

Chapter 8

Mercy slid from underneath the comforter and got up to close the window. She was cold. The alarm clock read a-quarter-past-two in the morning. She'd only been asleep an hour, and fitfully at that. She watched for a moment as fog crept into the bay and began to veil dock lights shining along the edges of Point Loma. Then she closed the curtains and crawled back into bed, feeling a little anxious, pretending not to know why.

The party had been mostly a success. The kids played along with her admittedly lame attempts at entertainment. Bobbing for apples and pin-the-tale-on-the-donkey held little appeal for teens growing up in the information age, she knew. But sensing her recent fatigue, they stuck with the planned activities long enough to make her feel good about letting them watch horror flicks on the donated big-screen. They even restrained

their hormones sufficiently to allow her some reading time while she chaperoned them through a movie marathon of *The Exorcist* series. Best of all, Cindy text-messaged her just about the time Mercy had started to wonder why she hadn't made an appearance: *He asked me to dinner. Happy? ;)* it read.

Golden Boy on the basketball court. Good news, but not good enough to trump what Cindy had said earlier regarding Henry Whitmore: *We're a lot more serious than you realize...*

Meaning what exactly? To Mercy, it sounded ominous. No longer the separation of *'Henry feels this,'* or *'Henry thinks that,'* in her words. Instead, the more united *'we.'* Sleep was going to come slowly, if at all.

So she prayed. She didn't pray for herself (which always felt a little arrogant). She prayed for Cindy.

“Dear Lord, thank you for this day, another blessing in the life You continue to grant me. And thank You for the opportunity to bring a little hope and joy to Your children who see so little. Lord, please forgive me my sins, especially for lusting after the golden-haired statue of perfection at the basketball court today, and for leading Cindy into temptation with him; forgive me oh Lord, though admittedly I show little sign of remorse. But in all seriousness, Lord Jesus my savior, I ask with humbleness and gratitude that you continue to watch over her, especially now. Please show her, dear Lord, Henry's true nature; protect her from this wolf in sheep's clothing. And Lord, if I may be so bold, please turn a blind eye to whatever... indiscretions this gorgeous young man might employ in his attempts to win her away from Henry—and forgive me ahead of

time, oh Lord, for whatever guilty pleasure I might enjoy when Cindy tells me all the juicy details. Thank you Jesus. In your precious name I pray, Amen.”

Minutes later, her cell phone beeped to announce another text message from Cindy: *Had a blast. He is so hot! Details 2morrow. Luv ya!*

An answered prayer if there ever was one. Mercy turned the phone all the way off and closed her eyes. She fell asleep seconds later.

Chapter 9

“Sir, anything to drink?”

The flight attendant steals my attention from the ground 35,000 feet below.

“Yes, I’ll have a cabernet, and after, some coffee.”

Neither drink will be especially good, but possessing refined tastes doesn’t make me a snob. It’s the relaxed clarity I enjoy when mixing alcohol and caffeine that I’m after, not a culinary experience. The dichotomous buzz, a first-class window seat, and a nine hour flight ought to help me clarify what I’ll report at the annual Council meeting tomorrow.

Twenty-one members comprise the Council. Which makes one representative for every ten of the original 1st Generation, plus a special position, elected by the twenty, for the purpose of breaking ties during close votes.

There were the same number of leaders among the Watchers—our fathers—the two-hundred alpha angles who chose the exquisite warmth of a woman’s flesh over God’s favor. Their defiance earned them chains in the outer darkness; made their brides barren; bastardized their sons. Not that I hold it against them. I mean, there’s only *one* God, but there are *billions* of women.

It was the meeting that had me in New York when I got the call from Uri. In addition to my usual security-related responsibilities, I’d planned to urge the Council to amend the Codes. They rarely act on such requests, but then, the Son’s of Jared rarely kill five of us in as many months. ‘Rarely,’ as in, it’s never happened. Nor has one of our own ever betrayed us like Artemis did. Given the threat, I think the Council will be receptive to my amendments.

The captain announces that we’ve now reached our cruising altitude of 55,000 feet; airspeed is roughly five-hundred-and-fifty miles per hour; should be a smooth flight.

Translation:

You are now free to walk about the cabin. In the unlikely event of a water landing, the aircraft will ricochet off the salty swells like a tin of mints. Your seat cushion may be used a flotation device. Remember: the nearest exit might be behind you. Simply claw your way down the illuminated path in the floor to the first jagged breach you come upon in the fuselage.

Did I mention I don’t like to fly?

The stewardess brings me the cabernet. It’s actually not bad. But then, this is Air France.

“Ready for your coffee?”

I nod and she brings it and I review the events in Sarajevo again, trying to see all the angles, searching my memory for anything important I might have missed. I just can't shake the feeling that I'm overlooking something critical about Uri's involvement, or how close the SOJ hit men came to offing me. It's frustrating not having all the answers. Maybe if I'd kept Artemis alive and been able to question him, I'd have less to worry about. Or if I'd been able to interrogate one of the gunmen who ambushed me at Uri's club? But there was no time. The clock ticks even for those whose days *aren't* numbered.

“More wine sir?”

“Yes, please.”

The stewardess is paying me far more attention than the other passengers, so I keep my replies shorter than usual to discourage her. I want to stay with my thoughts for the time being. It's a rare indulgence.

Yesterday there were one-hundred-eighty living 1st Generation Nephilim. Today, with Artemis dead, one-seventy-nine. And we don't even know the name of a single SOJ member. We don't know where they meet, how they recruit, nothing. The Council's stance has always been defensive. The risk of turning the tables on the SOJ and hunting them, they argue, is that we'll risk exposing our existence to the average citizen, or at a minimum, pique the curiosity of their three-letter agencies who might see our people as a security risk. I've been told, in no uncertain terms, that the only time I should engage the enemy is to prevent an imminent attack. In other words, the Council thinks the key to our continued survival is to hide better. But I'm tired of reacting to the SOJ's tactics. I want to take the fight to them for a change—damn the Council's *stay-under-the-radar* approach.

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“Anything else I can do for you?”

The stewardess again. She’s either very determined to spend a night with me in New York, or something else is going on here. I took the usual precautions, of course (fake IDs, bogus but believable passport, veingel booking agent, blah, blah, blah), but lately the usual precautions are working as well as jerk-squirt-wipe-and-worry birth control does for Catholics.

“One more round of each,” I say, and that’s all I say, but now that I’m curious and taking a closer look at her, I’m forced to imagine what nibbling lightly around her belly button might do to the evil glint in her eye.

The corner of her mouth inclines ever so slightly, as if she’s bugged my inside voice. A grin? a leer? I break eye contact and pretend to be fascinated with the scenery outside the window.

Should I be surprised to see one of the engines beneath the right wing of this Boeing 747 seize up like an epileptic in a strobe lit skating rink? No, I shouldn’t be surprised—living, breathing anomaly that I am—but surprised I am. More so, as I watch second engine flame out.

The syringe empties its payload into my neck like a kamikaze bumble bee.

I’m still conscious, but I can’t move. Serves me right for making light of epilepsy. They must want me alive; for now—whoever they are. The stewardess, “Dahlia” it says on her name tag, leans in to whisper in my ear.

“Strangely, having just fucked you, I find myself still curious what you’re like in bed. Maybe next time, eh?”

Another announcement drowns out the sly comeback I can't voice anyway.

“Everyone should remain in their seats with their seatbelts securely fastened until the pilot turns off the fasten your seatbelt sign,” and then, almost as aside, “some of you may have noticed we're having a bit of trouble with the engines on the right side of the plane, but I've spoken with the captain and he wants me to assure you it's nothing serious. The Boeing 747 is equipped with four engines and can safely fly with just two of them.”

Translation:

If the other two engines fail, we're all going to die.

But now both engines purr back to life as if nothing was ever wrong with them, and polite golf spectator applause sounds throughout the cabin. Clearly the engine failure was just a distraction, and for the next eight hours Dahlia has her hands full wiping drool from my chin.

I have no idea how they plan to get me off the plane without arousing suspicion from airport security at LaGuardia International, and frankly, I'm curious as hell. It'll be a learning experience.

An op like this, in such a public place, just isn't the SOJ's style. They're probably the most secretive of all secret societies—Nephilim included, as evidenced by the respective number of results in a Google search for both keywords. Granted, any term that appears in the Bible is going to get indexed by the search engines; 'Nephilim' does, 'The Sons Of Jared' does not (no surprise given the SOJ's contributions to at least three major world religions' holy texts). I just can't understand why they'd want to risk the exposure entailed in removing me from a commercial jet on a stretcher.

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But here's Dahlia with another needle, and as she injects the mystery cocktail into my neck, it's clear I won't get to see how they pull this off, because I'll be asleep.

“We are now beginning our final descent...”

True, that.

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