

Chapter 3: Michael Explains the Rules

My tongue searched the dull edges of each tooth in my mouth. I tried to count them. Was I trying to see how many were gone or how many were left? I couldn't remember. My brain struggled with any sort of computation. I took in an involuntary deep breath. There was nothing. It was the smell of nothing; the taste of nothing. If water had been dried and sprinkled throughout every molecule for a two mile radius, that would have been something. But this was void of even the very notion of the tasteless, the odorless. My instincts told me to be afraid.

I listened carefully for any sound. My body was preparing itself; trying to protect itself. My mind wouldn't allow me to open my eyes until it was sure. Sure of what? I wondered. My mind slowly opened the thick oak door where it jailed its delicate collection of information. Without a pressing matter of danger at present to deal with, the mind released small, perfect packages of recollection to the forefront of my reality.

Drip. First came the liquid image of Josh and Spirit with the sun shining on their faces. Drip . Next, the scene of the workmen in bright orange hard hats and vests working on a coal black street. Drip, drip. Two images came at once and my hands and arms twitched with involuntary muscle spasms. A woman yelling at the men, into her phone and then blackness. Then, came the brighter image, the larger drop of pure information into my mind's eye. It was the car.

The drips flowed into a stream of images that made my body twitch and jerk. Part of me was trying to stop it. Part of me wanted to stay here in the nothingness. But the wanting to know was stronger. I wanted an explanation. I had to move. A flood erupted in my head. There was the car, barreling down the road with an oblivious angry woman at the wheel. The sound of the pistons hammering under the hood of her Mercedes got louder and louder. My arms strained and reached to push my companions out of the way while my feet tore through the sponge like sod beneath my feet. I was pushing Josh and Spirit towards the field. My mind sent a message to my heart and it too felt like it was going to split in two. Logic told me they weren't going fast enough. I could feel the heat of the engine. The tires began to screech. I heard myself scream in my own memory.

Was it in my mind or could I hear myself screaming in my own time? This was getting me nowhere. I was frustrated. Ignoring my protective self, I threw my eyes open. There was no one nearby. The street was a void of people, of color, of any sign of life save one element; the relentless wind.

The wind threw my hair across my face, whipping where there should have been broken bones. It beat against my arms that were surprising empty of both Josh and my dog. All I had to confirm I hadn't woken from some terrible nightmare was the denim jacket that I had taken in a moment of kidding. But that would mean that I was what? Dead? This certainly didn't resemble heaven or hell from any description I'd ever heard of. Heaven was bright, lavish and beautiful. Hell was fiery, red, more resembling the surface of Mercury than of anything humans had known of earth. Both, as I recalled had color. This place was, well more like a war zone just before a thunderstorm. The trees

were barren, almost smoldering with ash- like fragility. The road, that from my recollection had been straight if not in a state of repair was thrust up half way into the air; as if something from within the belly of the earth had punched its fist through to the surface.

There was another memory coming. I could feel the black and sheltering edges of my mind attempt to block it. I pushed the cushion away. Drip, came the beginning of the liquid memory. I gritted my teeth at the slow inefficiency of my own mind. I told myself to focus. Drip, drip. There had been something else about the car. Drip. Besides the woman and her cell phone and the hammering of pistons in contrast to the squealing of tires. What was it that I couldn't quite remember? I struggled to open the tap. When wrenching the memory tap with my theoretical hands didn't work, I opened my mind as if I were kicking the valve with a sledge hammer. Floodgate!

A trickle of images in rhythmic fashion flashed behind my eyes. It was, blue? They were blue. A pair of eyes. A man. A passenger in the back seat. He hadn't been there in the beginning. He'd arrived just as the breaking and the screaming had started. He was motionless. It was as if his expression told that he knew what was coming. He knew the moment of impact. I had turned my head to meet his eyes as if I had answered some silent greeting.

Opening my eyes, I looked around for the man in my last memory. There was no sign of anyone here. I held tight to the crumbled up jacket in my arms to keep it from being carried away in the relentless wind. Taking a few steps forward, I proved to myself that my legs were all still in proper working order. I thought of the strange man with the glowing blue eyes. If anyone had any answers, he would. Without any idea of where to find him, I headed north down the charred, crumbling street in search of a stranger who for all I knew might be dead like me.

The farther I walked the more difficult it was to convince myself that this was in fact, my street. The houses on either side were in a state of disrepair; crumbling some at their very foundations. It didn't make any sense. Then, when I had fully convinced myself that this was just a place the coincidentally looked similar to the neighborhood I struggled to remember, there was something small but incredible that I couldn't dismiss that stood out as proof to change my conviction all over again.

The old Miller house had been 5 houses down on the left if I remembered correctly. My head had begun to throb and only eased when I closed my eyes. It made thinking clearly difficult. But I forced myself to figure my surroundings; my situation out. I talked to myself, coaching to relax, think. *"Ok, the Millers' live five houses down from my house. If this is my street, then the square of sidewalk just left of his fence post should be there."* My feet took me faster and faster to the Miller house. By the fourth house, I was in a dead run. I reached the yard and looked for the long yard, the lush green grass, the tiny house with the lace curtains. It wasn't there. All that remained was a blackened foundation. As I approached the remains, it was like an earthen cavity, painful looking and exposed to the open elements. My heart pounded so hard it made my ears ring. *What the hell happened to this place?* I wondered. *Poor Mrs. Miller in her house coat and rolled up stockings. Her husband had just passed away this past April. What about their cat?* Suddenly, I could hear another voice inside my head, this

time, more like a distant memory. “Just like you to worry about the damn cat...” My head pounded in rebellion to the immense blood flow from my heart. I closed my eyes. *Josh.*

The thought of him, what might have happened to him was crushing. I couldn't breathe from the thought that something bad might have happened to him. I shoved the thought away. I walked, instead to the place I had originally placed inside my head. The old fence post wasn't far and I made it back to the sidewalk. I pushed aside dead leaves and dirt in search of the possible proof and there, scrawled in the cement was my answer. “Jeff and Alice '04” was written in the wet cement and allowed to dry and become a permanent marker. I didn't know who neither Jeff nor Alice was, but they confirmed that this crumbling street was still a place I had once lived. I turned slowly to count the last four houses back. With the Miller house confirmed, roughly four houses and through a thick grove of trees should then be ...*home*. I told myself. I took a deep breath and headed for the trees when a strange sensation came over me.

The ringing in my ears had been splitting but nothing like this. I barely registered that my feet were no longer on the ground and that I was, what? Floating? Flying? I hit the ground with a loud crack. Obviously some bone had snapped. The ringing in my ears returned again or was it? *No, its different. Listen to its pitch. The timbre is almost like a howl.* A siren was blaring into the cloud heavy sky. The whirling wind carried the howl of the siren. It travelled. Somewhere near the north end of a road, an explosion ripped through a house; splitting the concrete and stone like a hot knife through butter. Another explosion went off in the south, farther down, maybe a half a mile away. I screamed. Forgetting the pain in my shoulder, I clutched Josh's jacket and ran for cover. A shadowy figure over in the yard moved. It was petit, waving something in the air with one hand while it waved for me to come in its direction with the other. “Mrs. Miller!?” I shouted. She waved her cane in the air directing me towards the burned out remains of her once beautiful little house. I picked myself up and ran towards her. She had already turned and was making her way somehow into the wide open basement. “Mrs. Miller, no!” I ran faster, trying to catch her. The little old woman was surprisingly spry with her cane. She seemed to make her way to an opening somewhere beneath the ground but I couldn't see her when I reached the edge of the open basement.

Her voice echoed from under ground, “Hurry dear! The bombs are getting closer! You won't last ten seconds out there.”

Small, confined places had always frightened me. I hesitated at the thought of squeezing into some tiny little root cellar with the prospect of the very heavy earth caving in on my head. A third explosion rocketed over my head and landed on the house next door. Survival instincts kicked in and I made the flight of stairs in one leap and ducked into the darkness. To my relief and concurrent astonishment, I came to find not a tiny confined room but rather a long tunnel. Mrs. Miller was no where. “Keep running dear. You're not safe until you reach the first corridor under the lamp light” she called back to me.

I cursed the thick darkness. I could hear her but I couldn't see her. Her voice echoed off of the rusted metal walls. “Mrs. Miller? Mrs. Miller, I can't see you. Are you okay?”

“Hurry dear. Run to the first lamp light.”

My stomach lurched at the thought of going into the tunnel. I closed my eyes. *Maybe Josh already found this place*, I tried to convince myself. I breathed out in strong, determined breaths like a swimmer preparing her lungs for a long swim with no oxygen. In my mind, places underground had no air. If they did, the crushing earth above was sure to cave in at any moment leaving the area with no air. I could feel my head get light from nearly hyperventilating. I argued with myself again. *Mrs Miller can not only breathe but run like an Olympiad down here and she's in her eighties, you wimp!* I made myself a deal.

I reasoned that I would run to the lamp light where Mrs. Miller said I would find relative safety. If there was no large room (enforced with steel frames) or Josh, I would easily turn myself immediately back. That was something I could live with. I might even be able to run it, there and back, on one deep breath, reserving as much oxygen in my body as possible. I wrapped the jacket around my waist to help hold myself against the nausea of willing myself into the confining space of the tunnel. As I ran, my lungs protested, screaming that there was no oxygen, no air. I was suffocating in this place. I ignored my illusion and focused all of my attention on the light. *Just get yourself to the damn light and then see. Breathe.* I coached myself. *You can do this.*

I made it down the tunnel. My left foot made its way, half in the light of the lamp post with my heel still remaining in the dark. The white hair, neatly tucked in a bun came into view. Mrs. Miller was standing at the bend in the tunnel and I breathed a sigh as the room opened slightly in the light. The architects of the tunnel had purposely made this bulge in their drilling as some stopping or arrival point. It was twice as wide as the tunnel itself containing one lamp post. Here the tunnel forked with an option of turning to the west or continuing south. Either direction plunged the traveler back into darkness sans the weak light of the lamp.

A low growl thundered from in front of the old woman somewhere in the inky blackness a few feet away in the tunnel. “See boys?” the growl continued.

“Mrs. Miller! There’s something in the darkness. Back up!” I reached from behind her and pulled on the arm that wasn’t holding the cane. She was incredibly strong for her frail frame. I screamed as the growl grew louder. “No! Get away from her!” I shoved the elderly woman to my right and felt my cracked collar bone move in protest. I held out both arms to protect her. “Run back to the basement. I can’t see where the growling is coming from!” I bordered. Blind if I inched any farther forward, I didn’t hear the tiny foot steps of the woman behind me in retreat.

The growl thundered again and bounced off the metal walls of the tunnel. It seemed to come from every direction. The growling slowly evolved into laughter. “Haven’t had one this entertaining in a while.” I swung around and found myself face to face with it.

The skin of the face and snout was peeling revealing a layer of new, raw flesh beneath that dripped and oozed, thick and yellow. Her rotting black and ivory teeth caged a writhing tongue that fell back when she laughed. Her eyes flashed a light crimson as she took a step towards me. I was frozen in

disbelief. Her gnarled hand took the cane and brushed back a lock of my long hair from my face. The deep growl replaced the shaky, womanly voice that beckoned me into the tunnel. "Some of us choose not to grow old gracefully or to wear purple." Then, she laughed, violently and shoved me backwards with a swipe of her can. Black boots met my landing and stood near my head. "As I was saying, boys. If we have to go out on Michael's little errands, we might as well have a good time doing it." The crowd of soldiers joined in her the good laugh.

Old Mrs. Miller dropped down to one knee and pulled me up by my shirt to meet her. Her stench made my stomach roll. She looked at the protruding collar bone that stretched the skin so thin at the surface that it was white. Her eyes returned to mine with her zombie like face and rotting flesh. She pressed her face to my ear as her cane continued to hold her up in the crouch position. "And you, my dear, have definitely been a good time." Her voice suddenly changed from the low, chest growl to that of her elderly woman voice. "Run Mrs. Miller, run!" she screamed mockingly. The black boot mob above my head howled in delight at the joke.

"Let's get her to Michael. We wouldn't want him disappointed" her voice was a mix of ice and silk. She used my shoulder and broken collar bone to push her bird like frame back into a standing position.

One of the soldiers grabbed my arm and picked me up; my feet dangling almost a yard from the floor. His grip was strange, tight with a burning sensation where his fingers wrapped around my upper forearm. I fought to get away from the sensation, twisting and turning my body this way and that. The more I moved, the deeper the burning sensation buried itself into my skin. It was like tiny needles imbedded in his gloves that dug deeper and more painfully with each movement. Soon my whole left arm was searing with red, hot pain. I tried to think of a way to break his grip.

A dull cloud blanketed my synapses, hindering my thoughts. I thought of ways to break my arm in his grip in the hopes to run down the tunnel from where I had come. Then, I couldn't remember exactly which direction I had come from. Next, my picture of running became that of sleeping, as if somehow I'd confused the two. In my last remains of logic, I pieced together that the small needles imbedded in my skin had injected their poison into my blood stream. I tried hard to keep my thoughts, mapping each turn in the tunnel as the soldier continued to carry me through the maze of lamp posts and darkness. Soon everything was black and I couldn't tell if I'd run out of lamps or consciousness.

The next thing I remembered was a sense of being watched. I blinked hard to clear away the fog from my eyes. The drug must have been wearing off. I reached out to help myself to my feet but my arm revolted in protest. The muscles were locked and pounding with pain. I tried to hold still until it subsided. A man, somehow familiar even in my drugged haze was walking throughout the room, calling others onto their feet who were also seated on the rough ground. As my eyesight cleared, I realized I was in a large tent with taut sides that resisted the prevailing wind, keeping the sand within at rest near our feet. It was very large compared to any tent I'd ever seen and it was full of people either stooped on the sand like me or dressed in the black armor like the men in the tunnel.

It was with curious fascination that I really took in the uniform here in the pale light of the tent. A “black boot” as I had nick named them back in the tunnel was actually some kind of soldier. His uniform was skin tight, black with sensory lights and read outs. As I watched him move from one corner of the tent to a large make shift table in the center, the read outs gave information about his vital functions, his body chemistry. I could imagine that if he were wounded, these read outs could help any medic immediately access injury, speeding necessary treatment. He and another soldier were looking at something on the table and in the discussion, one of the soldier tapped his forearm. A digital image of a topographic map appeared on the canvas wall of the tent. The two discussed some strategy and then he left quickly out the side door of the tent.

My fellow floor occupants were as diverse as the stars: a man who appeared to be wearing a Confederate Civil War uniform, a Roman infantryman, a present day soldier dressed in white and grey camouflage, an astronaut, an older, graying man in a tweed suit and a doctor. There seemed no rhyme or reason to any of us as a group. The only thing that did stand out made my stomach take another dive. I was the only woman in the lot. And besides the old man, I was the only other person obviously unarmed. A wave of vulnerability ran through me and I commanded my knees to bend and meet my chest for some sense of protection.

I turned my attention to the tall man calling people up to meet him. I racked my brain trying to remember, analyzing what was familiar about him. He started walking around the young Confederate soldier, looking him up and down as he circled him; interrogating him. The Confederate looked no older than maybe nineteen. He clung to his musket and stood at attention shouting answers to the questions barked in his direction; putting a ‘Sir’ at the end of each reply. One of the Black Boots walked up behind the Confederate at the slight nod of the Inquisitor. The Boot held the trembling young Confederate in a head lock exposing the Civil War soldier’s back.

It was the light that jogged my memory, casting off the last effects of the drugs. A light seemed to glow from the Inquisitor’s hand as he reached out and held it up to the Confederate’s neck. The young man didn’t flinch or seem to react in pain as his shirt seemed to melt away exposing his skin. A closer observation revealed that the light brought inscriptions to the surface of the flesh; some words I could easily recognize like the phrase “took life in battle”, “lies”, “hate”. Other phrases came to the surface as the Inquisitor’s hand hovered between the man’s shoulder blades that resembled Sanskrit; still others further towards the small of his back that I couldn’t recognize at all.

The Inquisitor nodded to the Boot again and this time, he spun the Confederate around and held him under the neck and round the chin, exposing the man’s chest. The young soldier’s chest heaved as he watched in terrified amazement at the revelations contained just below the surface of his skin. These phrases read “My true love, Rebecca”, “honest day’s work” near the man’s chest. Phrases across his shoulders simply read the names of people; “Jed, Hamish, Violet”.

The Boot released the soldier and the light from the Inquisitor’s hand dimmed. The soldier listened to further instructions and then the Boot escorted the Confederate into an adjoining room. The door banged loudly behind him once he was fully inside. The Boot and the Inquisitor gave each other an

uneasy glance. Once, the Inquisitor glanced at me. I met his eyes for a moment and remembered. The man in the back of the speeding car! Recognition spread across my face, and he quickly looked away from me.

He and the Boot tried to keep busy shuffling papers, talking over maps but both kept one eye on the door. I couldn't trust my sense of time but I would have guessed only five or six minutes had passed. As I checked the room, it was clear that it wasn't just the Boot nor the Inquisitor who was interested to see the outcome of whatever meeting was taking place inside the other room. The Boot straightened up and placed his hand on his hip holster. The Inquisitor moved with surprising speed, making his way across the room in a few long strides, all the while pulling out his gladius.

Whatever conversation had been beyond our ears now grew louder. Commotion and sounds of a fight against the side room wall. More yelling and a terrified scream tumbled out with the Confederate as the door swung wildly open into our large room. The young soldier scampered backwards with his feet propelling him on his back, as if he had no time to stop and get to his feet. Whatever was in that room gave him no opportunity to stop. I thought of Mrs. Miller and shuddered. The Confederate soldier looked up, wide eyed at the Inquisitor with trembling lips, "That thing" he whispered.

"Don't worry. Your encounter is finished. I release your soul" assured the Inquisitor. He took his sword in both hands and stared into the room at whatever nightmare lived inside that room. The look of absolute resolve on the Inquisitor's face as he wielded his Gladius almost made me feel sorry for whatever was in there. He took one step forward and with one fluid sweep, plunged the Roman sword into the Confederate's chest. The look of relief still sat on the young soldier's face. It was obvious he death was quick and immediate. He never knew what hit him.

Gasps from around the room from my fellow captives confirmed what I had thought myself. We had all assumed the Inquisitor drew his Gladius in protection of the terrified soldier. Our situation had quickly gone from bad to worse. As luck would have it, the Inquisitor sheathed his Gladius as he ran his finger along a piece of parchment. "Louella" he called out. I cringed and pretended not to recognize my name. I kept my eyes down, not daring to look up.

A pair of sandaled feet came into my line of sight. I was being called to a fate worse than death and I couldn't help to be curious about how the leader of an army could wear sandals. A large, black boot stood next to his and I looked up with a scowl. "Being the only female for miles around, I think it best you acknowledge your name" stated the Inquisitor. I stared back at his cobalt blue eyes.

"What about Mrs. Miller?" I hedged. I would say anything to stay in my corner, sitting in the uncomfortable sand.

He laughed slightly. "I forget. Civilians feel it acceptable to joke with the highest rank in the room. Let's keep this simple. I assume you have little military experience so I will try to be forgiving. You're also a..." he paused as if something were stuck in his throat. "A woman. That is a rarity here in

camp. Therefore, in the spirit of decency, I ask you, please step to the front of the desk so I may examine you.”

“So you can what?” I clenched my knees tighter to my body.

His patience had reached its limit. He snapped his fingers at the Boot and I found myself mid air again. This time, I was surely putting up a fight for all it was worth, ignoring the tiny needles being injected into my arms. Twisting and kicking the Boot with every bit of force I could muster, I screamed in protest, “No!” at the top of my lungs. Over and over, the Boot struggled to keep a grip on me; each time he replaced his hands, tiny new injections followed with searing heat. I recalled that logically, it was only a short walk across the room to the desk, but my fighting prolonged the walk. My screams were mixed with sobs by the time we’d reached the desk.

The Boot shoved my face into his shoulder and pressed my body into his until I could barely breathe. I turned my head for air which he begrudgingly allowed. The captives in the room hid their eyes from mine save the doctor. He stared at me and I could feel a cool breeze against what could only be my exposed, naked neck and back. I screamed again, this time trying to free my arms. The farther he travelled down my spine, the harder I fought against the mind numbing drugs of the injections, the brute strength of the Boot. Finally, a voice broke my personal hell and I felt warmth return to my skin just as the Inquisitor was about to reach my hips.

“I could examine her” came the voice. He cleared his throat and spoke again. “I could examine her. I’m a doctor. Just tell me what you’re looking for. She might feel more comfortable with a doctor than a ..” he stopped, searching for a title that wouldn’t offend.

“Than a head of the world’s largest army?” finished the Inquisitor. “Let me educate you, my fine doctor. Please step up to my table.”

I couldn’t see from the angle at which my head was securely held in place by the Boot. But I had the sense of another person standing behind me. I struggled again, this time from the shear humiliation. “If you will be so kind as to read by the beam of light, the back of her shoulders and blades reveal her misconducts; her sins. Every living being who has ever walked upon the earth carries their sins like a heavy burden strapped across their back. Women, in addition, carry the burden of their children in death where they carried them in life.” I felt the small of my lower back and hips turn cold in the stifled but noticeable breeze within the tent, remnants of the driving force outside its walls.

The Boots muscle moved in his arms and I realized he wasn’t wearing armor. The coating and injection sites were actually his own skin. Every tendon, every bone was covered under the thick black coating of his protective, infused skin. The muscles in his upper arms tightened again and the blackness or his sheltering arms was gone from my face. I squinted in the new brightness of the tent. A searing burn erupted from my neck and shoulder. I groaned as the Boot’s arm crushed my broken collar bone.

“Easy does it” the doctor spat reflexively. The Inquisitor looked as if he might release his anger but the doctor explained. “Her collar bone is clearly broken. Notice how it has already pulled away from the shoulder?” He point to my neck and ran a light finger over the pounding area in my shoulder.

I looked from the doctor to the Inquisitor. For a second, he stared back at me like he had earlier. For a split second there was a gentleness in his eyes. As quickly as it came, it vanished. I looked to the doctor, hoping he had caught it too. He was staring at my broken bone.

“Hold her by the forearms” the doctor instructed the Boot. Amazingly, the Inquisitor nodded. The glow of the beam grew brighter again and I struggled to breathe; my chest heaving at the thought of what came next. The doctor read my terror. He pleaded with the Inquisitor but any sign of humanity let alone compassion had been wiped from his face. He took his fist and pushed back the doctor taking over the examination once again.

I stomped on the Boot’s foot with my left foot. When that got no reaction, I kicked backwards into what I could only guess was his knee cap. He wavered slightly. A new clamp came down on my broken shoulder with tremendous strength. “I’ll make this as quick as possible. Unless I find something truly remarkable about your soul in the next five minutes, I will release it and you will begin to enjoy your afterlife as if none of this ever happened.”

“Release it? You mean like how you released that poor kid’s soul?” I argued. He ignored me and continued to explain his methodical inspection of my body to the doctor.

“If the back carries the sins and burdens of humanity, the front shoulders reveal one’s responsibilities. Thus the phrase ‘carrying a lot on your shoulders’. Our friend Louella here had the birth of two children written on her hips and spine. We confirm here on her shoulders the names of the children; Josh, a son and Libby, a daughter. “

He was about to lower the beam of light to my chest. I knew I couldn’t fight and to scream in retaliation would only prolong the ordeal. But I wasn’t going to let him enjoy examining my breasts. I locked my jaw firmly and stared into his face in absolute defiance and hatred. Every humiliating second of the last few minutes, I channeled into my mind and through the only part of me free to move; my eyes. The look was effective. At least it caught the doctor off guard. He had begun to ask a question and stopped mid sentence. The Inquisitor carefully avoided my eyes as the writing on my heart came to the surface of my skin.

He shook his head and sighed. He met my eyes finally as if it were something he could no longer prevent himself from doing. “True love is rare in any life. He was a lucky man”. The gentleness was again there and then fleeting. But I confirmed what I had questioned minutes ago. He sighed and unsheathed his sword. “I’m sorry. While I believe there are never any mistakes in the process as it is Divine and Perfect, I truly feel that, in your case, there must have been some mistake.” He raised his arms, holding the blade less than a foot from my heart. “I release your soul to move on to its next part of the journey.”

Something came over me and broke through the absolute terror in the realization that I was about to be murdered for the second time. Anger. Absolute and fantastic, delicious and freeing rage slowed time as the Gladius raced to pierce my chest. With my final breath, I chose to ask a question.

“What was her name?” As soon as the words passed over my teeth and through my lips, time sped up to its relative gallop. The Inquisitor had to let go of the hilt of the Gladius so as to stop it in its trajectory. He stepped back incredulously staring at me. He was suddenly gaunt, exhausted, more feeble than any leader should look; military or otherwise.

“What did you ask me?” he whispered, wild eyed.

“The woman you loved and yet killed. What was her name?” I asked, stone faced. I was gambling, literally, with my life. I had one chance to use the only weapon he’d left me; deduction.

His reflexes were lightning fast. My last thought, that I can recall was that he was running straight at me with his sword. I was dead.....again. If such a thing were possible in one day, I was dead; twice.

The only thing about being dead was that every religion I’d ever studied or heard about coveted the notion that the afterlife was free from pain. At least the afterlife before the judgment. I had definitely taken my fair share of pain in one day and while I was aware that my eyes were closed, I was in no way comfortable. As if in some fucked up notion of de ja vu, I was again blinking my eyes in a blurred state of mind, trying to make sense of my surroundings. Another aspect of familiarity, I was on the floor again.

My cleared vision revealed a small room with soft white light. Two men sat at a table with chairs. The man to the right was darn right ancient looking. He sat hunched over the table with his hands folded under his long, grey beard. He wore some kind of round, burgundy cap on his head that stood out against the soft white of the room.

The second man, across the table was far younger and handsome in every sense of the word. He wore his blond hair long and straight to his shoulders. He wore a black suit with a crisp white shirt open at the top button. His manner of resting his elbow on the table while he relaxed in the tall, straight back chair gave him an air of aristocracy. I moved to pull my knees once more to my chest, trying to protect the unbearable pain that took over the top quarter of my right side. Neither of the men said anything. It made me nervous.

I turned to the old man, figuring he was a safer person to begin conversation. “If this is heaven, and you’re Peter, I just want you to know that we’re supposed to be standing at a gate made of pearls, or gold or something.”

The old man chuckled. His younger companion cocked his head slightly. I met his eyes with a questioning look. He answered with a smirk. Before I could continue the old man shook his head.

“I am certainly not Saint Peter, although I think he would find the confusion of our identities quite entertaining. I thank you, my dear for an anecdote that I can assure you will be the hit of our next meeting.”

I smiled, confused. Certainly this old man was crazy. Was I supposed to believe he actually knew and had tea with St. Peter? Then, I considered the day I’d had. I didn’t pursue the issue. I just smiled back as if to say ‘Your welcome’.

The handsome man in the suit interrupted. His speech was like silk as a mixture of both Baltic and British accented his every word. “If anyone is to make decisions here about your future, presently that would fall into my hands. While Michael out there would love to see you dead, slowly and painfully I might add. I have to say I would just as soon smother a rose beneath my boot than to kill something as lovely as you.”

Here this man was apparently holding my life in his hands and all I could do was smile at him. My logical side tried to slap me out of it. I should have been running for the door, prepared to doge, who did he say? But all I wanted to do was listen to more, watch more, more, more, more of this incredible man sitting at the end of a table.

“Alas, I presume I shall only prolong the inevitable by explaining. Then again, a long wait is not what Michael is seeking at the moment. Thus, you are granted an explanation. Sound good?” He bowed slightly. “My name is Steven.”

I nodded. Everything sounded good when he said it. He could have read the phone book for all I cared. He stared at me as if he were waiting for me to respond. My neurons fired at rocket speed nudging me into the obvious like a smack on the head. “Luella” I squeaked. “But I hate it. My friends either call me Lu or El.”

“Right then, as I understand it, Ella, you were killed this morning in a vehicular manslaughter accident. At the precise moment of your death, you were searching for not only new meaning to your mundane existence but more importantly, a new vocation for your future. Michael,” he pointed beyond the door “as kismet would have it, has placed a call out to the Universe for a soldier, so to speak. The good guys are losing souls at an alarming rate and he needs a spy/soldier type to infiltrate at the front lines and win some for heaven’s side.”

“By doing what?” I couldn’t help myself but to ask.

Steven’s light sway in his walk helped him to gracefully glide from one corner of the room by the foot of the table to my side of the room and back. He was walking away from me with his face towards the old man when a flash of bright white sparkled against the soft walls of the room. Steven turned his face to reply and his bright smile revealed a set of pointed, razor teeth. His eyes blazed blood red as he answered in a cool, detached voice, “He wishes for you to kill the very demons that plague humanity.”

Keeping his transformed eyes on my face, he repeated the same phrase with each step, closer, "Such a shame to kill such a lovely." His glide brought him to my side where I stood to meet him. He groaned as if truly in pain, "so rare in this place....and so willing." Steven traced the line of my jaw, gently pulling my head back by pulling the ends of my hair. At the moment he opened his mouth, his face twisted. He face turned ghostly white, his eyes, so red I could no longer see the black pupils. He resembled more a wolf than a man.

I tried to contain myself, but it had taken all of my self control not to move. At the last moment, I finally let go. I burst out laughing! The release sent my already broken shoulder shuddering as I breathed in and out in uncontrollable fits of giggles. A tiny poke of something sharp sent Steven screaming and grasping at his throat, writhing on the floor as if he'd drank poison. For a minute, I thought he truly was the best actor I'd ever seen. But his screaming grew louder as he clutched his stomach. The old man ran to his side and examined his mouth and then checked my neck. A wave of certainty surfaced in his expression.

By this time, Steven was screaming, "But how, but how?"

The old man spoke soothingly. "Look" he brushed back my hair to show him the broken collar bone that in the force of his attempt to frighten me had broken the skin. "Your aim didn't take into account a broken bone. I believe pulling back her hair and exposing her neck so quickly was just enough to push the bone through the skin" he laughed.

I felt the bone in alarm. I hadn't felt it break through the skin. The old man smiled at me. "Vampire venom. While you've only probably been given a drop, it must be through your blood stream now. You should heal very quickly."

"You say that like it's a good thing" I said in disbelief. I watched Steven grip his ribs as if he were trying to keep them from exploding out of his body. "What's going to happen to him?" I pointed down at the writhing Steven.

"Vampires can't help but to draw blood once their teeth break the surface of any skin. In this case, he's had very little."

"But I'm dead!" I argued. "My blood is poison to him."

"Absolutely!" agreed the crazy old man; cheerfully. "But lest we forget he is, after all, immortal. While he can be poisoned and weakened, you can't actually kill him."

I looked down at Steven. "Could have fooled me. He looks awful."

Steven crawled across the smooth floor of the room where the Inquisitor stood in his killing stance. "Michael! Put that bloody thing down and get in here. She didn't even flinch. She knew I couldn't kill her. Demon lore must be somewhere in her "love" markings."

Michael threw down his sword and helped Steven to his chair at the end of the table. “I checked her out. There’s nothing there.”

Steven ran his hands through his thick, hair in exasperation. “Her love for things is written on her breasts. How hard were you looking, Michael?!”

Michael slammed his fists on the table and rounded one hundred and eighty degrees to meet my face. “How did you know he couldn’t really kill you? How could you not run? It’s your human instinct to run from him!”

I rubbed my foot on the floor. I stared at my shoe.

“HOW!!??” Michael’s face was red with rage.

“Substitute Tuesday night player. Dungeons and Dragons” I replied, embarrassed.

Michael looked confused. He looked up at the old man for confirmation but the old man only shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

I sighed. “I was embarrassing Josh. His substitute was his mom on D and D night when his friend, James had to work. So, I read the Monster Manual cover to cover so I knew what to do when the dungeon master tried to kill me off early in the game.”

Michael walked over to Steven and sat with his head in his hand. He rubbed his chin and sides of his cheeks where stubble was slowly growing. He stared at me as he asked Steven, “Not even a flinch?”

Steven coughed and wheezed in outward pain, “Not even a proper whimper.”

Michael got to his feet. “God works in mysterious ways. De’Vok, our librarian will gather some things that might help you. Let me explain the rules. You leave immediately.”