

Excerpt: *Death's Last Hand*

Chapter 4

Paladin stood atop Cooke's Peak and stared at the petroglyphs on the rock face across the ravine. The rattlesnakes were his favorite. If he watched long enough, stared hard enough, one of them would reward him with a flick of the tongue or the swish of a rattle.

Today was windy and his dark hair lurched and tossed in the wind. That had never happened before. He rubbed a hand across the stubble on his chin, dislodging a few bits of sand. He rubbed the grains between his fingers. "So, that's what you feel like."

Feel. He couldn't remember if he'd ever used that word before.

Behind him, the woman rocked with her arms wrapped around her knees. She'd stopped crying four days ago. She quit cursing him two days ago. It had been an hour since she'd said, "You're going to be sorry. Cliff will never stop until he gets me back. I'm not going anywhere with you!"

She was due any minute.

Paladin felt them before he saw them – a shift in the wind, a slight drop in temperature. Again, feeling. He rubbed his hand down his sleeve, letting his fingers follow the seams in the leather, marveling at the bumpity-bump of the stitches. He'd always liked the look of this coat. Now he knew it felt good too.

*Feelings. Preferences. Desires. Entirely inappropriate.* The sentiment floated into his mind as Griffin materialized at his elbow. Inappropriate... his compatriot always had a book in his pocket somewhere – against the rules, of course; but Griffin had been reading human literature for five centuries. Paladin knew it would be useless to make a stink about it now. Especially now.

He frowned. *Make a stink... even my words are changing. Smelling the air, the soil... the word stink becomes part of my lexicon. How much longer can I stay here before compassion sinks in?*

“Sinks in, indeed,” Griffin said.

“Where are the others?”

“They don’t want to come. Fury says you should never have let yourself get into such a predicament.”

“I don’t compromised by this,” Paladin said. He turned and stared through Griffin at the girl. She stared back, squinting as if trying to see through dirty window panes. Paladin found he was frowning... again. “This girl, that man... there’s something extraordinary about them. He could see me. He could touch the woman after I awakened her.” Paladin indicated his nose. “He punched me.”

“Hey, who you talking to?” Dale asked.

Griffin turned to the woman. “How is that possible?”

“Oh, I see him now,” Dale said.

“She can’t see me,” Griffin said.

“Sure I can. You’ve wearing a real nice sweater – cable knit, black. Black Levi’s. Kinda chic.”

“She does see me!” Griffin said.

Paladin smiled. Five hundred years and that ego had never succumbed to bondage.

“Can you also hear me?” Griffin asked.

“Yeah, I can now,” Dale said. “The longer you stand there, the better I can see you. More so when you’re near the grouch.”

“The grouch?” Griffin laughed.

His blond hair rippled when he laughed, like a golden wave of wheat. *Did I just think that?* Paladin straightened his back. “This has to stop.” He turned his face into the wind. “All of you, here, now!”

The replies came, sullen... cynical... bitter.

*I'm busy doing the work you should be doing.* That was Phoenix.

*No time to deal with your issues, man.* Clearly Condor.

*Fuck you.* Fury, ever eloquent.

Paladin breathed in the heat surrounding him to cover the anger building inside. He knew they'd feel it, recognize it, and know he was not as free of this situation as he pretended. “Do I have to make this a command?”

“COMMAND? Who the fuck do you think you are?” Fury appeared, almost on Paladin's toes, his nose so close Paladin could feel whiskers from his thick blond beard – an affectation Fury would not part with.

“Nice of you to join us,” Paladin said. The others were also coming. They would be five when they all arrived. To humans, there would appear to be a slight darkening of the horizon beyond the butte, an indication of rain or a storm perhaps. Especially when Fury was... aggravated.

At one time, there had been twelve of them – Reapers, as humans called them now. Half their number had fallen to temptations and compromise. He would not be of that number. Paladin wanted his rest, his peace. The time of release was too close to fail now.

The breeze at his back announced the arrival of the others.

“Mon ami, there is a stray soul here,” Phoenix said, squatting down in front of Dale. He pushed his shaggy chestnut hair back from his face and squinted at the woman. “Should I ask why, or will the answer be more than I can grasp?”

“The answer will be entertaining,” Griffin said. “Phoenix, meet Dale Gibbons.”

“Enchanté,” Phoenix said, a slight raise of the eyebrow to indicate his sarcasm.

“Charmed,” Dale said.

Phoenix flounced back onto his butt. “She heard me!” The dust quickly painted his black slacks gray. His eyes bugged, astonished by his position, the dirt, and the woman. “This cannot happen! She cannot hear me. I cannot get dirty.”

“Apparently you can, and she did,” Griffin said, laughing. “She can see us all. I sense a boundary to her perception of us, but it’s not making sense to me.”

“I feel it as well . . .” Paladin began.

“Feel? What’re you talking about?” Fury roared.

“He meant what he said,” Condor said from his kneeling position in front of Dale. He pulled his gaze away from the stare-down he and Dale had been engaged in and stood to face Fury.

“Stop lying and admit you feel it, too. Here, in this woman’s presence, I almost feel... human.”

“Did you just call me a liar?” Fury said, advancing on the shorter Condor.

Paladin sighed. He knew what was coming. Condor was smaller only in stature. His ferocity knew no equal. He was one of the newer members of their group and had all the New World’s swagger and propensity for violence. Fury was all old school rage. Condor was clearly not impressed.

Condor shook back his dreadlocks and returned Fury’s dead stare. “I didn’t bite my tongue. Here, with her, we’re all feeling IT, something, maybe everything. I know I’m closer to my earthly ties than you, but if you tell me you feel nothing at all, you’re lying.”

Paladin took a step to intervene, but Fury stopped, Dale Gibbons on the ground between him and Condor. Fury glared at his fellow, into the dark brown face that would have been a foreign thing in his lifetime. His Viking features twisted with the confusion Paladin knew Fury had for the black man and his words.

Fury was the oldest of their group, one who had indeed, in the beginning, been a “Ferryman”. New ideas about the dead, their transitions and what actually happens to a soul – he

had no use for any of it. Fury was the only one of them who still carried the old scythe. The long handle materialized in his hands now, the blade gleaming in the setting sun.

“I say we end what she’s doing, however she’s doing it. We kill her now.” He tossed his long blond hair back across his shoulder, platinum against the black denim jacket, and scowled down on the woman. “She’s supposed to be dead. I say we finish this and get back to work.”

“We can’t do that,” Phoenix said, still brushing dirt from his backside. “That is so far out of bounds we would all have to pay for it. Killing her is not the way.” His true accent crept in when he was startled or trying to be forceful. He had left his “Frenchness” behind ages ago, confessed it made his duties more difficult, especially with women. He had violated orders with a passenger once and got five hundred years added to his sentence. He wasn’t about to make that mistake again.

“There will be no killing,” Paladin said. “We will do what must be done, but within the rules. We have to convince Dale Gibbons that her voyage, her life, is not over. Death is but the beginning of new experiences.”

“You sound like the Travel Channel,” Dale said. “Look, whatever’s waiting for me has waited this long, it can wait a little longer. That’s all I’m saying. Just put me back and let Cliff and me continue with our lives.”

“She’s right,” Condor said. “No harm, no foul. Just put her back. There’s no guarantee she’s going to survive the coma. Maybe next time, she’ll be more ready to go.”

“Dale is not the one keeping her on the ground,” Paladin said. He turned away, staring across the desert as if the object of his ire were within sight. “It’s the man, Cliff Talon.”

“OK, he made that name up,” Condor said, laughing.

Fury scowled at him. “Like we didn’t.”

“Enough.” Paladin turned back to the group. “You don’t understand what I’m saying. He’s bound her to him by sheer force of will. He could not only see me, he could touch me – and Dale. He held onto her, blocked the door and I could not pass. These things... they are not possible, yet

they happened. Only by human intervention was I able to escape, and now I'm bound to ground. I can't open a portal when I'm within twenty feet of her."

"Sacre´ Bleu!" Phoenix said. "It cannot be."

"Yet, here we are," Griffin said. "Not your everyday problem."

"So, you're saying you're stuck here until you figure out what to do with the woman?"

Condor said. "What's the problem, dude? Put her back."

"We can't have humans believing they control us," Fury said. "Can't let shit like this start. It'll ruin everything."

Griffin stared at Fury, shaking his head. "I don't want to try to understand what you just said."

"We have to do something," Condor said. "Standing around on this rock isn't accomplishing anything."

"Like what? Paladin's too scared to do what's necessary," Fury said with snort. "One of them has to die to finish this. What about the man? Is he out of bounds, too?"

"Maybe we should talk to Balthazar," Griffin said. "He might have seen this happen before."

"Hell, Balthazar's been around since time began, right?" Condor asked. "He's seen everything."

"Yes, but will he talk to us?" Phoenix asked.

"Not to you," Paladin said, "but he'll talk to me."