

# What Shelters Them

Sarah Røark

**Blame it on Agent Orange.** Sam Ashbury could sleep like a rock through just about anything, caught in these nightmares that seemed to last for weeks on end, nightmares where soldiers kept turning into animals and the ground opened up and swallowed whole units. The sky would take on different colors depending on who was about to die.

It's a very personal Vietnam, I'll give it that. It has its own natural laws that stay the same from dream to dream, so I keep thinking I almost have a handle on it. Which just makes it worse. Ashbury probably feels the same, seeing as he's caught up in the dreams twenty-four/seven. Maybe I'll ask him the next time I'm dreaming about being napalmed by our own flyboys. That's where ol' Sam went to when he got so worn out that he let an honest-to-Grandma demon from H-E-double-hockey-sticks like me kick him out of his own body and take it over.

I got the dreams along with the body. Most of Ashbury's memories, too, and his affection for steamed franks with extra relish. So pretty much every night I get to suffer side-by-side with the poor soul I damned to eternal flashbacks for the only offense of not being able to handle a world that had treated him like shit. Some people would call that a pretty workable definition of Hell, I guess. Trust me, I been there, and they've got no idea.

I guess I'm trying to explain why I don't wake up when it happens. I'm not sure why I need to explain this. It must be the old shepherd's instinct. Back when I had the forgeworks, I always knew the instant anyone got hurt. But then I never had to sleep either.

Anyway, for whatever reason, I don't wake up until there's a hand on my elbow. I open my eyes and know immediately that I'm in the real world because there aren't any little black girls in Da Nang.

"Sir," she says. She has to be from the South, "sir" rolls off her tongue so easily. She doesn't say anything else, though, just looks behind her. I drag myself up to sitting, and the first thing I notice is that most of the people that were camping here last night have already gone, nothing left of them but the junk-food wrappers. The sky's starting to lighten, but it's still dark under the overpass and the concrete where my hand comes down is chilly.

The girl's brother sits across from me, chafing their mother's hand. The woman is curled up. A little string of spit connects her lip to the pavement. I don't need to get any closer, I already know. The girl knows it too. She's ten, maybe eleven, more than old enough for a street kid to understand what dead is.

The girl turns back to me.

"Mama's hands get cold a lot," she says. "She tell Alexander to rub 'em. 'Rub real fast! Faster! Ooh, you settin' it on fire!' Like that." She smiles briefly, already filing the memory away somewhere safe.

Alexander looks at me too now, tear tracks streaking down his cheeks. He's younger than his sister. Maybe he really doesn't understand. But I think he does. I think he just wants to keep busy.



After a long sleepy second I realize the girl is asking me to do it. She must have asked all the others first. I can just picture it: They don't even bother to shake their heads as they gather up their blankets and their taped-up sleeping bags. Sorry, little girl. Got things to do, lines to stand in, people to panhandle, coffee to drink, booze to buy. No time to make a 911 call.

How quickly things change. Right after the quake you'd see all this news footage, huge crowds of people living under freeways and in tent cities built with federal disaster money. Heartwarming stories about how folks pull together when they're all in the same bad fix. And I don't doubt it was really like that, for a little while. The aid still pours in from the rest of the country, but here in LA, it's finally hitting them just how long things are going to take. Just how long all these people are going to be on their own. And even the newbies have learned by now they can't always trust the cops.

Little brother doesn't want to leave mama's side, not even to walk to a pay phone. I point it out to the girl: See, there's one right there across the street, at the Zipmart. She and I cross the streets to get to it. She starts to walk against the light. My hand comes down instinctively and clamps on her shoulder. She looks up at me with this funny expression. Now I've really done it. I've screwed up.

The cops are decent, especially when they get a look at my veteran ID. One even buys me coffee. The EMTs make asses of themselves for nothing—it's not like they have any excuse to be irritable since all they're really doing is cleanup. The kids won't let go of my hands. The cops have to pry them off. Somebody gives Alexander a mangy old Care Bear. Good thing toys don't have to breathe, the way he's squeezing it. Monique—Monique LaMotte, I overhear her spelling it—answers questions calmly, patiently. They get bundled into the cop car. Her eyes are on me as they pull away.



Child Welfare Services won't tell me anything over the phone the next day, so I run my clothes through the Baptist mission's washer and dryer and take a bus down there. They wouldn't tell me anything in person either, but it just

so happens their wiring's been on the fritz ever since the quake. The power keeps going out and taking the computer network with it, which means cases don't get processed, and there's a hell of a lot more of those than usual. The generator they were supposed to be getting in last week still hasn't shown up. So I tell them I used to be in the union. A lie, but it's easier than explaining that I helped design the structure of molecules, so alternating current really isn't all that mystifying.

Anyway, they're so happy not to be working by fluorescent lantern anymore that I finally get the story. No, Monique and Alexander didn't get sent to McLaren's. McLaren's is already at twice capacity, so the caseworkers didn't even bother asking. They just let the kids sleep on a desk there at the office till somebody found spots for them at a group home—which also technically doesn't have room, but then neither does anyplace else.

No, of course they can't tell me where the group home is. But they can leave the paperwork out on top of this desk while everyone gets a long-overdue cup of coffee.



The group home's in Venice. I try to decipher the gang graffiti. The lettering style is Puerto Rican, but past that I'm at a loss. At least I don't see a lot of condemned signs, so maybe this street wasn't hit too hard. I think it's been run down for a long time.

The house stands out because it's one of the few with any fresh paint on it. I hear children's voices shrieking, and my blood freezes for a second before I realize it's just roughhousing. I glance at the windows then walk around the side of the house to check out the backyard. There's a foursome of preteens throwing a Frisbee around, a few younger kids wrestling on the jungle gym, and Monique's sitting on a swing with Alexander and a couple of little girls gathered at her feet. She's deep into an account of *something* or other—her arms are wheeling around and she's pulling all these different faces.

Her audience is rapt. I'm just about to take off with a clear conscience when the Frisbee four break off their game and come over to the swing set.



And your classic playground hassle starts up. "Ooh, the *secret stories*," one of the older kids calls in a high, fluty voice. "The secret *fairy tales*!"

One of the girls shoots something back. The little punk's just delighted to have his bait taken. "Look!" He goes up on tiptoe and arches his arms over his head. "I'm the Blue Lady!"

"Shit, with those Nikes, you gotta be a demon," his friend laughs back. Monique springs up and runs in the house. The other little kids scatter, deserting Alexander. That's when he looks up and sees me.

I grin like there's nothing at all wrong with an old bum skulking around a kids' home and motion him over. He joins me.

I assume we don't have a lot of time. I huddle with him against the wall there.

"You and Monique doing okay?"

He nods.

"Food all right? No roaches? Are the counselors nice?"

He nods again, but I don't think any of that's even registered yet. It matters a lot more that his sister gets laughed at.

"My name is Sam. I just wanted to check up on you." Can't I do better than that? "I... wish I knew a better place for you. If I did, I'd take you myself. But I don't even have a place for me. You know what that's like."

I bet he hasn't cried since it happened. He just says "Yeah."

"So you believe in the Blue Lady too?"

This is a big risk. See, I'm not supposed to know about the secret stories—no grownup is. And I'm not even really clear on the Blue Lady. I've just heard her mentioned in reverent whispers from Miami to Phoenix. Standing around waiting for a shelter ticket, eating lukewarm soup... if you're paying attention, you realize the kids have these stories. They shut up fast when they see somebody looking, though.

The look he gives me is hurt, guarded. "You know about the Blue Lady?"

"Always have. Even I was young once." Nine below know I have *some* idea how humans build their legends, so I take another leap. "And I know she's always listening. You can't give up on her. No matter what some gangbanger wannabe tells you."

"Angels is real," he says hesitantly. Seven years old and he can't take even that for granted. But he needs to believe, no question.

"Angels are real," I agree. A traitorous little shiver goes down Ashbury's spine. No. This is not my prayer to answer. Let it struggle up to the heavenly host, if it can.

On the other hand, what if? Who else *would* see the angels, whatever angels might be left? Or maybe at least the fallen ones. It's an easy enough mistake to make nowadays, isn't it?

"In the shelters, they always listen to Monique. She know every—she know—a *hundred and sixty-seven* stories, plus ten more. She say they just for girls." Alexander searches my face to see if I comprehend. I do. "We counted 'em once when Mama was gone all night and we had to stay up. She learn some from Delvin in Baton Rouge, and some from Marisa in Corpus Christi. The oldest most secret stories."

Alexander picks at the ragged edge of his sleeve. "But they won't listen here. Not if the big kids be gafflin'" em for it..."

"I'd listen."

"She won't tell you." He seems rueful, though. "She don't tell grownups."

"Even a grownup who believes?" I ask softly.



*This story come from Marisa, who say it happened a long time ago in Brownsville. There was a boy named Rafael and his family and they can't find a place to stay the night, so they go to the beach and lie down on the cold sand. Well, in the middle of a night a big storm come in. Rafael look up into the sky and he can see the Blue Lady and the Devil fighting—when he hit her the lightning flash, and when she hit him back the thunder go bang! Now the Devil's skin be sparkling like a gold and silver snake, and the Blue Lady*



*knock off a piece of it, and it fall to the ground and turn into a shiny new quarter. Then the Devil grab the Blue Lady's wing and pull on it, and one of the feathers come off and fall to the ground and turn into a palm leaf. See, back when God first made the angels and the demons they didn't have no bodies, but when they come to earth they put bodies together out of this and that.*

*Rafael run over to pick up the quarter and the palm leaf. He yell up to the Devil "Look here! I'm throwing a piece of you in the ocean, you better go get it!" And he throw it in the water. Well, the Devil go diving in after it, and he was so heavy he sink all the way to the very bottom of the ocean. And the Blue Lady come down to Rafael and say "Thank you." He try to give her back the palm leaf then, but she say, "You keep it with you. That way I can always find you, even if you die." So from then on all the children know that if you love someone and put a palm leaf on they grave, the Blue Lady can always find them and take them to the angels.*

"That's quite a story," I say. Monique smiles at me. I think about it. Gold and silver scales, not exactly, but in its prime, gold and silver motes seemed always to dance around the Morningstar, swirling in the tides of its energy, trailing after it like a coronation cloak. It's possible.

"Raquel say you can hear the Blue Lady's real name if you put a seashell to your ear and listen hard," Alexander volunteers.

"If you know her real name and you shout it out, then not even bullets can hurt you."

"Did Raquel say anything else about the Devil?"

"Bloody Mary his girlfriend."

"Is she now?"

"Uh-uh," Monique says disgustedly.

"Even the Devil can't look at Bloody Mary's face."

"But how come Rafael's family didn't see the Devil and the Blue Lady?" I ask.

Monique scrunches her face up and considers. "I think sometimes something wrong with people eyes."

"Whose—grownups?"

"Yeah, grownups. Maybe even some kids. Mama used to leave us at story time at the library so she can go panhandle. When she come back she say "'How many eyes I got?' I say two. She say 'How many ears?' I say two. Then she hold up her fingers and ask me how many, so I tell her and she say, 'Good. Then I ain't invisible.'"

I nod. It was an exercise in spiritual erosion just getting together \$8.70 to pay for their banana splits here, so I'm not about to argue.

"You the only grownup I ever know who believe the stories. I don't mean the Bible stories. A lot of grownups believe those."

"But those were a long time ago."

"Yeah. Like when the angels came to Lot to tell him about Sodom and Gomorrah getting burnt, they believe that story. But if angels don't die... don't they still got to be around?"

"Makes sense to me. Look at that, it's late. You'll miss curfew." I walk them back down the seven or eight blocks between the ice cream place and the group home. Monique's hand is wrapped around three of my fingers. They tell me goodnight and skip up the steps. I head for the bus stop at the end of the block, wondering if any shelter tickets are left. Probably not at this point.

A sputter of automatic gunfire erupts somewhere behind me, followed by the snarl of a revving engine. A car-shaped blur whips past.

Ashbury's damn hair-trigger adrenaline kicks in, making my heart thud and my head go light. For a second I think I might actually faint. But I force myself to turn around and stagger back up the street. There's a kid here on the sidewalk in a blood-drenched sports jersey and jogging pants. He's rolling, trying to get up. His arm flails at me. I dodge it. *They shot him right in front of the group home*, I'm thinking. *Right in front*. Somebody's screaming inside. A ghost-white young face appears in the window. I fling the front door open and charge right in—thank God it's unlocked—yelling the kids' names.

I bang through a couple hall doors before I find the room where they're all gathering to huddle, down below



the level of the windowsills. The counselor who's dragged the phone down to the floor to call 911 blinks up at me.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Where's Monique and Alexander?" I shoot back. Just then another counselor hurries in with Alexander in her arms and Monique alongside.

The phone in the first counselor's hand squawks and she jabbars into it. "I don't know. Police, ambulance, I don't know. Somebody's shooting out there."

"Tell them there's a boy down in front of the house," I tell her.

"There's a boy down. No, I don't know the name, I just—*sit your black asses down!*" she screams at two of the older kids.

"Come on, get down," I whisper to Monique. The counselor holding Alexander snuggles against the wall. She spreads her hand over his head like that would stop a stray bullet. Monique slides over to my lap and parks herself. The counselor stares at me. Of course. Nobody can ever think of a decent reason for a middle-aged man to care about a little girl who plainly isn't his daughter. But now doesn't exactly seem the time to explain.

I start humming a tune. I have no idea what it is, it's just something Ashbury knew. Monique is spring-wound in my arms. The 911 operator finally gets the counselor to stop panicking and give an address.

The humming is for me too. I'm doing my best to be calm for the kids. I don't want to get angry yet. Not this angry. Not here.



It's so easy. Maybe that's what's been wrong with me all along. Metals, salts, acids, ions: the things of earth are still supple and obedient under my fingers. They don't know they're not supposed to be. They don't have wills, only properties—some obvious and some hidden to all but the eyes of the angels that formed them, but anyone could master them completely with time. Not all Creation is so well behaved. I had no idea. I thought I could shape the humans too, structure them just like the molecules in a

crystal. Or, at least, I saw no reason why one such as the Morningstar should have any trouble with it.

There were bullet holes in the kids' headboards. Bullet holes. This is honestly the best the city can do for them. Theoretically they're lucky—other kids are sleeping in dumpsters so they'll stink too bad to get raped.

*Something wrong with people eyes.* No shit, Monique. No shit.

I need to keep the device small, small enough to go in a little girl's pocket or around her neck. Twisted paper clips and piano wire actually do pretty well for the cage, a crude but effective celestial replica dotted with tiny slivers of refrigerator magnet to help draw in and contain the energies. But the components for the core take me all day to gather. I'm forced to scrap my first and better idea and jury-rig it with something that only really works in Renaissance gemology. So I find an occult bookstore and rip a relevant paragraph out of Agrippa, wrapping it carefully around the offending anachronism as insulation.

"Never heard of no angel Sefhidor," Monique frowns when I bring it to her. "You sure he in the secret stories?"

"He's in some of the most secret stories there are. His name is one of the forty-four hundred carved on the Earth's cornerstone." It's thrilling that I can say these things to her simply because she's a child. Some days I think I could just as easily be a figment of poor Ashbury's nightmares, and no one including me would know the difference. "This charm has his breath in it. If you wear it, it'll protect you from harm. And if you hold someone's hand, then it'll protect that someone too."

She looks at it, spinning on the velvet ribbon I've strung it on, glinting dimly under the streetlight. It doesn't look like most right now. "Where you get it?" she wants to know.

And that's the end of my truth-telling. "My sister gave it to me, long ago," I answer. "Take it."

She touches it, takes it into her hand, jouncing it around a bit because it's been chilled in the evening air. But almost right away it warms in her palm. I fold her fingers over it.



"Do you believe in angels or not?" I prod her gently. "Do you still believe they're out there waiting to help, if you can just call their names?"

"I still believe it," she says, and her voice trembles a bit, but not with doubt.

"Then open your hand."

She does. A dull red glow, like light shining through a sheet of living muscle, leaps to life deep inside the device. I look up into her eyes. They've opened wide to catch the little bead of radiance, to mirror it. So little's left in her world that shines.

"There, see? Now put it on." I help her get it around her neck. "And remember the secret name... he's your guardian angel now."

"Sephidor," she says, not just correctly but beautifully. A flash of sorrow and pleasure courses through me: I am alive, I exist. I am an Annunaki, fallen artisan of Heaven, giver of wonderful and perilous gifts. Suddenly her arms circle my shoulders.

I've done it again. Why am I still so shocked that the Host won't show itself, that a demon should be the only one who seems to give a crap what happens? Maybe I think I'm proving something.

Or maybe it's this, just this, that I want.

So little left that shines...



It's not even a week before the device has to go off for the first time, while the kids are on a school field trip. Not that I know this at the time. Unless they say my name—and I don't mean "Sam"—I can't really know what's going on with them. But I get it from them later, after.

So this TV star, I don't know who exactly she plays but it's something involving PVC jumpsuits and assault rifles, decides to take the kids at Monique and Alexander's school on a tour of the soundstage for her show. There's a lot of this going on in LA right now. Celebrities without much to offer past their fame working that one asset just as hard as they can. Well, there they are on the soundstage with the star telling her funny stories and her handlers and agent

kind of orbiting alongside and a huge crowd of kids squishing in as close as they can, and some knucklehead boy dares one of the older girls to climb a ladder somebody left up against a lighting tower. Then as she gets near the top he starts shaking it to try and scare her. Monique and another boy jump in and try to stop him. Within seconds there's utter commotion, security jabbering into walkie-talkies and teachers yelling at the class to get back. A few of the grownups rush over, but by that time it's too late. The ladder's wobbling, waving, falling with the girl still clinging to the top.

Monique, frozen in terror, feels a sudden flare of warmth on her chest and sees the ladder actually *slide forward* a little on its legs before it comes crashing down right on her.

Or rather, right around her. One rung just in front of her and the other just behind her. After a moment of dead silent shock she turns around. The other kid who tried to help is lying pinned beneath the ladder, an oozing scrape on his head. As for the girl on top of the ladder, the security guard *tried* to catch her. She sits up, dazed. There's a patch of blood spreading through the fabric of her jeans, and a scary-looking lump underneath.

Monique feels the weight of eyes on her, staring. A blush rises in her cheeks. One stare in particular is heavier than the rest somehow—a man in a turtleneck, one of the starlet's handlers. He's youngish and good looking, and his face is a blank of surprise just like everyone else's, but somehow his surprise and just everything about him is more intense. Magnetic.

As she meets his gaze, she sees one corner of his mouth twitch with the beginning of a smile.



"With the angels let us sing, alleluia to our King..."

The word *angels* catches me up like a short leash. It's stupid, but I stop. I'm being addressed.

The month's swearing on toward its end now; school's out. A sign over the tarp-covered stage says *Oasis Christian Church—Christmas Benefit for Earthquake Victims 6:30*





p.m. They've got a section of the plaza blocked off. People are dropping money into the big plastic barrels in the audience area. It must be one of those new megachurches, or maybe one of the lefty new-agey ones, because the choir is such an eclectic bunch, all ages and colors. The only thing uniting them visually is their fresh-pressed blue robes. Their robes and their faces, all turned to the conductor. All smiling like the Christmas star's rising right in front of them. Like everything it promised is coming true right here on the street.

"Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly hosts sing alleluia..."

It's nothing—just a bunch of carolers. *I* was there at the very dawn, the first alleluia. I understand the meaning of the word. *They* do not. Cannot. Hot tears well up in Ashbury's eyes, spilling down the crevices in his cheeks. My vision blurs. But I want to cry out that all is *not* well.

All has not been well for a very long time.

And they know it! Half their city lies in rubble. Satan himself appeared to them not two months ago. An even bigger Big One's still lurking there in the depths of the continental plate, ticking off the years. So how can they stand there and sing about how all is *well*?

*How dare they*, I think, and the void within me opens its maw.

Which angel was it anyway that first taught them? It was Nazriel, wasn't it, who explained about the divided string, the proportions of harmony and the modes of melody? Yeah, it's Nazriel's fault my tears are falling now. And yet I can feel such joy in their voices, such a—oh, I never speak the angel tongue anymore and this body doesn't have the words. I don't know how to say it. But I remember all over again how no punishment seemed too cruel to suffer for their sakes. I remember how it felt to bear up an innocent Creation on sure and gentle wings.

Oh, Maker! I remember what it was like to love them....

But come on. Am I going to let them do it to me again? Do they *really* believe everything some guy who died two thousand years ago on the other side of the

world promised them? Or are they just too frightened to let themselves think of the alternative?

Or is it—this thought becomes the new axis that I turn on—is it something else, something about being human? Something that *makes* them human?

Yes. I think maybe it is. I think maybe that's why we fall so much further. How I pitied you once, children of clay. Pitied you your ignorance, your frailty. But see who is broken now. See who comes to you empty-handed and foolish, wanting nothing anymore but to learn.

Look to the One Above for your grace, then, since you can. I, I will look to you.



While I'm doing this, Monique and her brother have managed to get themselves lost. They go for sodas and make a wrong turn on the way back and don't realize it till they start seeing storefronts they don't recognize.

Alexander loses no time at all with the recriminations. "You got us lost. You said you knew the way. Girl, don't you ever watch where you going—"

Monique just grits her teeth. "Shut up. And don't let go my hand," she says to her brother.

"You can let me wear it, and *you* hold *my* hand," Alexander argues.

"No, I can't." She starts to clutch at it, then stops herself. "And you be quiet about it. Don't be talking about it, not here, not anywhere."

"You always talking about it!"

"Stop it, Alexander."

"Hey little girl, you and your brother lost?" A man at a pay phone says as they go by. "I've got a map in my car right over there."

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "No thank you, sir."

"Candy too. No? Oh now come on, I don't bite...." But he's already fumbling in his pocket, moving forward. A second later he's jumping back again as a motorcyclist roaring by them hits a slick spot in the road and wipes out sideways, skidding into Map Man and pinning him up against the pay phone. The kids stare for a second at the unmoving body



wedged under the bike and Map Man crammed painfully into the phone carrel, then use the wits the Maker gave them and run until they're out of breath.

Panting, they look around again—still lost. “What if we miss curfew?” Alexander complains. “You getting us in trouble.”

“You gonna let me think or not?” But in a way Monique feels better now. Her angel is watching out for them, obviously.

Alexander falls silent for a few minutes. Then all of a sudden he starts pulling at her.

“Hey, hey! Monique! Hey, Monique! Look, palm trees! Look!”

“Not now, Alexander.” She glances over. They're passing a minipark, one of those ridiculous attempts to de-ghetto the ghetto by putting a speck of green in it, like it's contagious or something. But there are a couple palm trees, roughing it as best they can through the LA winter.

“But Monique, the palm leaf for Mama, to put on her grave! Come on, it won't hardly take a second!”

“Fine.” She half pushes him up a tree so he can reach up toward the closest leaf.

“Monique.” All of a sudden he's whispering. “Hey, lift me up some more! Something over there.”

“Over where?”

“Look, look that way. See the light? Push me up higher.”

“I can't push you up no higher.” But she looks. Sure enough, there's a glow of some kind coming from deeper within the park, half-observed by the bushes. It looks like sunlight through water, wavering patches of blue and white.

Alexander jumps down, even more excited now, and runs toward it. Monique follows. Battling instincts cancel out. She shouldn't be going anywhere but home. She especially shouldn't be chasing mysteries at this hour. On the other hand, it's such a beautiful light, and colored light too. Colored light is a good thing—the secret stories say it attracts angels because that's what they like to eat.

(Actually I confess a preference for hot dogs, but that's definitely Ashbury's fault. Anyway I'm fallen, so I don't guess I count.)

They come around the bush and there, standing under the tree, is a woman. Or actually she's not so much standing as floating a couple inches off the ground. She's got dark hair and shimmering blue skin, which is what's throwing off that pearly radiance. Her arms are out in a sort of Jesus posture with the palms upturned, as if to welcome and bless them all at once. She's draped in folds and folds of what looks like the finest bridal lace, except it's all blue, and it and her hair are floating slowly around like she's underwater. She's got wings almost as big as she is, spangled with little beads of moisture that catch the light and sparkle. By all rights she should be a ghostly vision, but she's not. She's absolutely solid, visible and touchable. She's as real as the lamppost nearby, and brighter.

Of course the kids stand there dumbstruck. The woman leans forward and kisses them each on the forehead. Now what you have to understand is first of all, nobody has kissed these kids since their mother died. The counselors are there to see that they brush their teeth, stay off drugs, do their homework, and don't hog the hot water. Kissing is not in the job description, and besides, they're too scared of lawsuits.

But it's more than that. She smells nice. Her smile is gentle, and the kisses she plants sends warmth all through them so they feel like—this is exactly how Monique puts it—like they've walked into a room where a fire is going and a Christmas tree is all lit with presents mounded up underneath and turkey's roasting somewhere. Just the way you always see it on TV. Her wings curve forward, arching around them as though to shelter them.

Monique knows thirty-one legends of the Blue Lady. They don't always agree, but there are certain things that stay the same from story to story. They all talk about the blue skin, the dark hair, the sweetness of her face, the wings. Most of all, they talk about how good it feels to be near her. How like a waking dream.





"I need your help," she says to them, and the voice is so kind and musical that Alexander starts to cry. "A great darkness is on the city. If no one stops it, many children will suffer."

She stretches out her arms to them, and they step in. A moment later they're up and out, bursting free of the thickest layer of pollution. Shabby, dirty buildings become dark blocks adorned in twinkling light, the skyline rolls into sight and a cold breeze stings their cheeks and ears, waking up their senses. The Blue Lady's wings spread wide and beat powerfully against the air. For the first time Monique looks at Los Angeles and finds it beautiful. She's above it all for once. It's so much easier to feel benevolent from above.

And they're flying, joyously. I don't think it ever occurs to either of them to doubt her strength, to wonder where they're headed or into what danger. This is a dream come true. How often does that happen? Why ruin it?

The Blue Lady draws them closer. Regardless of whatever great darkness she was talking about, she doesn't seem to be going anywhere in particular. She swoops through clouds and over water. Then after a while she alights in a big comfortable oak tree in a garden somewhere. By that time they're feeling a little drowsy, exhausted from the thrill of soaring, warm and safe in the arms of this amazing being. The breeze waves the branches of the tree back and forth, and the soft rustling of the leaves is a lullaby all on its own.

They both drop off into the most peaceful sleep they've known in years.



Alexander wakes up and lies real still. At first he lies real still because he's in the most wonderful bed he's ever slept in and he wants to drift off again. But there's voices coming from the next room. One of them is definitely male and pleasant, rising and falling musically; the other one, though, would wake anybody out of a sound sleep. It sounds kind of like someone taught a dozen rats to talk in chorus.

"Young Monique would seem to be the one bound to it, yes," says the male voice as Alexander creeps up beside the barely open door to listen. "But unless I'm mistaken,

it also protects whoever holds her hand, and that, my lord, is the truly interesting facet of its design."

"Explain," says the other voice.

"Well, my lord, one must wonder exactly what would happen if the one holding her hand was also the one trying to hurt her."

"If the charm works the way they always used to, the energy would still be reflected somewhere. A bystander perhaps. *Someone* must pay."

"Yes, my lord. But then supposing there are no bystanders?"

An unidentifiable rumble.

"I begin to see what you mean."

"It has nowhere to go. The device is already protecting everyone within its reach."

"Yes, I see. Your theory is that it would simply build up until the device could no longer contain it..."

"Exactly. A veritable explosion of bad karma. Together with the usual rites, it should be enough to make at least a small rip."

"I'm getting tired of *small* rips, Nineresh."

"I'm estimating conservatively, my lord. But even so—surely there are still many lesser colleagues you would rejoice to see freed back into the world?"

"Of course. And it's an intriguing idea in any case, turning the Annunaki's creation against itself. Proceed, then. I always said that there was more to you than a pretty face."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Now, speaking of the usual rites...?"

"The preparations are underway, my lord. As for supplies, remember I also have her little brother."

Alexander peeks around the side of the door, then quickly jerks back. What he sees in that half-second scars his memory forever.

"Good. Then I'll have Ubbuk assemble the list of the chosen and deliver it to you as quickly as possible. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm trying to get the Oscar campaign into swing here..."

"Yes, my lord."



Suddenly the door swings the rest of the way open. Alexander gets folded behind it. A man walks through and heads over to the computer at the end of the room. Alexander realizes he has a terrible choice to make. He can slip back into bed with Monique and hope they get an opportunity to escape together—and something about that conversation didn't make that sound very likely. Or he can sneak out *now*, while the man's staring at the screen, and try to get some help.

With a last desperate glance at his sister's sleeping face, he decides.



At first I think I'm mishearing. I'm listening to this crisis-line woman explain about how the severe weather shelters work (in LA... honest!) and thinking that if it's in the Episcopal cathedral tonight that may not be such a good thing anyway, and right in the middle of it all she says "Sephidor."

My throat goes dry. "Excuse me?"

"I said you'll need picture ID. Did you get what I said before that?" They don't like getting called from pay phones on busy streets. Not much I can do about that of course.

"Yeah, but did you..." For a second I'm sure this is something left over from Ashbury, some post-traumatic thing. But then I hear it again and this time it's more focused. It's not the crisis-line woman. It's coming from somewhere in the distance.

*Somebody's saying my name.*

Monique's the only person I've told my true name to in two years. That doesn't mean it's her. There are others who know my name, most of whom I never want to run into. I hang up the phone and turn in the direction of the call, attuning my being toward it. As I concentrate, more detail comes to me. Young. A little boy, running... he's terrified... he's praying. He's asking for the angel Sephidor's protection. He has a name of his own.

*Alexander.*

Unfortunately this doesn't work both ways. Mortals don't hear these sorts of invocations, they're just good at making them. I take off at a jog, picking my way through

the streets—none of them is taking me exactly where I want, so I cheat a little on the laws of physics. I don't think too many people will really notice if this avenue runs north-northeast instead of north for just a couple minutes, or at least they'll just think it's their own fault for getting lost.

As it happens, I almost run right past him. He comes streaking out of an alleyway behind me, but I hear the pounding footsteps, turn around and catch him.

"Alexander!"

He yells as I snag his elbow, but then he recognizes me and bursts into tears. I bend down in front of him and grab his shoulders.

"What's going on, Alexander? Where's your sister?"

He twists away. "No! Lemme go! There's the car!"

"What car?"

A pair of headlights appears at the end of the block and he strains, trying to pull me back into the alleyway. I let him do it, dropping down behind a dumpster with him. A sleek sedan cruises slowly past us with the window down and a frowning man craning his head out of it. I don't know if we were spotted, but plainly that's the object here.

"Come on." I propel him back through the alley and start tracing a maze. The last thing they'll expect a little kid to do is double back toward danger, so I lead us back the way he came for a bit and then head off in another direction.

"They can smell me," he whimpers. Now that he says that, it strikes me that the man *did* look like he was sniffing. His nostrils were working anyway.

Sick dread comes over me. Most of the time I'm confined to Ashbury's instincts and intuitions, but even this soft flesh can't totally mute things out. I know the touch, the smell of the void and those that serve it. How could I not? So right away I have a premonition. I just need to find out exactly who, and exactly why. First, though, I need to lose our pursuer.

I swing Alexander up into Ashbury's strong arms.



About this time, Monique's waking up to realize Alexander's not with her anymore. She sits up and for the first time, because the Blue Lady's not there anymore either, she really notices where she is, which is a big condo done in what I later gather to be some kind of Asian-flavored ultramodern, red-lacquered wood, black glass and moody track lighting kind of style. Not exactly the kind of place you would expect to find angels, in other words. She heaves herself out of the waterbed and pads in her sock feet across the vast bedroom rug. There's a humming sound coming from the door across from her, a sound she's heard before, although it's been a few years.

She peeks in. There's a man standing there in the bathroom in front of a wall-size mirror running an electric razor over his jaw line. He's just wearing slacks. He checks out his perfect skin under the makeup lights.

It's the man she saw a couple weeks before, the one that was staring at her on the soundstage.

"Have a good nap, Monique?" he asks her. She just shakes her head.

"You... you're a man," she says.

He turns to her and gives her this blazing Sunset Boulevard smile, a smile for a forty-foot screen all trained on one little girl.

"Do you like that better?"

"Where the Blue Lady go?" she asks, even though she knows.

"I could be the Blue Lady for you again, if that'll make it easier. Your... friends at the home say you're quite devoted to her." He passes his hand along her jaw as he walks by. The smell of cologne wafts up from his skin, cool and crisp as moonlight. "But perhaps you're getting tired of your stories at last... maybe there's a new one you'd like to hear. That's why the children's stories are secret, isn't it?" He goes over to the closet, takes out one of those super-soft boutique sweaters and puts it on. "Revenge for all the secrets the grownups keep from you?"

"No. That's not it," she says. Luckily she's still a bit too young to really get the full appeal of one of these

creatures, but all the same there's that smell of moonlight, that sense of an unspoken promise, and it's hard to think of a good comeback.

"But you do agree that fair is fair, right? Monique, the system is trading you around like a bad nickel. You already know that the only way out is to grow up. You'll still be poor—" he frowns as he contemplates his row of semicausal shoes. "But at least you won't be anyone's property anymore."

"I don't need your help to grow up," she tells him. Her voice isn't as strong as she'd like it to be. It's thin, high-childish—and it gets swallowed up in the dark corners of the room. Her eyes burn with the start of tears.

"Of course not," he agrees. "We all grow up sometime."

"You can't hurt me."

"Yes, I know."

She retreats over to the bedstead by the other door. "I have a gua—"

"A guardian angel? Shh. Better not say the name unless you want me to be able to use it."

"Where my brother?"

"I have no idea. He has departed unannounced." A sparking glance. "Which means that another child will have to be brought into this, and that our timeframe has become, shall we say, rather more compressed."

She watches him. She wants to run but she's never seen anyone move like him, so odd and fluid. He comes over to her.

"What are you really?" she asks him.

"Look and see." He holds out his hand to her, palm upturned. She doesn't understand at first, but something catches her eye and she moves closer to look. Something's wrong with the lines of his palm. There's way too many of them, and they whorl and bend in strange directions. As she keeps looking, it almost starts to seem like there's a pattern to it, something she could read if she just knew the code.

Without even realizing it she reaches out to touch a line, to follow it to its end. She looks up, startled, to a sudden tearing sound, and as her head jerks up she feels the creature's hand clamp down immovably over her own.



"We gotta hurry," Alexander nags me. He clutches at my sleeve. I think the poor kid's disoriented. I don't blame him: I can hear four different buskers playing four different kinds of music—loud and mostly bad—and the blaze of storefront lights is blinding. Still, I think I'll have to come back to the Promenade again when this is all over. I bet there's good panhandling here if you don't mind getting chased off by bicycle cops.

"I know," I tell him. "But we can't go until I've found you something to take along. I'll fight this—I don't guess it ever said its real name?"

"No, but I heard—"

"Well, don't say it yet. We'll see if you can write it. Anyway, I'll fight this creature if I have to, but what are you going to do? Now you said you don't think a cross keeps evil away."

"Mama had a gold cross and bad things happen to her all the time. When she went to sell it she say it never help nobody anyway."

"Right. Like you say. So it's got to be something else."

"Like what?"

"Well, I had one thought... " I stop and squint through the artificial glare, agitated. "But I'm not seeing it. Holler if you see anything that looks like beach souvenirs."

"Like towels with stuff on it?" He squints around too.

"No... more like seashells."

"I've got sand dollars," comes a papery voice at the level of my waist.

Startled, I step away and look. The cardboard sign says *NOT a veteran, NOT a father, NOT seeking work, JUST an Honest Disciple of JESUS, God Bless.* The bearded man smiles up at us. I see pewter silver crosses and Stars of David on beaded leather thongs—a little spasm of unease shudders through my stomach—and hemp bracelets with *WWJD* woven into the pattern. He hands Alexander a plastic bag with a white sand dollar inside, along with a blue slip of typewritten paper. Alexander frowns at the words.

"The Leg—"

"Legend of the Sand Dollar," the man finishes. "Ever heard the story?"

"I know it," I say. Then I put a hand on Alexander's shoulder. "This is perfect. I'll explain on the bus. Uh... lessee." I feel my cheek coloring. Actually, if I pay for this I won't have bus fare, and we sure as hell don't have time to walk...

"Take it," the man says. "I believe I'm doing my Christlike deed for the night."



Alexander got the name of the building too, so I can look it up in the phone book, which is good because he'd never have remembered the way back. It's one of those chichi condo developments you can't just walk into. We hide by the entrance to the parking garage and wait for a car to come along. It turns out to be a van instead. As soon as it pulls in, a guy in a suit leaps out the side door holding a suspiciously lumpy garbage bag in his arms, with his 9mm laid up against the side of it. The security cameras wouldn't have picked out that little detail, but I sure do.

Maybe the Maker *is* still tinkering here and there. I get to kill two birds with one stone. The van's driver sinks a bullet into me before I manage to put him and his bag-carrying buddy out of commission. Maybe people will think it's a car backfiring, maybe not. I'd rather cops came, anyway. Anything to slow this Nineresh down. I tear the bag off the poor shaking kid inside and set him loose, telling him to go get help.

The suit's cardkey gets us in to the elevator. "You said he was up on top?"

"Yeah, up on very top."

Good thing we have the *right* cardkey, I bet the elevator won't even go up to the top floor without it.

"Get ready, Alexander." I check the 9mm. It's got a fresh magazine. The wound in my thigh pulls at me, throbbing. Ashbury's gotten shot before and been okay. That memory keeps me from panicking, though I definitely feel lightheaded. My blood dribbles onto the nice carpet. I concentrate for a second and the bullet pops out into my



hand and the hole closes, too late to do anything about the mess, though. It's always possible somebody could invoke and bind me with a spatter of Ashbury's blood. Oh well.

We can't find anybody in the designer murk of the condo itself, but I can *feel* that one of my kind is here somewhere. Luckily I finally think to open the big curtains that take up one end of the living room. There's a whole patio out there with a minigarden and a swimming pool. I see a man leaning over the pool, his arm half-submerged in it. He's grinning. The water around his elbow churns.

"Monique!" I throw the sliding glass door open.

The man looks at me, grins even wider, and lifts his arm. Monique comes up with it, flailing, screaming, spitting up lungfuls of water. He's got her hand *taped* to his with electrical tape.

She won't die no matter how long he's been holding her down in there. The reasonable part of me knows that. But she can certainly be *terrified*. She can certainly suffer the spiritual agony of drowning. My device can't do anything about that.

"Stay back, Alexander." I put my hand on the boy's chest, restraining him. "You don't want to get near the charm right now." I think he knows that, though. Even the dimmest human stepping out onto this patio could feel the terrible charge in the air. All my hair feels like it's standing apart.

The man—the creature, rather, Nineresh—sets Monique down on her feet poolside, or tries to. Her knees buckle under her.

"So you are right here in town," it says to me. "I shouldn't be surprised. So many of us are in LA these days."

"I know what you're doing—Nineresh." My voice comes out husky, half-breaking.

"Of course you do. You know your own work. Whether you actually gave much thought to its vulnerabilities before tonight, I'm curious on that point, but it hardly matters. Look, we needn't become enemies over this. My lord is, for all purposes, master of this city..."

I snort. It ignores me.

"You can be recompensed for losing the device—and its thrall. I assure you, there's plenty to go around for those who serve. And even those who simply agree not to interfere." Well, it's not trying to overwhelm me with glamour, at least. It's just laying out a nice logical proposal. If I really were collecting thralls, I'd accept in a beat of Alexander's fluttering heart.

"I'm afraid you really don't understand the problem here," I say.

"No, I'm afraid you don't, my nameless colleague," Nineresh answers, and as if to prove it right, Monique picks that second to shoot a really well-aimed kick at it. It should have been a kneecapper, but instead it somehow just kind of glances and slides off. Nineresh laughs. I hear a cracking sound beside me—the potted plant by the door is suddenly listing to port and turning black, and the pot itself has split into several pieces, dirt spilling out from in between. Looking around I notice a lot of the concrete paving around the pool is cracked too. I doubt Nineresh had it built that way.

"She's been fighting me the whole time, I'm afraid." Nineresh lifts her back up to her feet. She braces her feet against him and pulls. "It's really helped speed things along. Face it. As long as we're connected, there's nothing even you can do."

Which is absolutely true, I realize. There's no way to end this as long as she believes.

"Sweetheart," I call out. "Monique. Look at me. Look at me now." And I summon my strength, pushing my essence out through Ashbury's pores, swallowing and melting the clay of human flesh for just a moment so that I can show her what her Sefidor has come to. The millennia have not been kind. My skin, once the brilliant black of iron ore, has dulled to ash gray. The brilliant sparks that once flashed through my eyes and mouth whenever I opened them are long since put out. I'm sure I look older, even though it was only Adam's get that the Maker cursed with age. My face is lined from years of frowning, questioning, shouting, raging, all things angels were never really built to do.

Nineresh frankly stares at me, the mouth of its host body agape. The expression is horrible. The Lammasu



have never loved what isn't beautiful, and I am reminding it of things it would doubtless rather ignore. I bet it hasn't worn its own true face since it left the Pit.

"I made the device. I was an angel," I tell Monique. "Once, but no more. I fell a long time ago."

She blinks painfully, a web of tears spreading down her face. I'm killing something in her, killing the one thing that was keeping her going. *Maker, is this necessary? Why must I be the assassin? I love her. I'm one of exactly two people who do!*

"Even so I wanted to help you, but Monique, God didn't send me to do that. I don't even know where God is. I don't know where your mother is or why she had to be taken away. I don't know why anything is like it is, and it doesn't seem anyone's left who can change it."

"You a demon," she says. "A demon."

"Yes," I cry. "Like that thing beside you. And I've been hurting you as well—my gift, it'll kill you if you don't give it up. You have to renounce it. To renounce me. You have to give me up. You have to say it, Monique."

"If she says it, she dies," Nineresh snarls.

"Alexander, show him."

Alexander pulls the sand dollar out of his coat pocket. He's got the little slip of paper that came with it in the other hand.

"This is a sand dollar," he says slowly, glancing at his cheat sheet. I'm glad I coached him, he had trouble sounding some of these words out. "Four holes for the nails in Jesus' hands and feet. One more from a Roman spear. The Easter lily and the Christmas star are on one side, and a po—poin—"

"Poinsettia," I put in.

"On the other side, and five doves for peace hide inside of it." Then he levels his gaze at Nineresh, holding the sand dollar out. "That's why God loves the sand dollar, and so does the Blue Lady."

"Tell it the rest."

"I know what you are." Alexander's voice steadies. He steps forward. I don't want to let him, but I don't have a choice. If these kids don't have the strength to do what they must, I can't save them now. *I can't save them*—that

thought literally drives me to my knees. What good is it being created an angel, what good was any of it ever?

"I know you was an ocean angel just like the Blue Lady," Alexander says, "before you turned bad, and that's how you knew what to look like."

"No," groans Nineresh. It staggers back and raises a hand to block out the sight of him advancing. Yeah, truth hurts, all right. The boy has no idea how many million years of truth he's packing into those few words.

"So I know how beautiful you was in the beginning. And I know how ugly you really are. I know what the truth is now! I know it! And you will never be able to fool me or my sister again!" He's shouting now. Nineresh falls to the floor, stretching, trying to scoot away, but Monique is rooted in place somehow.

"Monique," I call again. Hertz is still on me. "It's already true, I can see it in your eyes. You just have to admit it. Hurry!"

"I give you up, Sephidor." The name rings clear and cold off the patio concrete, off the glass—things of earth, after all. On her chest, the device flickers and dies.

"Good," I say, though it doesn't feel good at all. Not at all. "Now quick, take it off. Put it around his neck!" I have no idea how long the harm can stay locked up in that thing now that it's been turned off, but clearly it's already seeping. Alexander is bent over Nineresh now, trying to press the sand dollar into its face. Nineresh howls and thrashes. Its free hand slaps at the sand dollar, gets sizzled a bit and it howls even harder.

Monique can't quite get the device around its neck with all that going on, but she does get it stuffed into its pants pocket. I toss my Swiss Army knife over so she can cut off the electrical tape. There's a new charge in the air around Alexander, crackling with the power of the new talisman. I better not get any closer.

"Come on, kids. Come on! No, don't drop it, Alexander, come away. Hold it out, keep holding it out. Keep facing him. Don't run, don't show any fear. Come on, Monique!"

Slowly, very slowly, they stand and back up toward me.



Alexander's crying again. I wish Monique would cry, just once.





"What is it, Alexander?" I set the ridiculous plastic box down. It's not that again, I hope. He almost killed me with his sobs when he first saw it. I had no idea what to say, still don't. Marie-Chantal LaMotte gets no dignity, not even in death. When Ashbury's body dies it'll be the same story.

He snuffles, then wordlessly rubs his eyes, reaches in his jacket pocket and pulls something out. It's a crumpled and folded lump of green I don't recognize.

Monique does.

"Palm leaf."

I nod. "Like the story said."

"Secret stories say a lot of things." The words have a grownup edge I don't like. She glances over Alexander's head at me—daring me to disagree.

"Yeah," I mumble. It's true. Stories say a lot of things. They say if you're a good kid the Blue Lady will come save you. They say you can always trust the angels, that someone's always up there listening and caring. She's learned now that her own story doesn't go like that. Maker knows I'm not the first to put it off—course, but I don't think she'll ever really forgive me for what I've taken away.

I don't think she should.

"Can't put it on her grave if she don't *have* one," Alexander says mournfully.

"Yeah." I cast my gaze over the rolling waves. The wind is blowing outward, out across the water.

"You know," I say, "I think we're doing what we can. I tell you what..." I fish out my lighter. "We can burn your palm leaf. That way its ashes'll go along with hers, out over the ocean, toward the sun."

This hadn't occurred to him. A little light of hope glistens in his wet eyes. He nods. Monique's face slackens, relieved for his sake.

"Will that be good enough?" he asks.

"It'll have to be," Monique asserts. Her gaze seeks the horizon too. They deserve a real angel, both of them. They're not going to get one. Me, I'm done giving them gifts, but maybe I can at least look out for them in human ways. And maybe that will be enough. It'll have to be.

Monique opens the box and lifts it into the light.

