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I will also include specific content warnings at the top of each chapter as needed (written in white text so you can highlight and read, or you are also free to skip if you want to avoid any potential spoilers).

Chapter One

In the beginning, God destroyed the heavens and the Earth.

- *Covenant of Ashes 1:1*

I have an impossible memory.

In it, I am standing on the deck of a ship, clinging to the leg of a woman who shares my face. I do not know her name. I do not know if I ever knew her name. She is singing something, soft and sweet.

“Brochan lom, tana lom, brochan lom na sùghain

Brochan lom 's e tana lom 's e brochan lom na sùghain.”

I am laughing as I sing along, stumbling over throaty consonants and lilting intonations. It takes no effort for my mouth to curve around each syllable. They are second nature to me, inscribed into the muscle tissue of my jaw and throat. Yet I cannot remember their meaning.

All around us, there are men scattered about the deck, scurrying to and fro as they pull rope and haul masts and gather seawater in buckets. Their clothes are tattered and bleached from days upon the rough seas. My own dress, thick and woolen and gray, is beginning to fray at the hem.

A figure at the helm yells something that makes the working men pause and the woman’s song cease.

“Land ho!”

Everyone turns their heads towards the horizon and I follow suit. At first, there is nothing. Then, I squint, and I see the tiniest speck of brown on a gray-blue canvas. Land. It has been days? Weeks? Months? So long my world has been nothing but sea and sky.

“Prepare to drop anchor!”

The men rush to their stations and the woman kneels down beside me, taking my face in her hands. She presses cold lips against my forehead and whispers to me, *“Our new home, Niamh.”*

The memory is so vivid, so vibrant, so tangible that I can almost convince myself it is real. I feel the burning wind stinging my eyes. I smell the salt and decay of the sea wafting up from the waves below. I know the warmth of the strange woman’s embrace, and sometimes at night I ache for the brush of her gentle fingertips against my hairline.

But my name is not Niamh, I do not know the woman who shares my face, I have never sailed beyond sight of land, and Heaven is the only home I have ever had.

A devilish trick conducted by an overactive mind, Father Amitiel once told me. Humble yourself to God, and remember that you are nothing more than your duty.

Breathe in.

I am a servant of the Lord.

Breathe out.

I am an Angel of Heaven.

Breathe in.

I am a child of God.

Breathe out. Remember the memory is not real. Remember what is.

See the pews of the Church, laid out in neat rows. Recognize the faces of my brethren standing beside me, eyes fixed on the lectern at the front with rapt attention. Listen to the soft melody of Mother Armaros' soprano voice as she sings our closing hymn.

*"God on high, worshiped and revered,
Let not your guidance go unheeded
Your righteous hand neglected.*

*God on high, all-powerful and feared
By your children be proceeded
Your holy word protected."*

Mother Armaros lifts her hands from the lectern and the entire chorus of Angels joins in her song, joyous and resounding. My own voice follows, our voices rising together as the melody reverberates off the stained glass windows of the church. Pings against the high arched ceiling, the oak beams.

*"May our wings stretch high and wide
Our faith and love unquestioned
Our duty wholly felt in every breath.*

*To you, our Lord, we abide,
Our war with Hell predestined,
We fight and serve you 'til death."*

The last note rings in our ears as it echoes all around us. Our voices, our bodies, our souls as one.

"Brother and Sisters of God, I thank you for your time and devotion this blessed morning." Mother Armaros never raises her voice, but somehow when she speaks, her words carry across the expanse of pews and Angels. A spell we cannot help but heed. "Go forth into this most sacred of days with your faith, your goodness, and above all else, your duty. Amen."

The congregation echos her. "Amen."

The piercing call of the Bell rings out as we file out of the pews and through the grand wooden doors onto the frostbitten earth. Outside, Heaven is just beginning to come alight. The

sun peaks its glowing brow above the glistening mountains, and I watch its arc as I follow the mass of Angels to the Hall for the breaking of our nightly fast.

They drift together in pairs, in groups. Exchanging quiet whispers on the sea salt air as they walk side-by-side. I should be used to it by now, but I cannot help the pang in my chest as I watch them. As I note my own lonely footsteps.

I catch Gadreel twisting over her shoulder, staring at me with pursed lips. Except, her gaze does not linger on my eyes or my face like I might expect. No, she eyes my right wrist, wrapped in the compression bandage that I have worn for nearly a year.

I raise my hand to wave in her direction, and the instant I do, she turns to the Angel next to her — Nathanael — and murmurs something in his ear that makes him cup a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

I feel my cheeks grow hot, and I force myself to look somewhere else, anywhere else.

Concrete buildings dot the blooming horizon: the Barracks, the Infirmary, the Hall. On the east side of Heaven, the Watchtower looms over all, jutting nearly one hundred feet into the sky. In the west, the Crucifix sits perched on the cliffside, overlooking the Sparring Field. At sunset, it casts a shadow cross over all of Heaven.

We are halfway to the Hall when I notice a pair of boots have fallen in step with my own. It is an arhythmic pattern of footfall, a slight favor of the right leg, a gentle huff of steady breath: more familiar to me than even my own.

“Father Amitiel.”

I look up, and Father Amitiel is smiling at me. Bright white teeth stark against the red scar cutting a line through his upper lip to his left cheek. His face is otherwise unmarred, handsome skirting around the edges of blossoming wrinkles. Warm brown eyes, dark thick brows, strong square jaw. “Sister Azrael. I trust you enjoyed the service this morning?”

“Indeed, Father. It is always a pleasure to listen to Mother Armaros preach. Today, especially.”

“No daydreaming then?” He quirks a single eyebrow. An infuriating trick I have never managed to learn even after years under his study.

I sigh. “You know me too well, Father.”

“No such thing. It is only my duty to look out for my Guarded.”

I choose not to point out that Father Amitiel has five other Guarded he could choose to focus his attention on. In the past year since my return to Heaven, it seems as if he has decided to save his scrutiny for me, and me alone.

Father Amitiel lowers his voice. “Anything particular about this daydream you should like to tell me?”

“It is only the same I always have,” I say.

“Ah. The song, the ship, the woman?”

“Yes.”

“No other visions? Nightmares? Feelings of... unease?” He dances his way through the question with tentative steps, light and curious.

I look down at our feet, our matching strides carving echoes of our steps into the frosted gravel. “Not since the last I reported to you months ago.”

I still have the occasional haunted sleepless night, the odd flash of vivid faux-imaginings, the sporadic flare of bursting, unexplainable emotion. But these are manageable nuisances. Nothing like the debilitating episodes I suffered upon my initial return from Crusade, so I am told. My memories of those first few months back are difficult to parse through now. Like the shattered remains of a stained glass mural: jagged fragments of color and shape all blurring together in a jumbled heap.

I swallow my guilt as Father Amitiel nods, believing my lie. No, lie is too strong a word. I am not lying. To lie is to sin. I only wish to spare my Guardian the weight of my small troubles.

“I am glad to hear it,” he says. “Sometimes days of great importance can... trigger the mind in all manner of strange ways.”

“Indeed, Father Amitiel.”

“And your wrist? Have you made any further progress in your healing?”

I glance down at the knobbled joint connecting my right hand to my forearm, encased in layers of flexible cotton. “Some.” I try to bend it back and straighten my wrist so my thumb is in line with the rest of my arm, but jolting pain stops me. “I can manage most daily activities now, but still cannot wield a scythe with it.”

“Ah yes, Father Raphael told me of your frustrations on the Sparring Field.”

“It should be healed by now. A year is more than enough time.” I try to keep my voice even, but some of my bitterness must seep through, because Father Amitiel frowns at me.

“It is entirely possible that you will never fully heal, Sister Azrael. And if that is so, your energy would be better spent working to accept that matter than to fight it.”

It takes a considerable amount of restraint to bite my tongue. Father Amitiel is right. It is the same thing Father Raphael keeps telling me — with increasing gravity — everytime I go to visit him in the Infirmary. But if my wrist never heals, then how am I to pick up a scythe? How am I to ever go on Crusade again? How am I to rise through the ranks of Heaven’s order and earn the title of Seraphim? One small injury I cannot even remember sustaining, and everything I have ever worked for starts crumbling in my very hands.

Father Amitiel must sense my urge to argue, because he adds, “There are other ways to serve the Lord beyond Crusade. Believe me, I should know.” He nods down to his right leg, to the limp that leaves his footsteps uneven in the thin coat of morning frost.

It is not the same, I want to say. You are already a Seraphim. You have nothing left to prove. No one looks at you like you are broken. No one mocks you like you are useless. I want to, but I will not, because Father Amitiel’s intentions are good, even if he does not understand.

Father Amitiel tilts his head towards me, eyes narrowing. His smile is tighter now than it was, tense around the corners where it is usually easy. “Have a blessed Dies Festos Crucis, Sister Azrael.”

He wants to say something else — I can see it etched in the crinkles around his brows — but I am grateful he does not. I would rather not ruin my day by focusing on the failures of my body before I have even broken my fast. “And you, Father Amitiel.”

He departs from my side with a silent nod, and I am left to walk the rest of the way to the Hall on my own. The sun has nearly risen now, its bright white head almost fully visible. It is beginning to slow its pace this time of year. Soon, the winter months will be upon us, and we will have to live our lives under the cover of daily darkness.

When I finally reach the Hall, I am briefly surprised at the level of noise emanating from within. The breaking of the congregation’s nightly fast is usually a quiet affair, the gentle clinks of forks against porcelain plates woven with soft-spoken prayers for the day to come. But today, as I enter the Hall, I see it is abuzz with chatter. Everyone is alight with excitement for the festivities soon to come. I load my plate, find an empty table near the back of the Hall, and say Grace before starting in on my meager breakfast of steamed oats and honey. I do not want to overfill myself before the feast this evening.

I am two bites in and halfway through a silent recitation of the Gracious Psalm when a plate is set down across from me. My table is no longer empty, and I try to swallow my irritation as I see it is Phaniel who takes the seat opposite mine without so much as a simple greeting.

“Who do you think it will be?” she says, her mouth half-full.

I wait for her to finish chewing before I respond. She may not, but I can choose to adhere to some semblance of decorum. “Sister Phaniel, God bless your soul.”

“And yours, Sister Azrael, and yours,” Phaniel parrots back before repeating her question.

“I do not know what you are referring to, Sister.”

“The Hand of God! Who do you think will get it?”

“I am not sure why you think I would be privy to that information.”

“Oh, come off it. Everyone knows you and Brother Michael are close. He must tell you these sorts of things.”

I try not to bristle at the mention of Michael. Before we went on Crusade together, he was nothing more than my rival — a petty relationship built on sparring matches that I mostly lost. Then he rescues me from a burning ship during our last battle, gets awarded the Hand of God for it, and suddenly everyone presumes we share some kind of deeper connection. I should be grateful. He did save my life, after all, and sometimes I think that the only reason I do not suffer complete social ostrization is because he still deigns to associate with me. The rest of the congregation avoids me like the plague, except for Michael. And Phaniel, I suppose.

“The Hand of God is Brother Michael’s title, and it is his sole responsibility to pass it on as he sees fit.”

“So you do not know who he is going to give it to?”

“No, Sister Phaniel. I do not.” Because I am a proper, faithful servant to our most gracious Lord, I do not add, *And even if I did I certainly would never tell the biggest gossip in Heaven.*

“Shame.” Sister Phanuel pops a grape into her mouth and chews loudly. “I was certain that if anyone knew, it would be you.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

Phanuel waves my disingenuous apology away. “I have my own theories. I think...”

Phanuel spends the entirety of breakfast prattling on about the various merits of the returning Angels and her predictions for the night ahead. First it is Bariel’s skill with a scythe, then it is Umbriel’s strategic quick thinking, then it is assumptions about Mother Armaros’ departing speech, and then general judgements about our peers’ most recent indiscretions and antics. Personally, I agree that Lailah’s inability to sing our closing hymn in any kind of even vaguely musical pitch is amusing, but I would never say that to another member of our congregation.

By the time she has run out of idle gossip to spout in my direction, her plate is empty and what is left on mine plate has gone cold. I use the opportunity to escape, offering to take both hers and mine to the kitchens to be washed.

Heaven’s Bell chimes as soon as I have set the plates on the counter. Dies Festos Crucis or not, we still have duties to attend to — at least until our 181st Crusade arrives at Heaven’s gate. My duties call me to the Nursery. It is a short walk, only a few hundred feet east of the Hall, and I am greeted by Father Raphael at the door.

“Blessed Dies Festos Crucis, Sister Azrael.”

“And you, Father Raphael.”

Once inside, I hang my coat on the rack and pull on the silk gloves we use to handle the infants. “How was Little Uriel last night?”

“Not as bad as she has been on other occasions.”

I wince. “But not well?”

Father Raphael laughs. Despite his aged position of Seraphim and the number of sleepless nights he spends caring for the young in the Nursery and the sick in the Infirmary, his face remains uncreased by time and exhaustion. “She was up most of the night, screaming and crying and trying to crawl out of her crib. But I managed to settle her down in the early hours of the morning. She is sleeping in the dayroom now, so it is probably best not to disturb her.”

Relief floods me, and I catch myself as I start to smile. As much as I dislike caring for the infant, it would be impertinent of me to make such feelings known to Father Raphael. “Is there anything else I could help you with, Father?”

He smiles. “Yes. In fact, there is.”

I spend the next several hours helping Father Raphael prepare the Nursery for our new Fledglings. They will come alongside our returned Crusade, freshly saved from the wicked arms of the demons who stole them. Each year, the number of new Fledglings varies. Last Dies Festos Crucis, when I was returning from Crusade, there were only two: Uriel and Nelchael — Phanuel’s Guarded. But with the sheer amount of blankets Father Raphael has made me fold and bottles I have been asked to fill, I imagine that number will be much higher this year.

The Bell tolls, summoning us to the Church for prayers followed by our midday meal, and I bid Father Raphael farewell. Usually, all the Seraphim join the congregation for prayers, but on a day like Dies Festos Crucis, Father Raphael must be ready to receive the Fledglings and the injured Crusaders at any moment.

We sing and pray and lend our ears to Mother Armaros as she preaches, but all around I sense my peers growing more and more restless. It is hard to predict exactly when the Crusade will return, but each passing instant makes their arrival feel increasingly imminent. Once Mother Armaros has dismissed us, we follow our morning path to the Hall where everyone picks at their food, waiting for the blare of trumpets from the Watchtower.

It never comes, and we reluctantly pass our dirty plates and utensils on to the kitchen before departing for our next duty at the instruction of the Bell. For me, the afternoon Bell signals it is time to go to the Greenhouse. For all the other Angels of my rank, it demands that it is time to go to the Sparring Field.

It is difficult to watch them go, chatting and laughing as they make their way to the western end of Heaven. Just another reminder that I am a hollowed out husk. Unable to fulfill my singular duty to God, to Heaven. Rendered useless by a crippled wrist.

Father Verchiel thought he was paying me a kindness when he assigned me to help him care for the Greenhouse. *I am getting far too old to be doing it all myself*, he had said, chapped lips cracking with wrinkles as he smiled. *All the weeding and watering is getting to be too much. Every time I bend down, I am afraid I will not be able to stand back up.*

Though it is a pitiable task — assigned only to give me something to occupy my useless hours — I have come to appreciate my time in the Greenhouse. Its gentle quiet. Its aromatic, earthy musk. The light that beams through the glass walls, bouncing off waxy green leaves. It is an entirely different world to the rest of Heaven and its gray, concrete buildings.

Most days, I spend the several hours of weeding and watering reciting prayers or humming hymns. Today, I busy my mind by attempting to recall the names and faces of every Angel sent out on the 181st Crusade.

Hecca, Samael, Ridwan, and Maroth. Orifiel, Nathanael, and Micah. Ariuk and Krael. Metatron.

Though it is conjured by my own recollection, the last name still takes me by surprise. I almost forgot Metatron will be returning today. I try to picture his face, his chestnut brown hair, his broad shoulders, but the only image I can conjure is that of his twin — Sandalphon — broken and bloody on the deck of a burning demon ship.

Sandalphon was one of the Angels in my Crusade. Strong, quick-tempered, and occasionally cruel. He, Michael, and I were a Flock. A trio hand-picked to infiltrate demon ships approaching shore. On our last excursion — the same that left my wrist indelibly injured — Sandalphon was brutally murdered by the Hellspawn we were sent to defeat. I was the one to find his body.

At least, I am told as much. I do not remember much of my Crusade. It is all a hazy fog, shattered with vivid fragments of broken memories. A shard of blood-soaked wood. A corpse splayed out amongst flames. Vacant brown eyes. A face battered nearly beyond recognition.

The tragedy of Sandalphon's death was doubled by the fact that Metatron did not get a chance to grieve his twin. Last Dies Festos Crucis, we returned to Heaven with the news of Sandalphon's death, and the very next morning, Metatron left for his own Crusade.

My wrist begins to ache, and I look down to find my knuckles going white as they grip the watering can with undue strength. I force myself to breathe, to relax.

There is no reason to dread Metatron's return. There is no cause for the swell of guilt that rises at the recollection of Sandalphon's death.

There is nothing you could have done to save him.

This is what I tell myself.

I am a servant of the Lord.

I am an Angel of Heaven.

I am a child of God.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

A high, reverberating sound wails outside: the warble of a trumpet blaring from the Watchtower. The sound of the Angels united.

The Crusade has returned, and it is time to welcome them back into Heaven's arms.

Chapter Two

His hand was forced by those harbingers of chaos — the ones He once called humanity.
- *Covenant of Ashes 1:2*

By the time I reach Heaven's Gate, the rest of the congregation has already gathered. They are all staring out at an empty landscape, crowded behind the massive arch.

I look up at the Latin phrase carved into the concrete. *Sumus filii dei*. We are children of God. It feels apt at this moment. All of us huddled together, awaiting our long-departed brethren like children awaiting a father's return home from a hard day's labor.

It takes several long minutes before the Crusade comes into view. First, nothing more than a collection of specks silhouetted against the horizon. Then, slowly, a staggering mass in dirtied white robes. Little by little, they come into view: battered, bruised, and bloody. Some of them carry filthy wailing bundles of cloth in their arms. The infants they rescued from the claws of Hell.

We do not utter a sound as they approach. There is only the soft trudge of their far off feet and the sparse song of the starlings, heralding in the early evening. The silent excitement of my peers is palpable, radiating off their shivering bodies in waves. I feel its echo pass through me, leaving behind a corrupted anxiety that has me taut like the string of a bow.

My hands ball into fists as I watch one of the approaching Crusaders stumble. From this distance, I cannot make out his face, but the crooked drape of his head, the hunch of his shoulders, the limp in his step tells me all I need to know: he will not make it to the Gate.

His fellows shuffle away from him as he sways from side to side dangerously. He stumbles again. A third time. I hear a gasp in the crowd as he drops to the ground.

I hold my breath, the sound of my own heartbeat pulsing in my ears. The fallen Angel lays still. Unmoving. His comrades, his friends, his Brothers and Sisters part around him like the Red Sea and keep walking towards the Gate.

It takes every ounce of willpower to keep my mouth shut and my feet rooted firmly to the ground. Every part of me burns to race through the Gate and help the poor Angel to his feet. Loop an arm around him and drag him back to Heaven if I have to.

But this is not our way. The returning Crusade must cross Heaven's Gate unaided by those within. In the unforgiving lands outside, in that limbo between our Heaven and the hell of the battlefield, we are at the mercy of God, and God alone. If our bodies cannot bear our own weight, how can they bear the great duty that God has bestowed upon us? If it is His will that we die alone and frost-covered a hundred yards from Heaven's Gate, who are we to interfere?

Though I curse my crippled wrist for all that it has cost me, I am grateful that my injury is relatively minor. If it had been worse, Michael might not have seen it worthwhile to save me, to help bring me back to Heaven.

Father Amitiel rarely talks of his own injuries — never about his scar, and only a few sparing details about his leg — but once, when I was much younger and we were hours into

conversation, he let slip that he injured his leg during the last battle of his last Crusade, and that he had to be dragged back to Heaven by one of his Flock. Father Amitiel said that he begged the other Angel to leave him, that he would never survive the journey and he was not worthy to cross Heaven's Gate so broken. The Angel ignored him, thank the Lord. *I have never been so grateful for a Brother's disobedience*, he had confessed, and when I asked him who the Brother was that saved him, he said no more.

The fallen Angel beyond the Gate lifts his head and lets out a small, broken sound. Something between a sob and a moan. I see a few of his fellow soldiers falter in their relentless steps, turning back to look at him. He opens his mouth again, and even though the sound of his voice is garbled and raw, this time the word he utters is unmistakable.

"Please."

For a second, I think the rest of the Crusade will abandon him there on the gravel road. A corpse left to freeze and petrify in the cold nights to come.

But after a moment of hesitation, four of the far off figures nod to each other and make their way to the fallen Angel. Hunching down, they lift him up and heave him onto their shoulders.

Air rushes out of my lungs as I remember how to breathe. There is a stinging sensation in my hands as I release them from their fists. When I look down, I find that my nails have carved bloody half-moon scars into the flesh of my palms. My wrist aches from the strain.

The Welcoming proceeds as usual. Eventually, the Crusade reaches the Gate, and we part ourselves down the middle to let them pass. Some of them manage a nod or a half-hearted smile as they pass us by, but most seem barely able to keep their feet shuffling forward. I try to match names to faces and count the number of those we have lost, but I cannot decipher the living from the dead in their hollowed cheeks and dull eyes and weathered skin.

The procession carrying their fallen friend trails in last. I lift myself onto my toes to catch a glimpse of his face, but their bodies block him from view as they quickly usher him to the Infirmary. The Seraphim follow close behind, blue robes billowing with their steps in the early evening breeze, and I wonder if the four saviors will be praised or punished for their rescue.

When it is over, it feels as though no time has passed at all. All the waiting, all the tension, all our sacred propriety dissipates into the air as we disperse for our own personal Dies Festos Crucis preparations.

A pair of pubescent Fledglings pass in front of me, giggling as they mutter something back and forth. It is only when they are out of earshot that I realize they were mocking the desperate cry of the fallen Angel. His heart-wrenching "Please" strangled into laughter coming out of their mouths. A knot forms in the pit of my stomach, and it stays there through the rest of the afternoon.

Hours later, I examine my reflection in my quarter's looking glass. Straw-yellow strands of hair brushed sleek and smooth and braided down my back. Cream skin splashed with freckles from a summer of endless days and constant sun. Eyes so pale that the blue of them is more like

ice than water, more empty than bright. I trace my fingers over my pallid cheeks, wishing that I had thought to snag some rosebuds from the Greenhouse while I was there earlier. The pink stain of the crushed petals might make my face look less flat.

I push the thought aside. Vanity serves no purpose to Heaven.

Outside, the sun kisses the horizon and turns the air to ice as it bids the sky farewell. Streams of Angels march South towards the Church, dressed in our finest: Fledglings in yellow robes with white trim, Angels in white and silver, and Seraphim in blue and gold. Many of my brethren have adorned themselves with makeshift jewelry and fineries. Lilacs laced through delicately braided strands of hair, glossy stones strung together into necklaces and bracelets, roses tucked into pockets or behind an ear. In comparison, I look rather plain.

I think of the rosebuds again, then remember the trick that Lailah taught me at Dies Festos Crucis two years ago. *Just a little pinch*, she had said, reaching for my face. *Works as well as any rosebud blush*.

I reach up and squeeze the flesh of my cheeks as hard as I can, thinking of how different my touch feels to the memory of hers. How I had laughed that night, head thrown back and hair loose from hours of dancing. How strange how much can change in two years.

We file inside and the entire congregation scatters around the edges of the Church, waiting to take their seats. All the pews have been removed, replaced by long feasting tables in neat rows. Everything is a blur of colors and lights: golden tablecloths strewn with candles and white petals, banners and fresh picked greenery lining the walls, draped silver fabric and shining lanterns hanging from the ceilings.

Behind me, the doors open and I step to the side as a line of Angels march out carrying armfuls of plates and utensils. They move quickly as they set the tables, sensing our anticipation for the Feast. I cannot help the excitement that swells in my chest, even though I stand alone in my corner of the Church.

The food follows, carried all the way from the kitchens, steaming and heaped on massive silver platters that have to be carried by two Angels for each one. There is smoked lamb, dark rye bread, roasted potatoes, dried fish, bowls of syrupy stew, whipped goat cheese, hearty gravy, and a near endless array of flaky pastries dripping in butter. The platters are set on the tables, left to tempt us until the returned Crusade finds their way to the Church.

Any conversation dies the moment they walk into the room. A single file line of drooping heads and shuffling steps dressed in black and red. Mourning colors. Worn to echo the empty spaces where our fallen soldiers should sit.

Father Sarathiel leads them to their own small table of honor near the back of the Church. Once they are sat, the departing Crusade — each with a purple lupine pinned to their robes — files into the matching table across. The Seraphim are next, taking their seats at the circular table atop the raised stage at the front of the Church, where the lectern usually sits.

Only once all seven Seraphim have taken their places can the rest of the congregation fill in the remaining empty seats. As soon as everyone is seated, we take hands and let silence

overwhelm us. A moment to pray. A moment to give thanks. A moment to grieve. A moment of quiet to collect ourselves before the Feast begins.

Father Gabriel, from his seat at the grand circular table, claps his hands together and shatters the stillness. “In the name of our most Holy Lord, let us begin the Feast of Dies Festos Crucis.”

Immediately, each and every Angel dives for the vast array of dishes, filling ceramic plates and bowls and glasses with food and drink. I savor every bite of succulent lamb, every sip of honeyed mead, every mouthful of cheese and potatoes. Just as I am mopping up the last puddles of gravy on my plate with a hunk of bread, the near-empty platters are cleared away and replaced by new ones — piled high with various sweets and baked delicacies. As soon as they are placed on the table, I snatch an apple tart, a tender wedge of vanilla sponge, a crumbly scone topped with a mountain of cream and honey, and several squares of sugar dusted toffee. All this I wash down with careful sips of hot spiced cider, afraid that I may burst if I drink one sip too many.

By the time the tables are cleared of desert, the lining of my stomach feels stretched over like a drum. I am overfull, warm, and perfectly content.

“My Brothers and Sisters of God,” a booming voice pulls our attention to the front of the Hall. There, Father Verchiel stands, arms outstretched like the stained glass depiction of the Son on the cross. “God bless your souls.”

“And yours, Father Verchiel,” we answer in discordant reply.

“Each year, with the winter looming above our gentle horizons, we celebrate the rotation of our Crusades with Dies Festos Crucis. We dine, drink, dance, and make merry with the blessing of our most gracious God, but let us not make light of this most sacred day, lest we shame our Holy duty.

“If not for our Crusades guarding His Kingdom’s coast, the last inland vestiges of Humanity would certainly fall to the demonic tide pushing against our shores. We are the last defense against the forces of Hell, and we must uphold our duty in every facet of our short lives.

“In this, it is the duty and honor of the Seraphim to select twelve of Heaven’s finest soldiers to send out on Crusade each year, and today, on this most blessed of days, it is my honor to announce the names of those brave twelve.”

Father Verchiel clears his throat before listing out the names of the selected. They rise with each summons until the entire table, a united circle of twelve, are all standing. I watch their faces. Those lucky Angels gifted the chance to prove their devotion in God’s Holiest mission. I commit their names and faces to memory, knowing that for some, tonight will be the last I ever lay eyes on them.

“May God give you strength, courage, and faith as you embark on this sacred duty. May your Scythes be swift, your resolve steadfast, and your conviction unwavering. Let us pray for your safe return in a year and a day.” Father Verchiel inhales, deep and slow, his eyes closed. He smiles as he exhales and motions towards the back table. “Please take your seats, and allow me to call on Brother Michael for the passing of the Hand of God.”

A golden head rises amidst the sea of braided crowns and flower woven headdresses. Michael is shining Venus in a crowd of constellations, his face sculpted in the image of God's first and finest. His body chiseled as the stone floor beneath us.

Every pair of eyes follows as he makes his way to stand before the Seraphim table. Attention he seems well aware of — if his slow, purposeful stride or bright white smile are any indication. The whole affair might seem garish, conceited, or vain if he were anyone else. But he is not, and no one is off-put by his prideful display. *No one save for myself.*

I brush the thought away, distracting myself with another sip of barely warm cider. If anyone has the right to pridefulness, it is Michael, and if anyone has the right to judge him for it, it certainly is not me.

Michael reaches Father Verchiel and turns to face us all as the Seraphim resumes his seat. "Blessed Dies Festos Crucis, Brothers and Sisters. God bless your souls, each and all."

Even his voice is nothing short of perfection, low and rich and resonant.

"And you, Brother Michael," we all reply.

"I am humbled to be standing before you all this eve, prepared to pass on that most noble and good title of the Hand of God. Just as in voyages past and battles still to come, this year's Crusade had no shortage of valor or virtue or might — all marks of a true servant of our Lord. But only one of these soldiers is worthy of the title I bear. Only one who has exhibited such goodness and selflessness that he should be commended in the eyes of God Himself.

"It is my privilege to pass on the Hand of God to Brother Metatron."

My hand clenches around my goblet.

Dozens of heads turn in the direction of the returned Crusader's table, and mine follows their watchful dissent. I catalogue their weathered faces and malnourished bodies, searching for the mirror of Sandalphon's cocky smile. Those hard gray eyes. The swell of a rugged chest.

They are nowhere to be seen.

I catch my own confusion painted on the faces around me, and we return our attention to Michael when he clears his throat.

"In a selfless act of bravery and valor, Brother Metatron single-handedly fought off a horde of Demons to protect his fellow Angels and safeguard their retreat from battle. He, alone, is the reason why the other Angels in his Flock — Hecca and Maroth — have returned to us unscathed. But in his efforts, Brother Metatron was brutally injured, and now rests in the infirmary where Father Raphael nobly tends to his wounds."

The realization dawns on me at that moment. The fallen Angel at the gate. Metatron. The pit in my stomach blossoms once more, and I wonder if it ever truly went away.

"Let us honor our new Hand of God, and pray for his quick recovery." As Michael speaks, his eyes wander over the congregation. Up and down the long banquet tables, passing over each and every rapt ear. Every eager face. His roaming gaze abruptly stops when it lands on me. "God be with him."

I am paralyzed under the scrutiny of his eyes, my mouth sealed shut as the rest of the congregation echoes, "God be with him."

As I sit there, hands frozen in my lap, I swear I see Michael's lips curve up at the corners. A brief flicker of a smile that is gone in an instant. A candle in the wind. Its only traces the smoke of my memory.

When Michael finally drops his gaze on the way back to his seat, I am able to breathe again. Father Bezaliel stands and speaks. Every word he says flies in one ear and out the other. There is a hymn, and a prayer, and a murmured "Amen." The Angels beside me reluctantly take my hands, and my fingers are limp in their grasp.

Eventually, we are called to rise and move to the edges of the Church so that the tables can be cleared to make room for dancing and merriment. I follow the wave and find myself near the back of the Church, to the left of the grand doors.

After a brief time during which the Church is once again transformed, an Angel on violin — Umbriel, with her dark curls and lithe stature — strikes up a high, bright, lively tune. She is joined by another violin, then a guitar, then drums. They ebb and flow like a spritely spring storm, fast and vibrant and occasionally disjointed in their execution of the un-rehearsed melody.

Gradually, Angels trickle off the wall, pairing off to dance in a weaving jig. I watch Nathanael take Bariel by the hands and pull her out onto the floor, both laughing as she stumbles over wine happy feet. He spins her once, twice, thrice, hands drifting to her waist while hers reach up for his shoulders. When she twirls to an unsteady stop, their faces land so close together that I feel myself flush at the sight, the memory of those delicate fingertips pinching my cheeks rushing forth all over again.

On any other night, I could imagine Mother Armaros breaking the two dancers apart and dragging them to her Confessional. *Sinful*, she would say, with her hands folded over her lap. *Your first and only love should be for our Lord, and His is the only touch you should savor.* But it is not any other night — it is Dies Festos Crucis, and Mother Armaros smiles on as she watches from the stage, because God himself can hardly fault us for our revelry tonight.

The couples dance, and I watch, torn somewhere between envy and resentment. In years past, I would be out there with them, spinning and bounding and brimming with mirth. But that was before I left for Crusade, before I came back with bloodstained hands and a newfound understanding of the way a body can snap beneath my fingers. A dance and a fight begin very much the same way: touch giving way to brutality in an instant. I would not know how to rest my hands on someone's shoulders without reaching for their neck.

Besides, there is no one who would be willing to dance with me even if I wanted to.

There is a tap on my arm, and I whirl around to see him standing there. Michael. Surrounded by the smell of smoke. The scorch of flame. The taste of bile and tears and blood and seasalt air mixing in my mouth. He is strangling my broken wrist in his calloused hand, my shattered bone screaming for release. His breath is hot, hotter — somehow — than the fire that envelopes him, as he opens his mouth to roar.

"Sister Azrael," he says. Quiet. Conversational.

I blink. There is no ship. There is no fire. There is no hand wrapped around my wrist, though it aches as if there is one. There is only Michael and the Church and the music and the pounding of my heart trying to escape my chest.

Michael frowns. It is a foreign expression on his beautiful face, painting lines where the skin is usually so smooth. “I hope I did not startle you.”

I force myself to smile, occupying the time it takes me to remember how to formulate words. “I suppose I was so entranced watching the dancing that I did not notice you come up behind me.”

“I suppose so.” The corners of Michael’s eyes tighten, and his frown remains unmoved.

“That was a lovely speech you gave earlier,” I say in an attempt to fill the space between my racing heart and reeling mind.

Michael’s lips curl back where they belong. A perfect line of bright white teeth framed by a dazzling smile. “That is very kind of you to say. I look forward to when Brother Metatron is healed and able to receive the news of his award.”

“Indeed, Brother Michael.”

Michael dips his head down low so his eyes are level with mine, his voice just above a whisper. “I did notice your face went quite pale when I named Brother Metatron as the recipient, and I wanted to... check in.”

The reply, the closeness of his mouth, the way he lingers on those last two words, they are arrows loaded against a taut bowstring, eager for me to fight or run. Neither is an option. “All is well. Your mention of good Brother Metatron simply reminded me of the tragedy that befell his twin.”

“Yes,” Michael says. There is something dark and scrutinizing in his face. The crease between his brows. “Brother Sandalphon’s loss was devastating for us all. Especially yourself, given that you were the one to discover his body.”

I do not enjoy the way Michael keeps circling our conversation back to me. Something in it almost feels like an interrogation. “I can only imagine the grief that Brother Metatron must have felt. Still feels.”

Michael nods, eyes growing distant as the muscles in his face — his brow, his chin, his jaw — loosen. “There is something almost poetic in it.”

“In what?”

“Those Angels Brother Metatron saved could have very well been his own twin, in some other fate. A strange mirror image, only reflected in some new angle by his sacrifice.”

I ignore the veiled implication that I somehow failed to save Sandalphon. Michael’s last word is of far more interest to me. “Sacrifice? But Brother Metatron lives, does he not?”

Michael spares a glance left and right before bringing his voice down to a whisper. “He did not cross the gate of his own volition.”

“But he did cross it.”

“Of course, and I pray that Brother Metatron will heal with time and care. But there is a reason we leave the fates of our kin to God beyond the Gate. I doubt our invalid friend will ever make a full recovery, if he lives at all.”

I think back to Metatron’s staggering form on the frost. Frail. Weak. Broken. Maybe those helpful comrades who carried him through the Gate were only prolonging the inevitable. When a horse breaks its leg, it is the kind thing to slit its throat.

But would you have made it across that Gate without Michael’s help?

“Let us not speak of that now.” Michael clears his throat. “Care to dance?”

He extends his hand and I cannot help the way I recoil from it. An instinctive revulsion that collapses my chest and pulls me backwards. It is immediate, involuntary, and completely unwarranted. I watch Michael’s jaw clench as he withdraws his hand. “You seem rather fatigued. Perhaps it is best you head back to your quarters for the duration of the evening. Catch up on some much needed rest.”

I cannot tell whether Michael is trying to save face after my discourteous rejection, or if he is commanding me to leave as some kind of punishment for it. Either way, it is an escape from him and this suffocating Church — which seems to have grown louder and brighter and more dizzying during the course of our conversation. “Yes, I think you are right. Blessed Dies Festos Crucis, Brother Michael.”

I bow my head and turn to leave before Michael has even finished replying, “Blessed Dies Festos Crucis, Sister Azrael.”

I am grateful for the roar of music and laughter that covers my pounding footsteps as I hurry out of the Church. No one notices my erratic pace, my heaving chest, my wide shining eyes as I weave through the scattered Angels at the edges of the room. If anyone does, they will chalk up my crude exit to any number of excuses. Too much drink. Too much food. Too much excitement. All that ever-present smothering judgemental weight lifted for one night of celebration.

Then why are you choking on air? Even after I have burst through the Church doors, out into the crisp autumn night, my lungs are filled with seawater.

Stumbling through the darkness, tripping over the gravel path, I somehow find my way to the Greenhouse. My feet have carried me of their own free will. I distantly think that it would have been far better for them to take me back to my quarters, to my blanketed pallet, but to make that trek is a sheer cliff I refuse to plunge off of. The Greenhouse will do.

I fumble with the collar of my robes, rummaging underneath to find the greenhouse keys that I always wear in a chain around my neck. Usually, I do not need them, as Father Verchiel keeps the Greenhouse open from dawn until dusk, but he gifted me my own set just in case. I manage to extricate the keys from my robes and unlock the door — though it takes me several tries because of my shaking hands.

Once I am inside, I rush for the stone bench underneath the fig tree. There, I curl into myself: legs drawn up to my chest, arms wrapped around my shins, head tucked into the space between my knees.

Breathe, I remember Father Amitiel's frequent reminder to me in those first few months after my Crusade. The so simple, yet impossible command he gave me everytime he found me curled in a dark corner of Heaven, losing every trace of myself inside my own head. *Breathe, and remember who you are. What you are.*

I am a servant of the Lord.

I am an Angel of Heaven.

I am a child of God.

I suck in a sputtering breath. Another. Little by little, the air turns from sea to smoke. I am no longer drowning, but smoldering with every inhale. Painful as it is, I know that the inferno within me will burn down to embers with every rise and fall of my chest.

Slowly, my breathing steadies. My heart soothes its pace. I lift my head, release my knees, and run a hand down my face, unsurprised to find my cheeks wet.

It is only as I am wiping my tear stained eyes on the sleeve of my robes when I see it. A fox. Sitting in the moonlit shadow of a poppy bush. Its tail tucked under its back haunches as it stares at me. Black eyes boring into mine.

There is no fear or animosity in its tiny frame. No raised fur or pinned ears or snarling teeth.

"Hello," I say, creeping forward with one hand extended like an offering. It tilts its head. "How did you get in here?"

Just as quickly as it appeared, the fox darts out of sight. A flash of white and silver gone in an instant.

Eventually, I leave the Greenhouse and cross Heaven to make my way back to my room. When I fall asleep, I dream of foxes dancing in the snow, and pray that I never wake.