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JESSICA SHIRVINGTON

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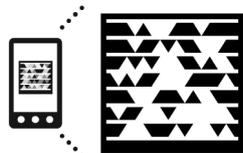
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*'God did not spare angels when they sinned,  
but cast them into Hell and committed them to  
chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until  
judgement.'*

***Greek Tartarus, Peter 2:4***

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## PROLOGUE

*'When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh: and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh'*

*Genesis 9:13-15*

**S**he didn't have to see him to know he was there. It had been a very long time since Evelyn had needed to rely solely on her eyes.

She released a final ear-piercing scream, a double-edged sword that heralded both life and death. It was done – her ultimate joy now within her reach, just as her ultimate sacrifice extended its hand to her.

*'It's a girl,' the midwife said, placing the baby in her arms.*

Evelyn stared down at the tiny child and wondered how she would find the strength to let her go.

*'She's perfect, Eve. She looks just like you. My two beautiful angels,' James said.*

His words brought the first silent tear from Evelyn's eye. He swept it aside lovingly.

*'I knew you'd cry,' he teased as his eyes drifted between his wife and their daughter. He lightly brushed the top of the baby's forehead, with the back of his little finger, caressing the skin so tentatively.*

*Evelyn's heart clenched and she couldn't breathe for a moment. Leaving him was not something she'd planned for. She'd always assumed it would be her that would outlive him. All the time she had spent deliberating when to tell him everything – how to explain he would grow old while she would merely age a few years – it seemed like time wasted now.*

*She looked down at their daughter, her eyes opening slightly. It would be her choice now if her father should ever know the truth.*

*Evelyn pulled James' hand to her mouth and kissed it, letting her lips linger on his skin, inhaling his vanilla scent and committing it to memory. She wished they had more time, but she sensed the power around her. She couldn't ignore it much longer.*

*'James, could you give me a minute to tidy up?' It was her last lie and still she hated that she had to. As necessary as it had always been, lying to her husband had never sat well with her.*

*He kissed her quickly and she tried to savour it.*

*'I'll be back soon, Mum,' he said with a wink before leaving. It was heart-wrenching to know that she would hear it just once.*

*The midwife gave Evelyn an intuitive smile, collected her clipboard and headed for the door. 'I'll make sure no one bothers you,' she said.*

*'Thank you.'*

*Alone with her daughter, Evelyn kissed her perfect forehead. She already had a full head of hair, dark brown like Evelyn's, and she smelled . . . intoxicating. It was a fragrance she could get lost in for all eternity. She wished she could hold her like this forever, inhaling her and playing with her tiny tiny fingers.*

*But she knew . . . She wasn't really alone.*

*'Do I have you to thank for the dreams?' She asked the empty room.*

*He materialised, a corporeal form confirming the presence she had already felt. It was as if he had always been there.*

*She sensed him with her whole body. She had always been able to feel them, the buzz of their presence, but usually only when she was around the exiles. Normally, they smelled of a combination of flowers, but his scent was entirely lilies.*

*And she knew – lilies held all the power.*

*He introduced himself, unnecessarily. She knew exactly who he was and why he was there. He'd been walking in her dreams for weeks now.*

*He stood by the window that looked out over a small park. There had been a time when he was able to frequent the world regularly, but that time had long since passed. He wanted to at least see the grass and sky from this point of view during his short visit.*

*They both knew how this was done. New life and new death equalled a gateway.*

*'Do you realise what you're asking?' she asked.*

*'I do.'*

*'What will she become?'*

*'The Keshet.' He spoke with a reverence that made Evelyn nervous.*

*'The Rainbow?' She repeated, recognising the Hebrew word.*

*He nodded. 'The bow that holds our arrow. The link between the realms.'*

*'The bow,' Evelyn whispered to herself. 'Why her? Why me?' It didn't seem fair – she had already given so much.*

*He could feel her pain but stuck to relaying information; that was what she needed from him.*

*'Through you, she is already more than human. She is one of a kind. For all eternity, there may never be another like her.'*

*Evelyn shook her head in disbelief, even though she knew he spoke*

*only the truth.*

*'You already know I'll agree, or you wouldn't be here,' she said, resigned, then inhaled a broken breath. She had to stay strong. 'Is there anything you don't know?'*

*'I do not know what she will choose.'*

*Evelyn circled the child's face with her finger; she was so soft, so innocent. 'She will choose with her heart.'*

*'Then let us hope that she finds love,' he said.*

*Her head lifted, now more determined. 'I have terms.'*

*He already knew what they were, had discussed them with her in her dreams.*

*'They have been accepted, as long as you are willing to pay the price. Do you have it?'*

*She nodded and reached under her blanket, revealing one of her silver wristbands. She slipped it on carefully while cradling the baby and raised her brow; she hadn't expected it to be that easy.*

*'You really need her?'*

*He tilted his head once in mute confirmation but with remorse. It was hard for him, to admit their failings, admit that they had to turn to humans to make these sacrifices because they could not contain their own forces.*

*'Swear you will make sure she wears the amulet.' Evelyn pushed herself up a little with one hand to sit. As she did, she felt the strength draining from her. She ignored it as best she could and focused on her daughter again.*

*'You have already defeated her, it is not certain she will return,' he said.*

*'Swear!' She wasn't going to let this drop, she had seen too much, fought too hard.*

*'I swear,' he conceded, impressed with her intuition as much as*

*with her sacrifices.*

*She shook her head, silent until finally she let a tear escape. 'Just another lamb to the slaughter,' she whispered.*

*He pulled himself away from the window and walked towards her. 'Not just any lamb. You forget – you are part angel, too.'*

*'When?' she asked, though she could already feel it.*

*'Now.'*

*'I'm 187 years old. Has it all been worth it?'*

*They both looked at the baby.*

*'You'll have to tell me,' he said, surprised by the effect the proximity of the child was having on him.*

*Evelyn knew she only had minutes left. She took hold of the nurses' call button.*

*'Give me a moment to be with my family. Stand away where I cannot sense you. I want to finish this as a human.'*

*'You still believe in humanity, after all you have seen?'*

*The heart rate monitor she was connected to started beeping frantically. Evelyn kissed the top of the baby's head, inhaling her scent again and again as she pressed the call button.*

*'Only a human can have this, even if it is just for the briefest of moments. I would not give you my life and hand you her fate if I did not believe.'*

*'I will travel with you to a point, if you like,' he offered.*

*She couldn't deny her fear. 'Company would be appreciated.'*

*The doors flew open as the midwife raced in, followed by the doctor with James close behind.*

*The midwife couldn't hide her horror when she saw the state of the sheets, now red. 'Why didn't you buzz?' she said, pulling the bedding off as the doctor began trying to fix the problem Evelyn knew he never could.*

*James' face had gone ghost white. Evelyn held out the neatly wrapped bundle of life to him. His arms shook as he took the baby. He knew this was bad. He could see it in her eyes.*

*Evelyn watched him, savouring her last moments with him.*

*'Tell me what's happening!' James pleaded, trying desperately to avoid his wife's terrified eyes.*

*The doctor didn't answer, yelling for more people instead.*

*It would be too late.*

*'James,' she said, but he couldn't look.*

*She tried again, softly. 'James, I've thought of a name.'*

*'What?' he said, through quivering lips.*

*'She is the heart of the Keshet, James. She is Violet.' It was all she could muster. The most she could offer as explanation for what lay ahead. She'd told him tales of the rainbow before. She hoped he'd tell Violet one day.*

*'Violet.' He nodded and wiped his tear-streaked face.*

*'It's okay,' she reassured.*

*James looked at the doctor and watched, disconnected, as the doctor gave him the slightest shake of his head. His heart fell to a depth it had never known.*

*'I love you, both.'*

*'We love you, Evelyn,' James whispered.*

*He was there for her, the moment it was over, and he stayed with her through the journey, as he'd promised. Later, he returned to the child Evelyn had named Violet and he left with her, the part of himself he could only ever give once.*

*Now all he could do . . . was wait.*



## CHAPTER ONE

*'As memory may be a paradise from which we cannot be driven, it may also be a hell from which we cannot escape.'*

*John Lancaster Spalding*

Smooth black lines bled from me – soul to hand to paper – begging for release. Charcoal wasn't my usual medium, but lately it seemed appropriate. With my back to the window, the sun cast a bright glow around my shadow on the remaining white. Beyond that, the charcoal began to carve out stronger, sharper lines as I dived deeper and lost myself within my work. That's what art did to me – it almost made time stand still.

*Almost.*

I was different, despite my efforts not to show it. I couldn't fool myself. The best I could do was stick to the rules. It was the only way. School, training and research – when I was of any use. That's how I held on to the control that had never been so important, or so fragile.

Lines had been drawn. Phoenix had what we wanted and we had what he was willing to do anything to lay his hands on. And if I should die in the process? Well, he'd see it as a well-deserved victory.

That didn't mean I was going to make it easy for him. If the Grigori Scripture remained in the hands of exiles an unfathomable number of innocent lives would be at stake. So, that left us with his suggestion – the trade. It wasn't ideal. If we handed over the Exile Scripture, Phoenix was going to do something so devastating we could not even begin to comprehend the price.

Or how many would have to pay it.

*How does one really calculate the cost of resurrecting the mother of all darkness from Hell?*

I tasted the apple – sweet and young, smelled the flowers – so heavy with pollen the air thickened. I flinched at their nearness, but I was slow to react, still lost to the hauntings, charcoal slashes now rigid and intense. Even as I heard the sound of wings crashing I channelled that, along with the flashes of morning and evening as they ripped through my vision, into the paper on my easel.

I finally snapped out of it at Miss Kinkaid's distinctive throat-clearing. She was hovering over my artwork. I didn't need to guess why.

'Ah-hem, Violet –'

But now that I was aware of my surroundings again, my entire body rang with alarm bells.

*Damn it, not again.*

Griffin was going to be pissed.

'Miss Kinkaid, you need to move away from the window,' I said, cutting her off before she could critique, already standing as I took a few deep breaths to steady my angelic senses. It was bad enough for normal Grigori, who had one, occasionally two, senses. I was the first to experience all five and, well – it

was more than overload.

'I, *well* . . . I beg your pardon?' She slapped her hand over her chest as if I had just insulted her very existence.

I rolled my eyes.

*Same reaction every time.*

'Yes. Now. And the rest of you!' I called out to my art class. Luckily we were a relatively small group of fifteen. 'Backs against the far wall!' I ordered, grabbing my mobile phone and typing in 'OIO3' before hitting send and dropping it.

*Out in open, three exiles en route.*

Yeah, we'd even come up with an abbreviation for my . . . spells. Sometimes I just couldn't stop my defences from dropping – especially when I was working on art, I just forgot about everything else.

My classmates looked at me like I was a freak and even though I didn't have time to care, it still grated on me.

*Maybe because they're right.*

'I'm really sorry, everyone, but move it!' I said, starting to literally heave people from one side of the room to the other – the display of my inhuman strength leaving my classmates' eyes popping out of their heads and mouths hanging ajar. The outright screaming would start later when they realised that this wasn't some practical joke. For now, everyone was affecting a certain amount of cool, just in case there was a hidden camera. As it was, I could already see Tristan Newland holding up his mobile phone.

Exiles were coming, they were almost here. I cursed myself. If I'd just kept my shields up for another half hour I would have been outside school grounds and this whole thing would be easier.

The thing about exiled angles is there aren't many rules they have to – or bother to – follow and while it's difficult for them to locate Grigori, angel-human hybrids like me, in our homes due to the protective barriers all homes naturally emit, every other place, including school, was fair game.

I pulled my jumper off. 'The windows are going! Close your eyes!' I commanded my classmates, who were now starting to react. Only half of them took me seriously, burying their faces in their knees. Maybe they thought I was taking them hostage. It probably didn't look good when I pulled out my very lethal-looking dagger from its 'glamoured' sheath, the glamour acting as a camouflage to ensure no one even knew it was there. Once revealed, though, all eyes could look nowhere else.

'Oh, dear God,' Miss Kinkaid whimpered.

But there wasn't time to help them anymore because right then three exiles came crashing through the glass windows with the force of a freight train, showering almost all the glass and surrounding woodwork straight into the room and over my classmates.

*Exhibitionists!*

I saw a few people hit by stray shards of glass, but nothing major. Yet.

Three against one was bad. Three against one – who also had fifteen defenceless humans to protect – was worse. A white-haired exile clapped sights on me immediately and started lunging in my direction. I had less than a second to react, knowing I couldn't leave the other two free to get expressive with their own version of art on my classmates – maim and torture.

As the exile prepared to land, I dropped my dagger and rolled, narrowly missing his fist and giving myself just enough time to grab the next strawberry-blond exile and hurl him like a bowling ball into the third one before Whitey was back on top of me. I paid for the move, my head pounding into the nearest desk, smashing it in two.

Whitey threw me to the ground and straddled me before proceeding to pummel fist after fist into my face, all within seconds. I managed to wriggle enough to get a knee to his gut and scrambled back, jumping to my feet.

Two more figures came flying through the now glassless windows, landing gracefully behind the three exiles. They didn't hesitate, just pulled their daggers and jumped into the fray. I breathed out a sigh of relief, before landing a fist into the face of the exile moving in on me. My strike packed enough force to throw him to the wall, giving me a chance to grab my dagger and draw upon the power that welled in the base of my stomach. I called it up.

My signature amethyst mist cloaked the room and I smiled as it encircled me. The exiles all stopped moving, stilled by my power and unable to break the hold.

I could feel a trickle of warm blood slipping down the side of my face. That earlier head-pounding had caused some damage.

'Hey, guys,' I said, to Beth and Archer, biting my lip.

My classmates started to scream or cry. I didn't blame them.

Beth and Archer simultaneously raised their eyebrows. 'This is the third time this week, Violet.'

I walked over to Whitey, slumped against the wall. He

could hear me, talk if needed. He watched me coming, knew what I could do to him. The very same thing that had led them to me let him know just how powerful I was. Yeah, apparently . . . I radiate the stuff.

He was young. Not just in looks but in experience. I was willing to bet he hadn't been here for much longer than a year, which was more than I could say for the other two. Millennia of existence as angels really didn't prepare them for taking human forms. This one looked awkward in his body, like it was the wrong fit. No surprises he was male. They all chose to be male, at least *almost* all. From their point of view males were superior and females the lesser gender, with no power and the added disadvantage of monthly bleeding.

*Idiots.*

This one didn't look more than my age, his bright white hair standing tall. He'd used one of those granny hair dyes and it was turning purple. I almost laughed, imagining him becoming human and then spending the next few weeks experimenting with hair colours.

Miss Kinkaid rose to her feet, shaking against the wall like a newborn foal and having to lean against it for support.

'V-V-Violet, put . . . Put that w-weapon away. We need to call the . . . police,' she said, losing almost every other word in a hiccupping sob.

I sighed. This wasn't good. And even though we had it covered, I wondered if we might be causing some kind of psychological damage to these people later in life. Griffin, the head Grigori in the city, assures me not, but still . . .

At least the art studios are in a separate building, otherwise the entire school would have charged in on us by now. As it

was, I could hear people moving in our direction already.

'I wish it were that simple,' I mumbled, not taking my eyes from the exile who would have killed me with a smile on his face, before finishing off everyone in the room out of a misplaced sense of rightfulness and, more practically, to cover the evidence. Exiles were thorough, if nothing else.

'Do you want me to make you human?' I said, glancing at the other two exiles. During an outright attack like this, we weren't required to make the offer and I knew what their response would be anyway, but I still felt the need to verbalise it.

*Yeah. Sentimental.*

The exile didn't respond, he just continued to look at me like he was envisaging ripping my head off. I tightened my grip on my dagger.

Archer cleared his throat. Unfortunately, I knew why.

I held back a sigh of frustration. 'Do any of you have a message for me?' I asked, sticking to protocol.

The exile didn't pause to consider his words, while the other two simply growled.

'I exceed you in every way! I'm more powerful than you can imagine and when I kill you, others will bow at my feet!' he exclaimed, unable to contain the anger from his human form, an emotion that his previous non-corporeal self could not process. He was already well down Delusional Way.

Not exactly the message I was looking for, but good enough.

In time with Miss Kinkaid's shriek, I ran my dagger through his chest, being sure to make it a fast killing wound. It didn't need to go through the heart, lots of other places would

ensure an exile's end. The only essentials were that a Grigori blade inflicted the injury and we made it count. Otherwise, exiled angels were damn near impossible to get rid of.

Archer didn't hesitate, taking out one of the exiles and then spinning on the spot to face the other, his blade slashing straight across his neckline.

I looked away. Archer was old school, and very good.

Two of my classmates, Ethan Willis and Meredith Faro, chose that moment to break out of shock and into hysterics. Ethan's pitch was the highest. At least no one was trying to bolt this time.

It wouldn't last long, Beth had already moved in on my classmates. Every Grigori had a particular strength and we were all a bit different. Beth's strength was memory. Like all of our gifts, though, it wasn't endless. She had about a ten-minute window of opportunity and only about a half-hour 'wipe' capacity *and* she needed to have touched her target in each case.

She started with Miss Kinkaid, who was now silent, despite her mouth being wide open and paused in a tense scream. Beth brushed her hand comfortingly.

'It's okay. Everything is okay now.'

She moved by her, then on to the next, touching everyone in some way, even those who cowered from her, before moving to give them each a good stare.

'Help is on the way,' she said soothingly. 'Would you all look at me for a moment?' she continued, pushing a little sweetness into her voice, which had everyone slightly entranced. Beth was old school, too.

Archer jumped back out the window and disappeared,

while I walked around, making sure all evidence of the exiles' presence had gone. Their bodies were the easiest part; as soon as they were 'returned', whatever magic had given them a physical form quickly disappeared along with their remains, but every now and then other remains were left behind. Weapons usually, but more recently we had started to check for other things that might hide a message, even though I knew Phoenix wouldn't bother with such plotting. He liked to deliver messages in person.

'You have all been in art class, like any other day. Vandals have been causing havoc in the area and just like they did on *Friday* last week,' Beth shot me a loaded glance, 'a gang of guys rode by on their bikes, hurling rocks through the windows. It was just lucky Miss Kinkaid was so quick to act that you all managed to huddle into the corner in time. A few of you were caught by flying glass but you're all okay and know you are safe now. Unfortunately, none of you managed to get a look at any of the perpetrators. Does everyone agree?'

My teacher and classmates all began to nod.

Beth waited until she was satisfied. 'Okay. Now sit silently until we are gone. Do not pay any attention to us and you will not remember us once we have left, all except for Violet, who is your classmate and was huddled in the corner with the rest of you.'

They all nodded again.

Archer made me jump when he came bounding back through the window with a number of brick-sized rocks hammocked in his Road Runner T-shirt. He scattered them around the room to explain for the shattered glass, dropping a couple on top of the desk I had broken with my forehead.

'It's just lucky your school doesn't have video cameras, otherwise this would be a lot more difficult,' he noted.

Rapid footsteps sounded down the hall. Beth and Archer both tensed.

'It's okay, just Spence,' I said. I could sense Grigori, not as easily as I could exiles, but I ran with Spence every day – I knew his gait well enough to be sure this was one of our kind.

Spence almost slid into the room, then looked at my classmates and saw they were held in a momentary daze and took about one second to put all the pieces together. He snorted. 'I've missed it, haven't I? Jeese, Eden, you could've at least called me!'

Yeah. I felt bad. He'd been close and Spence loved a fight.

'Sorry. I barely had time to call in Beth and Archer.'

We all knew they were first call in these instances. Beth's ability to make problems . . . go away, was essential.

'Shields?' Spence said, just as I started to feel the purr of another arrival.

'Yeah,' I admitted, hating that I still wasn't strong enough.

There was another thump as two more feet were propelled through the window. I raised my eyes to the roof.

*Did everyone have to be here?*

Lincoln took in the scene in much the same way as Spence. His eyes landed on me immediately after. 'You're hurt,' he all but growled.

I sighed. 'No. I'm fine. Stupid, but fine,' I said, trying not to focus on him, not that it made any difference. His very presence sent every part of me, human and angel, into overdrive.

He looked like he wanted to come closer but after a considering look at my head he must have deduced the wound

wasn't that bad and instead turned to Beth. 'How long do we have?'

'About thirty seconds until this lot come good,' she said, taking Tristan's phone from his hand, no doubt deleting his recent footage.

'And about a minute until the school rains down on this building,' Spence said.

I grabbed a few tissues from Miss Kinkaid's desk and started mopping the blood from my face. It really wasn't bad.

'Violet, are you okay from here?' Lincoln asked.

I sheathed my dagger, tied my hair back into its original ponytail. 'Yep, you guys go.'

Spence went back out the door the way he'd come. Archer and Beth leaped out the window. Lincoln moved to follow but paused briefly.

'Is that yours?' he asked, gesturing to my charcoal drawing, now on the ground.

'Yeah.'

His brow furrowed. 'It's beautiful . . . and awful, too. What is it?'

'It's me.'