

## 4 All Ye Who Enter Here

He knew that the universe had changed when he could move without a wave of pain slamming him down. Instead of a formless void of darkness and despair, a ground of soil and leaves crunched underneath him as he sat up and regarded his newly-formed surroundings.

He was in a forest, and it was either pre-dawn or dusk. The low light cast everything in shades of gray, including the skin of his body. It was the body of a healthy forty-something year old man. He wasn't surprised that he had a body, and that the body was as naked and clean as the day of Adam's creation. After everything that had happened to him in his long existence, nothing surprised him. Trapped in this human's inner universe, he wondered if he could give himself clothes.

He looked down and saw his body clothed in a solid black T-shirt, simple blue jeans, and white and black sneakers. He could feel clean underwear – boxers, not briefs -- and thick athletic socks underneath the ensemble. He touched his head and face: hair cropped short, face clean-shaven.

“All the creature comforts,” he wryly commented and then noticed his voice seemed to be swallowed by the trees.

No wind. No animal sounds. When he stood up and took a step forward, the only sound he heard was crunching leaves, muffled by the close-growing trees, their branches high and intertwined in a thick canopy. He reached out and touched the trunk of one of the trees.

“Aaah!” He jerked his hand back after feeling the uncanny warm thrum of a heartbeat. He flexed his fingers and gave his hand a quick shake. *Been in humans too long*, he thought derisively, chiding himself.

“Hello?”

He looked sharply to his right. From the gray gloom he saw a woman emerge, her feet crunching the dead leaves underfoot. He stared at her – slight build, thirty-something, olive skin, brown hair, blue eyes –and wondered what odd phantasm she represented, created from the madness of his human host.

“Are you real?” she asked.

He was taken aback. This wasn't the expected response from a figment of a homeless man's imagination. “Yes. Are you?”

In answer, she stepped forward, paused, and then touched his arm.

*Miranda*, he thought.

*Jamie*, she thought.

The transfer of thought was instantaneous, involuntary, and electric. He violently drew back his arm as if burned.

The woman’s blue eyes widened. “You’re *him*.”

“What?”

“The fallen angel.”

This time his whole body started, and he became afraid. “Who are you?” he demanded. “How do you know who I am?”

The woman sat down, placing her forehead in her hands. “This is impossible – absolutely impossible. But the pieces fit. They fit!” she rambled.

Being ignored, he found himself becoming more angry than fearful. He squatted in front of her. “Answer me – who are you?”

She looked up. “I refuse to believe that I am going mad. So I’m going to accept this reality as it is because Jamie needs me.”

“What are you talking about?” He couldn’t help yelling.

She moved to push him back, but he voluntarily moved out of her way, wary of her touch. “Jamie is my brother, the human you’ve been... possessing.” She stared at him. “I’ve been dreaming about your memories – I see now they’re your memories – for the past five years. I didn’t even know angels had personal memories except until I saw yours. Loving Miranda, who betrayed you. Living in crazy, harmless people.” She noted his look of shock. “I thought all fallen angels were demons. But you’re like a human – something in between.”

It was strange to hear about himself with such clarity from this woman. His gaze studied her, trying to see the light of Heaven in her, but he couldn’t tell; he had been more human than angel for far too long. “What are you – prophet? Saint? Preacher?”

She shook her head. “I’m no saint. I’m – I’m just an English professor.”

“So how --”

“Do you know anything about your hosts when you possess them?” Zoey interrupted. “Do you have access to their memories?”

He shook his head impatiently. “I could. I chose not to, as their memories were often shattered by their madness. It served no purpose for me to know. But--”

“So you don’t know anything about my brother.”

“What? No. He was unique. He had already encapsulated himself when I arrived, already locked away his memories – his soul – as if he was expecting something like me. But--”

The woman placed her forehead in her hands again.

“What?” he demanded, irritated.

“My brother could see something like you. Perhaps not all of you,” she waved a hand at him, “but he could see the dark, invisible things – human or otherwise – ever since we were children.”

He stared at her and then shrugged at that information. “What would he do?”

“Keep a low profile. Stay safe. He’d always try to warn me. But I never believed him,” she said, her voice stricken with guilt at the end.

“So you didn’t have this ability?”

“No.”

“He would be considered a prophet, a holy man, in the early times.”

“As opposed to a paranoid schizophrenic in modern times?”

He looked around him impatiently. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“So how do I know you?” She looked at him. “I don’t know. Jamie could never show what he could see. But with you in him – I don’t know – he has... spirit energy to send? And with Jamie, uh, encapsulated as you say, what he sent to me weren’t his perceptions but yours.”

He scowled. “That’s obscene. Like standing naked in front of a mirror, not knowing it was a two-way mirror.” He closed his eyes, crossing his arms deep into his scowl. “You know everything about me.”

“Zoey.”

“What?” He opened his eyes.

“My name is Zoey.”

“As in ‘life’.”

“Yes.”

He stared at her and then peered quizzically at the canopy-obscured imaginary sky, as if looking for an answer. “He’s dying, as you likely know. Your brother. He’s dying, but his soul won’t let go. He’s not encapsulated any more, or this forest wouldn’t be here. His soul won’t let go and won’t let *me* go. I don’t know why. But it has something to do with you, I’m certain; that’s why you’re here.”

“Why am I here?”

“My best guess – to help him die.”

She breathed deeply. She looked up at him with deep, piercing eyes and then pushed herself up, standing about a foot away from him. “Okay. That sounds right.” She clasped her arms around herself as if suddenly chilled. “I may know everything about you, but you at least know my name. What’s yours?”

He frowned at the question and took a long time to answer. “Call me Ed.”

“Like *Moby Dick*? Not your real name?”

“Astute, this one is.”

“That was unnecessarily rude.” Zoey scanned for an opening through the forest. “I assume you’re coming with me?”

“Better than sitting around here, waiting for your brother to die.”

Zoey ignored the callous tone of Ed’s reply, as it reminded her of an important concern. “Am I really in Jamie? Or am I really outside, next to Jamie’s hospital bed, and I’m dreaming all this?”

Ed shrugged. “God only knows. Let’s move.”

#

They weren’t certain that the forest did or did not go on forever until they felt the ground underneath them start to slope downward in a gentle incline. The trees thinned out onto long stretches of a clay-and-sand riverbank, which dropped steeply into a wide, fast-moving river, undulating as if filled with gray, silver-tinged fish.

Zoey drew closer to the river but then suddenly drew back. The river wasn’t a river of fish-filled water.

The river was a river of people.

Men, women, children. Different ages. Different ethnicities. But the gloom cast a universal silvery-gray to their color, and their eyes never wavered. They looked forward as they whipped past the river bank, a river rapid of single-minded people, as impersonal and untouchable as strangers in an overcrowded elevator.

On the other side of the river, at a distance, rose high, neon-lit buildings of a city.

Zoey glanced at Ed. “Can you fly?”

He hunched his shoulders. “No.”

“Why?”

“If I knew that, don’t you think I’d had figured out a way and would already be flying instead of walking?” he responded, peevish. He looked at the swift current of people before them. He stooped down, picked up a large rock, and threw it into the middle of the river.

“Hey --”

“Look.”

Like water, the current of people split before the rock hit and then converged back when the rock hit the bottom. “Have you ever walked on a crowded sidewalk? You’re busy, you have a thousand items on your to-do list. You’re on auto-pilot. So are the hundreds of people around you. What do you do if there’s an obstacle in your way – a big rock, a lost tourist, a homeless person? You go around it, without missing a step.” Ed hopped off the bank and strode through the river of people, leaving a tiny luminal space in his wake.

Zoey followed in his wake, amazed as the unseeing people swiftly parted and then converged around her, without anyone ever touching her like negative polarity magnets, repelling each other. The riverbed was wide, and Zoey took careful deliberate steps. All she heard was her heartbeat, her breath, and the low cacophony of muted footsteps rising like a hum from the riverbed. The gloom from the forest extended over here, and she couldn’t distinguish one from another in her slow crossing.

On the other side, Ed stood, waiting on the riverbank. He didn’t help her up and watched as she scrambled out of the riverbed and stood up, smoothing down her denim shirt and tan capri pants. They looked at the silent human river, a packed mass of lonely people.

“Acheron,” Zoey suddenly stated, her eyes widening in recognition.

“What?”

“That,” she nodded toward the riverbed, “is my brother’s version of Acheron. Filled not with water but the Uncommitted.”

Ed stared at the rushing people and then the city rising out of the gloom in the near distance. “Dante’s Inferno?”

“Jamie’s Inferno,” Zoey corrected. She shook her head in disbelief. “But inverted. Aren’t we supposed to go *down* in Hell?”

Ed snorted. “You don’t have to be in a deep, dark hole to be in Hell.” He looked at the city, built high on a hill, with an imposing office tower of staggered steel and mirrors eerily lit with red neon tubing as the highest structure at its epicenter. “You talk too much.” He strode onward.

“Hrmp,” Zoey replied, following. “You --” She stopped speaking as she stepped off from the incline of the riverbank to the flat plain before her which sat at the bottom of the high hill of the city.

The plain was filled with little cardboard shanties, and front of each cluster of shanties was a low fire in little metal trash bins. Clustered around each fire stood or sat people dressed in tattered clothes – some in layers, some hardly wearing anything at all. But what stopped Zoey’s voice was the vision

of little children, dotted here and there in that narrow plain, wandering around from fire to fire, crying out, “Daddy? Mommy? Where are you?”

Zoey hadn’t realized she had stopped walking until she saw Ed’s hunched, rushed form a hundred yards into that shantytown. She jogged to catch up, feeling smothered by the stifling heat of those fires and those huddled people, their backs turned against her and those little children.

“Shouldn’t we help them?” she asked as soon as she reached Ed.

“Who?” He glanced down. “They’re not real, you know. Just figments of your brother’s imagination, mixed with memories of events long dead.” He strode forward again but then realized that Zoey wasn’t following when he glanced back and saw her kneeling before one of the little images, which looked like a little boy. “Oh come *on*,” he sighed in exasperation. He backtracked to her location, in time to see her hold the little boy’s hand and start walking from fire to fire.

“What are you doing?” he demanded walking beside her.

“I don’t care if they’re just synapses firing in Jamie’s brain. Here, they’re people, and they feel, and this little boy is lost. I’m helping him find his daddy.”

“You can’t help everyone,” Ed pointed out, impatient.

“Well, I’m at least helping this one.”

Ed sighed but waited. He saw Zoey do what the wandering children and the fire-huddling adults did not do, which was catch their attention and look into their eyes, talking to them. The adults looked as if woken from a daze, and when Zoey didn’t find the boy’s father there, she moved on to the next fire.

But then Ed stood amazed as those adults didn’t return to gazing at the fire but began talking to each other and then talking to the children. When Zoey finally reunited the boy with his father, that was not the only reunion, as the adults continued Zoey’s action, finding lost parents for those lost children.

When Zoey returned to Ed, she left behind a wake of reunited families, holding each other close and tight, almost afraid to let go.

“What’s the point of that?” Ed asked. “They’re still stuck here, trapped in this plain. What’s the use?”

She shook her head at his question. “Even people in cages need love, too.” She continued forward, leaving Ed, who stared at her for a moment but then followed.

They hiked up a steep, thin ridge, finding that it was a levee wall as another narrow plain was on the other side. But this plain was filled with run-down buildings, a jumbled urban mix of warehouses,

motels, and burglar-barred storefronts, the streetlights barely illuminating the cracked sidewalks and empty pothole-strewn streets. Initially surveying the plain, Zoey and Ed thought the buildings and streets were arranged at random. But the more they looked, the more they found it fit a particular pattern.

“It’s a maze,” Ed declared.

“Yes.” Zoey traced the various routes with her finger, following all the dead ends. The last route she traced led to one particular place. “We need to go there,” she pointed, a warehouse building luridly lit, on the other side of the plain, nestled against the foot of the hill of skyscrapers.

Ed looked at the building, seeing the garish light pulsing as if to a heavy beat even though everything was silent. “A dance club? Your brother’s vision of hell has a *dance club*?”

She shrugged and then scrambled down the levee wall, with Ed following after. They emerged from a high border of evergreen bushes to a narrow alleyway slick with water.

They walked, turning left, then right, and then left again, following their mental map of the route to the club. However, they soon reached a dead end where another passageway should be. Backtracking, they arrived at a different point from where they should have been.

“It’s like the routes are changing,” Zoey exclaimed, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the suffocating silence.

“It’s because they are.” Ed held out his arm, stopping Zoey without touching her, like a crosswalk guard. This time looking at where they had been, Zoey saw the passageway obscured by fog and then clear with a totally different street, going left instead of right.

She groaned in frustration. “How --”

“Wait.”

They stood still, as immobile as the concrete walls and the lonely streetlights. At first Zoey strained to see and hear something – anything – but then she pulled in her senses, hearing the blood rush in her ears like waves crashing in an undertow. Then she heard her heartbeat – thumpTHUMP thumpTHUMP – until she could feel her heartbeat pressing hard against her sternum – boomBOOM boomBOOM – and then she heard it, outside of and all around herself.

“We’re here,” Ed said, his voice loud and close to her ear.

Zoey wondered why he had to be so loud, but the heavy beat of the house music and the sweaty, claustrophobic pressure of writhing bodies answered her.

They were in the middle of the club’s dance floor.

“Ed,” Zoey started to say, but the jostling mass of dancing bodies pushed her away from Ed so that she couldn’t see him. Panicked, she glanced up, seeing a gaudy disco ball spinning and reflecting crazily the roving spotlights of red, which were the only illumination in the entire place. She saw no ceiling, obscured by the inky darkness where there were no spotlights.

On high pillars staggered around the perimeter of the dance floor were tall, narrow cages with one barely-clothed, painfully thin woman writhing upright in each one. Each caged dancer glowed eerily with the two steady spotlights pointed upwards from the bottom of each pillar.

“Ed!” she called out, trying to push her way towards the direction where she last saw him. It was like pushing against a windstorm, albeit a storm stinking of sweat, musk, and sex pheromones. Hands groping for bodies whipped around her as she pushed forward, but, even in her alarm, she noticed that the hands were not for her but for each other, as mindful of her as ants were to lampposts.

The red lights cast everything and everybody with that eerie red glow, as if the entire club was inflamed and sick. While the music and dancing feet were deafening, the people themselves were silent, as mute as the one-minded people of the River Acheron.

“Jamesy-boy!” exclaimed a high, girlish voice. “Time for a drink!”

As much as a person in a windstorm could whip around, Zoey did so, as the voice was behind her. She saw one of the dazed, caged dancers jump down from her pillar, disappearing from her line of sight. More forcefully, she elbowed her way through, emerging against a low, metal rail that was part of the boundary enclosing the dance floor like a human pen. On the other side of the rail were a narrow strip of level floor and then a few but steep series of steps leading to an open-faced mezzanine, where a long, smoky bar ran along the entire length of the wall. The wall behind the bar was filled to the ceiling with bottles of spirits of every kind imaginable, displayed like graven images in shelves lit with the same black-light red. Every bar stool was occupied, mostly with people whose backs were turned away from the crowded dance floor, focused in their task of getting drunk.

On two bar stools, in the middle of the bar, sat the dancer, evidently on a break, and a young Jamie Fitzpatrick.

“Jamie!” Zoey cried out, clambering over the rail. He looked not much older than the eighteen-year old Jamie of Zoey’s twenty-year old memory, sitting in that familiar defensive hunched-over way that he would sit, an outsider looking in, unsure whether to scowl or frown. Once at the bar, she reached out to touch his shoulder, but her hand passed right through him, as if he were air, and it landed with a hard smack against the bar counter. “What the --”

“He’s a memory,” Zoey heard behind her, and she looked up and around, seeing Ed standing with a similar hunched-shoulders stance. “The club is an amalgam of memories and impressions, made into concrete form, but what you’re seeing now is based on an actual memory, of a ‘once upon a time.’ He’s as tangible as an image on a screen.”

Zoey pulled her hand back, through the Jamie-memory, and stood back, unsure what next to do.

“Jamesy, c’mon, don’t be such a party pooper,” the dancer said, pushing a shot glass of an amber liquid with one small hand while raising another to her candy-red lips. She whipped back her white-blond waist-length hair and then slammed down the empty shot glass on the counter. “Another one, Mando, and the next round for everyone on me!”

Her generous offer solicited a uniform response of cheers from the drinkers at the bar, but Jamie was undeterred, leaving his shot glass untouched. “Lexa, please listen to me.” He placed his hands on the dancer’s thin, bare shoulders and forced her to look at him, his dark eyes trying to connect with her watery, blood-shot blue ones, which were almost obscured by her heavy dark makeup.

For a heartbeat or two, she stared back. But then she laughed and shook off his hands. “You’re always so serious. Can’t you have fun? I wanna have fun, Jamesy.”

Zoey had been looking at Jamie, but then she shifted her full attention to the dancer. She gave a silent gasp as she finally saw her – a pale, skeletal girl who couldn’t be any older than sixteen.

“Lexa --” Jamie began.

“This guy botherin’ you, babe?”

A large man – a man of muscle and power – emerged from the shadows and draped a possessing arm around Lexa’s bird-like shoulders.

“No, TK, no,” she laughed with that high, girlish voice that belied the fear in her too-wide, blue eyes.

“Lexa,” Jamie said again, as if the man wasn’t even there.

“Hey, when you talk, you talk to *me!*” The man exploded, reaching for something in his jacket with his free hand.

“NO!” Lexa screamed.

“NO!” Zoey cried out, throwing herself forward, unable to stop the past of twenty years ago as a young girl threw herself between the man who owned her and the boy who loved her, taking the full brunt of the .45 caliber round that had sat ready in its chamber.

The gunshot drowned out the hypnotic dance music, drowned out Zoey’s screams, until its echo resolved itself into a steady but fast heartbeat – THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP – and Zoey could see again.

The club was behind them, silent and dark.

“Get up.”

The club behind Ed lay at the bottom of a bridge, a thick fog enveloping it and its surrounding warehouse district. Before him stretched a lonely wide bridge of asphalt and concrete, leading straight into the downtown of a dark city. He was impatient, wanting to cross that bridge, and frowned at the kneeling form next to him, which shook with every silent sob.

“Get up,” he repeated. “It’s just an old memory. No point crying about it.” He heard the sickening sound of mucus being sucked in, of Zoey wiping her eyes on her short sleeves. Then he heard her stand up.

“Will it *all* be like that?” she asked.

Ed glanced back at where the club was and then returned to peering down the curving length of the bridge, his eyes tracing a too-familiar snaky billow of dark smoke rising from the other side. “No,” he replied. “It will be worse.”