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Caught in the Middle: Existentialism in a Contemporary Fantasy

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Caught in the Middle:
Existentialism in a Contemporary Fantasy

Hannah DePauw

DePauw University Honor Scholar Program

Class of 2020

Sponsored by Professor Harry Brown

with Committee Members:

Professor Beth Benedix and Professor Nathanael Homewood

PART ONE:

The Camel

CHAPTER ONE

Raena Ward firmly identified as an orphan. The few people who knew her were under the impression that she grew up with and still lived with her father. Because that's what she told them. But the person they knew as Kiran Ward was not her father. He wasn't even human.

The Bound to Keep Bookstore nestled in residential Brooklyn was overwhelmingly quiet. All the brightly colored armchairs in the reading nook towards the back sat empty. Shelves stood tall and steady, boasting adult fiction, new and old. One man studiously pulled books from the shelves and inspected their summaries carefully. Raena sat behind the register, nose deep in her own book. The first signs of dusk fell into frame behind the front windows.

Her boss, Valerie, approached. "I'm going to have to kick him out. John just informed me he made reservations for an impromptu date night while the kids are at sleepovers."

Raena looked up to the curvy woman in her forties. She motioned impatiently at the sole customer. "He comes in every other week," Valerie said in a hush, "he knows what time we close."

“Exactly. He’s a repeat customer. We can’t throw him to the curb.” Valerie just frowned and Raena gave a soft chuckle. “I don’t mind locking up when he’s done if you want to get out of here.”

“Would you really?” Raena nods. “Thank god. I need all the time I can get to make myself ‘date-night’ ready.” Valerie disappeared into her office behind the counter, then reappeared moments later with her coat and purse. “Don’t forget the cash drawer and the alarm.”

“I won’t, go have fun!”

Valerie shouted back, “be safe,” as she exited the back door.

Quiet fell in the store once again. Raena truly didn’t mind waiting. The silent company of a fellow human was better than eating dinner in front of a celestial being. She always felt judged at home and if she could put it off, she would.

Her book of choice that day was a leather-bound copy of *Physical Sigils: Protection Against Unwelcome Beings*. Nothing of this sort would be found in the stacks at Bound to Keep. Valerie often rose an eyebrow at the titles Raena brought in and surely she had some idea in her head that Raena might be a Satanist. She couldn’t be more wrong. But these were the types of books that held Raena’s attention, not fluffy romance novels. The pages of *Physical Sigils* were thick and heavy; some were dog-eared, and others had notes scribbled in the margins. Ordinarily, Raena detested marked pages, but whoever wrote in her copy had a sense of humor.

The man finally finished making his selection and sauntered up to the register. They exchanged pleasantries and money. The man exited the store with a smile on his face and a new book in his hand. Raena deposited *Physical Sigils* in her satchel bag and started to make the rounds. Wayward spines were straightened, and misplaced titles returned. It was a calming chore

that never took as long as she thought it would. She made her way back to the front and cleared the register, dutifully returning the money to the safe in Valerie's office. Raena collected her bag, then locked the front door. She turned off the main lights as she made her way to the back door, leaving only the dim emergency lights on.

The wide back alley was shadowy but familiar. Although, she never could shake the feeling that someone might be crouched behind the nearly empty dumpster. Sometimes a stray cat would stalk around the dumpster looking for prey. But just as it was inside, the night was quiet. There would always be a car honking in the distance, but that was par for the course and mostly tuned out. Raena made sure the door was locked tight and the alarm was set. Then she walked towards the lighted sidewalks.

Once she reached the first crosswalk, she only had to wait a few seconds. At the signal's behest she stepped out into the road and was immediately bathed in white light. The horn blared and she tried to jump back so quickly that her feet got tangled. Her ass hit the curb and the car raced past her. A man might have screamed for her to watch where she was going, but she didn't hear it over the adrenaline pounding through her body.

Raena looked at the traffic lights which had only then turned yellow. The crosswalk signal still depicted the white walking man.

Maybe the timing was off. Raena was just that lucky. She gathered herself and shook out her limbs. This time she looked both ways repeatedly and rushed across when she felt certain that no other car was about to mow her down.

The rest of her walk was uneventful. All the lights were timed correctly, and all the cars followed the rules of the road. The banality continued for the next three blocks. Until she turned the corner onto her own street.

Something felt off. The air sizzled with hot electricity. Goosebumps rose along Raena's arms. She crept further down the sidewalk, watching the shadows. Then she saw what she was most afraid of.

The shadow near their front door corporealized into a cacodemon; an animate mummified corpse so dark it seemed to have bathed in black ink. Raena ran to the nearest jut of shrubbery and crouched low. Her eyes were drawn to the talons emanating from its long, spindly fingers. The cacodemon feverishly scraped at the door. Raena searched her bag, but she hadn't brought her knife to work. She spit out a curse then returned to her semi-obstructed view of the cacodemon. She'd read about them in countless memoirs and seen many pictures. But that did nothing to dispel the turn of her stomach whenever she saw a cacodemon in the flesh, or whatever it was that hung in tatters.

Raena soon saw Uriel, publicly known as Kiran Ward, looking through the window and watching for her approach. He spotted her the same time the cacodemon ceased scratching and cocked its head. Its stringy body swiveled in her direction as if it had caught her scent. The cacodemon stalked towards her. She looked back for Uriel, but the window was vacant. Suddenly, the angel burst through the door and regained the cacodemon's attention.

Uriel unleashed his angelic power and unfurled his pristine, white wings. A glowing blue aura enveloped him. The same blue light beamed from his eyes as he extended his hand towards the cacodemon, palm up. The light concentrated at his fingertips, but then it blinked out as if a switch were thrown. Uriel's face contorted in agony as he let out a bloodcurdling scream. A second demon was standing behind Uriel, its talons dripping with blood. Uriel's wings dissolved into dust, leaving behind scorch marks above the torn flesh near his shoulder blades.

Uriel stiffly drew a short blade from a sheath on his thigh and used the momentum of his turn to thrust it deep into the second cacodemon's side. It burst into a raging hellfire before imploding in a cloud of black smoke. Uriel nearly crumpled to the ground as he retrieved the blade. With his angelic powers gone, it was the only weapon he had.

Uriel gathered himself to confront the first cacodemon and was met with its putrid face mere inches from his. He tried to use the blade, but the cacodemon easily knocked it from his grip. The blade clattered to the pavement. Raena eyed the blade hesitantly.

Her attention snapped back to the fight when Uriel fell to his knees clutching a long gash in his neck. Blood poured between his fingers. Raena couldn't stand to see the horrid pain and failure that flickered in his eyes. She glanced towards the blade then back to the cacodemon looming over her dying guardian. It raised its arm to slash again and Raena leapt from her position behind the shrubbery, scrambled to pick up the blade while charging towards the cacodemon, and plunged the blade in its back. She was close enough to see the creature soundlessly screaming as it writhed in the flames before disappearing. But as the smoke cleared, she saw that the cacodemon had already landed the mortal blow. She was too late.

Raena backed away from the scene, unsure of what to do next. The only father figure she'd ever known was dead. A celestial being who was supposed to be immortal was dead. To be clear, Uriel had never been fatherly; never warm or comforting. He didn't give advice like a human. But he was the only other person who knew what existed behind the veil.

Raena let her knees buckle and she fell to the curb. She kept her head down so she couldn't see the body slumped in the street. She closed her eyes and rested her head against her fists. The approaching red and blue lights pulsed behind her eyelids as the sirens ricocheted in her brain. A migraine began to build.

Two police cars stopped a few houses down and the officers exited in a hurry, guns drawn. Some of Raena's neighbors stepped out of their homes looking for the cause of the commotion. One of the officers approached Raena while two others secured the scene. The fourth officer stood over Uriel's body and radioed dispatch requesting a forensics team.

"Ma'am?" The officer's voice was soft and comforting. Perhaps she already made the assumption that Raena was not the killer.

She brought her hands away from her face and caught a glimpse of the bloody body sprawled on the black pavement. She winced and focused her attention on the officer. She was short like Raena but had long blonde hair tied back in a messy bun.

"My name is Officer Parker. Do you feel up to answering some questions?"

Raena took a steadying breath. "Of course."

"Great. Can you tell me your name and where you live?"

"Raena Ward and my house is right there." Raena pointed across the street to where the door stood ajar.

Officer Parker looked behind her and back to Raena with pity in her eyes. "Do you know this man?"

"Yes. He was my father."

The officer asked a few more standard questions before an unmarked car rolled up. She excused herself to fill in the newcomer. The stares of her neighbors bore down on Raena. She hated drawing attention to her private life. Raena went back to hiding her face.

Eventually, the newcomer stepped in front of Raena. His shadow gave her eyes some much needed respite from the constant flashing lights. He cleared his throat. She looked up,

carefully keeping her gaze glued to the man standing before her. He stood tall and calm. He held a notepad and pen at the ready and was dressed in plainclothes. A detective.

His gaze, in return, was glued to the dark blood staining her hands. She quickly hid them under her knees.

“Ms. Ward, I’m Detective Grant. I understand this man is your father. Did you see what happened here?”

“His name was Kiran Ward, and no I can’t tell you who killed him.”

“Why not?”

Raena looked into Detective Grant’s brown eyes as fully as she could. “He was already dead when I got here.”

“And the blood on your hands?”

“I tried to stop the bleeding, but I was too late.” Raena’s voice cracked at the end. She broke eye contact and cleared her throat.

“Did your father have any enemies?”

Raena shook her head. “None that you can see.”

Detective Grant cocked his head, waiting for her to continue, but she stayed silent. “Well, if you think of anything, give me a call and we can talk.” He held out a business card which Raena obediently accepted. “In the meantime, Officer Parker will escort you to a hotel for the night.” He waved over the officer.

“What? Why?”

“Your house is part of the crime scene. We’ve found signs of forced entry. We need to have forensics clear it before you can go back.”

Raena leapt to her feet. “Can I at least grab a change of clothes and my charger?”

Officer Parker reached them and smiled at Raena. “Of course, I’ll accompany you.”

Raena nodded and led the way, careful to avoid the roped off area as they crossed the street. She slowly stepped past the scarred door and over the threshold. Suddenly, Raena was grateful she had cleaned their weapons the night before and had packed them all away in the false wall panel in the kitchen. Raena quickly ran up the stairs to the right of the living room to draw Officer Parker away from the arcane books lying around. Of course, that was pointless as the forensics team was going to go through everything later anyway. But for now, Raena didn’t want to stand there and explain her taste in literature.

Upstairs, there were two bedrooms and one bathroom. The first bedroom was small, pristine, and clearly unused. Angels don’t sleep. The next bedroom was larger and a little messy. There were a few items of dirty clothes on the floor by her closet and her bed was unmade. Officer Parker stood in the doorway and watched as Raena grabbed a light blue overnight duffel and began stuffing it with a few shirts. She kept her back to the door as she approached the nightstand and stealthily withdrew her double-bladed haladie knife from the drawer. She quickly stashed it between her shirts in the duffel. While she was there, she grabbed her phone charger, brush, and a few pairs of socks and underwear. When she finished with the bedroom, the women made their way to the small bathroom so Raena could grab a few toiletries, then they left the house. They didn’t speak much, and it made Raena feel like she was on the run.

Officer Parker led her through the commotion outside to her patrol car down the street. As they passed, Detective Grant looked up from his notes and watched them go. Raena sat in the back seat with her duffel hugged close by her side. It was claustrophobic and surprisingly quiet.

“Where are we going?”

“Holiday Inn. We have a couple of rooms reserved for these occasions. Unless there’s someone you know that you would like to stay with?”

“No. The hotel’s fine.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Raena stared at her hands. She tried to scrape off some of the dried blood, but it just got stuck under her nails instead. She couldn’t get rid of it.

She’d never seen an angel die before. Uriel told her how it could happen, but she never really believed him. Although, she never knew him to lie. Most of what Uriel had taught her in the past 17 years seemed entirely unbelievable, and yet, she faced irrefutable proof.

When she turned ten, Raena saw her first cacodemon. They were at the playground in Carrol Park. Uriel stood off to the side, eyes roaming constantly, while Raena ran around like a wild child who was finally set free. She was at the top of the play structure when she thought she saw a deep shadow move between the trees. Uriel saw it a second later as the cacodemon corporealized and he lured it to a secluded area before dispatching it. Raena had let out a piercing scream and all the other parents started collecting their children in a panic. That night she was finally ready to accept that Uriel’s stories weren’t scary fairy tales.

But the hardest thing for Raena to cope with wasn’t the demons, it was her own past. Or rather, her multiple pasts. Raena had the unique ability to reincarnate. It wasn’t something she ever remembered happening, and it wasn’t something she could control. According to Uriel, when her pervious body died, her soul transferred to the next baby that was going to be stillborn. Her soul provided the lifeforce for that baby, and Raena found it comforting to know that she didn’t steal a body intended for another soul. But whoever she was in that previous lifetime ceased to exist, her memories disappeared, and her soul started over with a new persona. A new name, a new language, a new gender. Nothing was out of bounds.

The Holiday Inn was sleek and modern. The streets were busier than she was used to, and she hoped the walls were thick enough to block the noise. Raena followed behind Officer Parker as she collected the room key and led the way to the elevator banks. Raena clenched the strap of her duffel and kept her other hand firmly in her jacket pocket. She tried not to look at anyone, hoping they wouldn't look at her. She held her gaze level and her back straight. The room was on the fourth floor, so the two women didn't have to stand in silence on the elevator for too long. Raena wouldn't even know what to say and Officer Parker didn't seem to be fond of small talk either.

The bell dinged and the elevator came to a surprisingly smooth stop. Raena settled in for a long walk down the hallway, but Officer Parker stopped only two doors down from the elevator bank. She supposed it made sense to house a witness near an available exit.

Officer Parker unlocked the door and held it open. "Here we are."

Raena flicked on the lights as she entered. The room was small but not cramped and far nicer than her own room at home. The bed sat against the right wall and featured pressed white linens. There was a large window that covered most of the far wall; the curtains were already drawn. A larger-than-necessary TV hung over a long desk on the left wall. Also to the left, was the bathroom. Raena peaked through the open door and noted the small counter and a tub shower.

"So," Officer Parker began, "this is your room key." She held it out to Raena. "My partner and I have a master key in case anything should happen. If you need to contact me for any reason, you can call my cell." She gave Raena her information card. "I have to return to the scene, then fill out some paperwork, but I'll be back in the morning."

"Okay, thank you."

“Goodnight, Ms. Ward. And don’t be hesitant to call me at any hour of the night.”

Raena nodded and Officer Parker left, closing the door behind her. Raena walked further into the room and set her duffel and satchel bag on the corner of the bed. She didn’t quite know what to do. She discarded her faux leather jacket, then kicked off her white Vans. She might as well take a shower; let the steam melt everything away. She tugged off her light-wash jeans and pale pink t-shirt, then padded into the bathroom in her nude underwear. She turned on the tap and waited for the heat to rise, creating her own little sauna.

While she waited, Raena stood in front of the bathroom mirror. She looked the same as the day before. But that was what surprised her. Her face was framed with a mane of dark, tight curls that stopped at her shoulders. The freckles across her nose looked a little more pronounced than usual. Her face was a little too pale, or maybe it was just the harsh lighting and the building steam. Her deep brown eyes stared into their own reflections. She wondered if her eyes stayed the same between reincarnations. Not the color, but maybe the glint. One time in high school, Raena sat on her bed with her makeup mirror and stared into her eyes for a few hours. There was a saying that eyes are the windows to the soul, but she didn’t think she found hers then. She wondered if she ever would see her soul.

She gave up on the mirror and stripped out of her underwear. She stepped into the hot shower and held her bloody hands under the water, watching as the stream turned red. Raena had small hands and skinny little fingers. She didn’t hate them, but she didn’t love them, either. There was a scar along the back of her left hand. It was thin and white. An injury from weapons training ten years ago. Uriel preferred teaching Raena how to wield blades and she grew to admire the fluidity it required. When she turned eighteen, she chose her personal weapon; the double-bladed haladie knife. Two double-edged blades curved out from either end of the handle.

To wield the haladie was like a lethal dance. It made her feel calm, in control, and feminine. That year she made her own birthday ceremony of etching demon-slaying sigils into the blades which she then sharpened with a whet stone. She completed the ceremony by naming the knife Echo. It was hers and it was deadly.

Raena stood under the water for a long time. She let the heat relax her muscles and her physical tension melted away. She wanted to stay there forever. When her fingers better resembled wrinkled prunes, she thoroughly washed herself, then forced herself to cut the water supply.

Back in fresh panties and a pajama tee, Raena sat on the edge of the stiff bed next to her duffel and retrieved Echo. She felt the weighted balance between the sheathed blades. Then she removed one of the sheaths and studied the etched sigil. She traced it with her forefinger. The sigil only worked because she created it herself; she had loaded the symbol with intention. It had taken a few months of trial and error before she found a process that worked for her. Every sigil started with a statement of intent, then vowels and repeated consonants were weeded out. The remaining jumble of letters were translated into a numerical system of one through nine, which corresponded to those nine numbers on a wheel. Then connecting lines were drawn in the wheel in order of the numericized letters. Lastly, the vowels were reintroduced as dots around the edges of the sigil. The result often looked like a patch of random lines crisscrossing amongst a scattering of dots, but each was unique, and each held the power of Raena's will.

She sheathed Echo once again and placed her on the nightstand. Raena grabbed her purse and took out a pad of sticky notes and a sharpie. She sketched her usual protection sigil on two sticky notes. This sigil, with the intent to "protect against negative spirits," looked closest to a sideways 'H' with protrusions on the stems. Raena walked over to the window and stuck one of

the notes on the sill, then she stuck the other note on the door. She preferred to draw sigils directly onto their intended surfaces, but she assumed the hotel managers wouldn't appreciate the vandalism. Raena returned to the bed and sat cross-legged against the pillows. She drew the sigil on the inside of her left wrist. She didn't usually put sigils on herself, but she figured it couldn't hurt. With each placement, Raena concentrated on the sigil until her vision blurred, then she repeated her intention to unlock the sigil's power.

CHAPTER TWO

A knock on the door woke Raena. She turned over her phone and squinted at the bright screen. 7:40 AM. Pale light struggled to breach the curtains, but it was enough to see the outlines of the furniture. A much brighter light seeped in under the door. Raena pulled herself into a seated position. She grabbed a scrunchie from her bag and stretched it around her thick hair.

The knock came again.

Raena stepped into her pajama pants as she walked over to answer the door. Officer Parker greeted her with a bright smile. This morning, only half of her hair was pulled back by a clip. It made her look softer. She held up a drink carrier with two thermal cups.

“I didn’t know if you like coffee, so one of them is hot chocolate.”

The smell of coffee was almost nauseating. Raena didn’t understand how anyone could prefer coffee. Maybe it was one of those weird things where the smell goes away after you taste it, but she lacked the desire to put that theory to the test. She chose the hot chocolate.

“Thank you. Do you know how much longer I have to stay here?”

“They’re just wrapping it up. I figure they’ll be done by the time you get ready and grab some breakfast downstairs.”

“Great!”

Raena met Officer Parker in the cruiser after she finished eating. She still had to sit in the back, but it felt more hopeful this time.

As they turned onto Raena’s street, she saw that the scene had been cleared away and only the red tint on the asphalt spoke to what occurred the night before. Even her neighbors had gone back to their regularly scheduled lives. But Raena doubted her life would ever be the same.

She thanked Officer Parker and turned towards the townhouse. She took a deep breath. The walk up to her door was a solemn one. The dark wood was still peeled and scored. Maybe she should get a new door. Or maybe she should let this be a reminder of the danger lurking everywhere, waiting to strike her down. Next time, she would be prepared.

Raena unlocked the door. No one was there to greet her. The forensics team had tidied up some, perhaps to catalogue everything, but mostly the living room looked as if it hadn’t been touched. She’d never felt so alone. It was the utter silence. She let her bags fall to the floor and headed straight for the sound system under the TV. She turned everything on, connected her phone, and let the music boom. It wasn’t as successful as she’d hoped, but maybe it would be enough to let her pretend that the glaring absence didn’t exist.

Raena made her way into the kitchen to check on their weapons behind the false panel. No, they were *her* weapons now, and hers alone. She rounded the small dining table to her left and moved the farthest chair away from the wall. She felt for the seam in the drywall, although this was almost unnecessary, then placed her hands in the middle, firmly pressing in. The panel

gave way and she slid it behind the stable portion of the wall. It was a shallow nook, but it held a small array of knives, daggers, and even a couple of guns with corresponding cases of bullets. Everything was accounted for. She closed the nook securely, replaced the chair, and returned to the living room.

She picked up her bag by the door. She removed Echo, placing her on the coffee table, then pulled out the leather-bound book. Raena turned towards the bookshelves behind her. The spines were generally monotone but varied greatly in thickness. Contrary to Bound to Keep's organization, Raena's books were grouped by content. There were sections for spells, weapons, and creatures. There was even a small group of religious texts on the bottom shelf; she'd gone through a secular phase at one point, though her reality didn't leave much room for faith.

After placing *Physical Sigils* in one of the few empty spaces, she glanced over at a separate bookcase to her right. It was crammed with hundreds of virtually identical black journals, which were all relatively thin. Each had different names and dates embossed on the spines. This bookcase was the one consistency in Raena's life and yet it was the strangest part. The journals contained the lives of her past personas, whom Raena often referred to as the Legion. Uriel had explained that each of her Guardian Angels made reports on every event in the Legion's lives. She'd read a few of the journals over the years, hoping they might spark some forgotten memories, but the entries were cold and calculating. She had a hard time connecting with individual personas. They were all strangers to her. Their lives untouchable and unrelatable. Some of the Legion even had children, which in a way meant that Raena had children. Her soul had more family than she could even imagine. And yet, she would've never known if it weren't for the journals. Or, more precisely, if it weren't for Uriel.

Uriel was an Archangel, a Lieutenant for the Life Expectancy Regime. The L.E.R. had been using the Legion to test ideas for prolonging the human lifespan. Raena was a guinea pig, and no one had ever asked for her consent. Usually a Guardian Angel was assigned to her, one of those who would watch over new souls. But they consistently ran into the issue of cacodemons trying to claim her soul. It skewed their results. So this time, Uriel volunteered to take the Guardian's place, ready to test his hypothesis that preparing Raena for the attacks would bring the results back on track. Part of that preparation was letting Raena read about all the ways the Legion died.

At one point she had ranked their deaths from mundane to spectacular. She figured this lifetime would end in something ordinary, like the car crash she nearly avoided the day before. But sometimes she found herself hoping for a death like Uriel's; to go out in a flame of glory.

Raena picked up Margot Richards' journal and flipped to the end. "October 2, 1993: died of a brain aneurism." That was the day Raena was born. Before Margot, Carlos had died from a severe case of the flu in 1948. Ivan died fighting in the Russian Civil War in 1917. Daniela got pneumonia in 1874. Nora drowned in 1853. Claire fell from a tree and cracked her skull in 1839. The list went on and on. Some of the Guardians claimed that the deaths they witnessed were orchestrated by demons and that they were unable to intervene. Raena wondered if that was true, or if they let her personas die rather than risk their own lives as Uriel had. How protective could a coward really be? How many times had she died because her Guardian didn't care if she reset?

Raena stepped away from the journals, turned off the stereo, and headed upstairs with her bags. She separated the clean clothes and put the dirty clothes in her hamper. While she was at it, she decided to tidy her room a little. She gathered all her dirty laundry, sniffing a few articles to determine their status, and headed downstairs with the basket. The stacked washer and dryer

stood next to the pantry in the kitchen. She threw most of it in, saving only the whites for a separate load, added a Gain pod, and started the cycle.

Back in her room, Raena hung the clean clothes that were draped over her desk chair and lined up her shoes in the closet. She closed a couple of books that were on her desk, stacking them to the side. The pens and sharpies were returned to their holder next to the post-it dispenser. She thought about making her bed and compromised with herself by flattening the covers without tucking anything or fixing her pillows. There was only one stuffed animal in her room, the last remnant of her childhood. It was a fuzzy-maned lion named Kami. Uriel tried to tell her that female lions didn't have manes, but little Raena wouldn't stand for it. Kami was moved above the covers, her mane fluffed, and back stroked.

Raena grabbed the vacuum from the hall closet. She guided it through her room and down the length of the hall. The white noise of the machine echoed in her head and she let herself space out. But she stopped dead at Uriel's bedroom. He never really spent time in there, but it still felt like an invasion to barge in. She'd get there eventually.

The washer beckoned her with an incessant beeper. She packed away the vacuum and heeded the call. She switched the laundry and threw in the load of whites. After the machines were started, Raena heard a sharp pop behind her. She froze. She wanted to tell herself that she imagined it, but she felt the displacement of air as well. But it couldn't be...

Raena turned and came face to face with a tall, winged stranger. She let out a shaky breath. They were so close it ruffled his thick golden feathers. The movement seemed to make them shimmer against his ebony skin. It never occurred to her that angels might have differently colored feathers. Uriel usually concealed his wings in case a human came around or looked in

the windows as they passed. Raena reached out to stroke one wing, as if there was a magnetic pull, and the angel shivered. She snapped her hand away.

“Sorry.” Her eyes lifted to meet his. She melted in his amber gaze and her breath slowed. She took a step back. “Um, hi. I’m Raena.” She respectfully offered her hand to shake.

He took it without reluctance. His warm hand dwarfed hers. “My name is Raguel.” The handshake was firm but curt.

“Are you here for Uriel?”

“I have already reclaimed his body from the morgue. No, I am here for you.”

“I think they’re going to notice a missing corpse. What am I supposed to do when cops show up at my door asking more questions?”

“That is taken care of. They will not be bothering you anymore.”

“How was it taken care of, exactly? You didn’t kill anyone, did you?”

Raguel looked taken aback. “Of course not. The Life Expectancy Regime exists to protect you humans and to extend your lifespans. The Guardians of those involved planted strong suggestions that the case is unsolvable.”

“Guardian Angels can mess with people’s minds like that?”

“How else are they supposed to guide their charges away from harm?”

“You’re saying free will doesn’t exist.”

“No. Guardians can make their suggestions, but it is up to the humans to choose to follow those suggestions.”

“So, we can’t even create our own options.”

Raguel cocks his head. “We give you the right options to prolong your life.”

“Then how do you explain war and murder and mass shootings?”

“Like I said, humans choose whether to follow their Guardians’ suggestions. But you should be familiar with that. Many of your personas were too stubborn for their own good. And I sense you are following in their footsteps.”

Raena knit her eyebrows. “You said you were here for me, what does that mean?”

Raguel stood straighter, clasping his hands behind his back. Even his wings extended as wide as the walls allowed. “General El has ordered the cease of all angelic support towards you. Uriel’s experiment resulted in his own death and the General sees no reason why the experiment should continue.”

“I thought you don’t kill humans.”

“We do not. But you are different.”

Raena’s whole body tensed. Her mind immediately rushed towards Echo in the other room. There was no way she could get past the angel to retrieve a weapon, even if she went for a kitchen knife.

“I am not here to kill you. The order was that no angel should help you. We are to let happen what may.”

“You mean let the cacodemons kill me.”

“Yes.” His eye contact never wavered. “However, I do not agree with the General.”

Raena remained guarded but her stance relaxed a bit.

“I would like to take over for Uriel. If that’s alright with you.”

She blinked. He looked down at her, lips pursed and eyes searching. He was waiting for her approval. Raena dropped her eyes and stepped around him. He tucked his wings against his back to let her pass. She sat at the table with her hands between her knees. Raguel strolled over to stand across from her.

Raena could say no. But how well would she fare without the protection of an angel? Guardians were manipulative, but Uriel... Uriel had told her the truth. He gave her the strength to fight for herself. And it didn't seem as if Raguel would try to control her. He actually asked for her permission.

Her eyes settled on his. "Yes. You can stay."

Raguel pressed his lips into a tight smile and nodded, except it was more like a bow.

"Won't you get in trouble for this?"

"There is more danger here. I do not fear what punishment General El might sentence. And until they know I am here they will surely send a troop of cacodemons your way."

"*Send* cacodemons?"

"Yes. It would not be wise to let your guard down. In fact, I should patch up your warding." Raguel started making his way towards the front door.

Raena leapt up and followed him. "But you said 'send.'" He nodded and continued to examine the invisible angelic warding on the door. "As if someone controls the cacodemons..."

"Yes. The Soul Administration Agency."

"The what now?"

Raguel stopped and looked at her. "Uriel did not tell you. Odd. I thought he told you everything."

"Apparently not. What's the Soul Administration Agency?"

"Just as it sounds. Unlike yours, other souls do not return after their body dies. They need a place to rest. That place is the S.A.A."

"Okay, but what does that have to do with cacodemons?"

“Their job is to collect wandering souls. Usually that means people who have died then were revived. But your soul has eluded the S.A.A. time and time again. They will not rest until they have collected your soul, permanently.”

“Fucking hell!” Raena paced the length of the living room.

Raguel returned to the warding. He waved his hands as if he were writing in the air. Golden symbols briefly appeared before sinking into the door.

Raena stopped short. “So, how do I end this?”

“End what?”

“My reincarnations.”

Raguel thought for a moment. “I am not entirely sure that is possible.”

“Would General El know?”

Once again, he hesitated. “Perhaps.”

Raena stood as imposingly as she could, crossing her arms and holding her gaze firm. “Then bring me to him.”

PART TWO:

The Lion

CHAPTER THREE

Raena and Raguel stood before a red brick building downtown. The sign on the ground floor read “Slide N’ Glide.” It was a sliding door company. Ironically, the entrance was a normal push door.

“You said you would take me to the Life Expectancy Regime.”

“This is the entrance. Follow me.”

Raguel led her inside. He nodded to the manager in greeting but said nothing. Customers examined the floor models and salesmen negotiated deals. Raena suspected the company might be a front, but it seemed to be a functional business. Raguel herded her into the elevator.

She poised to press a button. “Which floor?”

“None of those.” He touched the space just below the panel.

Raena raised an eyebrow. She leaned in closer. Then shifted her head from side to side, above and below. There was a shimmer where Raguel had pressed. She could barely see it. If she hadn’t looked closer, she would have thought it was just a shine in the metal.

“Wouldn’t someone notice an extra floor that doesn’t have a button?”

“No one counts the floors outside. Besides, the L.E.R. and S.A.A. do not exist on this plane.”

“The S.A.A. is here too?”

“Of course. It is beneficial to minimize spatial manipulation. However, there is an entrance in every city of the world. Archangels can fly, but Guardians and Eudemons cannot.”

“You mean *cacodemons*.”

“No. *Eudemons*. You can think of them as the S.A.A. equivalent of Archangels. Cacodemons are feral creatures under command of the Eudemons.”

Raena watched the indicator above the door. They rose above the sixth floor, then the seventh, then the eighth. Then the indicator went blank, but they hadn't stopped yet. A few seconds later, a symbol appeared where the numbers used to be. It was an outline of a shield against a set of wings. The elevator dinged. She held her breath.

Raena exhaled in disappointed when the door slid open to reveal a bland reception area. She looked at Raguel, but he offered no explanation. Instead, he swept his hand in front of them, inviting her to move forward.

She thought it would feel different to stand on another plane of existence. Lighter, maybe, like an astronaut on the moon. But gravity's pull was the same as ever. She walked further into the room. It was empty except for one angel sitting behind the mahogany reception desk. A placard sitting on the front edge declared his name was Gabriel.

Gabriel was nodding and typing at a desktop computer. Raena was about to move forward, but Raguel placed his hand on her arm, telling her to stay put.

“Ciro?... Okay.... We will send a replacement.” Gabriel was speaking to someone. But there wasn't a phone on the desk. He didn't even have a Bluetooth device in his ear.

Raena whispered to Raguel. “How is he communicating?”

“Telepathy.”

“But he’s speaking out loud.”

“Thoughts can get muddled. We speak aloud whenever we can.”

Gabriel acknowledged their presence then looked back down at the monitor. “Raphael.”
He waited for a moment. “We need reinforcements in Ciro... Yes...”

While Gabriel continued to talk, Raena better took in her surroundings. There was a heavy double door to the left of the desk. It was the only door besides the elevator. There was an absence of decoration, plants, and even seating. She thought of Uriel. He also paid no mind to anything that didn’t serve a purpose. Raena had to fight to get Kami and anything else Uriel deemed unnecessary.

The only thing Raena might call a decoration was a large coat of arms painted above the desk. It shared the shield and wings of the symbol in the elevator but was extensively more detailed. The large wings curled around the bottom of the shield. There was a cross of long swords in the top left quadrant, a glowing ring in the top right, an open tome in the bottom left, and a gilded goblet in the bottom right. The symbol was encircled by a phrase in what she recognized as Enochian. It was the same language that made up the angelic warding in her townhouse. But Uriel never taught her how to read Enochian. She would ask Raguel, but she could guess it said something about an order of angels protecting life.

Gabriel finished talking and smiled up at them. “Welcome, brother. And who is this?”

Raguel brought Raena closer to the desk. “This is Raena Ward. I brought her here to talk to General El.”

Gabriel looked directly into her eyes, then his own eyes widened in recognition. “She has the traveling soul!”

“Yes.”

Raena smiled humbly but didn’t shy away from his gaze. She supposed she would face this reaction many more times before they left.

“I never thought I would get to meet a carrier of *the* soul.”

She couldn’t stop herself. “How can you tell? How can you recognize my soul?”

“Through your eyes, child. Everyone who is not human can see a body’s soul.”

She pressed forward wistfully. “What does it look like?”

“All souls are... I suppose you would call it an orb of light. Each one has a distinctive intensity and color pallet. Yours shines brighter than I have ever seen, a testament to its age. And it is a beautiful swirl of indigo, bronze, and burgundy.”

Raena warms with the knowledge. She might never see it for herself, but at least now she could imagine it.

“I will let General El know you are here. Go on in.” Gabriel gestured towards the door.

“Thank you.” Raena walked with a little bounce in her step and Raguel pulled the door open for her.

Titles like ‘general’ and ‘lieutenant’ hinted at a military structure, but Raena was not prepared for the bustling war room hidden behind that heavy door. Maps with pushpins were posted everywhere she looked. Angels sat at desks, furiously typing, or marked locations on the maps, or directed entire groups. They were sectioned by continents, countries, states, counties, cities. The room seemed to expand forever in all directions. All notions of being in an Earthly building dissolved. And it was completely open. There were no walls or even cubicles. Yet,

despite the action and openness, it was relatively quiet. Perhaps they mostly communicated telepathically. Or maybe the machine was so well oiled, there was no need for speech.

Raena slowed and let Raguel lead the way. He greeted some of the group leaders, whom he addressed as Majors, as they walked down center the aisle. Many of the angels had their wings folded against their backs and Raena marveled at the range of colors. Some were a single solid color, but others were ombré, or streaked with different shades.

For as far as they walked, it seemed to take no time before they arrived at a glass office. Raguel didn't even have to knock for the General to look up and wave them in. Then the nerves finally hit. This was the being who kept tabs on and experimented with the Legion. He might not have caused her reincarnations, but he certainly capitalized on them. She stumbled around the chair leg as she and Raguel sat across from General El. He had sandy blonde hair and deep green eyes. His wings were concealed as Raena noticed they usually were while angels were sitting, but she wondered if his feathers were a similar color to his eyes.

“Ms. Ward. It is a pleasure to meet you. Although, I have to say I was not expecting this visit.” The General looked pointedly at Raguel.

“Sir, I apologize for disobeying, but I could not stand by letting a charge go unprotected.”

The General waved off the excuse. “No matter. You are here now. So, what can I do for you, Ms. Ward?”

Raena cleared her throat. “I want to end my reincarnations, and I think you might know how to do that.”

“Ah.” He sat back in his chair. “Unfortunately, I do not know how this trait began and I do not know how to fix it.”

“Are you sure it's not that you don't want to tell me?”

“Your case is exceptional and entirely escapes explanation. My regime fights to extend human life in order to preserve the integrity of their eternal souls. I cannot say that we do not find your condition useful, but even so, I know that your soul has suffered far too many deaths. If I had the answer, I would give it to you. I am sorry I could not be more helpful.”

Raena shakes her head in disbelief.

Raguel stands and Raena begrudgingly follows suit. “Thank you for your time.”

“Of course. And, Ms. Ward, I wish you luck in all your endeavors.”

She nods sternly. She doesn’t dare open her mouth, knowing a stream of insults would tumble out if given the chance.

This time Raena led the walk back to the reception area. Each footfall heavy and fueled by anger. Raguel said goodbye to Gabriel, but Raena ignored him and everything else on the way to the elevator. Once the doors closed, she punched the button for the ground floor. Two seconds later she let the insults fly. Raguel stood silently, allowing her to calm herself. Around floor three, she finally took a few steadying breaths.

“Sorry.”

“It is only natural.”

“I was so close! It’ll never end, will it?”

“Not that we have foreseen.”

Raena looked down at the shimmer hiding two buttons. “Could you take me to the Soul Administration Agency?”

“No, I cannot. Angels are not allowed in the S.A.A. The button will not even depress for me.” He watched as Raena’s mind continued to race. “Raena, I do not advise attempting to

breach the S.A.A. Remember, they are the ones responsible for so many of your deaths. Not to mention the cacodemons that are actively trying to claim your soul.”

The elevator reached the bottom and they stepped out into the company of humans. Raena quieted until they were outside and on their way to the subway. There was enough noise that she felt confident no one would eavesdrop. Still, she kept her voice low. “But souls are their specialty. And I bet they only try to kill my bodies because they know of a way to keep it. I mean that makes sense, right? Maybe they haven’t been successful because they can’t communicate with a glowing orb.”

“Neither of us know that for sure. The risk is too high.”

“But there’s a chance that if I go there and ask to talk, they might hear me out.”

Raguel sighed. “I know how important this is to you, and short of physical restraint, I cannot stop you from searching for answers. But I beg you to be careful and think this through.”

Raena smiled at the win. “I promise.”

As they emerged from underground, the hair on Raena’s arms tingled. It was the same feeling she had whenever a cacodemon was present. Except this time, it was overwhelming. Raguel sensed it too. He was on high alert. His wings unfurled at his sides and he began to glow. Raena pulled out Echo and twirled her wrists to loosen them.

Slowly, they continued to walk towards Raena’s townhouse. Both sets of eyes constantly sweeping. Raena spotted three already, but Uriel’s sight had always been better than hers.

She whispered as low as possible, afraid to make a sound. “How many?”

“Five.”

Raena involuntarily shivered, but they forged ahead. One block down, one to go. They didn't pass any humans and there were only a few cars on the road. Their Guardians must've been working overtime to steer them away. The cacodemons stayed at a distance, but they followed her down the road, stalking their prey.

One corporealized right behind Raena. She instinctively whirled around and brought Echo through the cacodemon's abdomen. With the light of its implosion, the others were revealed to be much closer. Raguel released a blast of light that forced them back. But it didn't deter them for long. Two more cacodemons joined the swarm. As one, they rushed towards their target.

Before she knew what was happening, Raguel pulled Raena tightly against his chest and he leapt from the ground. The sudden shift in altitude wrenched the air from her lungs. The powerful pulse of his wings vibrated through their bodies. She didn't even have time to think 'I'm flying' and they were already back on solid ground. Raguel kept a firm grip on her shoulders while she waited for the world to stop spinning.

"Breathe. It will pass in a moment."

Once Raena could stand on her own and her breath came easier, she looked around to see where he had brought her. They were in her living room. The wards, old and new, blazed with the effort of keeping those creatures at bay.

"I wish I could have warned you, but there was no time."

"Christ, I'm alive. Don't even worry about it." She walked over to the couch, wrapped a blanket around her, and sunk into the cushions. "Why were there so many?"

“I am sure the Eudemons knew you had just visited the L.E.R. Perhaps they thought General El granted your request. I hope this serves to give you pause about your plan to confront the S.A.A.”

Raena recoiled with shock. “Not at all! If those things are determined to kill me at any moment, I need to get there as soon as possible. This is my chance to end it all. If I die now, I’ll come back, yes, but I might never again know the truth of my existence. Or your existence, or any of this.” She took a moment and her voice softened when she started again. “I can’t let the L.E.R. or the S.A.A. or anyone else control my lives. I’m done following suggestions and fighting to keep my heart beating.”

“It would be easier to let yourself forget. Your awareness is the issue here.”

“My awareness is the solution. You heard General El. My soul has been suffering since this whole thing began. It’s time to let it rest. Death is a natural part of life, not an outside force. You and all the other angels and demons are the unnatural force in this world.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Raena sat at the desk in her bedroom. There were several scraps of paper strewn around her. One sentence dominated the top of the paper that was still under her pen. **I can see what is hidden.** Most of the letters were crossed out yielding the jumble of **CNSWHTD**. The sequence **3515824** sat underneath the letters. She crossed out the duplicate five, then pulled out a laminated sheet with multiple number wheels. She plucked a dry-erase marker from the holder and began to trace the sequence within the circles. What appeared was a sort of right bracket with a rectangle attached to the top corner. She added in dots along the right side of the symbol. She repeated the tracing on the other wheels to test out different flourishes and placements of the dots. She settled on a plain shape and grounded dots.

Raguel was sitting in the kitchen reading one of weapon manuals when Raena came down. Not an exciting read, but she supposed it passed the time.

“I’m going out.”

Raguel immediately rose from his seat. “You are going to the S.A.A.” She nodded. “At least let me accompany you to the building.” His eyes were soft and pleading.

“Actually, I would appreciate that.”

He stepped over the threshold first and scanned the area. All clear. The cacodemons had given up sometime during the night. They dissolved back into the shadows before the sun had peeked over the horizon. Raena followed him through the door. She trusted his sense, but she also had to scan their surroundings for herself.

They walked up to Slide N’ Glide, then stopped, much as they had done the first time.

“This is where I leave you.”

“Thanks for walking me over here.”

“I could not, in good conscience, let you come alone. I would wait, but I am not so sure you are going to come back out.”

Raena raised her eyebrows.

“All the same, I wish you luck.”

She took a deep breath and reached for the door. “Here goes everything.”

The traffic inside was no different than before, yet she felt as if every eye was on her. She stepped into the elevator as soon as it opened and quickly pressed the ‘close door’ button. Raena pulled out the scrap of paper with the new sigil and a sharpie. She drew the sigil on her left arm, then activated it. She stared at the space under the control panel. Nothing happened at first. She glanced at the sigil, then at the door, hoping no one wanted to use the elevator for a while. Finally, the shimmer grew more distinctive, but it took a few minutes more before it lifted away from the buttons entirely.

“Yes!” She stuffed the sigil materials back into her bag.

The button on the left held the outline she’d seen when they reached the L.E.R.’s floor. The button on the right had to lead to the Soul Administration Agency. Their outline looked like a sun with bright rays. It was a glowing soul.

Raena shook out her hands. “Oh, I hope this works.”

She pressed the soul. The elevator immediately began descending. Her body started perspiring with the anticipation. There was a basement in the earthly building, but the elevator took her much farther than that. She had no idea when it might stop, but she was along for the ride now. One more eerily long minute passed before Raena felt a jolt beneath her feet. The symbol of the soul flashed on the indicator and the elevator dinged. The sound startled her even though she’d been waiting for it.

Beyond the door was a bright, pale blue corporate lobby. There were seats everywhere and thick greenery popped up at frequent intervals. A few framed sceneries graced the walls.

A cheery voice claimed her attention. “Hello! Welcome to the Soul Administration Agency. How can I help?”

Raena approached the reception desk. Adorning the space above the desk was a corporate logo with the agency’s name circling inside a glowing soul. To the right of the desk was a tall glass door. She read the nameplate that was neatly surrounded by knickknacks and office supplies.

“Hi Charun. My name is Raena Ward and I would like to speak to your General.”

Charun smiled as if he found something funny. “We don’t have a general, but Mephistopheles is our CEO.”

Raena blushed. “Then I would like to speak with your CEO.”

“That’s not problem at all! Let me just send her a memo... And we’re good to go.”

Charun stood and came around the desk. “If you would come me, Ms. Ward.” He held the door open for her, then walked beside her.

The S.A.A. was a massive network of offices and hallways. Every office had a least one wall the was entirely glass. The other walls were covered with wood paneling, giving them a comforting spa vibe.

“We usually schedule a guide to help our new guests find their way. But I’m glad you came unannounced. Now I can say that *I* guided the famous traveling soul! What’s it like to be reborn? I’ve always wondered.”

“It’s a lot like being born for the first time. Mostly because I have no memories of the Legion.” Raena had responded, but she was more interested in the rainbows dancing along the halls. There had to be other souls around, but all she saw were people.

“The Legion?”

“That’s what I call my past personas.”

“Amazing...”

Charun’s giddiness wasn’t helping her nerves. It rattled her more. How could cacodemons come from such a bright place? And no one was trying to kill her. She’d expected some kind of fight, but it didn’t look like one was going to arise.

The hallway opened to a small court, complete with a simple, double-tiered fountain.

“Here we are!”

At the opposite end of the court, was the first solid door she’d seen in the whole agency. Charun knocked on it with a clear, sharp rap. A muffled woman’s voice beckoned for them to

enter. He opened the door for her once again. As Raena passed through, he said goodbye and reiterated how wonderful it was to meet her.

Mephistopheles stood to greet Raena and shake her hand. "It's an honor, Ms. Ward. I'm so glad you stopped by today."

As if visiting the S.A.A. was as common as visiting an old friend. Although, she supposed it was that common for her disembodied soul.

"I'm going to get right down to it."

"Of course!"

"Is there a way to end my reincarnations?"

She bobbed her head side to side. "Short answer: yes."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. However, it won't be pleasant."

"I don't care! I'll do anything."

Mephistopheles sat on the corner of her desk. "First, you must understand that this process is irreversible."

"That sounds perfect."

"As in your death will be permanent."

Raena grew impatient. "That's what I'm asking for."

"You won't be able to finish the rest of this lifetime. It ends as the process begins. Your body will die, and your soul will be set free."

"And how are you going to contain my soul?"

"That's the painful part."

"Dying wasn't the painful part?"

“Unfortunately, no. Your soul has been wondering the Earth since the beginning. It has resisted all ties to my agency and has proved unwilling to stay put. We will have to chain your soul and force it to become a Shade.”

“A shade?”

“It’s a shadow of who you are. An apparition. Or astral projection. Whatever you wish to call it.”

“So, I’ll become a Shade of myself.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, shouldn’t you know?”

“You’re different Raena. You’ve lived so many lives. There’re so many versions of your Self. I have no idea which version might manifest itself.”

Raena finally took a seat. “So, I die, then I might come back as me, or I might come back as someone I don’t remember?”

“Anything is possible. Your Shade might even switch personas from time to time. There’s really no telling.”

Raena starts to drown in her thoughts. This was the most important decision she could ever make. And she thought she knew the answer. But now... now she was scared. She was afraid of loosing herself. Afraid of becoming another little black journal on the shelf. Choosing reincarnation was choosing ignorance and exploitation. Yet choosing to become a Shade was choosing to become someone unrecognizable. To some extent, Raena saw no difference. Both options required delving into the unknown. The only detail she wasn’t concerned about was whether she had a physical body or an astral body in the end.

“Can I have some time to think?” It came out in a whisper. She couldn’t muster anything more than that.

“Absolutely! This is your choice. We wouldn’t hold you here until you’ve made the decision to stay. You’re welcome back whenever you’re ready.” Mephistopheles rose to signal the end of their meeting. “In the meantime, I’ll call off the cacodemons. You don’t need to worry about dying before you can make a decision.”

The mention of cacodemons broke Raena from her reverie. She jumped up from the chair. She wasn’t quite sure how to respond to the assurance that also sounded vaguely threatening. “Uh, thank you.”

Mephistopheles placed her hand on the small of Raena’s back and ushered her out the door. “It’s the least I can do!”

With a wave, the door shut and Raena was left alone. She started walking back towards the elevator. At least she thought she was going in the right direction. It took a while, but eventually she found the main hall and saw the bright glass door at the end.

Raguel was sitting on a bench outside Slide N’ Glide. Raena almost walked past him, but he called out to her before she got too far away.

“I thought you weren’t going to wait.”

“I changed my mind”

“I see.”

They stood facing each other. Raguel’s eyes implored for any information she might give, but Raena wasn’t paying attention.

“What happened in there?”

“I didn’t need Echo.”

“Good. I hoped you would not need a weapon. Anything else?”

“It boils down to losing myself or losing myself.”

Raguel knit his eyebrows. She wasn’t making any sense to him, but she didn’t care.

“Basically, either way I die.”

“That does not sound so good.”

“No, it’s really not.”

“Do you know what you are going to choose?”

“I need to go home.” Raena started to walk off without Raguel.

“Okay.” He followed behind her, watching her absentminded movements.

PART THREE:

The Child

CHAPTER FIVE

Raena joined Mephistopheles by the fountain.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. It’s time.”

Mephistopheles held a cup under the first tier of the fountain. She handed the cup to Raena. “Drink.”

Raena accepted the cup. The water didn’t smell special, but she knew it would kill her body. She hoped it would kill her quickly and painlessly, so she could move on to the next step. She held her head high and drained the cup. The water flowed through her body and infected every inch.

Mephistopheles caught Raena’s body as she fell to the floor.

There was nothing.

Then she flew.

But something stopped her.

She thrashed in every direction.

She couldn't break free.

Then she screamed as only an orb of light could.

Flares burst all around.

Something tugged at her in five different directions.

Her light stretched farther than it should have.

She faded with the strain of spreading thin.

Darkness came again.

She opened her eyes. She was weightless. Yet her feet appeared to touch the floor. She looked up and found a woman staring at her. She tried to ask what was going on, but the words were snared in a web of garbled voices and languages. She tried again, but it still wasn't quite right. By her fifth try, something intelligible finally made its way out of her mouth.

“Who am I?”

“You're going to have to tell me that.”

“Who are you?”

“You don't remember?”

She cocked her intangible head and searched what must have been her memories. Millions of images and words and sounds and smells passed through her conscious mind.

“Mephistopheles. CEO. Saa... S.A.A.... Soul Administration Agency.”

The woman smiled proudly. “Yes! You do remember. That's wonderful!” She came closer to the Shade. “Do you remember *your* name?”

“There's... so many.”

“Is there one that you prefer? Raena, perhaps?”

She shook her head. The name sparked memories, but it didn't sound right to her.

“No? Someone else then. What was your first name?”

“Eve.”

Mephistopheles huffed in disbelief. But Eve didn't falter, so she threw on the widest smile she could manage. “Well, then, Eve, I am honored to welcome you to the Soul Administration Agency!”

“I have been here before.”

“Yes, but now this is your home.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much like Raena, this story has gone through some major transformations. And it all started with a song lyric. I have no idea which song or even which artist, but the lyric included the words “guardian angel.” I asked myself how I could twist the general view of guardian angels and make it a little more interesting. I came up with the idea of a continually reincarnating girl who is used as a test dummy for guardian angels.

But I needed something more to make it worthy of being an Honor Scholar Thesis. Around the time I was trying to put everything together for the proposal, I happened to be taking Beth Benedix's seminar on existentialism in literature. I had never studied existentialism before, but much of what I learned in that class seemed to fit perfectly with Raena's story. Existentialism became the backbone and heavily influenced the structure. The three parts in the story follow Nietzsche's *Metamorphosis*. It starts with the Camel as the traditional beast of burden, holding the weight of others' decisions. Raena is stuck between the angels exploiting her condition and the demons constantly trying to end her lives. Then she became the Lion, fighting for her own agency and the freedom to make her own choices. Finally, she rose to the status of a Child. Raena stuck to her decision and started a whole new journey as Eve.

I used another of Nietzsche's ideas in creating the Legion's journals. He claimed that studying our past will enable us to see our illusions and learn to surpass them. Letting Raena read about her past lives allowed her reality to sink in and showed her just how much her life wasn't her own.

Camus inspired Raena's awareness. He questioned if knowing about your purpose sabotages your ability to fulfill that purpose. Raena proved the answer is yes. Knowing about her reincarnations sparked her need to end them, and thus end the angels' use of her condition.

Camus also suggested facing the absurd head-on. In the beginning, Raena thought Uriel had told her everything she needed to know, but that view burst open when Raguel came to her aid. She dove into the idea of the two offices and jumped at the chance to discover all they had to offer.

Sartre believed that if we wanted to survive, we had to decide to live. Raena agreed with that notion more than anyone else could. She constantly fought to keep her persona and her knowledge. By the end she decides to give up her physical body to let her mind survive. Another aspect that Sartre inspired was the idea that hell is other people. My full idea didn't quite make it into the story, but it certainly helped me shape the two offices. I wanted to create new versions of heaven and hell that would stand on their own while maintaining the dichotomy. If hell is other people, then heaven could be as well. The dichotomy became all life versus all death. Which led to the idea that demons weren't necessarily bad, and angels weren't necessarily good. Angels protected Raena while exploiting her, and demons hunted her before providing her with the solution to her reincarnations. What didn't make it into the story was how Shades were punished or rewarded based on their groupings. They were going to either enjoy or detest the company of their peers.

According to Kierkegaard, Raena spent the beginning of her story lost in the finite. She followed the expectations placed upon her without really questioning anything. Then she found herself lost in the infinite when she was faced with her final choice. There was too much to think about, so she delayed. In the end, she took a leap of faith and chose to become a Shade, even though she had no idea what might happen to her in the process.

After finding the plot, my biggest challenge was finding the right names for my characters. Raena began as Jamie Ward. I wrote and rewrote the first chapter, but it never seemed right. Then I realized that the tone was all wrong because of the name. I wanted a main character that seemed youthful while boasting a strength and maturity that was required by her upbringing. Jamie was too young, and my writing followed the tone of her immaturity. It took a while to find Raena, but it was obvious she was the character I was looking for. With a more mature name, her physical appearance became the cornerstone of her youth.

Next to Raena, the angels and demons took a good bit of research. I chose Uriel for his ability to enlighten others and to expose their inner strengths. And his fake human name, Kiran Ward, came from the original name I gave his character, Kiraman. Raguel is known for restoring balance and peace and acting as a mediator. I chose Gabriel because he guarded Israel. The General was the hardest to name. He stood in God's place, but I didn't want something so obvious. "El" means god, but it was distant enough. The demons gave me a different type of challenge because the more commonly known names are heavily associated with negative traits. I couldn't let myself name the CEO Lucifer, so I searched around and found Mephistopheles who was known for the collection of souls. Charun was chosen for his depiction of guarding hell.

Eve was perhaps the easiest decision. Even though, however natural the idea seems now, I hadn't thought of it until I searched for Raena's current name. The first woman became Raena's first self. This naming also created the story of Eve refusing to die until she realized the purpose and benefit of death. No one is meant to live forever and death brings us to the next natural stage of existence.

Writing this story was a major exercise in focus for me. I stayed with the story from conception to completion and pushed through the urge to move on to something else. Large

projects don't always keep my attention, and I've worked on this story for over a year now, but here it is. It's not perfect and there are areas ripe for expansion, but in the end, all works are works in progress.