
EVICTION ORDER
A DOMINION FAN FICTION BY TEEJAY

Title: Eviction Order

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Genre: Gen

Characters/Pairings: Michael, Alex Lannon, Ethan Mack, Noma Banks

Rating: PG-13

Warning: Contains spoilers for season 1 and a bit of swearing

Summary: What do you do when you're the Chosen One, when you possess skills that you never thought you'd be capable of, and you hear that one of your friends has been possessed by a lower angel?

Author's Note: This story is set some time after episode 1x08, with the assumption that somehow both Alex and Michael are back in Vega and Noma is still/again with the AA Corps. I'll leave it to you to imagine how their storylines were resolved after the season finale, but in the aftermath of the lab incident, let it be said that things aren't exactly peachy between the Alex and Michael.

Massive thanks go out to the lovely Alipeeps for the beta.

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"Alex."

The voice was familiar, the British accent and its inherent poise unmistakable. Yet, to Alex it sounded all but alien because he hadn't heard it in a long time.

He slowly turned around. He'd last seen Michael—when? Weeks ago? Yet, the archangel looked the same, even in the half-light of the shady alley where the light from the streetlamp wouldn't quite reach.

"What do you want?" Alex asked without preamble.

"You should come with me." Matter-of-fact, as always.

Alex shook his head incredulously. "Seriously? In case you've forgotten, the times are long past where I'd ask 'how high?' when you said 'jump'."

"It's important."

"Yeah, isn't everything these d—"

"It's about Ethan," Michael interrupted him.

That got Alex's attention. "What *about* Ethan?"

"He's been possessed."

"What do you mean, *possessed*?"

"He's been turned into an Eight-ball."

All color drained from Alex's face. No. That couldn't be. There was no way Ethan would go outside the walls. Could possession happen in Vega? That seemed unlikely. Yet…

"How do I know this is true?"

"You don't. But believe me or not, it won't change the fact that your friend has been turned into a murderous creature that will be executed on sight if he returns to the city."

His tone was icy when he asked Michael, "Where is he?"

"I was able to intercept the Blues before they could kill him. I brought him to the Triple-X."

Alex knew exactly which place Michael meant. Not gracing him with another response, he turned on his heels and made for the nearest gate. Michael hurried after him. "Alex, wait."

He didn't stop, didn't slow his urgent pace. "If you're gonna try and stop me, you better give it your best shot."

"Let me help you."

"Help?" Alex let out a sarcastic chuckle. "Like you helped Louis? Or Becca?"

A dark shadow seemed to cross Michael's face, but Alex wasn't sorry. Michael could go screw himself, for all he cared. Granted, if what Michael had just told him was true, he might have saved Ethan's life, but that was hardly going to make up for what he'd done.

Alex briefly paused his stride, facing Michael. "Look. I appreciate that you've… done this. But I'll take it from here, all right?"

"I can help you, Alex," Michael repeated, but Alex kept walking, the archangel's voice already fading, telling Alex he wasn't following.

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The pale teal building was remarkably well preserved, given that it was located outside the walls. The "NUDE & XXX SHOP" sign on the roof was still intact, the windows undamaged for the most part.

Inside, outdated raunchy magazines lay scattered across the floor, bearing titles such as "Lust" or "Perfect Pussy". Some of the metal poles had been dismantled, shelves overturned, velvety red pillows littered what remained of the plush, purple carpet.

However, Alex only had eyes for the cubicles that lined one of the walls. The beige curtains were drawn on all of them except the middle one, and Alex dreaded stepping closer. His very being was churning with dismay at the thought of laying eyes on what Ethan would undoubtedly have become—nothing could prepare him for seeing his best friend turned into one of the wicked creatures he'd grown to hate with a vengeance.

He hesitantly took a few steps forward and took in what he saw. It was surreal to recognize his friend, yet not his friend any longer. The telltale black irises glared at him from across the sizeable Plexiglas barrier, dark purple veins crisscrossed Ethan's face. Sharp, pointed teeth snarled at him, and Alex wanted to recoil; yet held his ground.

"Shit," he hissed. There'd still been a slight hope that Michael could have been wrong, but it hit home now that he wasn't.

"I know you," Ethan's voice said.

“Yeah, you would, wouldn’t you?” Alex muttered more to himself than to Ethan. *Not* Ethan. He couldn’t call this creature Ethan, it wasn’t right.

He made a quick decision to call him Mack, determined now to find out how much of his friend was still left in the Eight-ball.

“Do you know who I am?”

“By the way you’re dressed, I’d assume Archangel Corps.”

“Yeah. What else?”

“If you’re really AA Corps, I should be dead by now.”

Alex shook his head ever so slightly. “No shit. What’s my name?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Mack said disdainfully.

“Because we used to be fucking best friends!”

Mack narrowed his eyes, an ugly half-smile twisting at the corner of his mouth. “Gee, isn’t that a coincidence? Explains the not-dead part, though. You humans. Always with the emotional attachments.”

The feeling of dread in Alex’s stomach intensified exponentially. This person, this being, he couldn’t see anything of Ethan in it. How could it be that Clementine had retained the essence of her personality all those years, and his friend seemed to be just… gone?

“Dammit,” Alex whispered to himself, turning away from the cubicle, pressing his fist to his mouth.

“Oi, human. Am I boring you, or something? When do I get out of here?” Mack called out to him in a mocking sing-song voice.

Shit, shit, shit. This was worse than he’d imagined. An eviction—of course that had been his first instinct. But what then? What if Ethan was truly gone? Even if he could un-possess his body, would any of his friend be left, any of his personality, his soul?

He hadn’t practiced evictions for weeks now. The only successful one he’d performed to date was on a higher angel. Who was to say he could do it again? Who was to say he could finally make it work on a human?

Even if he’d told Michael differently the last time they’d been in this very place, he needed the Apocrypha. Maybe he’d missed something. Maybe the markings would reveal something else to him.

Mack’s voice pulled him from his reverie. “Hey, man. Got anything to drink? I’m kinda parched here. Bloody archangel locked me up ages ago. Need a piss, too.”

Alex drew in a long breath. He was torn between mercy and spite. Did Mack not deserve basic nutrition? Did he—it?—he?—deserve any act of kindness at all? Damn, this was all messed up.

With a grunt of annoyance at his own callousness, Alex went outside to get a bottle of water from his ATV, then went back inside.

He marched straight to Mack's cubicle and tossed the plastic bottle over the opening at the top. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

Mack scrambled to pick it up from the floor with some difficulty, the shackles around his wrists limiting his range of movement. He opened it and sniffed it. "Water? Seriously? Don't you have any of the good stuff?"

Alex couldn't believe the guy. "Take it or leave it, that's all you're gonna get."

"What about my other bodily needs?"

"Sorry, no can do."

With that, Alex left the Eight-ball to his own devices, not looking back.

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Alex was pacing, trying to muster the guts to make the first step that was going to be the most difficult. He really didn't want to admit he needed Michael's help, but he couldn't see any other way.

For what felt like the fiftieth time, he marched up to the elevator door on the ground floor of the Stratosphere Hotel with his hand hovering over the button, then retracted it again.

Maybe he could rope in Noma to help him get the Apocrypha? No, she'd start asking questions, and he didn't want to lie to her more than he already had. Besides, if she got wind of the truth, there was no knowing what she'd do. Maybe she'd kill Ethan—Mack—whoever he now was—faster than he could even say eviction.

Fuck it, he had to do *something*. His fingers touched the elevator button before he had even consciously decided he'd finally do it.

The elevator car climbed the thousand feet to the top of the tower so fast that Alex's ears popped a few times, and he wondered if Michael ever actually took the elevator. The doors slid open when he reached his destination, and he was unsure what to expect.

The room seemed empty at first glance. At second glance, he spotted the archangel at the antique mahogany desk across the room.

"Alex," Michael said before he had even laid eyes on him, and Alex wondered how Michael always seemed to have that annoying, omnipotent sixth sense.

Alex stepped closer, trying not to appear at the needy disadvantage that he was. "I need a favor," he said flat-out.

"You need the Apocrypha," Michael anticipated.

"Yeah."

"Have you attempted an eviction yet?"

"No," Alex sighed.

"Why not?"

Was he kidding? Why would he even ask that? "Look, do you have it or not?"

Michael opened one of the desk drawers and extracted the ancient, leather-bound book, crossing the room to hand it to Alex.

When Alex reached for the book, Michael didn't immediately let go. His steely eyes fixed on Alex's with such intensity that a shudder started to run down his spine. Michael's voice was gentle, almost pleading. "I can help. If you let me."

Alex couldn't help but swallow. "How?"

"There's more to the Apocrypha than meets the eye."

"And you're only telling me this now?"

"There's something I remembered, something I had forgotten until…" Michael trailed off and Alex studied his expression questioningly. Remorse seemed to mingle with a sadness he'd never read so plainly on the archangel's face.

Alex softened just enough to open himself to the possibility of giving Michael a second chance. "Which is…?"

"In the first 72 hours after possession, that's usually when a lower angel's soul is the most defiant. It's because the human mind is still struggling against the hostile takeover.

"Anger fuels angels in a way nothing quite compares to. The stronger the human mind, the more powerful the angel's will. The Apocrypha describes this; it may hold the key to performing a successful eviction on a human body."

Alex tried to process that information. It was a possibility that the Apocrypha had more to offer than he'd previously assumed, that he'd not been patient enough with what information he thought had extracted from it in the past.

"So you think I should try again, see if the markings reveal more?"

"Yes," Michael simply said.

It didn't take long for Alex to make a decision. "All right. Let's give it another shot."

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"This is total bullshit!" Alex angrily exclaimed and, for lack of anything better, threw his crumpled t-shirt across half the room.

A sheen of sweat was covering his exposed torso, the tattoos glistening in the stifling heat up in the Stratosphere tower. He didn't know how Michael managed to bear living here with the windows open day and night.

The Apocrypha lay open in front of his cross-legged lap; Michael watched him vigilantly from a respectful distance. His voice was as serene as ever when he asked, "Did you see anything else?"

"No," Alex snarled. "Why can't the damn thing ever just say anything like, 'Dance round a tree at midnight in the full moon and chant wagga-wagga'? What am I supposed to do with a cryptic message of, 'Find the connection'? That could mean anything!"

"Perhaps you're making this too complicated. Sometimes the simplest answer is the right one."

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You need to find the connection to Ethan, something that defines your relationship, your friendship. It may draw out his mind long enough to evict the angel without losing the essence of what defines him as a person.”

“That sounds almost too easy. You said evictions have been tried for millennia, and always failed.”

“Yes, but they were never performed by the Chosen One.”

Alex’s face briefly contorted into an irritated grimace, but he had to contend that perhaps Michael was right.

He clapped the Apocrypha shut, getting up from his sitting position. “All right. I’m done.”

When he sensed that Michael was about to follow him, he turned around and faced the archangel. “Oh no. I’m doing this alone.”

“Alex,” Michael protested.

“He’s *my* friend. *Mine*. I don’t want you there.”

Michael seemed to hesitate, then conceded, “Have it your way.”

And while Alex regretted his stubbornness for a split second, he only had to visualize the moment in the lab, with Michael in a blind rage, his hand clamping around Becca’s throat until the life had drained out of her. Who knew what Michael was truly capable of?

Ethan was his responsibility now—and his alone.

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The bottle of acrid schnapps was still where Alex had left it: on one of the Triple-X’s bottom shelves next to a set of cheap porn movies. He took a swig, casting a cursory glance at Mack.

The Eight-ball still had the same snide sneer on his face, as if he knew he had already won. “Back so soon, soldier boy?” the mocking voice intoned. Everything about it disgusted Alex.

Grabbing the bottle, he went back outside, seeking a spot in the shade behind the building. Sitting down on the warm concrete with his back against the wall, he took another long swig, reveling in the sensation of the tangy alcohol burning down his throat.

He snapped to attention when he registered a sudden noise to his left. It was pure reflex to jump up and put his hand on the pistol that was tucked into the back of his pants. He relaxed his stance when he recognized the familiar figure in the gray suede coat.

Alex shook his head incredulously. “Checking up on me?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Michael volunteered.

“What—worried that I’d botch up the task?”

Michael indicated the bottle on the ground. “The concern might be warranted if you’re going to attempt what is probably the most important eviction in your life not at your mind’s full capacity.”

Alex let out a derisive chuckle. “Yeah. Thanks for the lecture. All hark the almighty archangel.”

If Michael was offended by the jibe, he didn’t let it show. “I know how important Ethan is to you.”

“And what would you know about friendship? You don’t have any friends.”

“Your father,” Michael said slowly, deliberately. Sadness swung in his voice. “He was the closest thing I’ve ever had to a friend.”

Alex had never really thought about that, but it made him realize that underneath the stoic, aloof veneer, perhaps there was more to the archangel than he would let people see. He felt something akin to pity for him and Alex’s tone softened. “Do you ever miss him?”

“Every day.”

“Then how could you let him leave? Fourteen years he was gone.”

“Sometimes the greater good is more important than the contentment of one individual. I didn’t have a choice.”

“When he died, you didn’t even grieve. You cast one look at him, and then it was back to business. You weren’t even at the funeral.”

“I was watching from a distance. Just like you.”

“Touché,” Alex thought.

“He was a good man,” Michael added. “He loved your mother very much, and there was no question that he would raise you as best as he possibly could. When the tattoos were transferred to his body, he accepted his responsibility without question; he reluctantly let you go because he, too, could see the need to tend to the greater good.

“I have told you this before, but I will gladly repeat it again. He believed in you, Alex. As do I. I see the same strength in you, the same defiance, the same will to do whatever it takes to do the right thing. He taught you well, and he raised you to become the man you now are.”

Alex’s mouth drew into a sardonic, unattractive grin. “Yeah, right. All those years I spent scouring for scraps, looking for the next best place to sleep, alone and scared and miserable.”

“But those were not the years that shaped you. Those were the years where you learned the skills you now have. The years with Jeep, they taught you love and compassion and respect for the world we live in, and that made you into the person you’ve become. The person who never gives up, who will do anything to save his best friend’s life.”

Alex felt tears prickling in his eyes and quickly blinked them away. He studied Michael’s face for a long time, took in the sage eyes that had seen things over the millennia that Alex couldn’t begin to imagine. He saw eyes that looked very human but in all consideration were not. It had to be a very lonely existence to outlive generation after generation, to deny himself human attachment as much as possible. He wondered if they could…

It surprised even Alex when he actually said it out loud. “Do you think we can ever be friends?”

Michael’s eyes seemed to want to stare right into his soul, and after a long moment, his mouth curved into the faintest of smiles. “I’d like that very much.”

Alex wasn't sure what to do with that answer. "Yeah, but you see that it's not as easy as that, don't you? Friends trust each other. How can I trust you when I know you're capable of killing the people you claim to love?"

"Friends also forgive, believe in a person's ability to learn from their mistakes."

"And have you?"

Michael cast his eyes downwards. His voice was low and sincere when he said, "Yes."

Alex drew in a long breath, letting silence settle for a long moment. With newfound resolve, he finally said. "All right. We're losing time. It's now or never."

When he strode back towards the building's back entrance, he realized that Michael wasn't following him. "You not coming?"

"I wasn't sure you wanted me there."

"Well, fuck it, I need all the help I can get."

Michael followed him inside wordlessly.

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It was interesting to see, thought Alex, that Mack's demeanor changed entirely when Michael was in the room. The smug superiority was giving way to something more between fear and awe.

Alex realized that the hierarchy among angels must be something ingrained in their being, even though he knew few of the lowers had true respect for the choices Michael had made. Yet, they must all know how powerful he was.

Alex faced the Plexiglas that separated him from the Eight-ball, still taken aback by how much he still looked like Ethan.

He felt at a loss. He needed to find a connection… like what? He and Ethan had known each other for half an eternity. They'd been placed in the same army training camp, had basically been each other's family through all of their AA Corps training.

He tried to think back to how they first met, but the details were blurry. All those years, it was a long time, and nothing seemed to particularly stand out from those early days. It had been a lot of physical exhaustion, frustrations and the occasional sense of achievement if a particular drill had gone well or a target reached ahead of time.

Then he had an idea. Bixby. Maybe the young girl was their connection. He stepped closer to the cubicle, forcing himself to meet Mack's eyes.

"Do you remember when you were Archangel Corps? Do you, Ethan? We served together, you and I, for years. And then we met Bixby. You remember that?"

Mack only stared at him blankly, and Alex took it as a good sign that he wasn't getting any snotty retorts this time. He continued, "The little girl, scared out of her wits and half starved. Do you remember when we smuggled her into the AAC quarters for the first time? She was barely seven years old, and it was the middle of winter. You gave her your extra blanket because she was shivering so hard. Do you remember any of that?"

Mack seemed to fix him with a confused stare. “Why the fuck you telling me all this?”

Alex’s face fell. “I want you to remember, Ethan.”

“My name’s not Ethan,” the Eight-ball said.

“Yeah, I know. But Ethan, he’s still in there, isn’t he? He’s still fighting to get your attention. That’s the kind of guy he is, and the kind of guy he deserves to be again.”

Mack sneered at him. “The fuck he does. He’s long gone, man.”

Alex refused to believe it, and cast a questioning sideways glance at Michael who was silently watching. The archangel met his gaze wordlessly, and what Alex read was encouragement to keep going.

“You know,” Alex told Mack, “I don’t think he is. Are you, Ethan?”

He racked his brain some more, trying to find that one connection, that one incident that he’d need to get through to his friend. What was it that defined their friendship, what was it that had bonded them together to be more than just fellow soldiers in training?

It took him a few minutes, but then he remembered something that might just hold the key. There was a day years ago, the day where Alex felt like Ethan had confessed something he’d been carrying around for a long time and had finally shared.

Alex stepped even closer to the cubicle’s glass wall, so close that his nose almost touched the window pane. “Ethan, I need you to do something for me. I need you to remember the day we became friends. Come on, go through it again with me.

“It was, what? Eight years ago? Seven? Middle of the night I wake up, and you’re not in your bed. I found you sitting on the floor in front of the supply closet, desperately trying to cover up you’d been crying.

“You wouldn’t talk, so we just sat there. And then the story spilled out. The whole sordid story of the guy you’d been seeing for over two years—a V5. What was his name? Oh, that’s right, Christopher. You were ready to propose to him, only problem was, there’s no cross-V marriage. Plus his family had no room for the concept of their son being gay, so the whole thing was doomed from the start.

“That night, he’d told you it was over. Come on, you gotta remember that night.”

Alex narrowed his eyes and looked Mack straight in the eyes, and finally there seemed to be a flicker of something there, a hint of confusion or recognition.

He pressed on. "You were crushed, and I didn’t know what to do. I stammered helplessly, not a bloody clue what to say, but you—you… I don’t know. Somehow I got you out of the hole, and we ended up giggling like madmen at some silly and probably totally inappropriate joke I cracked.”

Mack’s mouth seemed to want to open, the confusion in the Eight-ball’s eyes now clearly there. Alex had to suppress a small whoop of triumph.

“Ethan,” he continued, “work with me here. You’re still in there, aren’t you? Come on, give me a sign.”

“Alex?” he slowly said, his brow furrowed.

Alex couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, buddy."

Mack's face contorted, the war that must be raging in his mind was now clearly readable in his expression.

Alex heard Michael's voice from behind him. "Now," he just said, and Alex knew it was time.

He started speaking the words he knew by heart now, holding out his hand. "Every shadow has its light. Banish this spirit that inhabits Ethan. Protect this body and soul. Sanctify this vessel, leave this body. Burn away, leave this body, I command you.

"Sanctify this vessel," he repeated with more urgency. "Sanctify this vessel."

He could see something was changing and, unlike most of the other Eight-balls he'd tried to evict, Mack suddenly became very still. The physical appearance was still the same, the teeth, the veins, the eyes hadn't changed, yet something was different.

Their eyes met, and he could see that the lower angel's eyes were filling with tears. That was the moment Alex knew without a doubt that Ethan was still there, that he could be saved.

He closed his eyes, concentrated on the task, on the incantation. "Sanctify this vessel," he repeated, then repeated it again. "Sanctify this vessel."

When he opened his eyes, the transformation was about to begin. Mack sank to his knees, writhing and convulsing for a few, agonizing moments. Then he lay very still, and Alex's heart skipped a beat.

It took another long moment for him to come to, to raise into a kneeling position. Gone were the telltale Eight-ball traits—the face looking up at Alex was the person he used to know, the person he would no longer call Mack.

"Ethan?" Alex addressed him guardedly.

Ethan blinked, taking in his surroundings. "Alex? What the—"

"Hold on," Alex said, about to enter the cubicle to free his friend, but Michael's voice stopped him short.

"Don't you think caution would be advised?"

He wanted to yell at Michael to shut the hell up, but he restrained himself at the last minute. He turned to Michael, his voice almost menacing. "Tell me one good reason why."

"You've seen with your own eyes how volatile and unpredictable the post-possession phase can be."

"Yeah, but this isn't just any damn eviction, is it now?"

Ethan had gotten to his feet, confusion written all over his face at the manacles on his wrist, his imprisonment in the tiny stall. "Eviction? Alex, what the hell is going on?"

Alex turned back to his friend. "There's no easy way to say this. You've been possessed by a lower angel."

"Possessed? Are you kidding me?"

Alex shook his head. "Nope. Wish I was."

“Then how is it that I’m… standing here. Alive.” He pointed at Michael. “Did he have a part in this?”

Michael gave him a steely look devoid of any emotion and Alex could only volunteer, “It’s, uh… kind of a long story.”

In fact, he had never really considered what would happen if the eviction was successful. Would he have to tell Ethan he was the Chosen One? If so, would that change anything? Could Ethan be trusted with the information? No, strike that, of course he could be trusted.

“How about you get me outta here,” Ethan told them.

Alex was torn. There was some merit to what Michael was advising. There was no knowing what could still happen. Did he want to take that risk?

He stepped closer to the cubicle again. “Look, this is hard to explain, but I think we need to keep you locked up a while longer. We’ve done this before, and it hasn’t always been… well…”

Shit, he thought. He had no idea what to say to his friend, how to explain this. “I know you have questions, but I need you to trust me, okay? I promise you I will explain everything when we can be sure this worked. There may be aftereffects. It’ll be best for everyone if we wait at least until tomorrow morning.”

He could clearly see Ethan’s mind was raging with unanswered questions, was trying to make sense of what he’d just been confronted with. “How did it happen?”

“The possession? We don’t know. I was hoping you could shed some light on that. What’s the last thing you remember?”

They went over what Ethan could remember of the last few days, which wasn’t much. Neither Alex nor Michael knew a lot about the process of possession and what happened to the human psyche in the process, so they both listened intently and asked more questions.

It seemed that once the lower angel had taken over, the human mind was being muted and locked away. From what Ethan was telling them, Alex was amazed that he’d managed to get through to Ethan at all when he was possessed. It seemed like a small miracle. Then again, he’d seen enough of those lately to not be truly baffled by any of this stuff anymore.

They kept talking for a long time, and finally, when the most important details had been covered, Michael told Alex to go back to the city and get some rest. Alex was reluctant to leave, but Michael assured him he’d keep watch through the night.

Darkness had fallen by the time Alex got back to the AAC quarters, but there was still enough of a hubbub in the large space, many of the bunk occupants not yet asleep.

Alex sat down on his mattress, letting the exhaustion of the day wash over him. He hadn’t realized how tense his back muscles were, how much the last few hours had demanded of him. He leaned forward and let his head sink into his hands.

“You all right?” he heard a familiar voice, then the mattress dipped when Noma sat down next to him.

He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring look. “Yeah.”

“You look like crap.”

'Gee, thanks,' he thought, but let it slide. "Long day."

"Alex, what's going on? I haven't seen you all day. Looks like Michael's been AWOL too. Something's cookin'."

He shook his head slightly, trying to decide whether he should tell her, but he didn't have the strength to fabricate another lie that would hold up to her line of questioning. He looked her in the eye, and almost buckled. How could he tell her that their best friend had been on the brink of something truly terrible?

He looked away again and fixed his eyes on a spot on the floor.

"Hey," she said softly. "Whatever it is, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I do," he replied. "It's just… I don't know where to start, because you'll… probably freak. So just listen, okay?"

She looked slightly taken aback but nodded, all playfulness gone from her expression.

He started telling her what happened, from the moment Michael had come to him with the news to when he'd attempted and succeeded with the eviction. He left out a few of the crueler details, even though he knew he didn't have to sugarcoat things with Noma.

And she listened intently, quietly, like he'd asked.

He finished with, "We left him at the Triple-X shop, because, you know… how can we be sure he's really back to normal? Guess tomorrow will tell. Michael's still with him."

When she didn't speak, he met her gaze. "Aren't you gonna say anything?"

She raised her eyebrows. "I… don't know what to say. That's… both terrifying and amazing. I mean, Ethan? It's hard to believe."

"Yeah, that's what I said. Shit, you should've seen him. He was a bona fide Eight-ball. The crap that came out of his mouth was unbelievable. It was scary as hell."

"And you think there's a chance he'll be back to what he used to be?"

Alex closed his eyes for a long moment. "I don't know. Yeah. Maybe. It's never worked on a human before. I really hope this time…"

He trailed off, not wanting to think about the alternative. He'd been so focused on getting the job done, he hadn't considered the repercussions until now of the loss he'd have to face if the eviction wasn't successful.

He felt her warm hand on his knee, her fingers squeezing his leg just a tiny bit, her thumb rubbing gently up and down. Her voice was low when she said, "I can't believe you've taken this all on yourself."

He had to fight hard not to let the tears that threatened fall. He sniffled once, rubbing the back of his hand under his nose while he struggled to regain a sense of composure. "I wasn't alone. Michael was there during the eviction."

"Yeah, and we both know how much he excels at subtlety and moral support."

Alex gave her the smallest of grins. "I wanted to tell you, but I wasn't sure how you'd react, higher angel and all. I needed to focus on Ethan, and there wasn't much time."

“It’s okay,” she offered. “I get it. I just… I wish… You know what?” She gave him a genuine, wide smile—one of those that would light up her whole face.

She got up from the bunk and held her hand to drag Alex into a standing position. “I think this warrants raiding the secret stash.”

He allowed himself a smile of his own, though he knew it was too early to rejoice. He fended her efforts off reluctantly. “Look. I really don’t feel like celebrating. Not yet. Let’s wait until tomorrow, okay? And then we can do it among the three of us.” It was very much a ‘when’ and not an ‘if’.

She nodded, the smile still there. “All right, savior boy. Tomorrow it is.”

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The frame of the old New York New York rollercoaster creaked dangerously in its bolts as the three soldiers climbed up to their favorite getaway spot.

Noma, Ethan and Alex had never been intimidated by the fact that what was left of the old structure could well cave under their weight. It had started out as a dare to climb all the way up to the top with the metal grate, but over the years it had become a hangout of sorts.

The threesome sat down in the early morning hours, and Ethan fished a green bottle out of the backpack he’d brought.

He unscrewed it and held it up to offer a toast. “To being human.”

“Here, here,” Alex said.

“Well…” Noma offered, giving Alex a knowing look that completely went past Ethan.

After Ethan had taken a swig, he gave the bottle to Noma, who passed it on to Alex. Noma made an approving gesture. “Damn, this stuff’s good. Where’d you get it?”

Ethan grinned. “Laphroaig Quarter Cask. Pinched it from Whele’s stock. Don’t tell anyone.”

She gave him a good-natured bump on the upper arm. “As if we ever would.”

Alex gave Ethan a long look. When Ethan caught him at the too obvious scrutinizing, Alex quickly gave him a smirk. “Good to have you back, man.”

“Good to *be* back. I mean, can you believe it? Still kinda blows my mind.” He fixed Alex with an inquisitive stare. “Actually, I think we need to talk about that. How did you do it?”

Alex had known that this question would be raised eventually, and he’d rolled it around in his mind countless times. There were well prepared lies he had at the ready, but somehow, right here, right now, he had a feeling it was time for the truth.

He looked at Noma, who raised her eyebrows. Was it encouragement he read there? Negation? Cautionary hesitation? It was hard to tell.

“Okay,” Alex began, trying to find the right words to drop the bomb. “You’ve probably noticed I’ve been AWOL a lot lately.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Like, when are you ever on duty anymore?”

“Well, there’s a reason for that.”

Ethan gave him a questioning look, and Alex undid the Velcro on the sleeve of his uniform. When he rolled up the fabric, Ethan gaped at the tattoos that were just visible there.

It took a moment for Ethan to realize what he was looking at.

“No way!”

Alex just nodded, and Ethan stared at him. “You… you’re the Chosen One?”

“Yep.”

“Are you sure? I mean… how can you be sure?”

“I’m sure,” Alex confirmed. “It’s, uh, kind of a long story.”

“Yeah, I’ll say! Come on, spill, man.”

“Well, in a nutshell, you know how Jeep dumped me on the street when I was a kid? It was because he had the tattoos on his body and went on a quest to try and decipher them. Fourteen years it took, until he realized it was a futile endeavor. He came back to Vega the night of the Jubilee. You already know he was stabbed, but what you don’t know is that when he died, the tattoos were transferred to me.”

“You’ve known this since the Jubilee?”

“Yeah.”

“Holy… wait—“ he looked at Noma. “How is it that you’re not surprised. You knew?”

“Yeah,” she just said.

“So…” Ethan raised both his arms, “wow, I mean… wow. You’re the Chosen One. That’s, like… I don’t even know what to say. I mean, aren’t you supposed to save humanity?”

Alex gave him a quick chuckle. “Yeah, well, it’s not as easy as that. I’m supposed to decipher the tattoos. Haven’t gotten far yet. It’s a little slow goin’.”

“But it sure explains why you’ve been hanging out with Michael so much.”

A dark shadow crossed Alex’s face. There was still a lot of patching up to do there. Ethan didn’t seem to notice. He continued, “Okay, so to come back to the Eight-ball thing…”

“It’s called eviction,” Alex explained. “I tried it on random lowers before. Never worked. Well, until now.”

“And, boy, am I glad it did. Thanks, man.”

“Any time. Which isn’t an invitation that I wanna do it again. Ever.”

Ethan raised his hands in a fending off gesture. “Yeah, no, totally on the same page here.” He looked at Noma. “Did you know he was doing this?”

“Not until last night.”

“You two, you’re a real piece of work. What else have I missed?”

Alex' and Noma's eyes met for a mere second—a silent exchange of mutual knowledge. Alex wasn't sure if Noma was ready for full disclosure.

She sucked in a long breath. "Well, since we're already sharing trade secrets."

Ethan cut in, "Okay, I'm not sure I'm ready for another mind-blowing revelation here."

"You better be," she told him.

"All right. Hit me."

"You know how higher angels are virtually indistinguishable from humans?"

"Yeah," Ethan said hesitantly.

"And you know how they've been living in the city, among us, just like everyone else?"

Ethan let his head sink into his hands. "No, no, no. Are you telling me you're a higher angel?"

"What would you do if I said yes?"

"I'd… I don't know. Shit. I don't believe this. You? I've known you for years, since… since we joined the Corps. You're… you're the most human person I know."

Noma couldn't help but smile. "Isn't that what I said? Virtually indistinguishable…?"

"Fuck, I can't take this." He looked at Alex. "And of course you knew this too."

"Remember when all those highers were killed and hung from the building? That's when I found out."

"Yeah." Ethan's expression grew a notch graver. "I mean, shit, this is all messed up. The angels are our enemies. How the hell are we supposed to defend the city when we can't even tell who's a friend and who isn't, when there's angels disguising themselves as Vega's soldiers?"

Noma bristled at the comment. "No one's disguising themselves here. I'm on your side, Ethan. You'd be a fool not to have realized that by now."

"Yeah, but that's just you. I know you. How do I know there's not, I don't know, fifty other higher angels pretending to be our allies until they come and attack us from within? That'd be a clever ruse. Something Gabriel would cook up."

"The higher angels in the city were all neutral. Michael granted them asylum to live here peacefully and away from Gabriel's influence. Don't you see that this was actually a good thing? They helped you, lived among you, had human friends. Would you rather they'd lived outside the city where Gabriel could manipulate them to choose his side?"

"You keep saying 'were'."

"Yeah. Gabriel had them all killed."

"What do you mean, all killed?"

“All of the higher angels in Vega. He made sure they were all eliminated because he detested that they wouldn’t join his fight. That’s the kind of twisted, power-hungry megalomaniac he is.”

“So how are you still alive?”

“Gabriel wanted to use me to turn Alex against Michael.”

“And did he?”

Noma looked at Alex, who answered, “In a way. Didn’t quite have the effect he thought it would, though.”

Ethan visibly tried to digest the information, and Alex handed the bottle of whisky back to him. He took a long swig from it, scrunching up his face as the pungent liquid ran down his throat.

Ethan met Noma’s gaze. “So you’re still neutral? Or what?”

“No, not exactly.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean.”

Her mouth curved into a mischievous grin. “Alex will hate hearing this, but I was… kind of his watchdog.”

Alex shook his head at her words, but she continued. “Michael couldn’t keep his eye on Alex all the time. He needed backup, someone to protect Alex—and there I was.”

A low giggle escaped Ethan’s mouth when he looked at Alex. “Forgive me, but… Noma babysitting you all hours of the day? I’m beginning to see the two of you in a whole new light.”

Both Alex and Noma joined in the smiles. Then Ethan seemed to think of something. “Wait, so if you’re a higher angel, don’t you have superpowers, or something? All those practice drills, did you hold back on purpose?”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be nice? But, no, we’re still bound to the limitations of a human body. Except maybe for the wings.”

“Oh man, yeah, the wings.” Ethan suddenly looked like child in expectation of Father Christmas. “Can I see them?”

“No!” Noma retorted quickly.

“Come on. Just a tiny peek.”

“No. Piss off. I’m not showing you my wings.”

“I bet Alex has seen them. Haven’t you?”

Alex just shrugged his shoulders. Ethan gave up. “You know the time is gonna come. Until then, I have a reason to tease you mercilessly.”

Noma’s expression grew more serious. “No one can know about this. You know that, right?”

Ethan narrowed his eyes. “What—you think I’m stupid?”

Noma's face relaxed. "Sorry. It's just… hard to know who to trust these days."

"Your secret's safe with me, okay? Both of yours."

Alex underlined this with an, "Amen to that."

Ethan raised the bottle of whisky again. "Okay, here's another toast. To humans and angels and keeping secrets. To friendship."

"To friendship," Alex and Noma repeated in unison as the sun rose above the roofs of Vega, basking the surrounding buildings in a warm, golden light.

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THE END.