

## The Story So Far...

Grace Fortune met Jared Lorn when he saved her life during a school shooting. Then she saved his life by helping him defeat the demon who had cursed him. That demon—a fallen angel named Azazel—was one of the Watchers who came to earth before the time of the Flood to procreate with human women. Jared is a descendant of his corrupt line, known as the Nephilim.

For their egregious sin, the Watchers were imprisoned by God in the Abyss. But according to prophecy, there would come a time when the Abyss would be opened, and the Watchers would be set free.

That time has come.

### Gabriel

The earth trembles as it did in the beginning.

I, Gabriel, stand with the Seven as witness to the splitting of the worlds, which had been long prophesied. The fire shoots like a spear into the sky, igniting clouds. At the same time, it goes deep inside the earth. Melting rock, tearing the Veil.

It reminds me of the day of the Cross.

Abaddon, the guardian of the Abyss, cries out to us, his voice blistered, burned.

*Will you do nothing?*

There is nothing we can do.

The Abomination rises from the depths of the churning sea, unmoored from his eternal prison. Azazel. Prince of the Fallen Ones. The Watcher King. He stands with his feet on the land for the first time in ten thousand years, his body compressing, his silvered skin burnishing in the harsh winter sun. His white hair cascades over massive shoulders of rippling muscles as he raises his arms in triumph. He lifts his face to the sky and takes a long, deep breath—his mouth contorts in what might be a smile. His minions, the Watchers, appear after him, their bodies similarly transforming. One hundred and fifty of them.

He knows we're here, though he can't see us. One eye is a white disc—the other one is nothing but a blackened hole. The work of a human girl. Still, he knows our presence makes little difference. We will do nothing to stop him—yet. This is the command of Elohim. This is the prophecy. The Abomination must be unleashed.

There is a disturbance in the water—another being rising. Samyaza, who once joined with Azazel to lead the Watchers to their doom. Azazel turns as Samyaza sets a newly formed human foot on the earth. His smile is cold. Before Samayza can hoist himself any further, Azazel hurls a fist into his chest. Samyaza reels backward into the sea. He flails helplessly as the other Watchers attack, pummeling him until he sinks below the surface and disappears. The sea is calm again.

“There can only be one to rule,” Azazel says.

The remnant of the Nephilim gathered to witness this Unleashing fall to the ice, singing songs of praise in voices as jagged and broken as shattered glass.

“Hail Azazel, Most High Ruler of All!”

Once, the Nephilim looked human, tall and fair and perfect. The giants of the earth, the mighty ones, the heroes. While their faces remain untouched by corruption, their elongated skulls slope backward like curved horns, their skin glistens with iridescent scales, and sinewy tentacles protrude like writhing snakes from their backs and sides. These are what's left of the hordes that once threatened to corrupt and destroy all life on earth. They've kept themselves hidden hundreds of years—well, almost.

They continue to worship Azazel, who extends his hands in their direction as if giving a benediction. “My children! Your patience has been rewarded. Your suffering is now at an end. Did I not promise you this?”

The Nephilim bow and weep in grateful adulation.

“There, there, now. All is well. I come to bring you peace.”

The Nephilim are too busy worshipping their new king to see what happens next. With a simple toss of his shining head, Azazel sets his minions upon them. Starved for flesh, the Watchers fall upon the hapless worshippers with savage abandon, tearing them bone from bone until the ice and snow are smeared with their blood and tissue. The worship of the Nephilim turns to wailing. Even I, who knows their evil, cannot bear to witness their suffering.

The gorging is over in mere moments.

Azazel peruses the carnage with smug satisfaction. “Such corruption had to be destroyed,” he murmurs. “To pave the way for perfection. My true son. I can feel him. I have always felt him. I will find him now. And the one who stole his heart from me.” Azazel’s body flickers with his anger, his composure cracks. “She of the human race! Cursed witch! I will find her and destroy her!”

The minions raise their arms, open their blood-engorged mouths, and cheer.

I turn to the little guardian, the one the human girl calls Ariel. Up to this moment, he has not understood why we brought him here to witness this event. But now, he sees for himself.

The son of Azazel is the Nephilim boy, Jared Lorn.

The one who stole his heart is Grace Fortune.

Ariel is Grace’s guardian.

The little guardian shrinks back in horror. And then he takes off like lightning to another mountain, far away in that other world. To the girl named Grace, who lies unconscious on the ground, still wet from her near-drowning only moments before.

*Grace, he whispers into her heart. Wake up. Time to run.*

PART ONE

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

# 1

## Fallout

### Grace

Well, it's been a day.

I woke up this morning a prisoner in a castle tower.

In Switzerland.

Seriously.

I managed to escape through a stone shaft that might have been a medieval toilet. I searched the whole castle until I found him, my husband Jared, chained up in an actual dungeon—*seriously*—dying from gunshot wounds that weren't healing.

Darwin Speer did that. Inventor. Genius. Billionaire. Megalomaniac.

I thought Jared was going to die in my arms. But then I sang, and he started to heal.

God did that.

And then Rael, who's a Nephilim and looks like a giant man-lizard, got loose and broke a hole in the castle wall, and we escaped, crossed a lake, in which I almost drowned, and ran up a mountain before the whole world blew up.

Well, that's the gist of it. Am I going too fast?

At the moment, I am lying on the rocky patch of ground under a tree, trying to breathe through the gurgling in my lungs as the earth trembles violently under me. It's louder than a crashing plane, louder than anything I can even imagine. Metaphors fail me. I'm pretty sure the world is about to end any second now.

Something blocks the sun shining in my eyes. Rael. All nine feet of reptilian humanoid. Despite the scaly, greenish skin and a skull sloped like the hood of a Volkswagen, he's got a very beautiful, very human face which always freaks me out a little. His muscular shoulders and sides are covered in ugly stumps where Darwin Speer's scientists did their grisly work, amputating the graceful tentacles that once adorned his body like angel wings. One of his hands is missing—he chewed it off to get free of his chains.

Rael saved my life, but right now I'm pretty sure he wants to end it. He leans over me, his mouth falling open to reveal sharp white teeth, electric blue eyes boring into mine, his breath heavy on my neck. I try to scramble away from him, but a stabbing pain catches me in my ribs. I cry out as he reaches toward me with his one good hand, and I notice the perfection of his long, elegant fingers—six of them—thin and pointed like talons. A low growl escapes his throat—he is more purely animal after the torture he has endured.

“Stop!”

The finger is almost upon my cheek when it freezes in midair. Jared pushes the giant arm away, wet hair pale as snow falling into crystal blue eyes. In some bizarre way, they look alike, these two. The black hoodie of Jared's captivity hangs off him in ragged strips, revealing the puckered skin of healing wounds on his stomach and shoulder.

“Back off.”

Rael, to my surprise, obeys. Jared kneels beside me. “You okay?”

“My ribs. I can hardly breathe. What's happening? Was that an earthquake?”

“The collider blew.”

The collider. The machine in Geneva—Darwin Speer's Big Bang machine.

“What does that mean, blew?”

"I saw the explosion."

"You mean a...*nuclear* explosion?"

"Yes."

"So why aren't we dead?"

"I think most of the blast went underground. Besides, it's pretty far away. But that doesn't mean we're out of danger. Can you walk?"

I try to move, but the pain takes my breath away. "Can you...do anything?"

He takes a slow breath and lays his hands gently against my ribcage. Lightning flickers under his skin. His hands grow very warm—I gasp at the burning sensation. He pulls away. I breathe deep.

"Better?"

I take another full breath for good measure. I nod. "Thanks."

Suddenly, Rael shouts at us, not in English but Archean. It's an angel language, though it sounds a little like Finnish to me.

"What's he saying?" I ask.

"He says we need to keep moving."

I'm pretty sure that's *not* what he said. Rael probably wants Jared to dump me—I'm going to slow them down.

"There are still drones around, and the radiation cloud might come, depending on how the wind blows. I told him he should go alone, but he won't...leave me."

"Why not?"

Rael interrupts with another Archean tirade. His eyes flash like a sparking circuit. Is it rage I see or pain? Jared gives him such a terse reply that he goes quiet.

"Can you walk?" he asks me.

"I'm not sure."

"I'll carry you." Jared bends down so I can climb gingerly onto his back, wrapping my arms around his neck, my legs around his hips. I bite my lip to avoid crying out.

"Take it easy—" I barely have the words out before he is charging up the slope to the top of the ridge. I bounce against him like a sack of potatoes, tears springing to my eyes. "*What happened to taking it easy?*"

Around us, trees shake and fall from the quakes, Jared leaping over them, trying to outrun them. Did I mention he has some

minor superpowers? Like Rael, he is a Nephilim, though at a different stage in his development. He hasn't gotten to the point where he's grown tentacles, thank goodness.

Every step he takes is like a spike thrust into my spine. By the time we get to the ridge, I am more hedgehog than human.

"Please, stop," I plead with my last breath. And then I look down—it's a sheer drop to the ravine below. "No."

Rael charges past—he leaps over the edge and lands halfway down, disappearing for a moment in a cloud of dust and loosened rock. He continues down the steep slope without pause. I groan out loud.

"There's got to be another way...."

Jared jumps. I close my eyes and pray: *save us*.

My throat drops into my stomach as we fall, then shoots back up into my skull when we land on the rocky slope. I scream into Jared's ear as the jarring in my ribs reverberates down my spine. I grip his neck so tightly that I'm probably cutting off his airway. I shut my eyes as he recovers his footing and takes another giant leap to the bottom.

He runs along an old railroad track, chasing after Rael. I'm sure my ribs are cracking into powder, dissolving into my lungs. Rocks and broken tree limbs rain down on us from above. A large stone, practically a boulder, hits Rael in the head—he barely notices.

Then suddenly, Rael stops, and Jared almost crashes into him. Jared lets me down, and I stare at a fissure in the earth at least twenty feet wide, as if the mountain had been sawed in half.

Jared and Rael look at each other. Rael takes a step back and jumps. For a moment, I am sure he will sprout wings and continue sailing into the sky, transforming from clumsy gargoyle to imperial angel. But then he lands hard on the other side, so hard he makes a small crater. Jared sucks in a breath. Rael rises slowly, then turns and raises his arms.

"Oh no, you don't," I whisper. But he does. He picks me up and tosses me in the air like a football. I scream as I spin over the fissure and slam into Rael, who has the texture of a slimy brick wall. I scramble out of his grasp as quickly as I can, in too much pain to be angry.



Jared is already jumping, his body arched like a dancer's over the crevice. He lands with astonishing grace next to me and gives me a crooked grin.

“Sorry about that.”

“I hate you.”

“If I'd told you, it would have been worse. Let's keep going.”

## 2

### You Better Run

We run into a narrow ravine, and Jared mercifully calls Rael to stop. He lets me down, and I collapse against the rock wall, folding my arms over my throbbing ribs. Every breath is agony.

“Thank you,” I rasp.

“We’ll wait here and see which way the fallout cloud is going.” Jared settles in beside me. I lean against him for support. Rael hunkers down a few feet away, glaring at us resentfully with his radioactive eyes.

“Why does he look at me like that?” I whisper. “Like he’s planning to swallow me whole the first chance he gets?”

“He’d probably like to. But he won’t.”

“Why not? Why won’t he leave you?”

“He thinks I am his...messiah. That I’m going to bring about the return of the Watchers.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? What if that explosion...I mean...we know Speer was going to use the LHC to try and break through dimensions. What if...he succeeds?”

“Obviously, he didn’t. The collider exploded.”

“I saw an explosion, but I don’t know what caused it.”

“As soon as we get to civilization, we’ll find out.” I pause to take in a slow, painful breath. “Can you try again?”

Jared presses his free hand to my ribcage. After a moment, the heat burrows under my skin, softening the stabbing pain to a dull throb.

“Better?”

“Better.”

His hand lingers on my stomach. I cover it with mine.

“What do you think went wrong? With the collider?”

“I can only guess that Speer was in such a big hurry to turn the machine on, he made a mistake. It was too soon. It wasn’t ready. It could have been leaks, manufacturing defects, or just too much power. It exploded once before, though the explosion was contained. And it was only running at a fraction of the energy back then.”

“And you think that explosion could open the Abyss? I mean, the Abyss is way up in Norway.”

“The Abyss is not limited to earthly geography.”

“But you think there is a connection to CERN specifically?”

“Well, it’s possible. There’s a story that CERN is located on a site of a temple of Apollo. Apollo in Greek is Abbadon.”

“The guardian of the Abyss.”

“Right.”

“So...kind of ironic that you were born right there, isn’t it?” I ask. Jared was born in Saint-Genis-Pouilly, where most of CERN’s Large Hadron Collider sits. “You think all this has something to do with you?”

He shrugs. “All I know is everything I’ve done—even when I tried to do the right thing—has just led to more bad things happening.”

“Not everything.” I press my hand to his cheek. “You saved my life a few times, as I recall.” I pull him to me, kiss him softly. He pulls away too soon. We’re silent for a long time.

“How long will it take for the cloud to reach here?” I ask finally.

“A couple of hours, probably. Why don’t you get some sleep?”

Sleep? While I’m crouched in a ravine with a bruised rib, waiting for nuclear winter, being watched by a creature with gigantic

teeth? He's got to be kidding. But Jared's body is warm, and my eyes are heavy, and, well, it's been a day.



Rael's rattling voice jars me awake. He's speaking Archean again, his voice like nails on the proverbial chalkboard.

"What did he say?" I ask, rubbing my eyes.

"He says we can go now."

"Did the cloud pass?"

"Not yet. I think maybe the wind took it in another direction."

Jared untangles from me and stands. He grabs my hand to help me up. My ribs feel less tender, my breathing not nearly as painful. Jared's healing ministrations worked. But my feet have fallen asleep, and sharp needles radiate up my legs. I lean on Jared for support until I can steady myself. Rael watches us impassively—he seems somewhat annoyed at my humanness.

"Where to?" I ask.

"We'll keep following the train tracks. They've got to lead to a town or some sort of civilization. Then we can get to a phone and call home." Jared crouches. "Hop on."

I groan at the thought of another bouncy ride on his back but climb on and wrap myself around him as he starts down the tracks, jogging as smoothly as possible. I press myself tightly against him as if the pressure alone will keep my ribs from shaking loose. Rael follows close behind—even his shadow makes the hair of my neck stand up.

After a few minutes, the ravine opens into a wide valley rimmed by rolling hills. Everything is saturated in green. Birds sing, hidden in clusters of trees. A small waterfall plunges into a gentle stream. This is the Switzerland of my imagination.

"What a nice place for a picnic," I say idly as Jared slows to a walk. The idea of a picnic reminds me of how hungry I am. We stop for a drink in the stream and head toward the foothills. I see nothing of civilization—even the train tracks have disappeared. Perhaps we've gone through a time slip and are now in the past before the invention of trains and planes and colliders. Perhaps the explosion never happened.

We come upon a cluster of old buildings nestled in the shadow of the mountains—a farm. The main house is composed of

crumbling stones with a steeply sloping roof, giving credence to my “lost in time” theory. The other buildings look like sheds dominated by a dilapidated barn.

Jared stops and lets me down.

“Looks deserted,” I say.

“Maybe. We should check it out. It’s getting dark anyway.”

We head toward the barn, the furthest building from the main house. It’s chock full of old junk, broken farm equipment, tools, pipes, televisions, bicycle parts.

“There goes my medieval theory,” I say under my breath. “Maybe someone is living here—who has a phone.”

“We should go knock on the door of the house,” Jared says. He turns to Rael. “You stay here.”

Rael growls and jabbars in Archeon. Jared replies sharply. Rael growls some more but turns away and slumps into the barn like an overgrown child having a tantrum.

Jared and I walk across the grass and climb the rickety steps to the front door of the house. I raise my fist to knock, but before I can even touch the splintered, peeling wood of the door, it bursts open to reveal the business end of a rifle.