

Shadows of Death

By Jason Vey

Luca walked along through the little community under the Sixth Street Bridge, not minding the stench of those who had neither the opportunity nor the propensity to bathe, and basking in the warmth and glow of the many trashcan fires that dotted the little landscape. There was a surreal sort of glow about the place, and somehow everything seemed to move in slow motion. So much sorrow here. So much pain and suffering, and Luca was terrified that he was looking around at the future of the entire Human race. For what little difference one man (or Guardian, as the case may be) could make, he was determined that wouldn't happen. Still, the faces of the homeless brightened considerably as he passed, and he returned their smiles with genuine affection. These were his people, for better or worse, and he loved them as he would love a brother, or sister, or child. He knew when he was among these beleaguered peoples why it was that Guardians couldn't have children. It was because Humankind in general *were* the Guardians' children. Luca made a difference here, more so than any he could make by slaughtering Hounds and Hunters by the hundreds, as many of his brethren did. For him, it was here, among the homeless and downtrodden, that he served his purpose. It was here where his calling led him, and it was here where he'd found his answers after he'd awoken one day with only the vaguest memories of who he'd once been, and with a tiny but insistent voice in his head calling him to a higher purpose.

A gentle hand fell on Luca's elbow and he drifted back to the moment. He turned to gaze at the lovely young Nightbane who walked next to him. Her chin-length blonde hair hung in ringlets around her face, bouncing merrily as she trotted along with him through the homeless community. There was an eternal sparkle in her bright, blue eyes and even at the age of nineteen there were tiny lines at the corners of her mouth which formed from the continual and mischievous little smile that seemed to be the result of the face of her shape.

"Hey," she said in a lilting, almost Elven voice, "you're drifting on me again."

"I'm sorry, Tasha," he muttered. "It's hard to stay focused among these poor souls."

"I know. I'd do anything to ease the suffering here, if I could. We're looking at the future of the whole human race if this war is lost. My God, so much pain, so much sadness. Why do we always have to meet here?"

"Because you need to face the victims of your little faction head on and realize what it is you consort with."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "Please, Luca. I came on a social call, not to be lectured by you."

"Oh really?" Luca grinned, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his black trench coat and leaning against a convenient pole. There was a teasing smile in his glowing eyes as he looked upon her. "So this little visit has nothing at all to do with Miss DeDonnan, does it?"

Tasha sighed. "It's bound to come up. It always does. But I didn't come here to talk you into seeing the light, if that's what you mean."

"Interesting choice of words."

"Bite me."

"Tempting offer," he winked.

"Why do you do this, Luca?" she asked. "We're both on the same side, here!"

"An old, old argument, Tasha. You consort with the undead. It's that simple."

"It's not 'that simple!'"

Luca shrugged. "Maybe not. But I'm not willing to discuss it any further."

"Why do I put up with you?"

"Because you can't resist my Lightbringer charms."

"Right. C'mon, let's walk."

The two friends walked on in silence for a few more minutes, until they came to a secluded, shadowy place underneath the bridge. Tasha found a large rock and straddled it in a distinctly casual and deliberately "unladylike" fashion, settling comfortably on its surface. She looked up at Luca with those big, blue eyes, so full of deceptive innocence, and painted a smile on her face of a sort he'd never seen cross her features before. It was a knowing smile, a loving smile, and a smile full of maturity and sadness at the same time. Luca was worried, suddenly, and he felt a chill crawl up his spine. He drew his long coat tightly about him, knowing full well that the act would do nothing against the cold that rose from within. He studied her for a moment and fought to find the right words for the situation.

"What is it, Tasha?" was all that came out.

"Hmm? Nothin'."

"Don't lie to me, young lady."

"Sorry, *Dad*."

"Very funny. I've never seen that look on your face before. It's—I don't know—haunted, I suppose."

Tasha looked to the ground. She picked up a long stick and started tracing random patterns in the dust. "Maybe. Maybe I just got a bad feeling."

"Nightbane aren't psychic."

"Nightbane don't need to be."

"True enough, I suppose." Luca shivered and looked around for a minute, then turned back to Tasha. "So come on. Talk to me."

Tasha chewed on her upper lip for a minute, and her eyes glazed over with the threat of tears. "I'm afraid there's gonna be another battle, soon, Luca. A bad one."

Luca came to her and squatted down in front of her. He reached out, gently, and lifted her chin with one finger, so she was looking him straight in the eye. The look on her unblemished, childlike face was one of terror far beyond her actual years. "What makes you say this, Tasha?"

"Jamie got word that the Nightlords have abandoned the Point. There's been no activity there for over a week. She's sending me with a scout party to check it out. For now it's a routine reconnaissance mission, nothing special, but she's seemed obsessed lately. I don't want the Nocturnes to suffer the same fate as the Resistance, Luca."

Luca was grim. "This isn't good news. The Resistance led a full out assault on the Point and they were all but decimated for their folly. No faction can take them on in a frontal war like that. Now the Nightlords have cut off the city, and the war effort is suffering on all fronts as a result. Miss DeDonnan isn't that stupid, though. Why?"

Tasha's next words were quiet, almost whispered, and all-too-timid for her usually extroverted personality. "Maybe," she said, "Jamie's hoping you'll help this time."

The Guardian caressed her cheek and pulled her forward, planting a soft kiss on top of Tasha's head.

"One day, perhaps, unity may be necessary. But now isn't the time. We've millennia of hostility towards Vampires at work; we—I can't just throw that away and ignore it. Their destruction is what gives us a driving purpose."

"The Vampires have nothing to do with this particular incident," came a new voice from the shadows. There was a quiet snap, followed by a quick grinding of metal upon metal, then the flare of a small flame from an old lighter, which the newcomer used to light a cigarette. He stepped from the shadows, his leather jacket gleaming against the flickering lights of the bonfires, and ran a hand through his tousled hair. He took a deep draw on the burning cylinder as he surveyed the two.

"Hello, my friends," he said.

"David!" Tasha leapt from her perch and ran to the newcomer, throwing her arms around him. David was caught off guard and staggered a few steps backwards, but managed to wrap her up in a warm embrace.

"Hello, my dear," David said.

"She knows you?" Luca asked, astonished.

"She does, and she knows of the Athanatos."

"Things fall apart," Luca said, quoting Yeats. "The center does not hold."

"What is that supposed to mean?" David said.

"It means," Luca said, "that the Athanatos should keep closer watch over those in their fold. How many others have you told of this secret, David?"

"Hold your tongue. It wasn't I who broke the code of silence. It was Joshua who fell in love with Tasha and revealed us to her."

Tasha pulled away from David and glared at him. "Don't mention that name to me."

David gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head in acquiescence. "My apologies. Luca had to know or else we might have witnessed his temper flare up. And such an explosion of light we do not need."

Although a slight upturning of the corners of David's mouth gave away his intent, nobody laughed at the attempted humor.

"Excuse me," Luca said. "Are you telling me, Tasha, that you left Joshua for David?"

"Not exactly," Tasha said. "I left Joshua because he went bad. David just happened to be there to save my sorry butt when it happened. He's a friend. A brother." She smiled at Luca. "Like you."

Luca was certain there was more in that smile than "brotherly" love for David.

"Now," David said, "what is this nonsense about a new battle for Point State Park?"

Tasha shrugged. "It's just a bad feeling I've got. I'm thinking that Jamie might be jumping the gun a little this time. But she's sending me in with a reconnaissance team to check things out before she makes a decision."

"You should know," David said, "that activity has not stopped at the Point. It is merely subtler and lower key now than it has been in recent months. I fly over there sometimes."

Luca was aghast. "You fly over there? There are Hunters patrolling the skies all over that area at night!"

David shrugged. "I have to keep in shape, do I not? The point is, I have seen quiet activity there at night. I know not what goes on there, but there are forces still at work and in control of the Point. My thoughts are that it is a decoy to draw out the Nocturnes and what is left of the Resistance. So you see, there is no need for you to take this team in. Report back to Jamie and tell her that a scout has discovered the truth, and that a battle would be foolhardy."

Tasha shook her head. "No. Don't you see? If there *is* activity, we need to go now even worse! If they've become so quiet and subtle in their maneuvering at the Point, then that means there's something going on there that's big. I have to check it out, find out what I can. Maybe we can stop it without bloodshed like we saw a few years back."

"Tasha, I promise you that this is a ploy, designed to wipe the rest of you out in one fell swoop. If the Nocturnes are extinguished, who is left to continue the battle? The Warlords?" David looked to Luca. "No offense, my friend, but the Lightbringers have not been extremely effective on that front."

"None taken," Luca said. "You're right."

"No. We have to find out what's going on. Morphinus wouldn't be that sneaky. It has to have something to do with the nexus, and I intend to find out what."

David hung his head, thinking. "Very well. If you insist on this path, I will go with you."

"So will I," Luca said.

Just then, two other Guardians floated to the ground to stand among the trio. One was a rather nondescript male, dressed in a similar manner to Luca, but with short-cropped hair and a brown trench coat rather than a black one. The other was a female, with long, thick hair that reached almost to her waist. It seemed to blow about her as though caught in an eternal breeze that was confined solely to her own body. As a Human she would've been quite attractive, with a sharp nose, but soft cheeks and lips. Her face, as were all the Guardians, was unblemished, and there was a look of wisdom and pure goodness in her eyes. The two faced Luca, pointedly ignoring Tasha and David.

"No, I'm afraid that's impossible," the female said.

"Hello, Sara," Luca responded. "Why is it impossible?"

"She is a Nocturne. We have no business in their affairs."

"Nocturne, nothing. She's a friend first."

"We have no friends among that faction. You have a choice, Luca. Obey me, or be cast out."

Luca was aghast. "You wouldn't!"

Sara stared him down, deadly calm. "I would."

"One day," David piped in, "You will have to accept that things are not so black and white."

Sara spun on David. "I was not speaking to you, Athanatos. Our business does not concern you."

"Any who practice prejudice and hatred in the name of Light concern the Celestials, Sara."

"Your own faction is split between light and darkness," Sara goaded. "At least we are still unified in our crusade."

"After a manner of speaking."

"I am not here to quarrel with you, but if you would care to test who it is that truly possesses the favor of the Light, I am quite willing." Sara's hands began to pulse with divine energy.

"Enough!" Tasha said, leaping between the two of them. "You may not like us," she said to Sara, "but can either faction afford a war within the war right now? Would you kill me to settle a stupid squabble?"

Sara hesitated for a moment. "You have wisdom," she said, and flashed a sudden smile at Tasha. "I like that. But you are still Nocturne, and Luca will not be assisting you."

"Fine," Tasha snapped, and shoved past Sara to Luca. She put her hand on his shoulder and whispered, "We'll be fine, Luca. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

"I promise. I'll see you later." She leaned forward and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, then turned and strode away, grabbing David by the arm and dragging him behind her. She didn't give Sara a second glance.

Only a brief twitching at the corner of her eye gave away Sara's annoyance. "Take care, Luca," she said, "You tread on uncertain ground."

"Shove it, Sara," Luca snapped. "I've done nothing to violate our code. But I will be keeping an eye on *you*." And he turned his back on his faction leader and strode off.

Sara's companion took a deep breath. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing, John. Luca is a solitary, and perhaps it is not for us to understand his ways. So long as he upholds our laws he is to be left to his devices." She rose from the ground, then stopped, hovering a few feet up. "But John?"

"Yes?"

"Keep an eye on him, will you?"

John's smile was anything but friendly. "Yes, milady."

"And tell me, my Nightbane lackey, why would I entrust a garrison of my most powerful minions to a stunted fool like you? I am Morphinus, future ruler of

this meager world, and eventual king of all of the Ba'al!"

Joshua knelt before Thomas Morphinus, his erstwhile Nightlord "master." He kept his head bowed low, so that the monster couldn't see the cynical smirk on Joshua's face as the pompous ass of a beast prattled on about ruling the world and overthrowing Moloch, how he would build a new fortress out of Pittsburgh on the foundation of the old and muster forces of Nightbane and Human alike who would function at his beck and call and be subservient to his every whim. After so long, Joshua had to stifle a laugh.

The stupid bastard thinks I'm a Nightbane, Joshua thought to himself. He'd come here to request a contingent of Hounds and Hunters at his personal command. Pretending to be subservient to this cheap piece of slime had served him well so far, but Joshua could only take the hot air this man spewed for so long before his patience ran low and he brought the full force of the Infernals' legions down on this city. Still, the Ba'al had an uncommon streak of cunning in him, masquerading as a simpleton and weakling, who won his elections on charisma and false boastings, not to mention rigged ballot counts. The man's voice alone was enough to send a shiver up men's spines, just from the wimp factor therein. If Joshua had met this Thomas on the street, he'd have gutted him without thinking about it. At least, he'd have tried. No single Athanatos, Celestial or Infernal, was a one-on-one match for a Nightlord. Now Moloch, that was another story, and it gave Joshua great pleasure to imagine the tortures Morphinus would face in Tophet when Moloch discovered his schemes. Still, for now the whelp served his purpose.

"You should give me what I ask for," Joshua said, "because I can give you the Nocturnes."

"What?" Morphinus bellowed with laughter. "How can you, a pathetic Nightbane, bring me the only organized force against me in this city, who have managed to evade even my most powerful minions for years?"

"Simple. I've had an affair with their second-in-command. After that, setting up an ambush was easy. I just need the troops to carry it out."

Morphinus thought for a moment, gazing down at what he perceived to be a puny underling, a member of a race that held the destruction of the Ba'al in their hands and didn't realize it, who had sold out his kind to the Night. Morphinus would use that to the fullest extent possible. The death of the Nocturnes' second-in-

command would certainly fragment the organization, and make things far easier on Morphinus in this city. He'd managed to decimate the ranks of the Resistance thanks largely to that faction's own foolishness. That only left the Nocturnes and Lightbringers to stand against him. If this little man was telling the truth, what could it hurt, the sacrifice of a few Hounds and Hunters?

"You refer to the sudden lack of activity at the Point."

You're not as stupid as you look, Joshua thought, then added aloud, "Yes. I've set up a ritual that will open a portal to a demonic dimension. Once opened, hordes of creatures of darkness will come down upon this city, thus drawing out the Nocturnes, and perhaps even the Lightbringers. Our forces will join with the forces of this dark realm to wipe out the Nocturnes once and for all."

"And once the battle is ended, we are left with a city full of demons to cope with!"

Joshua smiled. "No. Upon closure of the portal, all entities will be irresistibly pulled back to their home dimension. The ritual is flawless."

"Excellent plan. I will grant you this boon, but you have one chance. Bring me the head of their leader, or I will have yours."

Joshua bowed. "Yes, my master." He rose and turned to leave; he felt sick having uttered those three words, and had a powerful desire to cleanse his palette with a strong dose of mouthwash. As he stalked out of the room, a contingent of Hounds and Hunters fell in behind him, obeying the silent bidding of their Nightlord master. Now Joshua had all he needed to carry out his vengeance on the whore who had left him and the man who had betrayed his love and friendship. Now, they would both pay in blood and suffering.

"Are ye certain of this, Tasha?"

"Absolutely."

"That cuts it, then. Ye can't go in."

"Bull, I can't go in, Jamie! You give me the people and I'll take care of the mission."

Jamie's jaw was clenched. That always meant she was worried. She shook her head and her auburn hair rippled like a pond that just saw its surface cracked by a stone. Her emerald-green eyes flashed with concern and Tasha could almost feel the pain of the decision Jamie was facing. "I dinna like it, Tasha. Not at all."

"Yeah, well, I don't like it either, sister, but what choice do we have? You *know* they're up to something, Jamie. You know it."

"I know."

"Jamie, you took me in when I was a terrified kid wondering why I wasn't dead from all the wounds that had just ripped into my body. You calmed me down when I was hysterical after we slaughtered four hounds between the two of us. You taught me what it meant to be a Nightbane. And you taught me how to be a soldier. I'm a soldier, now, Jamie, and you know we have to do this. God only knows what they're planning at the Point, and the only way we can stop it is to find out what the hell is going on."

Jamie took a deep breath and turned away. Tasha knew her well enough to know that the tears were welling up. "Tasha..."

"Jamie, look. I don't have any illusions about this. But please. Let me do what I can."

There was a pause, and Jamie asked the question Tasha had prayed she wouldn't ask. "How d'ye know this, Tasha?"

Decision time.

"Jamie...I can't tell you. But you've got to trust me on this. I know. I know for a *fact*."

"Dammit, Tasha, if ye can't tell me, then how am I supposed to give ye the green light for this?"

"I could've lied to you, Jamie, but I didn't. My source is reliable. Totally."

"Luca?"

"No, not Luca. But he knows. He wanted to help. The Lightbringers wouldn't allow it."

"Figures, bloody fundamentalists."

Jamie paced back and forth. Tasha held her breath and waited. After a long while, Jamie swallowed hard. *Here it comes*, Tasha thought.

"All right, Tasha. I trust ye. Pick three teams, nine good people, and go. But Tasha?"

"Yeah?"

"Try and come back alive, girl."

"I'll do what I can. I always do."

Tasha signaled the group to keep quiet. She hadn't seen the Point so quiet and desolate at night since she'd been a little girl, before Dark Day. It didn't bode well at all. She turned to her team, and with a quick snap of her wrist deployed three to the left flank and three to the right. Snapper and Safety Pin stayed with her. Another quick cross motion with her hand had all nine members of the party shift into Morpheus form. Tasha winced with pain as the feathered wings leapt from her back, and the bloody Stigmata leapt to life, leaving bloody slashes across her wrists. She could feel the blood seep over her face from the barbed wire that leapt into existence around her head, and noted as always the new physical perfection of her body and lack of blemishes on her skin beyond her obvious stigmata. She closed her eyes for a moment to stave off the pain, and then looked at her companions.

Snapper was on all fours, his transformation to his reptilian, alligator-like form complete. He pulled himself up to his semi-bipedal stance and gave Tasha a grim nod. She turned to her left and observed the final, grotesque moments of Safety Pin's shift. Needles, pins, and nails jutted from his body from head to toe, and blood ran freely down him. It was a marvel he could even see through the newly formed cataracts that completely covered his eyes, and more of a marvel he could talk with his lips shredded as they were. She could tell that as always he was fighting back howls of agony with his transformation, but when it was all over he turned to her and nodded as well. All was in readiness. With a thought, Tasha activated her Shroud talent and obscured herself from the view of all but her companions. If there were Hounds or Hunters in there, the talent wouldn't do her much good, but at least it would hide her from the prying eyes of any N.S.B. agents skulking around, and from many of the various other supernatural baddies they might have in there. Snapper's form darkened, oozed, and melted until it was no more than one of the shadows around him. He slithered a few feet forward, and before long the only

reassurance Tasha had of his presence was her trust and faith in him. Safety Pin relied on his natural stealth, which was almost a match for any Nightbane Talent. He pulled his black coat about him and slipped into the shadows of the covered bridge. Tasha could feel him sneaking forward, but had a hard time spotting him, even with her night vision.

Before moving in, she turned her gaze upward to where David's team was creeping across the top of the bridge in an effort to get a bird's eye view of the Point. Their mission was almost as dangerous as Tasha's - they were far more visible up there than her team was, and in danger from any patrols of Hunters that passed above. Her group was down in the trenches, where any number of horrors could be hiding in the shadows. She didn't like this job, not one bit. The third party was already vanished into the park, scoping the perimeters. It was her team's duty to make their way across the park to the nexus point at the fountain and see what they could see there. It meant a pretty much straight hall across the center of the park. Tasha wished for a moment she'd brought Shade with her team; his Nightbringer Talent would've served them well cutting across the wide stretch of open field. But it also wasn't wise to have all of the obscuring talents in one place. When all was said and done, she probably should've placed Snapper with David's group. All in all the distribution of ability was pretty even and she had confidence in her team. But with these kinds of jobs, any number of things could go wrong...

Tasha gave a quick, sharp hiss and Safety Pin was at her side. A slight shifting of the shadows let her know that Snapper was there as well.

"You guys ready?" she whispered.

"Good to go, boss," Safety Pin mumbled in that eerie cadence that having no lips forced him to use. Snapper was silent as the shadows he melded with.

"It's a long dash across that field, Pin," she said. "I'm thinking it's not a good idea for you to be out in the open with me and Snapper."

"You're probably right. Still, I don't like the idea of you not having anyone tangible to watch your back. Snaps might not be able to revert quick enough if you get in trouble."

"Don't worry about me," hissed the shadow at their feet. "I will be there if Tasha needs me."

"Snap's right," Tasha whispered. "We'll be fine. You worry about yourself. Keep to the trees on the

edge of the park. Stay low, and keep your eyes open. Remember; we can't count on the others for help or the whole thing is shot. Autonomous units. At least one of us needs to get back if there's something going down here. I'd prefer that we all make it out of here alive, but let's do things by the book and be sure that we do, at least."

Pin sighed. "You got it," and he slipped into the shadows of the trees, moving with such grace that Tasha marveled that he wasn't a cat. She looked to the area where she presumed Snapper to be and gave a nod, then moved out across the field, keeping it slow and steady. Not even a locust or cricket chirped in the darkness. Something was very, very wrong here. Tasha kept low, practically crawling across the field towards the small set of stairs leading to the junction of the rivers and the fountain.

She froze. The shadows slithered around her, and Snapper's voice hissed up. "What's wrong?"

"SST!" she snapped, and pointed over to her left to indicate that she'd detected something over there. She barely breathed the next phrase to Snapper. "Something's tailing us."

"Probably Pin," came the answer.

"No, he went to the right."

"The others?"

"Maybe. Keep your eyes open and take it slow."

They moved on; Tasha's eyes were glued to the tree line on the left, across the field. The night was clouded over, with very little moon or starlight, and even with her night vision the trees were far enough away that she had a hard time seeing anything specific, but damn it, she was sure there was movement there, somewhere. If only she could make out exactly what it was that was moving through those trees! It could be Shade's crew, but how was she to know for sure? Well, she was too far in to turn back, now. She had to continue on and pray to whatever gods might be listening to get them out of this in one piece. Part of her damned Jamie for allowing them on this errand, but most of her understood. This was war, and sometimes in war, you had to make sacrifices, even if those sacrifices were your best friends.

A shadow flew across them from above, and Tasha rolled with a gasp, studying the night sky. Nothing. Nerves, probably. She turned back around and began to crawl forward again. The fountain wasn't

much further, and at least the few walls, stairs, and trails there would provide some degree of cover.

The two companions made it across the field with no obvious incident. Tasha dashed the last few feet and crouched at the wall that framed the left side of the stairwell. The shadow that was Snapper slid up next to her and huddled. The two of them sat, stock still while Tasha tried to catch her breath. A good twenty feet away, Pin stepped from a copse of trees and began creeping along the wall to them. Tasha nodded at him and turned her attention to the fountain. It was turned off at this time of night, but there was a strange sort of glow emitting from the spigot. It was bluish in color and almost resembled a tiny crackling of electricity. What she wouldn't have given to have a mystic with her now! She didn't know anything about Ley Lines and Nexus points, and she had no idea if this was normal or not. She knew that the nexus was supposed to be right over the fountain, but that was about it. She'd have thought there would be more guards here; this place was such a major point of contention between the Ba'al and the Factions. What was going on?

Pin was almost to them, now, and Tasha was sure this was some sort of trap. Maybe the Ba'al would let them get out to report the lack of activity back, and then be waiting in droves when Jamie sent a larger force in? Tasha was determined to find out what exactly was going on here, and if and where the Ba'al were hiding. Suddenly, Tasha realized she'd never felt so alone in her entire life. There was a stillness in the air, a sense of isolation unlike anything she'd ever experienced. With the stillness was a tension. The whole thing felt like a rubber band ready to snap, or the string of a bow pulled taut and held just before release. It was quiet, dead quiet, and Tasha came to realize with dread that she felt like she was being shut up in a coffin, a tiny space with no escape. A cold and noiseless wind seemed to arise, and Tasha felt the hairs on her arm stand up. As Luca said, Nightbane weren't psychic. What was it, then? Something, somewhere around here, just wasn't right, and if she wasn't psychic, that meant on some level that she'd detected something with her physical senses. If only she could figure out what it was.

A faint sound rang out in the distance, and Tasha threw up her hand, signaling the others to halt. Pin dropped to a crouch where he was, and perked up his own ears. Again the sound came, a soft clanking sound, joined by another, and another; then a thud, and more clanking. Jesus, it was the sounds of fighting on the perimeter! Shade's group!

“Jesus God, no,” Tasha muttered. “It is a trap. We’re screwed.”

Pin leapt to his feet. “That’s Shade’s group! We’ve got to help them!”

“Pin, no!”

Pin took a step, intending to run, then let out a choking groan as blood bubbled from his mouth and a black spear protruded through his chest and tore up, then back down. Before Tasha could even register a response, Pin’s body was torn open, ripped asunder from abdomen to throat. Behind him in the dark, a seven-foot tall silhouette rose up and gleamed in the moonlight: a Hound. It gave a jerk, and Pin’s limp body fell from the spear and landed, lifeless, on the ground. Then it turned and looked right at Tasha, easily seeing through her Shroud. More figures began to emerge from the shadows all around. Somehow, through her shock and horror, Tasha managed to pull her .45 from its holster and empty a clip into the Hound that had murdered Pin. The thing barely flinched, and closed on her, its skull-like face leering down at her with an expression of frozen, sadistic glee. She swung once, twice, a third time, putting all of her strength into each blow and screaming out at the top of her lungs. She grabbed hold of the thing’s head and tore left, then right, pulling it from the torso, which clattered to the ground. She spun and hurled the head at a second Hound that closed upon her. She gave in to pure fury and launched herself in full flight at the beast, though something inside told her this one was as desperate as they came. A cold stiffness gripped at her heart even as the heat of rage built within her, and the fight was on.

The momentum of her flight bore both her and the Hound a dozen feet away from the original battle site, where Snapper took on physical form and desperately fought to save his leader and get the two of them away. His claws took down first one Hound, then another, before the element of surprise wore off and the creatures realized a new enemy had emerged from the shadows themselves. Snapper set himself against the group of creatures that came for him, a look of grim determination plastered across his reptilian face.

“Bring it on, you greasy bastards,” He hissed, and whirled into action.

“Snapper!” Tasha grunted. “The *fountain!*”

Snapper managed to steal a glance at the fountain, where a human in black and red robes had climbed to the center and was drawing strange symbols around the glowing nexus. A ritual.

David heard the commotion from his perch, and it took him but a few seconds to locate the two battles going on in the park. “Oh, no,” he whispered. “Whatever god is listening, please help us.”

“What is it?” one of his two teammates asked.

“A trap,” he answered. “Get out of here and tell the Nocturnes the Point is still well under Ba’al control. It appears to be some sort of ritual at the Nexus,” He scanned the skyline; no Hunters in sight as of yet, “and it looks like I am the only one who stands a chance of getting there to stop it. I shall follow along with whoever I can get out of here.”

“But you’re just one Nightbane!”

David spun on him. “I am not a Nightbane, and there is no time to explain. Go, now!” He snapped, and launched himself from the top of the bridge, flying full tilt towards the battle at the fountain. His charges exchanged glances, and turned to run.

Both were cut down from behind before they took two steps.

The Hunters climbed atop the bridge from the shadows beneath and launched themselves after David. More Hunters rose from the cospes of trees to either side. David tucked his wings back, angled his body towards the Night Priest, and went into a dive, pouring on all the speed he could muster. Whatever the ritual was, he had to stop it, and fast.

Tasha bore down upon her opponent with feral rage, completely oblivious to the other Hounds all around. Somewhere inside her, she vaguely registered that the light from the fountain was growing brighter. Still, she fought on with a desperate need to get through this, to live and get back to Jamie and Luca and David. She howled in triumph as she brought her fist down upon the side of the Hound’s head and shattered its armored carapace. Two down. She was frothing at the mouth now, and she stood, ready to take on another. In

one fluid motion she drew a sword from a sheath at her back and spun to face her next opponent.

Rather than a Hound, however, she found herself face-to-face with an N.S.B. agent, his gun leveled on her. He pulled the trigger seven times in rapid succession, riddling Tasha's body with bullets in a tight grouping, right at her lung. Shots from several other agents around tore into her as well, and she staggered backwards, choking, tasting the blood that frothed into her mouth. Still, she forced herself to grin at the agent she now faced, who staggered backwards, clearly caught off guard by the Nightbane's resilience. Tasha beat her wings once and created enough current to put her directly in front of the agent, who got one gurgle out before her sword spilled his intestines on the ground.

The Hounds were closing in. Among their ranks were a good dozen others—whether they were humans, Doppelgangers, or Namtar she couldn't be sure; all were dressed in the neat black suits of the National Security Bureau. The pain from the gunshot wounds was intense, though, taking its toll, and she was growing dizzy. A Hound took a swipe at her with its Darkblade spear, and she clumsily threw her sword in its way, only to have her weapon launched far from her grasp and to have the wind knocked clean out of her by the blow to her ribcage. Tasha fell to the ground gasping, choking up blood and bile. Still she did not collapse completely. She pulled herself up to her knees and sat in defiance of her fate. Not ten feet away, she could see Snapper being borne down by six hounds. He looked to her, helpless but determined to rescue her.

“Snapper,” she gasped, “meld. Get...back...to...Jamie. That's an order!”

For one split second Tasha thought that in his desperation to save her, Snapper would disobey and throw his own life away in the process. Then he gave her a final look that in one instant spoke volumes of regret, sorrow, and devotion, and sank to the ground, the shadow that was him quickly merging with the darkness. Just before he completed the merge, a Hound got a nasty blow in at Snapper's throat, then he was gone and Tasha could only pray he was still alive. The Hounds did not make an attempt to give chase. Tasha was alone; she felt in her gut that all of her team, all of her friends had been slaughtered at the hands of these horrific monsters.

She had failed.

David saw the agents empty their pistols into Tasha, saw her take the hit and drop one of the bastards, watched in terror as the Hounds closed in and knocked her down, admired her for her defiance as she rose to her knees, cursed the world and the Megaverse in general, stopping just short of cursing the Celestials, as Snapper exercised his only option and tried to escape. David folded his wings back and dove straight for the center of the battle, intent on simply grabbing Tasha and making good their escape. To continue this battle was not only useless, it was foolhardy. Everyone else was dead, and the two of them stood no chance against the numbers here. The wind beat against his face, and the now bright light from the fountain Nexus threatened to blind him. A rift formed there, and legions of demonic creatures poured forth, spawned from the very bowels of Hell. The ritual, it would seem, was complete. In desperation, David redoubled his efforts and sped towards the Night Priest. David's claws extended and he tore into the Priest's chest just as the final words of incantation were leaving his lips. Perhaps out of reflex, from decades of battling his own kind, David rose from the corpse of the priest clutching the man's still-beating heart. He gave a contemptuous sneer and hurled the organ into the rift.

There was an instant of blinding light...and the demons were gone.

The Hounds remained, though, and the Hunters were bearing down on David. It didn't matter. All that was important was getting Tasha out of here. He flexed his wings and launched straight into the air. His intent was to swoop into the center of the melee, grab Tasha, and get far away before the minions of the Dark could react. Then he would carry the girl to safety. It was a mad act, but his best hope. He reached his intended height, turned, and dove, his eyes fixed on the prize.

So intent on Tasha was David that he never saw the Hunter swoop down in front of him, and had no time to dodge the vicious open-hand swipe the thing threw his way. David's momentum added to the force of the creature's blow and he went reeling; stars exploded in his head and he lost all sense of direction. He was limp as two pairs of hands bore him up and floated to a landing in the circle of Hounds, a good distance from Tasha.

The Hounds and agents beat Tasha mercilessly and ceaselessly, landing blow after blow of sheer agony, faster than she could begin to heal. The pain was intense; all of Tasha's senses were dancing in her head, and everything was spinning at breakneck pace. She wanted to vomit, but knew that if she did that somehow it would be the end for her. That simple surrender would be the end of everything she was barely holding on to. And she wouldn't let them win this way, damn them! Though it took all of her remaining will, Tasha refused to fall. She remained kneeling straight and tall, because she lacked the strength to stand and because this was better than being on all fours, or prone before them.

Tasha's heart sank when the Hunters landed, bearing David's limp body with them. *So this is it*, she thought. *At least we die together. If only you knew how much I truly love you, David.*

David stirred, just a little. With a few seconds of meditation he would heal quickly, she knew, but probably not fast enough. He raised his head just enough to look at her, and she saw in those eyes the same look that Snapper had borne before she bid him leave, except the look in David's eyes was more desperate, more defiant than Snapper could've ever managed. Then the look changed to one of anger, rage, of desperate, feral, murderous wrath. Tasha barely had time to question the look of fury before a set of rough hands grabbed her around the ribcage and dragged her to her feet. A muscular arm snaked around her throat and jerked her close to a hot, sweaty body. Her wings were crushed tightly against her back; the agony was almost unbearable, and Tasha knew she'd finally reached her threshold.

Then a voice whispered in her ear: "Hello, Tasha, my love."

"Joshua!"

"Yes. Joshua."

She felt the cold metal of a knife blade at her throat and sobbed. "Why, Joshua? Why?"

"I told you, Dear Heart. When you left, didn't I tell you it wasn't over? Didn't I tell you you'd be back in my arms? And lo and behold, here you are."

David grunted, took a deep breath, and cried out. "Joshua! Don't do this! The ritual is broken; it serves no purpose!"

Joshua laughed. "The ritual was a smokescreen, David! And you played right into my hands. This was about one thing and one thing only."

"Are you that petty, Joshua? Please, I beg of you. *Do not do this.*"

Joshua scowled at him. "Why not, David? Tell me! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't take my revenge on both of the people who betrayed me?"

"Because, Joshua," David gasped. "Because you love her."

Joshua paused for a long moment, his gaze never leaving David's. Tension hung thick in the air and Joshua's hand began to tremble, the vibration of the knife blade caused a thin line of bright red blood to trickle down Tasha's throat. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, I love her. And so do you."

"Why, then, Joshua? Why would you kill her? Let us go. Just let us both go."

"Why would I kill her?" Joshua repeated. Then he snarled at David and slashed Tasha's throat from ear to ear. David screamed in grief as Tasha's body hit the ground. Joshua spat on her, then said to David. "I'd kill her just so you had to watch her die."

"NO!" David howled, and grabbed hold of each of the Hunters that held him. A halo of radiance surrounded David and streams of light shot forth from both Hunters for an instant before they were consumed in divine fire. A sword of flame appeared in David's right hand, and he extended his left, launching a stream of fiery spheres into the press of creatures. Then he sliced into any nearby stragglers with his flaming blade, hacking his way to Tasha's rapidly dying body with incredible speed. The Hounds left David a strange amount of leeway as he cradled the girl in his arms. David let the tears flow as he smoothed her blood and sweat-matted hair back from her face. The helplessness was the worst part, knowing that even his vast powers to heal were helpless against the amounts and type of damage she'd sustained. She was leaving, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Please, Tasha," he cried. "Please. Don't leave me. Don't leave us. Not now."

Tasha reached up with a weak hand to touch David's lips. "At least I'm in Morpheus," she gurgled through the blood. "He won't have a trophy of me."

"Defiant, even to the end," David tried to joke.

Tasha shuddered and choked down a breath. The blood was everywhere, all over David. Tasha's blood. "So cold." She choked, "David, take care of Jamie. Take care of her."

"I will, I promise."

Tasha was overcome with the hacking, drowning cough. The blood flow seemed to have no end. David never imagined through all his battles that so much of the stuff could be in a single body. She shuddered, convulsed, grabbed hold of him and squeezed with superhuman strength, and went limp.

Tasha was gone. By the time David recovered his rage enough to even think about attacking Joshua and avenging her, the last of the Hounds were stepping back into the shadows, then gone. Joshua had let him live. Joshua had *deliberately* let him live. That would be the last mistake the Infernal bastard ever made.

David sat with Tasha as her body dissolved into a tiny pool of black liquid and oozed away into the rivers, then launched himself into the night sky with a howl of rage and pain.

Across the field, Snapper watched his field commander die and hated himself for not saving her as she had saved him so many times. After awhile, he turned his back on the carnage and went to deliver the horrific news to Jamie DeDonnan, his leader and mentor; went to tell her that he had failed her, and failed Tasha, and going over in his mind all the various ways he could end his own life.

The others had all died.

There was no reason he should live.