

Interfaith

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I found the box of angels in the attic when I went looking for the harvest wreathes. They were under the Christmas tree stand and alongside a stack of old suitcases, in one of His cardboard bins marked 'Winter Clothes, 1985'.

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" they sang as they swirled like celestial hummingbirds in the slanting golden light.

I shoved the box away and wiped my dusty palms on the seat of my robe.

"Damn it all."

The tiny creatures disapproved and smote me with flaming swords the size of toothpicks. I batted them away and went downstairs to get the Raid.

Justine was supposed to be doing her homework at the kitchen counter, but her notebook was covered with doodles of the Virgin Mary. This new bout of divinity was hitting her hard.

"I thought you were looking for the harvest decorations."

"I was." I stood on tiptoe and reached unsuccessfully for the bright red can. Justine shook her head and went back to her scribbles.

"It's a heathen holiday anyway, Mum. We shouldn't even celebrate the cutting of the wheat, or whatever it is."

"Spare me the pagan holiday lecture, Justine. You sound just like—" I bit the words off and swallowed them.

She gave me her Suffering Martyr look. "Just like who? Just like my Father?"

The separation was too fresh, the wound too raw. I needed a distraction. Besides, my little saint-in-training was never going to let me exterminate a holy infestation.

"There are seraphim in the attic. You want to round them up?"

"How wonderful!" Justine dropped her pen and clasped her hands together to give thanks.

"You have to the count of three, and then I'm setting off a bug bomb."

She ran, scattering beneficence and glory in her wake. I swept up the trail and emptied the glittery mess in the dustbin. The bits of silver and gold sparkled like stars and I swallowed. I should have ascended to my place in the heavens eons ago. But I hadn't been ready then, and I certainly wasn't ready now.

"Where are you going with those?"

Justine dragged the battered canary cage across the kitchen and dumped it next to her backpack.

"To school. They're a visual aid in my presentation."

The angels rattled the bars and protested their captivity in dulcet tones. I wrinkled my nose at the smell.

"You haven't cleaned that lately." I put six wafers and a bottle of grape juice in a brown paper bag for her. "I seem to recall a lot of noble promises you made."

"The bathroom font is empty. I'll stop at the chapel before first period." She sipped from a glass of water while I pattered around the kitchen. "What are you doing?"

"Cooking breakfast." I rediscovered the smell of honey and almonds in the morning and smiled.

"Whatever for?"

"Because I can. Because it's fun."

"You never ate in the morning *before*."

"Change isn't always a bad thing," I said, keeping my tone light.

She wrinkled her nose at me. "The smell is nauseating. Like a buttered beehive in high summer."

"Just have a bite," I urged, my mouth full of flaky pastry and nuts. "You might like it."

"Moth-er." She gave it a long look, even went so far as to poke it with her finger. Then she folded her hands together and prayed for my immortal soul.

I shrugged and took another bite. "Even the dedicated eat, Justine."

"Shush. I'm counting." Worn wooden beads clicked together. The angels smirked and stuck out their tongues. I threatened the cage with a spatula and they invoked the Almighty's wrath in pixie chirps.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered.

Justine finished her prayer, rescued her charges and kissed my cheek.

"I'll see you tonight!" she called over her shoulder as she ran for the bus. "Love you!"

"Love you more!" I shouted back. Then silence descended and even the angels would have been welcome company.

I dumped the dishes in the sink (*who's here to see?* I thought with a certain amount of grim glee.) Then I paced through the house and stood before the hearth. My touchstone. I built up the fire and took comfort in its steady warmth.

The doorbell rang and I started at the unfamiliar chime.

Amazing Grace? I need to change that.

I padded into the hall and unbolted the heavy oak door; a young woman stood on the stoop, heavy with

pregnancy and worries.

"Please. Please help me," she cried, and staggered into my arms.

Apparently my return to my "heathen" roots had not gone unnoticed.

"Mother?" Justine hovered in the kitchen doorway as though she could sense the traces of alien worship. She set the birdcage on the floor and took a hesitant step inside. The angels—which I expected to launch into a full air raid—didn't make a peep.

"How did your presentation go?" I swiped a few crumbs off the counter then attacked the breakfast dishes with gusto.

"Fine." She peeked over my shoulder. "Why are you doing those now?"

"Didn't feel like doing them this morning. Is that a crime?" Energy hummed through me; if I wasn't careful, I was going to melt the plates.

"What's for dinner?" She set her backpack on a barstool as though it might explode.

"Dinner?" I blinked. "Um."

Both her eyebrows skidded up. "Um what? You didn't make dinner?"

"Calm down. It's not a sign of the apocalypse." I jerked open the freezer door, scanned the contents and gave up. "Why don't we order a pizza?"

"Pizza?" Her voice scaled two octaves. "Do you even know how to do that?"

"I'm not a moron, Justine. I know how to order a pizza."

"But—" she sputtered. "We never ordered pizza before."

I located the number in the directory and dialed before she could protest further.

"Change is good. Especially change covered in pepperoni and mushrooms."

She crossed her arms. "Just tell me why you didn't make dinner. Something happened. I can tell."

"Yes. Delivery please," I told the bored, teenaged voice on the other end of the line.

"Moth-er!"

I covered the receiver. "I had a visitor, all right? Now behave yourself. I'm on the damn phone."

Justine's mouth worked. Then she snapped it shut and stomped off to sprinkle holy water in every corner of the ground floor. A miniature exorcism/protest, I imagine. She finished just as the pizza arrived. The cardboard box sagged under the weight of crust and toppings; the aroma when I opened the lid was heavenly.

"Are you going to eat?"

Her stomach growled. She plopped down at the table and helped herself to a slice. We chewed in silence and I thought the storm was over. But in the middle of her third piece, she burst into tears.

"Honey, it's all right." I stroked the top of her head and left a smear of sauce in her hair. "Really."

"He'll never come back if you go wild like this."

"Oh, Justine." My sigh came from the very heart of me. "He wasn't going to come back anyway."

"He doesn't love me."

"Of course He does."

"Not any more than any of the other little children."

I grit my teeth. "You mustn't doubt. Have faith."

"I have. More faith than anyone!"

It was true. I couldn't argue.

"Maybe—maybe He'll come for Christmas."

"Maybe."

She heard the doubt in my voice and there were more tears. The rest of the pizza floated away on a sea of salt water and grief.

After I tucked her into bed, I went downstairs and picked up the phone. Set it down. Up. Down. I pounded the counter with the receiver, took a deep breath and dialed. Got His voicemail, of course.

"You fell out of love with me, and that was fine. But your daughter needs you—"

"Hello?" He'd picked up the phone. I stuttered with surprise.

"Um, hi."

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I tried to set my resentment on the back burner. For Justine's sake.

"Your daughter hasn't seen you for ages."

He sighed. "You got custody. I got visitations."

"She misses you. Only you know why."

"Tell her I love her."

"She doesn't need me to tell her." I slammed down the phone, but His voice followed me into the living room.

"I told you a long time ago that this is how it would have to be. That I have responsibilities. You're being unreasonable."

"This isn't about me." I swept the hearth clean with a look.

"How many times do we have to go through this?" The lights flickered.

I stood my ground. "Don't you get all High-And-Mighty with me."

"You sound just like the rest of your ilk."

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. "You met my family. Knew what you were letting yourself in for."

"You were supposed to be the quiet one," He answered.

"And I should never have married the Catholic God. All that incense... Ugh!" I flopped on the sofa and plugged my fingers pointedly in my ears, but His voice was in my head now.

"I've missed you."

"Oh, I don't believe in you."

"A likely story."

The angels chattered and flapped in their gilded prison.

"I wondered where I left those," he said as he materialized. The bars dissolved and they were free. They settled on the mantelpiece, unusually quiet. He sat next to me, wearing the skin I always liked the best. "It smells different in here. You had visitors."

"Visitor singular. Just a woman in need of—" I trailed off, unable to complete the thought.

"Her goddess," He finished for me. "You must have wanted the company, or she never would have been able to find the house."

"I suppose I did."

"Have you thought of ascending now that—"

"Give me a break. It was only one visitor." I stared at the hearth, into the blue twisting flames of the fire. "It's been a long time. I thought I might have forgotten the way of it."

"It's who you are." He gave me a rueful smile filled with a thousand questions. "Just don't start spilling goat entrails on the rug, all right?"

Justine hovered around Him the next morning. She chattered about her schoolwork and her visions while He nodded and looked wise. He ate toast and eggs, so she did too. They bent their heads together and whispered in tongues.

He soon grew distracted, pausing mid-sentence to listen very carefully to nothing I could hear. I scrubbed a frying pan until I scoured a hole through the Teflon. It didn't take divine insight to know He wouldn't stay much longer.

After a particularly long silence, He got to his feet and hugged Justine to Him.

"I need to go."

Justine's face puckered. "But you just got here."

He detached himself very carefully from her grasp. "I've neglected things to stay this long. You'll come see me soon, though, baby girl."

In the time it took me to turn around, He was halfway down the hall.

"Daddy!" Justine chased after him. "You forgot the angels!"

But the door was ajar and He was gone.

A much-subdued Justine caught the angels with infinite patience and love but had nowhere to put them. She let them go in the backyard, her eyes filled with tears. They followed her as far as the porch and batted at the windows.

"Go on, get out of here!" she yelled.

They hovered, fearful. I'd never seen her angry before and my skin prickled. I could protect the house, but the sky was no realm of mine. Clouds gathered overhead, as dark as my little girl's eyes. Thunder rattled the window and lightning bolts rained down. They squeaked with impotent wrath and I smelled burning feathers through the glass.

Justine stomped up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door. I could hear her kicking things.

The next morning, she dumped a large box on the floor.

"I don't want these anymore." The expression behind her water glass was sulky.

I picked through the plaid of her uniform. Her rosary beads. A bible worn thin with frequent readings.

"You sure?" I wiped the counter and tried not to dance.

"Yeah. I'm tired of all that sanctimonious bullshit."

I met her gaze. "Oh come on. It wasn't all bullshit."

She flounced to the counter and stuck a fork in a plate of ambrosia. She talked with her mouth full of marshmallows.

"Whatever, Mother..."

The doorbell rang. She jumped up.

"I'll get it."

"It's probably another petitioner here to see me." No use sugarcoating it. They'd probably be queuing up on the lawn by the end of the week.

"I figured as much." The set of her jaw looked very familiar. "After I let her in, I want to you show me how to set out the altar. I saw it in the attic."

The angels batted madly at the window. She heaved her fork at the glass and turned her back on them.

"What in the name of all that is Holy is going on?"

We'd shooed the last worshipper out of the living room temple a mere hour before and I was exhausted. The last thing I needed was an irate call from Him. I cradled the phone in the crook of my neck while Justine cooed and pecked crumbs off the counter.

"She's trying something new."

"So I gathered. And you're encouraging this behavior?"

Snap! The dove was gone. Justine stood naked in the middle of the tiled floor for a split second. Then she was a birch tree, slim and white in the pale sunrise.

"She's missed a week of school," He thundered.

"She's taking a little break."

Snap! The tree was gone, and wriggling golden puppy was in its place. I laughed. She'd always wanted a dog, but He was allergic.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull—"

"I'm not pulling anything. I let her worship you for years without saying a word against it. You could at least show me the same courtesy."

"She's one of the chosen—"

"You forget she's also my child. A child of *two* immortals. I know you thought that your half was stronger, but that doesn't appear to be the case." Justine squatted to pee on the floor and I yelped. "I've got to go!"

I whisked her outside. This time, the line stayed dead.

The angels circled Justine-the-puppy with concerned interest and disapproval. She leapt at them and barked, then caught one between flashing white teeth and shook it viciously.

She chewed on it for a bit then left it in the grass. It twitched back to life, sodden and disoriented, its wings punctured with teeth holes.

Justine grew her hair long and plaited it with beads. Flowers bloomed in unexpected corners of the house. Animals congregated on the porch and mingled with waiting petitioners. I watched her blossom, and I hummed while listened to prayers. By the end of the week, she could sweep the hearth clean with a look and grant simple appeals.

The pride of it nearly killed me. I knew that someday soon she'd be strong enough, old enough, that maybe I could take my place in the sky without worry or guilt. Until then, I contented myself with her and the temple.

He sent gifts, hoping to resurrect her affections. She returned two or three and gleefully destroyed a few others. But even I didn't approve when she broke the halo into pieces and constructed a fabulous, glittering swag to hang around her throat.

"He's going to be angry," I warned.

"Well, duh."

But even indefatigable youth was disconcerted when she began to bleed from her hands and her feet. I placed an angry phone call as she sobbed behind the locked bathroom door.

"Maybe you should call Him, tell Him you're sorry—"

"If He wants an apology, He's got a long wait coming."

"Honey, you are double damned for stubbornness. You got it from both of us." She didn't say anything. "I think He's more hurt than angry."

"He can just get bent."

"That's enough of that."

She jerked the door open and I took a step back.

"Stop defending him. I'm sick of listening to you defend him. He's not always right. And neither are you." She brushed past me and stormed down the hall.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Prickles of unease snaked over me. She didn't answer, just grabbed her jacket off the chair and slammed the door behind her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I repeated to the empty room.

It was past midnight when she got home. I sat at the kitchen table, staring at food I'd prepared but not eaten. Wine I'd poured but not drunk.

"I think you're a bit young to stay out so late," I said after a moment.

"Why haven't you ascended?" The words tumbled out of her.

"I wasn't aware that you even knew that word, Justine." I took a sip from my wine glass, hand shaking.

"I heard it at school. The kids were all asking me about the temple... why you haven't ascended. They said it was because of Daddy. Because of me."

"That's partially true, I guess. I didn't want to leave either of you behind. I didn't want to forget, to go while you are still so young."

"Don't use me as an excuse Mother." Her hands clenched over and over. "You're afraid. You hid behind Daddy and now that he's gone you're hiding behind me."

"I'm happy here with you, with the temple."

"But you're not a priestess, you're a *goddess*. You belong up there." She stabbed a finger at the sky. "It's your destiny."

"I can't." The tears poured down my face now. "It's too late, Justine. I waited too long. I'm bound here,

to you, to this house. You *need* me."

"Maybe I still need you. But I don't need a mother that's a coward." Justine put her chin in the air. "Just let go of him, Mom. We have to let go."

"Her anger is disconcerting, isn't it?" His voice slid in my ear and I almost welcomed His company. "How long do you suppose she'll be mad this time?"

"You're the omnipotent one. You tell me."

He shook His head. "I can't read her as I used to. What are we going to do about this?"

"Damned if I know. What are you doing here anyway? She doesn't want to speak to you either."

He didn't answer.

"You've been keeping tabs on me." I had no hope of reconciliation; part of me had died when He left. But it was nice to know He cared, even a little.

"Yeah. It's what I do." He faded around the edges and was gone.

I let him go.

I stood again in the attic. Moonlight danced over the detritus of a broken marriage and memories of a child grown. I unlocked a trunk of leather and hammered gold and opened it with a twist of my hand. Silver folds embroidered with brilliant threads of star shine glinted in the late afternoon light.

I'd left Olympus in this gown.

It slithered over my skin and settled on my curves, the fit perfect from memory. I added a parure of flame. Curls tumbled free to the backs of my knees.

Then I tiptoed downstairs and opened her bedroom door.

"Honey?"

She raised her tousled head from the pillow with an incoherent mumble. I knelt by the bed, stroked the hair off her brow.

"You're dressed. Why are you dressed?" she asked. I took her by the hand and offered her a gown of sunlight and dryad tears.

"Try this on. We're going on a little vacation."

Only a few minutes later, we mounted the stairs to the widow's walk, accompanied only by the murmur of silk on the floorboards. The door stuck—no one ever came up here—but I wrenched it open and took my first step outside since I'd crossed the threshold as a bride. Justine took a deep breath of cold night air and laughed. And I held her hand, and lifted the other to the sky.

Stars tumbled from the sky in benediction as I willed the two of us upwards. The heavens rushed around us and the house fell away. The space between Justine and I was an umbilicus, stretched but not snapped.

My family called their greetings. Zeus himself crowned me with stars.

"Welcome Hestia. We have waited a long time for you."

I wrapped myself in blue velvet, wiped the glittering constellations of my eyes. Justine stood at my side, shining with her own special light.

My greatest believer.

I hugged her close, and patted the pocket that held the last remaining angel. When the time came, he could show her the way home.