

PROLOGUE

“Xandir, approach the bar.”

A figure cloaked in a gray robe spotted with black and crimson stains stepped forward. Golden chains, which glowed with a dull light, trailed from his arms and ankles. Before him stood three massive columns of light, each pulsing and letting off a low hum. The voice had emanated from the center column.

“Pronounce your sentence and be done with it,” said Xandir. “Cast me out if you must, but let us be done with it.”

The center column flared brighter. “That would be too light a punishment, Xandir. You must be properly instructed as to your place, and such lessons require a great deal of time.”

The center column dimmed and the right one glowed brighter. “Xandir, you did knowingly abet the rogue angel Azazel, and along with your fellow Watchers, you did stray from your duties and did willfully reveal the secrets of Heaven to humankind.”

Xandir lifted his head. “They were kept in bondage! In utter ignorance. I—”

“And furthermore,” the voice continued. “you did enter into illicit relationships with humankind, which folly served to create the race of Giants, an abominable race that would have proved the end of humans if left unchecked. For this—”

Xandir reared up and struggled against his chains. “Left unchecked? You slaughtered them! They deserved—!”

The golden chains flared with energy, and Xandir writhed against their stinging grip. A faint dark mist escaped from the folds of his robe.

“For this,” continued the voice. “You shall be consigned to the role of Destroying Angel, which sentence shall be served until the End of Time.”

Xandir raised his head. “The End of Time? But that—”

All three columns flared in unison.

“Silence.”

Twin shafts of light shot up in front of Xandir, each leaving a slender sword in its wake. The swords hung in the air around Xandir and then suddenly fastened themselves with a chain about Xandir’s waist. At once, Xandir felt himself falling, tumbling through swirling mists, buffeted by darkness and pain.

He gained speed, tumbling impossibly fast and unaware of time or direction. Then, without warning, it was over. Everything around him stood still, and for many minutes, he made no attempt to move. When finally he did stand, he found himself on a barren plain: the earth beneath him riddled with cracks. He glanced around in every direction and settled on a group of huts in the distance. His hands rested on his new weapons, and he set off.

“The End of Time,” he muttered. “We shall see about that.”

ONE

FAREWELL TO POMPEII

POMPEII, ITALY 79 AD

Xandir pondered the bustling city below him. He sat with his legs folded, his head propped up with his hands, taking in every detail of the city and the face of every person. He felt a momentary twinge of remorse as he considered Pompeii's citizens, but the feeling soon fled, replaced by a calm resolve that burned away all inhibitions. His dark cloak was wrapped around him and covered all of his shiny mahogany-colored armor. A pair of iridescent wings that normally billowed out behind him, now folded close to his body to create a cocoon. They only became visible when touched by light. Then they shimmered like sunlight passing through rain. He ran his fingers through his long, unruly platinum hair and sighed. "It's time."

However, before he could act, he sank again to the ground, a familiar twinge tugging at his heart. His next sigh came even deeper, and his scruples returned. "It's not time. It will never be time."

Just then, a brilliant shaft of red light announced the arrival of a messenger. The imposing figure stepped out of the light and scrutinized Xandir. The figure opened his mouth to speak, but Xandir beat him to it. "Honestly, I'm flattered," he muttered. "They don't send a High Seraph on just any ordinary business. But before you deliver your message, tell me, are the gates still as pearly as ever? I've been dying to know."

The High Seraph sniffed and wagged his head. He stood at over seven feet tall, with a mass of wavy brown hair, piercing blue eyes, and a white robe that revealed his muscular chest. An olive garland circled his head, and a gleaming sword, crackling with energy, hung strapped to his side with a simple golden belt.

“It is time,” he said, in a voice that caused the earth to tremble around them as if with a chill.

Xandir raised a single eyebrow. “That’s it? What do you take me for? I already knew that.”

“You are stalling,” asserted the High Seraph. “Do not forget the terms of your probation, Xandir. You have done your duty many times before without incident. What makes today different?”

Xandir pursed his lips and dipped his head. He didn’t have anything to say, as the High Seraph could sense his feelings.

“Do not tell me that you have given in, Xandir. I have heard the rumors, though I do not wish to believe them. If you hesitate now, what tidings about you would I have to bring? Do you not remember what happened the first time, to the Giants? What a catastrophe that was? You know the consequences better than anyone.”

Xandir shot up, extending himself his full height, only slightly less than the High Seraph. “Of course I know them. In all the millennia I’ve served, this has never been a problem. My performance has been beyond reproach, and I don’t even get to sit high and mighty on cloud nine, eating Ambrosia all day like some people. This isn’t right!”

The High Seraph’s eyes flared with indignation. “You dare question your mission? Who are you to judge the matter? Their time is up, and their fate is sealed. Complete your task.”

The High Seraph reached for his crackling sword, but Xandir placated him with an outstretched hand. His gray eyes flashed a tinge of red as he reached to his left and drew out one of his long, slender swords. Though pale light fell on its ebony surface, it reflected none of it; instead the blade slurped it up like hot pavement in a summer storm. In a movement almost too quick to register, he flicked the sword into the sky and thrust it hard into the earth.

The earth split and groaned beneath his blow, sending a rippling tremor through the ground, which suddenly bucked like a rolling wave and sent both Xandir and the High Seraph scrambling to take to the skies. Satisfied with Xandir's work, the High Seraph vanished in another burst of intense light. Xandir, on the other hand, shot into the air, gaining as much height as he could before the worst of the catastrophe hit.

Even from high above the earth, the explosion still sent him careening out of control as tons of ash and noxious gas erupted into the air with cosmic force. He flew as fast as he could from the scene but couldn't help glancing down one last time at the doomed town below. His eyes mellowed to a deep shade of black, and he spoke a piercing whisper that cut through the din. "Farewell."

NEW YORK STATE, 2011

The pearl earrings hit the mirror, and Eden only had time to snatch one before the other disappeared down the drain. She let out a frustrated cry and stared forlornly at the place where the other one had gone. There was no helping it now.

"Why did I just do that? Stupid!"

She had been unable to remove the back from one of the earrings and had given in to the impulse of flinging away her problem. With a sigh, she opened her jewelry drawer and selected her next best pair. Again, she struggled with the clasps, and in the end settled on a chintzy pair of clip-ons.

"Why am I so clumsy?"

Eden reaffirmed her assessment when she leaned over to look in the mirror and knocked over a picture frame. She righted it and smiled. Her husband Daren stared back at her as he had appeared when they first met at school. His grin was so bright that every look was contagious. Her smile faded, however, when she caught a glimpse of her hair in the mirror. She snatched her comb off of the dresser and launched a full-scale assault on a very poorly timed bad hair day.

After several minutes of frantic urging, it became obvious that

she had made as much progress as possible. She let the brush clatter to the dresser in defeat. She gazed blankly into the mirror at the hair, the make-up, the dress and decided that she didn't like any of it. She swung around, unable to hold her own gaze any longer.

"What else is new?"

Eden sauntered into the kitchen and saw everything still in readiness for their romantic evening. It was a surprise she had been planning for months, set on the day they had first met at a homecoming dance her freshman year as an undergrad. His copper skin and wide, dark eyes, coupled with that crooked smile, never ceased to play a jazzy tune on her heartstrings.

She gave the room a once over to make sure everything was perfect. Her nose wrinkled as she caught sight of something on the table that should not have been there.

"The rolls!" she cried, realizing she'd left the tray of uncooked rolls on the table. Softly berating herself, she clopped over to the oven in her red high-heels and slid the rolls in.

Hoping that she hadn't forgotten anything else, she ran over the list of details over and over again: the dress, pizzas with extra bland sauce, the cheap electric candles, the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. . . .

She placed a hand to her temple and tried to clear her head. There was something else missing.

She turned around, and it hit her. The music! How could she forget something as integral as that? She went over to the CD player and pressed the play button. A moment later, the first cheerful bars of a song from *Bye, Bye Birdie* filled the room.

"Gray skies are gonna clear up . . ."

She closed her eyes and went through the list one more time. Perfect. She had even stopped by the restaurant and swiped a stack of their signature napkins with a cartoon Italian twirling a pizza in each hand. It was the perfect touch.

Just then, the garage door clattered to life. Eden rushed toward the entry from the kitchen to the garage, ready to surprise him at once. She heard the engine cut off and the door slam. He was only seconds away now.

Her stomach clenched, and the door swung open to reveal her

husband in a collared shirt and tan slacks, his tie already hanging at half-mast.

“Hey, honey.”

He walked past her without a second glance, dropped his keys on the counter, and disappeared into the living room. For a full minute, Eden could not force her legs to move. Her breathing quickened, and she felt a line of sweat forming on her brow, ready to massacre her makeup at any moment.

Calm down, She told herself. He’s probably just had a really terrible day at the office. He works so much.

She took a few moments to compose herself and then followed him into the living room. Daren lay slumped over in one of the chairs she had set around their special dinner table. His eyes were fixed on the plate in front of him, bearing an expression as if she had just served him straight from the dumpster.

Eden cleared her throat. “Doesn’t this look familiar? I thought . . . I . . . I thought we might do something special tonight just you and me. You’ve been working so hard with that new project, and I—”

“What’s with my pizza?”

Eden felt like she had just swallowed a mouthful of laundry detergent. “What do you mean?” she asked, feeling her composure teetering again, close to the edge.

Daren wrinkled his nose. “There’s nothing on it. Your pizza is covered with toppings, and mine barely has enough cheese to cover the sauce.”

Eden unconsciously took a step back. “I was just trying to recreate things as they were. I mean, that is what you ordered, right? Plain cheese, go light on the cheese? Don’t you remember? I poked fun at you for it. Remember the cheesy show tunes and those awful napkins.”

Daren rose suddenly and swept his plate from the table. Eden yelped involuntarily as Daren advanced, an anger in his eyes that she had never before seen.

“What are you talking about? Napkins? I’ve never heard anything so stupid.”

He raised a hand and struck her full across the face. She yelped

again and raised her hands to shield herself. The next blow came only seconds later.

Frantically, she stumbled back and fought her way toward the kitchen and the keys sprawled on the kitchen counter. “Daren, stop! Daren, this isn’t you! Why are you doing this?”

Her husband said nothing but continued his relentless attack. He backed her into the kitchen, and she lunged for the keys. He was next to her in an instant, pinning her against the counter and readying another strike. She grasped the keys with one hand and lashed out, striking him full across the face and drawing blood. He released his hold, and she bolted for the garage. She fumbled for a second with the keys, then threw herself into the driver’s seat. She jabbed the button to open the garage door, and it began its agonizingly slow ascent.

Daren appeared in the garage, hefting a shovel that had been left near the door. He took a swing, and the car’s headlight shattered in an explosion of glass. Eden jammed the keys into the ignition, started the car, and flung it into reverse. Another blow struck the windshield, and she knew she didn’t have time to wait for the garage door.

She slammed the gas pedal to the floor, and the car barreled backward. It cleared the garage door but then rammed into a pair of trash cans on the curb as she turned out on the road, sending them crashing into the street. She jerked to a stop just in time to see Daren sprinting down the driveway, still brandishing his weapon.

She jammed the car into gear and shot forward, narrowly missing an oncoming car. Speed limits and seat belts forgotten, she raced down the road with no other thought than to put as much distance between her and her house as possible.

Her mind rattled about, unsure of what to do or where to go. *There’s always my mother*, she thought with resignation.

Out on the interstate, her heart slowed to its usual rate, and the enormity of the night’s events crashed onto her like an avalanche. She could hardly believe them herself. Daren’s temper flared up once in a while, but it had never been anything like this.

Her hot tears destroyed what little remained of her makeup. She didn't have to sort this all out now. Her mother would know what to do. She always did.