

“And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought. But they did not prevail. Neither was a place found for them in heaven any longer. The great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil. And Satan, who deceived the whole world. They were cast to the Earth, and the Devil’s angels were cast out with him.”

REVELATION 12:7

PROLOGUE

The old man had lived on Elk Mountain for as long as anyone remembered. Hikers were always welcome to stop and share a cup of tea or a glass of goat's milk. When asked his name, the old man always said it was Ed. He never gave his last name.

It was fall and the Oregon mountains were splendid with color. The rains had started. The land was green and rich with life.

Ed woke by habit at five a.m. He never used a clock. He didn't own one. When a visitor once asked why, Ed said that he refused to be a slave to time. It was part of why Ed lived alone. He refused to be a slave to anything, or anyone.

On this particular morning Ed sat up and stretched and scratched himself. He shuffled to the stove, kindled the embers into a flame, and filled the tea pot with water. While it heated he pulled his britches and shirt on over his longjohns. He always wore longjohns to bed, winter and summer. Since he seldom washed, he smelled a lot like his goats.

Ed took the tin of tea from the cupboard. He was

running low and that made him frown. It meant he must make a trip to the lowlands. He only did that when he absolutely had to.

When the tea was ready Ed filled a cup and went outside. He liked to watch the sun rise. Dawn was his favorite time of day. Sunsets were nice but he loved the feeling of newness each sunrise brought, as if the world was starting fresh.

Ed walked to the overlook and gazed to the east. A golden crown bathed the sky with glorious light. He sipped and swallowed and was nearly startled by the sudden loud flutter of wings. Thinking that maybe one of the ravens that liked to visit his place had flown close over his head, he turned and received an even bigger shock.

Someone was standing next to him.

Ed blinked but the man was still there. A tall man with beautiful hair and a face as handsome as any face Ed had ever seen. The man wore a suit that seemed to shimmer in the morning light. His hands were clasped behind his back and he was gazing out over the valley with a look of contemplation. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Ed found his voice. "Mornin," he said for lack of anything better.

The tall man looked at Ed. His eyes were an astounding blue, bluer than the sky, bluer than the sea, bluer than any blue Ed knew. The stranger smiled, and his teeth were perfectly white and perfectly even and somehow a perfect match for his blue eyes. In a deep yet warm voice he said,

“How do you do, Ed Parks.”

Ed was dumbfounded. The man knew his last name. But that was impossible.

“Beautiful, is it not?”

“Eh?” Ed said, so confused he couldn’t collect his wits.

“Creation,” the perfect man said, with a sweep of his arm.

“I like the mornin’s,” Ed said. “They’re pretty.”

The man said something to himself, softly and reverently, in a language Ed had never heard. Almost musical, the words were, and pleasing to the ear.

“Would you care for some tea?”

The man did an odd thing. He bent and sniffed at Ed’s cup. “Tea,” he said.

“Yeah. I like Celestial brands the best. You ever had their Raspberry Cinnamon?”

“I have not had tea in a very long time.”

“Come have some, then.” Ed beckoned and went in. He opened the burlap curtains over the window and indicated the chair. “Take a seat. I’ll have it ready in a jiffy.”

“Thank you, Ed Parks.”

Ed found a cup but it needed washing. He dipped it in the bucket and then wiped it with his shirt. He set it on the table and brought the tea pot and carefully poured, aware that his guest watched everything he did with unusual interest. “There you go.”

The man used a finger and thumb to hold the cup by the handle and delicately raised it to his lips. He swallowed,

and closed his eyes, and after a few seconds he opened them and smiled and said, “Raspberry Cinnamon.”

Ed sat on his bunk. “What might your name be, if I’m not bein’ too nosy?”

“Michael.”

“Mike, eh? I had a cousin by that name. Him and me were close when we were boys. Then he went and died.”

“He drowned in the swimming hole at the quarry.”

Ed nearly dropped his cup. “How in hell do you know that?”

For an instant Michael’s face clouded over. “I know a great many things.”

“You know my last name. You know about my cousin. What are you, a government man?”

“Government?”

“Yeah. I’ve been expectin’ someone. I haven’t paid any taxes in nigh on forty years and I figured they’d come for me sooner or later.”

“I serve a higher calling than government.”

“What are you doin’ here, then?”

Michael set the cup down. “We have been searching for a special place. My advisors chose seven. I’ve visited each and I like this one best.”

“What’s so special about this place? Oregon ain’t much different from Washington or northern California.”

“The valley below,” Michael said. “There aren’t a lot of people, yet it is near two cities.”

“Medford and Grants Pass,” Ed said. “As cities go they’re

kind of dinky.”

“Dinky?”

“You know. Small.”

“All the better,” Michael said. “That, and other factors make this spot ideal for our school.” He stood and bestowed another of his dazzling smiles. “I thank you, Ed Parks, for the Raspberry Cinnamon.” He stepped to the front door and paused. “God is.”

“Excuse me?” Ed said, not sure he had heard right.

“The beauty of Creation is the handiwork of the Creator. You’ve spent your life admiring the painting and not the painter.”

“You sound like a parson.”

“The true and the real, Ed,” Michael said. “Never lose sight of them.” And he went out.

“Wait,” Ed said. “Don’t go yet.” He hustled outside and looked right and left but his visitor was nowhere in sight. “Where in the world?”

From overhead came the faint beating of wings.

Ed glanced up but there was only sky. Bewildered, he scratched his stubble and made a circuit of the cabin and the goat corral. The man was gone.

“I must be cracking up,” Ed said. He went back in and refilled his cup. For some reason his hands shook as he poured. He took deep breaths to steady himself and sat on his bunk to ponder.

A shadow filled the room.

Ed glanced up, and smiled. A tall figure was silhouetted

in the doorway. “You came back.”

“May I enter?” the figure asked.

“Sure, Mike---,” Ed said, and stopped. It wasn’t Mike. It was someone else, someone just as tall and as strikingly handsome, with hair the color of coal and dark eyes, eyes so dark they were black, yet as beautiful as Mike’s. His clothes were just as fine. The man smiled and his smile was as dazzling as Mike’s but there was something about it that made Ed think of the mouth of a shark.

“You’re not Mike.”

“No,” the new stranger said almost fiercely. “I’m not.”

“I’m Ed,” Ed said.

“You may call me...,” the man stopped and seemed to be thinking. He grinned and said, “Al.” He looked about him with an air of distaste and sniffed a few times. “You should cut off your nose to spite your face.”

“Why in hell would I want to do that?”

“In Hell all your senses are intact. To fully experience torment you must be fully aware.”

“Are you a parson too?”

“Oh, that’s delicious,” Al said. He had a wonderful laugh. Turning the chair, he straddled it. “Suppose we get to it, Edward. What did Michael and you talk about?”

“Sorry?”

Al draped his forearms across the back of the chair. “You need to focus.”

“Excuse me?”

“Circumstances have conspired to involve you in

something momentous. First Michael. Now me. I came because my minions reported that he visited you. I want to hear his words. His exact words.”

Ed resented the man’s attitude. “I don’t think I’ll tell you.”

“Yes,” Al said. “You will.”

“You’re awful uppity.”

Al sighed and straightened. “I warn you. I have little patience with fleshsacks. Believe me when I say I’m the last being in all of reality that you want mad at you.”

Ed bristled. He never did like to be threatened. “What I want, mister, is for you to leave.”

“Michael’s words.”

Ed stood up. He was too angry to be scared. “You don’t hear too well, do you? I want you out of my home and I want you out of my home now.”

“Even as fleshsacks go, you’re pathetic.”

“Stop callin’ me that. I don’t even know what it means.”

“It means you’re a living monument to ignorance masquerading as intelligent. Sadly, most of your kind are the same.”

“What in blazes are you talkin’ about?”

“If you had even a glimmer of intellect you’d tell me what I want to know and I’d be on my way. But very well. Since you won’t accede to my request, I’ll take my cue from Him, as you mortals would say. Do you remember Sodom and Gomorrah?”

“Those places in the Bible? What do they have to do with anything?”

“They were object lessons. So are your goats.”

Ed gave a start. “My goats? What about them?”

“Go see.”

Ed set down his cup and dashed out and around the cabin to the corral. “No,” he bleated. His head swam and his legs grew weak and he had to grip the rail to keep from falling.

All his goats were dead. They lay in grotesque heaps of hide and flesh, their bodies looking as if they had been ripped to ribbons.

“Smell that sweet fragrance?” Al said behind him. “Madame Bovary had the right idea.”

Ed fumbled at the gate and stumbled into the corral. He sank to his knees next to what was left of his prized buck. A horn had been snapped in half as if it were a pretzel. “How can this be?” He couldn’t comprehend how they had been killed so swiftly and so violently and yet they hadn’t let out a bleat of alarm or pain. He tenderly touched the dead goat’s head and got blood on his fingertips. “What could have done this?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Ed’s eyes filled with tears. He’d had some of them for more than ten years. He’d given them names; Arthur, Sophie, Mary, Elizabeth. They were more than pets, they were his friends. Rage seized him. He stood and turned and balled his bony fists. “This is your doin’.”

“I can not tell a lie,” Al said. “Technically, though, while all I have to do is snap my fingers and anything I want is

done for me, my minions aren't me."

"You killed them!" Ed screamed, and flew at him. Ed intended to punch him in the face but Al's hand shot out and steely fingers clamped on Ed's throat. Slowly, almost casually, Al lifted Ed off the ground.

"Pay attention, fleshsack. Tell me everything Michael said to you. Every single word. Every single syllable. Leave nothing out. If I sense you're trying to deceive me, what happened to your goats will be nothing compared to what will happen to you."

Ed could scarcely breathe. Gasping and wheezing, he kicked and pried at the man's fingers and managed to screech, "Who are you?" He thought of an even better question. "*What* are you?"

"I've been called many things in many lands. For now it amuses me to have you call me the Son of the Morning." Al set Ed down.

Ed's legs buckled and he pitched to his hands and knees. His throat where Al had touched it felt hot.

"About Michael?"

Sucking in air, Ed defiantly shook his head. "It'll be a cold day in Hell before I tell you."

"Care to bet?" Al said, and snapped his fingers.

Part One

The Gathering

*“I commanded in the very lowest parts,
that visible things should come down
from the invisible.”*

THE BOOK OF THE SECRETS OF ENOCH

Chapter 1

The white stretch limousine came south down Interstate 5 and took the Woodville exit. It stopped at a light, turned left on Depot Street, and crossed the railroad tracks. At the intersection it went straight, past the giant rooster, to the Stop sign. There it took a left. It cruised by *Cattleman's* and along the next block and into the parking lot next to the bank. Two well-dressed men climbed out. One carried a briefcase. They walked around the corner to *Patty's Reality*.

Inside, Patty Gibbs was daydreaming. She'd seen the limo go by and wondered who it could be. Whoever was in it must be rich, she imagined. She envied them. She'd always wanted to be rich but selling real estate in Woodville wasn't the way to do it and she didn't want to live anywhere else.

The door opened and in came the two men. She had her feet propped on her desk and dropped them so quickly, she smacked her heels and winced.

One of the men stayed by the door while the other came over and held out his hand. "How do you do, Ms. Gibbs. I'm Darien Wells. I would like to have a few words with

you, if I may.”

Patty noticed several things right away. First, his suit cost more than she made in a month. A *Newman's*, she bet, three thousand dollars if it was a deal. Second, he was good looking. His hair was longer than most men wore it, but on him it looked wonderful. Third, although it was summer and he had just come in from outdoors, his hand was surprisingly cool.

“No need to be so formal,” she said. “Have a chair.”

Darien Wells sat and placed the briefcase in his lap. He gazed about him with an air of interest. “You have a pleasant office.”

“It’s just a place where I hang my license,” Patty said. She glanced at the other one. He, too, wore a top of the line suit. His hands were clasped behind his back and he was staring off into space. “Who’s your friend?”

“My associate,” Darien said. “All our dealings will be through me. May we proceed?”

“Sure,” Patty said. “How can I help you?”

“I represent Mr. Peter Gabriel---”

“The singer?” Patty said excitedly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Peter Gabriel? You know, Sledgehammer, Don’t Give Up, Blood of Eden.”

Darien tilted his head, almost as if he were listening to something. “Oh. The Peter Gabriel that I represent isn’t a songwriter. Do you follow Business Weekly or keep up with the world of finance?”

“No,” Patty said, hiding her disappointment.

“Then perhaps you are unaware that Mr. Gabriel is an investment manager. Gabriel Securities is ranked in the top three in the world.”

Patty sat up. “Gabriel Securities?” she repeated. “Isn’t that the one that was in the news recently? Something about donating ten million dollars to the relief fund for the victims of Hurricane Selene.”

“The very same,” Darien said.

Patty was proud of herself. She often had the news on during dinner but mainly to catch the weather. “What can I do for you?”

Darien opened his briefcase and took out a folded newspaper and set it on her desk. He opened it and touched a finger to an item circled in ink. “I am here about this ad.”

Patty was flabbergasted. The paper was the *Woodville Press*. “Your Mr. Gabriel reads our newspaper?”

“Mr. Gabriel has assistants who read most everything,” Darien said. “This particular advertisement was brought to his attention. It is one of yours, yes?”

Patty looked again. Oh my God, she almost blurted. It *was* one of hers. “Yes.”

Darien picked up the paper and read the ad out loud. “For sale. Five thousand acres on Starvation Heights. The largest parcel in Southern Oregon in some time. Split zoning but may be rezoned with application. Electricity has been on property and can be restored. Well was drilled

but pump not installed. Needs septic approval.” He looked at her. “Has it been sold?”

“No,” Patty said. That particular property had been on the market for a year and a half. It was overpriced and the owner refused to make the few improvements that might induce a buyer to pay what he was asking.

“On behalf of Mr. Gabriel I would like to purchase it.”

“You would?” Patty slipped into what she liked to call her Make Money Mode. “It’s beautiful land. Lots of woods and hills and there’s a year-round creek. There are fish in the creek and deer and elk everywhere. Does Mr. Gabriel hunt or fish?”

“Mr. Gabriel doesn’t kill.....animals.”

“Oh. My first husband was a hunter. Turkey, deer, bear, you name it. He spent more time off with the boys than he did at home. Between you and me, I think it was an excuse for him to get blitzed with his buds and shoot at anything that moved.” Patty stopped, aware that Darien Wells was looking at her strangely. She coughed. “Which is neither here nor there.” Patty opened the top drawer. “This is the earnest agreement. It’s a standard form. The seller will want to know how much earnest money you intend to put down. I would suggest at least ten percent if you want to close the deal quickly.”

“We will pay the full amount up front.”

Patty thought of the outrageous amount the owner was asking. Most buyers would dicker and try to talk it down. Then she thought of how much her commission would be

on the full purchase price. “That will certainly simplify matters. Once the seller has a written offer, you’ll get the disclosure statement. I can assure you that the property is exactly as advertised but you might want to drive out and take a look at it for yourselves.” She was required to reluctantly add, “Under Oregon law Mr. Gabriel will have five business days to back out.”

“I very much doubt he will do so but I will take your suggestion and drive out to view the property.” Darien placed the form in his briefcase and closed it and stood. He held out his hand again. “It has been a pleasure, Ms. Gibbs.”

“It’s Patty, please,” Patty said.

The man by the door opened it and after Darien Wells walked out, he followed and shut the door behind them.

Patty sat back and said, “Well now.” This was turning out to be her lucky day. Swiveling her chair toward her computer, she opened the client file and reread it to be sure she was current on the property. As she clicked off she heard the door open.

The man who entered had black hair and a dazzling face and eyes so dark they were almost black. They glinted as if he wore contacts. His suit, his shoes, everything about him was immaculate. He made Patty think of those fashion models she saw on TV. His smile was radiant. Sauntering over, he bent and dumfounded her by doing a courtly bow. “Hello there, beautiful.”

“Good God,” Patty blurted.

The man laughed. "God is great, God is good, but where is He when babies are starving in Africa?" He eased into the chair and sniffed. "Is that Jasmine O' Lay you're wearing?"

Patty blushed. Perfume was her weakness. She could do without a weekly salon visit and she bought her clothes on discount, but when it came to perfume, she only bought the best.

"I completely understand," the man said. "You might have caught my Clive Christian?" He laughed again, and quoted the popular ad. "To wear it is to love it."

Patty had indeed caught an exquisite scent. She recalled reading that *Clive Christian* was the most expensive men's cologne on the planet.

"Kindred spirits, you and I," the man said. "But enough of us. On to business." He offered his hand. "Al Shayton, at your service."

Absently, Patty shook, and nearly jumped. His hand was so warm it was almost hot. "What can I do for you, Mr. Shayton?"

"It's what I can do for you, little lady," Shayton said. He reached under his jacket and produced a folded newspaper and placed it on her desk. Opening it, he tapped an item circled in red ink. "I represent Mara Enterprises. You might have heard of us. We're a worldwide conglomerate. And we are very much interested in buying the property you have listed on Starvation Heights." Shayton chuckled. "Quaint name, by the way."

"I don't believe it," Patty said.

“A lot of people don’t believe but that doesn’t make the Maker or his Adversary any less real.”

“Excuse me?”

“An in-joke,” Shayton said, and indulged in his easy and charming laugh. “So what do you say? Shall we get the ball rolling?”

“What I don’t believe, Mr. Shayton,” Patty said, “is that I’ve had two buyers for the same property in the span of five minutes. What are the odds?”

“You’ve sold the property, then?”

“Well, no,” Patty said. “But the other buyer just went to look at the property and when he returns I expect to close the deal.”

“Nothing is in writing yet?”

Patty shook her head.

“Well then, as we both know, under Oregon law unless it’s in writing the sale isn’t final. A verbal agreement isn’t enough.”

“The thing is,” Patty said, “the other buyer has agreed to pay the full amount the owner is asking. You can’t possibly do better than that.”

“But I can, dear lady,” Shayton said suavely. “I’m willing to pay double the asking price.”

An electric spark seemed to shoot through Patty from her head to her toes. “Are you serious?”

“Nearly always, even when I’m not. Perhaps you should give the seller a ring and ask which offer he prefers.”

Patty was seeing dollar signs in her head. She would

make more from this transaction than she usually earned in a year.

“The first buyer will be terribly disappointed.”

“Yes,” Al Shayton said, and laughed anew. “Isn’t that a shame?”

Chapter 2

The white stretch limosine turned onto Pine Street. Children were crossing and the driver braked at the light between the schools.

In the back seat Darien Wells stiffened. “Do you feel that, Ithurel?”

Next to him Ithurel raised his head and closed his eyes and after a few moments he said, “I feel it, Dariel.”

“It can’t be one of us.” Dariel glanced out the side and front windows and shifted in the seat to gaze out the back. “The presence is strong.”

“We weren’t warned they are here.”

“Perhaps our coming has drawn them,” Dariel said. “I’ll investigate.”

“You’re entrusted with the mission,” Ithurel said. “Permit me.”

Dariel looked at him.

“I know what you are thinking. I’ll look and report back and that is all.”

Dariel put his hand on Ithurel’s shoulder. “No matter what, you mustn’t engage the Adversary.”

“I won’t,” Ithurel promised.

Dariel nodded. To the driver he said, “Find a spot, Neriell.”

The light changed. The limo went another block and came abreast of a parking lot and the driver wheeled in and parked. To one side were tennis courts. To the other stood a church.

Ithurel opened his door.

“Go with God,” Dariel said.

“And you,” Ithurel dutifully echoed. He got out and shut the door and walked to the tennis courts. The courts weren’t in use. Beyond was a footbridge and a sign that read *Palmerton Park*. He walked toward the footbridge but veered into a stand of trees. Reaching out with his inner sense, he made sure that no humans were near and phased out of the spectrum of human vision. Shedding the illusion of human trappings, he assumed his celestial form.

Ithurel raised his glowing face to the sky, spread his powerful wings, and rose into the air. He circled once over the limo and saw Dariel looking up at him. With a nod he was off and in the blink of an eye he was above the real estate office of Patty Gibbs. The presence was so strong, it startled him. He alighted on the cornice, folded his arms and his wings, and waited.

Below him, humans went about their normal routines. He saw an old woman with a little dog dressed in a tiny garment identical to her jacket, and he smiled. He saw a jeep pull up in front of a bar and a man get out. A woman

came out of the bar and cast furtive glances and they kissed and hurried inside. At that he frowned.

The front door to the real estate office opened and out came the one Ithurel was waiting for. His eyes widened but he betrayed no other reaction. He spread his wings and followed the figure down the street and across an intersection and past a football field to East Evans Creek. The figure looked up at him and grinned and went into the thick vegetation that bordered it. The very next instant, Ithurel was no longer alone in the air above Woodville. “Satanail,” he said.

Satan gave a slight nod of his brilliant head. He was larger and brighter and his wings were longer and he was in every way grander. “Little angel,” he replied. “Have you kissed Michael’s feet today?”

Ithurel ignored the barb. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you think we wouldn’t know? Your precious Michael and I were so very close for so long that, as the fleshsacks like to say, I can read him like a book. I won’t let him do this.”

“God’s will be done. You can’t stop us.”

Satan sighed. “The bitter nectar you drink has clouded your mind.”

Although he knew better, Ithurel asked, “What bitter nectar?”

“Your blind obedience. In your youth and simplicity you fail to appreciate the greatest of our Maker’s gifts.”

“To the contrary. My adoration speaks for itself. And

you are a fine one to talk. The only creature in all creation that you adore is yourself.”

“This isn’t about me. Why don’t you use the gift you were given? Why don’t you exercise the most marvelous treasure of all next to life itself?”

“To which gift do you refer?”

“Free will.”

“Relative free will,” Ithurel amended. “And I use mine quite well, thank you.”

“Do you? Do you ever question? Do you ever wonder why the Creator places so much value on these miserable maggots?”

Ithruel raised his hand. “Do you think you can turn me with your gilded tongue? I may be younger but grant me my intellect and my faith.”

“What you are is a puppet on a string and that string, alas, is about to be severed.”

“Now you resort to threats?”

“Who is with you?” Satan asked.

Ithurel didn’t answer.

“They wouldn’t send someone so young on so important a mission. There must be others. Give me their names.”

“I must report this,” Ithurel announced.

Suddenly Satan was above him, his wings spread wide, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“You would dare?”

“I have dared things, little one, that would make you

weep,” Satan said with a trace of sadness. “Surely you realize what is at stake here? Or hasn’t Michael deemed to explain it?”

“We are told what we need to know.”

“Ah, yes. The angelic creed. *Occaeco devotum*. Permit me, then.” With a sweep of his arm, Satan encompassed the town and the valley. “You wouldn’t think it to look on this wretched speck, but you see below you the dawn of Armageddon.”

Ithurel was taken aback. Satan seemed sincere and yet he *was* Satan. “You try to deceive me again.”

“No, young one, I don’t. I almost wish that I were. Have you heard what use the land will be put to?”

“Yes.”

“So have we. Our spies are everywhere. And there can only be one reason for this new gambit. They are preparing for the End Times.”

“That doesn’t necessarily follow. With my own ears I heard Gabriel say that the purpose is to perfect our service as ministering angels.”

“Your devotion blinds you to their hidden agenda. And the folly of youth dooms you to extinction.”

“Again you threaten me.” Ithurel spread his wings. “I am not without skill.”

“Silly stripling,” Satan said. “You have but half a million human years under your wings while I was created shortly after your liege. I was one of the first,” he declared with pride. “Your paltry skill can’t rival mine.” He rose slightly

higher. “But I won’t taint my hands with your blood. I’ll let my underlings see to that.” He pointed at the woodland that bordered Evans Creek and crooked a finger.

Out of the vegetation streamed a black swarm. They shot into the air and separated and then they were over and below and around Ithurel. Hovering, they licked their thin lips and clicked their claws, their faces split in vicious grins.

“Imps,” Ithurel said, and repressed a shudder. The slimy sheen to their skin, the vertical pupils in their eyes, the rows of dagger-like teeth; they were alien to everything spiritual. With his innate ability he instantly knew how many there were. “Six hundred and sixty-six?”

“A little humor on my part,” Satan said, grinning. Two of the creatures, slightly larger than the rest, floated on either side of him. He patted one on the head. “Hideous, are they not?”

“That you consort with them is a testament to your depravity.”

“Everything has its purpose.”

Ithurel placed his hand on his sword. “Let me pass.”

“I’m afraid not,” Satan said. “It is best that I keep my presence here a secret a while longer. And now that I have stalled you long enough that whoever came with you is out of range and you can’t contact them, I can dispense with this conversation and your life.” He paused. “Any last words, stripling?”

“You, who were once accounted among the Sons of

God, can do this?”

Satan’s face clouded with anger. “I will do whatever I must to prevent them from ascending.”

“You presume to thwart our Maker?”

“So young and so beautiful and so naïve,” Satan said, “and so ripe a feast for my pets. Or have you forgotten that their favorite sustenance is angelic blood?” Satan turned to the large imp he had patted. “Take him.”

Ithurel barely had time to draw his sword before the imps were on him. He swung and cleaved half a dozen but scores more covered his armor and his legs and arms. He heaved and kicked and his arms and legs were free. With a sweep of his wings he was out of the black cloud and streaking to the east. The cloud swept after him. Over short distances imps were as fast as angels and in moments he was again surrounded and battling for his life. He slashed a black throat. He split a black head. He hacked limbs. All the while, the imps covering his armor clawed and rent.

For the first time in his life, Ithurel knew fear. There was only one sure way to slay an angel and the imps knew what it was. He smashed an imp that clung to his chest, cut another in half, but they were only two in a seething black cloud. He needed to break free, and quickly.

His sword wasn’t enough. Fortunately, it wasn’t his only weapon. He had his wings, each feather a blade harder than human steel yet as flexible and as light as paper.

Flaring both wings into curved scythes, Ithurel began to spin, moving faster, ever faster, until his body was a blur

and his wings ripped through imps faster than the imps could replace the slain. As they died they disincorporated and fell in black rain that dissolved before it reached the ground.

Most of the imps clinging to his armor were cast off. Most, but not all.

Ithurel rose above the black cloud and spread his wings to escape. It was then that his chest burst with pain and he looked down in horror to find that an imp had torn through his chest plate and his undergarment and was ripping through his flesh. There was a tearing sensation, an agony beyond agony, and the imp pulled out a bloody hand. Clutched in its claws was his heart.

Ithurel had time to raise his face to the heavens and to cry, "Creator!" Then his wings stopped beating and his body went limp.

The imps caught him before he could fall and were on him in a frenzy. The last of his armor was ripped off. There, in the air, they devoured him like piranha would a hapless human, tearing off mouthfuls of his angelic flesh and lapping thirstily at his blood. Within a span of a human minute there was nothing of him left.

Satan witnessed the grisly spectacle without expression. When it was over, he glided over to the large imp he had patted. A piece of flesh had stuck to the imp's chin and he flicked it off. "Your table manners are atrocious."

Satan raised his gaze to the firmament. "What is it the fleshsacks say? Oh, yes." He grinned. "First blood is ours."

Chapter 3

The property was everything that the real estate agent claimed. Dariel stood beside the stretch limo and watched a doe and fawn graze in a meadow that bordered the road. Butterflies flitted amid wildflowers and a squirrel perched on a limb in a spruce and chattered.

The driver got out. “Shouldn’t we have heard from him by now?”

“Ithurel will report back when he is ready,” Dariel said. “You must learn to cultivate patience, Neriël.”

“The human realm is dangerous. Many of our kind have perished here.”

Dariel thought of the friends he had lost. “You don’t need to remind me.” He closed his eyes and concentrated on the spirit circuit that angels used to communicate. He picked up nothing other than Neriël.

It’s as if we’re cut off from the rest of creation.

“Troubling,” Dariel conceded out loud. “Let’s return to Woodville.”

Very well.

Once in the back seat, Dariel closed his eyes again and

reached out with what humans would call his sixth sense.

Inherent in angels was the ability to be aware of the presence of other sentients. They could sense one another, sense archangels and other orders, as well as the Fallen. The older and more experienced the angel, the further their ability reached. They could sense humans although they had to concentrate much harder and the impressions weren't as strong. They couldn't sense animals.

Now and then, for reasons no one knew, their sense went askew and they were 'blind'. Such incidents never lasted long but they were another reason why the human world was so fraught with peril. On the human plane it was much easier for an angel to be taken by surprise.

Dariel reached out but again there was nothing except for Neriél's presence in the front seat. He didn't sense Ithurel. He didn't sense anything. It was disturbing. In Heaven he would feel a wonderful warmth from the presence of so many of his kind. Here, he felt a cold emptiness.

Do I come in with you? Neriél asked as he was parking the limo.

Dariel was about to say it wasn't necessary but then he remembered a cardinal angelic adage. In numbers there was strength. *Come along.*

Dariel could tell that something was different about Patty Gibbs. Her greeting wasn't as warm and after she bid him to take a seat she coughed a few times, as if building up to something. To prompt her he remarked, "The

property is everything you said it was. Mr. Gabriel will be more than pleased.”

“The thing is, you see” Patty said, and she coughed, “the situation has changed.”

“In what respect?”

“Another buyer has come forward.”

“I was here first,” Dariel said. “Surely that gives me prior consideration.”

“It would, except the other buyer upped the ante.”

“Pardon?” Dariel said. Sometimes human figures of speech baffled him.

“The other buyer is offering to pay double the asking price. I’ve been on the phone with the owner, and as you can imagine, he’s very interested.”

Dariel digested this. He thought of the presence he had felt after their last visit to her office, and now this. Added to Ithurel’s disappearance, they were ominous portents. “I see.”

“You sound disappointed and I don’t blame you. But you can see the position I’m in? As Mr. Shayton pointed out---.”

“Who?”

“Oh. Well, I guess there’s no harm in telling you now that I’ve let the cat out of the bag. Mr. Al Shayton is the other buyer. He represents---.”

“Mara Enterprises,” Dariel finished for her. In his head Neriell was saying, *The Fallen are on to us. We must leave and get word to Gabriel.*

“You’ve heard of them, then? I must say, both of you walking in my door on the same day is remarkable.”

“Unless it was by design.”

“Sorry?”

“You think the owner will accept their offer?”

“He’d be a fool not to, wouldn’t he?” Patty paused. “How badly does your Mr. Gabriel want this land?”

“He wants it very much.”

“Then perhaps you should find out how high he’s willing to go. We don’t have anything in writing yet although Mr. Shayton tried to pressure me into signing with him. I finally had to ask him to leave. I told him it wasn’t right to shut you out seeing as how you were here first.”

“That was kind of you.”

“Kind, schmind,” Patty said. “I want to be fair. What do you say? How soon can you get back to me with a counter offer?”

Dariel glanced at the clock on the wall. The human concept of time wasn’t the same as the angelic conception, and he had to take that into account. “Within the hour.”

“So soon? That’s fine. That’s very fine.” Patty smiled. “I’ll be here waiting.”

No sooner were they out the door than Neriël was in Dariel’s head.

The arch-deceiver, here? This is grave. Ithurel is no more or we would have heard from him. We must assume aspect and flee or we will share his fate.

The limo, Dariel thought.

Have them send an Ally to pick it up. Our lives are more important.

Dariel gazed at the empty sky. He reached out with his sense but felt nothing.

They should have used an Ally for these negotiations. Humans are better at dealing with humans.

Follow me, Dariel thought. He led the way down the block and into an alley. The moment they were out of sight of any humans, he phased and spread his wings and rose into the air. Neriell ascended to his side and they turned to depart.

Neriell stopped. “Do you smell that?”

Dariel sniffed and felt a spike of alarm. “Angelic blood,” he said.

They flew slowly to the north, sniffing as they went. Their sense of smell, like their eyesight and their hearing, was far beyond the range of human beings, just as their minds and their bodies possessed capabilities that humans lent them the aura of the supernatural.

They came to a field. Below, oblivious to their presence, young males in uniforms and helmets went into a crouch and rammed into one another and one of them threw a ball.

“There was a fight,” Neriell said. “They say Satan’s skill is second only to Michael’s.”

“I told Ithurel not to engage.”

“Maybe Satan left him no choice.”

“Or maybe Satan brought some of his minions.”

They looked warily about and flew on to a creek fringed by greenery.

“Whoever or whatever, they must be gone,” Neriel said.

Without warning, from out of the vegetation below rose a dark cloud that bristled with teeth and claws.

“Imps,” Dariel said.

“Four hundred and eleven,” Neriel automatically counted.

Dariel communicated mentally. *The Raphael-Phanuel defense*. It was taught in Advanced Tactics and named after the two archangels who first used it eons past, when, at the height of a battle, the pair had been cut off from the rest of their angelic host and were attacked by evil pawns of the Fallen.

Now, Dariel and Neriel drew their swords and faced one another. They spread their wings to their fullest and curled them so that they were effectively encased in a cocoon of feathered blades from their head to their feet. Only above and below could anything get at them.

The swarm closed.

Begin, Dariel thought, and they gripped the other’s free arm and began to spin. In a twinkling they and their wings were as a whirlwind.

It was doubtful any of the imps had ever heard of the Raphael-Phanuel gambit. It was doubtful it would have made a difference if they had. The imps only thought of one thing, to rip out angel hearts and drink angel blood.

Dariel felt the impact of imp bodies and heard their

cries as they disincorporated. He kept his eyes above and Neriell kept his eyes below. A black face appeared, teeth gaping wide, and Dariel thrust his sword through its mouth. Neriell thrust down at another. They spun and they thrust and they spun and they thrust and the imps in scores dashed against their whirling wings and were slaughtered.

Suddenly the impacts ceased and the cries died. Dariel went on spinning until he was certain there were no more. At his nod, they gradually slowed to a stop. Cautiously lowering their wings, they gazed about them.

The sky was empty.

“The Creator be praised,” Neriell said out loud in the angelic tongue.

“There’s no sign of Satan,” Dariel observed.

“Do you think he sicced them on us?”

“It is, as the humans would say, his style.” Dariel slid his sword into its sheath.

“And now we know what happened to Ithurel. We must add his name to the Wall of Remembrance.”

“First we get word to Gabriel.”

“To Heaven, then?”

“To Heaven,” Dariel said. They raised their faces to the celestial realm and shot into the atmosphere in twin golden streaks.

Behind and below, Satan rose from Palmerton Park and stared after them. “The simpletons.” With him were the two large imps.

“Assemble another swarm,” Satan directed. “The same number.” He waved his hand and the pair sped away.

Gliding toward a Little League diamond, Satan gazed out over Woodville and the surrounding valley. “Why here, of all places?” he wondered aloud. He gestured and said, “Abaddon.”

A streak of light flashed in from the east and Satan was joined by one of his lieutenants. “My lord and master?”

“Tell me, Abaddon. Am I not aware of all that transpires on Earth? Am I not the ruler of this world?”

Abaddon gave a slight bow. “You are, my lord. Even our Maker has admitted as much.”

“Yet they think to start this school of theirs under my very nose.”

“I will do all in my power to stop them,” Abaddon vowed, “as will all of your legions.”

“Don’t do too much,” Satan said.

“Master?”

“Give the impression that we are doing all we can but let them succeed.”

“I don’t understand.”

“All you need know for now,” Satan said, “is that the great and glorious Michael, in his self-righteous wisdom, is about to make a mistake that will turn the tide of this war in our favor.”

“All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of darkness are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness.”

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Chapter 4

Tyler Brighton was twelve when he saw the angel. He was taking the trash out and went around to the side of the house and there it was, in the act of phasing, as beautiful as a rainbow.

It was glowing and he saw it clearly. He saw its wings, saw eyes that seared him like lasers. He remembered being both scared to death and mesmerized. He couldn't scream. He couldn't run. Then the angel was gone and he stood there staring at the empty air and wondering what in the world had happened.

Tyler had put the trash bag in the bin and hurried back in to his mother. "I saw an angel, mom."

She was watching TV and hadn't even looked up. "That's nice."

"No. I did. The angel looked right at me."

His mother reluctantly tore her eyes from the TV. She'd placed her palm to his brow and said, "You don't have a fever."

"I'm not sick. I really saw it."

"Uh-huh." She'd sipped her whiskey and said, "Don't tell

anyone else, okay?”

“Why not?”

“They’ll think you’re crazy.”

And that was all she ever said. For Tyler’s part, he tried to forget about it but couldn’t. It stuck in his head. He thought about it a lot. If he wasn’t crazy---and he didn’t think he was---and if the angel was real, then that must mean the stuff that went with angels was real, too. Stuff like God and Heaven.

Tyler’s mother wasn’t religious. She liked her liquor and her TV and that was all. She didn’t like religious kooks, as she called them, and she knew better than to believe in fairy tales, as she called the Bible. She never once took him to church. She never once had him say his prayers.

Tyler’s uncle and aunt were different. Each summer his mother sent him to live with Uncle Boyce and Aunt Martha. They owned a small farm west of Eugene. He loved it there, loved the big farmhouse, his cousins, the animals, nature. It was so unlike city life in Portland. Every Sunday, without fail, they went to church. Every meal, without fail, they said grace. Every night, without fail, Aunt Martha had the children say their prayers.

Tyler knew they believed in God. He knew his aunt, in particular, was a big believer in angels. She had angel knickknacks all over and kept a large statue of an angel in a nook in the yard and had plaster angels on the window sills and paintings of angels on the walls.

So it was only natural that on his first visit to them after

the incident, Tyler told her. Aunt Martha didn't call him crazy. She listened patiently and then said, "You've been blessed."

"How do you mean?" Tyler had asked.

"Angels don't appear to just anyone. They only appear now and then, and when they do, it's always for a reason. Like in the Bible when they convey God's word or destroy the wicked." Aunt Martha had lovingly run her hand through his hair. "There's a reason the angel appeared to you, Tyler."

"What reason?"

"I wouldn't presume to say. It's between you and God. You have to figure it out yourself."

For months Tyler wrestled with what that meant. He finally decided to read the Bible, thinking that would give him some idea, but it didn't. Often in the Bible when an angel appeared, it was to give a message. But the angel he saw didn't say anything. All it did was look at him.

He prayed for the answer. He didn't usually pray except at the farm but he prayed about this, secretly, so his mother wouldn't know. His aunt and uncle said that God heard every prayer so he asked God what it meant and what he was supposed to do but he didn't get an answer and after a few months he stopped.

He knew that angels were real. He knew it with an unshakable conviction. But beyond that he didn't know any more than anyone else.

When he was eighteen his mother died. The liquor and

her bad diet caught up with her and her liver gave out and there was nothing the doctors could do. His uncle said not to hold it against her, that she had loved his father dearly and she was never the same after he left her for another woman.

Only eleven people came to the funeral.

Afterward, Tyler went home to a dark house. He didn't bother turning on the lights. He sat on the sofa and leaned back and closed his eyes. His stomach rumbled but he was too sad to eat. His mother hadn't been the best mom in the world but he'd loved her. He sat there a while, wondering what he was going to do with his life. He'd thought about going to college but now he needed to get a job.

Tyler opened his eyes and there the angel was, in the middle of the living room, hovering and glowing like before. He somehow knew it was the same angel. It smiled at him and said in a soft but deep voice, "I bid you greetings, Tyler Brighton. I am Samchiel."

That was how it began.

That was the night Tyler was asked to be an Ally.

For the next three months he was mentored by an old man named Zeke who came twice a week. Zeke had been an Ally for more than fifty years, and the Mentor Program, Tyler learned, was how new Allies were trained.

Then late on a Wednesday evening Tyler got done work at *Big Lots* and came home. He wasn't expecting his Mentor. He shut the door and turned and there Zeke was, in the rocking chair in the living room.

“The angels have need of you,”

“Need how?” Tyler asked.

“They want you to go to Woodville. Do you know where it is?”

“At the south end of the state, isn’t it?” Tyler recalled.

“Down near Medford somewhere.”

“Another Ally will pick you up in the morning and take you,” Zeke revealed. “But be warned. There’s great danger. You can refuse if you want. An Ally has the right to say no to a mission.”

“Will I get to see more angels?”

“You might and you might not. There’s no predicting.”

“Look out, Woodville,” Tyler said. “Here I come.”

Chapter 5

Kaitlyn Clark walked out of the convenience store and got in her car. She sipped the caffè mocha she'd bought, pulled out the dashboard cup holder, and carefully placed the cup in the plastic ring. She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror and grinned at the froth on her lips. Licking it off, she inserted the key.

The *Sport* purred to life and Kaitlyn wheeled out of the parking lot and down the street to the entrance ramp to I-84. She headed west. Another forty minutes and she would be in Portland.

Kaitlyn turned on the radio. It was tuned to 104.1. *The Fish* was her favorite Christian music station. *Forgiven* by Sanctus Real was playing and she sang along with the lyrics.

She didn't think to look in the rearview mirror again until she'd gone a quarter of a mile and when she did the black car was back there. Her gut balled into a knot. There was no doubt. She was being followed.

Kaitlyn wasn't surprised. She prayed for strength and courage and kept on driving.

Whoever was in the black car let the gap widen when the traffic was light and came within a few car lengths when it wasn't. They probably thought they were being clever.

Kaitlyn could do a better job of not being noticed. Then again, she reflected, maybe they wanted her to know she was being tailed. Fear was one of the Adversary's most potent weapons.

Kaitlyn put it from her mind for the time being. Whether human or otherwise, she doubted the enemy would do anything just yet. She listened to music and occasionally sang along, and shortly before nine a.m. spied Portland's skyline on the horizon.

The night before, she'd gone on-line and entered the address of her fellow Ally and printed the directions to get there. She didn't trust the GPS on her phone.

She took Exit 2 and turned right at Halsey Street. Within a few hundred feet she came to Thirty-ninth Avenue. She turned right and then left onto Sandy Boulevard. Another right at Twenty-eighth Avenue brought her to Wasco. Two more blocks and there he was, right where she had been told he would be. She lowered the passenger window as she pressed her foot to the brake.

The young man was standing on the corner with his backpack over his shoulder. He bent and smiled. "Hey," he said, and introduced himself. "Tyler Brighton."

"God be with you and in you," Kaitlyn returned.

Tyler slid in and tossed his backpack into the back seat

and fastened his seatbelt. As she pulled out he looked at her and kept on looking.

“What?” Kaitlyn said.

“I don’t know,” Tyler answered. “I was thinking you’d be older but you’re not much older than me.”

“Why did you assume that?”

“Zeke never said, is all.”

“Zeke Morton? He’s your Mentor?”

“Sam set me up with him.”

“Sam?”

“Samchiel. The angel who sponsored me.”

“You call your angel Sam?” Kaitlyn was appalled.

“Sure. What’s wrong with that?”

“I’d never presume to be so informal. Angels deserve more respect.”

“Sam doesn’t mind.”

Kaitlyn took her eyes off the road to say, “How do you know?”

“He’s never said he did.”

“Angels put up with a lot of our quirks,. How long have you been an Ally, anyway?”

“About three months.”

Kaitlyn hid her surprise. Three months wasn’t even enough time to learn all the basics. She wondered why the angels had picked him for a mission so early in his training. You?”

“Going on seven years.”

“That expensive suit you’re wearing, are you some kind of

businesswoman?”

Instead of replying, Kaitlyn asked, “How many missions have you been on, Mr. Brighton?”

“It’s Tyler. And this is my first.”

“Ah,” Kaitlyn said. It was as she expected.

“Ah what?”

“Just ah.”

Tyler stared.

“Something the matter?”

“You sound a little upset.”

“I’m sorry. Your inexperience is showing, and it worries me.” Kaitlyn negotiated traffic while keeping one eye to the rearview mirror.

“What did I do besides get in your car?”

“You didn’t ask the important question,” Kaitlyn said. “The question anyone with more experience would ask.”

“Which is what?”

“Is it safe?”

“Safe how?”

Kaitlyn glanced at him as she turned at an intersection. “Exactly how much do you know about the state of grace on this world?”

Tyler shrugged. “I guess I know as much as anyone.”

“Is that so?”

A Cajun and Grill Restaurant was on the right. Idly wondering what a Cajun eatery was doing in Portland, Kaitlyn pulled into the parking lot and into a space and turned off the engine. “We need to get a few things straight

or we won't last two days."

"Last as in working together?"

"Last as in breathing." Kaitlyn drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "Explain to me about the Fallen. Show me you were paying attention when Zeke instructed you."

"What is this? Zeke never said I'd be quizzed."

"I'm senior on this mission. You'll do as I say or you can get out right now."

"This isn't at all how I thought it would be."

"I'm waiting."

Tyler sighed and said, "The Fallen are the angels who rebelled against God. Satan and his bunch."

"How many fell? Be exact. Don't tell me you don't know because I was given the same lessons."

"A third of the host of Heaven."

"Be more exact."

"Geez." Tyler's brow creased. "One hundred and thirty three million and something. What difference does it make how many? A lot fell."

"It makes all the difference in the world. The Fallen are everywhere. There could be a thousand of them hovering over us right this minute and we wouldn't know it."

"So? They're forbidden to attack people?"

"Directly," Kaitlyn amended. "The Fallen can't pull out their swords and hack our heads off. But indirectly they certainly can and do attack us. Tell me how."

"The Fallen have allies of their own. Humans who work with them like we do with the angels."

“No, we work with the angels. The Serpents, as they’re called, work under the Fallen.”

“Whatever,” Tyler said.

“How else can the Fallen harm us?”

“Through the possessed,” Tyler recited. “Or through hellspawn. What’s the point of all this anyway?”

“The point is that the Adversary is on to us. The point is that we’re being followed. The point is that we don’t know by who or what. And the point is that if you don’t get your head out of your butt, we could be dead.”

Chapter 6

Tyler didn't believe her at first, not until he saw the black car for himself. They were on Interstate 5 heading south and had just passed the Portland city limits when he turned to her and said, "You're right. We're being tailed."

"Maybe now you'll take this seriously."

Tyler could tell she was considerably upset. "Whoever it is wouldn't really kill us, would they?" Even after Zeke's warnings, it seemed unreal.

"What about 'war' don't you understand?" Kaitlyn asked.

"Hey, now," Tyler said. He was growing peeved. "I know what war is. But---"

"There are no buts," Kaitlyn said. "It's us versus them. Or to be more precise, God versus Satan. Get it through your head that the other side will do anything to win. They have no scruples, no morals. They lie, they cheat, they seduce, pervert, distort, and, yes, kill."

"All right, all right, calm down," Tyler said. It had begun to dawn on him that his life might really and truly and actually be in danger.

“You’re green as grass,” Kaitlyn said.

“All this is new to me, yes, but I’m a fast learner.”

“I hope so.”

Tyler held his temper in check. He made another effort to be friendly by grinning and saying, “You know, for someone who’s supposed to be on the side of the angels, you’re a real hardass.”

“I’ve been at this longer. I’ve had bad things happen.” Kaitlyn didn’t elaborate. “When you’re an Ally, either you learn quick or you don’t survive.”

“What do we do about the Dupree?”

“The what?”

“The black car. That’s what kind it is.”

“Oh. I don’t know cars that well.”

Tyler almost responded that it was nice to hear she didn’t know everything but that might only annoy her more. “What’s SOP in a situation like this?”

“What’s what?”

“Standard Operating Procedure. What are we supposed to do?”

“We do as we’ve been told. We drive to Woodville and meet our contact and take it from there.” Kaitlyn nodded at the rearview mirror. “We don’t do anything about the Dupree unless they make a move on us.”

Tyler sat back and shook his head.

“What?”

“We let them follow us all the way there? We don’t try to shake them?”