

Hell Becomes Her

by

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Dedication

To Lillian Akish Buhler (McCandless). The first angel I ever met.

Chapter 1 Calculations

The cold steel of a rifle barrel pressed hard into the side of Del's neck. Her muscles went taut and her heart rushed, pumping adrenaline through her system.

"Hands," a man ordered from behind her. He wasn't holding the gun pressed to her flesh

Two assailants—maybe more, Del thought and lifted her hands.

Normally, raised hands would have been a good thing. At chest height, she'd be much closer to her weapons and the weapon pressed against her neck. There would be options. But the plastic grocery bags she held were almost as good as handcuffs. Loaded with the four food groups, and adding weight to her arms, they'd require an extra second to drop. That was all the warning the gunman would need.

"In. Now."

There was no patience in the man's voice, but Del noted a touch of fear.

The weapon against her neck shoved her forward. Marrin, his girlfriend Jane, and her adopted daughter Jordan were already on their knees on the floor, hands behind their heads. Six men in combat boots, dark fatigues and obvious body armor were armed with mean-looking H&K G36 assault rifles. They stood at the ready around her living room. Their fingers rested on the trigger guards, which meant they didn't want to kill anyone yet. But the weapons were trained on her little family.

"Kneel," the man behind her ordered.

The pressure from the muzzle against her neck disappeared. She took the two steps forward and knelt down next to Jordan. The thirteen year-old looked up at her, eyes wide with fear.

"Mom?" Jordan asked.

"It's ok, Jordan," Del told her. "It's going to be ok."

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“It’s ok,” Jane said.

The middle of a crisis wasn’t usually the best place to comfort a child, but Jane had taken the chance. Del loved her for that effort.

Del hadn’t known what to make of Jane except as an operative for Joshua Smalls. They’d met a year ago, when Del and Marrin were on assignment in Salt Lake City. Jane had arrived in Detroit six months ago to see if she could find out anything about his “father” Jaccob. She and Marrin hit it off and they’d been a couple ever since, but Del was never much for making friends. She knew too many stories that ended with someone stabbed in the back by a loyal and trusted confidant.

“Mom?” Jordan asked again. Tears ran down the child’s face. Immediate rage filled Del. She fought down the urge to throw caution away, pull her guns, and start blasting at the men who had threatened and scared her little girl.

“Quiet,” the man ordered. Jordan gave a small sob, but was otherwise quiet. She was a strong little girl, stronger than most mortals.

Her little girl.

In her home.

It was too much. She began to let the grocery bags slip.

“Del,” Marrin said. His voice carried sympathy, warning, and caution. He was telling her they were caught, and caught good. Fighting was worse than stupid. If their captors wanted them dead, they wouldn’t have bothered with the intimidation. Bad guys in the movies tended to spill their entire evil scheme in a two minute monologue. In the really real world, they put three shots in the back of your head and went out for a microbrew. Wasting time with evil laughter was a Hollywood delusion.

Marrin was enough to calm Del down, but it didn’t save him. The gunman behind him slammed the butt of his H&K into Marrin’s side with cold efficiency. There was no anger from the man. He placed the blow where it would cause the

most pain and do the least damage. Marrin fell onto his shoulder with a groan.

“Keep your hands behind your head,” the man ordered Marrin. “Shackle him.”

The gunman who'd hit Marrin swung his weapon on its strap behind his back. He placed his knee in the small of Marrin's back and pressed his weight down to immobilize Marrin. Even as strong as Marrin was, he couldn't overcome the complete lack of leverage. The gunman clicked a shiny, thick, hinged handcuff to Marrin's wrist. He used the handcuff as leverage, pulled Marrin's arm down, and secured Marrin's free hand. The gunman stood, and pulled Marrin by his linked hands back into a kneeling position. Some of Marrin's long, blond hair came free from his scrunchie, and he blew it, annoyed, from his eyes. The gunman swung his weapon back to cover Marrin and retook his position.

Quick, smooth and efficient. Professionals.

“Stay quiet,” the man instructed Marrin.

Marrin gave Del a sideways grin. The blow had hurt, but not as much as biting back the obvious retort she saw. She caught Jane's gaze and gave her one nod of her head. It was thank you and understanding at the same time.

“The women too,” the man ordered.

The grocery bags were removed from Del's grasp and disappeared. Hard metal pressed around her right wrist. She didn't fight it. Rough hands pulled her arm down behind her back in the same smooth, efficient movement. A moment later, she was handcuffed as well. She gave the chain a test tug, and was pleased to feel a little give. These weren't cold-forged iron. Probably high-carbon steel or maybe even some titanium alloy. Great if you wanted to restrain a mortal, no better than loose rope if you were trying to hold a Nephilim. Their enemy had made a grave mistake. That must have been another part of Marrin's smile. Del hid hers.

“Keep your weapons on them,” the man ordered, and came around to stand in front of her.

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He wasn't as tall as Marrin. Few men could reach the seven-foot Nordic giant's height, but he wasn't off by more than eight inches. Everything about him was thin and angular. It was like he had been stretched. Even his tailored gray suit couldn't hide his fragile frame. His face was made up of long lines and prominent cheekbones that gave him a gaunt, fragile look. Long, honey-brown hair hung in loose curls over his ears, across his shoulders and chest, and down his back.

"My name is Alfred Waru," the man said. His voice was deep, powerful, and tickled her ears. "I'm the head of security for the Gold Park Mining Company out of Battle Mountain, Nevada."

"I know that you," he continued and nodded his head toward Del, "are Omedelia Azazel. And that you," he said to Marrin, "are her partner, Marrin Enkidu."

He looked at Jane for several long, quiet moments.

"I don't know who you are," he admitted. "Are you Nephilim?"

Jane gave her head one quick toss. The shoulder-length twists of her hair made small, rain-patters against her leather jacket. She stared at the man with her mouth firmly closed.

"That's unfortunate," Alfred said. "Three would be... fortuitous. Most fortuitous."

He nodded to the man behind Jane. "The backup, if you please."

The ripping sound of Velcro was followed by one of the gunmen moving behind Jane. He grabbed the other woman's arm and pressed the needle of a syringe. Jane's skin divoted from the force, her mouth made an "O" of shock.

"What the burning hell—" Del started to say.

Pain blossomed in both of Del's sides. Two quick strikes hit her so fast they were nearly one. The floor slammed against her cheek. Stars burst in front of her eyes. She wheezed and gasped for air. After a few moments the pain ebbed until she could breathe. Jane was laying on the floor next to her, eyes closed but breathing. She was unconscious.

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Alfred's face appeared in front of Del and she realized he'd knelt beside her. If she was fast enough...

"A sedative," he told her. "Not powerful enough for Nephilim by itself, but quite enough to handle a mortal. I have something stronger for you and Marrin. Please don't test my men any more. They've taken oaths that are older than you."

Del took a moment to try to process the information, but something was wrong with what he'd said. If he knew her name, even incorrectly, and he knew she was Nephilim, how could his men be older than her? There were gaps in Alfred Waru's knowledge.

"All will be explained, Omedelia," he said. "But not here."

Alfred reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick, cream-colored business envelope. He set it down in front of Del's face on the floor.

"I want to assure you, the child won't be harmed," he told her.

"That's enough!" Del yelled, and hoped Marrin took that as the sign.

Alfred nodded to the gunman behind her. She ignored him for the moment.

Del half stood and turned. Her anger fueled her strength, and she pressed her hands into fists. Metal squealed as it was twisted beyond its intended form and snapped. She thrust out a kick in the gunman's direction, and impacted with something that spun her a quarter turn. A leg swept her from her feet and she smashed hard into the floor. Immediately, the weight of a gunman pressed against her, and pulled her left arm, with impressive strength, into a hammerlock. Del struggled, and tried to regain some momentum. A sharp needle went into her left arm and a flood of familiar heat blossomed out from her chest. The weight on her back disappeared. Del pulled herself to her knees, but felt weak and shaky. Her bones felt like they'd been removed from her body, and she was a shapeless, inert mass.

"You have my word," Alfred said. "Please remember that."

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No harm will come to the child.”

He patted her shoulder with reassurance.

“Del!” Jordan cried.

There was movement to her side, as a gunman moved next to the little girl. Del made a grab for him. Her hand lashed out, but caught only air. The gunmen’s boots thudded on her hardwood floors, retreating back through the door. A haze descended over her vision. She blinked to clear her eyes, but her lids became heavy. She forced them up and made out the small figure of Jordan, slung over one of the gunmen’s shoulder, being carried past.

“No,” she said. Weakness flooded her. “No.”

Del reached out at hand toward the retreating figures. She pushed herself forward as the door closed. The last of her strength rushed out of her. The floor smashed against her shoulder and face as the world went dark.

* * * *

“Jordan,” Del mumbled.

The sound of her voice, harsh in her ears, woke her. Her eyes opened to the harsh light of late afternoon sun. She closed them, but smears of red cut through the black of her eyelids. Her mind was lost in a fog. Somewhere a fly kept buzzing at her. She opened one eye partially, and swatted near her face. Part of a blanket landed across her mouth and cheek, and she closed her eyes again. Her feet were cold, but she was too tired to pull the blanket down, and the bed wasn’t comfortable.

It felt like she was lying on the hardwood floor of the front room.

Her bedroom had no windows.

“Jordan,” she said again.

Del’s memories flooded back in a flash. Red anger filmed her vision. She reached under her arm for one of her SIG .45s, but stopped when she touched the weapon. There was nothing

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to shoot. Fear was added to the mix as she remembered the last sight she had of her daughter. She tried to sit up, but only managed halfway before her head began to split open from the sudden pain. Del pressed clumsy hands against her temples, which seemed to help. She'd managed to keep her skull from erupting all over her nice, hardwood floors.

"Marrin?" she moaned. "Jane?"

"Marrin is still out," Jane said. She was sitting on the couch a few feet from Del. "Whatever they gave you wasn't the same as what they gave me. I've been up for an hour. Groggy, but not in nearly the same state. I don't know what happened to Jordan. She was gone when I came to."

"They took her."

Del kept one hand pressed firmly against her head, and used the other to lever herself to her knees. Her stomach cramped, and pain shot from her abdomen through her chest and legs. The air left her lungs at the sudden onslaught. Darkness swam in front of her eyes and all sound was lost as static filled her ears.

"Burning, rutting Hell," Del swore.

"Try to breathe," Jane offered.

Del bit back a caustic remark and sucked in a small amount of air. Her vision and hearing returned slowly. She breathed through the pain as it receded back down into her abdomen. A few moments later and she was mostly whole, but the world felt shaky. She decided to chance moving and placed both her hands on the arm of the nearby chair. She paused in the motion, remembering the many nights she'd held Jordan in that same chair after the little girl had a nightmare.

"Let me help," Jane said.

Del wanted to hit the other woman. She didn't want help. She wanted Jordan. She wanted her daughter. She wanted to empty two full magazines into the smug, angular face of the bastard who took her, and let Jordan know nothing like this would happen again. But she was tired, weak and in pain. They'd taken Jordan, and she didn't know who to hit or who

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to shoot. She wasn't certain if she was capable of either in her current state. She started to wave Jane off, but the other woman's strong hands slid under Del's arms and took enough of her weight to help. Del was able to get into the nearest chair and sit somewhat normally in one burst of effort.

"Burning burning Hell," Del swore again. "How long?"

"A little better than four hours," Jane said.

"Damn it," Del muttered.

Any time at all was too much. Four hours could put the attackers and Jordan on a plane and across the country by now. If it was a charter flight, or if the arrangements had been well planned, they could be on their way to anywhere in the world.

"Let's get this over with," Del said.

She pulled one of her SIGs and aimed it at Jane. She kept her finger off the trigger, resting on the guard. The mortal woman froze where she stood, slightly stooped over and uncomfortable. The concern on Jane's face melted into anger and fear. Del didn't care if the woman hated her right now. She gestured with the gun for Jane to stand up straight.

"Tell me," Del ordered, "and be honest. Were you in on it?"

Jane tensed. "Are you serious?"

Del narrowed her eyes.

"Life isn't a movie where everyone wears white hats and black hats," Del said. "Even if we did, they'd be all different shades of the rainbow. Everyone has an agenda, and it only rarely lines up with mine. You're here. Armed men break into my place. I'd be a fool not to see a connection."

"I'm here because of a connection made six months ago," Jane said through clenched teeth. "A connection *you* made. You *agreed* to me coming to Detroit. You *gave me* safe passage. Joshua didn't have to ask. It's a free country. He did it as a courtesy because this is your town and we want to stay in good standing with you."

Del's finger curled off the guard and onto the trigger. She

wasn't completely certain of her aim in her current state, but she focused on Jane's right shoulder. A gunshot wound there would cause plenty of pain, immobilize the right-handed woman, but otherwise shouldn't be deadly.

At the moment, Del didn't care if Jane did die. Marrin would be upset, but that was a bridge she'd cross and burn later. Jordan was all that mattered.

"Answer the rutting question," Del replied.

Jane changed tactics. Her face softened and she gave Del a small smile.

"Del, listen—"

Del cocked the SIG's hammer with an unmistakable click-click of finality. It was completely unnecessary on the semi-automatic, but the sound was scary to most people. A scary sound could be better than a litany of threats.

"Jane, listen," Del repeated Jane's words back to her. "I've been assaulted, threatened, handcuffed, drugged and my daughter has been kidnapped. I'm so...tired, right now. I'm tired, I'm angry, and I'm armed. You know who I am. You know what I am. I know you can handle yourself and you like to sleep with Marrin. That doesn't make us besties by any stretch."

Jane put her hands up and took a step toward Del. It was a good tactic. If Jane could get close enough, put Del off her guard, she might be able to disarm or draw down on her. More anger and frustration flooded into Del.

"Do you really want to test me?" she asked and shook the SIG for emphasis.

Jane froze.

"Answer. The. Question."

"No," Jane said. She shook her head. The honey-brown twists of her hair added depth to the motion. "I had nothing to do with Jordan being taken. I don't know who those men are, and I don't know what they want. Put the gun away so we can stay friends?"

Del searched Jane's eyes for any hint of deception. She

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didn't have a talent for it. Some Nephilim did, but all of Del's genetic traits were for violence. Violence and, oddly, make-up and clothes. If she ever met her father, he had some explaining to do.

Del's lie-detection system was developed over generations of experience with mortals. None of them were as good at lying as they thought, but some were impressive. She didn't see anything in Jordan's face that suggested a less-than-honest answer. Del sighed deeply. She blew the air out of her lungs and felt like a deflated balloon—limp, lifeless and useless.

"I want Jordan back," Del said.

Her eyes brimmed over with tears, ran down her cheek, and plopped onto her shirt.

"I know," Jane said.

Del burst out in sobs. She couldn't remember the last time the anger and frustration of inability had taken her over so completely. Del was supposed to be tough as nails—chewing up rock for breakfast and spitting out a six-lane highway by lunch. She felt powerless.

Jane stepped to the side, out of the line of fire of Del's gun, and plucked it from her numb hand. She used the de-cocking lever to return the hammer to its safety position, knelt beside Del's chair, and pushed the weapon back into its holster. She looked down, opened her arms and pulled Del into her. Del collapsed. She rested her head against Jane's shoulder and let the tears fall. Jane patted her back, and muttered soothing words.

After a few minutes, Del pulled back and looked at Jane.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," Del said.

Jane smiled, squeezed Del's shoulders and nodded. "Unusual circumstances. We're all doing our best."

Del's blood thumped against her skull and tried to force her head to burst like a dam. She leaned her elbows against the arms of the chair and cradled her head against her hands.

"Water?" Jane offered.

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Del thought about the question for a moment. She tried to sense if it would help her body or cause her to be violently ill. She came back without a good answer. Her body felt like porcelain so thin that touching it would cause it to shatter.

“Yes,” Del replied at last. “I’ll try some water.”

Jane moved out of the large front room of the loft and into the kitchen area. Water filled a glass, and the other woman returned. She pressed the drink into Del’s hand, her fingers cool again Del’s skin. The glass clinked when it bumped against the unfamiliar metal bracelet still around her wrists. Del looked at the broken handcuff for several long moments. Cold forged iron would have held them much better, but the few extra seconds it had taken to break the restraints had been more than enough for Alfred Waru and his men to subdue them.

Was it planned that way? Del wondered.

She glanced to the side. Marrin still lay stretched out across the floor. Two blankets were spread over his large frame. Del gave a small smile at the concern. She sipped some more water. The hammering in her head eased.

“Thanks, Jane,” Del said to the other woman. “For all this.”

Jane pushed several strands of her dark brown hair behind her ear and smiled at Del.

“I’m sorry you got dragged in,” Del said.

“Boyfriends,” she said with a nod toward Marrin. “Whaddya going to do?”

“Oh, are you two going steady now?” Del asked, and gave a wink that didn’t quite hurt. “Maybe I should get a girlfriend. Do you have an evil twin back home?”

Jane smiled broadly. “I am the evil twin.”

Del lifted her glass of water in salute and sipped a little more. The water was tap-warm, but she didn’t mind. Her stomach rumbled, ached dully, but didn’t cramp. She took another sip.

“You’ve called Joshua?” Del asked.

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Jane's smile faded, but remained.

"As soon as I could safely dial the number."

"And?"

"He wants me back in Salt Lake."

Del took a small sip from the glass.

"I understand," Del said. "We put you in danger."

"It wasn't your fault, and Joshua doesn't own me," Jane replied. "I'm here on his business, but we both knew it was a long shot. You weren't joking that Ahadiel was hard to contact."

She hadn't seen Ahadiel since the night she signed the adoption papers for Jordan. She didn't like to dwell on those events for too long. Now that Jordan was her daughter, the thought of losing her, even in retrospect, made her shudder. The anger rose again, and she had a sudden need to do something, anything, to get the little girl back. Get her back and punish those who'd been arrogant enough to take her. A mortal mother might defend her children like an angry bear. A Nephilim mother would pull down the pillars of Heaven.

Adrenaline surged through her and she tried to stand. Her legs shook, and the glass dropped to the rug. The little water that remained sloshed free, beaded on the surface before it spread into the fabric. Del sat back down in the chair.

"Damn it," Del muttered. "What in Hell did they give us?"

"At a guess," Jane replied. "Heroin. Massive dose. It'd kill a mortal."

Del thought for a moment. She remembered the warm, familiar blossom of heat in her chest.

"Yeah," she agreed, "it felt like heroin."

"You would know—"

"Twenty-odd years," Del cut off the woman. "So yeah, I'd know. How did *you* know?"

"Jacob and Joshua made certain we knew things," she told Del with a shrug. "On the off chance."

"What 'off chance' would that be?" Del asked.

"A few scenarios come to mind."

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“Do you always carry enough heroin for a distribution charge on top of possession?”

Jane smiled, shook her head and patted the left side of her leather jacket where Del knew a Beretta 96 was nestled snugly under the woman’s arm. “I’m a big girl,” Jane told her. “I can take care of myself.”

A thousand reasons why that wasn’t true flooded into Del’s mind. The first of which was that even as a Nephilim, Del had found herself close to dying on more than one occasion. There wasn’t much worse than rogue demons, but even mortals, ones that otherwise were small and weak, had nearly killed her. Strength, courage, skill and even luck had seen her through. If Alfred Waru had wanted Del and every other one of them dead, they would be lying in pools of their own blood. Jane was trained, skilled and sharp. Sharp enough to cut.

Del looked at Jane. The woman seemed confident, but there was a fear around her eyes and in her words. She was a young mortal, and even though she’d seen fighting, she probably had never been taken so utterly unaware. Combat training was one thing. Home invasion and assault was something else altogether. There was no defense for a bullet to the back of the head.

“You are good,” Del said to reassure her. “When the big men go to sleep.”

She gestured toward where Marrin still lay, sleeping off the drugs.

“He’ll be ok, right?” Jane asked. For the first time, Del could see some of the cracks in her armor. “I mean, you’ll both be ok from the drugs?”

“The Smalls didn’t teach you that?” Del asked. She shook her head to indicate the answer didn’t matter. “Our metabolisms run too fast for most mind altering substances to have a lasting effect. We burn straight through them. It takes something fairly potent, like heroin, to do anything. We’ll suffer some aftereffects, like this ten-alarm migraine of mine. But a day or two, and you won’t even know.”

“And addiction?”

“For Nephilim, addiction is a choice,” Del told her. “Marrin’s smoking, it’s an emotional habit. It’s like your obsession with coffee. You *like* to have it every morning, you may even claim or joke that you *need* to have it. But the truth is, if every coffee bean and ground in the world suddenly disappeared, you’d be ok. You’d miss the habit of going to your favorite place, smelling the smells and tasting the tastes. But you wouldn’t go through withdrawals or con your granny into credit fraud for another coffee fix.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jane joked, but the relief was obvious. “I’m homicidal without my morning cup from House of Brews.”

Marrin saved Del from any further discussion on the topic. He moaned and rolled onto his side. His hands came up to hold his head together and Del sympathized.

“Jane?” he said. “Jordan?”

Del wasn’t certain if she was disappointed he’d asked about the mortal first, or pleased that he thought of both.

“I’m fine,” Jane told him, coming to his side.

Jane helped him into a sitting position. He rocked slightly from side to side, and most of his long, blond hair had come free. It draped around his face like curtains and cut off his gaze from Del. She said nothing, giving him time to get to his senses as she had. He held out a hand in front of his face and watched as his fingers shook.

“Rutting Hell,” he mumbled. “What *was* that?”

“Heroin. At least we think so,” Del said and indicated Jane. “A dose large enough to put us out of the game for four or five hours. No way to be certain, but that’s what it felt like. Doesn’t really matter anyhow, unless you’re thinking of taking it up as a hobby.”

Marrin looked up from where he sat, his ice-blue eyes gave her a flat, no-nonsense stare. Del snorted, and favored him with a half-smile. Unlike her, Marrin didn’t indulge in attempts to drown his sorrows through chemical means. Even

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his smoking was an affectation. What little nicotine actually got into his system wasn't worth mentioning. He liked his lighter and the tricks he could do with it. He insisted on the soft pack cigarettes because he liked the crumpled *film noir* look when he pulled them from his pocket. He even liked formal occasions when he could use his silver-chased black leather cigarette case and matching lighter. Like his movies, and his penchant for quoting them, it was all theatrics. Marrin didn't indulge in things that actually hurt his body. Anything that would make him less of a warrior was out the door. He'd made it one of his goals to "help" Del do the same when Ahadiel made them partners.

His flat stare told Del all of that in spades.

"Fine, fine," Del said and held her hands up in mock surrender. "No. That's all you had to say to me. Just no."

"No," Marrin replied.

"Well isn't someone Mr. Grumpy-Pants after he's assaulted at gun point, handcuffed, and drugged into submission," Del said.

"Jokes, Del?"

"I've already cried and tried to shoot Jane twice," Del replied. "Humor is my last coping mechanism."

"Your gravestone is going to read, 'Died of Sarcasm at the Wrong Time,'" Marrin replied.

"Wait," Jane said. "What do you mean twice?"

Del shrugged, which almost felt normal. "The first time, I didn't pull my gun."

Jane's eyes narrowed but she didn't say anything.

"What about Jordan?" Marrin asked.

Jane handed Marrin a glass of water, and he drained it in a single gulp. If his stomach bothered him, he didn't show it. Her gaze fell to the floor, and she couldn't help finding the spot where Jordan had dropped a full glass of purple grape juice and stained Del's expensive rug. At the time, Del hadn't been mad at all. She'd laughed at the cliché of a child ruining something nice. Looking at the stain now, she had to fight to

keep from bursting into sobs a second time. She didn't trust herself to speak. She shook her head in response to Marrin's question.

"There's an envelope," Jane said.

"There's an envelope?" Del asked. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Jane.

"It wasn't addressed," Jane replied.

"But you knew it wasn't for you," Del said. She fought down the urge for violence a little more easily. It helped that there was something she could do.

"It's on the table, laid out," she said. "Airplane tickets, car rental receipt, an itinerary, and a map. That's it."

Del stood up, picked up the fallen glass, and moved to the kitchen table. She tried very hard not to be angry with Jane for the violation. It wasn't much, and in the same position, Del would have peaked inside as well. But she wasn't in Jane's position.

"Tickets to where?" Del asked as she looked at the papers.

Jane had placed the tickets and the printed papers in neat rows. The map, an old gas station type printed by Amoco, was left folded. Its bright yellow text claimed to show all of Northern Nevada.

"Reno," Jane said. "Then Elko, Nevada."

"What's in Elko?" Marrin asked.

"The car rental agency," Jane provided. "The map has a route highlighted to Battle Mountain which isn't necessary. I-80 is the only reasonable road between the two."

"*The* Battle Mountain?" Del asked. "The Armpit of America?"

Marrin gave her another flat stare but she didn't budge.

"I'm not making this up," she told him. "Battle Mountain is a nothing town sitting in the middle of nowhere. Some major paper had a contest to find the worst town in the U.S. Battle Mountain won. That's how I know about it. I think the residents have to fight off the coyotes on a regular basis for control of the town limits."

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“Are you really saying,” Marrin asked, and he crinkled his eyes with some small mirth, “that if there’s a bright center of the country, Battle Mountain is the furthest thing from?”

This time Del gave him the flat stare. It was a quote. She knew it was a quote. It tickled her brain, but she couldn’t come up with the television show or movie it was from.

“Alright,” she said cautiously, “yes. That’s what I’m saying.”

“*And* it’s in the desert?”

“The high plains desert,” Del replied.

“Jane,” Marrin said. “Why haven’t you told me about this place sooner?”

“Don’t get delusions of grandeur, laser-brain,” she told him and ran her hand from his shoulder down his chest. Her dark hand made a stark contrast with Marrin’s light shirt. “I might know what’s there, what’s so important it’s worth kidnapping Jordan and making enemies of us.”

“Us?” Del and Marrin said at the same time.

Jane gave Marrin a broad smile, “Well, I’m not going to let you get all the credit and take all the reward.”

Marrin’s smile was so wide, Del thought it might reach around behind his head.

“The two of you,” Del said. “I might have to shoot you both.”

“What’s there?” Marrin asked.

“The Ljosalfar,” Jane said.

“Juice owl far?”

“Close enough,” Jane replied.

Del looked at Marrin, whose eyes practically twinkled.

“English?”

“Elves,” Marrin replied. “Straight out of Norse mythology.”