

# **INFERNAL REVENUE**

## **The Afterlife has a Balance Sheet**

**By Eden Crowne**

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### **Chapters 23, 24, 25...**

#### **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. This whole body went into some sort of spasm and before I could get out of the way, the guy fell on top of me. I stabbed the phone charger into his thigh and after vibrating, he went limp.

Limp, large, heavy, and still on top of me.

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 and tripped over the downed man's legs.

"Get off!" I tried to shout except the impact had squeezed the breath out of my lungs.

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

Graves twisted around like a boa constrictor, wrapping his legs around the man in a cool wrestling move. He grabbed the guys' 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 I 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. Not 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.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Compromising Positions

I pointed at the hole big enough to drive a Volkswagen through two yards to their right.

“Hard to stop you.”

All three looked at the hole, then to the doorway, then at me. None of them moved.

Zayn leaned close whispering, “They think the Threshold Spell is still functioning. Which it is not. They may only enter an Outpost by the Threshold’s grace. Even if the walls fall, generally the threshold spells are still in place around the building.”

“Uhhh,” I said scratching my head, “what about all the people walking through our wall for the past four hours?”

“If the demons were watching they would understand ordinary humans may come and go if they have no ill will. Remember the hoodie boys and the white van? Aside from that, the threshold rules only apply to supernatural creatures.”

The hunky demon cleared his throat. “Please?” he said again. “The girls are exhausted.”

I drooled at him. Or maybe smiled. I wasn’t quite sure what my mouth was doing. My brain suddenly felt like it had been run through Zayn’s blender.

Zayn elbowed me. “Put your tongue back in your mouth, Morgan. He’s demon spawn.”

“Hey!” protested Morgan shaking a finger at him. “First of all, I don’t like your negativity! Second...”

The man shushed her murmuring, “It’s okay, Mads, it’s okay.”

She made a little “*Hmph*,” sound and tossed her hair.

“Sorry,” Zayn said surprising me. “That was rude. You are demons. Not demon spawn. As you can see it has been a rough day. I am not at my hospitable best.”

“Tell me about it,” moaned Courtney with feeling.

“Would you like a smoothie?” Zayn asked.

Courtney and Madison nodded enthusiastically.

“First we must enter,” said the man. He made a gesture of them moving forward. “May we cross the threshold? If not me, then my sisters.”

Ah. He was the big brother.

Madison reached back and curled her fingers with his. ‘No, Stefan. You, too.’

“Are you asking for sanctuary?” Zayn said in a formal tone already halfway to the counter.

“Yes.”

“And will you abide by the rules of hospitality?”

“We will,” their big brother said.

“We will. We will,” echoed the girls. “Sanctuary rules and smoothies.”

Zayn nudged me with his shoulder. “That is enough. What are you waiting for? Tell them they may enter.”

“Me?” I shifted my eyes to look up at him.

“Under the Spiritual Accords of Hospitality, they are bound. They will cause us no harm under our roof.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. Wondering if those Accords still held when our Threshold spell was broken.

Zayn nudged me. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead what?”

“Go ahead and invite them in.”

I made a face at him. “You’re being weird.”

Because he was.

“Why are you being weird?”

He took several steps back. His body visibly tensing, hands clenched.

“See?” I pointed at him. “You’re doing your running away mode. Like when I asked why you never go out. Why don’t *you* invite them in, Zayn?”

“Could someone please invite us in?” snapped Courtney sounding exasperated. “Pretty please?”

“Yeah, Zayn. Effing invite them in,” I said in a similar tone of voice.

“I... I shouldn’t,” he stuttered. “Not my place.”

Something was clearly up. Not the time or the place right now.

“Fine. Me. I will do it. Come on,” I waved, “Come all the way in. I formally invite you.”

Madison came through first. As she stepped across the threshold, a shimmer of light cascaded across her head and shoulders.

Golden.

Sparkling.

I shot a look at Zayn.

Leaning close he cupped a hand around my ear whispering, “I’m doing it. Just for show.”

Courtney was next. She stopped halfway as the golden light fell across her.

Her sister grabbed her hand and yanked. “It doesn’t hurt. Come on.”

The four of us stood in a line waiting for the handsome brother.

He hesitated.

“I don’t want to compromise you.”

His voice was deep and resonant.

“Oh baby, compromise me all you want.”

His eyes widened.

Courtney and Madison burst into snorts of laughter.

I slapped my hand over my mouth. Cheeks burning. I had not meant to say that out loud. Crap. I know what I was when I was alive. I was a private investigating, cosmetic surgeon, psychologist, *slut!*

I cleared my throat and imitated his earlier gesture of moving forward. “I mean, it’s fine. We are a wreck right now as you can see. Compromise away.”

Tightening the muscles in his jaw, I know because I was still staring at his face, he walked through. The same little golden shower of sparkles glimmered over him.

Madison and Courtney were still giggling. It had a wobbly edge to it and quickly turned into sobs. Courtney put an arm around her sister. I got behind and pushed them both to the bench at the back of the cafe. The only seating still intact. The girls sat slowly, obviously in pain, keeping their fingers tightly laced.

Zayn went into the kitchen, returning with a couple of wet bar mops. “They’re warm,” he said handing one each to the girls.

They had dried blood on their cheeks and forehead and one side of Madison’s face was covered in soot.

“I will make your smoothies,” Zayn announced, looking around for his blender. He found it, the handle sticking out from a pile of plaster and window glass near the counter. Not a crack on it.

Remembering how he’d brained that attacker with the thing, I told him to wash it with hot water first.

Stefan, accent on the last syllable, remained standing, his hands shoved into the pockets of his ripped black parka.

“Daddy sent us to you, Morgan,” Courtney said, scrubbing at the dried blood on her upper lip with the warm cloth. “The Angels are after him and he doesn’t know why.”

I thought about that. “Well, he is a demon king. Don’t angels and demons fight from time to time?”

“Hell no!” said her sister with feeling.

“Not like this,” agreed her brother. “At least not in modern times. This was a full-scale Old Testament-style attack.” He had a faraway look in his eyes as if remembering ancient battles. “Not like this,” he repeated softly.

“Not all demons are monsters,” Courtney said, taking a last swipe at her upper lip. “That’s Christianity talking. Anything with horns and it’s, you know...” she made a slicing motion across her throat.

“Amen to that,” said Zayn from behind the counter. The Djinn must have extra-sharp hearing if he could catch our conversation over the ear-splitting roar of his blender.

Stefan cleared his throat. “You must understand, Miss...” he popped an eyebrow at me and I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“Morgan. I’m Morgan.”

“Right. I’m sorry, Courtney told me your name.” He waved a hand in the air. “The day has been a perilous one. There are high demons, low demons, dirty-low-down demons, and many more in between. We did not evolve here on this earth but in one of the Hidden Worlds. One thing...”

“Wait, wait,” I interrupted. “Hidden Worlds. Is that like the Demon Lands?”

“The Demon Lands is but one of many worlds. Fae, the home of the faeries and Elves, is another, then Heaven in its infinite and varied forms, and many more in between.”

“Yeah, yeah, I had that lecture. Is the demon world Hell?”

He sighed, “Again, Christianity talking. No, not hell. Think of it more like Europe in the eighteenth century. A crazy quilt of countries and principalities.”

“But you guys come here, right?” I persisted. “Demons, I mean.”

“Wouldn’t you?” said Stefan with a half-laugh. “No one makes anything half so nice as humans. Look at your technology. Humans are creative, vibrant, and burn with a light so bright you attract all the creatures of the Hidden Worlds like the proverbial moth to a flame. Even the Gods love you.”

“And flush toilets,” added Madison. “Don’t forget the awesomeness of indoor plumbing! Humans are so much better at waste disposal.”

“Word,” said her sister solemnly.

Stefan leaned over to place a quick kiss on Madison’s head. “Exactly. We are all here for the plumbing,” and laughed. “If I may continue?” He looked at me as if waiting for permission.

“Yeah, yes. Go ahead.”

“What demons all have in common is we are opportunists. Always looking for a deal. That does not always have to involve blood and dismemberment. High demons like my father covet money, property, power, all the things humans like as well.”

“And Netflix on seventy-inch flat screens,” quipped Madison.

“What about souls?” my mushy brain remembered to ask. “Don’t you come for people’s souls?”

“Souls are made of energy. Impossibly powerful. Yet there is a catch. Contrary to what most humans believe, you do not own your soul. Therefore, the contract is more of a lease. They are not a high demon’s preferred form of payment. Lower demons are the ones who covet souls. My father is a king.” He said the last part proudly, his chin up.

He held up a hand as if to forestall any protest on my part. Ha! Like I knew what any of that meant. We don't own our soul? Who owns it?

Oh, wait. Probably the Infernal Revenue Service. Just like the IRS on Earth owns your ass. I remembered that much.

"And yes," he continued, "demons are willing to kill and dismember to get what they want. But so are leaders in human organized crime. Many more landfills hold their victims than ours. Most of those who make deals with demon lords deserve their fate."

He pointed at my flashlight. "The acolytes and Nephilim who attacked us had weapons I haven't seen in centuries. Your light beam can destroy lower-order demons and beasts. Higher-order demons can be disabled but not killed except by weapons of extraordinary power. You are new to the afterlife, so you probably don't know."

"She doesn't! She hasn't read her manual," grumbled Zayn, carrying an armful of smoothies. "They're all the same flavor I'm afraid," he apologized as he handed them out, straws already stuck in the tops. Smoothies mattered to Zayn.

"Well maybe if I could get the magazine away from you!" I fired back.

Stefan popped an eyebrow and my heart fluttered. I sipped my smoothie to keep my mouth from saying something stupid again.

"Earthbound hunt higher-order demons, if the demon's actions warrant it. They are captured, contained, and sent back to the demon lands. Not killed. That has been the natural order of things since the Old Gods were banished. Today, the Angels and their helpers killed anyone and anything in their way. We have many human workers at our warehouses. It didn't matter."

Courtney put the straw to her lips, sniffing and saying with a catch in her voice, "Prancer and Dancer."

"And Blitzen," her sister continued, "Comet and Cupid, and I can never remember the others, dang it."

Both sniffled wetly

Madison swiped at her eyes. "They had an Angel with them. An actual Celestial. She used her sword on...on," she sniffed again, "anyone she could find."

They looked at me for a reaction and I was just sort of, "Duh..."

"It's begun," Zayn announced in a dramatic voice.

'Duh...' said my face again.

"The declaration of war, idiot," Zayn said, shoving me. "Keep up Morgan."

I shoved him back harder. "I get that. Bethel was a scapegoat to get the action started with Raoul's murder. The good guys blew him up to lay the blame on the bad guys."

“Hey!” protested Courtney. “We are not bad guys.”

I countered with, “Did you or did you not drop Hank the policeman in the ocean.”

Courtney pouted.

“So, bad guys sometimes at least.” I looked Stefan in the eyes. “They came here too. They took Graves and Alistair.”

“I was meaning to get to that,” said Stefan scratching his head and looking around at what had been Djinn and Tonic.

“It doesn’t always look like this?” asked Courtney. “I mean you’re sort of at the wrong end of Colorado Boulevard and all.”

“No, it does not always look like this,” said Zayn hotly. “It is neat and tidy and there is never blood on the walls. We have an ‘A’ rating from the Los Angeles County Board of Health.” He drew himself up straighter and gave the demons a look as if daring them to contradict him.

“Sorry,” Madison said.

“The people who attacked us were wearing SWAT-type uniforms with the angel wings insignia.” I looked to Zayn for confirmation.

He answered with a tight-lipped nod. I left out the part about Alistair maybe dropping the protective spells to let them in.

Courtney’s hands balled into fists. “The same ones who attacked us at the coffee place.”

“Why would the good guys attack the good guys?” Courtney asked.

“The Closet,” said their brother with finality.

We all looked at Stefan. Well, I’d been looking at him since he walked in. Somehow until a few minutes ago and in my newly dead state, I seemed to have forgotten men existed as a deliciously separate gender. Now I in a rush of hormones I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, MEN!’

“You know about our Closet?” Zayn asked.

“Everyone knows about that,” he answered.

Madison pointed her smoothie in my direction. “You said they took two of your guys. Why didn’t they take you and him?”

“Zayn, my name is Zayn.”

“Right. Zayn. How come they left you guys?”

I shrugged. “No idea. But! And this is a big but...”

Courtney sniggered.

I ignored her saying confidently, “We are going to get them back. Aren’t we Zayn?”

His expression changed into, ‘We are going to *effing* what?’

“We are getting them back,” I said, emphasizing each word. “Today. You and me. Agoraphobia or no agoraphobia.”

Courtney made a face. “What does agoraphobia have to do with it?”

“You know what that means?”

“Sure,” she said. “A fear of open spaces.”

Now I made a face. “Smarty-pants. Anyway, not relevant to your current predicament. So, big brother...”

Stefan looked me in the eyes and for a second I forgot what I had been going to say.

“Yes?”

“Duh...”

“Yes?” he said again.

Awk! Get hold of yourself, Morgan. Remember, you are a cosmetic surgeon/psychologist/private detective/demon-slaying Earthbound spirit who may or may not have a weakness for brown eyes with gold flecks. Partners are depending on you for rescue and demon princesses need protecting.

“I can hide the girls,” I said.

All three demons looked pointedly at the giant hole in the wall.

“Upstairs,” I said. “There’s a safe room that I am pretty sure will screen Courtney and Madison from the angels. Maybe from Heaven itself.”

Madison started to speak, I cut her off. “Yes, it has WiFi and a bathroom.”

She smiled.

Stefan didn’t try to hide his surprise. “An Outpost with a heaven-proof room is not, I believe, a common thing.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I countered. “Djinn and Tonic is the only one I know and what matters is that it exists. Zayn, maybe you could load them up with snacks, some real food, water...”

“And Diet Coke?” Courtney said hopefully. “I would cry for a glass right now. No offense to this marvelous smoothie.”

Zayn looked like he had absolutely taken offense. “Coke? You want to drink that concoction of hell-spawned chemicals?”

“Diet Coke,” I cut in. “There’s a bunch in the pantry fridge.”

Zayn sputtered a bit more about poisonous brown fizzy drinks.

“What about you, Stefan? Are you staying?” Stefan the luscious with his perfectly shaped nostrils.

‘Please, please, please,’ I chanted silently.

He sketched a sweeping Old-World bow. “Many thanks and I mean that sincerely. When Courtney suggested we find you, I thought it was foolish. Why would an Earthbound care about the fate of demons?” He laid a hand on his sister’s arm before she could protest. “I see she is a good judge of character. I must try to help my father get to safety. Earthbound and Acolytes we can fight. An angel?” His voice caught and he said more quietly, “How do you fight an angel?”

