gabriel stepped back.

"Lailah! What happened to you?"

Once again, he reached out for me, and I withdrew, shaking my head.

Jonah stepped in front of me, protectively placing his arm across my chest. "What happened is that you sent her to death's door, and she was happily knocking on the damn thing when I found her."

Gabriel's faded blue eyes left mine, and he turned his attention back to Jonah.

"Don't," I said. This was one fight I had no interest in being at the center of.

Jonah relented. "It doesn't matter what happened; all that matters is that she's here. That she's still alive."

Ruadhan shuffled me forward. "Come, let's go inside, as Gabriel suggested."

I followed Ruadhan through the gate, and we walked

around the outside of the house, making our way from the front to the back garden. Jonah and Gabriel trailed us, and Brooke, unusually, hung back, quiet.

“We don’t tend to go into the main house—that is, Brooke and myself,” Ruadhan said.

“Not Vampire-friendly?” I replied. Although I was blind in my left eye, the sight in my right was still sharp enough to detect the glint of silver weapons hidden within the gardens. I especially liked the creative use of the unassuming, decorative garden gnomes. Though they appeared innocent, they had murder on their minds; each one was molded around deadly silver saber claws.

“Not in the least,” Ruadhan said.

At the end of the backyard, behind the fence, was a field upon which sat the Sealgaire’s home away from home, in the form of their large, well-equipped motor home. Positioned seventy feet or so behind that was Little Blue—the Winnebago. To the left was a dirt track, leading out to the road at the front of the house. Numerous trucks and bikes were parked next to one another, standing by and waiting for action.

“Sealgaire HQ,” I stated, and Ruadhan nodded.

Ruadhan nudged me in the direction of the larger motor home, where, chivalrous as ever, he held the door open for me. The place hadn’t changed. The open-plan sitting room was still home to the dining table where I had first broken bread with the members of the Sealgaire—the surviving members. So many of their group had perished the night they’d

traveled to Wales at the request of an Angel—my mother—to rescue me. I could almost smell the chicken casserole Iona had prepared that evening. So inviting, it had warmed me through despite the cold shoulder Phelan had offered. In the corner of the van, the same sofa Iona had pulled a silver blade from when she'd felt threatened by me—not knowing then who I really was—still wrapped around the walls. Though the motor home seemed untouched, it had been repurposed. As ludicrous an idea as it would have been back then to the Irish band of slayers, this place was now home to a demon and a fallen Angel.

We were barely through the door when a familiar voice sounded behind me. “Feck me, so you were right then, she made it out alive.” Phelan’s smooth words rose up alongside the swirl of smoke from his cigarette.

I spun around, startling Phelan, and the roll-up dangling between his fingers fell to the floor.

“Sorry,” I said, “but I don’t trust you when my back is turned.” I might have placed my belief in the wrong O’Sileabhin brother, resulting in Fergal capturing me, but I hadn’t forgotten the revelation about Phelan. He had been the one who had shot me in the back the night I had found Jonah in Creigiau.

He gathered himself quickly. “And I don’t trust you *full stop*. You take being two-faced to a whole new level, like.” He tipped his head to the right as he stared at me. “And I told you before, I was aiming for the Vampire.” He glanced at Jonah as he stamped down on the cigarette beneath his feet.

“Sorry, *what?*” Jonah growled.

“Now, lad, leave it be,” Ruadhan interrupted. “All water under the bridge. With things as they stand, arguing among ourselves is wasted energy.”

“And how do things stand?” I asked.

Before anyone could answer, a polite tap at the door sounded twice, followed by a low voice requesting permission to enter. “Phelan?”

“Just get in here, Cam.”

The young lad made his way into the motor home. He shifted nervously beside Phelan, a silver blade pressed down against his leg. Believing was seeing. We had indeed been gone far longer than it had felt. Little Cameron was not so little anymore. Now taller than his brethren, he was lanky and lean, his red hair styled neatly, short in back and on the sides, and his voice had finally broken.

“’Lo, Lailah. Good to see you again,” he said. As he looked at me square, I expected him to recoil the way everyone else had, but he didn’t. He only smiled.

“Is it really? You’re holding a blade in your hand,” I replied softly.

Phelan cut in, “You’ve been gone three years, and it ain’t Heaven you were paying a visit . . . not to mention the Jekyll-and-Hyde situation you’ve got going on. So before we tell you anything, you tell me, what the feck are you exactly—Angel or demon? Coz from here I sure as hell can’t tell.”

“*Don’t*,” Gabriel snapped.

Pulling a chair out from underneath the table, I gestured

for Gabriel to quiet. My reply to Phelan was honest. “Neither. The same as you, I live in the gray. Your energy, *your soul*, regularly flips between light and dark, based on the nature of your day-to-day decisions.” Some time ago Ruadhan had explained how an individual’s soul could easily be tinged from light to dark and vice versa depending on their choices.

“On the inside, I have the same color palette as you. So as far as I’m concerned, that makes me human.”

Phelan considered this, scratching his temple underneath his woolly hat. “Yeah, well, might need to add a *super* in front of that *human*. We can’t none of us maim demons quite as effectively as you can.”

“Then you’ll be happy to have me on your side,” I replied. “So how do things stand?” I pressed again.

Phelan looked to Cameron and then back to me. “All right,” he said, taking a seat on the opposite side of the round table. He freed a roll-up from behind his ear and placed it at the corner of his mouth. “Cam,” he said. “Drink.” And Cameron followed Phelan’s order without complaint.

Ruadhan escorted Cameron to the kitchen, and Gabriel took the seat beside me.

When we’d all sat here before, Fergal was with us. His absence suggested he hadn’t survived the attack in Henley. Then again, if that were the case, I’d have expected more reaction from Brooke. Still, three years *had* passed. . . .

Automatically, Gabriel reached for my hand, and I pretended not to notice as I leaned away. Jonah was gesturing for

Phelan to pass him a smoke, but I could tell he was watching me from the corner of his eye.

“Roll your own,” Phelan said flatly, throwing a packet of tobacco and some Rizla paper across the table.

Jonah snatched them as he took a seat next to me, while Brooke sat down on the sofa. She was scowling, displeased that she might not be the one to deliver the detail about *the world having gone mad*, as she’d put it.

“First, I want to know why you’ve been gone so long—what you’ve been up to in Hell,” Phelan said.

I should have known he would want me to show my hand before he’d even consider revealing his.

I sighed. “As far as I was aware, I’d been gone a few hours, not a few years.”

“Time travels slower in *Heaven*—” Gabriel began.

I cut him off. “Wait, wait, wait. I’m sorry, but are we *still* doing this?”

“Still doing what?” Phelan said.

“Calling it *Heaven*?” I directed my question to Gabriel, as next to me Ruadhan placed down two tumblers and a bottle of scotch.

Before I had fallen into the third, Gabriel and Ruadhan had insisted we keep the Sealgaire ignorant of the knowledge we possessed. Deeply Christian as they were, there seemed no point in enlightening them to the truth of what they believed to be Heaven and Hell.

It appeared, in three years, Gabriel still hadn’t felt it

necessary to have a religion-versus-reality conversation. But then, even Ruadhan himself was not in full possession of all the information. In all their time together, Gabriel had kept things from him. I remembered then the reason I hadn't attempted to fill in the blanks for Ruadhan, either; I'd had no desire to diminish his belief, for it brought him comfort. Perhaps Gabriel hadn't wanted to shatter Phelan and his men's beliefs in much the same way. It was, after all, a belief they had devoted their lives to, something their nearest and dearest had died for. It seemed we were still working on a need-to-know basis.

"I know you call it something different," Phelan said as he gripped the base of the bottle Cameron had brought him. "Plenty of people do. But it is the abode of the Angels, of our Lord, and the place of divine afterlife. Paradise, Nirvana, the Promised Land . . . here, we call it the Kingdom of Heaven, and we offer our holy reverence, and our lives to protect it and all who serve it." Calm and collected, Phelan poured himself a glass.

His words echoed a similar conversation I had shared with Jonah. He had told me that no matter what name I went by, and I'd had many, I was still the same person underneath.

Phelan had a point, but it was a weak one.

What he didn't know was that an Arch Angel by the name of Orifiel sent his Angel Descendants here to claim, in death, the light energy—or souls—of mortals to fuel his world, Styclar-Plena—Heaven—to sustain its existence. Rewarding the human

race with some distorted form of divine afterlife was not the principal design for his Heaven. Phelan and the rest of the human race were not the center of the universe as he believed.

I expected that his Bible stories did not explain that Hell was, in fact, another dimension existing in a state of cold, dark matter. That the Devil—Zherneboh—only came to be because the leader of the Arch Angels took it upon himself to cast another of his kind through a dark gateway. In essence, his Heaven had created Hell, which in turn led to the loss of so many mortal lives by the hand of the dark forces that now penetrated Earth.

Jonah's faith in me, in who I really was, might have allowed him to see beneath my name, but for Phelan, his faith would keep him blind as to what lay beneath Heaven's.

"The first dimension travels at a slower speed than Earth. One day there is around twenty years here," Gabriel reminded me. "You were gone a few hours in the third, and those few hours to you equated to three years here. Heaven and Hell are on the same clock; it's Earth that runs out of time."

"You don't say," Jonah chimed in, rolling his cigarette with exaggerated slowness; the same could not be said for the way he was helping himself to the scotch.

"So what were you doing there?" Phelan pressed, blowing a stream of smoke past my face.

"Taking the place of someone I care for." I paused, and even though I knew it would sting, I ripped off the Band-Aid. "Someone I love."

Gabriel said nothing, but the whites of his knuckles showed through the speckled spots that blemished the back of his hands as his grip tightened around the cuff of his black sweater. Jonah looked around the table, his hazel eyes widening, noticing for the first time that Gabriel was not between the two of us.

“I went there to die. And I went there with the intention of taking the Devil and all of Hell with me.” I spoke in a language Phelan understood, one of both religion and warrior. It was too much for Gabriel; he got up then, making his way in the direction of the door. But he didn’t walk through it. Instead, his shoulders hunched as he spread his arms out, steadying himself using the door frame, where he stayed.

“Well, you’re not dead, like, so I guess that means neither is the Devil.” Phelan sipped his drink.

I shot Jonah an unforgiving look. “No. Now that you know where I’ve been and why, what have I—what have *we*—missed?”

“Oh, you know . . .” A sarcastic grin creased Phelan’s cheeks. “Just the dawn of the apocalypse.”

# FIVE

AT MY REQUEST, Ruadhan fetched another glass, and I filled it to the top as Phelan began. “After you disappeared, we returned home, but by the time we arrived, already things had changed.”

“Changed? Changed how?” I asked.

“The demons, Lailah. All of a sudden they were everywhere. They flooded out through the mouth of Hell, spreading across the world.”

I would have looked to Gabriel for a more accurate explanation, but still he had his back to me.

“The day *you* went in, *they* all came out,” Phelan added.

Okay, surely the time had come for “need to know.”

“They didn’t all come out, Phelan,” I said. “Second Generation Vampires were human once. They were changed by the Pureblood Vampires who emerged from the third dimension,

or as you prefer to call it, Hell.” When I left, the Sealgaire were totally uneducated to the fact that the demons they slayed had been human once, and clearly nothing had changed.

“You’re wrong,” Phelan insisted, taking a sip of his scotch.

Jonah snorted, reaching for the matches on the table and lighting the end of his roll-up. Uninterested in the conversation that was unfolding, he fidgeted, and I thought then that he was growing anxious to speak with me alone. If I had tuned in a little more closely, I’d have realized it was because he needed to feed.

“I’m not wrong. You saw a Pureblood in Henley. You saw me end it. Differs somewhat from the demons you’re used to killing, no?”

Phelan shook his head. “The Devil has many servants, Lailah, and they take many forms. Don’t get it twisted—just because the demons disguise themselves to resemble us, it doesn’t mean that they were once us. The Devil’s own will never reveal—”

“Their horns,” I said, cutting him off. “Yeah, I remember someone else in your family saying that.”

Phelan finished his drink. “Aye.”

“Have you bothered to ask Ruadhan or Brooke? They’re demons, you know.” As soon as I said it, I realized it was a silly question; he would never take the word of a Vampire, “reformed” or otherwise.

“Hey, who you calling a *demon*?” Brooke piped up from the corner, her nostrils flaring with disgust.

Ruadhan jumped in. “You’re quibbling over semantics. Little love, what Phelan is trying to say, in the way he understands it, is that since you’ve been gone, the sheer volume of Vampires roaming around has increased dramatically. As have the number of people being found dead, drained completely dry.”

A sudden spike in Vampires? Why? Zherneboh had left the third, but only right at the last second before I did, and only when he thought I was about to blow it all to kingdom come. The other Purebloods, and I didn’t know how many there were, could have escaped at any time.

I ran my fingertip around the rim of the tumbler, tracing the outline of a circle, which reminded me of the blazing blue ball that had ridden the river.

*That’s it.*

When I had struck the third with light, the towers, the moats, and the river had all heated. The scavengers had ripped one another apart to consume the dark matter before it was no longer in liquid form. By taking away their supply of dark matter, I had left the Purebloods and their scavengers with nothing to drink—their river had run dry.

“Lailah?” Ruadhan said, and I realized that everyone, Gabriel included, was watching me, waiting for what my mind was churning on.

“There was a river of dark matter, a sea of souls. . . .” I trailed off, and Jonah exhaled a plume of smoke as he met my

gaze, sharing the memory of the horrors we had seen in what felt like mere minutes ago.

“*A sea of souls?*” Phelan repeated.

Cameron came out from behind the kitchen counter, positioning himself more squarely in the room. I almost didn’t want to offer my theory with him within earshot. He might now be legally classified as an adult, but I still saw the shy, lonely kid that I remembered from this morning—what was this morning to me, at least.

“You believe that if you are a good person, when you die you go to Heaven, and that there are Angels tasked to guide all those good souls to the pearly white gates?” I asked Phelan.

“Aye,” he answered.

“And you believe that if you’re bad, you go to Hell?”

“That’s simplifying it some, but essentially, yes.”

“Right. Heaven might have Angels who help guide the light souls, but Hell has some help, too. We call them scavengers. They travel to Earth with the sole purpose of pulling in the dark energy, *or the soul*, of a mortal in death. They were depositing that energy into a *system*, which gave life to, and sustained a river full of, churning, dark matter. Or put another way, a sea of souls.”

“You saw this, too, lad?” Ruadhan’s eyebrows lifted as he glanced toward Jonah.

Jonah tugged on his cigarette before necking his fourth

shot, his pupils dilating as he returned Ruadhan's stare, giving my makeshift father the confirmation he was seeking.

"I spread light into the darkness. I caused the dark matter to heat, and it began to evaporate." I sucked in a breath. "I took away the Purebloods' supply of souls." For Phelan's benefit, I added, "They feed off them. Without the souls, they are relying completely on the dark matter they take from a human, here on Earth, through their blood."

The Purebloods were creating more Second Generation Vampires, but not just to add to their armies: They needed the Vampires to steal more humans for them to drink from. Which would account for the increasing number of dead, hollowed-out bodies being discovered.

Jonah nodded at me in quiet understanding before exhaling smoke through his nose.

"Would certainly explain why so many mortals are being killed," Ruadhan said, confirming my thoughts.

Phelan leaned across the table. "So, what, did you destroy this sea of souls for good?"

Again, my resentful gaze settled on Jonah, but he didn't falter when his eyes locked with mine. "Maybe, maybe not," I said. "Jonah pulled me out before I had a chance to—"

"Before you had a chance to what, Lailah?" Gabriel demanded, pushing the sleeves of his sweater to his elbows.

An expectant silence descended. "To destroy the darkness. To finish what I started. To end it."

"To give your life for it." The veins in Gabriel's neck jutted

out. I might have lost half of my sight, but his pain was all too easy to see.

“I had already bartered my life away before I entered the third. I saw an opportunity to take the Purebloods and their world along with me, so I took it. At least, I tried to take it.”

Gabriel’s brow creased in confusion. He had no idea I had rewritten the past and what I’d had to offer to strike that bargain with the universe.

“So you didn’t defeat the Devil, and you didn’t close Hell’s gates, but you did manage to bring about the apocalypse. Not an altogether successful trip, now was it?” Phelan said.

I tipped my glass back, letting the warm scotch burn the back of my throat before swallowing. “No.”

Cameron piped up with childlike enthusiasm. “It doesn’t matter, you can save us all, Lailah. You’re the Savior.”

“I’m sorry, *the what?*” I replied, unable to stop myself from shooting Ruadhan a glance. That was a word he, too, liked to pair with me.

“The Savior—”

Phelan cut Cameron off. “She’s not the Savior, Cameron.”

Now I looked to Ruadhan for an explanation.

“Christianity teaches of the Second Coming,” he said. “Of a time when Jesus Christ would return to Earth, at the Last Judgment. The Sealgaire have awaited the return of the Savior for centuries, believing that she would once again die for our sins, sacrificing herself so that God and mankind could be

reconciled.” He pawed at the stubble on his chin. “We believe the Savior will destroy the Devil himself, and in doing so, she will expel the evil from this world, thus delivering freedom to humanity.”

“And you think that your Savior, Jesus Christ, would return as a woman?” I said with a hint of sarcasm. As far as I was concerned, religion was entirely man-made, a product that packaged women as second-class citizens. It was rather strange that the Sealgaire would suggest that their Savior would undergo a gender swap.

“Long ago,” Ruadhan said, “a seer foretold of the apocalypse, and with it, the return of Christ. He was clear in his description that the Savior would walk among us, *female*.”

“A seer?” This was not the first time I had heard of a prophet who foretold the story of the end of days.

“We saw what you did. . . . To that demon, I mean.” My attention shifted back to Cameron as he cut in, hope and excitement spread across his face.

I couldn’t help but feel like that rotten person who delivers the news that there is no Father Christmas. “Sorry, Cam, it’s just a story.”

“You’re wrong,” he replied swiftly.

I yielded a little. “All right, if you believe there is a Savior due your way, then I’m not going to argue with you, but I will tell you that it’s not me.”

“Too right it’s not you,” Phelan grumbled. “I think I’d know the Savior when I saw her.”

“Now, now,” Ruadhan said. “Are you sure about that? You thought Lailah here was a demon when you first met her.”

“Actually,” I said, “I think for once, this is something Phelan and I can agree on.”

Phelan sighed. “I don’t believe she is the Savior we have been waiting for. But I do believe that my men are tired and that the Devil resides here, on our doorstep. If you are on our side, as you say, then you want the same thing we do.” Though it wasn’t a question, it was a statement Phelan expected some form of agreement with.

I looked at Ruadhan, Gabriel, and Jonah. “I want those I hold dear to be safe. I want them to live in a world that is free. In Zherneboh’s eyes, I saw his story firsthand. I know what he wants. As we thought, his desires are set on bringing Styclar-Plena to an end. But perhaps even stronger is his desire to force Orifiel out and into the second. He doesn’t care about mankind; he’ll do anything to succeed. We have to stop him.” I glanced at Ruadhan and said, “*I have to try.*”

Gabriel shook his head but said nothing, and Jonah’s defensive body language said it all. Neither welcomed my decision to fight. Ruadhan, however, placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed, reminding me that he was true to his word—he would stand beside me.

Phelan slid his chair back. “Well then, while here in this room we can agree that you are not the Savior, to my men, to the people of Lucan, they need to believe that’s exactly who you are, because right now, they could do with some hope.”

He swiped his tobacco products off the table and stuffed them into his cargo pants pocket as he stood.

I rose to meet him.

“Brooke,” Phelan said, eyeing me, “do summat about her face.”

Turned to leave, he pushed Cameron out ahead of him.

“Do what with it?” Brooke said with a tone.

She’d never been one for taking orders. Skip ahead three years and nothing had changed.

“I don’t fucking know,” Phelan said. “But do something. Paint it, dress it, whatever, just make her look how a Savior should. *Make her look beautiful.*” For my benefit, he added, “No offense, like, but folks buy things more easily when they come in a pretty package.”

My appearance was a trivial matter; the lack of sight in my left eye was my paramount concern. But as my gaze found Jonah’s, I flinched. I cared what he thought, and despite myself, I didn’t want him to think of me as ugly. When my time here was up, and death came to call, there was only one face I wanted him to remember me by, not two.

“You’ve got until this evening. Ruadhan, bring her to the North Star at six o’clock.” With that, Phelan ushered Cameron out of the motor home, slamming the door behind him as he left.

I didn’t know whom to address first—Gabriel or Jonah. Both seemed as anxious to have a private conversation with me as I was with them. A part of me wanted to speak with

Ruadhan first—jump straight into discussions about how to begin waging our war to protect this world.

Brooke hustled me across the living room and made my decision for me. “You heard him, let’s get to work.”

“Where do you think you’re taking me?” I said.

“Brooke stays in the Winnebago,” Ruadhan said. “Her things are there. Gabriel and I reside here.”

I pushed my weight down, shrugging Brooke off easily. “Gabriel, you don’t stay in the house with Iona?”

Gabriel scraped his hand through his blond hair as he shook his head. “Why would I?”

“I . . . I guess . . . Never mind.”

Brooke tugged my wrist. “Come on.”

“Go, little love, take some time, catch your breath,” Ruadhan said. “We will be here waiting for you when you’re ready.”

I was hesitant to go. As angry as I was with Jonah for pulling me out of the third against my will, I couldn’t deny the nervous flutter in the pit of my stomach, born from the knowledge that he had come for me, that he had risked himself to save me. When I had thought he was lost, he had felt so far away that now I just wanted to be near him.

Jonah winked at me, letting me know he’d be okay. He wasn’t about to disappear into thin air; our conversation could wait a little while longer. Gabriel, on the other hand, didn’t know where to put himself. The dark circles under his worried eyes showed how tired he was, as though he had aged

more than the three years I'd been gone. Guilty as I felt to be the cause of his sadness, I knew deep down it was for the best. Short-term pain, long-term gain, I reminded myself.

Once outside, I made a point of walking slowly to Little Blue. I breathed in the fresh dew from the grass and welcomed the cold air against my bare arms.

For just a second, I savored being alive.