

MISERERE

AN AUTUMN TALE

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TERESA FROHOCK

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SAN FRANCISCO

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*Dedicated to my husband
and best friend
Dick Frohock*

PART I

Haunted by ill angels only...

—Edgar Allan Poe

“Dream-Land”

CHAPTER ONE

woerld in the sabbatical year 5873

Night shadows deepened when Lucian extinguished the candle beside his bed. The cry from beyond his chamber ended too soon for him to determine its source. He sat on the edge of his mattress and listened for the noise to repeat itself. The hearth fire crackled. The blaze saturated the room with heat, but Catarina forbade open windows. His twin sister was always cold.

Sweat crawled through his hair. He dared not move; he had no desire to draw attention to himself. The seconds ticked into minutes, but Lucian remained still.

Listening.

Sounds drifted upward from the room beneath his chamber. A man laughed too loudly with a thin note of hysteria edging his mirth. The sound gave Lucian goose bumps.

Something—perhaps a vase or a mirror—shattered. Another peal of laughter clipped the air before indistinct voices murmured in approval.

Reaching for his cane in the half-light, Lucian stood and limped across the room. His knee was stiff with the premature arthritis afflicting his old wound, and when he first rose, he moved more like a man of eighty than one of forty. He despised his crippling infirmity,

and in his agitation, he turned the key with more violence than was necessary. It was a futile gesture; if his twin and her company wanted access to him, nothing so flimsy as a lock would stop them.

As he went to his chamber's sole window, he kept to the carpeted areas so the rugs would muffle the sound of his cane against the floor. Elaborate tapestries covered the marble walls with his sister's favorite hunt scene. Firelight distorted the images woven into the cloth, elongating the faces of the hunters and hounds into freakish mutations. The stag's eyes were almost human with their pleading, but there would be no mercy. The hunt was over. All that remained was death.

Lucian averted his gaze from the wall hangings as he passed his desk, piled with papers full of endless calculations. Books littered every flat surface, including the ottoman that squatted between two cushioned chairs by the hearth. He had only to ask and his every request was filled, but all the gifts in Woerld couldn't replace the life Catarina had stolen from him.

A prison, no matter how finely furnished, was still a prison. He reviled her house and all she stood for, but he had not tried to escape again. He had learned to fear his sister after his first failed attempt to leave her.

In spite of her edict, he went to the casement and pushed aside the heavy drapes to open the window over her sprawling gardens. The wide window-seat accommodated him comfortably, but his humor didn't improve with the cold breeze. Years of helpless rage slow-burned through his chest to rise like bile at the back of his throat.

On the opposite side of the city, the construction of the sprawling bastion for the Fallen Angel Mastema continued unabated. Dozens of fires illuminated the black stone turrets rising to meet the night. Girders stretched upward to the overcast sky, forming an open claw as if stone and steel could snatch the paradise the Celestial Court had denied the Fallen.

Lucian had no doubt Mastema would win a foothold in Woerld if Catarina's plans succeeded. Instead of searching for a site of power to hold back the Fallen, she perverted the teachings of the Citadel to calculate the appropriate longitude and latitude to find a weak Hell Gate in the city of Hadra.

The harsh northern provinces of Golan were isolated from the lower lands. Lucian was certain that Woerld's other religious fortresses were unaware of Mastema's temple; otherwise, they would have sent emissaries to assess the situation. Once they were assured of Catarina's goals, the various bastions would send their armies to stop her. Yet no word came from any of the three closest bastions: the Citadel, the Rabbinate, or the Mosque. The Hindu bastion of the Mandir, at the heart of Woerld, remained silent as well.

Of course, they had no way to know. Catarina was careful to mask her bastion's true intent from the general populace, and the city of Hadra, nestled deep within the Aldilan Mountains, was especially secluded from the rest of Woerld. His twin sat in the center of her intrigues like a great dark spider, spinning her web of deceit and growing her army.

Downstairs someone shrieked; one voice rose above the others in pleasure and pain. Catarina no longer hid her perversions but reveled in them and dared him to admonish her. She ignored his efforts to guide her from her chosen path. He had failed to keep her safe. He had failed them all.

Lucian swallowed his misery as the sky lightened with dawn. Doors slammed below him; Catarina's guests were taking their leave to sleep through the morning. He wished he could flee with them. He had to get out of the house, even for an hour, to some place undefiled by her corruption.

Lucian closed the window, careful to secure the latch. He had to calm himself before he went downstairs. If she sensed even the slightest resentment in his attitude, she would slam the doors shut on him. Today he feared he would go insane if he couldn't leave.

Rather than call his servant, who would no doubt bring the usual array of light indoor clothing, Lucian dressed himself. Although it was only autumn, Golan's northern winds had started to blow cold, so he chose his heaviest clothing and his boots. The merchants and priests knew him too well. Should he step inside a teahouse or church for too long, the proprietors would ask him to leave rather than risk Catarina's rage.

At his bedside table, he opened the drawer and removed his Psalter, wrapped in a silk scarf with faded crimson flowers. Other than his

father's signet ring, the scarf and book were the only possessions he maintained from his life before Hadra. He placed the scarf and Psalter in his breast pocket close to his heart.

With any luck, his sister would be in bed, exhausted from her night of debauchery, and he might slip out unnoticed. He opened the door to find a frightened manservant, who had been prepared to knock. The servant lowered his hand.

Lucian tightened his grip on his cane. "What does she want?"

Relieved, the man bowed twice before blurting, "She wants to see you. She's in the dining room." He hesitated, glancing up and down the hall. "If you please, sir," he whispered.

No, it doesn't please me. Not at all. He wouldn't send the trembling servant back to her with that message. She would have the old man beaten to death. Lucian gestured brusquely, and the man scurried ahead of him.

It took him several painful minutes to navigate the wide, marble staircase, and he made no attempt to hurry. As he reached the main floor, one of the maids stepped into the corridor beside the dining room door. Tears streaked the livid bruise forming on her cheek, and she wiped her nose with her apron. In spite of her distress, she lifted her long skirts and curtsied as he passed.

He entered the room to find his sister seated at the head of the table wearing nothing but a loosely tied dressing gown. The deep frown that pulled her full lips downward marred her beauty. A gold filigree pendant that depicted two ravens, their beaks locked in an obscene kiss, hung between her breasts, which were partially exposed by her open robe. Without acknowledging him, she pushed aside the report she had been reading and violently rang a small golden bell.

Three of her guards were in the room, each wearing a pendant with her raven seal, each guarding a different door. They didn't acknowledge Lucian and he ignored them.

Catarina's obsidian eyes locked on him. The bruised circles beneath her dark lashes deepened her gaze. She looked like a cadaver. "What took you so long?"

Her sharp tone reignited his anger. "I was delayed." He twirled his cane and thumped it on the floor, indicating his leg. "*Darling.*" A cobra couldn't have spat more venom into his endearment.

“Don’t mock me today, Lucian. I’m not in the mood.”

When are you ever? He clamped his teeth against the words. Antagonizing her was pointless. He wanted out, and he knew the game he had to play.

A shadow slid by on his left as his sister’s demon familiar, Cerberus, entered the room. The creature disguised itself as a large hound but fooled no one. His pallid flesh sported no fur; the large bat-like ears carried no canine resemblance. His talons clicked on the tiles as he moved to Catarina’s side. He appraised Lucian with cold, silver eyes and rolled his thick tongue over multiple rows of teeth to grin lewdly. Mercifully, he did not speak.

Now our little ménage à trois is complete, Lucian thought desperately.

His sister slammed the bell down and shrieked for her coffee. Lucian was gratified to see Cerberus and one of the guards recoil at her outburst. The door leading to the kitchens slammed open, and a young woman almost tripped over her skirts to get the tray to her mistress. There was only one cup alongside the urn. Lucian said nothing.

Catarina waved the girl away and served herself. Appeased, she sipped her drink with imperious calm, then said, “Close the door, Lucian. We need to talk.”

He pushed the door shut with his cane and took a seat at the foot of the table directly opposite her. She was beginning her assault early this morning. He had no doubt she intended to dole out his pain in slow increments today.

Cerberus went to his mistress and tugged the sash of her robe. She pushed him away and tightened her belt. At least Lucian wouldn’t be treated to one of their displays of affection this morning.

“Captain Speight tells me he has had some difficulty with you.” She shifted the pages and read from the report. “According to Speight, you’ve been warning priests, rabbis, and imams to move their congregations out of the city by mid-winter. You’ve also advised a bhikkhu and a brahmin to do the same.” She met his gaze evenly and tapped the report with a manicured nail. “Is this true?”

He presented no defense; he was guilty. The cities’ religious houses usually stood immune to Woerld’s political instabilities, but Catarina’s intercourse with the Fallen brought the churches and temples into the direct line of battle. Once Mastema’s temple was complete, she

would force the people of Hadra to worship the Fallen Angel and sacrifice those who refused on his altar.

“What are you trying to do?” Catarina asked. “Commit suicide by proxy?”

Better than dying by inches. To his left, a log popped against the hearth and sent a blaze of light up the chimney. The hissing fires were the only sound as they played their demented game to see who would break first.

“Answer me!” Her spittle flew across the captain’s report.

“Yes,” he said.

Whether she was shocked at his honesty or that he wanted to die, he had no idea, but she made no retort. Instead she sipped her coffee, and her hand shook slightly as she rattled the cup back to its saucer. Shunning Golan’s nasal dialect, she spoke to him in their native Walachian so the guards wouldn’t understand her next words. “*Good God, Lucian. Are you serious?*”

She must have seen the answer in his face, because she held her hand out to him, and he could have sworn the tears glittering in her eyes were heartfelt. “*Why do you wound me like this? You know I don’t want you hurt. If you were dead, I would be cut in half. You tear out my heart when you talk like this.*”

The cadence of her speech resurrected his nostalgia for the days when they had loved one another and lived in harmony. In the past she had cuddled him back to her graces with promises of familial love spoken in words remembered from their youth.

This morning was different. Whether it was his bad night or his worse morning, he felt nothing for her platitudes, not even regret for the love they had lost. Sometime in the night he had died, and he wasn’t sure he would ever live again. His misery complete, he was numb to her pleas.

“*I love you,*” she crooned, oblivious to his disregard for her manipulation. “*I don’t want to see you hurt again. You misunderstand—*”

“There’s been no misunderstanding, Cate. You’ve made your position clear,” he replied, speaking in Golanian. “You expect obedience from me. Absolute obedience.”

Her head rocked as if he had slapped her, and her eyes grew cold again. She leaned back in her chair. “Mastema has named me Seraph of his fortress.”

Now Lucian felt the blow of her words settle in his stomach as icy fear. If the Fallen Angel had claimed her as the high priestess of their warrior-prophets, her political influence in Hadra was assured. The ever-present fire roared, and a rivulet of sweat tickled his collar. “When?”

“Last night. And what is my first order of business as Seraph?” She clenched the pages of Speight’s report and threw them in Lucian’s direction. “My recalcitrant brother.” The paper wafted to the center of the table as ineffectual against him as her rage. “Let me be clear, Lucian. The only reason you’re still alive is because of me. If you continue your flagrant disobedience, even I won’t be able to plead your usefulness to our cause.”

“Are we finished, Cate?”

Cerberus pushed his head under Catarina’s hand, and she shoved him away. “Have I dismissed you?”

Lucian didn’t answer, but neither did he leave.

Another servant brought a tray laden with breakfast for his sister. The odor of the food nauseated Lucian.

“I’ve appointed Malachi Grusow as my Inquisitor. He assures me that our Katharoi will be prepared to march on the Citadel in the spring.”

Lucian looked down and picked an imaginary piece of lint from his pants so she would not see his scowl. *Katharoi*. She and Grusow demeaned the honorable title of the bastions’ warrior-priests by bestowing it on their ragtag army of mercenaries and cut-throats. A true Katharoi spent years training in martial and spiritual arts while the men in Catarina’s army were little more than ruffians who owned armor and sword.

“Grusow believes our spies within the Citadel are close to creating a schism within their ranks.” Catarina raked the tines of her fork across the slab of meat, and when blood rose to the surface, she smiled. “And Rachael is dying.”

A terrible pain filled Lucian’s chest, and his numbness fled before the familiar guilt that destroyed his nights. He’d betrayed Rachael with an act that could never be undone, but surely she wasn’t dying. The Citadel had other exorcists just as skilled as Lucian, and Rachael would have submitted herself to an exorcism; she had no choice. As

the Seraph's last heir, Rachael was all that stood between anarchy and unity within the Christian bastion's ranks.

Catarina's smile broadened. "When she's gone, there will be none to stand against you, and the Citadel will be defenseless against Mastema's legions."

She lies, he warned himself. *Half-truths and lies.*

Catarina buttered her bread. "Rachael never allowed anyone to cast out the Wyrms, and the demon has started to take her mind. She is lost in her prophecies. They say she dreams awake." Her glare held him until he lowered his eyes in shame.

"You're lying." He called her bluff, surprised at his even tone. "The Wyrms should have been adjured years ago."

"She allows no one to heal her, no one to touch her." Catarina picked through her food. "Someone she loved must have abused her trust."

Horror settled over his body, stealing his breath. Rachael could be stubborn and she would believe herself able to handle such a minor demon, but she was not an exorcist. If she had fought the creature for this long, it was entirely possible she had grown weary, and the Wyrms were most dangerous to those who dreamed. Lucian bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb to stop his tears. Not now, not here.

"Oh, please, Lucian, don't tell me you're still pining for your little whore. Your benevolent God left her in Hell to become a one-eyed, drooling monster lost in her dreams. The least you could do for yourself is bed someone who will recognize you in the morning."

"I left her there, not God."

"And you were right to do so." She slipped a bloody piece of meat to Cerberus. "She was in the way, an obstacle."

You were jealous of her. "I left her there in exchange for your freedom."

She shrugged, dismissing his sacrifices for her with that one banal movement.

"I left her there because of your lies!" The strength of his baritone rattled one of the guards. The man stepped forward.

Startled, Catarina almost dropped the sliver of flesh in her hand. "Never raise your voice to me."

Lucian rose so fast that he unbalanced his chair. The air around him

darkened and crackled. He was rewarded by the fear in his sister's eyes.

Cerberus' muzzle snapped as he jerked his head in Lucian's direction. "Have a care, Lucian," the demon said, his silver eyes narrowing.

"Don't make us subdue you, brother." His twin reached over to rest her hand on Cerberus' broad forehead.

Her guards waited on Catarina's word. Everyone knew the eventual outcome of the tableau; it had been enacted enough times in this house. Lucian might be more powerful, but she held the tactical advantage with the demon and her guards. When he had fought them in the past, she'd called on her followers to restrain him. She wouldn't hesitate to do so again.

They both knew it.

Lucian simply didn't care anymore.

"You're strong, Lucian, but you're not invincible. Now stop your tantrum and sit down. We have more to discuss."

In his agitation, he gripped his cane until his hand ached. He examined the woman before him and felt nothing but revulsion.

"Damn it, Lucian, I said sit down."

For this callous bitch, he had sacrificed Rachael, only to remain locked in battle against his twin until there was nothing left inside him but ice and apathy. His heart lay quiet now, cold as sorrow, dry as hate. Lucian turned and walked away from her.

"Where are you going?"

He heard her chair scrape the floor as she stood. He jerked the door open. The maid he had passed earlier fled down the corridor.

"Lucian? Answer me!"

Cerberus spoke in the background. Lucian neither heard nor cared what the demon directed. He slammed the heavy dining room door hard enough to shake the frame.

She was still calling his name as he grabbed his mantle from the hook in the foyer. He emerged into a day as gray as his mood. Another of her guards attempted to impede his way. Lucian shoved past him and reached the wide avenue before the soldier recovered himself. A note of panic edged his twin's voice as she called after him. Lucian didn't stop. If she wanted to make him pay later then let her; he would lie down and take it because he had purchased his pain.

And the price had been dear.

Lucian stepped off the residential avenue catering to Hadra's elite and followed a shortcut the servants used. Smoke from the construction fires hazed the skyline and curled around the battlements of the city's walls. Ash coated the streets and the populace, shrouding their prosaic lives in gray. Mastema's fortress sucked the life from Hadra and its inhabitants, turning the city into an open crypt.

At the next street, he hurried across during a gap in the traffic and stepped into a narrow alley. From the shadows, he watched a line of draft horses pull wagons filled with slabs of marble in a cumbersome procession, their hooves pounding the cobblestones in a solemn dirge.

Two of his sister's soldiers emerged on the other side of the street. They looked over the crowds and temple traffic then apparently decided to search their side of the road first. One man jogged off to the left and the other went right. Lucian turned and waded through the alley's muck; he'd evaded them. For now.

He soon reached the commercial district where vendors hawked their wares and customers haggled over prices beneath ragged awnings. The walkways were congested to avoid wagons. The market crowd raised a cloud of dust and noise rivaled only by the clamor of the temple construction.

A cold wind gusted into his face as he left the alley and shouldered his way into the mass of bodies. Far ahead, he glimpsed a woman with hair the hue of sunlit autumn fields, and he almost cried out Rachael's name. The woman turned; she wasn't Rachael, but a pale replica. A sparrow imitating a phoenix. He passed her without a second look, chiding himself for a fool.

He stepped into another alley to lose himself in the winding paths between the stone buildings. Entrapped by the city's walls, he had explored every garret and undercroft of Hadra in hopes of finding an escape route. The days had dragged into years; his dreams of leaving faded to nightmares of captivity. His only recompense was learning to evade his twin's guards by disappearing into the labyrinth of alleys leading deep into Hadra's decaying heart.

The buildings became more dilapidated, the streets dirtier, and the people more furtive as he moved east toward the slums. His fine, ermine-lined mantle and sturdy clothes marked him as an outsider, but none dared to impede his journey. Lepers were greeted with more

enthusiasm than Lucian Negru, because where he walked, his sister's soldiers were soon to follow.

Lucian stopped in front of a small church nestled between two leaning tenements. He'd walked this route many times, but he couldn't recall ever seeing the simple crosses on the doors. Now that she was Seraph, Catarina would waste no time in shutting down the various houses of worship to force them into her cult for Mastema. This lonely church would burn with the rest.

His leg was on fire from his walk, and he needed to sit. Perhaps he could warn the priest to take his congregation from the city. If he could save one of them, he might be able to justify the pain of the last sixteen years.

The street was strangely empty. Only a dirty yellow dog rooted amongst the trash three buildings down. Even the animal didn't mark Lucian's presence. It was as if he had died and become a ghost in his sister's city.

He was a corpse in need of a grave.

The chapel door was unlocked and he entered the sanctuary where only eight rows of pews stood between the entrance and the pulpit. After he genuflected to the humble wooden cross at the altar, he took a seat on the back row. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, resting in the silence.

His thoughts drifted and for one mad moment, he half-expected to feel Rachael's hair touch his cheek. If he was very still, he was sure he could summon her memory and breathe life into her shadow, making her real and whole again. She had always known where to find him when he was troubled. It was her habit to lean over his shoulder and press her lips against his ear. *Come away*, she would whisper. *Come away with me*.

Lucian was so lost in his reverie he didn't hear anyone enter the room, so he was startled when a hand clasped his shoulder. Terrified one of Catarina's guards had found him, he jerked upright only to see knuckles gnarled with arthritis.

The old priest's smile faltered momentarily. "I've seen a dead man's eyes that looked like yours. What makes you so weary, son?"

Lucian dropped his gaze; there weren't enough days before them to spin his tale.

"Aren't you Lucian Negru?"

The old man's voice exhibited no condemnation, but Lucian didn't want to hear the contempt that would follow his answer. "I'm sorry. I just needed to rest. I'll leave."

Genuine alarm passed across the man's features. "No, no, you shall not. All are welcome in God's house, especially those who are called prophet. You are Katharos, are you not?" The old man imbued the title of Woerld's warrior-prophets with a reverence Lucian hadn't heard in years.

"Was. I was once a Katharos."

The priest patted him on the shoulder. "Did God rescind His calling and send you home to Earth?" The old man's lively green eyes shined with compassion. "You *are* Katharos; that power can never be taken from you."

"I was banned from the Citadel many years ago. I've lost my power."

The priest shook his head. "Your power comes from God, not the Citadel. So long as God's throne stands, then so does your power. You've just lost your way. We all get a little lost from time to time." The priest sat sideways on the pew in front of Lucian, turning so they could talk face to face. "What troubles you that you wear your misery for Woerld to see?"

Tears burned Lucian's eyes and he forced them down; why should he weep for a woman already lost to him? When he felt he could trust his voice, he said, "What if I told you about... an evil man who betrayed the woman he loved to save his sister's soul?"

"Is this man truly evil or does he just think himself so?"

"Once upon a time, he was selfish and wicked."

"And now?"

"He's sorry for the suffering he brought to her."

Minutes passed with the priest considering Lucian's sincerity as if it was a jewel to be bartered. Not since he had lived at the Citadel had he watched someone so thoroughly study his words for their truth.

The priest asked, "What if this selfish, wicked man, who is now sorry, was presented with an opportunity to amend his grievous act? Would this man take such an opportunity?"

"Please don't mock me."

"I'm not mocking you, son. I'm asking you a question. Would you take the opportunity?"

Lucian searched the old man's face and found only kindness. He

had not been the recipient of benevolence in so long he wasn't sure how to respond. "An opportunity?"

"Nothing more. Nothing more can be promised, just the chance to see if she'll forgive you. Would you take that opportunity?"

He didn't hesitate. "With both hands." He waited for the priest to render a proverb about good intentions being the first step toward redemption.

Instead, the chapel door opened and one of the slum's dirty waifs slid inside to scurry to the priest. "The soldiers have come, Father Matt."

"Good boy, Jamie." He reached inside the folds of his cassock to find a coin and tossed it to the child. "Go out the back way. Be careful not to be seen."

The boy vanished with the same ease with which he had appeared. The priest pulled himself to his feet and patted Lucian's hand absently.

The sound of horses in the street choked Lucian with terror. He had been a fool, and now he'd endangered everyone who had seen him here, including the kind priest. "Do you have a side entrance?" He couldn't be sure, but he thought the old man winked at him.

"I thought you wanted an opportunity." Without another word, the priest turned and walked toward the altar.

"I don't think you understand." Lucian rose and followed him as quickly as he could, trying desperately to keep the telltale thump of his cane quiet against the rough wood floor. "I only need for them to find me on the street so they don't connect me to this church."

"They're going to burn it anyway, son. You have no control over them." He went behind the altar and opened a low door, which was all but invisible against the dark paneling. "I dream, you know."

And those that dream, prophesy. Lucian had once desired those dreams simply because they denoted power, but that talent had been denied to him. He did not dream; he did not prophesy; he could not see the truth in another's words. Those were Rachael's talents.

Stunned, Lucian stared at the old man. "You were Katharos?"

"Am, son. I am Katharos, just as you are Katharos. It's not a coat you can take on and off at will. God remains on His throne so we are Katharoi. Mastema might win the battle, but that dark angel has yet to win the war." Father Matt stooped to pass through the low

doorway and disappear into the darkness. The priest's face reappeared suddenly. "Don't dawdle, Lucian."

Lucian followed and found himself on a wooden stairwell where he could almost stand straight. Father Matt was waiting three steps below.

"Pull it closed and latch it." The priest mimed pulling the door shut. When Lucian obeyed, they were plunged into suffocating blackness.

Father Matt grunted softly. "Well, isn't that the wickedness of it? It's the first trick they teach us and it's the first one we forget." The priest stopped talking abruptly as a small yellow globe formed in the palm of his hand. The ball of light strengthened until it acquired the soft luminosity of several candles revealing Father Matt's delighted features. "There we are!" He held his soul-light before him. "You've thrown the bolt on the door? Good. Come on, we haven't much time."

Lucian followed him down the stairs into the sepulcher beneath the church. "If you are Katharos, then why are you not at the Citadel?"

"Not all of God's warriors in Woerld fight with magic and sword. Some of us have more traditional callings. Now hush or they'll hear us." He led Lucian past alcoves lined with bones, skulls staring wide-eyed into the shadows. Rats scattered before Father Matt's soul-light and then closed over the men's wake like a rippling brown pool.

They wound their way deep into the vault until Lucian was so lost he doubted he could find his way out alone. The priest slowed, examining the floor as he kicked aside the slower rats. The beasts squealed like old women vying for vegetable scraps at the city's waste heap.

Father Matt grunted in victory. He went to the wall, unceremoniously shoving skulls, femurs, and finger bones aside. Opening a trunk that had been hidden by the bones, the priest removed an iron bar and leather sack with a thick strap. He handed the heavy pack to Lucian before he rammed the heel of the bar into a slot in the floor. His face reddened with effort as he slid a metal panel aside to reveal a ladder descending into darkness.

He gauged Lucian's bad leg and shook his head. "I'm sorry for you, son. You'll have to find it in yourself to get down there."

Lucian took one look before he stepped back from the rank odor of rust and mold flowing out of the darkness. He had no chance of

escaping his sister's guards on foot, especially through damp caverns. This was a cruel joke. "Are you mad? You expect me to crawl into that hole and go where?"

"I thought you wanted an opportunity, or are you still looking for an easier way?" The priest's voice turned as frigid as the air flowing out of the pit. "Perhaps you would rather crawl back to your sister and throw yourself to her mercy."

A pit of ice opened in his stomach at the thought of Catarina's rage. Suffering upon suffering would result from his walking out on her this morning.

"I thought so." The priest held the little ball of light up before Lucian's fearful eyes. "The light comes from our souls, Lucian, and you know by my light that I am Katharos, because the Fallen can't make light—"

"They only steal it," Lucian whispered.

"Yes! You're remembering, son. I dream and the Lord has spoken to me. I have done everything that's been commanded. You have enough food in your pack to get you through the caverns and deep into the Wasteland if you're frugal. In the caverns, follow the right-hand path at all times. No matter how they twist and turn, never deviate from the right-hand tunnels. You'll find your way out."

Father Matt took Lucian's free hand and passed his soul-light to hover over the younger man's palm. "They might find you if you use your own magic. Go with as much speed as you can, because once my light dies, you'll know they've wrung the truth from me."

Chilled, Lucian looked into the old man's steady gaze where there was no fear, only cold resolve. "I don't have your courage."

"You lost it when your heart turned to stone." The priest leaned forward and tapped Lucian's chest twice. "Find the heart of flesh that still beats within you. There lies your courage."

Another draft of air blew out of the hole. All his life, Lucian had calculated his every decision, factored every coefficient, every possible outcome, but now there was no time. Did exchanging one black hole for another really matter? At least this way, his dying was in his own hands, and there was a slim chance that he could right a terrible wrong. Before he could change his mind, Lucian lowered himself to the edge of the hole and released Father Matt's light down into the

darkness. The rusting ladder ended about twenty feet down.

“Come with me.” He threw the pack over his shoulder.

“I’m eighty-six, boy. I’ll only slow you down, and you’ll be slow enough on your own.” He blessed the younger man quickly. “God goes with you. He’s a much stronger ally.”

Lucian took a long time descending the damp ladder, but eventually found his feet on solid ground. He looked up when the priest called his name one more time.

A long slender object fell toward him, and he thought perhaps it was another cane. Unprepared for the weight of it, he almost dropped it. It was a Citadel sword; the hilt bore the Greek letter Omega embracing the Alpha, and though he didn’t draw the blade, he was sure the inscription, *Ut unum sint*, was etched in the steel.

That they may be one.

“John Shea remains as the Citadel’s Seraph,” Matthew called down. “Take the blade to him, and you tell John Shea that Matthew Kellogg did what was right in the end.”

At the mention of John’s name, the sword felt heavier. Lucian tried to imagine facing John again after all these years. The only image he could summon was the look of John’s grief when he had discovered Lucian’s treason sixteen years ago.

Lucian shoved his anxiety aside; he would have to face them all eventually. He looked up. “I will, Matthew, I swear it.” Lucian couldn’t see the priest’s face, but the silhouette of Matthew’s head nodded before he disappeared. “I won’t forget you,” he whispered.

Lucian rubbed the rust from his palms onto his pants and took up his cane. Above him, the sound of metal screamed against stone, and then silence. His way back was sealed from him forever.



Judging by the growth of his new beard, he had been in the darkness for five, maybe six days when Father Matt’s light flickered. Lucian had known something was wrong with the old man hours ago when Matthew’s soul-light deepened to the color of urine. Now it went out briefly before glowing back to life only to darken again like a dying firefly.

“Oh, God, please take him quickly. Don’t let him suffer.” His whisper echoed down the branching tunnels as he stood mesmerized by the flickering soul-light before him. Automatically he touched his heart and drew comfort from the presence of his Psalter.

And please don’t let me be next, he prayed selfishly.

The priest’s light faded before it burst into a shower of sparks. When the last ember faded, Lucian was immersed in blackness.

In the eternal night of those caverns, the steady drip of water resumed, filling the quiet. From somewhere behind him, he heard the hesitant click of claws against the stone floor. The rats were returning with the darkness.

He held his palm up, but hesitated to say the prayer that would bring his own soul-light into existence. He had no idea how far he had come, and as he walked through the long hours in the dark, he often felt he was moving in a large circle. If he used a small magic, then his sister and her council might not sense his presence, but there were no guarantees.

More rats joined the first few, their squeaks multiplying as they sensed their prey’s vulnerability. Before his panic could overwhelm him, he prayed and was rewarded with a spark that burned brighter as he charged it with his life-fire.

He turned on the rats and they fell back, tumbling over one another in a black-brown sea of fur, teeth, and tails. He backed away from them; when they continued to retreat from his soul-light, Lucian turned and began walking again.

With the death of the priest behind him, he moved faster. If Matthew had talked, then Catarina’s guards would soon be on his heels, and he had no desire to be dragged back to his sister. She had already promised that if he tried to escape her again she would give him a chance to experience Christ’s Passion in excruciating detail.

Though his pace quickened and he rested only when he couldn’t walk another step, he guessed it was still three more days before pale sunlight began to push against the darkness. He found himself steadily moving uphill, and the rats fell back to the caverns behind him. Craving daylight more than food or water, Lucian didn’t sleep and rested little as his eyes gradually adjusted to the ever-increasing brightness. The air became fresher and dryer as he emerged from the

depths of Woerld to find himself on a ledge where he could look out over the Wasteland.

The tunnels had spiraled and he had indeed followed a circular path. Approximately thirteen leagues away, Hadra lay to his left, belching smoke and death into the air. Stretching out before him were thousands of acres of blighted wood and sour magic left over from the War of the Great Schism.

The War between the Katharoi and the Fallen had lasted six years and involved every religious bastion on Woerld. The Zoroastrian bastion had been destroyed along with the country of Norbeh, and the reverberations had carried over into Earth's time to create a devastating conflict there. John claimed the very Gates of Heaven had shuddered when the Katharoi's forces summoned their magic to clash with the Fallen's hoards.

Both sides left nothing but destruction in their wakes. Trees bleached of color reached for the sunlight with their bare limbs creaking against one another, dry as bones. Soil blackened with long burns of desolate ground flowed like stretch marks between the forests and abandoned towns.

But the sky was blue.

A clear crystalline blue.

The sun glowed, and he realized it was rising.

The sun was rising.

Lucian leaned on his cane and wept.

He had an opportunity.

Nothing more.

But for now, that was enough.

CHAPTER TWO

earth—present day

The bright lights of Ferrell's Dance Studio faded when twelve-year-old Lindsay Richardson turned the corner to step into the shadows of Watlington Street. Shaggy trees, thick with kudzu and poison ivy, deepened the twilight where the forest ran adjacent to the road. The woods crept toward the asphalt to eclipse the three neat brick homes across the road. Leaves whispered to the ground when a mild breeze rattled limbs heavy with vines.

Normally, the sound of cars speeding less than a block away were loud, but tonight the swampy woods muffled the drone of engines. Even the mouth-watering smells from the neighboring restaurants were strangely subdued. Lindsay's sneakers jarred against the odd silence as she stomped home. She didn't notice the lack of sound; she only heard the pounding of her older brother Peter's tennis shoes hitting the pavement behind her.

When Peter called her name again, she set her jaw and walked faster until her ponytail swung violently and her gym bag rapped her hip. *Jerk*. She hated the tears stinging her eyes; she had never been so humiliated. It just wasn't fair. She'd practiced all week on her second position. In spite of her efforts, Mrs. Ferrell accused Lindsay

of looking like a dead bird. Again.

The mirror behind the ballet barre had reflected the other girls' glee when Mrs. Ferrell allowed her outstretched arm to sag comically. She chastised Lindsay for her lack of practice in front of the entire group. It wouldn't take long for that to get around, not with Melissa Kent watching Lindsay's downfall with hungry eyes. Half the school probably knew by now. Melissa yapped on her cell phone as she walked out of class, and Lindsay heard her name followed by a giggle.

Yet the worst part had been her older brother sitting in a chair by the wall, watching the entire demonstration. Her pride in having a family member stay and watch her practice had crumbled into horror when Peter laughed out loud.

Lindsay kicked a can into the ditch and swiped a tear from her burning cheek. Her dad already said dance classes were a waste of time and money on a klutz like her. This just proved his point. Lindsay hoped he was drunk when she got home, even though his jibes were more vicious; at least then, she could pretend it was the booze talking and not her dad.

"Come on, Lyn, hold up!" Peter's hand touched her shoulder, and Lindsay whirled on him.

"Thanks. A lot." Lindsay shoved him; he barely moved. Why did she have to be so small? "I didn't laugh at you when you fumbled at Tuesday's game and cost the team a point."

"Seven points," he said.

Another renegade tear slipped past her defenses and she bit her lip. God, couldn't she get anything right? Her dad was right, she was stupid.

Peter sighed and brushed the tear from her chin. "Lyn, it wasn't that big of a deal."

Lindsay's left eye narrowed as she glared at him. How could he say such a thing?

Peter said, "I wasn't laughing at you. It was Mrs. Ferrell that was so funny. When she flopped into that weird position, she looked just like a dead bird with her bug eyes and pointy nose." Peter snickered at the memory then sobered when Lindsay didn't smile back. "Jeez, Lyn, you're twelve going on twenty. You really take yourself too seriously."

She was not going to let him put this back on her. "Everybody

thought you were laughing at me. That's how it looked, Pete."

He sighed and raked his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, okay? I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Lindsay slid the purple band away from her cornsilk white hair, then gathered her hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. In the past, when Peter's laughter had been aimed at her, he wouldn't stop teasing her. He wasn't ragging her now. His eyes, the same pale blue as hers, were earnest and no smile turned the corner of his lips.

"Hey, listen," he said as he straightened and raised his right hand, "I swear I will never laugh at you in front of your friends again. Even when faced with fowl old ladies. No pun intended." He winked at her. "Well, maybe a little one."

"Don't make fun, Pete. It's going to be all over school. And you know Dad is going to find out. He plays golf with Melissa's dad, and oh, shit." She couldn't do anything right for him as it was and now the teasing would never end. She looked for another can to kick.

"Come on, Lyn, you're tougher than that! Don't let that bitch Melissa screw with your head. You're better than her." Pete's eyes lit up. "Hey, I got an idea. We'll tell Dad that it was really her that did the funky bird."

She sighed and answered her brother. "We're not going to do that." She could just imagine the hurt in her mother's eyes if she found out Lindsay had lied about someone else. No, maybe Peter was right. She was tough enough to deal with Melissa, but she'd do it on her own terms.

"So." He shrugged. "Are we good, Lyn?"

She scuffed the asphalt with her shoe and looked up at him. She never could stay mad at Pete for long. "Yeah, we're good."

He held out his fist and she touched knuckles with him, their private sign of peace. Peter put his arm around her and turned her toward home. As she fell into step beside him, she glanced into the woods where an odd red glow pulsed in the twilight.

At first, she thought someone was playing with a laser, but the light didn't waver or move erratically. The illumination widened to the size and shape of a door. She stopped walking and Peter halted beside her. He frowned at the light.

"What do you think it is?" Lindsay asked.

“Aliens?”

“Jeez, Pete, be real.” She would have given him one of her most withering looks if only she could have taken her eyes off the hypnotic light.

Entranced, Lindsay watched the beam expand until it ascended from the ground to the sky. The glow shimmered like heat waves rising from summer roads, but the October evening carried a chill that promised an early frost. Her mom had even made her pack her winter coat and gloves for the walk home.

Lindsay examined the Veil. *And where did that word come from?* It did look like a veil, though... a red veil...

The eerie quiet prevailed.

The Veil shimmered and the swampy woods of Watlington Street disappeared. On the other side of the red haze was a forest with old trees. She saw a huge gray rock covered in lichen, and a man who dozed with his head tilted back against the stone. His sword lay across his lap and shone with a pale luminance. She made out a cane and a pack beside him.

She thought the moonlight enabled her to see him so clearly. When she looked harder, she saw that the radiance didn’t descend to him from above but rose up from within him. Though his appearance was rough, his face was serene in sleep, and rather than fear, she felt drawn to him.

Peter murmured, “Wow, it’s like another world.”

“Yeah,” Lindsay said, but Peter was saying it wrong. It was really ‘Woerld.’ She shivered in the cool air.

“Oh, man, that’s one cool looking horse.”

Lindsay had no idea what her brother was talking about. “What horse?”

“The gray, Lyn. Can’t you see it? It’s dappled gray with a black mane and tail. It has one blue eye and one brown eye and it’s looking at somebody walking in the dark.”

How could he know all that about a horse in the night? Stepping closer to the red curtain...

... *Crimson Veil*, her mind whispered...

Lindsay peered into the darkness; she saw no horse, no one walking. The supernatural silence drained the life from their surroundings.

She reached out and gripped Peter's hand. Neither of them noticed the Veil inch closer to them in the deepening gloom until it was too late.

Pete dragged Lindsay's hand backward, but her terror overwhelmed her and she stood rooted to the spot. The light rushed forward and the Veil swept over them. It was like getting sucked under a wave. She gasped for air. Peter's hand clenched hers until she thought her fingers would break.

The street faded to black then burst into a blinding white brilliance before the world she knew vanished. A deep whine filled her head, soft and changing in pitch like tractor-trailers zooming on an interstate, but nothing as metallic as machinery. This noise erupted from things alive.

Alive but best not seen.

Peter looked over his shoulder with wide eyes and held on to her. Both Watlington Street and the forest where the man slept were shaded red. She and Peter were carried deep into the Veil. She had no control over her destination; she couldn't go back, only forward.

She'd felt sick like this when her mom lost control of their car in an ice storm. The world became a blur. All she could do was hold on and hope for the best. She and Peter stood in the eye of a hurricane where, instead of thunder and rain, another world eddied around them. Yet she never lost sight of the sleeping man. Somehow she knew if she could get to him, he'd know what to do.

Shadows deepened in the Veil. Out of the corner of her eye, Lindsay caught flashes of movement. The shadows turned into dark canine shapes running beside them. She tried to turn. Peter jerked her closer to him and held her tight. More of the dogs flitted by them and Peter paled. Pushing her backward as hard as he could, his mouth formed a word: *Run*.

What was he thinking? She couldn't run; she was at the mercy of whatever force pulled her. Unable to focus on the danger he saw, she reached for him. He didn't wait. Peter disappeared into the red mist. The dogs ran past her to pursue her brother deeper into the Veil.

Sick with dread, she screamed his name only to have her voice swallowed by a rising wind. Then she was whirling through the Veil. Her gym bag slipped off her shoulder to land near the sleeping man. He stirred but didn't wake.

Subtle changes in the air pressure signaled her exit from the Veil

and her ears popped painfully. Another force wrenched her past the man. Reality frayed, threads pulled from a tapestry. The dead, white trees faded into a wraithlike mist. Lindsay stumbled through the cold fog to trip and land in a pile of ash.

She choked from the acidic dust flying into her nose and throat. Coughing, she scrambled to her feet and looked around. The man and the forest were gone. Stifling her fear, she tried to calm herself enough to think. Less than a minute had passed from the time the Veil swept over her and Peter. Even if the man was gone, Peter couldn't be far.

"Peter?" she whispered. A cold wind lifted the loose grit and swirled dust clouds in the semi-dark. The land surrounding her was flat with rock formations jutting out of the darkness. In the distance, mountains lined the horizon, and a volcano belched smoke and fire into the sky. Rivulets of lava poured like bloody tears down the mountainside. Lindsay's mouth went dry. God, what was this place? She raised her voice. "Hey, Pete!"

He didn't answer.

Her heart beat so fast she wondered if she was having a heart attack. *Okay, don't panic. Everything is going to be all right.* Panic set in nevertheless. She should look for Peter, but she couldn't make her legs move.

The ground beneath her feet gave a low, ugly rumble. Moans vibrated in the dank air and a group of people emerged from the dusk. A hidden force seemed to tether the lumbering mass of bodies together, prodding them onward, their joints twisted and bowed beneath its pull. As they neared, light erupted overhead and the group was illuminated in a photoflash moment.

Their heads twisted in her direction as if the weight of their skulls were too great for their necks. Parchment flesh clung to their bones and their vacant stares chilled her to her bones.

One of the men stopped walking to retch violently. "Water," he croaked through cracked lips.

She thought she saw the vomit wiggle as she backed away from him. "I'm sorry," she managed to whisper.

"Stupid girl." He swayed unsteadily.

A sob, such a small sound in that great expanse of misery, scratched her already sore throat. She stepped just out of his reach. Oh, God,

she just had to find Peter and get home. Please, God. “Please? What is this place?”

He opened his mouth but could only gurgle as he doubled over in a spasm. Another flash of light punctuated the semi-darkness and he lifted his head. In his gaping maw she saw worms chew the back of his throat.

A nasty squeak burped through her lips, gaining momentum, growing to a wail. Pressing her fists to her mouth did nothing to stop the sound and Lindsay’s screams ravaged the night.



Heart punching against his ribs, Lucian awakened with a child’s shrieks echoing in his ears. He drew Matthew’s sword with his left hand and stood to survey the low mist hanging over the forest. Deep, rocky gullies sheared away on either side of the hill where he camped. The terrain made good cover for both the hunters and the hunted.

It was only a matter of time before Catarina’s guards located him. Last night, he could have sworn he heard soldiers and horses. Whether it was his sister’s men or a haunting from the dissonant magic of the Wasteland, he did not know.

The War of the Great Schism had turned the country of Norbeh into a wilderness unfit for habitation, and the Wasteland’s fractured spells confused his senses. Four days had passed since his emergence from the caverns; instead of relief, he felt more exposed. During his long nights he realized his terror of the unknown would break him long before Catarina had her opportunity.

A flicker of light caught his eye and he turned. This was no haunting from the Wasteland’s fractured spells but illumination from the Crimson Veil. On the other side of the Veil, he saw an asphalt street and three brick houses standing in a row, each with neatly maintained yards. He didn’t have time to wonder about the purpose of the poles connected with heavy cables before the Veil closed. The houses wavered and dissipated from sight, and Lucian forgot everything when he saw a bright blue and green bag on the ground.

A foundling.

Lucian stared at the bag in disbelief. It couldn’t be a foundling,

not for someone like him. Only those with the highest integrity were selected by God to foster the Citadel's next generation of warriors. He wouldn't be so blessed as to draw a foundling through the Veil.

She is here. He had heard her voice, and he knew without a doubt it was a girl. Those weren't things he would know about another Katharos's foundling.

He used his cane to snag the bag's straps and lifted it within easy reach. Inside he found a skirt made of stiff lace, slippers, a heavy coat, and a pink cell phone. He replaced everything except the phone, which he held with all the reverence of a holy relic. He had once seen such a device when another Katharos's foundling passed through the Veil; John showed him how to use the phone and the dangers that accompanied it.

Dangerous or not, the phone in his hand could be his only clue to his foundling's whereabouts. The girl might be pictured in the display, or he might find one of Hell's denizens struggling for a way out of Hell and into Woerld through the tiny screen. Only the most minor demons would seek escape through a device such as this, and Lucian had once been the finest exorcist at the Citadel. He wouldn't be cowed by such a trivial foe.

On Earth the foundling would use the device for remote communication, but on Woerld the qualities of ownership and communication manifested differently. The machine should still be bound closely enough to his foundling to show her physical location. He flipped the phone open with a flick of his wrist and narrowed his eyes to better see the tiny screen.

Static filled the display before solidifying to show the image of a girl standing in Hell. Her fists were pressed to her face and her eyes were wide with terror at the soul before her. The soul reached out to grab her. The girl twisted and stumbled out of his reach. She turned to do the most dangerous thing she could by running blindly into the shadows.

Lucian closed the phone; his breath quickened. He concentrated on the resonance of magic around him. After several seconds, a buzzing sensation traveled up his arms. The weak reverberation of a broken Hell Gate grew stronger then faded again.

Had she passed through the Veil anywhere but within the

Wasteland, her journey would have ended beside him. The child must have slipped through the nearby Hell Gate where evil waited to take the unwary or inexperienced, especially those foundlings new to Woerld.

Lucian could save her, but it would mean opening the Hell Gate. To use so much force would automatically inform Catarina of his approximate location. Even someone as dense as Speight would feel the surge of power and the parting of worlds. Everything he had sacrificed, everything Father Matt had sacrificed, would be for nothing.

Don't dawdle.

Startled by the sound of the old priest's words, Lucian looked over his shoulder, half-expecting to see Father Matt standing beside him. He was alone.

"You don't understand—" He stopped talking. Good God, he was going insane.

To open the Hell Gate would be a breach of his covenant with the Citadel to never manipulate the Gates again. Taking the pledge was the lone reason he had left the Citadel alive and, until this day, he had never considered breaking his oath. If he violated his covenant, he would have to stand trial to answer for his recidivism. His exile would be revoked, and he would face a death sentence.

A foundling, Lucian, drawn to your light and allowed through the Veil by God's hand, Matthew's voice chided. Will you let her become like Rachael? A one-eyed, drooling monster lost in dreams?

His sister's mocking words sounded no gentler in the old priest's voice. Lucian pressed the phone to his lips. Real or imagined, Matthew's words were true. Lucian couldn't let the child die, even if it meant giving himself over to the Citadel courts. He had squandered his life, but the foundling deserved her chance to live. Perhaps this was the opportunity Matthew had offered, for what better way to make restitution to Rachael than to save another from the fate she had suffered?

He pocketed the cell phone, closed his eyes, and tried to remember the Psalm to open the way between Woerld and Hell. Yet all he could recall was standing with Rachael the last time he held her. When he'd stroked her cheek to soothe her, she turned her face to press her

lips against his palm. He almost stopped, almost took her back to the Citadel on some pretense, but his pride and his sister had set his course.

Lucian snapped free of the memory and opened his eyes. The words wouldn't come. Panicked, he tried to clear his mind. If he delayed too long, the time could slip, extending the girl's torment in Hell without a second passing in Woerld.

While inhaling the rotted air of the Wasteland, he caught the faintest whiff of clover. Rachael always smelled of sunshine, clover, and some sweet musky scent all her own. He touched his Psalter, wrapped in the scarf she had once wound through her hair.

Lucian had not prayed since his exile, but this request wasn't for him. He hoped God would hear him for the child's sake. "Please, God, help me remember."

The only words he recalled belonged to Rachael: *John doesn't think I'm ready for the Gates*. She had been breathless and impatient. Always impatient was his Rachael and it would prove her undoing.

The memories he'd evaded for the last sixteen years floated to the surface, and this time, Lucian didn't stop the recollections. Let them come. Let him remember. If he intended to face Rachael, he must stop running from his past.

His fingers tightened around his cane. "Psalm 20," Lucian whispered to the dawn. That was it. They had used Psalm 20 to open the Gate, and Rachael never lost her focus. Neither of them ever lost their focus. It would be their triumph; it would be their ruin.

"The Lord answer me in the day of trouble. The Lord..." He couldn't recall the rest of the Psalm. What if he could no longer command the Gates? What if God no longer answered his call? He, who had once guided her so confidently, couldn't remember the next words in his anxiety. Clearing his throat, he stilled his nerves and began again, recalling once more the musky scent of her skin.

"The Lord answer me in the day of trouble! The name of the god of Jacob protect me!" *Yes! Yes! That was it!* He was no longer sure to whom he prayed, the God of Jacob or Rachael. "May he send me help from the sanctuary, and give me support from Zion. May he remember all my offerings and regard with favor my sacrifices."

The hesitancy fled his voice and peace filled him. He felt for the

spatial ripple in time as he chanted. “May he grant me my heart’s desire, and fulfill all my plans. May the Lord fulfill all my petitions.”

The words flowed back into his mind as easily as the unseen strength allowing him to channel this greater power. Humbled by the force filling him, he sensed a give in the air and knew the Gate was close to obeying his command.

His baritone thundered through the Wasteland, and he spread his arms wide, feeling Woerld give. “I shall rise and stand upright. O Lord; answer me when I call.” On the final word, he rapped his cane against the earth, a rush of air rippled around him, Woerld fell away, and he was alive again.

CHAPTER THREE

cross creek

A flame swelled and receded behind the dirty hurricane glass surrounding a thick gray candle. Its light illuminated a dusty dresser and black cobwebs wafting from the ceiling. On a rickety nightstand, another candle cast shadows around the dying boy and the scarred, one-eyed woman occupying the austere room.

Rachael pulled her rocking chair closer to the bed and peeled back the blood-soaked quilt. She narrowed her left eye as she frowned at the youth. Pink bubbles formed at the corner of his lips where his skin had been ripped. She'd stitched him up as best as she could, but there were too many wounds, too much lost blood. The boy's eyes were open slits, dull with death. She was sure he didn't see her. Perhaps that was just as well.

She wiped her fingers on the tail of her filthy shirt and picked up the stack of cards she'd found in his wallet. An identification card contained his name and address—Peter Richardson, 909 Country Club Drive, Taylorsville, North Carolina—and a fingerprint beside his smiling picture. The boy's library card was next then his social security card.

A thin headache threaded its way into her brain. She rubbed the black patch over her right eye. This was her fault. It didn't matter

whether he was attacked within the Veil or in Woerld. He was her foundling, and she should have sensed his coming so she could be there to help him.

She was slipping. A tendril of fear burrowed into her heart; she killed it before it could take root. Fools whined.

Peter closed his eyes and his chest rose and fell as he slept. She placed the cards on the table and settled back in her rocker, the creak of wood against wood the only sound above the wind. Rachael remembered her own pain when Caleb had brought her out of Hell. Sleep had been her only escape; deep, dreamless sleep where her agony couldn't touch her. Lulled by the rocker's smooth motion and the warmth of the room, Rachael's thoughts drifted in the semi-dark. Her mind wandered into a dream where she dreamed herself back on Earth.

She was eleven years old again and running through the field behind her father's house. A rusty pick-up truck obscured by kudzu and weeds loomed out of the twilight. Her hip bumped the fender before she could swerve. Rachael caught her scream before it fled her lips. She left a bloody handprint on the hood as she passed.

A quick glimpse showed her father following her at a dead run. He was only a few yards behind her. Pale blonde hair stood in stark contrast to his red, furious face, but Rachael only saw the bloodied ax that he carried. From the open windows of their farmhouse, the radio blared. Her father grinned and Mick Jagger growled a song about a man with railroad spike driven through his head.

Rachael ran toward a strange crimson fog. She cringed when her tennis shoes hit the boards that covered the old well, but the wood held. For her. Seconds later, her father crossed the same boards. A resounding crack drowned the chorus of the song.

She heard the crash and looked back, but the field was blurred by the red haze so like the blood that covered her. Suddenly someone grabbed her and she screamed. She stumbled into John's arms hard enough to drag them both to their knees.

Her father's cries rang through the Veil. *Rae-baby, you come on over here and help your daddy now.* From the depths of the well where he'd fallen, his voice echoed strangely into Woerld. *Rae? Get daddy a rope. Baby? I know you're there.* There was a splash and a panicked groan.

Goddamnit, Rae, you quit fucking around and get your ass over here! Right now!

Rachael turned to John, but he was gone, and she was in Lucian's arms. He spoke her name with a voice like thunder and silenced her father's pleas. With a touch, he drove her demons into the night and made her safe. She reached for him; he slipped away, swallowed by a mist.

A mighty wind dispersed the fog to reveal a city of death where the gale shrieked through empty buildings. Lucian stood before her, his dark eyes ruined with grief, a blaze of white marring the black of his hair. He leaned upon a cane and called her name. She was drenched in blood, only now it was her own. She thrust her crimson hands forward, her life pooling at her feet.

I can't make it stop, she said as a fly whined past her face.

Peter's final whistling breath woke her with a start, and her dream dissipated into the night with a little boy's soul.

Rachael leaned forward. "Peter?" She rubbed his hand between her palms. "Come on, Peter." She pulled the blanket off his body and listened for his heartbeat. Silence. The room blurred and her throat burned. She choked her tears down. Weeping wouldn't bring him back. The dead never came back.

"Hey, you tried. You really tried." Rachael smoothed his hair and kissed his cheeks. "I'm sorry." Sorry for him and for herself. "I'm so sorry." Her first foundling and he'd died before they could know one another. She reached over the headboard and took down the rosary hanging on the wall then wound the beads around his broken hands.

The quiet house echoed her loneliness as she knelt beside him. After rummaging through her exhausted brain, she settled on the Lord's Prayer and recited the verses by rote. She remained still for a few minutes after she finished, resting her head against the mattress.

On the floor beside the nightstand leg, a piece of paper caught her eye, and she reached down to pick it up. The photograph must have slid out of Peter's wallet. Rachael stood and carried the picture to the candlelight. Two young people posed on a beach, laughing at the camera. The boy was Peter in the not-so-distant past; the girl was obviously a very close relation, possibly a sister.

How happy they looked. Rachael tried to remember if she'd ever

laughed with such wild abandon but no memory would come. A tear wept through the stone of her heart; she swept it away before it could weaken her.

A fresh drop of blood splashed across the photo, landing on Peter's face. Rachael examined the red blotch in wonder. When she dabbed her nose, blood smeared across the back of her hand. The headache returned and rammed into her skull with the riveting agony of a spike through her temple. She screamed in surprise and anger. Fire snarled her synapses, driving her thoughts like quicksilver before the beast in her head.

Somewhere a Katharos opened a Gate between Woerld and Hell.

Her brain burned with cold as the Wyrms surged from the abyss of her soul. The demon seized her distraction and scratched against the back of her mind, a cadaverous fingernail scraping against a tomb. She started her Psalm of protection: *'I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me...'*

The Wyrms flinched back.

This was nothing. She could control it.

The body on the bed sat up.

"Rigor mortis," she murmured, but she knew the corpse was too warm for rigor.

Peter's head turned toward her and his eyes shot open.

Or not. She continued the Psalm through parched lips. "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord."

The temperature in the room dropped until her breath misted before her in a cloud of white. Her fear raised beads of sweat to her upper lip. The air was oppressive in spite of the cold, a dark heaviness settled on the room, and the Wyrms uncoiled in her brain. The creature sought a vein, an artery, a canal to its birth; the Psalm held the demon back. For now.

"Save her," Peter croaked, the stitches on his cheek ripping open his flesh again. The air in front of his mouth did not turn white. No warmth in his lungs; the dead didn't breathe.

She glanced at the rosary. Peter's skin didn't burn so the boy's spirit had returned, nothing more. Had there been another foundling with him? The girl in the picture?

"...in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying," her

hoarse whisper broke the stillness.

“Lyn... Lyn.” The remnant of Peter’s hand started to jerk within the rosary. “Save—” The corpse gagged horribly.

A thin stream of smoke began to smolder where the rosary touched his flesh. There was a sudden change in the pitch of Peter’s voice as the minor Possessors surged forward, seeking a body to command. The boy’s mouth worked. A shrill cacophony erupted from his throat, each voice striving to be heard one over the other through his dead lips.

Certain her head would explode, she shut her eye. Her hands shook as the Wyrms fought for control of the body they shared. “...my soul refuses to be comforted...”

The Gate closed against the shadows rushing out.

“Leave us alone!” The hellish chorus vomited from Peter’s lips. His flesh burned.

The Possessors receded, clawing to remain in Woerld before they were sucked back into Hell. Shadows dry as October spiders skittered into the corners of the room. The Wyrms withdrew to the recesses of her soul where the demon would await its next opportunity. Peter’s body flopped back to the bed and twitched before it resumed the illusion of sleep that was death.

Half blind from the sweat pouring into her good eye, Rachael staggered to the window and threw it open. Cool night air washed her face. Vomit slipped through her lips before she could lean over the sill where she retched until she thought she would see her lungs. She took deep breaths, glancing once to the inert Peter, now a shadowy husk.

Lucian had commanded that Hell Gate. The residue of his magic tingled through her veins, and she raked her nails across her forearm. Not even pain drove the warmth of his prayers from her soul. Ever since his exile, she’d starved her heart of his love and purged her flesh of his touch. Until tonight, he’d been dead to her.

She slammed her hand against the wall and strangled her angry cry. The dead don’t come back. She prayed mindlessly, *I think of God, think of God, oh, God, please God, God, God*, forcing down the despair that threatened to engulf her. *Lucian. Oh God, oh damn, not Lucian.*

CHAPTER FOUR

the citadel

The sun rose over the trees before the pungent tang of wood-smoke aroused Rachael. Someone had lit a fire in her stove. She lifted her head and rested her chin on her arm as the yard crept into focus. Her head pounded; she felt hung-over.

Her dog Caesar barked and Rachael thought her scalp would peel from her skull. She sat up to see a black mare and a small roan tethered to her hitching post. The roan's saddle displayed the Citadel's black and red colors. The mare also wore the Citadel's alpha/omega emblem on her bridle, but the rest of her tack was nondescript.

That was not a good omen because the plain saddle meant someone was going on a directive. Around her throbbing headache, she recalled the previous evening. The shock of feeling Lucian's magic had receded to become the silent rage she'd learned to live with.

Half the Citadel must have experienced Lucian opening the Gate, and John wasn't going to let Lucian slide again. The Seraph had obviously sent the judge and constable for an extra horse.

A door slammed from the direction of the kitchen, and she winced. "Rae?"

She recognized Caleb's voice and frowned. He was one of the few constables who didn't fear the Wyrms and frequently dropped by to

check on her. He was also John's primary choice to accompany her on directives. Her heart quickened to send throbs of agony into her head. Surely John didn't intend to send her after Lucian.

"Rae, you up?"

Peter's wallet was cool in her hand, and she realized she still held the photograph. She licked the tip of her finger and managed to rub her blood off the image before she returned it to the inside flap.

Caleb came into the room and leaned against the doorjamb, surveying the mess. Instead of his cassock and collar, he wore a brown shirt and pants to blend in with the locals of the surrounding countryside. Caleb was definitely going on a directive. "Rae?" He assessed her condition with a critical eye, and she knew he watched to see whether she was connected to reality or immersed in her dreams.

"I'm all right." She tried to stand and slipped in her vomit. That couldn't look good. The sour stench gagged her and she choked down her bile, willing her body into control.

Caleb came to her side and took her arm, helping her balance herself on numb legs. Very few Katharoi bothered to touch her; they all complained the resonance of her magic was as tainted as the Wym. It was just as well; she didn't like being touched anymore. She shook the constable's hand off her arm.

She smelled coffee and tobacco on his breath when he said, "Take it easy, Rae. What happened?"

"Foundling." The bed was empty. God, had she dreamed it? She touched Peter's wallet for reassurance. "Where is he?"

"Outside. We cleaned him up and gave him a shroud so we can get him to the Citadel." Caleb reached out to her, but she stepped away from him. "Why didn't you send for me?" he asked.

Rachael plucked at the bloody sheets, pulling them off the mattress. A strand of Peter's hair drifted through a shaft of sunlight. Even Lucian with all his healing skills couldn't have brought the boy through those injuries. "There was nothing you could have done, Lucian."

"Caleb," he said.

"Caleb," she dutifully replied, looking away from him.

He took the sheets from her and tossed them to the mattress. "Come on, Rae. Get yourself together."

He had no business patronizing her. Even debilitated with the

Wyrm, she stood above him in rank. When Caleb had first brought her out of Hell after Lucian's betrayal, she'd been grateful to him, but over the years, he'd misinterpreted her gratitude for something deeper. She refused to foster his hope for any relationship other than a professional one and discouraged his attempts at familiarity.

Before she could answer him, the front door closed. Rachael snuffed the candle on the nightstand with her fingertips, pinching the wick and not letting go. The pain oriented her mind.

"Master Caleb, I've fed the animals." The soft voice announced Caleb's oldest foundling Victor.

Caleb went to the hurricane glass to blow out the flame. "Okay. Victor, go down and saddle Ignatius for Judge Boucher; she'll be riding back with us."

"Yes, sir." The youth left the house, and Rachael glimpsed him on his way to the stables. He was a tall, handsome young man with auburn hair and olive skin, about the same age as Peter. Caesar trotted at Victor's heels and the youth bent down to scratch the dog's shaggy ears.

"Rae? Are you paying attention?"

She focused on Caleb and frowned. The Wyrm had yet to blind her soul's eye. To anyone else Caleb would appear to be the epitome of calm, but she sensed apprehension hunkering beneath his facade. "What?"

"The Seraph wants you at the Citadel."

She barked a short, nasty laugh, unable to remember the last time anyone wanted her at the Citadel. She kept her apartments there and attended the quarterly Council meetings but that was all. More and more she felt like the discarded piece of a puzzle, swept into a corner away from all the other joined pieces. "It's Lucian."

He wouldn't meet her gaze. "You know it is."

God, she had escaped him never to escape him. "And John is issuing a directive for you and me?"

"Yes." He sighed and gestured at her filthy clothes. "You can't go like that. You look awful. And you'll need to pack. Looks like we're going on a long trip. Lucian is northwest of us in the Wasteland."

"All right, all right," she murmured, but it wasn't all right. It would never be all right again. Lucian Negru had seen to that. "Give me a few minutes."

“Sure, I’ll make you some coffee.”

Caleb had thoughtfully placed two large buckets of water in her room. She must have been in a coma for him and Victor to move around her for so long, but when was the last time she’d slept? The unmade bed gave her no clue as she closed the door to her bedroom and pulled the curtains across her window. She tugged her shirt off and tossed it into the corner.

On her right arm her flesh suddenly rose as if there was a pebble just beneath the surface of her skin. The pigmentation around the blemish became discolored. Before she could clamp her hand over the bump, it moved up her arm to disappear into one of the raised scars mapping her body. The disfigurements became more pronounced as the Wyrms gained another inch of her with every passing year.

Hands shaking, Rachael made certain to choose a shirt with loose sleeves. She pulled on the gloves she’d made to hide the joining of her pinky and ring fingers on her left hand. The physical deformities were not readily noticeable, but nothing hid the pall of the Wyrms’ resonance, which hovered over her like a shroud.

She finished dressing and packed. When she opened the curtains again, she caught a quick glimpse of herself in the glass. The scars on the right side of her face and neck undulated where the Wyrms crawled beneath her skin. The movements were barely perceptible unless someone looked very close. Rachael never allowed anyone to get too close.

Her long hair looked like she had cut it in the dark with a dull knife. She reached up and dragged the ragged layers over to shadow the right side of her face. Maybe she couldn’t hide the Wyrms’ resonance, but she obscured the demon’s physical presence.

Satisfied, she left her reflection and went to collect her sword. She loosened the strap of the scabbard and slung the blade over her shoulder, then grabbed Peter’s wallet and pushed it into her pack. Whether his death was her fault or not, he was the first foundling she had ever drawn through the Veil. Since he had no other family on Woerld, she’d hold on to his personal possessions. The wallet might give her some small comfort in the night.

In the kitchen, Caleb poured her a cup of coffee, and she could tell by his appraisal that she looked presentable. She would have to rely

on him because she removed all the mirrors from her house years ago.

She paused by the table where the account book for Cross Creek was open. She set her pack down, unable to recall leaving the book there. Her eye was drawn to the heavy slashes of ink scarring the paper. The pages that had once held neatly spaced columns of handwritten numbers were now filled with nightmare sketches of incomprehensible violence. She turned the leaves slowly, marveling at the detail of familiar faces pulled in agony. Sickened, she slammed the book shut and took it to the stove where she shoved it into the fire.

Without a word, Caleb took the poker and mashed the curling paper deep into the flames, making certain they burned. "Blackout?" he asked. He likened her episodes of dreaming to alcoholic blackouts. A fitting enough description of the times when she dreamed and the Wyrms took her for its own.

She nodded. "Did Victor see that?"

"No. It was on the table, but it was closed. While Victor fed the animals, I flipped through it and saw, well, you know." He shrugged.

She took her cup and steadied her hand to drink.

Caleb looked at her.

She shuddered. "You know it's worse when I'm alone. I fell to dreaming. That's all. It's nothing. A minor fugue. I'll be all right."

"Is there anything else here that might be like that?"

She felt sure there was nothing. "No."

"Good, because John's sending Sara and Stephan to steward Cross Creek while you're gone." He closed the stove.

Rachael grabbed her pack and went outside with Caleb following her. She lashed her saddlebags to Ignatius' saddle as the dapple gray fixed his one brown eye on her. The constable mounted his black mare, and Victor turned the buckboard carrying Peter's body. The youth was obviously eager to be away from Cross Creek and the sour stench of the Wyrms' magic.

Caleb said to Victor, "Judge Boucher and I are going to ride ahead. You take your time."

"Yes, sir."

They soon left Victor and the plodding wagon behind. They rode in silence, keeping a steady pace. As they neared the Citadel, the congestion on the road became thicker with merchants and local

farmers coming and going either to the Citadel or the Semah River with their wares. Most of them remained on the central road to the Citadel to enter the main eastern gate. A few followed another narrow side-road to the village of Baniyas, a dirty river village that snuggled up to the Citadel's western wall like a tick.

Rachael and Caleb followed a less traveled road to enter the Citadel's northern gate. Not one of the better-maintained thoroughfares, the road boasted less traffic but became a mud-hole during the heavy autumn rains. Rachael didn't care; she was glad to be out of the crowds.

They crested a small hill and on the plain below rested the Citadel, high on a manmade mound. In spite of her years on Woerld, the sight of the bastion never failed to take her breath away. The Semah River sparkled, a jeweled necklace that curved behind the Citadel. A fortified outer wall gave the Citadel its first line of defense, and a second inner wall encompassed the cathedral and grounds.

The cathedral faced the east where the basilica rose to form a dome between two towers. At the top of the dome, the lesser spires of adjacent buildings surrounded a great resurrection cross. The towers contiguous to the cathedral housed the apartments and offices of those Katharoi who resided at the Citadel.

Most of the Katharoi lived on their holdings and only reported to the Citadel for council meetings or in times of war. The supplies from the holdings kept the Citadel functioning so that in Woerld, the Katharoi stood outside of Ra'anan's local government. They supported themselves and rarely interceded in Woerld's political arena. To keep Ra'anan's King Phillip happy, the Seraph sent an annual tribute and helped in years of famine or plague.

In return, King Phillip never interceded in the Citadel's business and trusted the Seraph to keep the Fallen from corrupting his lands. The War of the Great Schism had made a deep and abiding impression on all of Woerld's kings, and none wanted to see their countries turned into a barren wasteland like Norbeh. They left the bastions to their own devices so long as taxes were paid and the Fallen remained in Hell.

The Citadel and the Katharoi who lived there formed a splendid machine that never seemed to lose its way. *Even when a piece falls from the cogs, the wheels continue to turn*, Rachael thought as she and Caleb

approached the postern gate to the outer wall.

She bit down on her self-pity and nodded to the guard who motioned them through the open portcullis. The sun disappeared as the long, dim tunnel swallowed the light. They emerged back into the brightness of the middle ward and passed through the second gate into the crowded courtyard.

The alley between the summer kitchen and the bake-house was congested with a few Katharoi and staff on their way out of the Citadel. The crowd parted reluctantly for Rachael and Caleb. Rachael ignored the three Katharoi who made the sign of the cross as she passed.

They hated her, and those that didn't hate her feared her. She carried the stench of the Wyrms on her like a vile perfume, and they sensed it the same way they sensed one another's magic. Rachael turned her face away from them and guided Ignatius to the right, toward the cathedral.

The courtyard was busy with Katharoi and staff members who served the Katharoi going about their daily business. Katharoi from other bastions moved amongst the Citadel's members. Emissaries from the Mosque and the Rabbinate laughed together as they walked toward the Citadel's great library to the left of the cathedral. The blue robes of an Avalonian priestess contrasted with the red clothing worn by a Deg Long from the Tibetan temple as they wound their way through the crowd, heads bent close to converse over the racket.

Members of other bastions came from all over Woerld to visit the Citadel's famed library like they traveled to the Mosque to learn astronomy. In her youth, Rachael had journeyed to the bastion of the Hindus, the Mandir. There she had studied the Dharmacakra and the confluence of energy that created the spokes of the Dharmacakra's wheel. Under the guidance of the Mandir's Seraph, Rachael had come to understand how the realms of existence—Heaven, Earth, Woerld, and Hell—interrelated with one another. The four realms were like four lakes joined by tiny streams; toss a pebble into Hell and the ripples would extend to the farthest reaches of Heaven.

Rachael scanned the crowd to see if any of the Citadel's visitors were disturbed by Lucian's opening of the Gate, but the only tension she sensed came from the Citadel's Katharoi. Everything else seemed

normal. The steady ring of metal against metal announced the blacksmith was well into his day. Four women wearing cooks' aprons whispered amongst themselves as they sauntered to the gardens swinging empty baskets. Rachael ignored their stares, wishing she didn't have to undergo this indignity every time John needed her.

When she and Caleb stopped at the western entrance to the cathedral, grooms came forward to take their mounts. Caleb ordered a third horse be saddled and brought to them, and one young man took the animals to the shade while the second ran to the stables.

Over the doors of the cathedral's entrance was a relief carved in stone. With his great wings outstretched and his sword drawn, Saint Michael pressed his foot against the fallen Satan's throat. Satan's eyes were defiant, in spite of his crushed wings and Michael's obvious rage, the fallen angel exuded confidence. His gaze promised he would rise again.

Rachael instinctively crossed herself as she approached the steps. The doors were open to take any breeze up to the highest floors. They stepped into the coolness of the atrium where tall arched windows allowed natural light to spill into the cathedral. Approximately twenty feet ahead, another set of doors opened into the nave, an area almost as busy as the atrium.

The nave extended for several yards before an ornate wooden screen interrupted it. Through the latticework of the screen, Rachael glimpsed the quire and high altar where the Katharoi held both Mass and court.

She turned away from the nave and looked beyond the carved colonnades to the arcades that melted into the shadows. With Caleb on her heels, Rachael slipped around a small group of protégés.

Rather than take the straight path to the Seraph's formal entrance where emissaries from other bastions might be waiting, she veered right toward an arcade that led to a dim passageway. Tapestries depicted battles from the War of the Great Schism when the Fallen had almost destroyed the Zoroastrians by dividing their ranks over theological differences.

The Fallen's adherents had infiltrated the Zoroastrian bastion and convinced the Seraph that the unity of Woerld's religions betrayed their beliefs. The Zoroastrian council voted to separate from the

Council of Seraphs and their respective bastions. Not even the most passionate pleas from the Mandir's Seraph had swayed their hearts. From the moment the Zoroastrian bastion divorced itself from the Council, it had only been a matter of time before the Fallen attacked, and without being able to rely on the other bastions, the Zoroastrian fortress fell to the powers of chaos.

By the time the surviving Zoroastrian Katharoi reached the other bastions with news of the breach, the Fallen had secured their defenses in the city of Melasur. John was a foundling during the last years of the War, and he recounted how the ripples from the War of the Great Schism had extended into Earth's realm in the form of World War II. John never wanted his Katharoi to forget how close they'd come to losing Woerld and Earth to the Fallen.

Rachael and Caleb passed the last of the tapestries and the chattering crowd thinned as they reached a plain door that connected the cathedral to the adjoining tower. The next corridor ended at a narrow stairwell used by the Katharoi and serving staff to access the Seraph's chambers. The less she was seen, the better.

The ride to the Citadel along with the climb to the fourth floor cleared her head. Once John heard about her latest blackout combined with the loss of her foundling, he would surely rescind his directive. Then she could go back to Cross Creek, raise warhorses, and drown herself in forgetfulness again.

Rachael stepped into a passageway lit with a few scattered sconces. No ornamentation lined the stone walls. The only occupants of the hall were the two guards who flanked the side-door to John's office and a line of three empty chairs. The guards came to attention as Rachael neared them.

She said, "The Seraph has summoned me."

The soldier bowed and knocked before he opened the door. He returned and gestured for Rachael to enter. "Judge Boucher. Constable Aldridge, you may wait there." He gestured to one of the empty chairs.

Into the abyss, Rachael thought, steadying herself for the interview to come.

In the expansive office, she inhaled the scent of leather and tobacco tinged with the faintest odor of incense. It was a smell she had long associated with John's book-lined shelves in the well-lit room. When

she was young, this chamber had been her sanctuary. With the coming of the Wyrn, she had sought comfort from her Elder's presence less and less.

Parallel to the door she had entered was another entrance, which led to a comfortable antechamber where formal guests awaited their private audiences with the Citadel's Seraph. Flanking the door were two large globes atop brass stands. The globe on the left was of Earth and the one on the right represented Woerld. The thirty-one spokes of the Dharmacakra's Gates crisscrossed both globes and reflected what John believed were the corresponding sites of power between Earth and Woerld.

To her left, natural light from three tall, arched windows flooded the room. The rest of the chamber was given to bookshelves except for the one wall farthest from the door, which sheltered the hearth. Cushioned chairs surrounded the open fireplace where John often entertained the visiting emissaries of other Seraphs. Seated in one of the chairs was Reynard Bartell, the Citadel's Inquisitor, and he rose when she entered.

At the center of the chamber was John's desk, as ornate as any throne, the wood burnished to a deep cherry. As soon as she shut the door, John said, "You took your bloody time getting here."

John Shea's voice had been the first Rachael heard in Woerld, and as her Elder, she had come to know his moods better than her own. He wasn't angry with her for her tardiness, but he intended to know the reason.

He was seated behind his desk, looking up from the paper he held. He wasn't a large man physically, yet he commanded the room nonetheless. Though he was well in his seventies, he could still put one of the younger Katharoi in place with either sword or argument.

Reynard Bartell clasped his hands before him as he moved into the light. His cassock and crimson scapular were immaculate. In spite of her recent washing and clean clothes, Rachael felt dingy.

As if sensing her discomfort, Reynard smiled benevolently. Her gut constricted. A master courtier, Reynard had been a judge when he'd used Lucian's trial to secure his position of Inquisitor, chief Citadel judge.

She ignored Reynard and went to John's side. She took his hand as she knelt to kiss his ring of office. "Forgive me, your Eminence."

His hand lingered on top of her head. Though he tried to keep his face impassive, she saw his revulsion at what she'd become. Worse than his disgust was the disappointment in his eyes over her failure to master the Wyrm. John released her and gave her leave to rise with a wave of his hand. "Don't let it happen again."

Taking a deep breath, she pasted a smile on her face and turned to greet Reynard.

"Judge Boucher." He reached out to her. "We were becoming concerned."

Rachael braced herself for the contact and didn't resist him when Reynard took her shoulders and kissed her left cheek, then her right. He cupped her face, his hands remaining a second too long, and the Wyrm rose briefly, whether to feed on her hate or Reynard's, she didn't know. The demon fell back to the recesses of her mind when Reynard released her. He said, "The Lord be with you, Judge Boucher."

"And with your spirit, my Lord Inquisitor." She responded with a slight tilt of her head. She didn't take his proffered hand. As John's heir, she wasn't required to submit herself to Reynard's authority. She bent her knee before the Inquisitor only during the most formal ceremonies when John allowed no breach of etiquette.

Reynard's fingers curled but didn't close.

"Sit down, Rachael." John indicated the chair across from his desk. "I'm sure Constable Aldridge has briefed you."

"He has." She didn't like the way Reynard positioned himself just behind John's right shoulder. The entire scene was reminiscent of when she had to answer for her actions in Lucian's crime. John spared her a public trial, but the inquisition by John and Reynard had been intense nonetheless.

"What kept you?" John asked.

"There was a foundling."

"Was?" Reynard raised an eyebrow.

Rachael stilled her nervous fingers and met John's gaze. "He was dying when I found him. His name was Peter Richardson, he was fourteen and from the early twenty-first century. He died this morning just before dawn. Victor is bringing him."

"What killed him?" When she didn't answer, John prompted, "Jackals?"

“I believe so.”

“You believe?” Reynard shook his head.

“I never saw the Veil,” she said to her boots.

John leaned forward. “So you don’t know if he was attacked within the Veil?”

“No.”

“Did the jackals cross over and attack him in Woerld?” Reynard snapped.

“I don’t know.”

John threw his pen into the stack of papers, and the nib spurted ink across several pages in defiance of its mistreatment. Rachael felt sorry for the novice who would have to laboriously re-copy the marred pages.

John asked, “What do you know, Rachael?”

“I was lost in dreams. I don’t even remember the last two days.” She pressed her fingers against the patch covering her missing eye and stopped talking. Shakier than a foundling, she took a deep breath and tried to pull herself together; it wasn’t working. This was going very badly, but maybe this was the wake-up call John needed to remove her from service. Let him name Reynard as the Seraph’s heir; she was nothing more than a figurehead anyway.

“Rachael. Look at me.” John’s tone broached no disobedience.

She swallowed against the burning in her throat and forced herself to meet his gaze. With a slight turn of her head, Reynard disappeared from her sight, and she pretended it was just her and John in the room.

“Show me,” John commanded.

A hoarfrost nip of fear bit her heart. He didn’t need to elaborate for her to know he wanted to see her soul-light, and while it was the simplest of tricks, it was the most revealing. John wanted to see if the Wyrms had taken her, if she had become complicit with the creature she harbored. If her light didn’t burn true, then being the Seraph’s only remaining heir wouldn’t save her from a formal inquisition.

“We’re waiting, Judge Boucher.” Reynard moved into her line of sight.

Rachael clenched her jaw and held out her right hand. She summoned her soul-light and almost wept with relief when the white globe appeared to hover inches above her palm. Her reprieve was brief. Shadows formed within the sphere, streaks of black lightning—

signs of the Wyrms' progress. Rachael concentrated harder and the dark spots faded to the background. Sweat prickled across her brow as she focused on the light, and the shadows fled. Her light burned true.

"That's enough," John said.

Rachael extinguished the illumination.

"It's progressed, your Eminence." Reynard stepped from behind John so he could face the Seraph. "I strongly suggest we attempt another exorcism before you send her into the Wasteland."

"You've had sixteen years, Reynard." John sounded as tired as the argument Rachael had heard a thousand times. "If you haven't divined the demon's true name by now, another week isn't going to make a difference."

"We can't afford to lose her, my Lord, even as a symbolic heir." Reynard twisted his ring of office. The Inquisitor wasted no opportunity to point out her uselessness, and John no longer defended her. Rachael's coffee soured in her stomach.

"I've got Lucian Negru opening Hell Gates in the Wasteland and drawing God knows what back through with him. No. There's no time for another exorcism." John sorted through the mounds of papers on his desk to unerringly retrieve the one he sought from the stack. He shoved the paper at her like an accusation. "And sending you is against my better judgment, but I've dreamed and the Lord has spoken to me."

Rachael's fear turned glacial and spread over her heart. Once John dreamed, no one changed his course. A prophecy would not be denied, no matter how much commonsense stood in the way. She took the document and scanned it. Her head began to hurt, distorting her vision.

"I'm issuing a directive for you to bring Lucian Negru back to the Citadel to be tried for violating the terms of his Ban. If the Council finds him guilty of desecrating his covenant, he will hang."

She swallowed the bitter taste of her regret, keeping her eye on the document so she wouldn't have to look at John or Reynard. The sorrow gripping her heart took her off guard. *It's the foundling*, she reasoned, pressing her finger to her eye to squelch a tear. She hadn't adequate time to mourn the loss of Peter. This was not about Lucian.

John went on as if he didn't notice, but she knew he did. Nothing

escaped her Elder. “Lucian will surrender himself to your authority. I will determine the retribution when he arrives, which means I’m expecting him to arrive here alive. Do you understand, Rachael?”

“I do.” Feeling more in control, she folded the document and held it loosely.

“Caleb has received his directive and he will serve as your constable.” John sighed and lowered his voice. “Rachael, this can’t be botched.”

Reynard made a derisive noise. Rachael’s fingers crumpled the directive before she willed herself to loosen her grip on the document.

“Go,” John said. “God watch over you while you’re out of my sight.” He made the sign of the cross over her and turned back to his papers.

Reynard smiled as she rose and turned away.

She was almost at the door when John spoke again. “Rachael, be on your guard. I want you here, where you belong. Come back to me safe.”

Rachael nodded and opened the door to step into the hall. Caleb stood a few feet away, speaking to the Citadel’s Commissioner Charles Dubois. The two men were the same height, but Dubois was broader in the chest than Caleb. Life at the Citadel’s court had softened the Commissioner’s once athletic body, but nothing dulled the man’s vigilant gaze. Rachael remained as wary of Dubois as she was of Reynard. They were vultures hanging over her deathbed.

Dubois bowed in her direction; she gave him only a cursory nod in return. Rather than wait for the men to finish their conversation, Rachael went to the stairs.

Within minutes, Caleb was rushing down behind her. “Is everything okay, Rae?”

“Everything’s fine.” She lifted the paper without turning. “We have our directive.”

Outside, she paused so her sight could adjust to the sunlight. Caleb passed her and went to the horses where the groom now held the reins of a chestnut gelding that stood alongside Ignatius and Caleb’s mare. Rachael assessed the gelding and complimented the groom on his choice before she moved to take Ignatius’ reins from him.

“Rachael.”

Rachael shoved the directive into her pocket like it was a dirty secret and turned. John’s wife Tanith stood within arm’s reach. Still a priestess in the Goddess’ service, her pale blue gown reflected the

colors of an Avalonian. Like John, she was small in stature, but her poise and self-confidence gave her the illusion of height. Usually a smile teased the corners of her eyes, but not this morning. Today sorrow dragged the corners of her mouth down, and Rachael's heart twisted with guilt. She was no less responsible for Tanith's grief than Lucian.

Tanith held her hands out to Rachael. "Will you leave without seeing me?"

"Of course not." Rachael forced her false smile back to her face and touched Tanith's fingers.

Other than the slightest twitch of her lips, Tanith showed no sign of revulsion at the Wyrms' taint. "Walk with me to the gate so I may see you off." She took Rachael's hand in her own.

Rachael loved her for that one small gesture.

Caleb cleared his throat and bowed to Tanith. "My Lady, we're on a directive from the Seraph. It's of the utmost importance."

Her dark eyes flashed from Caleb back to Rachael. "Then wait for her at the gate."

Caleb's protest withered under Tanith's glare. He gave Rachael a look of appeal, but she didn't acknowledge him. If Tanith wanted him gone, then she had a reason. Without another word, he mounted and took the gelding's reins from Rachael before he disappeared into the crowd.

Tanith lowered her voice as she fell into step beside Rachael. With the clamor of noise around them, no one would hear her words. "It's grown worse, hasn't it?"

Rachael kept her pace slow to accommodate Tanith's shorter stride. "It comes and goes."

"The truth," Tanith whispered, barely moving her lips. She nodded to Ganak, the emissary from the Mandir.

Rachael ducked her head in a move that could be interpreted as a slight bow so her hair shadowed her face. She hoped Ganak didn't recognize her.

"Rachael." A note of warning changed the pitch of Tanith's voice.

"I can control it." Ignatius nuzzled her shoulder and she shrugged him off.

Tanith stopped walking and faced Rachael. People flowed around

the women and horse like they were stones in a stream. Other than an occasional nod to Tanith, no one spoke or approached them. They could have been alone.

Tanith took both of Rachael's hands in hers and squeezed. "Adam Zimmer wrote to me recently. He's very worried for you."

Rachael bit the inside of her cheek and nodded. She had first met the Rabbinat's Inquisitor a few years after Lucian's betrayal. Adam had looked past her scars and often brought a smile to her face through his witty observations. They had grown close over the years through their correspondences, but last year, no matter how she tried, she could no longer read Adam's letters. The words swam before her eye to become senseless shapes that fed her headaches.

Too proud to admit she could no longer read Rachael had stopped writing to him. In spite of her lack of correspondence, Adam continued to write to her once a month with what she assumed was news from people they knew at the Rabbinat.

"Adam asked me to give you his regards. He tells me he prays a *Mi Sheberakh*—a prayer of healing—for you every day. He wants to hear from you."

Rachael blinked against a burning in her eye and lowered her head.

"You are loved, Rachael. More than you know." Tanith brought Rachael's face close to hers to kiss her cheek. Her breath tickled Rachael's ear as she whispered. "Make no sign you've heard. Trust no one."

Rachael's blood chilled as Tanith repeated the gesture and kissed her other cheek. "We are infiltrated," she whispered.

"Who?" Rachael hissed the question into Tanith's ear.

Tanith gripped Rachael's fingers tightly and stepped back. She raised her voice to a normal tone. "I wish I knew, but the ways of the Goddess are hidden from my eyes. I will write to Adam for you and give him your gratitude for his prayers. If you like."

"Yes." Rachael never had to ask; Tanith always knew exactly what to do. "Please. I would like that very much."

"Good. You'll not be long, I hope."

Rachael forced a smile to her numb lips and looked down into Tanith's worried gaze. She wished she had some reassurance for her, but they could share only the most banal pleasantries in the courtyard. "I'll return as quickly as I can."

“Good.” The older woman smiled. “I came to give you my blessing. May the Goddess ride with you all the days of your journey, and may She bring you home to us safe. Here. Where you belong.”

The hair on her arms rose at Tanith’s eerie echo of John’s parting words. Tanith stepped back and melted into the crowd before Rachael could whisper goodbye. Alone again, she mounted Ignatius and turned his head toward the gate. She rode away without looking back.

We are infiltrated.

Rachael found her flask and took a quick drink to drive the taste of fear from her mouth. If Tanith suspected members were complicit, then surely John did too, and neither of them would warn someone they thought complicit. No, John trusted her, Rachael was sure of it. She never would have walked out of his office if he believed her corrupt, but that didn’t mitigate her danger.

With the Wyrms, she would be a prime suspect if accusations were made. No wonder Reynard had been so eager to see her soul-light fail to burn true. He rooted out the complicit with savage zeal and was not known for advocating mercy for the condemned. With Rachael gone, no one would stand in his way as heir. Whether he could prove she was complicit or not, Reynard would use any opportunity to further his advance to Seraph.

Ahead, Caleb stood talking to one of the guards. When he saw her, he mounted his mare and was ready to ride by the time she reached him. “Everything all right?” he asked.

“Fine.” It would have to be for now. She couldn’t do anything about complicit members until she finished with Lucian. She led the way beneath the portcullis and tucked Tanith’s words close to her heart.

She steered Ignatius back toward the farm. “We need to go back to Cross Creek. I want to backtrack Peter’s trail. I need to know where that child was attacked.”

“Sure,” Caleb said. “It shouldn’t take us long.”

Rachael didn’t care how long it took. Now more than ever she needed to know if she was at fault for the boy’s death. Reynard could easily claim she murdered Peter through her neglect, or worse still, that she summoned the jackals to cheat the Citadel of another warrior. She had to have a plan of action in place, and she couldn’t do that until she knew the truth.

She set Ignatius to a trot, and Caleb covered her blind side. The sunlight burned the Wyrn to the recesses of her soul. By the time they reached the field where she had first seen Peter, her head felt clear.

Caleb dismounted and checked the foliage for blood before following Peter's tracks. As they moved between the trees, her home slipped away in the background. She was already sick with longing for her familiar routines, meaningless though they were.

They followed a slight incline, then up another hill where Peter's blood trail ended. The only disruption of the earth came from a young boy's feet. No paw prints marred the ground. Rachael released the breath she had been unaware of holding and dismounted to search the leaves with her own eye.

Caleb validated her conclusion. "I can't find any jackal tracks. They took him inside the Veil. There wasn't anything you could have done, Rae."

Rachael relaxed. If Caleb bore witness and affirmed she wasn't at fault for Peter's death, Reynard couldn't claim otherwise. Caleb reached down and picked something up.

"What did you find?" she asked.

"Cell phone."

Of course, twenty-first century parents tethered themselves to their children with their electronics. The devices usually worked while the Veil between Earth and Woerld was thin; sometimes as much as forty-eight hours, sometimes as little as five minutes.

Rachael held her hand out, and Caleb gave it to her. She flipped it open and punched the power switch. The little screen lit up, but it didn't show Peter or his last moments as she had expected. Instead, she saw the smiling girl from Peter's photograph.

Lyn. Save her.

Shadows and darkness set the background like some macabre wallpaper. Rachael recognized all too well both Hell's landscape and the young woman from the photograph. Only her summer beach smiles had vanished beneath tears and terror. There was no doubt she was Peter's sibling, and Rachael suspected Peter had given himself to save her.

Rachael gave Lyn only the most cursory examination. She focused on the man who held and comforted the distraught child. Lucian.

The ragged figure stood, favoring his lame leg. Good God, was her dream this morning a prophecy? Rachael frowned at the screen and remembered his dark gaze ruined by grief. A doubt crept soulfully into the back of her mind, a tiny seed of disquiet that the man she loathed was not the man before her. She silenced the misgiving for fear it would unravel her heart.

The picture distorted momentarily, breaking her reverie; if she was lucky, the Veil remained thin enough for the phones to connect. She pressed the menu button and examined the list of numbers; there were two possible Lyns, Marilyn Anderson and Lindsay. Rachael pressed the number for Marilyn and received silence. She touched a button then chose Lindsay's number and was rewarded with a ring.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raised in a small town, Teresa Frohock learned to escape to other worlds through the fiction collection of her local library. She eventually moved away from Reidsville and lived in Virginia and South Carolina before returning to North Carolina, where she currently resides with her husband and daughter.

Teresa has long been accused of telling stories, which is a southern colloquialism for lying. *Miserere: An Autumn Tale* is her debut novel.