

# INFERNAL REVENUE

## The Afterlife Has a Balance Sheet

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### Chapters 20, 21,22

### 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’m not wearing my uniform,” I made of flourish of showing them my outfit.

He rolled his eyes so far back in his head I bet he could see the past. “Will you *please* read your manual for all our sakes. Say ‘weapons’.”

I looked at him. “What?”

“Say the word weapons.”

Alistair nodded, “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.

