Title: Pain and Promises
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Genre: Gen
Characters/Pairings: Michael, Jeep
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Contains spoilers for episode 1x03 "Broken Places"
Summary: "As I promised Jeep and your mother as she lay dying, I will do anything I must to protect you," Michael tells Alex when they visit Jeep's old house. Michael vividly remembers the day Charlie died.
Author's Note: Written for a prompt by rdemon90 on Tumblr (=> Michael told Alex that he held him in his arms while he wept when his father Jeep cremated Charlie). Thanks to Alipeeps for the beta! Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

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Michael can hear the gunshots ringing out in the distance before he can see anything and he knows it can't be good.

His flying speed turns from placid to hasty on his approach to the lone house out in the desert.

What greets him there is mayhem. A handful of dead Eight-balls litter the ground, one still alive but wounded, writhing in pain. He doesn't feel any pity but he still takes his Empyrean blades and ends the creature's sordid existence.

Some of the other lower angels pounce on him immediately and he wields his swords in practiced motions, fending them off. He's done this too many times, the attacks ever more vicious in recent weeks.

The Extermination War is still in full swing, Gabriel anything but defeated. The Eight-balls were becoming more and more brazen these days and Michael could barely keep up with teaching the humans how to defend themselves.

Another gunshot rings out near his left and, from the corner of his eye, he sees Jeep running out of the house, firing his rifle at an oncoming group of possessed angels that seem to be coming out of nowhere. There's more than any human could ever have defeated on his own and Michael is doing his best to keep them at bay. He prays that Charlie and Alex are safe.

The fighting is vicious and violent. In the end, he counts sixteen Eight-balls, all slain and lifeless now. His eyes sweep the surrounding terrain for Jeep, whom he last saw running towards the rickety shed across the dusty yard, but his immediate concern is not for his friend, it's for the child he has sworn to protect.

He has to work through the make-shift barricades inside the house, calls out Charlie's name. He fears the worst when he is greeted by silence. Two more dead Eight-balls litter the floor and he follows their trail to the bathroom door.

Inside, Charlie's unmoving form is curled up in the bathtub and Michael's heart plummets. There's a pool of blood under her torso, too much of it. He's seen this before many times, he knows she doesn't stand a chance.

Michael touches her and she strains to say his name when she recognizes him. He helps her shift onto her back, to reveal Alex in her arms, alive and seemingly well. She had protected the four-

month-old with her life, and paid dearly for it. He wishes there was something he could do and a bone-deep sadness seems to want to overwhelm him.

Charlie indicates for Michael take the baby and he does without question. Alex immediately starts wailing as if he knows that something terrible is about to happen.

Having made sure Alex isn't physically harmed, Michael gently places him against his shoulder and rocks him. It has the desired effect, Alex's crying slowly subsides.

Michael can hear hurried steps and he sees Jeep rushing in. He kneels down next to the bathtub, taking in the tragedy before his eyes.

"No," he whispers. "Charlie, oh my God."

He presses a towel he picks up from the floor against her wound, which is quickly soaking through, the crimson standing out starkly against the off-white fabric.

Charlie's attention is already waning, her eyelids drooping. "No, Charlie, stay with me," Jeep pleads. Then he looks at Michael. "Dammit, do something, Michael!"

The archangel shakes his head. "I'm not a healer. I'm sorry."

"No. This can't be happening! Charlie!" He cups her face helplessly. "Don't leave me, leave *us*."

"Cold," she whispers, then her attention seems to focus elsewhere. "Alex, is he…"

"He's fine," Michael replies. "You saved him."

"You must protect him," she tells Michael, "Promise me you'll protect him."

Michael kneels down beside the bathtub, looking her deeply in the eyes as he says, "I promise you both, I will do anything in my power to protect Alex."

"Thank you," she whispers weakly before her head lolls to the side.

"Charlie!" Jeep calls out, trying to rouse her. "Charlie, no, don't you die on me!"

It is to no avail, the life has left her. Michael closes his eyes, feeling tears prickling behind them that he can't stop.

Jeep is muttering unintelligible words of denial and disbelief. Michael softly touches Jeep's shoulder. "Jeep. She's gone," he says just above a whisper.

Jeep stares at him for those few, long moments it takes for the finality of his statement to sink in. Then he gets up, taking Alex from Michael's arms. "Gabriel's gonna pay for this," he says in angry determination before he marches outside. Michael lets him leave.

The scream Jeep unleashes outside can be heard across the barren plains for miles.

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Dusk is beginning to fall by the time Jeep has finished digging Charlie's grave. The bone-dry desert soil isn't making the task any easier and sweat dampens Jeep's hair and runs down his sun-tanned neck into his t-shirt collar.

Michael is holding Alex in his arms as Jeep lowers Charlie's body, now wrapped in a cotton sheet, into the hole. Michael keeps a respectful distance—this moment isn't his to share.

Alex's restless, intermittent cries are now turning to full-on wails. Michael tries his best to calm the boy but it's as if he knows his mother is being buried, never to return, never to hold him in her arms again.

Jeep stands at the foot of the grave, his head bowed, his hands folded in front of him. He stands there for a long time and Alex just won't settle down. Michael knows he needs a familiar presence, the warmth of a parent, something the archangel can't give him.

He hesitantly sidles up to Jeep, gently placing his hand on the young man's shoulder, squeezing it ever so slightly. Human emotions are still a foreign concept to Michael but these past few months he's grown attached to this family, and will call them his friends. He's seldom felt such attachment to any human being and he is once more reassured that saving the Chosen One had been the right thing to do.

The promise he's made that he will do anything to protect Alex is now ingrained in his very being and he wishes he could do something to make any of this easier on Jeep.

Jeep takes Alex from Michael's arms and tries to console him. It doesn't take long for Alex's cries to turn into slowly subsiding sobs and Michael has never been surer of Jeep being able to raise the boy. Jeep's as much a father to Alex as any biological parent would ever be. There's no doubt in Michael's mind that Alex will have all the shelter and nurture and love that he needs.

An unfamiliar sensation suddenly distracts Michael and he stares at his bare arms. The tattoos there are shifting and fading and then they vanish altogether.

A moment later, they appear on Jeep's arms and up his neck, and Michael watches in astonishment. He hadn't expected this—and neither had Jeep.

"What the—" Jeep asks. "What did you just do?"

"It wasn't anything I did."

"Then what the hell is this?" he nods at his arms.

"I was never meant to decipher the tattoos. I was a messenger to carry them as long as I needed to. They will eventually be passed on to the Chosen One, to Alex. It is now your destiny to carry them until they are transferred."

"Oh great," Jeep says sarcastically. "Just another cross I have to bear. What kind of sick joke is this?" He indicates the grave below. "Isn't this enough?"

Michael isn't sure what to say because he doesn't have all the answers either. "Father works in mysterious ways," he offers vaguely.

"Yeah, He fucking better know what He's doing."

With that, he leaves the gravesite and places Alex in an old, banged-up stroller a few feet away before starting to shovel the dirt back into the grave. Michael joins him wordlessly.

Dark has fallen when the last spadeful of sandy earth is being patted onto Charlie's grave. They go back towards the house without looking back—both have already said their goodbyes.

In front of the door, Jeep turns to Michael. His voice is laced with grief when he tells Michael in a low voice, "I'd like to be alone for a while."

Michael indicates with a silent nod of approval that he will grant Jeep's wish. He watches his friend go inside with Alex nestled against his shoulder and only lifts himself up in the air when the door has closed behind them.

The night is devoid of stars or moonlight and Michael soars high into the sky. A little piece of his soul has withered away today, a piece he hadn't realized had even existed.

It's still hard to fathom that the little baby who knows nothing of the world will grow up to be a man, grow up to become humanity's savior. But he has faith, and maybe faith is all he needs.

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THE END