

## Lydia At Night, part 2

I tried to keep my attention on the angel Mallory, but the sights and sounds of the Isle of Dreams provided a constant distraction.

We sat at a small wrought-iron table amid a lush garden on a promontory overlooking the Sea of Neith. Huge waves crashed below while flower beds bursting with color surrounded us. Hedge-rows enclosed the entire area, forming living walls teeming with butterflies and honeybees. The insects joined flocks of multicolored songbirds, all flying to and fro through the endless gloaming of Elysium.

Mallory faced me across the table, legs crossed. Her wings had vanished as soon as she alighted on the island. She wore only a simple white tunic with no footwear, and her face held an inscrutable expression.

"Do you like it here?" she asked me.

How did I answer that? Elysium—the forbidden island, said to hold ultimate secrets of magic. Wizards and sorcerers had done unspeakable things, sacrificed their bodies—and in some cases their very souls—to try to get here. *Like* it? I could barely contain myself.

"It's beautiful," I stammered. At my neck Hiru's snakes waved and hissed, sensing my agitation. With a thought I calmed them, then tried to gain some measure of initiative in the conversation. "I hope when we've finished our business you'll give me some time to explore."

Mallory laughed. "I brought you to the island so we could speak in private, not to let you ransack the place. When we're done, I'm taking you right back to the beach."

*Damn it.* "Have you searched Elysium yourself?" Mallory obviously had no trouble getting to the island—maybe she'd already claimed its prize.

"No. I'm not interested in magical secrets, priestess."

As a gust of wind blew her dark hair back from her face I noticed for the first time a hidden ferocity in her eyes. What the hell *did* she want? My occult contacts knew little about the Exiles—not even why they'd been banished from heaven. None were thought to be evil—but all were considered extremely dangerous. Allannah died by her

own hand, Fallon went out in a berserk rage, and Claire sacrificed herself to stop an invading horror. Mallory represented the last of the four.

The time had come to stop beating around the bush. "You said you wanted to make me an offer."

"Yes. There's something I want you to do for me, Lydia. Consider it a job for hire. If you succeed, I will grant you anything in my power."

Well now...that sounded interesting. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"Just what I said: anything in my power to do. Maybe you want to come back here and poke around looking for hidden treasures. Perhaps you need a problem solved—or maybe you want someone dead."

Offering to kill? She sure didn't talk like an angel.

"That sounds fine, but what does someone like you need me for?"

Mallory looked out over the choppy sea and deep crimson sky. In the distance Erehon Beach curved away like a strip of burnished gold. "Long ago, I caused a man to turn away from God. Because of my actions, that man was consigned to Naraka by the gods of his pantheon." The angel had clenched her fists. "I've been searching for a way to undo my misdeed. I know you deal with some of those same gods." Her eyes locked onto mine again, frightening in their intensity. "I want you to sneak into Naraka and release him."

I took a moment before answering. Not because of any uncertainty on my part—she offered a reward far too good to pass up—but because I didn't want to appear overeager.

"So, I get this ghost out of hell and that's it?"

"Naraka isn't hell, it's just a cheap imitation."

"Then why not go there and get him yourself?"

Mallory lowered her eyes. "I am forbidden."

I wanted to ask her, *forbidden by whom?* Instead I stood and extended my hand. This was a huge opportunity for me, and not just to obtain an angel's favor. If I actually completed this mission, word of my success would spread fast—and in the world of magic sometimes reputation opened doors that pure power could not.

"I'll do it. All I need is some information on this unfortunate individual. What he looks like, the harmonic vibration frequency of his spirit, standard stuff. Also, would you like to tell me exactly why he got condemned to an eternity in a fiery netherworld?"

Mallory stood, took my hand, and shook it. "No."

*Okay, fine.* A thought struck me. "By the way, if I happen to fail, are you going to hunt me down and destroy me or something?"

The angel stared at me, her expression blank. "If you fail, you'll never leave Naraka."

"Oh. Right."

Mallory's wings appeared, radiant and white as new-fallen snow. She reached out and gathered me close with one arm, and together we ascended smoothly into the air. The angel's presence made me feel safe and protected in a way I'd rarely experienced, maybe not since the early days of my marriage to Ken, before everything went to shit. I almost blurted several embarrassing things as Mallory carried me back to the beach, but I managed to resist.

As we landed, the creature who owned the patch of sand next to mine, an ugly beast called Garaharman, growled and snarled at Mallory. She released me and regarded the dog-faced gremlin calmly. The monster looked about to lunge at her, but as it tensed to spring a sword appeared in the angel's right hand, shining like a pale full moon. Garaharman stared at the shimmering weapon for a moment, its eyes wide, then slowly slunk away.

"That thing is smarter than it looks," Mallory said. She turned and reversed the sword. "Here, take it."

"What?" I said stupidly. She wanted to give me her *sword*?

"It might get you out of a bad situation or two."

I grasped the hilt of the glowing blade, feeling the deep thrum of power vibrating through it. When Mallory released it the light winked out, leaving only dark, steely-gray metal.

The angel spread her wings and rose off the sand. "Good luck, priestess."

"Thanks," I replied. Within seconds she became a bright dot, soaring away above the endless sea.

A number of nearby beings crowded as close as possible to my little patch of territory, staring at the sword I'd been given. Damn rubbernecks.

"What are you people looking at?" I snapped. "I don't have time for this shit, I've got work in the morning." I concentrated, disconnecting my soul from the plane where Elysium and Erebus Beach lay—it felt like leaping down an elevator shaft. I fell unerringly towards Earth, returning to my physical body in mere seconds. I jerked awake and found I'd drooled all over myself while unconscious.

*Great.*

In my hands I still held the angelic sword. I stood on aching legs and stuffed it under my bed—as good a place as any for now. Then I blew out the candles surrounding my altar, crawled under the covers, and fell asleep within moments.

'Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life'...isn't that how the saying went? On the other hand, tomorrow might be just another day in a cubicle-filled purgatory. Either statement could be true. Maybe both.

In fact, the next day turned out to be very eventful.

What more could a girl ask for?