



# Gargoyle Reaper (Shadow Slayers #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Evil still lurks in the shadows, and the Shadow Slayers prepare for an epic battle...

As the designated Shadow Slayer healer, Ezekiel is rarely called to fight the evil forces that threaten to plunge the world into darkness. The nicknamed Reaper worries he'll never reach the kill quota allowing his mate to be revealed to him. But everything changes when he's called to Boston to heal a Slayer tortured by demons.

Archer is a surgeon who lives an unremarkable life in Boston. Too grumpy to care how lonely he is, or that he doesn't have friends beyond work acquaintances, he instead focuses his energy on being an expert in his field. However, when he returns home from pulling an all-nighter at the hospital, he discovers his house has been trashed and a mysterious man claiming his life is in danger.

Plunged into a bizarre world of deadly supernatural creatures and strange prophecies, Archer fears he's losing his mind. But the electric touch of the handsome man who swears they're fated mates is starting to turn him onto a believer...

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Ezekiel's massive form cut through the night sky, his stony skin impervious to the biting cold. With immense power, his large, grey wings flapped against the fierce winds, propelling him forward to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, under which the East Coast Shadow Slayer lair was located. His talons flexed instinctively, ready to grip the cathedral's surface as he descended toward the twinkling lights of downtown.

As he neared his destination, Ezekiel's keen eyes scanned the city.

The streets boasted a multitude of holiday decorations, lit with twinkling lights.

The streets were dusted with a layer of fresh snow that glittered from the bright display, reminiscent of a picture on a Christmas card.

The irony of the festive scene wasn't lost on Ezekiel.

While humans celebrated the joyous time of the year with friends and family, he and his fellow Shadow Slayers fought an eternal battle against darkness.

As he approached the cathedral's spire, Ezekiel's wings folded close to his body, allowing him to dive gracefully toward a hidden entrance.

With practiced ease, he landed silently on the cathedral's roof, his claws finding purchase on the weathered stone.

In an instant, his massive form shimmered and contracted, the rough grey skin smoothing into a cool bronze as he shifted back to his human appearance.

Ezekiel straightened his leather jacket and ran his palm across the top of his head, mentally preparing himself to enter the world of mortals once more.

He slipped through a hidden entrance behind an iron buttress, then quickly descended stone steps enclosed behind the wall

Midnight had already come and gone, so he wasn't worried about being caught lurking about

What gripped him in fear was whether he was in time to save Ronen, a slayer who a rogue demon had mercilessly tortured.

The fact that the rogues were now doing some of the dirty work typically reserved for the shadow gargoyles didn't portend well

Perhaps they believed their mission to steal enough holy relics so they could plunge the world into darkness and seize the reins of power from Lucifer was failing, and they needed to move the proceedings along.

When Michael summoned him to heal the gravely injured Ronen, the archangel hadn't shared many details, so Ezekiel could only guess how much Ronen had revealed to the demon—if anything at all

While the injured slayer was an excellent warrior, he was a newer recruit

How resilient he was to torture was in question

On the other hand, he might not know enough about their operations yet to have caused much harm to their mission.

Ezekiel's footsteps echoed softly through the narrow passageway as he moved deeper

into the cathedral's hidden chambers

The air grew thick with the scent of incense and something else—the metallic tang of blood

His heart raced, worry for Ronen gnawing at his gut.

Once he entered the makeshift infirmary inside a dimly lit chamber, his eyes fell upon Ronen's prone form

The sight that greeted him made his stomach churn

Ronen lay on a stone altar, his body a canvas of cuts and bruises

The rogue demon's handiwork was evident in the intricate patterns carved into Ronen's skin, symbols of vile shapes meant to encase Ronen's spirit, to prevent him from fighting for his light.

The healing would require a difficult combination of physical restoration combined with spiritual renewal

These sessions were always the most taxing on him

While he loved and embraced his role as the official Shadow Slayer healer, the unending battle with the dark forces had become more draining as of late

The Grim Reaper might have shed every speck of light left inside to ensure that Ezekiel would have as much power as possible, but there was only so much he could handle

The battles had become more frequent and brutal

And now, with the rogue demons entering the fray? He feared he couldn't keep up with the demands being placed on him.

“About time you showed up, Zeke,”

a familiar voice drawled from the corner. Cassiel, another Shadow Slayer, pushed off the wall she'd been leaning against. “I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost in all that holiday cheer up there.”

Ezekiel grunted. “Hardly. Not feeling all that cheery these days.”

Cassiel's smirk faded as she approached, her eyes softening with concern. “I know, Zeke. None of us are. But we need you at your best right now.”

Ezekiel nodded, steeling himself as he moved to Ronen's side. He placed his hands gently on the wounded Slayer's chest, closing his eyes to focus his energy. A soft golden glow emanated from his palms, seeping into Ronen's battered flesh.

“What happened?”

Ezekiel gritted his teeth, furrowing his brow as he struggled to concentrate his light on Ronen.

Cassiel sighed heavily

“Ambush

The demon caught him off guard near Copley Square

We believe they're after information regarding the relic the seers believe are here.”

Several of the mated Nephilim had been gifted with the ability to sense the presence of holy relics, which is why those who were mated and exhibited the gift were located in different parts of the globe

As of yet, they could only vibe out general locations and only that the item was holy—not what it actually was

Ezekiel figured the demons couldn't possibly be aware of that information.

He shuddered at the thought if they did know

They would then be more likely to steal a Nephilim than a gargoyle

The idea of a pregnant Nephilim being taken and tortured filled him with dread

No one should be tortured ever, but that felt even more egregious. Should he ever be given his Fated One, he'd be destroyed if such a thing happened.

Ezekiel drew his eyebrows together. "Did they find out anything?"

"We don't know yet."

She pressed her lips together. "He's been unconscious since we found him."

He nodded, understanding the implication. If the demons had gotten what they wanted, Ronen would likely be dead. The fact that he was still breathing meant they probably hadn't broken him.

Yet.

Ezekiel continued pouring healing energy into Ronen's battered body, the younger

Slayer's spirit flickering weakly. The demonic symbols carved into his flesh were like anchors, dragging Ronen's essence down into darkness. He gritted his teeth again, pushing harder against the malevolent magic.

"Come on, Ronen,"

he muttered. "Fight this."

Sweat beaded on Ezekiel's forehead as he worked, the golden light from his hands intensifying, pulsing steadily, knitting together torn flesh and mending broken bones. Slowly, painstakingly, the wounds started to close. Finally, the demonic symbols faded, replaced by smooth, unblemished skin.

Ronen's eyes flew open, wild with panic. He thrashed against Ezekiel's touch, nearly toppling off the altar.

"Whoa, easy there."

Ezekiel laid his hands on Ronen's shoulders, gently restraining him. "You're safe now. You're with us."

Ronen's eyes darted around frantically before focusing on Ezekiel's face. Recognition dawned, and he relaxed slightly, though his breathing remained ragged.

"Ezekiel?"

Ronen croaked, his voice hoarse. "What..."

He licked his cracked lips. "Where am I?"

"Back at HQ,"

Cassiel chimed in, stepping closer. “You gave us quite a scare, rookie.”

Ezekiel helped Ronen sit up slowly, keeping a steadying hand at his back. “How much do you remember?”

Ronen's brow creased. “I was... patrolling near Copley Square. That was where the seer at the Cape felt a relic might be found. I thought the library was a good possibility. I mean, who knows?”

He shrugged. “The only description from the seer was that the artifact was small enough to carry.”

Cassiel crossed her arms. “So it wasn’t bigger than a bread box?”

Ezekiel sighed. “Cass. Please. If you’re going to use human sayings, at least choose them from this century.”

She tilted her head. “Mortals don’t use breadboxes anymore?”

Ezekiel pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we stay on topic?”

Cassie muttered under her breath, something about cranky gargoyles being big know-it-alls. He didn’t have time to get into it with her. At any moment, the shadow gargoyles could find the mysterious relic. Even worse, the demons seemed to be on the hunt now, too. He wasn’t sure how long they could stay ahead of them with the added forces.

Ezekiel regarded Ronen. “Sorry about that. So, you were heading toward the library. Were you in the park, or...?”

“I...”



He rubbed his forehead. “A lot of it is blurry. But yes. I remember thinking that area was a logical place to begin looking for a hidden artifact, it would be somewhere in the large library.”

“Makes sense. So, you were on your way to the library, and it’s late at night, so no one’s around. What’s the next thing you remember after that?”

Ronen pressed his lips in a severe line, frowning as if he could summon his memory to the surface. “I...”

His shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. The only thing I remember after that is pain.”

He shuddered. “So much fucking pain.”

“Hmm.”

Ezekiel rubbed his chin. “Nothing about the interrogation, what they’re looking for, were asking you? Nothing?”

“I wish I could remember.”

Ronan shook his head. “I know I’m not much help.”

Ezekiel turned to Cassiel. “How did you find him?”

“When he didn’t check in, I went searching.”

She crossed her arms. “He was dumped in some bushes near the library. He was barely hidden, almost as if he was meant to be found.”

Ezekiel's eyes narrowed. “That's unusual. They don't normally leave survivors.”

“Exactly.”

Cassiel nodded grimly. "Which means they either got what they wanted or..."

“Or they're trying to send us a message,”

Ezekiel finished. “Fuck.”

Ronen regarded him with wide eyes, fear etched on his features. “What kind of message?”

Ezekiel sighed, placing a hand on Ronen’s shoulder. “That they're getting bolder. That they're not afraid to come after us directly now.”

Cassiel’s jaw clenched. “We need to inform Michael. If the demons truly are working with the shadow gargoyles, we're going to need all hands on deck.”

As if on cue, a shimmering light filled the room, coalescing into the form of Archangel Michael. His ethereal presence commanded attention, his wings folded neatly behind his back as he surveyed the room with piercing blue eyes.

“I'm afraid the situation is even more dire than you realize.”

Michael narrowed his eyes at Ezekiel before continuing. “Glad you made it in time to save him. Anyway, I’ve just returned from a nice lunch with Lucifer, and he’s informed me that the demons have grown impatient with their shadow gargoyle minions. They’ve decided that things will move along faster if they join in the fun.”

“And by fun, you mean torturing and killing?”

Ezekiel growled.

“Wait.”

Cassiel frowned. “Did you say you had a nice lunch with Lucifer?”

Michael sighed. “He’s not my angel bestie by a long shot, but we’re all on the same side right now. As soon as this demon uprising is handled, we can return to hissing at each other.”

Frustration overtook Ezekiel. “And in the meantime, how do we move forward? I’m only one healer. If the situation is more volatile now, and the demons are using these new tactics, we’ll be overwhelmed in no time.”

“Clearly,”

said Michael. “I’ve already discussed this with the Divine Spark. We’re going to bring in more gargoyle recruits, including those who have mated or haven’t been appointed already.”

Michael dusted his arms as if the lair was making him dirty. “You should also know that we’ve recently taken in some shadow gargoyle defectors who want to return to the light.”

“Oh perfect,”

sniped Cassiel. “Now we’re working with traitors. What could possibly go wrong?”

Michael still hadn’t answered the most pressing question from Ezekiel’s point of view.

“Michael, I understand that reinforcements are sorely needed now. But that won’t solve the issue of the ones who are injured. I’m drained every time I use my essence

to heal another, and Ronen's injuries were particularly vile."

Ezekiel shook his head. "As I stand here speaking with you, I'm still not completely replenished. What if several slayers were to be brought in at once?"

Ezekiel locked eyes with Michael. "I need help. Aren't there other angels who can provide the healing light here on earth?"

Michael's eyes held a hint of amusement. The archangel was seriously beginning to piss him off. "Heaven's population isn't coming down to earth on an ongoing basis."

He rolled his eyes. "It's bad enough this annoying situation has forced me to spend more time here than I care for."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "But I believe you'll find your prayers answered in good time."

One of his least favorite aspects of Michael was his propensity for being cryptic. As far as he was concerned, Michael should be more forthcoming, considering how dire the circumstances were. Ezekiel wasn't a big fan of games.

"Not enjoying your time here is one thing."

Ezekiel crossed his arms, hoping his stance signaled to Michael that he wasn't amused. "How about we discuss what needs to be done in the meantime?"

Michael stared him down. "As I said, everyone is being called into action."

He turned to Cassiel. "Choose a slayer in the lair, your best. Then you, Ezekiel and whoever you pick will use the seer's impressions to hunt down the relic."

He sighed. “There’s no more time to waste, and I have an appointment with the Heavenly Choir that I’m late for. So many holiday preparations.”

Ezekiel barely bit back an acerbic comment before Michael continued. “If you need anything, Uriel is in the region and can be called upon.”

Cassiel nodded briskly. “Understood. I’ll gather the team, and we’ll head out immediately.”

As Michael vanished in a flash of light, Ezekiel turned to Ronen. “You should rest here and recover. We’ll need you back at full strength soon enough.”

Ronen moved to stand but wobbled, clearly still drained from his ordeal. “I’ll head to my room.”

“Not from the looks of it.”

Ezekiel helped him to his feet, then turned to Cassiel. “Who do you have in mind for our third?”

Cassiel smirked. “Oh, I think you know exactly who I’m thinking of.”

Ezekiel groaned. “Not Darius. Anyone but him.”

“Come on, Zeke. He’s our best tracker, and you know it.”

Cassiel nudged his ribs with her elbow. “Plus, this gives you two a chance to kiss and make up.”

Ezekiel pursed his lips. “The absolute last thing I wish to do with that gargoyle is kiss him. He doesn’t know how to take no for an answer, and I don’t appreciate that.”

While many of his fellow slayers got some whenever and with whoever they could until their mates came along, Ezekiel found his right hand did the job effectively. It also didn't leave him with an empty spot in his heart after the deed was done, and he realized he was still alone.

Cassiel nudged him again while he struggled to help Ronen out of the room. "Don't you mean he got a bit too tailsy with you?"

Ezekiel groaned. Why me? "Not funny, Cass. Not even close."

She moved to the other side of Ronen and draped his arm around her neck. "Come on. Admit it. That was hilarious. Who doesn't love some great tail play?"

Ezekiel decided not to encourage her by continuing the conversation. As they made their way down the long hallway of the stone lair, his mind wandered to what Michael had revealed. If he was being called to duty despite being a healer, and the mated slayers were being brought back, were they on the brink of losing the battle completely?

He forced his own selfish needs from his mind. The fate of all was what mattered, not whether he ever found his mate. Ezekiel swallowed hard. If only he could've touched his mate one time.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Archer pulled into the driveway of his brick colonial home, exhausted after a long night of performing emergency surgery on a trauma victim. The temperatures had dropped unexpectedly, and ice covered the roads. He loved his job as an orthopedic surgeon, but the hours could be grueling. At least he didn't have a neglected family to worry about.

Living alone suited him just fine. Sure, sometimes it could be lonely, but whatever. His career kept him busy. And whenever he had time off, there were the season tickets to the Red Sox that the hospital provided to the top surgeons. He grunted to himself as he stepped out of his BMW. A couple of those guys weren't too annoying to hang out with.

It was still too early to check the mail, so he made his way to the front door. All he wanted to do was jump into the shower then fall into bed. However, as soon as he stepped into the foyer, he knew something was terribly wrong. His security alarm didn't beep, and he wasn't the type to forget to set it.

Archer flipped on the light then sucked in a sharp breath. What the hell? His large living room looked as if an actual tornado had torn through it. A surge of anger built inside him, and he marched forward, wondering how the thieves who'd broken in managed to get past his security system. The company he'd hired assured him they were the best. He gritted his teeth. As soon as he assessed the situation and called the police, he was going to have a very terse conversation with the so-called security company.

Right as he stepped into the open room, a movement like a shadow caught the corner of his eye. Archer whipped around, squinting his eyes in the dim area and trying to

see if anyone was there. The house was eerily quiet, and a thread of unease coursed through him. Either whoever had broken into his home was still there, or he was delirious from exhaustion and hallucinating.

Not wanting to take any chances, he decided to call the cops now rather than later. Archer reached into his jacket pocket to retrieve his phone when a deep voice sounded behind him.

“Don’t call anyone, it’s not safe.”

Archer whirled around, startled to find a tall, handsome man staring back at him with dark, almost black eyes that held a tinge of a golden glow around the irises. Before he could ponder the odd occurrence, the seeming glow disappeared. That left him with nothing to do but consider the meticulously dressed man with striking features, deep bronze skin, and a piercing gaze.

Whoever he was, he didn’t seem like someone who’d just robbed and vandalized his home. Archer almost chuckled at how out of place the sophisticated man seemed amidst the chaos. This gorgeous specimen would more likely be found in the boardroom of a high-powered corporation or hosting an exclusive party on his yacht. Yet, here he was, standing in his living room and claiming danger.

Archer was yanked from his appraisal as he remembered this was a stranger in his half-destroyed home and that there could indeed be danger. Archer clutched his phone in a tight grip and took a step back, ready to run if the man had a weapon or stand his ground if necessary. The stranger seemed strong, probably in his mid-thirties like Archer was, but he was a student of martial arts and could put up a decent fight if necessary.

“What’s going on here and who the hell are you?”



Archer bit out.

“I’m not the hell, but they were here. I’m sorry your home was damaged while my colleagues and I fought them off. I’m only grateful you weren’t here at the time.”

His brow furrowed before he continued. “I’m afraid they would’ve tortured or killed you in order to obtain the relic you’re hiding.”

Hot or not, this guy was clearly a nut job. “I need you to leave right now.”

The guy had the nerve to shake his head. “You don’t understand. The mortal authorities can’t help you, can’t keep you safe. Only my colleagues and I have the skills to protect you from what you’re up against.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand, but it’s still time for you to leave.”

The guy advanced again, and Archer stumbled back.

“I can’t allow you to call the authorities. It’s too risky. You need to verify whether the relic was stolen or if it’s still here. Then we can secure it and keep you safe.”

The man rubbed his chin. “I’m afraid you’ll have to leave this world behind. Now that the demons have found you, they’ll never leave you alone.”

Yup. This guy had taken a one-way trip to Looney Town, and it didn’t appear he was planning to return.

Archer jetted to the door, reaching for the knob, but he was yanked back and spun around. He gasped from the electric charge that surged through him. The man stared at him with wide eyes as if Archer was the one who’d shocked him.

Now that he was being held in the powerful grip of the stranger, his muscular frame that wasn't noticeable in his suit was rather apparent. Archer swallowed hard, not sure why he was overcome with the desire to let this stranger, this man who was clearly a threat to keep touching him.

Archer forced himself to snap out of whatever trance he was under, struggling in the man's arms. He quickly realized the guy's strength exceeded what he believed possible for one person. The chances of him breaking free seemed miniscule.

"Let me go. Immediately."

The situation was becoming more awkward by the second. Being held by this man so they were chest to chest, his muscled arms wrapped around Archer's waist, his warm breath fanning across Archer's face, awakened something in his body. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this close to another man, especially one so intoxicating. Archer tried to focus on the danger, not the inexplicable attraction he felt.

"I can't let you go,"

the stranger said, his voice low and husky. "Not until you understand the gravity of the situation."

A sharp knock at the door jolted them both. The man's eyes rounded, a flash of golden light pulsing in their depths. He released Archer abruptly, pushing him behind his broad back in a protective stance.

"Dr. Blackwood?" called a muffled voice from outside. "Special delivery. Signature required."

Archer frowned, glancing at his watch. Who would be delivering anything at this

hour?

The stranger tensed, his fists curled as if ready to attack. “Don't open it,”

he whispered urgently.

But Archer was over this this nonsense. He shoved past the man and yanked open the door, determined to get answers and end this bizarre standoff.

A courier stood on his porch, holding out an electronic pad. “Sign here, please,”

he said, his voice the type of monotone indicating he'd used the same phrase countless times.

Archer hesitated, eyeing the small package in the courier's other hand. Something prickled under his skin, like a silent alarm going off. The stranger's warnings echoed in his mind, but he pushed them aside. This was ridiculous. He was a respected surgeon, not some character in a supernatural thriller.

With a resigned sigh, Archer scrawled his signature on the pad. The courier handed over the parcel without a word then left.

As soon as the door closed, the stranger was at Archer's side. “Let me open it,”

he commanded, reaching for the package.

Archer yanked the padded envelope behind him and narrowed his eyes at the intruder. “I don't take orders from strangers who break into my home.”

The man sighed. “For the last time, I didn't break in. I realize how bizarre this must seem, but I did save your life.”

His features softened, his shoulders dropping. “I apologize for my harsh tone. I don’t want to frighten you, and I promise I’ll explain everything in detail. However, time isn’t on our side. He laid a hand on Archer’s shoulder, catching him off guard. “Don’t fear. I will protect you with my life.”

There’s that electric jolt again. Archer drew his eyebrows together. The sensation was less jarring this time, more pleasant. Odd.

Archer held back a snort. Nothing was making sense. Why on earth would this stranger be so damn protective over him? It’s not as if he was cowering in fear, or hiding behind the furniture. And he’d give his life? Archer glanced down at the return address and frowned. Whatever was inside the puffy envelope had been sent by an attorney. If he was being sued or there were other private documents, he certainly didn’t want this guy to get a look at his personal business.

“That’s bizarrely thoughtful of you but also completely unnecessary.”

Archer turned the package over, the large padded envelope unremarkable except for the weight of its contents. The stranger reached for the envelope again.

“Please. I would be devastated if anything were to happen to you.”

This time, Archer had to chuckle. The guy was too over the top. “You’re not opening my private mail, so get over it.”

The stranger pressed his lips in a severe line and crossed his arms. He didn’t, however, stand back.

With a shake of his head, Archer tore open the envelope. Inside was a single key, a handwritten note, and the attorney’s business card. He glanced at the back, where the attorney wrote that he’d been instructed to send Archer the key upon word of his

death. Archer unfolded the paper and glanced down at the signature. His blood seemed to turn to ice. The signature belonged to a recently deceased patient, Colin Fitzgerald.

The memory of Mr. Fitzgerald saying he'd chosen him as his surgeon for a reason he wouldn't reveal came rushing back to him. Who was his former patient, really?

"My dear Dr. Blackwood,"

the note read. "If you're reading this, I'm no longer among the living. I entrust you with a great responsibility and an even greater secret. The key enclosed opens a safety deposit box at First National Bank on Boylston Street, containing an artifact of immense power. Guard it with your life, for dark forces seek to claim it. Trust no one but those who speak of the Divine Spark. The fate of our world may rest in your hands. Godspeed, Colin Fitzgerald."

Archer's hands trembled as he re-read the cryptic message. He tried to recall all he could of Colin—an eccentric but kind older gentleman who came in for a routine hip replacement. He'd died unexpectedly of cardiac arrest just days after being discharged. Now, he wondered if something more sinister was behind his demise.

The stranger's deep voice broke through Archer's racing thoughts. "What does it say?"

Archer cleared his throat, his mind a jumble of confused emotions. The paranoia was real. He rubbed his forehead. Colin's message was eerily similar to the stranger's ramblings.

"Here. Read it."

Archer shoved the note at him but curled his fingers around the key. It felt as if the

fate of the world truly was in his hands.

The stranger's eyes widened as he scanned the note, his posture tensing with each line. When he finished, he peered up at Archer with an intensity that made the surgeon's breath catch.

“This changes everything,”

the stranger said, his voice low and urgent. “We need to move. Now.”

“Who’s we?”

Archer snorted. “I’m not going anywhere with you. I don’t even know your name.”

The stranger paused as if debating whether to reveal this information. Finally, he sighed. “Ezekiel. My name is Ezekiel.”

“Well, Ezekiel,”

Archer said, crossing his arms again. “You still haven’t given me a good reason to trust you. All you’ve told me so far is I’m in danger. What if you’re the reason for that? I need more information before I do another thing.”

He clutched the key in the palm of his hand and his phone was at the ready in his pocket. Calling the police remained on the table unless this Ezekiel guy gave him a damn good reason to go along with his wild story.

Ezekiel's expression softened. “I don’t mean to be so abrupt with you, of all people. Several of my colleagues can be rather bossy, and I don’t appreciate it.”

He ran his hand across the top of his head. “But it would put me more at ease if we

left your home. I don't think the demons or their minions will return right now, but it's hard to say. They've been becoming more brazen."

Archer weighed the options. He could dig in his heels and refuse to leave with Ezekiel, the mysterious regal hunk who may or may not want to kill him. Or, he could lock up his house and go somewhere in public and maybe figure out what the ever-loving hell was going on. Should it become clear that nothing dire was happening and Ezekiel was merely delusional, it would be a much easier task to get help if they weren't alone.

Yet, something about the situation nagged at him. How likely was it that his former patient would send him a key regarding an ancient relic right after Ezekiel claimed that was why his house was broken into? In which case, Ezekiel might be trying to trick him by pretending to be on his side. Maybe it was Ezekiel who'd broken in and was behind all the destruction.

However, when Ezekiel promised to shield him from whoever was at the door and protect him with his life, the idea had sent a thrill through him, even if he couldn't explain why. With a sinking heart, Archer reminded himself that he was crap at reading people, especially men he found attractive. His pathetic attempts at relationships certainly bore that out, and those hadn't been guys spouting off about demons, holy relics, and the fate of the world.

"All right. I'll go with you. But first, I need some coffee. There's a place I frequent downtown where we can talk."

Ezekiel's shoulders relaxed. "Good. The sooner I get you away from here, the better. We'll still need to be vigilant, and you must follow my instructions to the letter."

He held up his hand in a placating gesture. "Not because I want to boss you around, but so I have the best chance of keeping you safe."

That thrill of Ezekiel being concerned for his safety coursed through him again. So ridiculous, yet so wonderful at the same time.

“Fine. I’ll play along.”

Archer jabbed a finger at the mysterious Ezekiel. “For now.”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Ezekiel tried not to stare at Archer as they made their way down the sidewalk. Over the many centuries of waiting, he'd refused to fantasize about what his mate would look like. His appearance wasn't important. But the tall, ruggedly handsome man with a full head of wavy brown hair and piercing green eyes would've called to him regardless of them being fated.

Archer claimed the coffee shop was nearby and it would be quicker than trying to find a parking spot. He glanced at Archer again and got a side-eye and smirk for his trouble.

This was the man he now knew was his mate. Such a fantastic turn of events. But was Archer a man? He had to be Nephilim, or else they couldn't be fated. Yet, Archer was adamant that he didn't believe in anything of a supernatural nature.

While staring at his fated one was truly tempting, they were better served if he remained vigilant of their surroundings. Despite how reckless the shadow gargoyles had been lately, they rarely attacked in public, and never during the day.

Regardless, Ezekiel kept his senses on high alert. If shadow gargoyles were in the vicinity, he'd feel their presence. He understood why Archer needed to process everything that was happening, and he was proud that his mate possessed such a strong character. But if ever time was crucial, it was now. The rogues knew the relic was nearby and they'd already tortured to get more info. Perhaps Ronen unwittingly confessed something when he was at their mercy.

“Here we are.”

Archer opened the door and gestured for Ezekiel to go ahead.

Ezekiel smiled. "Thanks. But after you."

He swept his hand toward the interior of the busy, bright and modern coffeehouse. With a scowl, Archer stepped inside with Ezekiel close on his heels. Once they ordered, he chose a small tiled table with two uncomfortable wrought iron chairs as far from the crowd as feasible. He scraped the ornate chair closer to Archer so he could keep their conversation private. Otherwise, he'd be yelling to be heard above the noisy echo of chatter.

To his surprise, Archer didn't recoil from him the way he'd been doing so far. Instead, he seemed to welcome Ezekiel's closeness. But no sooner had the thought left him, Archer cleared his throat and angled his body away from Ezekiel, his eyes darting around as he took a sip of his coffee.

Ezekiel sighed, admonishing himself for getting hurt by Archer's unspoken rejection. Maybe Archer wasn't entirely human, but he was clearly unaware of his angelic heritage, and probably still thought Ezekiel was a lunatic.

"I'm sorry this is happening to you."

Ezekiel almost laid his hand on Archer's but stopped himself in time. Was Archer even gay? That could be awkward. He cleared his throat before continuing. "If I could spare you this anguish, I would."

Archer cocked his head. "You have an unusual manner of speaking."

Ezekiel raised his eyebrows. He didn't get out much, particularly not in the last century when his healing powers had been needed the most, but no one had ever commented on the way he spoke before.

“How do you mean?”

Archer rubbed his chin then took another sip of coffee before setting down his cup. “Hmm. I suppose the best way to describe it would be as if I was reading something from *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“The romantic tale by Jane Austen?”

Archer pinked and averted his gaze. “You know what I mean. As if you just stepped out of an episode of *Bridgerton*.”

Ezekiel drew his eyebrows together. “I don’t think I’m familiar with that one.”

Archer regarded him as if he were under a microscope. “You know, the more I’m around you, the more I find myself believing your goofy story.”

Ezekiel huffed. “Please. I concede that this must be overwhelming for you, but I would hardly describe what happened at your home goofy.”

Archer frowned and let out a small growl. “There’s something we can both agree on.”

He took another big swallow of his coffee then swept the cup aside. “Enough of this chit-chat. Tell me what the hell we’re supposed to do next? Obviously, we go to the bank, and we see what this supposed relic is. But then what? Take it to the authorities?”

Ezekiel didn’t want to get frustrated with his mate, but his nerves were truly being tested. “As I explained earlier, that’s the last thing we can do. We need to get the relic, but we can’t rush in if we’re being watched. We could be ambushed right after we have the relic in our possession.”

Archer straightened, whipping his head around the room. “Do you think someone followed us?”

Ezekiel placed a reassuring hand on Archer's arm before he could stop himself, the jolt of electricity at the contact stealing his breath. He quickly pulled back at Archer's startled expression. “No, I don't sense any immediate danger. But we must remain cautious.”

Archer nodded, his jaw slack. “I...”

He blinked several times then straightened again, rolling his shoulders as if trying to wake himself up. “Right. So what's the plan then? We can't just sit here all day.”

“We need to formulate a strategy, and a colleague is nearby who we'll meet with soon.”

Ezekiel hesitated to use Uriel's name yet. Archer didn't need more ammunition to doubt what was happening. “The shadow gargoyles are ruthless and cunning. You saw what they did to your home. They're equally ruthless when it comes to getting what they want from someone.”

Archer ran a hand through his hair. “This is insane. I must reiterate that I'm a surgeon, not some... supernatural treasure hunter.”

Ezekiel's heart ached over his mate's distress. “I understand this is difficult to accept, but you're more than a treasure hunter to me.”

Archer narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean by that? You keep acting as if I'm someone special to you.”

He snorted. “Which is even more ridiculous than this holy relic nonsense.”

Ezekiel's chest tightened, his heart hurting for his mate. "Why should someone finding you special be so impossible? I imagine you possess many fine qualities. The fact that you're a healer says so much about your character."

"I...that's not..."

Archer frowned before glancing away, then shifted his position on the unforgiving metal of the chair. Ezekiel knew how he felt. The coffee shop really didn't want their customers lingering.

Ezekiel took a chance and clasped Archer's fingers, but Archer yanked his hand away. "I'm sorry, Archer. It's only that I can feel your anguish, and I wish I could comfort you."

"Stop it,"

Archer gritted through his teeth. "I don't know what your agenda with me is, and I don't care. Forget I mentioned it."

He pressed his back to the chair and crossed his arms. "Let's get on with it. If we can't go to the safety deposit box because we might be followed, and we can't sit here and rot, then what do you suggest? I want to move on with my life."

He groaned. "I can't wait to see how much the house repairs are going to be."

As agitated as Archer was, Ezekiel didn't think it was wise to remind Archer that he would never be going back.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about your patient? Perhaps there's a clue as to what the relic might be."

“I’ve got a clue what it might be.”

Archer smirked. “Unlock the safety deposit box and look inside.”

Ezekiel pressed his lips together. Archer wasn’t the only one who was getting agitated.

“Getting the artifact isn’t the issue, Archer, you know that.”

He sighed. His mate was going to be a real challenge. “The Slayers who ran off the demons at your home will be in touch soon, will let me know it’s time to meet up with our colleague. That’s when we make our next move.”

Archer dropped his head in his hands. “This is ridiculous. I’m exhausted, stressed out, and pretty pissed off about everything right now. I just want this over with.”

“Try not to worry. I sent a message to the area team before we left the house. They’ll let us know when it’s safe to meet up.”

Archer fell back in his chair with a sigh. “Terrific,”

he mumbled. “Fine. Then as long as we’re stuck here, why don’t you fill me in on more details.”

He leaned forward, folding his hands on the table, and fixed his gaze on Ezekiel’s. “And don’t sugarcoat. Give me all the details, or else I’m taking my chances with the cops.”

Ezekiel’s gut tightened. Archer was as good as dead if he followed through on his threat. “Okay. I’ll tell you everything. But please, I beg you. Don’t get the authorities involved. Your life truly is in danger.”

Archer narrowed his eyes. “I’ll make that decision once I’ve heard your story.”

Ezekiel sucked in a breath. Here goes everything. “Our connection runs deeper than me making sure the relic is found and kept safe. As I explained, I’m part of a network of slayers—ancient gargoyles who the Archangel Michael has appointed to save the holy relics the rogue demons and shadow gargoyles seek. If they collect enough of them, the world will plunge into darkness, and humanity will be destroyed. I wasn’t expecting this to happen, but...”

Ezekiel squirmed in his chair—and not because of the hard metal surface. “Well, I recognize you as my Fated One, the one who I will spend eternity with as my mate.”

Archer blinked several times, his jaw going slack as he gaped at Ezekiel. He snapped his mouth shut then shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. “Yeah. I’m out.”

Archer jumped from his chair, the metal legs scraping on the wood floor. Several customers whirled their heads around, undoubtedly hoping for a good scene. Ezekiel needed to get them out of there fast before someone decided to record them and post it on social media.

Ezekiel sprang up, reaching for Archer's arm. "Wait, please—"

But Archer was already striding toward the exit, his shoulders tense and fists clenched at his sides. Ezekiel hurried after him, weaving through the maze of tables and curious onlookers. As they burst out onto the sidewalk, the crisp Boston air hit him, carrying the faint scent of the harbor.

“Archer, stop!”

Ezekiel called, his voice tinged with desperation. “I know it sounds insane, but—”

Archer whirled around, his eyes blazing. "Insane? That's putting it mildly. Gargoyles, demons, fated mates? I can't believe I almost bought into your crazy story. I'm a man of science, for God's sake!"

Ezekiel stepped closer, lowering his voice. "I understand your skepticism, truly. But think about what happened at your house. You saw it with your own eyes. How do you explain that?"

Archer froze, scrubbing his face with one hand before bowing his head. "I can't, dammit. And I truly don't want to believe a damn thing you're saying."

He lifted his gaze, and Ezekiel noted the pain in his eyes. Ezekiel took a chance and laid a hand on his shoulder in comfort. Almost immediately, Archer yanked his arm away, but paused, his eyes wide. "Why the fuck does that keep happening every time you touch me?"

"It's the connection between us,"

Ezekiel said softly, aware of the curious stares around them. "I know it sounds incredible, but you must feel it too."

Archer ran a hand through his hair, his expression a mix of confusion and frustration. "I don't know what I feel. This is all too much."

"I understand,"

Ezekiel said, taking a cautious step closer. "But I implore you to hear me out. I'm serious about your life being in danger, whether you believe in the supernatural or not."

"What am I supposed to do with that information, huh? You're asking me to accept



that everything I've ever believed to be true about my existence is wrong."

He threw his hands in the air. "Does that mean my old life is over? That I can no longer work as a surgeon, live in my home, or..."

His brow wrinkled. "Do other things."

Ezekiel tilted his head. "You mean be with your family and friends?"

That was the biggest aspect of their situation that Ezekiel was worried about. If he were in Archer's position and no longer had the support of his fellow slayers, or even the snarky Michael, he'd be devastated. They all might bicker and let the snark fly, but that didn't mean they didn't care about or love each other. They were a team, and it must be an awful thing for Archer to contemplate leaving his world behind.

Archer's jaw ticked, his eyes darting around. "It's kind of chilly out here."

His tone had definitely softened. "We don't dare return to the coffee shop, but maybe we can find somewhere else to warm up."

Archer was holding something back, although Ezekiel sensed that his defenses were finally coming down. He was much less growly than he'd been.

Ezekiel nodded. "I apologize. I forget how humans are more susceptible to cold than we are. Although, since you're most likely a..."

Oops. "I mean..."

Archer glared at him. "What aren't you telling me?"

He balled his fists. "You promised not to hold anything back! This isn't a great way

to build trust, you know?”

Ezekiel’s stomach did a flip. That one small statement meant that Archer was considering a relationship on some level. Even if it wasn’t the one they were meant to share, there was now the possibility of something.

“I know, you’re right,”

said Ezekiel. “Part of my hesitation is that I’m not sure yet.”

Archer frowned. “Not sure of what exactly?”

“Well...”

Ezekiel shifted from foot to foot. “Shadow Slayers aren’t destined to mate with any type of human.”

He arched his eyebrows. “I take it that these gargoyles, of which you’re one, are the Shadow Slayers?”

“Correct. And the only fated mates that the Divine Spark has chosen for us are Nephilim.”

Archer snorted. “What the hell is that?”

“Half human, half angel.”

Archer stared at Ezekiel for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he burst out laughing, the sound tinged with hysteria. “Oh, that’s rich. First, I’m supposed to believe in gargoyles and demons, and now you’re telling me I’m half angel? I can hardly wait to hear what’s next.”

Ezekiel winced, understanding the absurdity of it all from Archer's perspective. "I know it's a lot to take in—"

"A lot?"

He interrupted, his laughter dying abruptly. "Try impossible. I'm just... me. A regular guy who happens to be good at surgery. There's nothing angelic about that."

He huffed. "My ridiculously expensive education is the culprit when it comes to any expert abilities I might possess."

Ezekiel took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. "Your skill as a healer might not be as ordinary as you think. And there are other signs—the way you reacted when I touched you, right? I saw how startled you were."

He arched his eyebrows. "When you say you don't believe in the supernatural, what does that mean exactly? You're telling me you've never experienced anything? Not a premonition, deja vu, a flash of something you couldn't explain. Nothing?"

Archer took a step back from Ezekiel, as if the words he'd used held a physical power. He shook his head a bit too frantically, rubbing his wrist as he glanced away.

"I prefer everything to be logical and ordered,"

said Archer in a biting tone. "Chaos and uncertainty have no business in my life, and I refuse to allow this nonsense you're spouting to disrupt my world."

Ezekiel chuckled before he could stop himself. He was rewarded with an icy glare from Archer. "I'm sorry, Archer. I'm not mocking you. But what you describe is impossible. No one's existence is perfect. Surprises, abrupt change, disappointments—that's true for everyone."

Ezekiel smiled. “Supernatural or not.”

“Look.”

Archer licked his top lip. “I doubt you’d understand. But I grew up in the foster care system, and I swore I’d never let my world be such a mess again. I was bounced around from here to there, no one would commit to me for some reason, and the homes were typically overcrowded. I formed zero attachments, there was never a chance for me to get settled.”

He looked away. “I still don’t understand why other kids stayed when I was kicked out. I don’t remember causing any problems. I don’t know why...”

His breath hitched then he shook his head again. “God, I have no idea why I’m telling you any of this. I never talk about it anymore.”

He shrugged. “What’s the point? It happened when I was a kid. Means nothing now.”

Ezekiel’s heart broke for his mate. If only he could hold him, comfort him. “Of course it means something. All your experiences shaped who you are today.”

Ezekiel rubbed his forehead. “Perhaps there were moments from your childhood, events you’ve tucked away, that indicate your true identity. Maybe that’s why your foster families never bonded with you. Do you know anything about your real parents, your history?”

“Not a damn thing,”

Archer growled. “I was one of those special cases, loved so much I was dumped at a fire station. No one knew who the fuck I was, not even my real name.”

Archer regarded Ezekiel with a scowl. “Archer was what my first family called me, and their last name was Blackwood. So that’s what went on my updated birth certificate. Basically, it’s all bullshit. I’m not really me.”

He barked out a derisive laugh. “So sure, whatever. I can be your Fated One, your little angel.”

He jabbed a finger at Ezekiel. “But let’s get this shit over with so I can go back to my old make-believe existence or start a new one if everything’s been destroyed as you claim.”

He crossed his arms, anger blazing from his eyes. Ezekiel hated the way his mate had been treated, despised how Archer was cast aside. He’d never let that happen to him again. With that in mind, he laid a hand on Archer’s arm, battling the urge to feel hurt when Archer flinched.

He has to feel the connection.

“I won’t hurt you, Archer. And I’ll never allow anyone else to, either.”

They locked eyes, Archer not backing away from their shared gaze. “Sure, Slayer. Whatever you say.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Archer followed Ezekiel as he rushed down the street, barely able to keep up with the statuesque man who moved with an impressive gait.

“Hold up! What about my car?”

Archer chuckled at the irony of him willingly trailing behind Ezekiel instead of being coaxed to do his bidding. Ezekiel paused then turned to face him. His jaw dropped then he rushed to Archer’s side.

“I apologize, dearest. A message came through from Cassiel that Uriel is waiting for us in the Square near the library.”

Archer snorted. “At least Colonel Mustard didn’t do it with a candlestick in the study.”

Ezekiel pinched his eyebrows together. “I don’t understand.”

“Welcome to my world. Hey, wouldn’t it be easier to drive?”

“Your vehicle is down the street in that parking garage. Then, we’d have to find another spot, possibly driving in circles for who knows how long. Humans...”

he mumbled. “Anyway, it’s quicker to walk.”

Archer muttered under his breath about wasting his time with lunatics. When he lifted his gaze, he noted that Ezekiel’s expression had softened.

Ezekiel sighed. “I suppose I’m not being very understanding of the abrupt circumstances you’ve found yourself under. And my sense of humor seems to be on vacation as well.”

He sighed. “If you truly knew what we’re all facing when it comes to this evil plaguing the world, this would be easier for you to accept.”

“Exactly.”

Maybe the guy was finally getting it through his pretty skull that the morning’s events were a lot for him to unpack. “Everything else aside, if I’m as important to you as you claim, I need to be kept in the loop. Cassiel, Uriel... none of that means anything to me. Nor does why we’re in such a rush to get to the library.”

Archer tilted his head. “And I don’t remember you calling anyone...”

His gaze roamed Ezekiel’s frame. “Or that you even have a cell. Did you know all along that’s where we were heading, and you had us hanging around that coffee shop for no reason?”

Ezekiel grabbed his arm, and the electric zing that had initially shocked him was now a pleasant hum. Not only that, but the urge to touch Ezekiel back was almost overwhelming.

Almost.

He wasn’t about to give in to this wacky nonsense so easily.

“You are important, don’t ever doubt it.”

Ezekiel offered him a soft smile. “I’ll admit I’m startled by the morning’s events as

well. Battling the shadow gargoyles, healing fellow slayers from the torturous attacks of the rogue demons is a typical day for me. But finding my fated one...”

He lowered his head. “I was beginning to despair of ever finding him. I hadn’t realized my kill quota had been met.”

“Excuse me?”

Archer tugged Ezekiel out of the way of the other pedestrians, who didn’t appear amused by them blocking the middle of the sidewalk. They took refuge in the entryway of an apartment complex. “What do you mean kill quota? Healing fellow slayers?”

Archer planted his hands on his hips. He hated functioning in mystery. “I’m seriously getting irritated with this whole mess. If you can’t keep me clued in, I’m outta here. Let me know how it all turns out.”

Archer turned to march away, and Ezekiel grabbed his arm again. Okay, so maybe he’d been hoping that’s what would happen. Maybe the idea of a man as decent and handsome as Ezekiel wanting him was rather appealing. But he wasn’t kidding about being kept in the dark. He despised not knowing what was going on.

“I understand,”

said Ezekiel. “I do. I don’t care for being left out, either. But there is an urgency here. I’ll give you every detail you want when we’re safely back at the lair. For now, though, I’ll say that we don’t use many modern tools, such as a phone. We communicate telepathically. As far as healing goes...”

Ezekiel gave him a lopsided smile. “That’s something we have in common. I’m responsible for healing those who’ve been injured in battle, or need other medical



help.”

Archer arched his eyebrows. “You’re a doctor?”

“I suppose that’s how you would view my role, yes.”

Archer rubbed the back of his neck. “Interesting. Do I want to know what you mean by kill quota? That doesn’t quite vibe with the whole healer thing.”

“Hmm. Yes”

Ezekiel nodded. “I can see how those two things might seem at odds with each other. Just bear in mind that as a slayer, I have a duty to eliminate the evil. WE’ve all been given a kill requirement by the Divine Spark before we can be mated, and I wasn’t aware I’d reached my quota yet. But as a healer, it is my role to tend to my injured colleagues.”

“Okay. That makes sense. At least in the context of your world.”

Archer patted Ezekiel’s back. “See? That wasn’t so hard. Now I’ll be less bitchy.”

Ezekiel's eyes widened slightly at Archer's touch, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I appreciate your patience, Archer. And your... bitchiness, as you put it, is quite understandable given the circumstances."

They resumed their brisk walk towards the library, weaving through the bustling sidewalks of Boston. He wanted to quiz Ezekiel as to why they weren’t calling an Uber instead of tromping down the street, yet he welcomed the opportunity to ponder. He was begrudgingly ready to admit that he believed Ezekiel for the most part. However, that didn't mean he was ready to go all in until he witnessed more to support his supposed mate’s story.

Ezekiel paused beside a particularly grotesque statue perched on the corner of the Square, its stone eyes giving the impression it was following their movements.

“Getting tips from your cousin?”

Archer quipped, trying to ignore how his body was inexplicably drawn to Ezekiel, like a compass needle to the north.

Ezekiel smirked. “Something like that,”

he replied as he closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, his expression turned serious. “When I explained I needed to remain alert, I wasn’t only referring to a visual assessment. My spirit must keep tuned in as well. Whether it’s a fellow slayer sending out a warning or the enemy nearby, we can’t afford for me to falter.”

After another moment in seeming contemplation, Ezekiel brushed his fingers across the back of Archer’s hand. “Come on. Uriel’s waiting.”

Archer swallowed hard, a flash of wanting to clasp Ezekiel’s hand in his consuming him before he shoved it aside. But as he trailed after Ezekiel again, something else built in his core. A desperation, the impression that if he didn’t do something right away, all would be lost. Whatever it was, the sensation grew more intense the closer they drew to Copley Square.

Archer matched Ezekiel’s hurried stride. “So, this Uriel we’re meeting,”

Archer began, slightly out of breath as he tried to keep pace with him. “Another one of your supernatural buddies?”

Ezekiel barked out a laugh. “Hardly. Uriel is an archangel, one of the highest ranking

in the celestial hierarchy. He's been tasked with guiding and protecting humanity since the dawn of time."

Archer nearly tripped over his own feet. "An actual angel? Like, with wings and a halo?"

"The wings, yes. The halo... well, that's a bit of artistic license humans have taken over the centuries,"

Ezekiel replied with a wry smile.

"Come on," Ezekiel said, placing a hand on Archer's shoulder, his touch now more than welcome. "We're meeting at the bottom of the library steps. That's where the Slayer, who was tortured by the rogue demons, was taken last night. It means the relic is nearby."

Archer's gut tightened more, his heart racing as soon as Ezekiel mentioned the relic. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to get to the bank to see what was inside the safe deposit box. Archer found himself glancing around the area, suspicious of anyone approaching them. Deep down, he'd accepted the truth of Ezekiel's story. Something in his spirit told him this was all too terrifyingly real.

Right as they reached the bottom of the steps, a man materialized from behind a weeping willow, like a guardian angel who'd traded in his halo for leather and attitude.

"Hello Archer, Ezekiel."

He turned to Ezekiel. "The distraction is set. Slayers will keep any unwanted company at bay while you retrieve the relic."

Archer cleared his throat, not sure how he should greet an archangel. The strange pull returned with a vengeance, an intuition gnawing at his gut when Uriel had spoken. He moved closer to Ezekiel.

“Uh, hi.”

Uriel fixed him with his gaze, the gray eyes seeming to pierce right through him. This time he did clasp Ezekiel’s hand. “And the relic is there for sure?”

“It knows you're coming,” Uriel’s expression remained unreadable. “Trust your instincts.”

His usual snark and cranky repartee failed him in the face of something much bigger than himself or the life he’d once inhabited. Archer finally understood there was no going back.

“Yes, sir.”

Ezekiel squeezed his hand and Uriel stared at Archer a beat longer before turning to Ezekiel again. “After you have the relic in your safekeeping, return to the lair. Malachi will meet you there, and once it is safe, so will Darius and Cassiel. As Sentinel, Malachi will travel with you to the council gathering for the official transfer of the relic.”

While Archer had been comfortable grilling Ezekiel, he didn’t have it in him to smack-talk an archangel. Once they were out of the celestial being’s presence, he’d ask for more clarification about lairs, council gatherings, and other people - or gargoyles - that were mentioned.

“Understood,”

said Ezekiel. "Thank you for your help."

As they made their way toward the bank the next block over, Archer whispered to Ezekiel, "Why did he have to come down from the heavens? Couldn't your friends have simply telepathically told you all that?"

"You don't have to whisper."

"Uh, right."

Now that he'd met the austere angel, he couldn't shake the feeling that Uriel was listening in. Clearly, he was going to need some time to adjust to everything. "I guess I'm wondering why such a powerful angel would waste his time coming to Boston to share two sentences."

"I counted three."

Archer gaped at Ezekiel, then caught the side eye and barely concealed quirk of a smile.

"Ah, so you do have a sense of humor after all."

Archer chuckled. "I was getting worried about you there."

"I have my moments. To answer your question, Uriel needed to ensure all aspects of the plan are in place."

Ezekiel glanced sideways at him again. "I also suspect he wanted to see you in the flesh."

Archer furrowed his brow. "See me? Why would I matter to an archangel?"

Ezekiel's gripped his hand tighter. "I told you, Archer. You're special, more than you realize. Your Nephilim heritage makes you a key player in this battle."

As they approached the bank, the strange pull intensified. His skin tingled, and the urge to race inside the concrete building was almost impossible to resist. If Ezekiel weren't by his side, he would burst into the lobby and probably get himself arrested.

"Something odd is happening to me,"

Archer muttered, his free hand unconsciously moving to his chest. "It's like there's a magnet inside me, trying to draw me in."

Ezekiel nodded solemnly. "That's the relic calling to you. It recognizes your bloodline."

They paused at the bank's entrance, and Ezekiel turned to face Archer fully. His

Ezekiel turned to face Archer fully, his eyes filled with a mix of concern and determination. "Are you ready for this? Once we retrieve the relic, there's no turning back. The dark forces will always know who you are. Your life will never be the same."

Archer took a deep breath, the weight of the moment settling like a brick house on his shoulders. The pull from inside the bank was almost unbearable now, like an invisible cord tugging at his very soul. He glanced at their joined hands, marveling at how natural it felt, then back up at Ezekiel's face.

"Honestly? I'm scared out of my mind," Archer admitted with a wry chuckle. "But I think I passed the point of no return the moment you crashed into my life this morning. So let's do this."

Ezekiel's features softened. "I'm amazed by your courage. You'll be an incredible partner by my side."

"Right. That."

Archer coughed into his fist. "We need to have a serious conversation about that later."

"We will."

Ezekiel grinned. "I'm looking forward to being alone with you."

"Yeah. Me too."

Sweat beaded on Archer's upper lip, despite the chill of the December air. His senses seemed out of whack, as if his body could use a reboot.

"Come on, my angel. It's go time. Once we have the relic, I'll let Cassiel and Darius know to begin the distraction."

Archer eyed the large, imposing doors that led to the bank's interior. "Do we know whether any of the bank employees are on the other team? Or are the things that mangled my home completely inhuman?"

Ezekiel pressed his lips in a severe line, and Archer sensed things could go south in the bank pretty quickly.

"Unfortunately, we've had some recent defectors. Once a gargoyle is completely infected by a demon and turns to shadow, they become a hideous creature that isn't visible to a mere mortal. But until then, they can seem like any other gargoyle when we take on our human form."

Human form? Archer hadn't thought to ask about that. Was Ezekiel going to morph into some kind of stone statue all the time? He added that to his long list of questions for later.

"Can I see them?"

The last thing he wanted was a demonic monster to sneak up on him.

Ezekiel nodded. "Yes. Another advantage to being Nephilim."

"Oh boy."

Archer dragged his fingers through his mussed hair. The day wasn't even half over, and he was a wreck. Then again, his big plans of a shower and falling into bed had been unceremoniously disrupted. "Well, at least they can't get the jump on me, right?"

"Stay behind me,"

said Ezekiel, his gaze boring into Archer. "I won't allow anything to happen to you."

"I'm not a big wimp, you know,"

he mumbled.

Ezekiel wrapped an arm around his waist. "That's not what I'm inferring. It's that you don't have experience fighting a supernatural."

Archer rubbed the back of his neck. "Point taken. But I won't run."

"I know you won't,"



Ezekiel whispered in his ear, the gargoyle's heated breath fanning across his chilled skin. Archer shivered, but not from the cold.

Archer cleared his throat. "So, we ready?"

Ezekiel released his hand then straightened his collar and cuffs. The meticulously dressed Slayer was not only hot as fuck, but he commanded attention with his confident demeanor and striking features. The not-so-subtle appraising glances from both men and women passing by woke up a tinge of jealousy inside Archer. Yet somehow, he knew he had nothing to worry about where Ezekiel was concerned. No one had ever looked at him before the way Ezekiel did.

As they entered the bank, Archer's senses went into overdrive. The pull from the relic intensified, almost painful in its urgency. He scanned the lobby, half-expecting to see shadowy figures lurking in corners, but everything appeared normal. Customers queued in lines, tellers counting money, Festive holiday decorations, and two security guards standing stoically by the doors.

Ezekiel guided Archer to a quieter area near the safe deposit boxes. "Remember, act natural. We're just here to access your box."

Archer nodded, fumbling in his pocket for the key. His hands trembled slightly as he approached the attendant's desk. "I need to get into a safe deposit box,"

he said, keeping his voice steady. "I received the key and this letter from the owner's attorney this morning."

The attendant smiled blandly. "Of course, sir. May I see the letter and some ID?"

While they went through the motions of confirming his information, Ezekiel remained close by his side, his body heat becoming oddly distracting, considering the

dire circumstances. He shifted his position, keeping his expression flat as he fought the desire coursing through him. Sure, it had been a minute since he gotten laid, but this was ridiculous.

“Archer?”

Ezekiel’s voice startled him out of his trance. “She needs your signature in the log.”

“Huh?”

Archer blinked a few times and scrubbed his face with one hand. “Right, sorry.”

After finishing up the perfunctory paperwork, they followed the attendant into the section containing the safe deposit boxes,

As they entered the vault, the pull intensified to an almost unbearable level. Archer’s hand shook as he inserted the key into the lock. With a soft click, the box slid open. Inside lay a small, ornate wooden box adorned with intricate carvings. The moment Archer touched it, a jolt of energy surged through him. He gasped, nearly dropping the box.

"Easy," Ezekiel said, steadying Archer’s hands. "Let's get this somewhere more private."

They thanked the attendant and hurried to a secluded corner of the bank. Archer’s fingers itched to open the box, but Ezekiel shook his head minutely.

"Not here," he whispered. "We need to get back to the lair first."

As they turned to leave, a commotion erupted near the entrance. Two men in dark suits burst through the doors, their movements unnaturally fluid. Archer’s newfound

senses tingled with danger.

"Ezekiel," he hissed, clutching the box tighter. "Those aren't normal guys, are they?"

Ezekiel's jaw clenched. "No. Gargoyles who haven't completely fallen into shadow yet. We need to move. Now."

They made for the side exit, but one of the security guards stepped in their path, his eyes flickering with an otherworldly glow. Archer's heart pounded as he realized the guard was one of them too.

"Hand over the relic," the guard growled, his voice distorted and inhuman.

Ezekiel pushed Archer behind him. "You'll have to go through me first."

"And us."

Archer startled at the female voice behind him. He glanced over his shoulder, meeting the eyes of a tall, blue-eyed beauty with short, dark hair in skin-tight leather pants and a black turtleneck sweater. Next to her stood a shorter, younger man with long, brunet hair that cascaded past his shoulders. His intense gaze was directed at the beefy guard, his top lip curled in clear disgust.

The guard laughed, a guttural sound akin to a raging hornet nest. "Ah, the cavalry arrives. Cassiel and Darius, I presume? How touching. I hate to inform you, but you're outnumbered."

Archer clutched the box tighter to his chest, his eyes darting between the newcomers and the menacing guard. The pull from the relic inside was almost overwhelming now, thrumming through his body.

“Outnumbered doesn't mean outmatched, Raziel,”

Cassiel replied coolly, her stance shifting subtly into a fighting position.

Darius smirked, cracking his knuckles. “Besides, we brought friends.”

As if on cue, a cacophony of car alarms and sirens erupted outside the bank. The dark-suited men at the entrance whirled around, momentarily distracted.

In a blur of motion, Darius launched himself at Raziel, his lithe form belying incredible strength. Raziel lunged forward, meeting Darius halfway, his body morphing mid-leap into a grotesque twisted version of his human form. Leathery wings erupted from his back, his face contorting into a snarling visage of stone-like skin. The two crashed into a nearby desk, sending papers flying. Customers and staff screamed or stood frozen in shock, with others silently rushing to the exits.

Archer stumbled backward, his grip on the box tightening. "Holy shit.”

He gaped in shock as Darius shifted into a similar form, his gargoyle unlike Raziel's. Instead of appearing mutilated, he appeared like a traditional mythical creature.

The transformed pair clashed in a fury of fists and claws, the bank now quickly clearing of everyone. Archer stared, open-mouthed, as he realized that some of the humans appeared confused, as if they couldn't see the monsters battling it out amidst them.

Cassiel positioned herself between Archer and the approaching dark-suited men.

“Get him out of here,”

she yelled at Ezekiel. “Others have arrived. We'll handle this.”

Ezekiel grabbed Archer's arm. "Come on," he urged, tugging him toward the exit.

As they ran, Archer clutched the ornate box to his chest, his mind reeling. The sounds of chaos echoed behind them, the streets alive with police presence and, Archer imagined, whoever the other Slayers were. They rounded into an alley, and Ezekiel paused, his breathing ragged.

"Are you all right?"

Ezekiel framed Archer's face with his palms. "You saw them, didn't you? I knew you were Nephilim, but now there's no doubt."

Archer could barely breathe. "Those others, the people in the bank. Why couldn't they see them? I don't understand."

"I'll explain later."

Ezekiel pressed their lips together in an abrupt kiss. "We need to get to the lair."

Startled by the unexpected kiss, Archer could only nod shakily. "S-sure. Please tell me it's nearby. I don't feel safe out here on the streets like this."

"It's covered, dearest. Cassiel left a motorcycle nearby. We can escape on that."

Ezekiel grabbed his hand, and they took off down the alley at a fast clip. Archer thought raced as he tried to process the bizarre turn of events. Escaping hand'thideous monsters bent on tearing him from limb to limb to steal a holy relic been on his bingo card when he got home that morning.

Not even close.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Ezekiel helped Archer off the motorcycle in the lot behind the cathedral. He held on tightly to Archer's arm as he did a brief visual check of their surroundings. While he would sense if danger were near, nothing could be left to chance. They were at a critical juncture where the relic was out in the open, and they were tasked with its protection without reinforcements. If a shadow gargoyle were to swoop in, they could be annihilated and the relic stolen before he had a chance to send for backup telepathically.

Satisfied for the moment, Ezekiel noticed how Archer had relaxed into his touch, no longer bristling at the contact. Archer leaned against him, as if seeking comfort.

"Is it safe out here in the open like this?"

Archer clutched the box to his chest beneath his jacket, his eyes darting around the area.

Ezekiel wrapped his arm around Archer and tugged him close. "For now. I need to get you into the lair, which won't be as simple as you might imagine."

"Don't we just need to get inside the cathedral and we'll be safe? Like what's her face in Hunchback of Notre Dame?"

Ezekiel chuckled despite their circumstances. "Esmeralda. One of my favorite stories. Safer, but not impervious. I'm afraid it's not that simple. The shadow gargoyles can definitely breach the cathedral and lair. But at least when we're inside, we have the advantage of barriers and my fellow Slayers."

“Then let’s go already.”

Archer shuddered. “I’ve never been so on edge in my life.”

Ezekiel kept his palm at the small of Archer’s back. “It’s still daylight, dearest. I can’t fly you to the secret entrance on the roof, and we can’t march into the church and duck behind the altar where another entrance to the lair is located.”

Archer’s brow creased, and he wrapped both arms around the box still hidden beneath his jacket. “Can we at least hover at the top of the steps by the front door?”

Ezekiel let his eyes drift closed as a message drifted to him from Malachi. “All right, we’re good to go inside. We’ll remain in the front until the priest who works with our faction greets us.”

“Seriously?”

Archer shook his head. “Okay. Still not sure how all this works, but I’ll follow your lead.”

Ezekiel smiled as he led Archer to the front. “I promise not to steer you wrong. At every lair location, we work with an earthly spiritual leader to help facilitate our ability to come and go.”

As they made their way up the steps, Archer appeared lost in thought. When they reached the top, he paused, regarding Ezkiel with a frown.

“I have to say, I’m amazed by how intricate your world is, how all this has been going on under humanity’s noses this entire time.”

Ezekiel opened the enormous, wooden arched door for Archer, gesturing for him to

go first. “We’ve had centuries to perfect our methods.”

Archer opened his mouth like he was going to respond, then snapped it shut. Ezekiel imagined that with each supernatural revelation, the more the scientifically educated man would question his previous understanding of reality.

The elderly priest silently guided them to the altar, the main section of the church empty of worshipers.

“We have a mass this evening,”

the priest whispered to Ezekiel. “But Malachi warned me earlier that you would need access to the lair this afternoon.”

He gave Archer a quick glance. “Is he...?”

Ezekiel nodded. “Nephilim.”

Archer cleared his throat loudly. “I’m standing right here.”

The priest clasped his hands together and made a slight bow. “Forgive me. I have never met one of the ancient races before.”

Archer’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh. I...”

A flush bloomed in his cheeks. “That’s okay. I’m a bit shocked myself.”

After thanking the priest, Ezekiel ducked behind the false door next to the altar, then lifted the rug, concealing a trap door. He grasped the iron ring and heaved, revealing a stone staircase that spiraled down into darkness. He motioned for Archer to follow, and they descended the narrow stone staircase into the dimly lit passageway below.



The air grew cooler and damper as they climbed further down, the sounds from above fading away.

Archer stumbled on the uneven steps, his breath quickening. "It's so dark down here. How far does this go?"

Ezekiel reached back to steady him. "Not much farther."

Once they reached the bottom, a shimmering barrier of light appeared between them and the door to the thick, iron reinforced door to the lair, the golden glow pulsing with ethereal energy. Ezekiel pressed his palm to it, causing the barrier to ripple and part like a curtain.

Archer gasped. "Whoa. What was that?"

"Angel wards," Ezekiel explained. "An extra layer of security. We've been adding them whenever an archangel is present. We had a nasty incident a while back at our Los Angeles location. Unfortunately, a traitor allowed a faction of shadow gargoyles to attack the lair, and we almost lost a pregnant Nephilim."

"Damn,"

Archer breathed. "I hope she and the baby are okay."

Ezekiel froze. Shit. Being so out of touch with earthly concerns, existing in the realm of healing his fellow Slayers for so long, had left him woefully unprepared to properly introduce Archer into his new world. However, now wasn't the time. They had to get the relic to Michael first.

"Umm...everything turned out fine for them, yes."

Archer regarded him with suspicion. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I assure you. They’re safe and unharmed. We can discuss details later.”

Ezekiel clanged the iron door knocker against the thick door. “We must get the relic inside where it’s protected.”

Archer nodded, his grip tightening on the box beneath his jacket. “Right, priorities. But don't think I'm letting this go.”

The heavy door creaked open, revealing a cavernous chamber bathed in soft, golden light. Ezekiel ushered Archer inside, his hand still protectively at the small of the doctor's back. As they entered, several figures emerged from the shadows, their faces a mix of curiosity and wariness.

“Welcome back, Ezekiel,”

a tall, broad-shouldered man with piercing blue eyes stepped forward. “Glad you both made it here safely.”

“Malachi,”

Ezekiel smiled in greeting. “This is Dr. Archer Blackwood. He's... well, he's more than just the key to finding the relic.”

The corner of Malachi’s mouth quirked in a smile. “So I’ve heard. Congrats on finding more than one treasure today.”

His gaze shifted to Archer, a mix of curiosity and reverence in his eyes. “And welcome, Nephilim. You've done well to bring the relic here safely.”

Archer tensed and Ezekiel moved closer to his nervous mate. "I... thank you? I'm still trying to wrap my head around all of this."

"I'm sure it must be difficult. When things calm down a bit, perhaps you can meet up with Amir, a recently mated Nephilim. This was all very startling and new to him as well. As a matter of fact, Ezekiel was the one who delivered his —"

Ezekiel coughed loudly. "So we should get this underway."

He locked eyes with Malchi in an intense stare. "I was just telling Archer that I would explain everything to him after we dealt with the relic. You know, since he has no idea what it means to have a fated mate."

Malachi's eyes widened. "Gotcha."

He cleared his throat. "On that note, Michael is waiting for us in the conference room."

They followed Maclahi down the hall, with the other Slayers trailing behind them. Beyond the use of the angelic wards, the beefed-up security was obvious. Once they entered the room, the other Slayers stood at the entrance, guarding the way.

"Ezekiel, Archer. Welcome,"

said Michael. "I won't waste time on pleasantries. Protocol demands verification of the artifact, and only the Nephilim who recovered the relic may open the box,"

Michael stepped back as if to allow Archer his moment.

"Right. No pressure then,"

Archer quipped as he cracked his knuckles.

Ezekiel leaned in and whispered, "I'm so proud of you, angel."

Archer tensed at the words, his jaw going a bit slack. He regarded Ezekiel with a tilt of his head, wonder crossing his features. "You mean that?"

"Of course."

Ezekiel's heart ached for his mate, further cementing his resolve to care for him always. "You've been thrust into an unbelievable situation yet handled it with remarkable courage."

Archer's cheeks flushed. He took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as he approached the ornate table at the center of the room. With trembling hands, he placed the box on the polished surface and carefully opened the lid.

A soft gasp escaped Malachi and Michael's lips as Archer revealed the contents of the box. Nestled on a bed of faded red velvet lay an intricately crafted amulet, its golden surface adorned with swirling patterns engraved deeply into the precious metal. At the center was a symbol Ezekiel wasn't familiar with.

"The Amulet of Mary Magdalene,"

Michael breathed, his eyes wide with reverence. "It hasn't been seen since the early three-hundreds. I have to wonder who this man was that you the key, Archer."

Archer appeared startled by the contents of the box. He couldn't keep still and was rubbing his chin.

"I'm wondering the same. When he came to me for a hip replacement, I'll admit his

referral was from a doctor I didn't know. But that's not terribly unusual."

Archer shook his head. "He must've known that I'm..."

Archer raked his fingers through his hair. "This is so wild."

Michael arched his eyebrows. "Indeed. Well, we'll attempt to solve the mystery of your patient later. In the meantime, taking the amulet to be verified and sealed away is all that matters."

Ezekiel pointed to the symbol on the amulet. "I've never seen this before. What does it mean?"

Michael gave Ezekiel the side eye. "Not well-versed in ancient Aramaic, it would seem. That's the symbol for love, but in a universal sense."

Ezekiel smirked. "I apologize for not keeping up with a language I haven't had the occasion to use in almost two centuries."

Michael gave him a wry smile. "Apology accepted."

Malachi cleared his throat. "Shouldn't we get going?"

With a nod, Michael turned to Archer. "Do you freely offer this amulet to the council for protection?"

Ezekiel dipped his chin at Archer. "Sure,"

said Archer, picking up the box. "Here you go."

Ezekiel marveled at how Archer's demeanor had softened throughout the day. While

he'd seemed impossibly stubborn at their first meeting, the remarkable circumstances seemed to have given him a new perspective.

"Thank you,"

said Michael, accepting the relic from Archer. "We leave you behind with a heavy heart, Ezekiel. But your healing will be essential after the coming battle."

Michael regarded Archer. "We shall meet again soon. In the meantime, your assistance to your mate will be greatly needed."

Archer glanced at him with a wrinkled brow, but Ezekiel knew exactly what Michael was inferring. He doubted it was an accident that he was given a mate who was a doctor in his mortal life. The timing of him being gifted with his Fated One right as the need exploded for additional healers couldn't be ignored.

As Michael gave instructions to the other Slayer present, Malachi elbowed Ezekiel. "Congrats, buddy. I have a feeling he's going to keep you on your toes."

Ezekiel chuckled. "Hey. I put up with Dante all these centuries. Archer doesn't come close to that snark factory."

Malachi snorted. "Actually, the guy has mellowed out a lot since Amir and the baby."

A wistfulness fell over Ezekiel. He always had a soft spot for the babies he'd delivered. He stole a peek at Archer, who was being introduced to the other Slayers.

Someday.

"Little Leonardo is doing well?"

“They all are. We need to have a get-together when things are less hectic. You should see what Dante’s done to his little slice of heaven there in the mountains.”

Malachi let out a light laugh. “Now that he’s not ripping apart the enemy at every turn, he’s been expending his energy on home improvement projects.”

“I bet one of those projects involves knocking up Amir again.”

They both fell into laughter, and it wasn’t until Ezekiel looked up that he caught the bewildered expression on Archer’s face.

Malachi elbowed him again, covering his mouth with one hand as he whispered, “Dude. You’ve got to tell him.”

Ezekiel rubbed his forehead. “I know. But this is all so abrupt for him.”

“Not any more abrupt than him going into heat and freaking out. He keeps flushing.”

Ezekiel let out an aggravated sigh. “You’re right. I’m waiting until Cassiel, Darius and the others return. Then maybe we can sneak off together and -”

“Fuck?”

Ezekiel shot Malachi a glare. “Do you mind?”

Michael called out, “Sentinel. We need to leave.”

Malachi locked eyes with him, arching his eyebrows. “Don’t wait.”

“Bye,”

grouched Ezekiel. "I can handle this."

He patted Malachi's back. "Safe travels."

Malachi winked. "Thanks. See you soon."

Once the room cleared, Ezekiel turned to meet the gaze of a frowning Archer. "What was that all about?"

Ezekiel clasped his hands in front of him. "Well... Michael and the others need to take the relic to the council, which is located in a Mount Shasta cavern. Then - "

"Ezekiel, please."

Archer held up his palm. "Something's up. I can tell from the way you and Malachi were whispering to each other. And I heard something about babies."

He crossed his arms. "Are you married with a family? Because I'm out if you are. I don't stand for that kind of shit."

Ezekiel's jaw dropped. "What? No! I would never do anything like that."

"Okay, fine,"

said Archer tersely. "Then out with it."

A cacophony sounded from down the hall at the entrance of the lair. Ezekiel and Archer exchanged glances, then bolted down the corridor toward the noise of shouts and cries for help. Cassiel staggered in, bloodied, with an injured Darius leaning against her, their faces etched with pain. Behind them, four more Slayers appeared at the entrance, the two at the rear looking up the steps as if verifying they weren't



being followed.

“Did the wards hold?”

Ezekiel called out as he approached the group.

Cassiel nodded. “Yes. I unsealed them.”

Ezekiel dipped his chin, as he ushered them inside. “Archer! I need your help.”

Archer hesitated, his eyes wide as he stared at the sight of the injured Slayers. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, he rushed forward alongside Ezekiel.

Ezekiel gestured to Cassiel. “She can fill you in while I reseal the wards. It’ll only take a few minutes. Start triage until I return.”

Ezekiel rushed to reinstate the wards. The way the Slayers had been checking behind them had him on edge. He hoped it didn’t mean they’d been followed. The lairs were a closely guarded secret. The attack in L.A. when Dante’s mate Amir was almost killed was the first they’d ever faced.

Once he was comfortable that the lair was protected, he rushed back inside. Archer glanced up from where he was crouched on the floor, checking Darius. His features a study in relief the moment they locked eyes.

"What happened?" Archer asked while assessing Darius' wounds. “Is all this from back at the bank?”

Ezekiel helped Archer lower Darius onto an ornate pew lining the hall. He seemed to be going in and out of consciousness, and Ezekiel knew they didn’t have time to waste on talk.

“I don’t know. I thought we had the advantage, were prepared.”

He drew his eyebrows together. “Have you determined what his injuries are?”

Archer indicated to Darius’ right arm. “This laceration is the most obvious wound, but I’m concerned by how incoherent he is. Do you have any medical equipment here? He needs a CAT Scan at the very least, and that’s not something I’m qualified to do. I can read the results, but I’m not a medical technician.”

Ezekiel placed his palm at the base of Darius’ skull. “That’s all right, dearest. We don’t utilize that type of medicine here.”

Archer pinched the bridge of his nose. “I guess I should’ve seen that coming,”

he muttered. “Okay. Then you’ll need to guide me through gargoyle protocol. I can dress wounds, do stitches, set broken bones without issue. Anything else you’ll have to talk me through.”

Ezekiel regarded his mate with affection. “I have a feeling you’ll find your place as a healer on your own. But of course, I’m here to help however I can.”

He returned his attention to Darius, the cloud in his colleague’s mind from more than a physical injury. As he’d feared all along, the drain on his spirit would be immense. Perhaps that was the rogue demons’ plan. They didn’t have to kill every Shadow Slayer, only injuring them enough that healing the ranks would be next to impossible. They could strike and run before losing too many of their own army.

Slow and deadly wins the race.

Archer had been studying him while he worked on Darius, but now he needed his help tending to the physical injuries Archer could handle.

“Dearest, check on Cassiel, please. She would’ve taken the other Slayers to the infirmary. It’s down the hall, third door on the left. While you’re there, perform a triage, then grab whatever you need to dress Darius’ arm.”

Right as Archer rose, Cassiel appeared around the corner, pressing a hand to her own bleeding side. “Hey, I could use some help with the other guys back there.”

Ezekiel frowned. “Looks like you’re the one who could use the help.”

“I’ll live.”

She jerked her chin toward Darius. “How’s he doing? He got slammed against a wall several times pretty damn hard.”

Ezekiel wrapped his palm around Darius’ nape, letting his fingers be guided to the parts of Darius’ brain where light was needed the most.

“Sorry we couldn’t stay and help. Was the security footage wiped clean before you left?”

Cassiel huffed, then winced again. “What do you think this is? Amateur hour? Yeah, I zapped that shit clean before we bailed.”

She sighed. “However, it wasn’t the bank wall that Darius was smashed against. That was in an alley about a block away.”

She arched one eyebrow. “The one we left the cycle at. It was an ambush. Shadow gargoyles were waiting for us. We barely made it out.”

Ezekiel’s gut clenched. “They’re being awfully brazen, aren’t they?”

Cassiel sank on the pew next to Darius. “The Seal of Solomon that Amir found seems to have tipped the scales of desperation for them. I’m guessing the latest relic was a biggie too?”

The darkness pushed against the light Ezekiel was sending into Darius’ brain. He needed more focus. “The Mary Magdalene Amulet.”

Her jaw went slack. “The one given to her by the Superstar Himself at the tomb?”

“That would be the one.”

Ezekiel screwed his eyes shut. “I need to concentrate. Can you bring Archer to the infirmary?”

He opened his eyes, catching her gaze to make sure she understood how serious he was. “Let him decide who gets treated first. If he says you’re his first customer, don’t argue.”

“Whatever,”

she mumbled.

“Cassiel, I mean it,”

he growled.

“Don’t worry,”

interjected Archer. “I’ll make her behave.”

Cassiel slowly rose from the pew. “I’m not into the kinky stuff, cowboy.”

Archer turned to Ezekiel. "Is this what I have to look forward to from now on?"

Ezekiel had to smile. "Pretty much."

He peered up at Cassiel. "Behave yourself. This is my cowboy's first rodeo, got it?"

"Fine."

A light sweat decorated her brow, and her skin had paled more since her arrival. "I'll dial it back a notch."

Archer looked back and forth between him and Cassiel. "I'm an expert surgeon. I wouldn't exactly call that my first rodeo."

Cassiel looped her arm through his. She might be trying to put on a good front for Archer, but Ezekiel knew her light was seeping out quicker and quicker.

"I know, angel. But gargoyle medicine is unique."

Archer pressed his lips together, his expression one of determination,

"Got it. I'll do what I can."

He hesitated for a moment, eyes lingering on Ezekiel. "Be careful, okay?"

Ezekiel's heart swelled at the concern in Archer's voice. "I will. Now go. They need you."

As he watched Archer help Cassiel down the hall, he wondered whether his mate's innate Nephilim abilities would manifest during the healing process. It wasn't unheard of for latent powers to emerge in times of great need or stress.

He returned his attention to Darius. “Come on, soldier,”

Ezekiel murmured. “Fight this.”

More than anything, he hoped they could all fight against the storm of darkness he sensed was imminent.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Archer pressed his lips in a grim line as he adjusted the angle of the lamp, casting a focused beam onto Cassiel's injured side. He'd already swabbed the puncture wound with antiseptic and was readying to stitch her up. She watched him work with interest, and once again, Archer marveled how all the Slayers took their pain and suffering in stride, their main concern being to eradicate evil and protect humanity - not protect themselves.

He brushed the thought aside to focus on Cassiel's injury. Another time, he could ruminate on his shame at how selfish he'd been his whole life.

"Man,"

she said, furrowing her brow. "That rebar in the alley got me good."

She chuckled. "Good thing it wasn't Raziel's claw. Shit's got hellfire poison. I would've needed Ezekiel's light or probably wouldn't make it."

She jerked her head to the threshold of the room. "And he's got his hands full with Darius."

Archer remained focused on his task, but he had so many questions. Without looking up, he said, "Thanks for protecting us today."

"Don't get all teary-eyed, sweetheart. Our main concern was the relic."

Despite their dire circumstances, the corner of his mouth tugged into a half-smile. "Fair enough. But you guys did an incredible job."

“Ppph. You should see a full-on air-battle. Those are pretty sweet.”

Archer shook his head with a chuckle. He was immersed in a bizarre and remarkable world that he still wasn't a hundred percent sure was real, yet he'd never felt so alive, so thrilled to be a part of something.

And maybe...

He gave himself a mental shake. Any thoughts of Ezekiel were dangerously distracting. He was still fighting the urge to jump the guy.

Cassiel flinched “Fuck! Easy there, Archer.”

“Sorry,”

Archer said, unsure if he was apologizing for the pain or being so mentally absent when Cassiel needed him present.

“Hey, you're doing great. I've had worse scrapes from shaving my legs.”

she joked, though the pallor of her skin suggested otherwise.

As he reached for another gauze pad, one of the other Slayers resting nearby let out a long groan as if he'd been holding it in for as long as he could, but the agony was too much. Next to him, a fellow Slayer had seemingly fallen unconscious. Archer couldn't be sure, though. He didn't dare leave Cassiel until he'd stitched her up.

The anxiety from having to handle all the gravely wounded gargoyles without so much as a nurse assisting was beginning to get to him. How did Ezekiel handle this by himself? What if Ezekiel hadn't found him that morning, hadn't brought him to the lair? Would all but one or two of the Slayers have died because Ezekiel didn't



have help?

He sucked in a sharp breath. The concept of fate was beginning to carry the ring of truth.

The frustration that had been simmering within him bubbled over and before he could form another thought, a light emanated from his palms, soft and warm, like the first rays of dawn. It wrapped around the wound, seeping into the torn flesh. His breath hitched, the world going silent save for the thrumming in his ears.

Cassiel's eyes widened, her jaw-dropping. "Holy shitballs, Archer. Your hands..."

"Are freaking glowing. This can't be."

Cassiel grinned wide. "Oh yes, it can, dude. About time you let your Nephilim freak fly."

The light intensified, pulsing with the beat of his racing heart as the edges of the wound knit together right before their eyes. The room was awash with an otherworldly radiance, and for a brief, suspended moment, Archer felt connected to something grander—a force beyond the confines of his own skepticism. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the glowing light receded, leaving behind nothing but healed skin and his shattered doubt.

Archer couldn't speak, barely able to process the magic that had flowed from his fingertips. He gaped at his hands as if they belonged to someone else, someone decidedly more mystical.

"Wow,"

said Cassiel. "Looks like Ezekiel got his wish."

Archer blinked several times, then jerked up his head as her words sunk in. “Huh? What wish?”

“He’s been bitching to Michael that he needs help. Never shuts up about it.”

She prodded at her now healed side as she rose. “Not to mention feeling as if he was getting the short end of the stick in the fated mate department.”

Archer tensed. Was that a dig? “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She gave him a belly smack with the back of her hand. “Ease up, Mr. Delicate Sensibilities. I don’t know how much you’ve been filled in on from Ezekiel. But we have a minimum kill quota to meet before the Divine Spark gives us our mates. Zeke was complaining that because he’s the only available healer, he’s unable to go out and kick evil gargoyle ass.”

Archer didn’t know what to make of Cassiel’s words, but a pained moan yanked him back to reality.

“Shit,”

he mumbled, rushing to the Slayer’s side.

“Anything I can do to help, slick?”

asked Cassiel.

Archer let out a heavy sigh as he peeled back the remains of the Slayer’s shredded shirt. A series of deep cuts crisscrossed the gargoyle’s torso. A distinct warmth built in his core, slowly traveling up his frame and into his arms before beginning to glow at the tips of his fingers.

“I think I’ve got this.”

He glanced as he leaned over the hurt Slayer. “But can you do me a favor? Tell Ezekiel I could really use him in here once he’s finished with Darius.”

She patted him on the shoulder with a smile. “No problem.”

Battling his nerves as he worked on the gargoyle, he silently willed Ezekiel to his side. He had no idea if he’d ever be capable of doing whatever it was the Slayers did to communicate, but he gave it a try anyway - because he sure as hell had no idea what he was doing.

"Is this going to be a regular thing? Because I'm not sure my heart can take the surprise," Archer said, half-joking, trying to steady the tremor in his voice with a dash of levity. Inside, his mind scrambled to catch up with reality—or whatever version of reality now included impromptu light shows and instant healing.

\* \* \* \*

“Is this a bad time, or did I just walk into the grand finale of a magic show?”

Ezekiel couldn’t hold back a smile as he entered the infirmary, admiration filling him over how well his mate had done.

Archer glanced up, his wrinkled brow and the worry in his eyes tugging at Ezekiel’s heart.

"I—uh, yeah. You could say that,”

he said with a shaky voice. “Why didn’t you warn me this could happen?”

Ezekiel rested his hand on Archer's shoulder as he leaned over to examine Baron, the Slayer he believed couldn't be saved when they arrived at the lair. He'd sense the life force rapidly draining from him and determined that Darius was the next priority.

"You have a remarkable gift, dearest."

His chest swelled with the pride he felt for Archer. "I didn't know whether you'd manifest healing powers at all. I've never met a Nephilim who had that ability."

Archer frowned. "Seriously? Do you think that's why we were brought together so quickly?"

Ezekiel tilted his head in confusion. "Did Cassiel say something to you?"

Archer shrugged as he pulled a blanket over the sleeping Baron. "Yeah, but I grilled her."

He snorted. "I was shocked as fuck when the light burst out of my hands."

"I'm sorry, my angel. That must've been startling. I promise I would've said something had I known."

They locked eyes, and the pull to kiss Archer was almost unbearable. To be locked in his arms, to touch and taste his mate - to fill him with his seed. Archer moved closer until they were less than a few inches from each other. He lowered his eyes, rubbing their noses together. The gesture was unexpectedly soft and gentle from the growly man he'd first encountered that morning. They'd been through an excruciating day, and Archer had to be drained.

"Come on, let's grab a room so we can get some rest."

Ezekiel wrapped his arms around Archer's waist, their foreheads pressed together. "Let me take care of you tonight."

Archer pulled back, holding Ezekiel's gaze. "Take care of me the way I want?"

Ezekiel paused, not sure what the best course of action would be. When he went to Archer's home that morning, nothing could've prepared him for what meeting his Fated One would entail. Archer didn't seem to be in the throes of an agonizing heat, which was probably related to the energy he'd drained from the healing. In many ways, it was for the best. Not only because it gave Archer a chance to adjust to his new circumstances, but Malachi's admonishment still rang in Ezekiel's mind. He had to reveal to Archer what would eventually happen.

"Follow me."

Ezekiel laced their fingers together. "We'll find a room, relax, grab a bite to eat. I could use a shower, too."

Archer nodded, allowing himself to be led out of the room. "I could use one, too. And I'm definitely ready for something to eat."

He squeezed Ezekiel's hand. "When we get to the room, I need to confess something to you I didn't think was possible."

"Oh yeah? I can't wait."

Ezekiel headed to his favorite guest suite in the Boston lair. He doubted it was already occupied. With Michael, Malachi, and the other forces leaving for Mt. Shasta, plus the remaining Slayers in the infirmary, that only left Darius and Cassiel. This was their home base, so their quarters would be in the section at the opposite end of the long hall.

They reached the door, and Ezekiel gave it a light tap before entering. Archer froze once they crossed the threshold.

“Damn,”

he breathed. “What a magnificent room. The artwork...”

his gaze darted around the suite. “These woven tapestries, so medieval. It's like stepping into another world from a different era,”

Archer murmured, his eyes wide as he took in the opulent surroundings. He wandered throughout, pausing to run his fingers along the intricately carved mahogany bedpost of the luxurious four-poster bed. “This embroidered satin duvet. Remarkable. Such detail with the fleur de lis and...griffins?”

He peered up at Ezekiel. “Should I ask?”

“Another time,”

Ezekiel smiled. “I still have a lot of other things to tell you first.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And I believe you had a confession to make?”

Archer sank onto a side chair covered in a rich, forest green velvet. “I think I need that shower and some food first. Exhaustion is finally taken over.”

He yawned. “I’ve been up for almost thirty-six hours.”

Ezekiel sucked in a sharp breath. Already he was failing at caring and providing for his precious mate. “Let me run a bath for you, angel. You relax while I get us something to eat.”

Archer shook his head. “That’s all right. I can just jump in the shower.”

Ezekiel pressed his lips together. “No. I insist.”

He made his way toward the ensuite bathroom. “You stay there, and I’ll get it ready.”

Archer sighed. “That’s ridiculous. I’ll help you,”

he said as he pushed up from the chair.

Ezekiel rushed forward, placing his hands on Archer’s shoulders and encouraging him to sit down. He didn’t face much resistance.

My poor angel.

“Don’t argue,”

chided Ezekiel. “I’ve waited centuries for a mate to care for. Don’t rob me of this moment.”

Archer lifted his eyes. “Centuries?”

He scrubbed his face with both hands. “Yeah. Absorbing all this info is going to take a minute. Griffins can wait.”

Ezekiel chuckled, kissing the top of Archer’s head. “That’s my good boy.”

“Boy? Ha! I don’t think so.”

But Ezekiel didn’t miss the quirk of a smile from his less growly mate. “I’m not much of a cook, but I can scrounge up some smoked meats, there’s never a shortage

of that. Probably some cheese and bread, too.”

Archer closed his eyes, his head lolling to the side a bit as he relaxed against the velvet chair back. “Mmm... Sounds great.”

Ezekiel couldn't resist pressing his lips to the top of Archer's head one more time. “I'll be right back, dearest,”

he whispered.

As he made his way down the corridor to the kitchen, his body seemed lighter than it had in a while. Finally, after a seemingly endless amount of time, he felt as if his life had truly begun. He only hoped that Archer would feel the same after he learned of his role in their pairing.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Archer groaned in appreciation from the soothing heat of the bath. Lying in the opulent marble bath in a steam-filled oasis was not how he'd expected to end such a chaotic day. However, he was extremely grateful.

"I brought you some fresh orange juice."

Ezekiel's voice cut through the haziness of his thoughts.

Archer's eyes flew open, suddenly aware of his nudity. He'd never been particularly modest about such things. But he still felt out of sorts from the events of the day. In his fantasy that had arisen about being alone with Ezekiel, he'd wanted to present himself in a more enticing way.

As Ezekiel kneeled on the plush rug next to the tub, Archer turned to find he was being watched intently by the gorgeous Slayer. Archer's stomach tightened—the usual annoyance at being scrutinized replaced by a flutter of something else, something wild and reckless.

"Sorry," Ezekiel said, handing him the juice. He tucked a stubborn hank of unruly hair behind Archer's ear. The touch was brief but sparked a trail of fire on Archer's skin. He held the juice in one hand and allowed the other to drift over his burgeoning erection.

"No worries."

Archer's words came out strangled, his vocal cords not quite on board with playing it cool. "You don't have to hold back."

“Good to know,”

Ezekiel remarked, his eyes crinkling with amusement. He moved back, settling on his haunches, yet the warmth between them remained.

Archer noted that Ezekiel had slipped out of his clothes and was now wearing a gold satin bathrobe. He'd be lying to himself if he didn't admit how badly he ached to see the goods. However, the one thing Ezekiel was spot on about was the need to decompress from what they'd endured that day. Plus, he still had many questions. And from what Ezekiel said earlier, there were still more secrets to be revealed.

Archer sipped the juice, savoring the tart sweetness as it slid down his throat. He set the glass aside and leaned back, letting the warm water lap at his chest. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so relaxed, despite the surreal circumstances.

“So,”

he said, trying to keep his voice casual. “You mentioned there were some things you needed to tell me.”

Ezekiel nodded, his expression growing serious. “Yes, and I hope you'll hear me out before reacting.”

Archer raised an eyebrow. “That doesn't sound ominous at all.”

Ezekiel laid a hand on Archer's arm. “It's nothing bad. It relates to some of the unique aspects of our biology.”

Archer straightened a bit. His previous state of relaxation was slowly diminishing. “Unique aspects? Like the whole healing light thing?”

“That's part of it, yes.”

Ezekiel took a deep breath. “Archer, as Nephilim, you have abilities beyond normal humans, but also beyond what a gargoyle possesses. But there's something else you need to know about male Nephilim specifically.”

He paused, seeming to gather his courage. “You can bear children.”

Archer gave a quick shake of his head, his stomach plummeting. “This is a joke. C'mon Ezekiel. I'm a doctor. I guaran-fucking-tee you, no human male is capable of becoming pregnant.”

He let out a derisive snort. “I've experienced many amazing and unexpected revelations today. But I'm not buying into that. You can forget it.”

Ezekiel appeared stricken. While it hurt to see Ezekiel upset, he didn't believe him - couldn't believe him. Why Ezekiel was making up such a goofy story was beyond him, but he wasn't going to encourage the delusion.

He sighed. What had he been thinking? He'd been on the verge of falling into Ezekiel's arms, ready to join the Shadow Slayer cause and save the world. He rolled his eyes, mostly at himself.

God, I'm a fool.

The water had cooled, and so had his desire. What he truly needed was about twelve hours of sleep and some time alone to process his thoughts. And being around the delectable Ezekiel, who had the nerve to smell so fucking delicious, wasn't helping him keep a clear head.

Archer rose from the tub, no longer worried about being naked in front of Ezekiel. He

needed to get away from him, needed some space from everything. All the unbelievable things that had happened to him that day were about to make his brain explode. Piling anything else on top of that would tip him over the edge.

“Let me help you, dearest.”

Ezekiel steadied him by his elbow.

Archer drew away from him, stepping out of the tub and yanking a towel from the rail. “I’m okay,”

he snapped.

Ezekiel's face fell at Archer's harsh tone, but he stepped back. “I understand this is a lot to take in,”

he said softly. “I didn't mean to overwhelm you. But you had to know before we...”

He rubbed his forehead. “It wouldn't be fair to you if I didn't say anything.”

Archer wrapped the towel around his waist, avoiding Ezekiel's gaze. “Look, I appreciate you helping me today, making sure I was safe and all that. But I need some time alone to process everything.”

“Of course,” Ezekiel replied, though Archer could hear the disappointment in his voice. “I'll take one of the other rooms. I left a snack tray on the nightstand and laid out a robe for you on the bed. If you need me, I'll be in the last room down the hall.”

As Ezekiel turned to leave, a pang of guilt hit Archer. Despite his frustration and disbelief, Ezekiel was a good man. He was thoughtful and kind, and his only thought all day had been to help. An undeniable pull still existed between them, even if he

wasn't ready to fully acknowledge their connection.

“Ezekiel,”

he called out softly. The Slayer paused in the doorway, looking back with hopeful eyes. Archer sighed. “I'm sorry for snapping. I need time to consider everything. I hope you can understand.”

A sad smile graced Ezekiel's lips. “I'm trying. We might be fated, but I'm realizing we come from such different worlds. I can't simply expect you to accept everything without a second thought. I promise I'll work on being less insistent. I've been lonely for many centuries and was so excited to meet you finally. But that doesn't give me the right to push you before you're ready. I apologize for that.”

Archer rubbed the back of his neck, still unable to meet Ezekiel's eyes. “Thanks for that.”

Ezekiel was almost out of the room before he paused and looked over his shoulder. “Let me leave you with one more thing. Before today, would you have ever believed that a wound could be healed with a stream of light pouring from your hands?”

Archer turned away, unable to answer. By the time he was ready to respond, Ezekiel had left. His shoulders dropped, and he tossed the towel on the floor. He made his way into the bedroom, half expecting to see Ezekiel there, sitting on the bed, waiting.

Instead, he was alone, the way he'd asked to be.

Some things never change.

With a pained growl, he swept the food off the nightstand, the tray hitting the stone floor with a clatter that echoed through the room. Archer collapsed onto the bed,

burying his face in his hands.

Sleep. I need some damn sleep.

He opened his eyes, groaning at the sight of the big mess he'd made. His temper never did him any favors. With a resigned sigh, he set about cleaning everything up. He also decided that in the morning, he'd confront Ezekiel about the claim of male pregnancy. If he could somehow prove it was a reality, then he'd deal with the repercussions of that knowledge.

But if it was all bullshit, then he was done. Maybe everything had been an elaborate illusion, somehow. Perhaps there was a hidden agenda behind the events of the day he wasn't aware of. Regardless, he was determined to get some answers.

\* \* \* \*

Ezekiel's stomach was in knots, his heart thundering as he walked at a fast clip back to the kitchen. He couldn't remember where they kept the liquor in the Boston lair, but he was determined to find out.

Despite having no choice but to tell Archer the truth, his reaction had gutted him. Instead of spending a night in each other's arms, his mate was upset and angry, and he was miserable and heartbroken. When he reached the kitchen, a startling, contemporary contrast to the rest of the lair, he flipped on the light switch and almost jumped out of his skin.

"Cassiel, why are you sitting in the dark?"

She was perched on a cantilever chair upholstered in a black fabric with colorful geometric designs. Ezekiel found the decor in the kitchen to be foul, but the Boston gargoyles seemed to appreciate the modern look.

She took a slug from a longneck bottle of beer. “Pondering.”

He pointed to the chrome fridge. “Any more of those in there?”

“Yup. Grab me another one while you’re at it.”

After he popped the caps off both brews, he took a seat across from her. She downed the rest of her first beer then started in on the second. He took a swig of his own, curious why she seemed so frustrated.

“What’s on your mind, Cass?”

“Don’t call me that,”

she grumbled.

And he thought he was in a bad mood. “Why not? You call me Zeke even though you know I hate it.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s different when I do it.”

“How do you figure?”

He smirked.

“Because I’m awesome.”

She snorted out a laugh, and Ezkeiel joined in.

He grinned. “At least you’re humble.”

They laughed a little more, then Cassiel's features darkened again.

Ezekiel sighed. "Come on. What is it?"

She glanced around the room as if verifying no one else was listening. "Something Ronen said before you got here to heal him. He was delirious, of course, not making any sense, barely conscious. At one point, he called me Lysander."

"One of our defectors who came back to the fold?"

"Yeah. Him."

She shook her head. "At the time, I thought, wow. Ronen's so out of it that he doesn't even recognize me. But almost immediately after you healed him, Michael gave us our orders, so I pushed it to the back of my mind."

"And now it's back to the front again?"

She took another long pull of her beer. "Yeah. I started thinking, what if Ronen said Lysander's name because the little fucker was there while he was being tortured. Maybe that bit of telling memory didn't get erased from his mind."

Ezekiel let out a low whistle. "Ooh, that's not good. Yet Michael seems convinced that the defectors are legit, that they can be trusted."

"Ppph."

She made a jerk-off motion with her hand. "Whatever. I don't trust any gargoyle who flipped like that. I think Michael's gone soft. Doesn't make sense that he'd let them infiltrate our lairs again."



“Well, we are hurting for recruits.”

And the way things were going, he and Archer wouldn't be contributing to the forces any time soon. “Archangels are gifted with sight way beyond ours. He must know something we don't.”

Cassiel frowned, pursing her lips. “Maybe. But my gut tells me something's off. And my gut's rarely wrong.”

Ezekiel nodded, taking another swig of his beer. He respected Cassiel's instincts - she was one of their most skilled fighters for a reason. “Have you shared your concerns with Michael?”

“Not yet,”

she sighed. “I wanted to be sure before I said anything. Plus, there hasn't exactly been time for a heart-to-heart with everything that happened today.”

“Fair point,”

Ezekiel conceded. “But promise me you'll talk to him soon. If there's even a chance the defectors aren't truly on our side, we need to know right away.”

“Don't worry, I will. First thing when he gets back from Mt. Shasta.”

She tilted her head, eyeing Ezekiel curiously. “Speaking of concerns, why are you down here drowning your sorrows instead of up there cuddling with your hot new mate?”

Ezekiel winced. “I might've gone too far.”

“Uh oh,”

Cassiel said, leaning back. “Trouble in paradise already? Spill it, Zeke.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “I told Archer about the whole male pregnancy thing. He didn't take it well.”

Cassiel's eyes widened. “Damn, you dropped that bomb on Captain Science already? Bold move.”

“I had to.”

Ezekiel groaned. “Things were heating up between us. I couldn't in good conscience let things progress without him knowing the full truth.”

“Let me guess. He freaked and kicked you out?”

Ezekiel nodded glumly. “Pretty much. He said he needed time alone to process everything. I can't blame him, though. It's a lot to take in, especially for someone rooted in science and logic.”

Cassiel grunted. “No shit. Poor guy's whole worldview just got flipped upside down in one day. Finding out he can get knocked up was probably the cherry on top of the mindfuck sundae.”

“I know, I know.”

Ezekiel rubbed his temples. “I just... I've waited so long for him. Now that I've finally found my mate, I want to dive in headfirst. But I need to remember this is all new to Archer. He needs time and space.”

“Look at you, being all mature and shit,” Cassiel teased. She reached across the table and patted his hand. “For what it's worth, I think you did the right thing.”

Ezekiel gave Cassiel a grateful smile. “Thanks. I just hope I haven't ruined things before they even had a chance to begin.”

“I wouldn't worry too much,” Cassiel drained her beer then let out a loud belch. “From what I saw earlier, that man is definitely into you. He just needs time to wrap his head around his magical new world. Give him space tonight, but don't let him stew for too long tomorrow. You two need to talk this out before the next gargoyle crisis hits.”

Ezekiel nodded, feeling slightly better. “You're right. I'll give him the night to process, then approach him in the morning.”

He finished the last of his beer. “What about you? Are you heading to bed soon?”

Cassiel shook her head. “Nah, I'm too keyed up. Think I might go for a fly, clear my head a bit.”

“Be careful out there, Cass.”

She pointed at him. “Don't start with me Zeke.”

She mock-punched his stomach as she passed him on her way out of the kitchen. “Get some rest, reaper. Tomorrow is another day.”

He tossed both of their empty bottles in the bin with a loud clank, his mind still whirling.

Hopefully, the new day wouldn't bust his balls.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Ezekiel carried a small tray with two mugs of coffee as he made his way toward Archer's bedroom. He rapped his knuckles on the heavy wood door, a staccato beat that echoed down the hall. He balanced the tray carefully, his nerves jittering like static electricity. When the door finally swung open, Ezekiel was met with the sight of Archer looking as if he'd been through a particularly vicious battle with his bedsheets—and lost.

“Hey.”

Archer wrapped his robe tighter around him.

“Good morning.”

Ezekiel could barely stand seeing Archer so distraught. “May I come in?”

He scratched his head, clearing his throat. “Uh, sure.”

He pointed to the mugs. “I hope those have coffee in them.”

“I figured you might need some. I know I do.”

Ezekiel offered Archer one of the cups and stepped inside. “I think I remembered how you took it from when we were at the coffee shop yesterday. If not, I can make you another one.”

Archer's eyes widened slightly as he accepted the mug. “We were in mortal danger, and you were paying attention to that?”

Ezekiel set the tray down on a small round side table next to the green velvet chair. He withheld comment about the food tray from the night before. Broken plates with mangled cheese, bread, and meats were jumbled together in a pile on the bent silver platter that had been set on the floor near the wastebasket.

“Whether you accept it or not, you’re my mate. Everything about you, no matter how small a detail, is important to me.”

Archer wrapped his hands around the mug then sank on the chair. “See, that’s what’s messing with my head.”

Ezekiel perched on the edge of the bed, wishing like hell he could be next to Archer, that his mate hadn’t chosen to keep a physical distance between them.

“What is, dearest? Tell me how I can help you through this abrupt change in your life. I’d do anything for you.”

His gaze swept over Archer, searching for any signal that he was getting through to him. “Would it help to speak with another Nephilim?”

Archer lifted his eyes. “Are there any here?”

Ezekiel sighed. “No. But I could see if Amir is available to speak with you. When Dante rescued Amir, he was also unaware of his Nephilim heritage. They have since had a baby boy together.”

Archer’s eyebrows shot up. “This is so unreal.”

He frowned. “Wait. I thought I heard that name when you and Malachi were talking. So you’re saying this, Amir, he actually gave birth to a baby?”

Ezekiel set his mug down on the floor. “He did. And we might not have phones, but I can send a message to Dante through the lair computer. We’ve found we have no choice but to track human activity through those devices. Many times, we’ve discovered a shadow attack through baffled scanner groups.”

Archer grunted. “You know, the more information I get about gargoyle life, the less I understand.”

He dropped his head in his hands. “But I suppose I have no choice but to move forward.”

Ezekiel couldn’t stand to hear the anguish in Archer’s voice. He went to his side, dropping to his knees on the floor next to the chair. He took a chance and grasped Archer’s hand. When he didn’t pull away, hope bloomed in Ezekiel’s chest.

“I don’t want you to feel as if you’re being forced, angel. Spending our lives together as mates is meant to be a joyous experience, not a prison sentence.”

Archer squeezed Ezekiel’s fingers. “That what I want to believe, that I can have something so precious. But it feels too good to be true.”

Archer’s voice dropped to a whisper. “And I’m terrified of losing it all.”

Ezekiel nodded, his thumb tracing soothing circles on Archer’s hand. “What you shared with me about your upbringing broke my heart. It must be hard to believe that you no longer have to keep your heart locked up so it doesn’t get crushed. That I won’t abandon you. We don’t have to rush anything. We can take this as slow as you need.”

A small smile tugged at Archer’s lips. “Even though you’ve been waiting for me for centuries?”

“Even then,”

Ezekiel gave him a soft smile. “Your comfort and happiness are what matter most to me.”

Archer was quiet for a moment, his eyes searching Ezekiel's face. Then, hesitantly, he reached out with his free hand and cupped Ezekiel's cheek. “I never had the chance to make my confession last night.”

Ezekiel leaned into his touch. “Will you make it now?”

“I can’t stop thinking about how badly I want you. I’ve never experienced such an aching need before. I know at least some of it is from this fated business, but even if you were just a regular guy, I’d want you.”

The corners of his mouth tugged into a slight smile. “I’ve never met anyone so kind and good. Brave, caring, unselfish, gorgeous.”

Archer shook his head. “To be honest, I don’t think I deserve you.”

Ezekiel reached up and laced his fingers with Archer’s. “Just because you were rejected as a child, doesn’t mean you weren’t worthy of love then or now. That’s on those who didn’t try to see your true value.”

He brushed his lips across Archer’s knuckles. “You deserve every bit of happiness, dearest. And if you’ll let me, I’d like to spend the rest of eternity proving that to you.”

Archer’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Ezekiel’s. “I want to believe you. I really do.”

“Then believe this,”

Ezekiel whispered, his breath ghosting over Archer's lips. "I'm not going anywhere. No matter how long it takes or what obstacles we face, I'll be right here by your side."

A shuddering sigh escaped Archer as he closed the tiny gap between them, pressing his lips to Ezekiel's in a tender kiss. It was hesitant at first, a mere brush of lips, but as Ezekiel responded, the kiss deepened. Ezekiel tangled his fingers in Archer's hair, pulling him closer. Archer slid from the chair, embracing him back as they battled for dominance over the kiss with their tongues.

When they finally parted, they were both breathless. Archer's eyes were wide, pupils dilated.

"I need you,"

Archer begged. "I feel like I'll lose my mind if you don't fuck me now. My body is on fire."

Ezekiel rose, dragging Archer to his feet with one hand and encircled his waist with the other. "I'm not making love to my angel on the floor for our first time."

"We can do it on the fucking kitchen table for all I care,"

Archer growled. He squeezed Ezekiel's ass cheek with a powerful grip. "Don't make me wait one second longer."

After giving Archer's ear lobe a quick nip, he tugged him toward the bed, whirled him around then pushed him onto the mattress. His poor angel was flushed, and Ezekiel was sure his heat was hitting him full force. Archer needn't worry. He wouldn't be waiting.

Ezekiel wasted no time in shedding his clothes, his eyes never leaving Archer's



flushed face. With each layer removed, Archer's breathing grew more ragged, his hands fisting in the sheets as if to anchor himself.

“You're beautiful.”

Archer licked his lips, his gaze roaming hungrily over Ezekiel's form.

Ezekiel's heart swelled at the compliment. He climbed onto the bed, hovering over Archer as if he was the predator and Archer was his prey. “And you, my angel, are exquisite.”

He leaned down, capturing Archer's lips in a searing kiss, using one hand to untie the robe.

Archer arched into the touch, a low moan escaping him as Ezekiel's fingers trailed over his newly exposed skin. “Please,”

he gasped between kisses, “I need you inside me.”

Ezekiel's control snapped at his mate's plea. He growled low in his throat, nibbling and kissing his way down Archer's neck as he pushed the robe open fully. His hands roamed over Archer's chest, teasing his mate's hardened nipples.

Archer gasped, writhing beneath him. “Quit stalling. I can't take it anymore.”

“Shh, I've got you,”

Ezekiel murmured against Archer's skin. He trailed kisses down his torso, savoring every inch of his mate's body. When he reached Archer's straining erection, he took him into his mouth, savoring his velvety hardness.

Archer cried out, his hips bucking, forcing his hard cock to the back of Ezekiel's throat. He held Archer steady by his hips, working him with lips and tongue until he was a quivering mess. Right as Archer neared the edge, Ezekiel pulled back, eliciting a frustrated groan from Archer.

“Not yet, my love. I want to be inside you when you come.”

Archer nodded frantically, spreading his legs up and back in invitation. Ezekiel's eyes widened as he noticed the glistening slick between Archer's thighs—a telltale sign of a Nephilim in heat.

“Mmm... you're already ready for me,”

Ezekiel moaned, running a finger through the natural lubricant.

Archer shuddered at the touch. “I...I don't understand what's happening, but it feels like I'm going to die if you don't fill me this very second.”

Unable to deny him any longer, Ezekiel positioned himself at Archer's entrance. He pushed in slowly, savoring every inch as his mate's tight heat enveloped him. They both moaned in unison

Archer wrapped his legs around Ezekiel's waist, pulling him in deeper. “Fuck,”

he gasped, his head thrown back against the pillows. “You feel incredible.”

Ezekiel stilled, giving Archer time to adjust. He peppered kisses along his mate's jaw, savoring the salty taste of his skin and the light scratch of his morning stubble. “Are you okay, my love?”

“Beyond okay.”

He rolled his hips, drawing a groan from them both. “Move, dammit. I need you to fucking move.”

Ezekiel chuckled. “So feisty.”

He started with slow, deep thrusts, basking in their first time being joined. With each thrust forward, Archer met him eagerly, their bodies rocking together in perfect synchronization.

“Faster,”

Archer demanded, his nails digging into Ezekiel's back.

Ezekiel obliged, picking up the pace. The room filled with the sound of skin slapping against skin and their mingled moans of pleasure. He angled his hips, searching for that sweet spot inside Archer.

“Oh fuck!”

Archer cried out, arching his back. “Right there!”

Ezekiel grinned, maintaining the angle as he pounded into Archer relentlessly. He barrelled toward his own climax, a tingling heat coiling in his lower belly. He reached between them, wrapping his fingers around Archer's neglected cock. He stroked in time with his thrusts, Archer's precum helping to ease the way.

“That's it, angel,”

he panted. “Let go for me. I want to feel you come undone.”

Archer's body tensed, his passage clenching around Ezekiel's cock. With a strangled

shout, he came, spilling between their bodies. The pulsing pressure around him sent Ezekiel over the edge, and he buried himself to the hilt as his own release crashed over him. Ezekiel cried out Archer's name as he spilled deep inside his mate, their bodies shuddering together in shared ecstasy.

For several long moments, they remained locked together, panting and trembling in the afterglow. Ezekiel peppered soft kisses along Archer's neck, cradling him as his knot began to swell. Archer tensed, and he clasped Ezekiel's shoulders.

"What the...?"

He struggled beneath Ezekiel. "What's happening?"

"Shh, angel. Don't fight me. That's my knot, keeping us joined so my seed will stay inside you."

Archer stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Let me guess. It's supposed to help me get pregnant?"

Ezekiel wished he had the right words to help Archer believe everything would be okay. "It is. Whether you think getting pregnant is possible for you or not, I promise my knot won't hurt you."

Ezekiel smiled in reassurance. "Can you at least trust me on that?"

Archer took a deep breath, his body relaxing slightly beneath Ezekiel. "I... I trust you,"

His gaze searched Ezekiel's face. "Still processing."

Ezekiel nuzzled Archer's cheek, placing a gentle kiss there. "I know, my love. We'll

figure this out together, step by step.”

They lay entwined, Ezekiel’s knot keeping them connected. As the minutes passed, Archer’s breathing evened out, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Ezekiel’s back.

“This is... nice.”

Archer let out a happy sigh. “I’ve never felt so complete before.”

Ezekiel’s chest tightened. “That’s because we were made for each other, angel. Two halves of a whole.”

Archer hummed thoughtfully, his fingers continuing their gentle exploration of Ezekiel’s back. “I’m starting to believe that might actually be true.”

Ezekiel’s heart soared at those words. He pressed a tender kiss to Archer’s forehead. “It is true, dearest. And I promise, I’ll spend every day proving it to you.”

Archer regarded him, his brow furrowing. “What happens now? Do we stay here, go to another lair, get a house?”

He smirked. “Build a nursery?”

Ezekiel chuckled, propping himself up on one elbow, his softening erection slipping from Archer’s body. He placed his palm on Archer’s belly.

“Now, we face whatever comes next together. There’s still much for you to learn about your heritage, about our world. Plus, the amazing revelation of your healing powers. I’m looking forward to working with you side by side.”

Archer held his gaze, but Ezekiel could tell his thoughts were racing. “I will say I’m

excited by that prospect as well. I know I come across as flippant like I don't give a shit about anything. But being a doctor means so much to me. Until you, I didn't care about anything else, really."

Ezekiel's eyes burned with unshed tears. Hearing Archer admit he cared about him was more than he'd expected so soon. He leaned down and gave Archer a soft kiss. "I'm honored to be someone you care about. And don't worry. Your healing skills combined with your experience as a doctor will be invaluable to our cause."

Archer covered Ezekiel's hand with his own, entwining their fingers. "You know, I never thought I'd want a family,"

he admitted. "But with you... it doesn't seem so scary anymore."

Ezekiel grinned. "You're making all my dreams come true."

Archer grinned back. "Never thought I'd ever hear anyone say that about me."

He leaned up to press their mouths together before laying his head back on the pillow. "But I'll take it."

Archer's words hung in the air, a tentative promise of a future Ezekiel had only dared to dream about. He gazed down at his mate, marveling at how quickly everything had changed. Only yesterday, Archer had been a stranger, unaware of his true nature. Now, here they were, tangled together in the aftermath of their passion, discussing a shared future.

He couldn't imagine ever being without Archer again.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Archer, wake up!”

Archer jerked upright, jarred out of a sound sleep by Ezekiel’s urgent call. “What? What’s going on?”

Light from the bedside lamp cut through the pitch-black darkness of their bedroom, and Ezekiel was hopping on one foot, struggling to pull on a pair of dark jeans. Despite having no idea what was going on, Archer jumped out of bed to get dressed, too.

“Sorry, love.”

Ezekiel yanked the shirt he’d tossed onto the chair the night before shrugging it on, working the buttons frantically. “Urgent call from Cassiel. Woke me from a sound sleep. She needs help.”

Archer searched for his own shirt, eventually finding it under the bed. They’d been having a sex marathon over the past few days while waiting for word from Michael on their next move. They couldn’t for Ezekiel’s home base in Los Angeles until they were sure Razel wouldn’t launch another attack in Boston.

As Archer finished dressing and started waking up more, it occurred to him that the call from Cassiel must’ve been telepathic. Did that mean she wasn’t in the lair? As far as he knew, they were all holding tight for now. Then again, he wasn’t exactly an expert yet on Slayer protocol.

Ezekiel paused, as if a thought struck him. He turned to Archer. “You should stay

here with Darius. He's fully recovered and an excellent fighter."

Archer grabbed his arm. "Cassiel isn't here then?"

Ezekiel regarded him with a pained expression. "I'm afraid not. I don't know why she would've left without telling anyone. Maybe she was lured away somehow."

"I don't like this,"

Archer gritted through his teeth. "And from what you've told me, Darius is this lair's best fighter after Cassiel. You can't go out there without him."

"I need him here with you. I don't trust Lysander, and I don't know the others that well."

Archer shook his head in confusion. "Who's Lysander, and why don't you trust him?"

He hadn't been paying attention to the Slayer roster. Most of his time had been spent getting railed by Ezekiel in their own private lair paradise.

Ezekiel rubbed his forehead. "I don't have time to explain. But it has to do with something Cassiel said to me the other night."

He gave Archer a quick kiss on the mouth. "I'll tell you everything when I return."

Fear wrapped around his heart like a fist. "Don't go,"

he pleaded. "Something's off."

Ezekiel framed Archer's face with his palms. "I sent a message to Malachi, but I



don't know how quickly he can get here. Cassiel needs help now, but Malachi can alert others who might be nearby. Slayers we know are trustworthy."

The whole situation was making his head hurt. If everything didn't go tits up before the night was through, he was going to insist on a crash course in all things gargoyle, angel, and demon. He despised being clueless.

Archer clenched his jaw and nodded. "Okay. But I swear to all that is holy, if you get yourself hurt, I'll punch you."

Ezekiel yanked him into an embrace. "I won't let anyone hurt me. Our baby needs both fathers."

Archer froze. Before he could ask Ezekiel what he meant, his mate was already out the door and racing down the hall.

He meant that in general, right?

Archer placed a palm on his abdomen and swallowed hard.

Nah.

\* \* \* \*

Ezekiel swooped down low over the downtown cityscape. A new layer of snow covered the ground, tufts of fluffy white flakes clinging to bare tree branches and streetlamps. The city was eerily quiet at this late hour, save for the occasional rumble of a snowplow in the distance.

His wings beat steadily scanned the streets below, searching for any sign of Cassiel or unusual activity. Her telepathic message had been garbled and cut off abruptly,

leaving him with only a vague sense of her location near the harbor. As he glided over the waterfront, a flash of movement caught his eye.

There—a dark figure darting between shadows near an old warehouse. Ezekiel banked sharply, diving toward the alley where he'd spotted the figure. As he drew closer, he recognized the familiar silhouette of a shadow gargoyle. His heart raced. Where there was one, others were sure to follow.

Ezekiel landed silently on the warehouse roof, his wings folding against his back as he crouched low to survey the scene. The shadow gargoyle was skulking near a rusted side door, its obsidian form barely distinguishable from the inky darkness surrounding it. Ezekiel's enhanced senses picked up the faint scrabbling of claws against metal—the creature was trying to break in.

He tensed, ready to spring into action, when a flicker of movement caught his eye. Another figure emerged from behind a dumpster, this one in human form. Ezekiel's breath caught as he recognized Cassiel. To Ezekiel's shock, she sauntered up to the fallen gargoyle, making no effort to hide her presence from the shadow creature.

His gut clenched, bile rising as he battled the fear that Cassiel - not Lysander - was the Slayer engaged in treachery. Had she frantically lured him away from the lair so the shadow creatures could take him out easier when he had no reinforcements? Had she been in league with Raziel this entire time?

Ezekiel's mind reeled, his heart breaking at the thought of his close friend falling into darkness. His claws dug into the roof's edge, his muscles coiled as he watched the scene unfold below. Cassiel approached the shadow gargoyle with an easy familiarity that sent chills down his spine. This couldn't be happening. Not Cassiel. She had been his mentor, his friend, a pillar of strength within the Shadow Slayer organization for centuries.

Ezekiel's sharp fangs bared at the sight of Raziel emerging from inside the warehouse. He waved off the shadow creature then turned to acknowledge Cassiel's presence without hostility. They exchanged words in low tones, their voices carried away by the bitter wind before Ezekiel could make out what was said.

Torn between retreating until reinforcements arrived and gathering more intel, Ezekiel inched closer to the edge of the roof, straining to hear their conversation. His heart pounded, each beat a painful reminder of the betrayal unfolding before him.

Suddenly, Cassiel's head snapped up, her eyes locking onto his position. Ezekiel froze, realizing too late he'd given himself away.

"Well, well,"

Raziel's smooth voice carried on the night air. "It seems we have an uninvited guest."

In an instant, Ezekiel's world exploded into chaos. Shadow gargoyles poured from the warehouse, their obsidian forms blending with the darkness as they swarmed toward him. He spread his wings, ready to take flight, when a familiar voice cut through the din.

"Ezekiel, wait!"

Cassiel cried out. "It's not what you think!"

Ezekiel hesitated for a split second, torn between his instinct to flee and his deep-rooted trust in Cassiel. That moment of indecision cost him dearly. A shadow gargoyle latched onto his ankle, its claws digging into his flesh as it dragged him off the roof. He tumbled through the air, wings flailing as he struggled to right himself.

With a bone-jarring thud, Ezekiel hit the ground. He rolled to his feet, fangs bared

and claws extended, ready to face the onslaught of shadow creatures. But instead of attacking, they formed a loose circle around him, Raziel and Cassiel at its center.

“My dear Ezekiel,”

Raziel purred, his voice dripping with false warmth. “How kind of you to join us. We were just discussing you, in fact.”

Ezekiel glared at the smug demon but turned to face Cassiel. “Explain yourself.”

Cassiel stepped forward, her hands raised in a placating gesture. “Ezekiel, please, you must listen. Things are not as they seem.”

Ezekiel's eyes darted between Cassiel and Raziel, his muscles taut with tension. “Then enlighten me,”

he growled, “because from where I'm standing, it looks like you've betrayed everything we stand for.”

Raziel chuckled a disturbing sound that sent chills down Ezekiel's spine. “Oh, how deliciously dramatic. But I'm afraid you're operating on outdated information, my friend.”

“We're not friends,”

Ezekiel spat, his wings rustling with agitation.

Cassiel took another step closer, her gait odd, her eyes glimmering in an otherworldly glow - not a deep amber, but a cloudy, putrid orange rot. “Ezekiel, the world is changing.”

Her voice deepened. “The balance between light and dark... it’s shifting. We can't keep fighting.”

She raised her arms, but they no longer showed a feminine line. Instead, they thickened, dark hair covering the pale muscled limb like a dusting of soot. Ezekiel’s heart jumped into his throat.

“It can’t be...”

Lysander burst into laughter. “Oh yes, it most certainly can.”

His lips curled up in a hideous grin. “Goodbye, Ezekiel.”

\* \* \* \*

Archer paced the large, rectangular carpet at the entrance to the lair. Ezekiel had only been gone ten minutes or so but it felt like an hour. Darius sat at attention on the very bench where he’d been healed by Ezekiel a few days ago.

“Don’t be afraid, Archer. I’m completely recovered. I’ll be able to protect you should it come to that.”

Archer came to a halt and crossed his arms. “That’s why you think I’m stressing out over here?”

He huffed. “I’m worried about Ezekiel charging in to save the day without any help!”

Darius raised an eyebrow, his stoic expression softening slightly. “Ezekiel is one of our most capable warriors. He's faced far worse odds and came out victorious.”

Archer resumed his pacing, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “I know, I

know. It's just... something feels off about this whole situation. Why would Cassiel leave without telling anyone? And who's this Lysander character Ezekiel doesn't trust?"

Darius's brow furrowed. "Lysander? The rogue demons turned him, but his strength of character ultimately gave him the strength to resist. He returned to us about a year ago and provided us with some valuable info. Quiet fellow, keeps to himself. Why do you ask?"

"Ezekiel mentioned not trusting him, said Cassiel told him something about him the other night." Archer ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. "But he didn't have time to explain before rushing off."

A loud yawn sounded behind them. "I said what to who now?"

Cassiel stretched her arms above her head. "What's all the racket out here? Can't a girl get her beauty sleep?"

Archer gasped and Darius shot to his feet, crying out, "Where's Lysander?"

Cassiel's eyes went wide. "I knew it!"

Her eyes flashed with fury as she lunged forward, grabbing Archer' arm. "Where's Ezekiel?"

she demanded, her voice laced with panic.

Archer stumbled back, his blood seeming to drain from his body. "He...he left to help you! He said he received a message from you, that you were in trouble."

"It seems that fucker has some new tricks up his sleeve,"

Cassiel growled, releasing Archer and whirling to face Darius. “Lysander. That treacherous bastard. I knew he was up to something.”

Darius’ face paled. “But how? He passed all our tests, provided us with valuable information.”

“A long con,”

Cassiel spat. “I’ve suspected for weeks, but I couldn’t prove anything. I confronted Ezekiel about my suspicions the other night, but...”

Cassiel’s face hardened, her amber eyes flashing with determination. “We need to move. Now.”

She strode toward the lair’s exit, calling behind her. “Darius, alert the others. We have a traitor in our midst, and Ezekiel’s walking into a trap.”

Archer rushed after her. “I’m coming with you!”

Darius jumped in his path, blocking his way. “Ezekiel will have yours and my ass if you leave this lair.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Cassiel. “I’ve sent the emergency alarm. I’ll stay here and stand guard.”

Fuck. If he was part angel, why didn’t he have wings? Then he’d bust out of there and save the man he loved his own damn self. Archer covered his mouth with both hands. Without warning, he’d fallen hard and fast for the most amazing being he’d ever met.

But would he lose him just as quickly?

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Ezekiel shot into the sky like a rocket, his only hope to keep from being mauled to pieces by the traitorous Lysander, Raziel, and the shadow creatures. The moment he realized he'd been fooled, he'd sent out a cry for help. However, he couldn't be sure it was received. If the rogue demons had discovered how to mimic a Slayer, then perhaps they had other hidden abilities he wasn't aware of.

The frigid wind skated across the thick, leathery skin of his wings as he rose higher into the night sky. Ezekiel's heart pounded, adrenaline surging through his veins as he desperately sought an escape route. Below him, the shadow gargoyles swarmed, their inky forms blending with the darkness as they pursued him relentlessly.

Lysander's mocking laughter echoed through the air. "You can't outrun us forever, Ezekiel! You forget, I know all your tricks!"

Ezekiel gritted his teeth, pushing himself to fly faster. His mind raced, trying to formulate a plan. He couldn't lead these creatures back to the lair, back to Archer. Even if Lysander knew the location of the lair, he refused to go anywhere near the cathedral where his precious mate was waiting for him. The thought of Archer in danger shot a wave of terror through his body.

A searing pain tore through his left wing. Ezekiel cried out, nearly plummeting as he struggled to maintain altitude. He glanced back to see a shadow gargoyle's claws embedded in his wing membrane, the creature's weight dragging him down.

With a snarl, Ezekiel twisted mid-air, using the momentum to swing the shadow gargoyle off his wing. The creature screeched as it plummeted, its claws ripping through delicate membrane as it fell. Ezekiel hissed in pain, his injured wing



struggling to keep him aloft.

He dove toward the harbor, weaving between cargo cranes and shipping containers. The maze-like layout of the port might give him a chance to lose his pursuers. As he zigzagged through the industrial landscape, Ezekiel's mind raced. How long had Lysander been playing them? What was Raziel's endgame?

A flash of movement to his right caught his attention. Ezekiel barely had time to bank left before Lysander barreled past him, narrowly missing a collision.

"You're slowing down, you old fool! Centuries of air battles, and this is the best you can do?"

Ezekiel's jaw clenched as he banked sharply, narrowly avoiding Lysander's outstretched claws. The traitor's taunts rang in his ears, fueling within him a mix of rage and desperation. He couldn't let Lysander win—not when Archer and their unborn child were waiting for him.

With a burst of speed, Ezekiel shot upward, climbing higher into the night sky. His injured wing screamed in protest, but he pushed through the pain. He needed to find an advantage, something to turn the tide.

As he ascended, an idea struck him. The harbor cranes—their towering structures might provide cover and a chance to ambush his pursuers. Ezekiel tucked his wings and dove, plummeting toward the nearest crane. At the last second, he snapped his wings open, using the updraft to slingshot himself around the massive structure.

Lysander's frustrated roar bellowed behind him as he weaved between the crane's steel beams. Ezekiel's heart pounded as he pushed his injured wing to its limit, ignoring the searing pain with each beat. He had to stay ahead, had to find a way to turn the tables.

Suddenly, a dark shape materialized in front of him. Ezekiel barely had time to register Raziel's smirking face before the demon's fist connected with his jaw. The impact sent him spiraling, crashing into a stack of shipping containers with a bone-jarring thud. Ezekiel grunted, the wind knocked from his lungs as he tumbled to the ground.

Lysander landed nearby, his dark wings folding behind him. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen,"

he sneered. "The great healer, brought low by his own predictability. What's wrong, can't heal yourself?"

Lysander and Raziel fell into peals of laughter, the sound like gears grinding.

Raziel's lips pulled back in another hideous grin. "Once the Shadow Slayers' great healer is dispatched, we'll dispose of the doctor, and then who will they turn to?"

Lysander bent down, staring directly into Ezekiel's eyes as he responded to Raziel. "No one. We can pick them off one by one because no one will be left who can fix them."

Ezekiel struggled to his feet, his body screaming in protest. The tang of blood was on his tongue, trickling from a gash above his eye. His injured wing hung limply at his side, useless.

"Why?"

Ezekiel gritted out, buying time as he assessed his options. "Why turn against us, Lysander? You begged us to take you back."

Lysander sneered at him. "Yeah, you idiot. How else could we pull this off?"

He threw his hands in the air as if he were a prizefighter celebrating a win. “I couldn’t very well use this super sweet cloning skill Raziel taught me unless I wormed my way back in, now could I?”

Raziel’s laughter filled the air again, the wretched sound boring into his skull. His body was rapidly weakening and he doubted he could hold on much longer. The horrible truth was that Lysander was right about one thing: he wasn’t as skilled a warrior as the others. Not when he spent most of his time healing all their casualties.

The demon’s plan had been smart. Instead of constantly battling a myriad of Slayers and losing ranks in the process, eliminate the one who saves the fighters. Take out one, and the rest will eventually fall.

Ezekiel’s stomach roiled. Or two. If he didn’t survive, they would go after Archer next.

With a last gasp of energy, Ezekiel whirled away from his attackers and launched himself off the edge of the shipping container. His injured wing screamed in protest as he glided awkwardly toward the water, but he couldn’t think about the pain. If he could only make it to the harbor...

“Oh no you don’t!”

Lysander snarled, diving after him.

Ezekiel hit the water with a splash, plunging beneath the dark waves. The icy shock jolted through his system, but he forced himself deeper, using his good wing to propel himself forward. His lungs burned for air, but he knew surfacing too soon would mean certain death.

From above, the muffled sounds of Lysander and Raziel's frustrated shouts reached

his ears. Ezekiel allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. They may be formidable in the air, but underwater, he had the advantage. As a healer, he'd developed the ability to hold his breath for extended periods, a skill that had saved many a drowning Slayer over the centuries.

He swam deeper, letting the murky harbor waters conceal him from his pursuers. Ezekiel's mind raced as he formulated a plan. He needed to get back to the lair, to warn the others about Lysander's betrayal and protect Archer.

Archer. The thought of his mate sent a surge of determination through his battered body. He couldn't fail, not when they had so much to live for. Their future, their child...

A shadow passed overhead, and Ezekiel whirled around to prepare for an enemy attack. He peered up through the murky water, barely making out Cassiel's form circling above. His lungs burned for air, but could he trust this was actually Cassiel this time? Or was Lysander mimicking her again to draw him out?

Ezekiel's lungs screamed for air. He had no choice but to chance that the gargoyle above him was his friend, the real Cassiel. He angled upward, propelling himself toward the surface with powerful strokes. As he broke through the water's surface, he gasped, gulping in precious oxygen.

Cassiel spotted him, swooping down low over the water. "Ezekiel! Thank the Divine Spark you're alive!"

She circled above him, her amber eyes scanning the area. "We need to get you out of here. Can you fly?"

Ezekiel shook his head, wincing as he tried to move his injured wing. "No, it's too damaged. Lysander—"

“I know.”

Cassiel gritted her teeth. “What a fucking piece of shit. We'll deal with him later. Right now, we need to get you to safety.”

As if summoned by her words, a dark shape plummeted from the sky. Lysander hit the water with a massive splash, sending waves rippling outward.

“Go!”

shouted Cassiel, but he refused to abandon her. Slayers - true Slayers - fought for each other no matter what. He might not have the use of one wing, but he still had the other one along with his claws, fangs and sledgehammer-like tail.

As Ezekiel surged through the water, Cassiel dove down to engage Lysander. The two gargoyles collided in a flurry of claws and wings, churning the dark harbor waters around them. Ezekiel's heart raced as he swam toward the battle, determined to aid his friend despite his injuries.

Lysander's mocking laughter rang out over the sounds of splashing and snarling. “Two against one? How unsporting of you, Cassiel. I thought Shadow Slayers prided themselves on honor.”

“As if you knew what honor was, you pathetic fuckwad.”

Cassiel raked her claws across Lysander's chest. “Go to hell where you belong and stay there!”

Ezekiel reached the fray, his good wing helping him maneuver through the choppy waves. He lashed out with his tail, catching Lysander off guard and knocking him back. The traitor splashed and sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of seawater. He

whirled upward, a spray of water shedding from his wings. He hovered over them, batting his wings, tail flicking, his claws wiggling impatiently.

“You'll pay for that, Reaper,”

Lysander snarled.

He lunged toward Ezekiel, claws extended. Cassiel intercepted, grappling with Lysander mid-air. They tumbled back into the water with a massive splash. Ezekiel's heart raced as he searched the churning surface for any sign of his friend.

Suddenly, Cassiel burst from the waves, dragging a thrashing Lysander by the throat. Her face was a mask of brutal fury as she ascended, wings beating powerfully.

“Ezekiel, get to shore! Malachi is on his way!”

she yelled. “I'll handle this filth.”

He hesitated, torn between helping Cassiel and following her orders. His injured wing throbbed painfully, reminding him of his limited usefulness. With a frustrated growl, he turned and began swimming toward the nearest dock, his good wing and powerful tail propelling him through the icy water.

Behind him, the sounds of Cassiel and Lysander's battle filled the air - snarls and shrieks, the clash of claws, and the whoosh of wings. Ezekiel clenched his teeth, fighting the urge to look back. He had to trust in Cassiel's abilities and focus on reaching safety.

As he neared the dock, a familiar figure appeared at the edge. Malachi's imposing form stood silhouetted against the night sky, his wings spread wide.

“Ezekiel!”

He called out. “Over here!”

With a final burst of energy, he surged forward, reaching the dock's edge. Malachi's strong hands grasped his arms, hauling him out of the bay. Ezekiel collapsed onto the weathered wooden planks, gasping for breath as his body shook from pain and exhaustion.

“By the Divine Spark, what happened?”

Malachi demanded, his eyes widening as he took in Ezekiel's battered state.

Ezekiel struggled to sit up, wincing as pain lanced through his injured wing.

“Lysander... he's a traitor. Working with Razi. They lured me out here...”

He broke off, coughing up briny seawater.

“Fuck me.”

Malachi gritted out. “We got here as fast as we could. Fortunately, we were already on our way back from Shasta to meet with you and Archer, so we were fairly close.”

A stab of worry hit him at the mention of Archer. “My mate, he's safe?”

Malachi smiled. “Perfectly safe. But Darius told me he's being a pain in the ass about knowing how you are. Should we return you to him so he leaves poor Darius alone?”

Ezekiel drew his eyebrows together. “What about Razi, the others...”

He tried to push himself up from the ground but failed miserably. He groaned. “We

have to kill them first.”

Malachi shook his head as he reached down to help Ezekiel stand. “You’re a mess.”

He draped Ezekiel’s arm over his shoulder. “I know you can’t morph all the way back to your human form because of your jacked-up wing, so this should be interesting getting you back to the lair. Too bad it’s not Halloween right now.”

“Raziel...”

“Fuck, Zeke. Do you have a hard-on for the freak?”

Malachi snorted. “Don’t worry about him. The Slayers with me ripped the shadow gargoyles to shreds. You might’ve noticed that demons aren’t known for being team players. Once our boy Raz saw how the wind was blowing, he disappeared in a poof of sulfur.”

Ezekiel chuckled and immediately regretted it. He must’ve cracked a rib or two. Before he could respond to Malachi, Cassiel landed on the planks with a thunk.

“Hey fellas, how’s it hanging?”

she curled up her top lip and pointed at her mouth. “Do I have any gargoyle between my teeth?”

Malachi and Ezekiel burst into laughter, but once again, Ezekiel was filled with regret. “Ow, ow, ow. No more joking. I can’t take it.”

“What’s the matter, sport? Rough night out with the boys?”

Ezekiel rolled his eyes. Once she got going, she’d never stop.



“Malachi, take me home. I need to see my angel.”

Clinging to Malachi as they flew back to the lair, his only thought was of Archer. The pain from his injuries faded to a dull throb as anticipation built in his chest. He needed to see his mate, to hold him and assure himself that the father of his unborn child was safe.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:44 am*

Archer placed a hand on his belly, not sure if the slight swell was his imagination or from wishful thinking. A week had passed since the fear of losing Ezekiel had almost consumed him. When Ezekiel had returned from his showdown with Lysander and his cohorts, he'd launched into a tirade at his mate. After several minutes of yelling and warning Ezekiel never to do anything so stupid again, he'd collapsed into his arms, kissing him until they were both breathless.

If that didn't prove to him that he loved the infuriating gargoyle, he didn't know what would. Judging from the bemused crowd of Slayers who witnessed the dramatic display, he figured his feelings were also obvious to them.

Speaking of Ezekiel...

Archer was propped against the pillows in the guest room bed, waiting for his mate to return from a meeting with Archangel Michael and several of the top Slayers involved in the most recent battle. He'd been a little queasy earlier, so he'd told Ezekiel he'd meet him back in their room. But now that he was feeling better, he was back to being horny.

He tapped his fingers on the blanket, his legendary impatience beginning to take over. Ezekiel had also promised to discuss with Michael when they'd be going back to the lair beneath the San Gabriel Mission near L.A. That was Ezekiel's home base, and while leaving Boston made him a bit sad, it had never truly been his home. The beautiful city was merely where he'd ended up after being bounced around the state throughout his younger years.

The latch to the bedroom clicked and he was hit with the now familiar rush of

excitement whenever Ezekiel was near.

As soon as Ezekiel's gaze landed on him, he broke into a wide smile. "You look better, my love."

"Lots."

He patted the bed. "Join me?"

Ezekiel chuckled. "My, my. Aren't we anxious?"

"You know I can't get enough of you, gorgeous."

"Such a flatterer."

Ezekiel grinned as he began removing his shirt. "By the way, Amir and Dante will be arriving later. Amir's excited to meet you."

"Oh?"

Archer picked at the blanket.

Ezekiel sat on the bed next to him, leaning in to place a quick kiss on his lips. "Still don't believe it's possible for you to be pregnant?"

He sighed. "I don't know. As you said before, after all I've witnessed, why should that be so hard to accept?"

He shrugged. "I hate to admit it, but part of me is afraid to get my hopes up."

Ezekiel's expression softened as he cupped Archer's cheek. "I understand, love. It's a massive change. But since Amir has been through this, experienced his own doubts

because he never knew he was Naphilim - he can answer any questions you might have.”

“I appreciate that. I do have about a million questions.”

He paused, biting his lip. “Are you going to deliver our baby?”

Ezekiel’s eyes brightened. “I wouldn’t let anyone else near you.”

He winked. “Plus, I’m the only one who’s qualified for the job.”

Archer frowned. “Hey, what about me? I thought I was your healer partner now.”

Ezekiel tsked as he laced their fingers together. “Of course. But I’m not planning on your delivering our child alone.”

“Fair enough.”

He decided he’d rather not think about pushing a baby out of his body, so he changed the subject. “Did Michael say when we can head back to L.A.?”

Ezekiel nodded. “As a matter of fact, he did. We’ve been cleared to return home in two days.”

“Cool. What about everything else?”

Ezekiel rose from the bed and started removing his pants. “What everything else?”

Archer still had so many questions. While he understood how difficult it was to reconstruct his history because the records pertaining to his birth were either lost or destroyed, he figured an Archangel might at least be able to come up with something.

“Who my real family was? And why Colin gave me the key to the security deposit box?”

Ezekiel paused in the act of removing his pants, his expression turning serious. “I’m afraid Michael didn’t have much new information about your family. “As for Colin,”

Ezekiel continued, “it seems he was part of a secret society tasked with protecting Nephilim children. He likely knew of your heritage and was trying to keep you safe by hiding information about your true identity.”

“But why give me the key now?”

Archer drew his eyebrows together. “Why wait until now?”

Ezekiel finished removing his pants then sat back on the bed. “From what Michael could gather, Colin likely wanted to protect you from the shadow creatures for as long as possible. Giving you that information too early could have put you at risk before you were ready to defend yourself.”

Archer nodded. “Maybe once he realized his time was running out, he gave it to his attorney with that letter.”

“That as well.”

Ezekiel lifted the covers and scooted in beside him. “But I’m so grateful I was there to protect you.”

“Yeah. Pretty amazing coincidence.”

Ezekiel gasped. “Really? What will it take for you to believe in destiny? That there are no accidents?

Archer shoulder-bumped him. "I'm messing with you."

He laughed. "Had you going though, didn't I?"

Ezekiel growled, giving him a playful jostle. "I have a good idea how to get you going."

Archer hissed as Ezekiel wrapped his fingers around Archer's half-hard cock. "Yeah. That'll do it all right."

Right as they moved in for a kiss, a loud banging sounded at the bedroom door. Archer tensed as Ezekiel leapt from the bed. Was the lair under attack, or a Slayer calling for help?

Ezekiel rushed to the door, opening it a crack while concealing his nudity behind the rest of the barrier. "What is it?"

Archer curled his fingers in the blanket. He'd assumed that since Ezekiel was mated and they were the only healers, that Ezekiel would be exempt from battles. At least that's what Michael had claimed. It turned out that he and Ezekiel had been brought together before the kill quota was met. Between the risk of the amulet being stolen and the need for more than one healer, the Divine Spark had allowed a concession.

A laugh sounded and a throaty voice Archer didn't recognize answered, "Is this a bad time?"

"Dammit, Dante,"

Ezekiel growled.

Dante snorted. "I've been waiting for the perfect moment to do that."

“You’re ridiculous. Is there anything you actually need, or are you just fucking around?”

Dante laughed. “I needed to get back at you and my guess is that you’re the one who’s fucking around.”

Ezekiel groaned. “Fine. You got me. Now will you please leave?”

“Ooh, you’re saying please to me? The world has definitely turned on its axis.”

“Bye.”

Ezekiel started closing the door and Dante called out, “Archer! Amir’s looking forward to meeting you later!”

Archer didn’t have a chance to respond before Ezekiel shut the door all the way.

“What was that all about?”

Archer chuckled.

Ezekiel sighed, climbing back under the covers then yanking Archer to his side. “Nothing important. Just something that happened when he and Amir were first together. I’ll fill you in later.”

“Why don’t you fill me instead?”

Ezekiel ran his hand slowly up Archer’s frame, stopping to tease one of his hardening nipples. “With extreme pleasure, dearest.”

Ezekiel rolled him onto his back and covered Archer's body with his own, pressing him into the mattress. Their lips met in a deep kiss, a clash of tongues while Ezekiel’s

hands roamed over Archer's skin, igniting sparks of pleasure everywhere they touched.

Archer moaned into the kiss, arching up to press himself more fully against his mate's muscular form. He wrapped his legs around Ezekiel's waist, grinding their hips together. The friction sent jolts of electricity through his body.

"Ezekiel,"

Archer gasped as they broke apart for air. "I never dared to wish I could have someone so perfect. I love you."

The hint of an amber glow lit Ezekiel's eyes. "I love you, my heart. Always and forever."

Archer smiled, a contentment he'd never known possible washing over him. "Forever. That works."

When Ezekiel entered him, he gasped at the exquisite fullness. Their bodies moved together in perfect rhythm, as if they'd been made for each other. Ezekiel set a slow, sensual pace, and Archer savored every moment of their connection.

Their fucking intensified, their bodies moving faster and harder, a fine sheen of sweat building between them. Archer chased his orgasm, the familiar tension coiling in his core, his release building with each powerful thrust. He cried out as he came, his body clenching around Ezekiel. Ezekiel froze, his own release pulsing deep inside Archer as they shared in their climax together.

Archer and Ezekiel lay tangled together, basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking. Ezekiel trailed his fingers lazily along Archer's spine, savoring the closeness.



“You know, I’m honestly looking to our new life together in L.A.,”

Archer murmured, nuzzling against Ezekiel's chest.

Ezekiel pressed a kiss to Archer’s forehead. “Me too, dearest. Though I hope you know our lives will never be completely normal.”

Archer chuckled. "What, you mean most couples don’t have to worry about demon attacks and stolen holy relics?”

“I’m afraid not,”

Ezekiel replied with mock seriousness. “We're special that way.”

“Yes we are.”

Archer tilted his head up for a kiss.

As he drifted off to sleep, thoughts of babies and a future filled with love and adventure swirled through his mind. He knew their life together would never be simple or ordinary, but he wouldn't have it any other way. With Ezekiel by his side, he felt ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

He finally had a family of his own.

\* \* \* \*

Thank you for reading sunshine Ezekiel and grumpy Archer’s romance.