

PROLOGUE

WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

*Outside Las Vegas, NV
March 15th*

Jon Bronlee cracked open the door and peeked out into the motel parking lot. Car bumpers and hubcaps gleamed in the bright Nevada sunshine, flashed dazzling light into his slitted eyes. Perched atop a weathered-wood telephone pole, a crow caw-cawed.

Nothing moved. At least, nothing Jon could see.

He wished he'd never slipped that damned security disk into his pocket. Wished he'd never smuggled it and the padded mailer he'd discovered on Moore's desk out of the Center. Wished to hell he'd never looked at either.

As if on cue, and for the thousand-millionth time, his mind chanted: *Gonna sell it and make a helluva lot of moolah. Moolah enough to retire decades early, enough for me and Nora to live easy, enough to send Kristi to gun-free private schools.*

Greed was one helluva con-artist. Pooh-poohing the consequences—*You'll be rich and long gone before anyone even notices*—until everything had gone to shit.

Yeah, a big old explosion of shit—a regular *shitplosion*—and then greed suddenly had nothing to say.

The nightmarish images captured by the med unit's security camera flared behind his eyes again for the thousand-millionth time. And her scream looped through his mind on endless repeat, a scream that had abruptly ended in a wet gurgle.

And a splash.

Jon desperately wished he could go back in time, back to D.C., back to that night and rewind events. But since he couldn't . . .

With a fresh mailer tucked under his arm, he stepped outside and sweat instantly sprang up on his forehead. He caught a whiff of Old Spice as his deodorant kicked into overdrive. The rumble of a diesel being down-shifted on the highway behind the motel rolled through the taut, heated air like a steel barrel across blacktop.

He hurried to the motel office, pushed the door open, and walked inside. The AC-

cycled air cooled the sweat on his face. He stopped at the counter and a balding man reeking of B.O. and nicotine bellied up against the other side.

“Help you?”

Jon placed the mailer on the counter. “You have mail service here?”

“Yup.”

“Great.” Jon poked the mailer with a finger.

With a sigh, the man scooped up the mailer, strolled to a box marked MAIL at the end of the counter closest to the door, and dumped it inside.

With a muttered thanks, Jon left the office and sprinted back to his room. Chained and locked the door. Collapsed on the bed and stared at the water-stained ceiling. He needed to plan his next move. But his mind refused to move forward. Instead, it kept padding back to the Center, snuffling at the past like a nose-to-the-ground dog.

Jon had scooped up his share of corpses during his ten years on the interagency cleanup crew, and the cleanup at the Bush Center for Psychological Research had been routine. Bodies outside in the snow, a pair of security guards—one slashed throat and one broken neck. Two more bodies inside; one dead agent, one dead serial killer. Hard to say what killed the agent, but bullets had done in the bad guy.

Routine had ended at med unit one.

Had ended in a exam room inexplicably filled with twisting, thorned blue vines.

Had ended in a puddle of liquid gleaming on the tiled floor.

Stomach acid burned the back of Jon’s throat and he swallowed hard. He tried to shut out the scream drilling through his mind. Managed only to muffle it. He wondered what it’d be like to gaze into that pale beautiful face as you disintegrated.

Moore had screamed. Loud and long and liquid.

A dark thought slithered through Jon’s restless mind: Maybe he’d been *meant* to find the disk. Maybe it’d been *fate*, and not just greed, his hand, guided.

During cleanup, his crew had discovered that lightning or something had zapped the Center’s main transformer. The surge had fried almost everything, the computers, the security cameras, you name it. Everything *except* the med unit cameras; apparently they’d been wired to a different system.

And then curiosity or greed or fucking fate had crooked its finger . . .

In the days following the cleanup, his team had started dying, one by one. Heart attack, unforeseen, what a shame! Husband caught her with another man and shot her, then himself. Can you believe it? In debt, committed suicide, man, *unbelievable!*

Yes. Yes, it was. Unbelievable.

Jon had gone on the run. Across the country. Dashing from one dingy motel to the next, terrified to look in the rear-view mirror or even out a café window as he scarfed down a meal. Afraid of *who* he might see.

He'd considered giving the disk to the media, but realized they'd think him a wack job with too much free time and the newest version of Final Cut Pro to play with. He'd even considered sending it back to the Center, but suspected that it'd be too little, too late. Then, last night, it'd dawned on him who needed to see the disk.

Dr. Robert Wells.

Even after Wells had retired from the center and the FBI and moved to Oregon, Jon had kept in touch. His little girl, his honey-haired Kristi, was alive and healthy because of the genetic work Wells had performed while the baby had still been inside Nora's womb, defective and doomed. As far as Jon was concerned, he owed the doc a debt beyond measure. He hoped that the disk and its contents would help Wells prepare for what was coming, equip him to survive it.

After all, Bad Seed had been Wells's creation. If anyone knew how to contain Dante Prejean or S or whatever the fuck his name might be, it would be the doc.

Jon closed his burning eyes and prayed his absence had saved Nora and Kristi. Knuckles rapped against his door.

Jon's eyes flew open, his heart pounding hard and fast. Shadows hid the water stain on the ceiling. The light had faded from the room. He'd fallen asleep. Knuckles rapped again and a voice, low and confidential, spoke his name. "Bronlee? It's Cortini. Open the door. We need to talk."

Jon's heart hurtled into his throat. He bolted upright on the bed and jabbed his fingers through his hair, trying to think. Cortini. He pictured her: shoulder-length coffee-dark hair, hazel eyes, elfin face, slender. Good-looking. Rumored to be vampire. Or a vampire's beloved.

He'd learned about the existence of vampires when he'd joined the cleanup crew.

Amazing how quickly he'd adjusted to that reality once the fact had been twisted into his face like a grapefruit half.

But, vampire or not, that wasn't the problem. The problem was Caterina Cortini tied up loose ends. And he was a *major* loose end. How did the saying go? *If you see God, you're already in heaven; if you see the devil, you're already in hell; if you see Cortini, you're already dead.*

The doorknob rattled again. "Bronlee, we really need to talk."

"Just a minute," he croaked. "Gotta find my pants."

Jon stood and padded to the bathroom, eased the door shut. Stood on the toilet and forced open the window. Grabbing the slick tiled sill, he hauled himself up and through the window.

Even though twilight glimmered on the horizon, the heat of the sun-baked parking lot slapped him in the face. He gasped, sucking in the smells of hot concrete, sand, and diesel exhaust. He dropped onto the pavement.

"Looks like you found your pants."

Jon whirled around. Cortini stood on the blacktop, one hip cocked, her gloved hands loose at her sides. His heart renewed its assault on his ribcage. His vision grayed and his knees buckled. A hand locked around his biceps. Kept him up on his feet.

"Breathe," she said. "Slow, deep breaths."

Not having much choice, Jon did as Cortini suggested. Gradually his vision cleared and his thundering heart slowed to a canter. He straightened, but Cortini didn't release him. Her fingers felt as hard as steel around his arm. He spotted a holster-bulge beneath her light suit jacket.

"Do you know why I'm here?" she asked.

Jon considered lying. Considered feigning innocence. But, looking into Cortini's eyes, he realized there was no point. "Does it matter why I took it?"

"No. Not really."

Jon nodded. Swallowed hard.

Cortini slipped a hand inside her jacket. "But I think it *does* matter that the rest of your team is dead *because* you took it."

Cortini's words hit him like a hard right to the jaw. He closed his eyes. Nodded.

“I’m sorry for that.”

“Be sure to tell them that when you see them again.”

Something in her voice opened Jon’s eyes; something weary and sad and exasperated. Her fingers slid away from his arm. She pulled out a silencer-lengthened pistol from inside her jacket.

“Let’s go inside and chat,” she said.

Figuring he had nothing left to lose, Jon bolted, his Keds slapping the blacktop as he ran across the parking lot. He stumbled as he hit the hard-packed dirt, sand, and scrub beside the highway. Blood pounded in his ears. His breath rasped in his throat.

The diesel-powered sound of a semi hauling ass down the highway thundered through the deepening night. Headlights lit up the road like twin suns, growing brighter with each step Jon took. No hands grabbed him to pull him back. Cortini didn’t shout his name. He dashed onto the highway and in front of those huge glowing lights.

Squealing brakes and stuttering tires weren’t loud enough to blot out the wet sound of the scream still looping through his memory, Johanna Moore’s last breath.

Would he face the same fate?

The smell of burning rubber clogged his nostrils. His vision filled with light. Jon staggered to a stop, turned to face the rig and closed his eyes.

Caterina watched as the rig, black smoke rolling off its locked-up tires, smashed into Bronlee. He splattered against the front grill like a low-flying june bug. Then his body bounced under the truck, the tires smearing what was left of him across the highway as the semi shuddered to a stop. The stink of burning rubber and scorched blood drifted into the air.

Caterina tucked the Glock back into its holster, then turned and walked back through the weeds and sagebrush to the front of the motel. Doors stood open. People clustered at the motel’s edge, staring at the highway and the semi jackknifed across the road. A grim-faced man spoke into his cell phone.

Using an electronic lock-pick, Caterina unlocked the door to Bronlee’s room. She unhooked the door chain with a slender steel pick, and slipped inside. She shouldered the

door closed and glanced around the room. Open suitcase on the dresser, rumpled bedspread, a laptop on the table beside the curtained window.

The room smelled stale. Like Lysol and old tobacco. Like lost hope.

The rig's headlights illuminate Bronlee as he swivels to face it.

Caterina blinked the image away. Who the hell opts for a messy roadkill suicide instead of a well-placed bullet into the skull?

She crossed to the laptop and folded it shut. Then she went to the suitcase and rummaged through the wrinkled tees and jeans and boxers. Blank post cards. A few photos. She picked one up. A pudgy little girl of about ten or eleven, her grin framed by brown curls, sat on a swing. The fingers of her right hand flashed a peace-sign vee.

Sorry about your daddy, sweetie.

Slipping the photo back in with the others, Caterina continued searching the suitcase. No sign of the security disk. But a mailer bearing a BUSH CENTER FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH return address caught her eye. She pulled the envelope free, then closed and latched the suitcase.

The MAIL TO name, neatly written in black felt-tip pen, was DANTE PREJEAN. Caterina recognized the flowing penmanship—a dying art in the twenty-first century—as belonging to Dr. Johanna Moore. The Bureau's missing ADIC of Special Ops and leading behavioral scientist.

Caterina frowned. Wasn't Prejean part of Bad Seed? One of the study subjects?

She didn't know a lot about the project because she didn't need to, her job didn't require it. All the same, she knew it involved the development and study of sociopaths; a decades-long study that had ended abruptly a couple of weeks ago with a big, messy bang and clusters of bodies in two cities—New Orleans and D.C.

So what would the missing Dr. Johanna Moore be mailing one of her study subjects? Peering into the torn-open mailer, Caterina caught the silver gleam of a CD.

Interesting.

Caterina tossed the room for anything else Bronlee might've stolen, but found nothing. Returning to the dresser, she picked up the suitcase. She tucked the laptop under her arm and walked out of the stale, empty room.

She crossed the parking lot in quick strides, while sirens banshee-wailed through

the heated desert night. Blue, white, and red lights whirled and strobed across the crowd gathered at the highway's edge.

Caterina dumped the suitcase inside her rented Charger's trunk. Sliding behind the wheel, she placed the laptop and the envelope in the passenger seat. She drove out of the motel parking lot and headed east toward the interstate.

The rig's headlights illuminate Bronlee as he swivels to face it.

Something besides Caterina had scared him out onto the highway and in front of the semi—something unknown and that disturbed her.

Bronlee hadn't tried to bluff his way out, hadn't tried to bargain, not even for the safety of the grinning little girl in the swing. And even though that meant he'd already dumped or sold the security disk, it didn't explain his final action.

As Caterina steered the Charger from the dark highway onto the I-15 on-ramp and hit the gas, *why* kept circling through her brain. *Why* wasn't a part of her job. Wasn't supposed to be a part of her vocabulary. And that'd never been a problem.

Until now.

She could've sworn she'd seen *relief* on Bronlee's face as he'd faced the rig.

Caterina's hands tightened on the steering wheel. She tried to focus on the road and the white lines blurring past alongside. *Why* droned and buzzed in her mind like a fly trapped between windows. She switched on the radio and country-tinged music twanged from the speakers.

The droning and buzzing faded as she concentrated on the song lyrics. *I hear the train's lonely whistle blow / and I pour another drink / I lift a glass to you, Joe / because of you my heart's on the brink . . .*

Miles rolled past underneath the Charger's tires and song after song rolled through Caterina's mind. Spotting a blue REST AREA sign, she swung the Charger onto the exit ramp, pulled around to the far side of the restrooms and parked.

She listened to the car's engine click and tink as it cooled. She rolled down the window and hot, dry air smelling of baked sand and diesel exhaust wafted into the car.

Her mother's words played through her mind: *You walk in two worlds, Caterina. Dangerous worlds. Never forget that. As a child, you learned a truth most mortals never uncover—they are not alone. So you must listen to your instincts, cara mia. Always.*

Why buzzed and battered against the panes of her mind.

Caterina unfastened her seat belt and retrieved the mailer from the passenger seat. She dumped the CD from the envelope, then swung open the laptop. She pushed the on button. And slipped the CD into the hard drive.

A list of files popped up on the screen, each marked with a letter of the alphabet. Caterina tapped a finger against her lower lip as she studied the headers. Dr. Moore had addressed the mailer to Dante Prejean. How had Special Agent Bennington referred to Prejean as during his debriefing in D.C.?

Dr. Moore warned us—that'd be me and Agent Garth—that E and S were on their way home, led by Thomas Ronin. But Ronin never showed. Only E and S and a third individual—an unsub.

E had been Elroy Jordan.

Caterina clicked the file marked S and began reading.

1

CITY OF THE DEAD

New Orleans – St. Louis No. 3
March 15th

“So where’s this weird-ass bit of hoodoo supposed to be?” Von asked.

“Beside a tomb,” Dante said as they scaled the cemetery’s locked wrought-iron fence, both vaulting with ease over the black bars and onto the path below.

“Yeah, but which tomb?”

“Baronne, I think,” Dante said, pushing his hood back. He chose the paved central path and followed it past gleaming white crypts. He drew in a deep breath of cherry blossom scented air. But beneath the sweet scent, he caught a whiff of decay, moldering bones, and old, old grief.

“These N’awlins cemeteries are creepy as hell,” Von commented. “I can’t imagine what they’d look like in daylight.”

“Didn’t you ever check ’em out when you were still mortal?”

“Hell, no,” Von snorted. “Like I said, creepy. Especially for a delicate flower like *moi*.” He paused, touching a finger to his ear. “Wait . . . breaking news. Correction, seems I *ain’t* a delicate flower.” He shrugged. “Who knew? Mama musta lied.”

Dante laughed. “Yeah, you’re gonna be fun on the tour bus.”

“Man, I’m fun *anywhere*. And we should be heading to the airport soon.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Dante read the names on the tombs as he passed: DUFOUR, GALLIER, ROUQUETTE, and listened for the quiet pulse that had drawn him to St. Louis No. 3. When he caught the letters B.A., he stopped, his heart kicking against his ribs.

He hears the sound of his own voice, raw and demanding, the words echoing in the cathedral's vaulted silence. "What was her name? Genevieve . . . what?"

Dante's hands clenched into fists as he struggled with the memory. He closed his eyes. His breathing quickened and fire flickered to life within his veins. Smoldered within his heart. He opened his eyes. Pale moonlight shafted through the thick twisted oaks, dripped from the Spanish moss.

"Baptiste," he whispered.

<You okay, little brother?> Von sent.

Dante nodded. He looked at the tomb and finished reading the name chiseled into the white stone: B.A.S.T.I.L.L.E. He released his breath. His hands unknotted and an emotion he couldn't name curled through him, damping the flames into embers.

Did his mother even have a grave?

A hand squeezed his shoulder and he looked up into Von's moonlit green eyes. The nomad had shoved his El Diablo shades on top of his head.

"You sure, man? No pain? Cuz I thought I felt—"

Dante cupped Von's whisker-rough face between his hands. He brushed his lips against Von's, tasted him, whiskey and road dust, then smoothed his thumbs along the edges of the mustache framing the nomad's mouth.

"I'm good, *mon ami*," Dante replied. Dropping his hands, he twisted free of the nomad's grip. "And I don't need a fucking nanny."

Von extended a middle finger. Arched an eyebrow. "How about that? You need that?" Extended the finger on his other hand. "How about some more?"

"I'll take it all," Dante said, "*gêné toi pas*."

Dropping his El Diablos back over his eyes, Von shook his head and sighed. "Boy's hopeless as hell."

"*Merci*."

As they resumed walking the moonlit path, a hush swirled through the city of the dead, isolating it from the world beyond the wrought-iron fence like a deep black moat;

the air was so still the muffled clink of the chains on Dante's leather jacket and the creak of Von's leather chaps echoed in the silence.

But beneath the hush, Dante caught the faint rhythm that had—for the last couple of weeks—filled his mind just as Sleep claimed him. Primal. Like a tribal drum beating within the earth's heart.

Like the wordless song that poured, at times, from Lucien and into him, its complicated melody meshing with the refrain of his answering song. Similar, yeah, but not the same. This rhythm reminded him of the unfamiliar song that had rang through his mind that night in Club Hell.

The night Jay had been murdered, dying as Dante'd struggled to reach him.

I knew you'd come.

The same night he'd found Lucien broken and impaled on the checkered floor of St. Louis Cathedral, his wings torn, his song nothing but cooling embers. And had learned that Lucien, his closest friend, his *ami intime*, was something else altogether.

You look so much like her.

Pain prickled at Dante's temples. *Send it below. Focus on now. Focus on here.*

The song wisped into his mind again like smoke. A muted, desperate rhythm. Beckoning him. He *moved*, racing past whitewashed and time-weathered statues guarding tombs, standing sentinel to loss. Trees and marble monuments blurred into one flickering shadow as he picked up speed.

The song's deep-earth drumming pulsed in time with the blood flowing through his veins, increasing in intensity until he felt it resonate within his own chest. Then the sound vanished.

Dante slowed to a stop. He stood next to a tomb marked BARONNE. And crouched beside it, holding a bouquet dead and dried, its wings curved forward, mouth wide-open, was a stone angel.

The one rumored on the streets to have appeared in the cemetery overnight.

Magic, some said. *Gris-gris*, others believed. A sign.

So mortals whispered, yeah.

And nightkind said nothing, their silence uneasy.

A gust of cool air smelling of leather, frost, and old motor oil fluttered his hair as

Von stopped beside him. “Well, there ya go,” the nomad said. “Weird-ass hoodoo shit.”

“Ain’t just hoodoo shit, *llygad*,” Dante murmured, his gaze on the stone angel. He felt Von step back a few paces as he took up his duties as Eye.

Observing. Safeguarding. Composing.

Candles in glass holders burned before the stone angel. The smell of vanilla and wax curled into the air. Plastic Mardi Gras beads hung from the wing tips and around the corded throat. Good luck *xs* chalked in blue, yellow, and pink decorated the path in front of the statue and curled scraps of paper nestled against the taloned feet.

“One of the Fallen, looks like,” Dante said. Something *else* Lucien hadn’t bothered to mention. “And someone’s turned him to fucking stone.”

Dante knelt, picked up one of the pieces of paper and read it. *Loa of the stone, grant me protection from evil. Keep me safe in the night.* He returned the prayer to its place beside the stone foot.

He studied the squatting shape. Moonlight glimmered and sparkled like ice along faint patterns etched into the wings. But not feathered wings, no. Like Lucien’s, these wings would be black and as smooth as warm velvet to the touch, the undersides streaked with purple. Waist-length hair framed the screaming face. The figure was nude, except for some kind of thick collar-bracelet twisted around the throat and a bracelet around one biceps. And most definitely male.

Von sent an image of the collar-bracelet. <*Torc. Celtic. Ancient.*>

<Merci, *llygad*.>

Moonlight illuminated a dark stain on the statue’s forehead. It looked swiped on, a blood symbol of some kind, maybe a hoodoo *vévé*. Dante leaned forward, leather jacket creaking, and touched the stain. Residual power crackled against his fingertips like static electricity. A tiny blue flame arced in the space between his hand and the statue.

Fallen magic.

Catching a whiff of Lucien’s pomegranates-and-dark-earth scent from the blood symbol, Dante pulled his hand back and regarded the angel, wondering what Lucien had done and why. To turn one of his own kind into stone...

Then he remembered Lucien’s words from *that* night: *Shield yourself. Shut it out. Promise me you won’t follow.*

Dante'd bet anything he was looking at the reason why for that promise. Touching a finger to the collar—*torc*—around the angel's throat, he closed his eyes and listened. Song whispered in through his fingertips. His breath caught in his throat as his own song, chaotic and dark, answered. The stone beneath his fingers tremored like a rung bell.

Pain suddenly bit into his mind. White light strobed behind his closed eyes. Migraine storm warning. Dante opened his eyes and started to rise, then hesitated, one knee still down on the pavement. The fading song plucked at him like desperate fingers.

Promise me . . .

He wrapped his left hand around the angel's dead bouquet. The sun-dried stems and shriveled petals crackled beneath his fingers. Flaked away like cindered wood. Like unspoken truth.

You look so much like her.

You knew all this time? And you never said a word?

Anger swept through Dante and music pulsed white-hot at his core. He poured energy into the wasted bouquet's remains. Song, dark and driven and wild, raged through his mind, from his heart, and spiraled around the skeletal stems. Blue fire kindled in his palms and shimmered against the stone.

The cupped stone fingers now held green stems topped by tightly-closed buds. But pain shafted through Dante's mind again and his rhythm shifted, blasted harsh and dissonant notes, and his song spilled away into the night.

His hand slid from the angel and he staggered up to his feet. Pain twisted through his mind, snagged his thoughts like barbed-wire. He clenched his jaw. Tried to will the pain away.

Send it below.

The cemetery spun; the moon-lit tombs wheeled white beneath the cypress. Blood trickled from his nose. Spattered the pavement at his feet.

Behind, he heard Von calling his name.

Within, voices whispered. *Dante-angel?*

Above, he heard a rush of wings.

Dante closed his eyes and touched fingers to his temples. Sweat slicked his skin.

A familiar cool touch pressed against his mind, seeking admittance. Lucien. He tightened his shields, refusing.

Fingers squeezed his shoulder. “How the hell do you do that?” Von’s voice, low and tight, sounded uneasy.

Dante opened his eyes. A black-flowered and thorned bouquet swayed within the angel’s stone grip as though caught in a gentle breeze. Or as if it moved on its own, dancing to the song cupped within the heart of each dark blossom.

“Fuck.” He’d done it wrong. Pain throbbed behind his eyes. “Not what I intended.”

“Intended or not,” Von said, “that gift ain’t nightkind, least not that I’ve ever heard. Must come from your dad’s side of the family.”

“Yeah, my thought too.”

Von gently turned Dante around. “How’s your head?” he asked.

Dante shrugged and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Blood smeared his skin. “I’m okay.”

Sliding his shades up, the nomad cocked an eyebrow and regarded him dubiously. “Uh huh,” he said, then dropped the shades back over his eyes.

Dante glanced at the stone angel and the midnight twist of flowers in its hand. “Why?” He nodded at the offerings tucked at the angel’s feet. “Why do mortals pray this way? What do they hope to gain?”

Von stroked his mustache, considering. “Hard to say,” he replied. “A lot of different reasons. Some might be prayers for a friend or relative who’s in trouble, maybe for protection or success or to be healed from something.”

Dante’s gaze returned to the candles. He stepped forward and fingered a loop of smooth beads dangling from one wing tip. “Did you do stuff like this? When you were mortal? Pray, I mean.”

“No, not like this,” the nomad replied. “And I never prayed to anyone, ya know? I just kinda said things that I really hoped would happen, like wishing a friend safe on a long journey or saying goodbye to one that’d died.”

“Who hears the wishes and goodbyes?”

“I forget you don’t know this stuff.” Von shook his head. “Who hears the wishes

and goodbyes? The speaker does,” he said, voice quiet, reflective. “And you hope that what you say from the heart has power. Power to protect, power to reach the ears of the dead. A spoken thing or a wished-hard thing takes a shape within the heart, man. Takes shape. Becomes real.”

“Becomes real,” Dante repeated. “And the goodbyes?”

“Goodbyes can heal the hurt. Or at least start the healing.”

This doesn't need to be good-bye.

Heather's words whispered through Dante's memory. An image of her filled his mind and surrounded him in white silence: Rain-beaded red hair, black trenchcoat, cornflower-blue eyes, she'd looked *into* him with her steady gaze. She was a fed, yeah, but a woman of heart and steel too. He remembered telling her: *Run from me.*

She had and now she was safe.

From him, maybe. But was she safe from the Bureau? She'd uncovered a nasty secret in D.C. Now she was caught between the truth and a hard fucking place. She was on her own in Seattle, without backup.

But not for long.

The West Coast leg of the tour ended with two gigs in Seattle followed by two weeks of downtime before the tour picked up again. Trey had already ferreted Heather's address, had teased it free from the Seattle DMV's records online with a deft touch.

Easier than rolling a tourist on Bourbon Street, Tee-Tee.

Dante let go of the Mardi Gras necklace, the beads clicking against the stone wing, and turned to face Von. “You got paper? A pen?”

Von frowned. “Fuck, I dunno.” He patted his jacket pockets, leather creaking with his movement. “I hope you ain't planning on me taking dictation.” He pulled a Bic pen from an inside pocket. Offered it.

Dante accepted the pen, holding it between the fingers of his left hand as the nomad fished a wadded-up receipt out of his front jeans pocket and handed it to him.

Kneeling on the pavement in front of the stone angel, Dante smoothed the crumpled piece of paper against his leather-clad thigh. His pulse raced as he scrawled his prayer on the receipt, wondering if it had the power to protect, the power to reach the ears of the dead.

Dante folded the piece of paper, then raised it to his lips and kissed it. Blood from his nose dotted the prayer with dark color. He laid it at the angel's taloned feet among all the other paper prayers and chalk wishes.

Dante stood, glanced at Von. Wondered at the expression on his face, shadowed and a little sad. A smile touched the nomad's mustache-framed lips as he took his pen back and tucked it away again.

"You ready, little brother?" he asked, voice low.

"What time does the plane leave?"

"In about two hours."

Dante nodded. "Let's go."

A sudden gust of vanilla and wax scented air blew Dante's hair into his eyes. The candles flickered wildly and a few dimmed to blue, then died. Von's gaze shifted up and his brow furrowed. Dante's muscles knotted. Pain pulsed at his temples. He saw his own tension mirrored in the nomad's face.

Hoped we'd slip away without a scene. But maybe I need to play this out.

"Child, wait." Lucien's deep voice resonated from the sky above.

Pushing his hair back with both hands, Dante drew in a deep breath, swiveled around, and watched as Lucien descended from the star-flecked night, black wings stroking gracefully through the air.

Dressed only in expensive black slacks, Lucien De Noir touched bare feet to the flagstones bordering the Baronne tomb. His wings flared once more before folding behind him, their tips arching above his head. He straightened to his full six-eight height, his black hair spilling over his tight-muscled shoulders to his waist. His handsome face was composed, watchful. Gold light glimmered in the depths of his eyes.

"Wait, huh?" Dante shifted his weight to one hip and crossed his arms over his chest. "Give me one fucking reason why."

"You can't go on tour."

"That's a *command*, not a *reason*. And fuck you."

"You're not well. Your control slips more everyday. You're dangerous."

Fire blazed to life, fused with the pain in Dante's head, the ache within his heart. "Fuck you twice," he said, voice low and strained.

Lucien's face remained impassive, but tendrils of his black hair lifted as though breeze-caught. "You know I speak the truth."

"Wow." Dante's gaze locked with Lucien's. "Is that like a first for you?"

A muscle jumped in Lucien's jaw. Shifting his attention to Von, he said, "I need to speak alone with my son."

<You want me to stay? Play referee?> Von sent.

<No, I'm cool. Don't worry. I'll meet you at the bike.>

<Your nose is still bleeding, little brother.>

"Merde," Dante muttered, wiping his nose against the sleeve of his jacket.

Von studied him for another moment before nodding. "Okay. See you in a few." He walked down the path past moon-washed crypts to the cemetery gates. "Play nice, you two," he called over his shoulder.

"I didn't lie to you," Lucien said, voice tight.

"*D'accord*, you didn't lie. But you kept the fucking truth from me and that's the same as lying. Happy now?"

"How can I be when your search for the truth is tearing you apart?"

"My problem, not yours. Stay outta my business."

"Impossible. You *are* my business!"

"Fuck you! I ain't your business, never was!" Pain fractured Dante's vision, throbbed at his temples. Blood trickled hot from his nose. "We were *friends*, remember?"

Lucien looked away. His fingers reached for the pendant that no longer hung at the base of his throat—the rune for friendship, for partnership, that Dante'd given him—then closed into a fist. Dante wasn't sure when Lucien had lost the pendant or how, but its loss seemed somehow karmic to him.

"I made a mistake, one I regret," Lucien said, returning his gaze to Dante's. Amber fire flared in his gaze. "But I refuse to keep apologizing."

"I never *asked* for a fucking apology." Rubbing his temples, Dante closed his eyes. Nothing looked right. Blurry. Distorted. "And I ain't asking for one now either. Quit *pushing*! Leave me the fuck alone so I can find what I'm looking for. I *need* the truth or the past will *always* control me."

"The truth is never what you hope it will be, Dante. And the cost is always higher

than you imagine. Much higher,” Lucien said, his deep voice as low as a sigh. “I thought I could keep you safe in silence. I thought I could hide you, help you heal from all the damage done to you.”

Dante opened his eyes and lowered his hands. *Safe in silence?*

“I thought I could contain your song or at least muffle it so it couldn’t be heard.” Lucien closed the distance between them with one long stride. His dark earth scent curled around Dante. “But I was wrong.”

Dante straightened, suddenly uneasy—something he’d never felt with Lucien before. “Hide me? From who? Are you talking about Bad Seed?”

“I didn’t know Bad Seed even existed. No, I hid you from others. *Powerful* others who would use you without mercy.”

“Others . . . like him?” Dante nodded at the stone angel hunched on the path.

Lucien’s gaze flicked to the statue, resting for a moment on the flowers swaying in its hand, then back to Dante. “Yes, like Loki. I trapped him to protect you.”

“Yeah?” Dante questioned softly. “From what?”

“The Fallen.”

Lucien’s golden gaze pierced Dante to the core, iced his heart. “What the hell are you talking about? Why would I need protection from them?”

“You aren’t merely True Blood and Fallen, child. You’re much more.”

“And that is . . . ?”

“*Creawdwr*.” A reverent note sounded in Lucien’s voice. Pride gleamed in his eyes. “You’re a Maker. The only one in existence.”

A chill rippled down the length of Dante’s spine. He looked at the bouquet bobbing in Loki’s hand. “Is that why I can do shit like this?”

“Yes. You can create anything and everything. Your song carries the chaos-rhythm of life. And you can Unmake, as well.”

Dante’s memory flipped back. The center. *Johanna Moore screams as his song pulls her apart, divides her into elements . . .*

Dante shifted his gaze back to Lucien, his hands curling into fists. “And how long have you known this? That I was a . . . Maker?”

“From the first moment I met you,” Lucien admitted quietly. “Your song, your

anhrefncathl drew me. Just like it drew Loki. Just like it will eventually draw the rest of the Elohim. Unless I teach you—”

“Forget it. No,” Dante said, throat tight, heart pounding out a furious rhythm. “Instead of pretending to be my friend, you shoulda told me the fucking *truth!* Shoulda offered to teach me *then*. Now’s a little late.”

Pain prickled behind Dante’s eyes and suddenly it was as if he was looking through a shattered window as Lucien’s image fractured and multiplied. Alarm flickered across Lucien’s now diamond-faceted face. “Child . . . ?”

Something abruptly shifted inside Dante, something long-broken, carving into his mind with white light and molten pain. The world spun, the stars streaking the night with gossamer ribbons of light, and he felt himself falling, tumbling down, down, down as memory sheared up, sharp and slick and edged with whispers.

You wanna take her punishment, p’tit? D’accord, take it if you so hellfire eager.

He’s quiet now. Take him down.

Little fucking psycho.

Pain wrenched Dante apart and his vision winked out in an explosion of incandescent light—

Wings rustled.

Dante tasted blood, pomegranate-tart and heady. Felt heated flesh against his cheek. He opened his eyes and looked up into Lucien’s shadowed face. He tried to remember where he was and why he was cradled in Lucien’s lap, held tight within his arms. Lucien’s wings curved forward and purple-tinged darkness folded around them, creating a warm shelter smelling of dark earth and green leaves, of wing-musk.

“I was falling . . .” Dante said, then stopped, uncertain. Or had that been a dream?

“Shhh, *mon fils*. You’re safe. Rest.” Gold motes danced in Lucien’s dark eyes.

“You need morphine, little brother?” Von asked, voice pitched low.

Ice frosted the base of Dante’s spine. There were only two reasons Von would spike him full of dope. Migraine or . . .

Another fucking seizure.

“No, *mon ami*.” The lingering taste of Lucien’s blood on Dante’s tongue, his lips, told him why red-hot pain wasn’t needling his joints and muscles, why he wasn’t sapped

of strength. “Did you give me blood? Or did I jump you?”

A smile quirked up the corners of Lucien’s mouth. “I gave.”

“*Merci*,” Dante murmured. He felt Lucien gently tapping against their closed bond, urging him to reopen the link. Shaking his head, he pushed free of Lucien’s embrace. As he rolled to his knees, kneeling within the circle of Lucien’s wings, the *where* and *why* suddenly poured into his mind like water from a broken levee.

The cemetery.

I tried to keep you safe in silence.

The bead-draped stone angel.

Yes, like Loki.

Creawdwr.

Dante’s hands clenched into fists on his leather-clad thighs as his rage reignited. He met and held Lucien’s gleaming gaze.

To Von he sent, *<How long was I down? Did we miss our flight?>*

<Only a few minutes. We’re good to go—if you still wanna.>

<I wanna.>

Lucien’s wings swept back and folded behind him. He uncrossed his legs, rising to his feet in one smooth motion. “You are ill, Dante, and hurt. You need time to heal.”

Dante stood. “Don’t tell me what I need.”

A muscle ticked in Lucien’s jaw. “Let the past go. Cancel the tour and let me teach you what you need to keep safe.”

“No.” Dante turned and headed down the path, his fingernails biting into his palms.

“The Fallen *will* find you, one night,” Lucien said quietly. “And, if I’m not with you to prevent it, they *will* bind you.”

Dante paused on the path. Deep inside, wasps droned. “*If* they find me, they ain’t binding me,” he said, his voice low and taut. “They’re gonna hafta *kill* me.

“Not if, Dante. When.”

“Peut-etre que oui, peut-etre que non. Same ending.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“You ain’t got a say,” Dante said, his throat almost too tight for speech. “And

we're done here." He *moved*, racing down the path, the night streaking past in a blue-white ribbon, the smells of moss and weathered marble deep in his lungs.

A few moments later, astride Von's Harley, his hands on the nomad's hips, the wind cold against his face, Dante wondered if Lucien followed. Wondered if any of the Fallen followed. Wondered if Lucien had finally given him the truth.

I tried to hide you from others who would use you without mercy.

The Fallen will find you. And bind you.

No, they wouldn't. Not ever. Not unless they knew how to bind a corpse.

One way or another, he would be free—his life, his own.

Dante glanced up. The sky was empty but for stars and moon and pale streamers of clouds. Nothing winged above. Not that he could see. And the Harley's deep-throated rumble swallowed any sound he might hear.

Like a rush of wings.