

Chapter One

Year 2315.

The 3rd Era of the Great Cataclysm

Regional countryside outside Chambon, France

Le Lieu de la Miséricorde- The Place of Mercy

Generation after generation lived amidst the bounty of The Rider's blessing. The Place of Mercy was sheltered from the outside world by a dense forest that turned intruders away. Leading them back out the way they came in, the woodland avenues of the Place of Mercy were winding and mysterious to strangers, but straight and clear for those who called it their home. The boundaries of the woodland seemed to expand and contract, making the way difficult for those it did not recognize and easy for those it did. How it accomplished this mystery was unknown even to those who lived there, but as the world beyond its sheltering borders grew more desperate and violence became the norm, the protection the Place of Mercy offered was invaluable.

No longer an individual farmstead, it grew into a small village with the farm at its core. Its citizens lived in a unique harmony that stood in stark contrast to the world outside its sheltering boundaries. While the rest of the world endured decades of devastating warfare, droughts, and famine, the villagers of the Place of Mercy lived an equitable communal lifestyle, sharing bounty and adversity equally. The descendants of Gabrielle and Annabella held fast to the philosophy of kindness and generosity they had taught their daughter and, in honor of what they began so long ago, once in each new generation the first-born daughter of their direct lineage was named Lourdes.

Just as Pestilence and War had ridden hard across the face of the globe, Famine began his ride during the fifth year of the third era of the great cataclysm. In response to his passage, the fields of the earth became sterile. Great tracts of land were left fallow. Oceans around the world filled with algae and immense blooms of jellyfish. Blights infected the fruits of the vine and plagues of insects devoured the crops that remained. Hunger, want and need were commonplace.

Those who survived in the wake of Famine's ride had to find alternative means of survival. Few animals could be supported without grain and farms of livestock were replaced with small herds and flocks that provided only for the wealthy and privileged. Commoners were forced to turn to insects for food, which thrived in the predator-less environment. This became the bulk of their nourishment. Massive water farms were constructed where impurities were distilled out of contaminated water and the purified liquid became more valuable than gold. Humans adapted to the stark, dry climate and returned to a way of living that more closely resembled the 17th century, rather than the 24th.

History repeated itself as the strong subjugated the weak. Vast municipalities were formed and were ruled with an iron fist. Entire villages were confiscated by the newly formed governments and the inhabitants lived merely to till and fertilize the sterile earth, working year after arduous year until scant harvests could again be gathered. Little fed the mouths of the workers while much filled the bellies of the rulers. As land became productive again, principalities expanded and claimed larger and larger expanses of ground as their own. These

growing farmlands required more workers to keep the earth fertile and entire populations fell into servitude.

Liberty and freedom became a distant memory under the harsh governance of the new order and in the fifteenth year of the 4th Era, the Eminent Protectorate emerged.

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Year 2446

The 96th Year of the 4th Era after the Great Cataclysm

Day One - The countryside outside Marçais, New France

The heat and glare of the late summer afternoon melted into a droning cadence of insect songs and hazy golden light. Tzadkiel held Lourdes for what seemed like hours, speaking softly to her and sometimes saying nothing at all. Sharing her pain in the only way he could, he helped her far more than anyone other than her own parents had ever done. His embrace was more comforting than she ever imagined one could be and she longed to remain exactly where she was, safe and secure within his care.

Of course, she couldn't. Life was never that simple or that kind. Releasing him at last and drawing back to dry her eyes, she felt suddenly exhausted. She never would have guessed she'd held in so many tears or that such storms of emotion might have been congealing behind her mask of composure. She'd almost managed to convince herself that she was fine. She'd almost succeeded in ignoring the truth altogether, but truth never let you ignore it for very long.

Sighing resignedly, she glanced around them, realizing the day was rapidly fading and she couldn't stop herself from apologizing. "I'm sorry."

He looked at her as if she'd taken leave of her senses. "There's no reason to apologize, Lourdes."

Sniffing, she smiled ineffectively. "I've wasted the rest of the day." Her words wavered beneath the weight of her lingering emotion, but he took hold of her hands and captured her with a penetrating stare that stole her breath away.

"You've done no such thing. You have absolutely every right to feel what you feel," he insisted, but she clarified anyway.

"I ... I only meant we could've gone farther,"

Frowning at her, he shook his head even more adamantly. "I understand what you meant. Please, understand what I mean. I know life at The Bastion was hard. I know you had only yourself to rely upon and no one had time for your needs." Looking down at her hands with an expression she had never seen in the eyes of another before, he spoke more softly. "That is no longer the case. Life may still be hard, but you can rely upon me, Lourdes. I will always have time for your needs."

She stared at him. How could he possibly know what life had been like for her at The Bastion? How did he seem to understand everything she'd gone through for the past ten years, despite only having met her days before? His assurances overwhelmed her and nearly brought her to tears again, although for the opposite reasons. Before her crying renewed itself, however, he continued even more earnestly.

"Besides, I should be the one apologizing to you."

She shook her head, dumbstruck. “Why? You didn’t,” she couldn’t force the words passed her lips, but the guilt that filled his deep lavender gaze was unmistakable.

“If I hadn’t allowed them to do what they did to me, you would never have suffered such,” his voice trailed off, but it was her turn to insist adamantly and she did.

“You didn’t do it. I knew the risks when I volunteered. I didn’t have to.”

Staring at her in surprise, he shook his head. “You volunteered?”

“Yes.”

“Volunteered to come to The Tower?”

“Yes. Brigyda was so scared and I couldn’t just turn away. So, I offered to take her place.”

Her explanation intensified the expression of culpability in his eyes and he shook his head ruefully. “If I hadn’t been in The Tower in the first place you wouldn’t have assumed such a risk.” Again, his voice faltered, but she argued even more stubbornly.

“You said you were injured so badly you didn’t have a choice.” They considered each other silently and she could see how greatly he struggled with the guilt he felt. “It’s not your fault and I won’t let you take the blame. You didn’t do anything wrong. You were in The Tower because you were desperate to find someone; because you care so much. How’s that wrong?”

He stared at her with a penetrating gaze that seemed to see into her soul and she shivered, but didn’t look away. After several intense moments, he spoke softly. “It isn’t wrong, not when you say it like that.” His seriousness melted into a gentle smile and he released her hands so he could get up. “I’ll get us some water.”

Lourdes watched as he wandered off in the direction of the pack mule to retrieve the drinking tumblers before strolling unhurriedly to the stream. He was clearly giving her some few moments of privacy, or perhaps taking some for himself, and she knew she ought to use the time to compose herself, but she couldn’t seem to tear her attention away from him. She picked up the two halves of the stuffed loaf of bread he’d divided for them and then found herself watching as he crouched beside the stream and dipped the cups into the crystalline water to fill them. Absently, she brushed a few opportunistic ants from their supper, only to find herself gazing at him while he set the cups aside and rinsed his hands in the burbling splash of the stream. Removing the officer’s peaked cap he wore, he brushed his hands through his blood-stained golden hair, closed his eyes, and basked several moments in the lingering radiance of the evening sun.

He was so different from any man she’d ever known.

Of course, he was.

He was an angel.

An angel? She repeated the phrase to herself several times, hoping each time she said it, it would make better sense, but the notion of him being something other than human was more than she could fathom. Yes, he had survived torture every day for nearly a year that would have killed a human a hundred times over and he could apparently command objects to do his bidding, but he didn’t appear any different than any other male.

Her thoughts ground to a halt, then spiraled unexpectedly and she shook her head as her cheeks blushed warmly. She’d never really considered the male human form before, perhaps because she’d never seen a man entirely unclothed, but recalling him earlier that day standing beside the table while bandaging his thigh sent a fervent sensation through her she could scarcely comprehend. She shook her head. It would be best to focus on the present and leave musing about him for another time.

Turning her attention back to their meal, she decided to cut off the line of attack for any other adventurous ants. Getting up, she moved towards the pack mule to collect the blanket, retrieved it and spread it over the lush green grass at the base of the oak. She'd only just finished placing the two halves of their supper, as well as the apples he'd brought, in its center when she looked up to see he was returning. He smiled pleasantly at her and gazed around him. "This might be as good a place as any to make camp for the night. The skies look clear, but if it rains the oaks will offer some protection." Handing her one of the cups he'd filled, he sat down beside her and gestured at the blanket. "This was a good idea."

"I was only supposed to take medical supplies, but," she shrugged innocuously as she glanced around the small grove, "I guess it was a fortunate impertinence." He laughed as she handed him his half of the sandwich and took a bite while she tried to control her whirling thoughts. It hadn't really occurred to her that they would sleep beneath the stars, though it should have, and she hadn't fully considered what it would mean to travel and live with a man she barely knew. All the private things she did to care for herself suddenly imposed on her thoughts and she blushed involuntarily.

Of course, he noticed. Turning his head slightly to one side, he paused from eating and gazed at her curiously. "What is it?"

She shook her head, her blush deepening as his stare grew more penetrating.

"Have I done something to upset you?"

Again, she shook her head and she could feel the warmth of her cheeks intensify. "No, I...I didn't..." stammering, she drew a deep breath and tried again. "I hadn't thought about...what traveling with you would mean."

He looked downward, visibly attempting to understand her less than illuminating remark, but shook his head and gazed back at her, perplexed. "I'm not sure I understand."

She smiled as the warm blush of her skin turned scarlet. "I hadn't thought about where I would sleep or...how I might bathe or..." unable to force herself to state the obvious, she closed her eyes and shrugged again. She could feel the weight of his stare on her and had to force herself to open her eyes. He was looking at her with an expression she couldn't quite identify, but he smiled and finally nodded.

"I will not intrude upon your privacy, Lourdes."

"I know, I just didn't think about it." She tried to change the course of the conversation. There were a thousand questions tumbling in her head, but before she could ask any of them he chose to make trivial conversation, speaking about the beauty of the trees and the sweetness of the evening breeze. Perhaps he was doing his utmost to make her comfortable. Perhaps he simply needed a break from everything that happened.

Although she tried to be conversational, she found herself paying closer attention to the way his mouth moved when he spoke and the way the breeze tousled his hair than to what he was actually saying. He was so unlike other men. She hadn't truly known many, other than her father, her brother and the men of the village where she'd grown up, but she'd seen plenty during her years at The Bastion. She'd heard stories from other servants about how they suffered at the hands of one or more of the guards and had memories of her own to validate her opinion that most men were opportunists in search of only a few things. Tzadkiel, however, seemed entirely different. He was charming and thoughtful, gentle and mirthful, caring and mysterious, all at once. The combination was undeniably beguiling, but he was still a man, wasn't he? Didn't he still want what all men wanted?

She tried to argue her own rationale by repeating to herself yet again that he was an angel when she suddenly realized he'd stopped talking and was returning her unguarded stare with a curious and slightly amused expression. She had no idea what he'd been saying, but before she could retrace her thoughts the question she'd been repeating to herself slipped out. "You're an angel?" The inquiry spilled across her lips without preamble and he chuckled dryly.

"Yes, but I'm in human form."

She considered this for several moments longer, unsure what difference such a distinction would make. "But you heal from sunlight and your sword and the horses, they understand you when you speak?" She simply couldn't wrap her mind around it. Gazing at her silently as he considered how best to explain himself, he looked down at her hands. Taking hold of her gently, he placed her hand on top of his and her other hand beneath, allowing her to clasp him as he spoke with a measured tone.

"You feel my warmth, don't you?"

Glancing down at his hand, she nodded.

"You've seen my blood and know I suffer pain just as you do." Again, he paused, waiting for her to answer and she nodded another time.

"You've heard me cry; fed me when I was hungry; cared for me when I was weak."

She nodded a third time, watching as he shifted his hand so that he clasped hers between both of his.

"*You* are warm. *You* bleed, I know. You suffer, cry, and need, just as I do." His words brought a pained expression to her face, but he continued quietly before her emotions could overrule her again. "We are both immortal energy bound within human flesh, a mystery far greater than even I can truly comprehend, but we are the same in every way that matters, Lourdes."

She stared at him, endeavoring to understand him. "Immortal energy?"

Her confusion brought a gentle smile to his lips and he nodded. "Yes. That which makes us who we are, the essence that abides within."

"You mean our spirits?"

Again, he nodded. "Yes. We are both spirit contained within a human body. At this moment, in this place, we are the same. Flesh and blood, emotion, fear, need, hope. I may be different in some ways, but not in any way that truly matters. All the 'strange' things I seem to be capable of, like speaking to the animals, healing by sunlight and commanding my sword can be explained."

"They can?"

He smiled at her blatant curiosity and his expression brightened. He looked down at her hand with an unfathomable glimmer in his eyes, released her and got to his feet.

"Yes, they can, but it will take some time and I think, perhaps, we should concentrate on making camp first."

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Year 2446

The 96th Year of the 4th Era after the Great Cataclysm

Day One - Tower Obligar, Le Bastion de la Résolution, - Marçais, New France

Lévesque regained consciousness to the sight of one of his lieutenants, Delacour, bending over him while shaking him urgently. Blackness spun at the edges of his sight. His head throbbed and a sharp, incessant pain pierced his side where the Archangel had repeatedly kicked him. He'd done precisely what was required, perhaps a bit too well. Damnable creature. Attempting to sit up while Delacour shouted for the guards, he cursed at the piercing stab he received for trying. The young officer got up and strode hurriedly around the chamber assessing the situation before returned to his side. "The prisoner is gone."

Lévesque groaned, biding his time. He didn't really know how long it had been since he'd been knocked senseless, but he fully intended to keep his word and delay reporting the escape as long as possible. Pushing himself up into a reclining position, he leaned forward on one arm, wrapped the other around his ribs and scowled up at Delacour.

"First things first, lieutenant. He's cracked my ribs. Find a medic." His breathless growl refocused the younger officer's frantic energy and he looked around the chamber another time.

"Where's Phillippe?"

Lévesque shook his head. "Dead." His blunt answer shocked the lieutenant into gaping silence as he attempted to formulate an inquiry, but Lévesque rebuffed him with an exaggeratedly patient tone. "I realize you've been assigned elsewhere and have missed all the excitement, but explanations later. Find a medic!"

"Aye, Sir!" Snapping his head in an acknowledging nod, Delacour hastened off in search of a medical officer. It would take him some time. The only other medics were stationed in the infirmary on the south side of The Bastion which was a full twenty minutes from The Tower at a fast walk. It would buy him some time, but he called after the rapidly departing lieutenant, just to be sure.

"Delacour!"

The sound of the lieutenants receding footsteps halted abruptly and returned. "Sir?"

Lévesque glared up him with an expression that warned him not to disobey the order he was about to receive. "Say nothing of this to anyone."

Nodding sharply once more, Delacour turned on his heel and strode off while Lévesque looked around disagreeably. Reaching for his pocket watch, he checked the time. It was 1430 hours. The guards would return from the training he'd sent them to by 1500, which gave him some time. Time to get himself off the floor and into his office, which was not nearly as simple a matter as he hoped it might be. The Archangel had taken him at his word and left significant injuries.

Angel of mercy, indeed!

Scowling fiercely at the pain even the slightest movement caused, he shuffled towards his office feeling more like a 90-year-old man than an officer in his prime. Leaning on the doorframe to catch his breath before managing to get around his desk and sit down, he cursed at the liberty he'd extended, unsure what he was thinking. To his chagrin, sitting wasn't any more comfortable than standing or walking and he closed his eyes in an attempt to focus on something other than the stabbing in his side. His first thought was how he would explain losing so valuable a prisoner and how he would avoid reporting it to the Marshal until the morning? He'd hoped to give the Archangel as much time as possible before sending out the first wave of an official search, one which he truly hoped would fail,

but Delacour was an eager young officer who was keen to advance and would be difficult to contain.

The chamber grew oddly quiet and the stillness felt heavy and uneasy. Lévesque wasn't one to scare easily, but after witnessing what he could only assume was a demonic attack on the Archangel, the unusual silence sent an involuntary chill down his spine. Would he be next? He would certainly make an easy target. Looking around uneasily, he tried to shake off the jitters. He was getting soft. The shadows were no more about to turn into demons intent on his blood than Sauvage might suddenly appear weeping in remorse for all the misery he'd caused.

Surrounded by youthful officers who were eager to improve their rank, he found sitting at his desk hunched over from an attack made him feel old and worn out. Granted, it was an attack he elicited, but that fact didn't make the pain any easier to bear. He grimaced culpably. After all the torture he'd ordered, he deserved to suffer a little. What were a few broken ribs compared to the agonizing 'treatments' Phillippe had devised? How could he justifiably compare his split lip and inability to breathe deeply to scalded flesh, lashes from a barbed whip or incisions made at an agonizingly slow pace in order to create as much pain as possible?

Shifting uncomfortably as he contemplated, he focused his thoughts instead on planning the first search. He was unwilling to get mired in self-recrimination. Planning was a far more constructive use of his time; particularly when he had to mislead the search party from discovering the trail of fugitives while at the same time obscuring his personal involvement.

How he would successfully mislead The Protectorate without losing his rank or his head was an entirely separate problem.