

INFERNAL REVENUE

The Afterlife has a Balance Sheet

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Chapters 20-25

CHAPTER TWENTY: Squad Ghouls

The bubble tea place didn't have room for outdoor tables, so we took our drinks across the street to Target — a different one from yesterday, bigger — and borrowed their patio. Graves couldn't walk and drink at the same time. Or use a straw. Never underestimate the value of opposable thumbs. And lips. You never appreciate how valuable your lips are until you watch an alligator or a wolf attempting to drink from a cup.

“The thugs had a clear shot at me a couple of times,” I told them. “They didn't take it.”

Alistair stirred the bubble tea with his straw and took a sip.

“Also, the witch looked me right in the eye.” I wiggled my fingers. “But no spooky spells came my way. They wanted Bethel.”

Graves barked.

“Or perhaps, as Graves suggests, they wanted to keep Bethel from talking to you. Because that is the only thing truly out of character here. That a demon king would approach an Earthbound spirit like you directly.”

“Why? Because I have no value?” Given my confused state, what he said stung. Heaven certainly thought I was garbage. They'd thrown me right out on my ass.

Graves stopped mid-slurp, making an 'O' with his muzzle.

Alistair looked contrite. “Sorry, sorry. That came out a bit harsh. Bethel believes you have value to some matter at hand. The demons and the scam at the track were a way to raise money for a venture of some sort. One at odds with our mission or Bethel's interests. He chose you to speak of a conspiracy against Heaven because you have no special allegiance to any faction.”

“Dude, I didn't even know there were factions until this morning.”

“Precisely.”

His phone jingled. He touched it, mumbled, “Yes?” and looked at me with a confused expression. “Morgan? Yes, all right.” He handed the phone over. “It’s for you. Someone called Courtney.”

“You left me high and dry there,” I said by way of hello.

“Yeah, sorry,” said the demon’s youthful voice. “We had to get Dad out of trouble. Filial piety and all that.”

“And why did you grab poor Hank? He was nice.”

“Whose Hank?”

“The policeman.”

“Oh.”

“Hank the policeman. Didn’t you even ask his name?”

“No,” she snorted. “He saw through the veil. We have sniffers around, checking for that sort of thing when Dad is under a *glamour*. Besides, maybe he made it. If he’s a strong swimmer.”

My voice rose several octaves. “You dropped him in the ocean?”

“Whatever. Listen, to make amends for ditching you, Dad says to tell you the hit was from your people. Acolytes.”

I put my hand over the phone and spoke to the guys, “She says the hit squad was Acolytes. From us.”

Alistair was in mid-sip and choked. Coughing and hacking until his eyes watered.

There was an explosion and what sounded like gunfire from the other end of the phone.

“God damn!” Courtney’s voice escalated to a yell and cut-off. Maybe the attack wasn’t over.

“Who was that?” Alistair gasped.

“Courtney. One of Bethel’s demonic teenage daughters. She and her sister were at our coffee morning.”

“She said that the attackers were ours?”

“Yep. It sounded like something bad was going down on her end. I’m pretty sure I heard gunfire.”

Graves’ lips pulled back over his teeth.

Alistair turned several shades paler. “We should call Philippa, shouldn’t we?”

Graves growled.

“She could be part of the conspiracy,” I pointed out. “Which would make perfect sense. Raoul was one of her people. The hit on Raoul had been staged, if Bethel can be believed, to make it look like he did it. Now today is payback, right?”

Graves and Alastair seemed to be thinking the same thing. They nodded and I continued, “Whether she’s a part of it or not if it was the Acolytes, they’ll say I was there. It will look suspicious if you don’t call. You need to sound confused and innocent.”

He gave me a narrow-eyed look, “You are a devious person, Morgan.”

“I sure as heck hope I am because things are getting weird at an exponential rate.”

Graves yipped and whined.

“Yes, as my partner points out, it only got weird after you showed up.”

Alistair pulled out his cell phone.

What he said brought my brain to a screeching stop. My retort fell to ashes in my mouth.

Did I have something to do with these events?

No. The answer had to be no. I was a brain-wiped newly dead woman with a mouth like a sailor, a definite fondness for espresso, and a thirst for Craft Beer. I didn't like animals or people from what I could tell. How could I possibly influence a conspiracy to release the old gods? Also, this had not started with me.

“That's not exactly true,” I pointed out. “Inverness seems to have kicked the hornet's nest first.”

“Perhaps he was removed only to make room for you. Ah, Philippa? Sorry, I know you're busy.”

He moved a few steps away.

My phone buzzed again, surprising me.

The screen said, ‘Djinn and Tonic.’

“Hello?” I said tentatively.

“Morgan, where's Alistair?” Zayn demanded.

“Talking on the other line.”

“You guys need to get back here. Tune into KTLA. Now.”

I grabbed Alistair, still talking, and we started to walk back. Graves needed no urging. His super wolf ears heard what Zayn said.

KTLA was gleefully reporting scenes of mayhem on their mobile site. Three warehouses had been attacked, two near the port, one out in Lawndale. Explosive devices were used in all three cases. There were casualties. Fires were blazing. Sirens wailing. Reporters and news helicopters converging. Traffic was at a standstill on several freeways. LA was a mess.

Alistair hung up, shrugging, “She told me nothing. No reaction to our information about the attack at all.”

I showed him the live feed.

“All right, all right,” he rubbed his chin anxiously, repeating ‘all right’ several more times.

“All right what?” I prodded trying to keep up with his long stride.

“This ties in with what Bethel told you. After the pandemic, the *then* President and his cronies, and the devolution of certain superpowers I shall not name, the push to be more proactive against demons

and the seeming indifference of heaven supercharged this Cabal. Their objective must be to open some of the Closets.”

We stopped at a red light. Graves looked up, barking to Alistair.

“Graves said they would probably try to free some of the more aggressive punishment deities first. They won’t be as powerful as they were in the old days.”

The light changed and we crossed quickly. I thought about what he said. “Yeah, but people still believe in the concepts they represent. Punishment. Revenge. Justice. I bet that’s enough to get them going.”

Graves and Alistair stopped abruptly to stare at me.

“What?” I said, narrowing my eyes suspiciously.

“That was a very intelligent observation,” Alistair remarked.

“I can say smart things,” I snapped defensively.

He sketched a little bow. “Of course you can. You will pardon us for not knowing that as we have only barely begun to get acquainted. And you like to swear and bring down thunder and lightning and are rather fond of kicking.”

That was true. I did all those things.

We walked on.

“So,” I continued, “Punishment, vengeance, justice, those concepts are found in every religion and by people with no religion at all.”

“And humans want to believe,” Alistair added.

Graves growled out a sentence.

“Yes. There is that.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“He said everyone loves a good revenge story.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Do you know who you have in our closet?”

They shook their heads.

“Did you ask?”

They shook them again.

“The Closet spoke to me about vengeance. Somehow, I don’t think there are a bunch of flower fairies trapped inside.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Ghost Writers

Zayn was hopping from foot to foot just inside Djinn and Tonic's front door looking out for us. He had the news on his tablet computer set up on the counter and we gathered around.

Not a minute after we got back, Trahn came running in.

"Are you watching?" She spied the tablet. "You are. Oh, my God! This is crazy. Did you hear they found a bunch of Bald Eagles dead from smoke inhalation at one of the warehouses!"

"Oh no, Santa's eagles," I cried.

Trahn looked at me like I was nuts. I didn't care. Poor eagles. Pale Horse appeared to have escaped since no one mentioned any equine deaths.

The words 'terrorist attack' were batted around like badminton shuttlecocks. Trahn calmed herself by petting the now-human Graves which made him blush crimson. Zayn blended a big smoothie for her on the house.

I went upstairs and shut the door to Inverness's bedroom. My job was to see if I could find any clue Inverness might have left behind. The interior goods from Target had arrived and were sitting piled in the corner. Courtesy of Zayn I assumed.

I changed into the sweats from my shopping spree before stripping the bed. The old sheets went in a pile outside the door.

The mattress revealed nothing resembling rolled or folded paper. Heaving and straining, I managed to lever up the box springs. All there was under the bed was a pair of mismatched socks and a colony of dust bunnies. I even tipped the thing up to see if there no rips in the fabric indicating it was being used as a hidey-hole. No luck.

Running downstairs, I grabbed a broom and dustpan. The whole group was still gathered around the notebook's screen.

The dust bunnies were swiftly dealt with. I removed the plastic from the new comforter, pillows, pillowcases, and blanket. In minutes the bed was dressed in its new finery.

Next was the old throw rug. Worn and flattened, I quickly ruled it out as a hiding place. Knocking on the floor didn't produce any loose boards. At least not that I could find.

I shoved the papers from the closet in my pocket and pulled out all four drawers of the dresser drawers, emptying the man's clothes, of which there weren't many, into the bag the comforter came in. They could be donated.

Nothing was taped to the back of the drawers or hidden behind or underneath. Nothing in the pockets of the clothing either.

Despite Bethel's suspicions, I had found zip so far. Fingering the slips of paper in my side pocket I knew I should bring these up with the guys.

Why wasn't I?

I walked to the Closet. I knocked. "Hello? Voices? Are you in there?"

A hissing sound like steam from a kettle whispered from the other side, followed by, "We are here, Earthbound."

Gulp.

"Who was the message in Greek for?" I said in a shaky voice.

The hiss again. No words.

"Was it for Inverness? Because he's gone."

More hissing.

"I didn't give it to anyone."

The door bulged out and I jumped back.

"Give it!" the voices snarled. "Give it, give it, give it!"

Three skull-like faces pushed against the door. They were so clear I could see the fangs.

Emboldened by my bubble tea earlier I asked, "To who?"

"To him!"

"To him"

"To him!"

Three different voices.

"Like I said. Inverness is gone. As in poof. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

They cackled in voices that made my skin crawl.

"He waits," they howled.

"For what?" I said out loud. "I told you, Inverness is gone."

Abruptly the door stopped bulging and the hissing trailed away.

"Are you talking to the Closet?"

I clapped my hands over my mouth to keep from swearing.

Graves was looking at me from beneath his bangs. His long wavy hair was a mess. Trahn had been petting him far too enthusiastically.

"I told you not to talk to The Closet. The voices seek only to beguile. To play on your weakness and entrap you."

"I am not beguiled," I declared, putting hands on my hips. "Do you read Greek?"

He cocked his head to one side, clearly puzzled by my question. “Certainly. Greek, Latin. I speak French and Italian as well. I received a classical education back in my day. Ancient languages were mandatory.”

He hadn’t tried to hide it.

“What about Ancient Greek?”

“You mean classical rather than colloquial. Well, yes. That is what we learned. Though I am no scholar.”

Grabbing his shirt, I pulled him to my room, sat him down on the bed, which was looking quite nice now, and handed over the crumpled papers from my pocket.

“They came from the Closet.”

He snorted, “No, they didn’t,” and pushed them back at me.

“Yes, they did. Honest and truly.” I handed them back.

“No.”

“Yes, damn it.”

He gave me a worried glance.

“Sorry. Sorry. From the Closet. Under the door.” I mimed the piece of paper sliding out.

“Underneath the door?” He looked genuinely shocked as I nodded.

Silently he studied the papers.

“Greek letters, yes, you are correct. This,” he waved them in the air, “looks like gibberish.”

He studied it some more.

“It could be a cipher. Written in code.”

“For you?”

He shook his head. “That seems improbable. The Closet has neither spoken nor taken an interest in me since my arrival.”

“Alistair?”

His jaw tightened and he pressed his lips together.

“I know you two are a couple, which is great, very glad for you. But...” I let the sentence hang, waiting for him to fill it in.

He dropped his eyes back to the paper saying at last, “Whether he reads Greek or is adept at ciphers, I cannot say. Those subjects have not come up. From what I have observed, he dislikes the Closet as much as I and never approaches it.”

“Zayn?”

“Zayn is afraid of his own shadow. Although he has admitted the Closet whispers to him.”

“Plus, he’s a Genie.”

“A Djinn. As such, his powers are diverse and arcane.”

“What would the Closet want with these messages?”

“To be opened. What else? You said it spoke to you.”

I gave an involuntary shiver. ‘Yeah, twice. Asked if I wanted vengeance.’

“Do you?” he said quietly.

Feeling around my spiritual insides I said, “Not now. No driving burning anger.” I recalled the incident on Lake Avenue when I’d blacked out. “No that’s not true. After the attack, with Hank and all that, I felt angry. In the vision, someone else was lying on the floor next to me. Probably dead. Oh, I pretty much have figured out I was shot in the chest by the way.”

“I’m sorry,” Graves said sounding sort of sincere.

“A pair of big brown eyes were looking back into mine. There on the floor.” My heart lurched and I put a hand to my chest. “Oh fu...heck, ow, ow. Those eyes. I was upset about those eyes. I can feel that now.” A shiver ran through me. Not fear. Rage. I was angry about the eyes.

What was Heaven’s game? Letting me see these tiny bits and pieces of my past. Either wipe my memory completely or give it all up.

Graves smoothed the papers on his thigh several times although they lay perfectly flat. “Your feelings, well, they will probably change. Anger, a desire for revenge, that’s normal after a traumatic event. Difficult to get more traumatic than dying.” He gave a mirthless laugh.

I stood abruptly, wrapping my arms tightly around myself. “Alistair said we couldn’t open the door anyway. We’re...” I paused and took a breath, “tainted.”

“True, we certainly are.” The way he said it felt like the designation didn’t bother him. After all, he’d been a very bad wolf.

I didn’t feel like I’d been a bad person. A bitch? Oh, yes. A bad human being? Not really. Anyway, what was the advantage in the Closet talking to me or passing notes? I said as much to Graves.

“Perhaps the Closet senses the possibility in you.”

“For betrayal? Gee, thanks.”

“I am sure the deities within are hoping for a go-between. One who could work on their behalf.”

“Like offering me a bribe if I find someone?”

“Precisely.”

“Then that person would open the door.”

“They said give the papers to *him*. I thought they might mean Inverness. I said he was dead. They laughed.”

He clenched his manly jaw. “That’s troubling. And what good could handing them over do anyway? Only the pure of heart can open the Closet. That is the one and only condition. If you offered

them a bribe and they took they would no longer qualify. A sort of ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ scenario.”

“Seems like too much of a coincidence to think this,” I pointed at the papers, “is not related to me or one of us here in the Outpost.”

We were both silent digesting that salient point.

A sharp rap on the door was followed immediately by a long scaly snout. “What’s going on?” Alistair snapped, narrowing his googly gator eyes suspiciously.

Graves looked at me. I didn’t think it would be possible to keep this from Alistair. I nodded and he explained.

Granted Alistair was a large green anthropomorphic alligator with limited expressions available to his toothy face, still, I thought he looked genuinely puzzled.

“From under the door, you say?” His accent became more pronounced as I’d noticed it did when he was upset. “A paper? In code?”

“Are you good at codes?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, snout wagging, “I am rather. Let me see.”

He inspected the papers. “The letters are Greek; I am sure Graves has told you already.”

He looked at it some more. “Decoding it blindly with no idea of the source...” he let the sentence trail.

“Was it for you?”

He gave me a toothy frown. “No. Of course not. I don’t even walk on this side of the second floor.” A small shudder reached all the way to the tip of his tail. “I hate the whole idea of the Closet. Phantoms haunting the other side. Listening and lurking. At least the voices don’t talk to me as they do to Zayn.” His head turned sharply in my direction. “And you.”

Gulp. He was right. They’d spoken to me several times.

“You found them, you said?”

“Don’t say it in that tone of voice. They’re not for me. Geez, I just fell from heaven a couple of days ago. Hardly time to put together a master plan to overthrow the celestial pantheon. And why would I show them to you if I was? My brain may be foggy but I don’t think I’m stupid.”

“We should show these to Zayn,” Graves declared, standing abruptly.

I waved them out, handing him the papers. “You do that. I need to finish cleaning up in here.”

While we’d been talking, I was mentally running through other possible hiding places for the notebook or whatever I was looking for.

If Inverness was such a good buddy, why wouldn’t he tell his pals that something was up?

Checking the bedside table and the lamp produced zero results. Hiding it in Graves or Alistair's room didn't seem likely. Bathroom?

A thorough examination of the medicine cabinet and drawers produced nothing. Something tugged at my bleary brain. About hiding things in the bathroom. Someplace wet.

Wet. Wet. Wet.

The toilet.

Criminals hid things in the toilet. My foggy brain seemed to believe that was a thing.

Lifting the porcelain lid on the tank I looked inside.

Jackpot.

A gallon-sized plastic zipper bag was attached to the jiggly handle inside with a rubber band. I wrapped the bag in a bath towel and took it to the bedroom.

Inside were two maps taped together. One of Pasadena the other San Pedro and some of the beach cities on LA's south side.

I high fived myself. Maybe I had been a private detective. That would explain my attention to nostril shapes, knowledge of design, and quick proficiency with the Flashlight of Death. Also, perhaps, the large red column in my Heavenly Ledger.

Inverness was not giving me warm fuzzy feelings. The only reason to hide the map was to keep someone in the house from finding it.

I plopped on the bed and stared at the dang thing. No special markings that I could see. Two street maps taped together.

Why hide something as mundane as this?

Zayn burst through my door without knocking waving the two strips of paper.

"You had these? *You*?" His face was red and the flames in his horns shot up half a foot.

He practically thrust them in my face. "I needed these. They were for me."

My eyebrows popped up of their own accord.

"Thanks for admitting that," I said.

"You have no idea..."

"You're right," I said just as hotly. "Because you've been keeping secrets. From me, well, who cares? I'm nobody to you. But you've been hiding something important from Alistair and Graves and they are your friends."

He flushed as brightly as the flames.

"Were you passing them to Philippa?"

His flames shrank and he shifted his eyes to the bed.

There was no way to hide the map.

“You didn’t make that,” he stated, his voice flat.

“No, I did not.” I snapped. “It was in Inverness’s toilet. I assume it’s his. Or is this yours, as well?”

Alistair’s heavy tread cued his entrance, Graves close behind. They paused at the doorway staring.

“What?” said Alistair looking from Zayn to me. “What’s happened?”

“Zayn has been handing secret coded messages to Philippa from the closet. That’s who the messages were for.”

His google gator eyes popped and his jaw dropped.

Graves shouldered past Alistair and pointed at the map.

I explained. “Bethel suggested I look for a notebook. I found the map instead.”

The downstairs door chimes jangled. A customer.

Zayn turned on his heel pushed between the two men and left.

“Hey!” I shouted after him. “Mr. Genie-Without-A-Lamp! We need to talk about this.”

He kept going.

“This is not over!” I shouted more stridently.

“Show us,” the two men said.

I did.

They looked just as puzzled as me.

Alistair kept flipping it back and forth. “There’s nothing special on either side.”

Graves had his arms crossed and was staring at the paper, then at me, and back at the map.

“Use your flashlight,” he said.

“On what?”

“The map. Shine it on the map.”

“I don’t have my flashlight.” I twirled in a circle gesturing at my waist. “See? No belt. No weapons.”

His eyes rolled so far back in his head I bet he could see the past. “For all our sakes would you read your manual. Just say ‘weapons’.”

I looked at him. “What?”

“Say the word *weapons*.”

Alistair nodded, “Yes, say it.”

“Weapons,” I said.

There was a flash of light accompanied by a furious tickling sensation all over my body. Squirming, I jumped to my feet. Something banged against my thigh. Looking down, I saw my Flashlight of Death. I was back in my work outfit. Both weapons dangling from my belt.

“See?” said Graves with a superior smirk. “The code word is in case you need to defend the outpost. In an attack, the Outpost will also allow me to choose either my human or wolf form to fight.”

“What about Alistair?”

Alistair frowned, shaking his head. “Alligator inside, human outside. No choice.”

“That sucks,” I said before pulling the flashlight out on its zip line. “Won’t the anti-demon beam zap the map to dust.” I narrowed my eyes at him, suspicions flaring. “Or is that what you want to happen?”

He snorted, “The map is not a supernatural being. Your light will not destroy it.”

“Tell that to the concrete stairwell on Lake.”

“What happened to the stairwell on Lake?” Alistair asked.

“Bam,” I made an explosive gesture with my fingers. “Blew a hole right through the concrete.”

“How extraordinary,” Alistair said looking at me with big alligator eyes. “You were in danger at the time, were you not?”

I adopted a fake British accent in imitation of his dulcet tones, “Yes, I jolly well was.”

“Don’t be a smart mouth,” Graves growled sounding like his wolf. “The flashlight is an arcane object of protection. Don’t be fooled by its present form. It sensed the threat then and reacted. Your manual said it can also be used in revealing.”

“Have you been reading my Fall Fashion Issue?”

“Some of us have to!” he countered irritably.

“Maybe I would read it if I could find the da... dang thing.”

He gave an exasperated sigh, throwing his hands in the air. “Just try it. Shine the light first on the corner for a test.”

I moved the map to the floor. Not taking any chances, I rolled back the new floor rug before flicking the switch. I sighed in relief when no mayhem burst forth with the light.

Graves motioned for me to move it over the map.

Two clusters of symbols in purple ink revealed themselves.

I swung the beam away.

No symbols.

Swung it back.

There they were.

I leaned over peering closely. They weren't just symbols. Maybe some kind of script. But no writing I recognized.

Not so Alistair.

The gator blew air through his snout and clamped his teeth together rapidly. A tremor shook him from his shoulders to the tip of his tail.

"Excuse me," he said, turning on his gator heels and exiting at a gallop. Or trot maybe, since I don't think anthropomorphic gators can gallop.

"Was he trembling?" I asked Graves.

The big man rose to his feet, mumbled a clipped, "Excuse me," and left as well.

Why were dead people so weird?

I looked back at the map. Arcadia and the racecourse weren't even on either side. If Inverness was so concerned about the horses and demonic activity at the racecourse, how come they weren't there?

Flipping it over revealed two more clusters of winding, interlocking symbols near San Pedro and the Port of Los Angeles.

Bethel's warehouses were by the port.

It only took a minute to find the addresses online.

The marks on the map appeared to correspond to the buildings currently on fire.

"Jeezus, Joseph, and Mary," I muttered. "The universe has gotten too fucking complicated."

It took a moment to realize what I'd just said. Grabbing the map, I held it to my chest in case of imminent lightning strikes.

None came.

"Damn?" I said tentatively.

Nothing.

"Fuck you?"

Complete absence of thunder and lightning.

I stepped out into the hall.

"Sons of bitches!" I mumbled.

Thunder shook the floor and a shout of, "Cut it out Morgan!" came from downstairs.

Back in my bedroom, I closed the door and said it again.

No thunder. No frantic shouts.

Was Inverness's room Heaven proof?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Storm Warning

I set the map back down and flopped on the bed clutching the Flashlight of Death. Think, think, think, I told my brain.

Alistair hadn't freaked out until I'd shone the flashlight on the map. The light revealed the writing or symbols. Flipping on the light I looked again at the purple script full of curling, fluid shapes. Art? Writing? Writing art?

Let's ask the Internet.

Starting with 'handwriting that looks like art' I worked my way through a lot of websites that mostly pointed to Arabic, Persian, Hindi, etc. None of them fit.

This was heavenly business.

Heavenly funny business.

I tapped 'Supernatural Languages' into the search engine on my phone.

This led to Aramaic, the language of Christ with roots in Phoenician. I only had the Internet to go by, but it looked too angular for what was on the map. Most of the references were for a TV show called 'Supernatural' which my soupy brain did not recognize. Enochian and the Language of the Magi were suggestions from the Web but both of those seemed way too new. I mean, I was talking about Heaven. It had been around a long time.

Flopping back on the pillows I idly shone the flashlight up to the ceiling.

Well, crap, look at that.

The ceiling was covered in the same complex symbols as the map. I shone it on the walls. The curving, rolling script from the map appeared on almost every surface.

Feeling my insides tighten into a cramp, I pulled up the area rug and shoved the bed over. Another splash of symbols similar but a little different than the ones on the ceiling covered the floor.

Whatever I was when I was alive, I don't believe I was stupid. This was either demonic or angelic script and its purpose was to lock out Heaven.

Inverness had created a secret room.

Secret from whom, I wondered.

Graves and Alistair had not been a part of it. The map alone freaked out the gator. Graves less so. He'd been more upset because of Alistair's reaction.

Zayn? Scared or bad? That was the question. I felt he was part of whatever in-house conspiracy was going on. Those coded strips of paper were meant for him to pass on to someone outside the Outpost.

Bethel's conspiracy theory regarding the Old Gods was fast becoming reality. Our Outpost, if it was not caught up in the storm now, shortly would be. I couldn't read the map. Presumably, Inverness could. If he was with the radicals and this was some sort of battle plan, perhaps he got cold feet. Decided to rat them out to Alistair and Graves but the bad guys took him out first. Or he was a good guy, got too close, with the same result.

I lifted the map, weighing it in my hand. It felt slightly heavier than two sheets of paper should be. There were nail scissors in the bathroom drawer. Grabbing them I carefully cut the tape binding the pages together. After opening a few inches, I saw another folded paper inside.

Snip, snip, snip, and it was free.

This paper was folded several times. Spreading it open revealed a map of Southern California. I flicked the flashlight on. The color of the ink was the same but this time there were circles arrows and English instead of the weird heavenly script.

Five, no six, areas were circled. Pasadena, Palm Springs, and San Diego. Hadn't the guys said there were clean-up crews in those cities? If my guess was correct, the circles were Outposts, like ours. A few more places had arrows pointing at them. San Pedro and something in Lawndale.

Bethel's warehouses were there. Squinting, I saw numbers by each. Two sets. Dates? Times? The date looked weird. If it was a date. There was no month twenty-two.

Click whirr went the brain cells. Not every country writes the day and month in the same order. Brits wrote the month first, then the date.

I gave myself a triumphant thumb's up.

Wait. What was the date?

I had no idea.

My phone would know. I looked and my mouth went dry.

Today's date was next to the marks in San Pedro and Lawndale, Pasadena, and half a dozen other places.

The attacks on Bethel began today starting with the ambush at the coffee shop. All these places had the same day written in. Today.

These weren't notes. This was a battle plan.

I grabbed the headboard as the room shook.

Earthquake?

It shook again except this time it was more like a shiver.

A shadow of light bled from the ceiling running down the walls onto the floor. A bad feeling quivered in the pit of my stomach.

Out in the hall, something *binged*. Then *banged*. Then *kapowed*.

I jumped off the bed, spilling the map, and flung open the door.

A large person in black fatigues and flak jacket, face hidden by a knit msk, skidded to a stop about ten feet away.

Well, fuck.

My flashlight beam hit him square in the chest. Graves was wrong, it did affect humans. Or maybe it was a case-by-case basis. I was in danger, so my flashlight switched to kick-ass mode.

He didn't poof into dust when the beam hit him, nevertheless, it was a satisfying outcome. He flew back as if yanked by a rope. Arms and legs stretched out in the air. There was even time for him to squeak out a yell before he flew down the stairs, *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk*.

That's when I heard the shouts.

I guess the storm had found us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Punch and Fury Show

‘So, this is what chaos looks like,’ I thought to myself.

Men in black crowded Djinn and Tonic knocking chairs and tables and almost each other over in their haste to muscle through the front door.

I hesitated for a moment a few stairs from the landing. They didn’t have guns. Clubs or maybe some kind of expandable nightstick.

Alistair was by the counter trading punches, quite expertly, with one attacker.

Graves was closer, trying to fend off three men. From the looks of it, there had been five originally. Two were sprawled on the floor, unmoving.

Wait. We were inside and they were human. Were they fighting Graves in his wolf or human form? He’d said he could choose if the Outpost was under attack. Going by his movements, I guessed he’d chosen human.

I aimed the Flashlight of Death at the three men trying to muscle their way inside. At least I guessed they were men given their size. They could be big, burly women. Impossible to tell beneath the knit masks and body armor.

They collapsed into each other in a tangle of arms legs and about seven hundred pounds of muscle, completely blocking the door.

Letting the flashlight drop I backed up another step. Pulling out the phone charger, I launched myself super-hero style on top of the three men fighting Graves.

I landed spread-eagled like I was crowd surfing. I stabbed the charger into the neck of the closest guy. He screamed and vibrated jerkily before going limp.

As I slid off the seething mass of bodies, I zapped another attacker in the chest. He vibrated in the same jerky dance as the other guy and we both hit the floor at the same time. With one arm protecting my head, I stabbed the charger randomly into the body part nearest me — a leg.

Of course, it was pretty much a fifty-fifty shot the leg belonged to Graves, however, the Gods of Luck were with me.

Sort of.

The attacker’s whole body went into spasms dragging me to the floor with him. I stabbed the phone charger into his thigh again on the way down and damn if he didn't pass out completely.

On top of me.

Heavy, limp, body.

Graves spun around on the floor; his snarling face a few inches from mine.

My, what big teeth you have. He seemed to be part wolf, part human at that moment.

Thank heaven he was not snarling at me.

In a blink, he was on his feet tackling another of our assailants.

Wriggling mightily, I attempted to push the large man off. You'd think this would not be difficult. Well, it is. Moving two hundred pounds of dead weight is exceedingly difficult when you are five foot three and *not* two hundred pounds.

Graves and the other guy were grappling with each other. They tripped over the downed man's legs. Falling guess where?

"*Ooof!* Get off!" I wheezed as they thrashed around on top of me.

My vision was turning into black dots when they finally rolled off.

As I gasped for air, I saw Graves coiling like a boa constrictor, wrapping his legs around the man in a cool wrestling move. He grabbed the guy's arm and twisted. There was a horrible cracking sound and screaming ensued.

I finally succeeded in extricating myself from the man on top of me. I'd no sooner gotten to my knees when someone grabbed the back of my shirt and waistband and heaved me into the air. With my arms and legs flailing, the attacker pitched me like a softball into the cluster of café tables and chairs.

Adrenalin is a wonderful thing. I was hurt but so pissed off at being manhandled I didn't care. Scrambling up, I ran at him, head down, charger ready.

Sometimes brains and a bit of strategic maneuvering is better than brawn. From my crouched position, the phone charger connected with his testicles. I thumbed the button.

Too bad the café didn't have security cameras. This was the sort of footage you'd want to run again and again.

First, he shook all over in a very good imitation of a wacky inflatable arm man like you see in front of car dealerships. The wiggling was accompanied by a sound like an eagle being strangled. Or what I assumed that would sound like. I thumbed the charger and crotch-shot him again just for good measure. The scream reached a high that I believe shattered a few of Zayn's glasses.

Damn this was entertaining.

Graves, back on his feet, grabbed one of the cafe chairs and smashed it over the man's head.

"Hey!" I said frowning, "I was enjoying that!"

He gave me an odd look, muttering, "You are a sick girl, Morgan." Before grabbing another chair and smacking it over the head of the man whose arm he'd broken.

I stayed where I was, charger at the ready. I seemed to remember in movies people pop right back up after getting smashed with a chair. I looked at the man on the ground sprawled in a heap, hands over his crotch, blood running down his forehead, and waited.

Nothing.

Okay, unlike the movies when you get hit by a chair, you stay down. Good to know.

Half a dozen guys in flak vests lay sprawled on the floor but the cafe was still crowded.

Alistair had a man's head between his long toothy jaws. To my infinite regret, I couldn't turn away in time before he clamped down on the guy's skull.

Oh, so much nastiness.

Alistair whipped around, swinging his thick, spiny tail to knock another man off his feet. Graves leaped on the fallen man and began punching.

All our attackers inside the cafe were now down except for the one Graves was wrestling with.

Outside, several more were moving to enter through the front door.

Zayn was waiting out of sight, at the edge of the doorframe.

He brained the first and second ones through the door with the heavy mixer from his smoothie machine. Both fell and he whacked them several more times to make sure they stayed down. The mixer never even cracked. Now that is real craftsmanship.

Alistair hightailed it to the far end of the counter to pick up something long and slim. He tossed it to Zayn.

A baseball bat.

Zayn set the blender aside.

Another man barreled bulldozer style through the door to tackle Graves. They smacked into the counter with bruising force. This guy was the size of an ox. Honestly, an ox. Graves' rapid one-two punches bounced harmlessly off his flak jacket. He got his hands around Graves' throat and squeezed. Graves pried at the man's thick fingers and I heard a bone snap. Graves hooked a leg behind the other's knee and with a shove, overbalanced him. They fell hard onto the floor yet still the man held tight. Graves face was turning purple.

I was just moving in with my phone charger when Zayn leaped into the fray. He cracked the big man over the head with the bat.

Smack.

Oh. Yuck. Nor a pretty sight.

The guy stopped holding onto Graves. He stopped doing anything, including breathing probably.

With his tongue hanging out in a good imitation of his wolf form, Graves grabbed the counter and pulled himself up. His throat had bright red finger marks all the way around.

For the first time since I'd thrown myself into the fight, I had a second to look around. There were seven or eight bodies on the floor of the cafe. All the attackers wore black fatigues and flak jackets.

No helmets. The front of their jackets had the same insignia of a flaming circle with light spokes radiating out of it as the team that had attacked Bethel and me on Lake Avenue.

My heart shifted position to pound in the base of my throat. I tried to take a deep breathe but my chest was too tight. Probably because my heart was trying to jump out of my mouth.

These were our guys. Acolytes.

Why attack an Outpost? Particularly *our* lame-ass Outpost, to paraphrase Graves.

Maybe these were part of the radical group looking to free the Old Gods and thought we'd be an easy target? Even so, none of them could open The Closet. The guys told me the *very intention* of wanting to open the closet meant they could not.

Alistair gave a high-pitched scream close to the falsetto range of the guy whose balls I'd tasered. Ball-tasered guy seemed to have regained consciousness but was still curled up on the floor crying.

I followed the direction of Alistair's green snout.

Philippa stood outside our window staring through the glass. She wasn't moving or shouting directions to the SWAT-type guys. No. Her eyes were fixed on us: Alistair, Graves, me, and Zayn.

I was trying to analyze her expression — angry for us? angry at us? — when the world exploded.

One moment I was on my feet, the next, airborne, flying so fast my ears popped. Hitting the counter ass-first, I bounced up, over, rebounded off the wall, and dropped to the floor, taking stacks of cups and dishes with me.

Sprawled on my back, I lay there too stunned to move. The world spun dizzily until I had to close my eyes. It was still too much. Vertigo took me and I dry-heaved myself into unconsciousness.

The room was thick with dust or maybe smoke when I clawed my way out of the darkness. Not that I wanted to be awake. My head felt as if my brain had been removed none too gently and replaced with maracas full of gravel and maybe car alarms. I think my eyes were bleeding.

I lay on the linoleum, hurting, staring at the painted plaster ceiling. I couldn't seem to remember what I had been doing to end up in such pain.

I hurt because... an explosion. There was an explosion from... an attack. That's right. We'd been under attack. Graves, Alastair, and Zayn all fighting. I'd been fighting too. I felt for my phone charger and the Flashlight of Death on their zip cords and breathed a small sigh of relief.

Were we still under attack? I couldn't hear anything except a roaring inside my head.

"Get it together, Morgan," I wheezed, rolling to my side. With much groaning and a little retching, I got up on my knees. From there I shifted my grip to the counter and after some trial and error and a few tears, made it to my feet.

Gray smoke was thick in the cafe, floor to ceiling. My hearing must be returning because I realized what was whoop-whooping in time to the gravel maracas in my head actually were car alarms.

Leaning heavily on my elbows I tried to see through the veil of smoke. Or perhaps not smoke. I couldn't smell anything burning. Whatever it was, the clouds began to swirl in waves on the far side of the room.

I was just thinking, 'That's not normal,' when I saw something moving closer, the smoke flowing around it like a mantle.

Without warning the gray veil transformed. Brilliant, incandescent golden light suffused the entire room, enveloping me in almost tangible folds. If light could be combined with velvet, this is what it would feel like.

Automatically I brought both hands up to shield my eyes. Much good that did. The light penetrated everything. Not in a painful way. No. But there was no escape. I opened them just a little and squinted through outspread fingers.

A larger-than-life human shape was moving through the light, wings outstretched so far they brushed the walls.

Jeezus, Joseph, and Mary. An Angel?

The shape moved farther into the cafe and appeared to bend over. When it rose, I clearly saw Graves hanging several feet off the ground. He wasn't moving.

I was not getting happy-happy vibes from this scenario.

"Graves," I tried to say. "Wake up!" The words came out as nothing but a hoarse croak. Gathering whatever meager strength remained, I limped around the edge of the counter. What I intended to do I had no idea but this divine being should not be taking Graves.

I'd made it about four steps when the light grew impossibly bright. A sound like a sonic boom shattered what remained of the mirror above the counter and he, she, or it was gone.

The haze lifted and what to my wondering eyes should appear but Philippa still standing out on the sidewalk. This time she held Alistair roughly by one arm.

"Alistair!" I tried to yell. Like with Graves, I only managed to croak.

It was enough. He looked at me. He was in human form and his face looked desperate. That was the only word I could think to describe it. A terrible desperation that twisted his eyes and mouth with fear.

Shuffling as fast as I could, I headed for him. The Flashlight of Death in my hand. I didn't hesitate. I aimed the beam right at her chest. The energy flash knocked Philippa back a good six feet. It did not poof her to ash.

Damn it.

I aimed again but she had already pulled Alistair with her behind a car. I staggered closer. Her wings flashed out. They were enormous. Shining in the late afternoon sun. Colorful as a peacock's tail.

She leaped impossibly high. The first down sweep shattered the windshield of the nearest car. She and Alistair were gone before I could even take aim. Tiny figures high in the sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Battle Fatigue

Too battered to even curse, I leaned over, my hands on my knees, gasping for breath.

“Morgan!” shouted a high-pitched girlish voice I knew. “Morgan, what happened?”

I saw Trahn standing outside her shop, arms hugging her chest, her big eyes wide. In fact, I saw the entire parking lot, Colorado Boulevard, and a convoy of fire trucks and police cars hightailing it in our direction.

I took in this surprising vista because our wall was gone. The one around the picture window that bordered the parking lot.

The whole effing wall.

For a wild second, I thought, ‘Crap! Did I do that?’ The Flashlight had shown it packed some punch on inanimate objects.

Then I remembered the golden flash of light that had blown me over the counter.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Not my fault.

A low moan from the back of the cafe had me limping over, one hand on the counter for support.

Large Nike-shod feet attached to sturdy legs were feebly moving beneath a pile of wood, plaster, broken chair legs, and the remains of a cafe table.

Zayn.

Trahn was beside me in a heartbeat. Together we dug him out.

“Something took Graves,” I told him breathlessly, brushing the plaster off his shoulders and out of his hair as Trahn tried to steady him into a sitting position. “Philippa sprouted wings and grabbed Alistair.”

Trahn looked at me in grave concern. “You’re in shock.”

She waved an arm in the air as firemen in heavy protective gear ran through the gaping hole.

“Woman in shock. Help.”

The arrival of a burly fireman put an end to private conversations. What followed was not fun. Lots of uniformed men and women confronted us with many, *many* questions.

Zayn produced a fake I.D. for himself and halleluiah one for me as well. Seems my name was Althea Moore. Thirty years of age. Address, here. Height five-foot-four. Weight one-hundred twenty-five pounds.

What?

I whacked Zayn on the arm hissing, “I do not weigh one-hundred twenty-five pounds, mister!”

The policeman questioning Zayn gave me an odd look.

Zayn twisted around to do his super intense eyebrow thing hissing right back, “Not the time or place, dearest.”

Looking back at the policeman, he put an affectionate arm around me. “My darling fiancé is a little upset and confused.”

I gagged.

The words ‘paramilitary’ and ‘militia’ got tossed around. They looked at Zayn with suspicious, squinty eyes, maybe because of his Middle Eastern features. We could tell they desperately wanted to make a connection between him and the attack.

Trahn and her family came over from Trahnsformative Nails and testified hotly for our innocence. Because of her, we had to tell them our dog was missing since Trahn had only seen him in his wolf form.

“Poor doggy,” she repeated over and over.

Poor doggy indeed. I suspected he’d been carried off by a full angel and might be pushing up daisies along with Hank the policeman.

Lucky for us, whichever heavenly administration office created our fake identities had done an excellent job. We were both upstanding American citizens without so much as a parking ticket or suspicious email between us. The cafe even had a top rating from the LA County Board of Health, thank you very much.

Zayn and I both refused to be taken to a hospital. And, no, we did not know who would attack the cafe like this. We generally dished up smoothies, not mayhem.

Zayn called the Cafe’s insurance agent.

An ambulance came and took away three men who had not regained consciousness plus the man whose balls I had busted for real. He couldn’t walk and was still crying.

“Score one for me, asshole,” I said giving him the finger as they carried him by.

Heaven chose to ignore my lapse. As well it should!

The Coroner or whatever Pasadena had to deal with dead people took away four bodies.

Watching them bag up the corpses pricked my memory and sent me running up the stairs. If we’d been attacked, those other circles on the map might be under siege as well.

The door to my bedroom was open and the map was nowhere to be found. I tossed the covers, crawled under the bed, moved the carpet. Nothing. One of the attackers must have come up here to retrieve it. That meant they knew it was here. Had they tortured Inverness for the information before they’d killed him? Or was he part of the plan and died for some other reason?

Running back, I told Zayn my suspicions the other Outposts might be attacked today.

I think he looked shocked. It was hard to tell under the plaster and paint flakes covering his face.

“Have you got their numbers?” I prodded when he just stood there.

“What? No,” he said in a strangled voice. “That’s not something I deal with.”

I stared at him, not knowing what to do.

“Wait, wait.” Zayn pointed at the ceiling. “Graves keeps his cell phone in the bedroom. He never takes it out of the café because of the wolf-shifting thing. Come on.”

We found it sitting on top of the bureau. Everyone had the same passcode and password to keep things simple. (I’d tried to change mine the day I got it. Philippa had locked the system. Bitch.)

There were dozens of messages waiting. Both calls and texts.

We went downstairs and Zayn started going through them one by one.

Afternoon ground slowly to evening. The firemen rolled up their hoses. The police talked to each other instead of us.

Zayn slipped Graves’ phone in his pocket at last and shook his head. “No answer at any of the Outposts in Graves’ call list. Nor at the Acolyte headquarters in Torrance. Every call and text he received was a plea for help. Now all I get is voicemail.”

Yep. The map had been a battle plan. I told Zayn how it had vanished during the battle.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said with a tired voice, “the attacks have already happened. If we’d known sooner,” he shrugged. “Who knows? As far as I can tell, we are the only Outpost on the West Coast that’s still manned.”

When the last ambulance and fire truck had rolled away, one of the detectives came and said we’d need to come in and make statements tomorrow

Which seemed weird. Extraordinarily weird. Men had died here in our cafe and we could come in tomorrow?

The police departed, leaving the cafe wrapped like a present in bright yellow incidence tape.

“We probably won’t even have to go in,” Zayn said as we watched the last of the unmarked police cars drive into the sunset. “Bureaucrats working with the Acolytes will sweep it all under the table. You’ll see.”

“Where are the cameras and reporters?” I asked. “This is big stuff for Pasadena.”

Zayn slumped onto the undamaged bench, he looked tired. “Someone shielded the café from sight during the attack.”

“But what about inside? Aren’t we protected with abracadabra charms? When those hoodie boys in the van came the other day, the Outpost knocked them on their butts. How could the Acolytes enter with guns? Was it because they work for heaven? Or Philippa let them in?”

“She couldn’t have done that. The Outpost is suspicious of Angels and Nephilim. The Fail-Safe on the Threshold was disabled. Dropped completely.”

I moved to stand in front of him, my arms across my chest. “Was it you?”

He took a shaky breath and rubbed his face with his hands. “No. The secret to turning off the threshold spell is known to only one person on a team. The Outpost itself chooses who to whisper it to.”

“And that person is?”

“Alistair.”

“And yet...” I made a helpless gesture at the wreckage around us.

He brushed some more plaster out of his hair stared at the hole in the wall. “Alistair is a good person. Our friend. My friend. He would never have let them in to do this to us. They must have tricked him or...or something.” He said the last part almost viciously.

Was he trying to convince me or himself?

“You were betraying them. *Us*,” I pointed out. “Picking up secret messages and passing them on. So why not Alistair betraying Graves?”

“No.” He made a slashing motion with his hand. “Never. He loves Graves. They love each other. Why would he do anything to jeopardize that?”

“Well, he was with Philippa, and I didn’t see him throwing any punches.”

Zayn didn’t have an answer.

The flashing police lights had no sooner faded into the distance than three people showed up at what was left of our front door.

I use the term people loosely.

Teenage demons Courtney and Madison leaned against each other looking exhausted. Their faces were smeared with soot and what looked like blood, their Lululemon ensembles ripped and torn. Behind the girls, with one protective hand on their shoulders was a tall man. A tall, drop-dead gorgeous man.

And being dead, I felt I knew what I was talking about when I said *drop dead*.

His hair was brown instead of raven’s wing black like the girls. He had a bit of Bethel’s look to his features when the demon king was hiding in his human Glamour. Though this guy was way more handsome.

His eyes blazed amber bright.

Honestly.

Almost golden.

Zayn was on his feet in a second, baseball bat raised and ready. I put a hand on his arm. “Chill, Zayn. I know the girls. They’re Bethel’s daughters. I met them this morning.”

Damn. Had it only been this morning? How much action could you squeeze into one day? Whoever thought death was a long peaceful sleep had been so horribly wrong.

“We mean you no harm,” the handsome guy said in an appropriately deep and melodic voice.
“Please, may we enter? My sisters need help.”

