

Archangel's Salvation

Victoria Novak: Paranormal Division

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PROLOGUE

MARKED

After all these long months, the pounding was a part of him. The steady beat of the drum was as familiar as the beating of his heart, and more reliable. After all, his heart did not beat and had not for over two hundred years.

But the pounding had stopped. For almost three days it had not returned. Down in the bottom of the huge sailing vessel sitting on the bench with his oar among others like him, he could not see out of the boat. That meant it was not long after dark. Sunshine was bad for them, so they only rowed at night. When they shuttered the boat and everyone collapsed, that meant it was dawn. Only once everyone was awake, was it probably dark again. Everyone was awake.

He waited for the pounding beat that would tell him it was time for everyone to row again. There had not been such a long break in the steady beat since he had been shoved down here almost four months ago. Something was happening out there, but he did not know what it might be.

Creaking. The trapdoor in the ceiling normally opened only long enough to send down food in old rusted buckets. That usually happened hours from now. It was only just barely dark. He did not know how he knew this, but he was certain of it.

"You, come," barked a harsh voice. A vaguely familiar voice he had not heard in four months. A hand snapped down on his arm and yanked him to his feet. Usually, only food came to them through the creaky door. They all drank, but it was never enough. Only enough to keep them alive, never enough to keep them strong. Voices did not come from that door.

He followed the relentless pull of the hand on his arm. No fight was left in him. The fight would return, but only if he fed. Right now, staying on his feet as he moved wherever he was directed was as much fight as he had left to give.

"Up," the voice barked. He climbed the ladder in front of him mechanically, without really feeling the wood against his callused palms. Four months ago, he had been shoved down this ladder. This was the first time he had been back up.

Standing on the deck of the boat was like waking up after hibernating; but the hand on his arm did not let him enjoy the sights. He was forced roughly over the side of the big boat and down into a smaller boat. This little boat took them to land. He was only glad that someone else was rowing the boat and he could watch the stars.

That was what he had missed most during those four long months: the fresh air and the stars. A quarter moon hung in the sky like a heavenly smile, and he could not help but feel that someone somewhere looked upon him with favor on this starry night.

Pushed from the boat, he endured a forcible entry into a wagon of some kind. His hands were kept behind him in a death grip, but he did not struggle. He had nowhere else to go. He was not strong enough to fight.

The ride in the wagon was long. Several weeks of riding in the wagon by night, hiding by day. He never remembered much of the places they stayed to hide from the light. An endless blur of small houses, caves, tunnels in the sides of hills. The places meant nothing to him.

Through the weeks of travel, the stars were his only comfort. He was fed, but still never enough. Never enough to give him the strength to wonder where he was going. To wonder to whom he was going. Just enough to survive. Enough to see the stars for one more night.

Finally they stopped traveling. The underground system at this stop was more complex, bigger. Others walked the tunnels. He was dragged before someone with power. This had to be the new Master.

"What is your name?" the Master asked.

"Gabriel," he answered. "Like the angel." That was what she had told him, when she named him all those years ago. He had the face of an angel, so he would forever bear an angel's name. And he had. For two centuries, he had borne the name she had given him. His angel's name.

"An angel?" the Master sneered. "You are not an angel. You are a demon. An abomination." The Master looked to the side. "I will make him mine, then you will mark him."

More voices. Quieter this time. Even his improved hearing could not catch the words. He was pulled to his feet and dragged to the Master. Forced to his knees with his hands still held behind him, he could not escape their hold. Not that he even tried. He knew what came next. He'd done this before.

Without being told, he turned his face to the side and tucked his chin into his shoulder. The twin pains in his neck did not cause him to flinch because they were expected. The deep tugging relaxed him, as it was meant to do.

"By your blood in me, I accept you," came the harsh voice of the Master using the formal words. "By your blood in me, I give you life. By your blood in me, I bind you to me."

The Master offered a wrist, and he gently bit down into the skin above the vein. One small sip, and the magic bound them together. The master pushed him away.

It was done. He was forced away from the Master, dragged to his feet and down a side tunnel. The underground was dark and he already missed the stars, but he did not dare open his mouth to complain.

Even as the hands shoved him down to the floor on his back and pinned him, he did not complain. When they came at his face, he did not complain. When they began to draw on his skin, he did not complain. But when the hot and searing pain ripped through his cheeks and chin, he screamed. Eventually, he passed out.

When he woke, he was marked. His face was masked, covered with two large black stains. It took him a long time of staring into the murky water basin to decipher what they had done to him.

Angel's wings.

They had put angel's wings on his face.