

Flames of Perdition Book 1

# TEARS OF HEAVEN

"With McCandless the action doesn't stop from the get-go. And get going it does"

— NICK COLE, "author of CTRL ALT Revolt!; winner Dragon Award 2016."



R.A. MCCANDLESS

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rogue said.***

His voice had a sibilance that surrounded her, whispering in both of her ears intimately.

“Leave, and I will not kill you. Stay, and I will make your pain a torture. I will see you last for days upon days, and I promise you abuses you could not dream.”

Del said nothing.

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**ALSO BY R. A. MCCANDLESS**

*Hell Becomes Her (2017)*



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R. A. MCCANDLESS



ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

2017

AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

TEARS OF HEAVEN

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*This book is dedicated to Porter, Tristan  
and Xavier—the angels in my life.*

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## VARIATION UNDER NATURE

*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.*

— Genesis 6:4

*June 14, 223 BCE*

She stood tall, proud, strong, beautiful, wearing only heavy shackles, in the warm sun. A bright sheen of sweat made her olive skin glisten and sparkle. She was almost completely devoid of hair, a point that Aeschylus, the slave-master and auctioneer, was demonstrating even now. He ordered her to lift her arms and open her legs so that all could inspect this fine specimen of femininity.

Damascus—Dami to his friends—didn't know all the tricks of the slave trade, but hair could be removed, paints and tinctures could be used to hide scars and wash over the average. So the features of the slave girl didn't particularly strike him.

Still, there was something about her, something that reminded him of...

Carefully and casually, so as to not draw attention, he hefted his money pouch tied to his broad leather belt, opposite his short sword. He weighed its likely worth against the likely worth of the girl, and knew he was already outbid.

“Aeolus,” he whispered to the man next to him. The short, stocky man didn’t turn away from the bidding, but he did cock his curly head to one side to let Dami know he listened. “How much have you?”

“For her?” Aeolus shrugged. “*You’d* have to pay *me*.”

Aeolus laughed at his own joke, which to Dami always sounded like a cross between a cough and a bark.

“Come now, how much?”

“Look at her,” Aeolus said, as he unfolded one arm from across his broad chest and gestured with his thick-fingered hand. “She has no hips, at least not enough for one or two babes, and her breasts are not even a half handful. A child will starve trying to suckle. There’s no meat on her, and what there is looks to be field muscle. She has nothing to give a growing child warmth. She’s not worth a shekel for birthing.”

“I don’t want her to give children,” Dami replied.

“What good is a slave girl except for children? Oh sure, you love them at your whim, but when they grow older, what’s the point? If they haven’t given you daughters to marry or sell, and sons to make you immortal, you’re just wasting your seed.”

“Pah,” Dami replied, now slightly annoyed. “You have no soul, man.”

“Sold it,” Aeolus said, with another barking laugh. “Kept getting in the way. Got a good price for it, too.”

“And drank it on a single cup of vinegar-wine,” Dami retorted. “Come now, Aeolus, I know you won well on the horses last night, and you’ve been lucky at the dice cups all week. You’re carrying half my profits.”

“I’d have *all* your profits, if you could hold your drink,” Aeolus replied. “But I don’t mean to part with any of them until that plump little thing comes up; she’ll bear five or ten babes with ease, and not a one will ever starve. And I mean to have me a horse as well, so stop asking.”

“Fifteen shekels?” Aeschylus cried in mock exasperation. “Is that all I’m bid on the fine, the fair Water Lily? Come now, she will keep your bed warm at night, and during the day too.” He turned her around and slapped her rump. “See, firm and ready for the right man to set his plow. Now what am I bid? Give me good bids for Water Lily!”

“Seventeen,” a voice cried out.

“Nineteen,” another replied.

Dami caught sight of the girl again. Where most slaves cowered, watched the crowd and followed the voices, to see what manner of men might own them, this girl didn't seem to pay any attention to the process. She held her head high and haughty, and except for the chains at wrist and ankle, she looked for all the world as if she owned the place. As if she didn't care a whit that there wasn't a stitch of clothing to cover her, or that she even needed it to be out in public.

Heavy chains, too, Dami noted.

“What would a sailor do with a horse?” Dami asked, but Aeolus ignored him. “Her name is Water Lily. That's a good omen for sailors.”

“Twenty shekels,” a new voice sang out.

“Aeolus...” Dami began again.

“Zeus's left ball!” Aeolus swore. “Stop your crying. You sound like a mewling calf.” He pulled his leather money bag free from his belt and shoved it hard into Dami's stomach. Dami grunted, half in surprise and half in jest.

“There's thirty shekels in there,” Aeolus said. “See that I get something back.”

“Aeolus—” Dami began with a huge grin painted on his face.

“Shut up,” Aeolus cut him off. “You owe me it all back and interest, may the gods feast on your liver.”

He began to make his way through the crowd in mock disgust.

“What would a sailor do with a horse?” Blight-bitten, mewling, whining...”

Dami smiled at Aeolus' retreating form.

Horses.

*I'll never give it over for horses, Dami thought. Smelly beasts, no good for sailing men.*

“Twenty-four.” A now-familiar voice raised the last bid. Dami looked over to see Dreskin, the butcher, shoot a nervous look at Aeschylus and back at the girl.

*He's in over his head, Dami thought. He got caught up in the bidding, and now he's hoping someone will outbid him and save him the coin.*

There was silence for a time, and Dami, an old hand at such auctions, held his breath. In his chest, his heart hammered. He stroked his chin as if he was considering a bid, and watched Dreskin. Sure enough, as the silence deepened and Aeschylus waited with a practiced patience, Dreskin began to look around him, desperation clear in his eyes.

“Twenty-five,” Dami shouted. Dreskin deflated in relief.

Aeschylus looked to Dreskin to see if he would enter another bid, and Dreskin put on an impressive show of considering the slave girl.

*She’s no good for breeding,* Dami thought at Dreskin. *Come on, give over.*

“Turn her around again,” Dreskin requested, and Aeschylus motioned for the girl to turn. At first, she didn’t move, but Aeschylus placed his hand on his waist where his short whip was shoved into his belt, and she began to turn around slowly.

Dreskin stroked his bearded chin, but Dami wasn’t worried. Dreskin was obviously relieved, and probably for the same reasons Aeolus hadn’t wanted the girl. Now Dami had to be patient, look disinterested in whether Dreskin raised the bid or not, as if the girl was another piece of chattel up on the block.

Finally Dreskin shook his head at Aeschylus.

“No?” Aeschylus asked the small crowd. “No more? She may not have much, but they say that hard women birth hard sons. Sons that will tend your goods, and fight in coming wars. No, none? Come, come, good men.”

Twenty-five shekels was a month’s pay for some of these men; it was two months for others. No one was going to risk that much money on a girl so skinny and proud. It would take too much time and effort for her to learn her place and act the proper slave.

“None,” Aeschylus said, and paused. “None. None. The deal is done!”

He raised his hands, dropped them both to point at Dami and then pointed to a table where Aeschylus’ moneychanger sat. Dami gave a slight bow of his head, and began to move through the men who still looked up to the slaver’s block. Aeschylus motioned, and a Nubian, easily a head taller and a stone heavier than Dami, came forward and took the girl by the chains.

Dami approached the table. The man sitting there looked up.

“Twenty-five shekels,” the man said, as he began to tally. “It’s another shekel if you want her robed, and another three if you want to keep the chains.”

He looked up at Dami as the Nubian brought the girl toward them, still naked and glistening in the sun. The moneychanger leaned forward and motioned Dami to come closer.

“This one,” he said. “I suggest you keep the chains. I’ll give you a good price for them. They were made for her special.”

“Ha,” Dami laughed. “How much trouble can one slip of a girl be?”

“I jest not, good sir,” the moneychanger replied. “The chains are twice as heavy as Aeschylus uses, and that includes the men for laborers. Why would he waste good iron on a girl?”

Dami paused at that. The initial offer he’d considered to be a ploy to separate more of his money, and Aeolus’, from the pouch. The Nubian slave-guard brought the girl to a stop near the table, but he kept at arm’s length from her.

The girl caught his gaze, and bright hatred of him glowed in her eyes. Not of him personally. She gave the same look to every man who dared to meet her eyes. No, she was...angry.

Angry enough to kill? Dami wondered. *Don’t drop anchor in a port you can’t get back out of.*

“Two shekels for the iron and the robe,” Dami responded without taking his gaze from the girl, “and you deliver her to my ship.”

“The iron alone...”

“You said yourself that the iron is more than you would use for even the men,” Dami responded. “They won’t serve you future use.”

“Fine—four shekels for robe, irons and delivery,” the man said.

“Two shekels, twelve,” Dami replied.

“Three shekels, and I’ll see the robe isn’t flea-ridden.”

“Done,” Dami replied. “But if I see a single flea...”

“Do you need it counted for you?” the moneychanger interrupted, eager to get past the implied threats and move on with the business.

“No, thanks,” Dami replied with a grin. “I probably couldn’t afford the fee.”

*And you might be able to really cheat me,* he thought. Men who couldn't read and couldn't count were always at a disadvantage against those who could. It was simple enough to miss a few numbers, or slip an extra coin or three out of the mix.

He opened his pouch first, and emptied seven shekels onto the table. Then he dug into Aeolus' pouch and counted out twenty-one more. The moneychanger weighed each coin against one of his own, then deposited them into an iron-bound hardwood box.

"What ship?" the moneychanger asked.

"The *Wavedancer*," Dami replied. "She's berthed off the Sumar quarter."

The moneychanger gestured to the Nubian, and the big, dark-skinned man moved off with the girl.

Dami pulled an extra shekel from Aeolus' pouch and placed it on the table. His finger held the coin firmly against the rough wood.

"A nice robe," Dami suggested, "and she's there before sunset?"

The moneychanger looked up at Dami, down at the shekel and over toward where Aeschylus was extolling the virtues of his latest piece of flesh. He reached out and took the shekel, sliding it into his tunic.

"A pleasure, sir." The moneychanger nodded. "A pleasure."



*November 2, Present Day*

"Throne be damned," the rogue hissed.

The fight was not going well. Del should have brought Marrin. Ahadiel had told her to bring Marrin, but that only made certain she wouldn't.

Del gasped as the rogue landed a solid punch into her stomach and ribs. The air whooshed from her lungs. He followed with a stab of his fingers into her right arm. Cold-filled pain suffused her shoulder and caused it to spasm painfully. She spun away, awkwardly. Her right arm felt like it had been shattered, pulverized into pudding, useless as gelatin. The cold-forged iron spike she'd been holding dropped from useless fingers and clattered

to the floor. The rogue looked at her with brutal menace in his eyes and flame licking around the lids.

It would have been a good trick.

If only it *was* a trick.

The flames were all too real.

Fortunately, Del didn't suffer from the same fears that mortals contended with. A rogue divinity hissing heresy and spouting fire, literal fire, around his eyes would have left a mortal quivering in terror until the Last Judgment.

She'd seen it happen.

"Leave now, little half-breed," the rogue said. His voice had a sibilance that surrounded her, whispering in both of her ears intimately. "Leave, and I will not kill you. Stay, and I will make your pain a torture. I will see you last for days upon days, and I promise you abuses you could not dream."

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Flood, fire, famine, disease, pestilence and death are conjured through an angel.

Angels should be a human's worst nightmare embodied.

Rogues were an order of magnitude worse. An angel was a messenger of destruction, operating under orders from the Throne. Rogues had no direction, no channel for their power. They sought only dominion through the most direct means possible.

"Go, little girl." The rogue gestured with his right arm, the one where she'd managed to drive a spike through his wrist.

It would have been stupid to engage the rogue, or really any opponent, in conversation. Witty banter was for the movies. Errol Flynn and John Wayne could while away the hours as they faced a bad guy and spouted catchy one-liners.

In the really real world, Del knew better than to take time out of her busy schedule.

She still held a second cold-forged iron spike in her left hand. She wanted to drop it and reach for her last SIG Sauer .45 behind her back. Most melee weapons against a rogue were nearly useless, unless it was the right weapon. She shifted her grip, stepped into the rogue with speed no mortal could, and stabbed with enough power to lift the rogue off its feet. Rogues might be strong, but the laws of physics were stronger. The foot-long spike punched into the rogue's left shoulder, and only her fist on the weapon stopped it.

The Host takes care of their own.

Even if they have to hire it done.

When the rogue landed, he immediately lashed out with inhuman strength, and this time Del was thrown off her feet. She held onto the spike caught in the rogue's arm, and her own shoulder jerked painfully. Not for the first time, she wished she was even the lowest form of immortal.

A mere angel could shrug off the pain that now threatened to overwhelm her.

One of the higher choirs, a Principality or even a Grigori...

Pain washed over her vision, and bright red sparks danced in front of her eyes. When she thought her shoulder would come clear of its socket, the rogue gave ground. It wasn't much, and even in her current state, Del wasn't certain it would be enough, but it would have to do. She clumsily seated her feet on the ground, uncertain of the positioning, gripped the spike firmly, and threw all her weight backward. She thought that she would bend in half before the rogue was thrown. His body slammed hard enough into the floor that ceramic tiles popped and shattered, cutting around them like shrapnel.

She didn't waste the time she'd gained. Del dropped her knee down hard on the rogue's chest and caved it in. The rogue's eyes went from slightly stunned to pain-filled and angry. The Host may not have mastered, or had even an understanding, of most emotions, but anger, righteous or otherwise, was right up their alley.

Her right arm hung useless, but since her left was dominant, it didn't matter. She jerked the cold-forged iron spike free of the rogue's shoulder and slid forward on his chest, so that his head

rested between her knees, while the balance of her weight rested on his shoulders and immobilized his arms. Her more than powerful thighs clamped down on his jaws and seized his head.

In any other context, she would have thought they were doing a porn scene.

In this context, she almost wished she *were* doing a porn scene. It would have been less painful, except to her dignity.

There were things even Del wouldn't do for money.

His arms flailed, powerful but useless. He tried to claw at her, to gash huge bloody rends in her legs. All he could manage was to tear the floor with ear-shrieking scratches. Now, desperation entered the mix in his eyes.

Desperation was something only a few divinities truly understood.

About one in three knew it intimately, and every one of them was a rogue.

*"Omnia glorium Solii."* She spoke the words as she brought the cold-forged iron spike up above her head. She couldn't help but say them. They were automatic, a natural force, like gravity. *All for the glory of the Throne.*

She brought the spike down, hard and fast, slamming it between her knees. It went into the rogue's right eye, destroying the *chakram*, out through the back of his skull, through the ceramic floor and stopped two inches into the concrete. The rogue's head was pinned to the house's foundation.

*Whoa*, Del thought, and shuddered from the force she'd exerted.

"It is finished," she intoned aloud; the words flowed out of her without conscious effort.

Power flowed out from the rogue's body into the air and the earth, and partly into her. Power, like a strong wind danced all around her, grabbing at her clothing and her hair. She rolled off the rogue and pushed herself away awkwardly with her feet until her back met a wall. Then she stared, cradled her injured right arm, and gasped for breath.

There was no lightning show or gaping black hole in the floor, with the cries of the damned reaching out of Hell itself. Those, Marrin often observed, were only mortal theatrics, a way to vi-

sually comprehend the inconceivable. Mortals always had a tough time with intangible concepts. Lust was often mistaken for love; visual beauty was equated with internal worth, and wealth with wisdom. Death was a skeleton wearing a robe and carrying a scythe.

What did a skeleton need with clothes?

The release of power abated. An almost peaceful silence, in a strange contrast to the titanic fight, replaced it. She glanced at the room, which might have been a kitchen. Holes the size and shape of flying bodies could be seen in almost every wall of the abandoned house. Del was amazed the building, condemned for some time now, still stood after the beating she and the rogue had dished out to each other. Perhaps, it was a testament to the builder who might have believed, or hoped, his work would stand and serve forever.

The Fallen proved that nothing does.

Thirty seconds had passed since she drove the spike into the rogue's head and destroyed the necessary *chakram*. She'd destroyed some of the house's foundation as well. In that time, the rogue changed from a fierce creature the size and shape of Andre the Giant to a representative of the Lollipop Guild.

Not one of the larger reps either.

The rogue's body grew smaller and smaller, more compact, squat and less recognizable. Now it was the size of a basketball, now the size of a grapefruit, now a walnut. Smaller and smaller, until Del could only make out a dust mote that contracted further still.

Then, with a pop no louder than Orville Redenbacher's best, even that vanished.

The iron spike clattered to the ground and steamed slightly.

She left it there. By morning, it would crumble into dust.

"Why would anyone want to meet an angel?" Del asked the emptiness.

She pulled her two SIG .45s from the rubble of the house, checked their loads, and returned them to her shoulder holsters. Carefully, she made her way to the waiting Jeep Cherokee, and managed to open the door on the first try. It took a little longer to start the Jeep with her left hand, longer than she liked. The sirens were definitely headed in her direction.

Using her left hand, she put the Jeep in gear, switched the lights on, and pulled calmly away from the house. Just another day at the office. She caught a brief glimpse of her own face as she looked in the rearview mirror and paused to inspect the damage.

“Burn,” she swore.

Most people thought that she was of Asian descent, but most people were wrong. The epicanthic slant to her eyes and her dark hair supported that conclusion, but that was where the similarities ended. Del dyed her hair from its shockingly snowy white to its current dark brown. Her eyes were a blazing blue that lovers commented on constantly to the point of annoyance, and her skin was almost dark enough to place her as African. Also, she was taller than an average woman, and much taller than almost any Asian woman she’d ever met. Over the last two centuries the mortals had started to catch up to her. Better diet, easier living and access to greater breeding selection had seen to that.

Evolution at its finest.

She glanced again in the mirror and sighed. Her nose was probably broken, and at least one eye would be puffy for the next couple of days until her body healed. Bruises were starting to darken around her throat that matched the rogue’s fingers, print for print. It still amazed her that internal injuries, really anything major, would be healed within hours, or days at worst, while external, superficial and completely aesthetic injuries might take days or even weeks.

It was as if her body mocked her for being a half-breed, and made certain she remembered it at every opportunity. A final glance confirmed that the bruise to her eye was growing and would be swollen and black by the morning.

“Damn.”

She didn’t notice Ahadiel until she was stopped at a red light.

“You may put away your weapon,” Ahadiel said. His gaze was focused on hers, and the same uncomfortable shiver trickled through her spine as she looked into his pupil-less depths. Deep, dark blue that swirled the longer she stared.

Ahadiel was near perfect. He was dark-skinned, a color that always reminded her of a Hershey’s chocolate bar. His was well-

formed and looked as if he worked out every day, though Del knew he didn't. Even had he needed to, his duties would have prevented it. He was half a head taller, and a good hundred or more pounds heavier. His head looked close-shaved, but he had no need for a razor, a haircut, or even a shower and deodorant. He looked exactly the same today as he had two hundred years ago, and exactly as he would two hundred from now.

Right down to the half-smile which always seemed to signify that he was in on a joke the rest of the world would never know.

*Weapon?* Her mind locked down on the thought, and she looked down at her left hand.

She was obviously more exhausted than she realized.

The SIG was cradled in her left hand, cupped by her lap. It was aimed directly at Ahadiel's nose, her finger curled around the trigger. She didn't remember thumbing the safety off, but as she changed the focus of her eyes, she could see that it was. Slowly, calmly, she thumbed the safety back on and slid the SIG back under her right arm.

"I wish you would just call," she said. The rush of exertion overcame her, and she slumped back into her seat. She needed sleep, and nothing more strenuous than lifting a glass of absinthe. In her current state, her right arm wouldn't be able to manage even that.

"That...technology," Ahadiel said the word with as much scorn as she'd ever heard from him, "does not work for the divine."

"Exactly," Del replied. Although the same problem affected her as well. There was something in their makeup, those crafted by the Throne and their offspring, that caused phones to give nothing but a feedback loop of ear-piercing static. It didn't matter if it was an analog landline or a digital satellite mobile. If Del put her ear to the thing, she'd be as deaf as Quasimodo for a good hour.

"I came to offer you my touch," Ahadiel said. He lifted perfect fingers toward her.

For a moment, she hesitated. Ahadiel was more than simply a beautiful creature. He was perfect. His skin was flawless, and his body the epitome of trained and toned, without being muscle-bound and cumbersome. She could admit to herself that there was an attraction, if only physical, for her. But that was not what Ahadiel meant.

“Don’t,” she said the word with as much command as she could muster, pleased that her voice didn’t crack. The blood in her veins lit on fire as she spoke the syllable. Her body reacted to the thought of another conflict, though she didn’t have enough energy left to fight.

Ahadiel looked from her hand to his, closed his fingers and dropped it to his lap. Two perfect chocolate hands, almost good enough to eat. If he’d been mortal, she’d have been well past tempted by now.

“I trust the rogue is banished?” Ahadiel asked, although it sounded more of a statement.

“Have I ever failed?” Del replied. Her voice was tired again as some of the heat in her blood ebbed away.

“Yes,” Ahadiel replied. “You have, and on more than one occasion.”

“Rhetorical question.”

“Such questions do not make sense to me. You have failed, otherwise, why broach the subject?”

“Go to Hell.”

Ahadiel smiled, broadly, with perfect, brilliantly white teeth, the color they try to make them in toothpaste commercials.

“You asked,” his voice trailed off and his face lit up with his smile. “Where is young Marrin?”

Del almost laughed. The idea that Marrin could be called young was ludicrous. It was like calling Mt. Everest short, or the Grand Canyon shallow. While he was younger than Del, it was only by a thousand years or so. In a lifespan such as theirs, that meant he was the college-age nephew to her recently graduated, and now working in New York, auntie.

But it was not the same for Ahadiel.

To him, who had seen the First Light of the Creation, all things that did not date within a millennium of the Beginning were “young.” He counted his age in eons, epochs.

“I sent him out for milk,” Del replied, and let the sarcasm show plainly in her voice.

“You would likely not be in this state if he had come with,” Ahadiel responded, almost mothering in his chiding.

Del wasn’t certain if it was the adult-like tone or the slow manner of his speech that annoyed her most.

Behind them, a horn honked its annoyance. Del looked up. The traffic light was green, and she pressed the accelerator harder than she should have. Ahadiel slammed into his seat. She smiled to herself, glad to see him thrown even a little off by the sudden movement. It reminded her that while the Throne might be infallible, Its servants were not.

“The Throne is pleased with your recent successes,” Ahadiel began again.

“Aren’t we all,” Del replied. “I even cleaned my room and did all my homework. Do I get an ice cream?”

“We would like to offer you another job.”

He said the statement simply, almost as if he were asking her to take a left at the next light. As if she would accept, and that would be the end of it.

“By ‘you’, I’m guessing you mean *you guys* or the more proper *y’all*?”

“You have been more...successful since Marrin joined you,” Ahadiel replied.

“I don’t like him.”

“Yes, you do. You like him very much. You like him because, in this vast world, he is one of the few you can call kin. You like him because he is younger, and in some ways less mature, less experienced than you. You like that because it gives you the opportunity to teach. You like to teach your skills. It has given you a sense of self and of generation, something forbidden you. Also...”

“Fine, fine,” Del interrupted. “I like him. It’s you I hate.”

“That is, at least, more honest, if not more accurate,” Ahadiel responded with that same slow, paced voice. “So, you will take Marrin for the job.”

“I haven’t said I will take the job. I haven’t even recovered from this job,” she said, as realization hit her. “That’s why you offered your touch, isn’t it? The job has to be done now, doesn’t it?”

Del slammed on the brakes and pulled the Jeep to the curb, jerking both of them when she stopped abruptly. Horns sounded all around them, but Del paid them no heed.

“Goddamnit, Ahadiel!” she yelled and slammed her good hand against the steering wheel hard enough to bend the plastic and the metal underneath. Ahadiel actually winced at the blasphemy,

as if Del had slapped him. His smile disappeared, and his gaze narrowed and hardened.

“Calm yourself, Omedelia bar-Azazel,” Ahadiel warned, the words sounded like a growl. “If you grow angry, you become... unreasonable. I assure you that I can be most...unpleasant if you persist.”

The play of power in his voice trickled over her skin like cold spring water. Gooseflesh followed as the syllables reverberated in her ears. The feeling was similar, and at the same time completely opposite, from the power of the rogue as it spoke to her; like water so hot, or so cold, that initially the senses can't discern the difference. It, also, was not a pleasant sound, but the rogue's voice was like that of a bully, and one who is not afraid to fight, but wants to fight to prove himself. Ahadiel's voice was like that of a parent who is about to lose patience with a disobedient child.

A disobedient child warned many times.

But Del had faced the anger of divinities before, faced them and lived.

“My name,” she said slowly, carefully, almost in mockery of Ahadiel, “is Del.”

It was a small distinction, but one she clung to. Ahadiel looked at her for several quiet moments. His hard gaze met hers with an intensity she had rarely seen.

Slowly, so slowly, like the melting of ice, he smiled. The moonlight lit up his dark skin so that it glowed. The absolute beauty of the divinity sitting in her Jeep struck her to her core. What felt like an electric current passed through her, and she shook. The vibration travelled from her center, out to her arms and legs, and down to her fingers and toes. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted and gave her a warm shiver. An instant longing rose in her, the mix of lust and love for the creature, unbidden and unchecked. Everything about him was wonderful, was perfect, was worthy of her love, was worthy of her body. He was the embodiment of her deepest desires made flesh and presented to her. She wanted to unwrap him, and started to move toward him to do so.

Something interrupted her movement. The seatbelt, doing its job, held her outstretched arm six inches from his shoulder.

That obstacle allowed her mind to reassert itself. Not much, but enough that she could make the attempt to clamp down on her runaway emotions.

She struggled to keep herself from unclipping the belt and falling forward in abasement before the power, before the Power. The need to acknowledge this, to worship its Source in the most basic of ways nearly overwhelmed her. This was the feeling that many great men and women had felt before her, the near rapture of presence that a servant of the Throne could bring to bear.

*Bring to bear, and use to command.*

Mortals were, almost without exception, unable to resist. Queens and kings, emperors, and the mighty, had all fallen to their knees, to their faces, and made themselves humble in this Power's presence while they writhed on their bellies in the dust. Some mortals even longed for the sensation, the engulfing, mind-numbing, ego-shattering experience that would bring them a step or two closer to their version of deity.

But those who had felt the Power knew it for the scariest moment in their short lives. The loss of self, the loss of will and control, was something that could break all but the strongest or the most humble. It would reveal the soft core of a great man, or the hard steel of a small child. It was the true understanding of being infinitely small within an infinitely vast universe. A universe that was ordered and controlled, but was so large and complex that even the simplest rules could barely be grasped. It held a full-length mirror up to the soul, and the walls came tumbling down.

The hand of the Throne was truly a mighty force.

*Burn all angels*, Del thought, and the momentary rebellion helped steel her mind.

"You are strong, for a mortal," Ahadiel said slowly, and Del felt the weight of his Voice. His gaze moved across her skin from her smallest toes to the ends of her black hair. It was as if she were naked to the inch, fleshless, and he saw her soul, bare, exposed, fragile.

The desire he invoked made her *want* to be naked and to bare her soul to him.

Almost.

It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Her experience with the divine and her heritage hadn't made her immune, not by a cannon shot. It did, though, help her resist. As a big man might be able to take a bite from a rattlesnake and not suffer more than a day's worth of weakness, so too Del could absorb the power that radiated from Ahadiel, and hold her soul just outside his total influence.

Ahadiel hit a light switch and the feeling left her.

She shuddered as if cold, and could still feel the ghost fingers on her arms, legs, chest, back and face. A lover's caress from only moments before. She could even feel them inside her, deep, as if Ahadiel still touched her on a level no mortal could ever reach. A level no mortal could even know, except for the presence of the Divine.

She closed her eyes, ignored the instant warning her mind cried out, and focused on breathing. Slowly, in through her nose, then even more slowly out through her mouth. She counted, paused, and counted again, as she'd been taught.

In a few more moments, when she regained her composure, she opened her eyes to find Ahadiel smiling at her with that same in-joke smile.

"You are one of the strongest," Ahadiel complimented her.

"If you ever do that again..." Del began, but wasn't certain what threat she would actually be able to follow through with. Ahadiel, cocked his head to one side and looked curiously at her, as if he too wondered what she would say.

He was amused.

"If you wish me to work for you, you will not do that again," Del said lamely. It didn't feel like much of a threat. The Throne could hire any gun it wanted, and had on occasions when she refused the job or couldn't finish it. But, after a few months or a few years, even a few decades, they always came back to her. In the end, she still owed Ahadiel, and they both knew it. Plus, she had a singular advantage over most of her competition.

She and Marrin both.

Ahadiel nodded slowly and reached into his jacket. Warning bells went off instantly. Del pulled the SIG again, smoothly, effortlessly, as if it leapt from the shoulder holster into her waiting hand.

This time she remembered thumbing the safety off.

The sudden movement caused Ahadiel to stop. He went completely and utterly still. Not even breath stirred in him. It was an impressive trick Del had only seen a few times. Usually, it preceded an equally impressive display of swift and unstoppable violence. Her gaze caught on the black leather strap over Ahadiel's right shoulder that she hadn't noticed until now. Whether it was a pool-cue case, an architect's blueprint tube, or even a musician's instrument case she didn't know and didn't care. Ahadiel and his kind never went anywhere without a blade. Even the Fallen had their edges. To Del, the weapons were appropriate in the hands of immortals, as if the use of modern tools of war were improper, anachronistic.

"Do you really think..." he began, then shook his head. "You do, do you not? But you would. Your paranoia has kept you alive."

"It's only paranoia if no one is out to get you," Del said automatically, her focus never moving from her target. The gun in her hand didn't waver.

"It is," Ahadiel said, "too...confined to wield a blade in this carriage."

That didn't assuage Del's concern. Even without a sword, Ahadiel was stronger than any mortal. He was stronger than Del, or Marrin, or almost any combination thereof. He could bench press her Jeep for warm-ups, and he was well within grabbing distance. If he got his hands on her...

*Time and a place*, Del told herself. *Time and a place*.

Ahadiel wasn't here to kill her, or one of them would already be dead.

She nodded and allowed him to pull an archaic, soft leather bi-fold from his pocket and place it on the dash. It was about eight inches by four inches of tooled leather worked in an obscure pattern that may or may not have meaning. A clasp that was certainly of the purest silver and leather tie-down completed the archaic look of the thing.

Del stared at it as if it were a serpent.

"The fee is standard," Ahadiel said. "It will include exclusion from the List for an additional five years."

The List.

Capital L.

He didn't need to say more.

She nodded slowly, but kept the SIG trained on his head. Briefly, she imagined emptying the magazine into that perfect face and watching it explode. There would be no blood or brain matter, only flesh and the smell of fresh flowers. It appealed to her darker nature in a way that no mortal could understand.

"I see what you are thinking, Omedelia," Ahadiel said calmly. "Though spent and injured, the battle-lust is still strong in you, as it was in your..."

He let the thought trail off, but Del finished it for him.

"As it was in my father."

"As it was in your father," Ahadiel said. Del wasn't certain if he was capable of pity or remorse, but his voice managed to convey the emotions. She closed her eyes a second time, but no warning bells went off in her head now. Without looking, she thumbed the safety on and holstered the SIG.

"Is everything on the dash?" she asked.

"Not quite," Ahadiel replied.

Del's eyes snapped open and locked on Ahadiel's, only to stare into the endless black depths.

"The Throne does not want any...issues with this task," Ahadiel said without any prompting.

"I work with Marrin only," Del replied. "You know that. Even *that* is a concession."

"Not this time, Omedelia," Ahadiel replied.

"My name," she said, "is Del."

Ahadiel looked at her and gave a partial shrug. Perhaps he'd been among the mortals for too long.

"Not this time," he repeated in exactly the same tone of voice. "The importance is too great, and I understand you need the... fee."

"Burn," Del replied again, but she didn't mean it this time. "Burn in Hell."

"Hell is not tangible. I could no more burn there than freeze," Ahadiel replied. "I will leave you with the packet. But understand, if you do not take this...this *job*, the Throne will never offer you another extension from the List."

“You wouldn’t,” Del replied, astonished. If there was a tale of a servant of the Throne lying, she didn’t know it. Rogues and other Fallen, certainly. They rebelled against everything and lies were a small consolation for the price of that rebellion.

But a servant?

Whether it was out of loyalty, or simply the manner of their creation, Del didn’t know. She’d met a few who could play on perspectives, so that the truth heard was not the full truth. The truth depended on other knowledge. But an out-and-out lie was outside her experience.

Ahadiel had told the truth.

No more jobs. No more exclusion.

What did she have? Maybe twenty years saved up? Maybe thirty? Money wasn’t a problem, but if she turned from hunter to prey, there wasn’t a safe hole on, off, or under the Earth. She might hide for a year, perhaps two, if the Throne didn’t consider her a high enough priority.

If her name didn’t appear at the top of the List.

But only a few days measured by a life as long as hers. A death sentence and a last meal.

Another gun, or a pair, or perhaps she would rate an entire team, would appear and she would be finished. Oh, she would fight, to be certain, but as the mark, all the Throne truly needed was to point. Maybe not for the first assassin, or even the third, but the Throne would have her.

The Throne had always had her.

“I would not, Del,” Ahadiel replied. “I like you, though you lack respect and should know better. This comes directly from the Throne. You are probably the best at this work, which is why you have enjoyed exclusion. The Throne knows that you can be replaced, even if it is inconvenient to do so.”

“Replaced?” Del asked. “Replaced by who?”

Ahadiel didn’t respond. He looked down at his hands folded in his lap, then up at her eyes. He turned to open the door to the Jeep and gave her the perfect shot at his back if she wanted it. She focused on the spot where his neck met his shoulders, where nine rounds would tear his head free, and her finger tightened on the trigger. Ahadiel pulled the door handle, cracked the door and paused.

*Shoot him, spike him and finish him, her mind screamed. You've done it before!*

It would be so easy.

What worked for a rogue worked for the Loyal. Destroy the *chakram* beneath the eyes, and he would be banished from the Earth for a generation.

Ahadiel opened the door, and a brief, cold wind blew at the leather tie of the bi-fold on the dash. The motion was caught in her periphery, and her stare flicked to it for the barest of moments. When she looked back, the Jeep's door slammed shut.

Without even a flutter of his long-coat, Ahadiel was gone.