

arbiter

THE SENTINEL TRILOGY BOOK 2

arbiter

THE SENTINEL TRILOGY BOOK 2

jamie s. foley

Copyright © 2015 Jamie S. Foley

10 Digit ISBN: 0692376615

13 Digit ISBN: 978-0692376614

Published in Bastrop, Texas by Jamie S. Foley

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either used fictitiously or are products of the author's imagination. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

the world of *Alani*



I

Soft arcs of snow crested over a line of mountain peaks as an ocean gale broke over them. The soft, white flurries wafted downward and vanished over the broken city of Altair.

The heart of the city teemed with activity. Shouts of allure from market vendors wafted into a cluster of regal government buildings.

The most recent addition was marked with a cat-like icon but no text. The door was protected by a digital lock, but its security camera dangled by a cord. One of the two small windows was shattered. The darkness inside sucked at the sun's light and devoured it with fangs of glass.

It was in the underground floor of this structure that Darien Aetherswift stared up in horror at the winged lizard that towered over him. Its wide golden eyes examined him as if he was a rabbit in an open field.

He'd seen a beast like this before: a bull that had stood like a man, twelve feet tall with wings formed of pure darkness. But that one had most definitely been in an arbiter's nightmare.

"Wh—what..." Darien's throat closed up and refused to allow any more speech.

"Don't be afraid," the beast said, but it sighed as if it had already repeated that exact line thousands of times. "I'm really not *that* scary, am I?"

Darien's jaw hung open, but the shock was wearing off. He quickly determined to defend himself. Adrenaline surged through his blood and his aether churned eagerly.

The beast's massive wingspan lowered to the carpet and its head twitched

to the side like a bird's. "Hey, don't try anything, now. You don't want to go down that road, trust me. I've never lost to a human."

Darien weighed his options as his mind regained speed. He was in the lowest, most remote part of the Altair Lynx base... and the door behind the beast was closed... so surely no one would hear him if he screamed.

He swallowed hard to clear his throat. "What are you?"

The beast snorted and reeled back, curving its beak ever so slightly in a smirk. "I'm an arch angel. Name's Rigel." He bowed his head low.

Darien blinked, too dumbstruck to return the gesture. "Uh..." He glanced at the sleeping form of his sister on the bed behind him, then once around the room to ensure that he wasn't hallucinating. "I'm... Darien. Regular... human."

The room resonated with the beast's strange laughter. "Not for long, boy. I've waited far too long for you to make up your fool mind. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to navigate the time of this realm?"

Darien resigned to the weakness in his knees and sunk into a cross-legged sit on the floor. His muscles, exhausted from constant training, burned in protest. "No, I don't... I don't know what's going on right now."

He squinted at the beast. Feathers covered all of its lizard-like body except four clawed feet, which were armored with ebony scales. On its wings were streaks of vibrant blue flanked by black and white, creating a complex pattern resembling that of a blue jay.

Darien furrowed his brow. "I thought angels were supposed to look... different."

Rigel snorted, causing Darien to jump. "What was I supposed to look like, hmm? A big strapping man? A human toddler with cute little useless wings?" His talons flexed downward and pierced the carpet.

"N-no, I—"

"Never mind. Let's get this over with. I'm needed at the front." The angel's feathers fluffed and smoothed out again. "I am here to offer you a feather."

The silence was long and awkward. Rigel stared at Darien with the eyes of a hawk until his throat went dry.

"Um... thanks...?"

Rigel growled, and Darien sank back against the bed. "You don't even know?" the angel simmered. "Do you have any idea how many humans have killed each other for this over the centuries?" The eagle-like head leaned back. "Joshua, you sure know how to pick 'um!"

"I'm sorry!" Darien blurted. "I didn't even talk to Joshua until like five seconds ago! And then you poofed out of nowhere. Why would I want a feather?"

The angel tilted its long neck and looked at him sideways. His eyes almost displayed humor before he harrumphed. “I thought you’d attended a Serran Academy, but I suppose I can explain again.”

Rigel’s massive body caved inward until he was lying on the floor as a lion might. His blue wings folded in on each other and flanked either side. “You see,” he began in a bored tone, “rarely—only during times of great importance—Aeo will choose a human and an angel to share power. An angel may offer a feather, and if the human accepts, a bond is formed between them.”

Darien’s mind spun, but he nodded slowly. “Okay...”

Golden eyes dissected him. “If you accept my feather, you can place your aether within it to summon my wings to yourself. You would become a Serran.”

Darien shook his hands as if warding off the idea. “Wait, wait. You mean that I would... like... *have* your wings? For real?”

Rigel grunted. “*For real.*” He muttered something about languages and youth.

This couldn’t be right. Darien suddenly shot to his feet and called out at the top of his lungs. “Very funny, Jet! I don’t know how you’re doing this, but play time’s over. Did Garrett help you with this? Huh?”

The angel produced its strange laugh again. “This isn’t a joke, human. I’m not ripping out a feather until you give me a straight answer, so make your decision.”

Darien stared at the beast at eye level, now that he was standing and it was lying down. “You don’t *sound* like an angel should.”

Rigel groaned. “This again? What should I sound like? Should I have no personality? Should I have no free will? No personality? Shall I speak more eloquently for you, or in a higher pitch? Would such a prospect allow you to reflect in a more pleasant fettle?”

“Okay, stop. I have no idea what you’re saying.” Darien turned and paced uneasily across the carpet. He pinched his forearm—hard—and winced as the correct amount of pain registered. “Beth must be working us too hard. These Lynx trainings are going to be the death of me. And I thought Levi was bad...”

The beast regained its feet with surprising speed. “Alright, I can see that you need some time to process. That’s fine. I’ll return in three of your days. Have your answer ready by then or I’ll assume it’s a ‘no.’” The patterned blue wings began to stretch as full as they could manage in the confined space.

“Wait!” Darien squinted at Rigel, who watched him wearily. “If you’re real... and you aren’t lying... then of course I’ll do it. Why would anyone say ‘no?’”

Rigel was as still as a sculpture for a long moment. “There are many

implications. Humans become very political about these things... and there is always the chance that you will not survive. Perhaps the wisest are the few who decline.”

Darien stepped closer. “Not survive? What does that mean? I thought you said you were just giving me a feather! Is it, like, poisonous or something?”

The arch angel wasn’t amused. “Of course it’s not poisonous. But you can’t just suddenly grow wings; your body would have to adjust. Humans weren’t designed to fly. You are about as aerodynamic as a boulder.”

Darien frowned. “You mean I’ll turn into a monster like you?”

Rigel let out a deep growl and stomped a clawed foot on the floor just inches before Darien’s feet. Darien screamed and tumbled back onto the floor in a heap.

“Don’t worry,” the angel seethed. “You’ll still be your loose-tongued little human self—”

“I’m sorry!” Darien cried.

“... but when you activate my feather, you will transform into a Serran, which is neither human nor angel.” Rigel glared down at him. “Nor monster.”

Darien gave a nervous laugh and an innocent grin. “I was just kidding.”

Rigel snorted. “Your body would need several days to adjust before being able to assume Serran form. Some don’t survive the changes, but you’re young. I’m confident that you’ll be fine.”

Darien cleared his throat and slowly got to his feet once more. “How many is *some*?”

The angel glanced up to a corner of the ceiling as if the answer was written there. “The vast majority.”

Darien’s brow furrowed. “Is this majority like fifty-one percent or ninety-nine percent? How many people have you killed like this?”

“None,” Rigel snapped. “It is your decision, not mine... and I’m still waiting to hear it.”

Darien let out a sharp breath. This prospect was becoming less and less desirable by the second, but his eyes swore that a winged beast truly did stand in front of him, just as he stood in the room himself. “Let me... can I...?” He tentatively reached out a hand.

“Still doubting?” Rigel’s claws flexed as one of the expansive wings arched forward until a splay of foot-long flight feathers hovered just under Darien’s palm.

Darien ran his fingers down the design as if it was a blade’s edge. The feather was soft but firm to the touch. The intricacy was just as breathtaking as the artwork that graced any animal he’d awed over as a child.

The idea that they could be his was absurd... yet tantalizing. How could he possibly ever just sprout wings...? But the possibilities!

Their color is even blue, he thought, like my aether. Darker and more vibrant maybe, but... still my color.

Darien glanced up at the ceiling as if he could see straight through it and into the sky. *And right after I talked to Joshua...*

"Okay," Darien whispered. "I'll do it." Between homemade food and two-a-day military and aether training, he'd never felt healthier. And Rigel was right that he was young at seventeen, so surely the chance of survival would be high enough in him.

Besides, he'd recently escaped the Vanishing, an apocalyptic earthquake, a mass-murderous purge, and somehow an encounter with the deadliest group of humans on the planet. He was practically immortal.

Darien looked up at the golden eyes with excited determination. "What do I have to do?"

Rigel looked down at him for a long, uncomfortable moment. Darien could only partially discern the words under his breath: "I never would've picked this one..."

In one swift motion, the beast plucked a striped feather from the base of its wing. He grimaced and examined the six-inch length as it lay in his enormous clawed hand. The quill was long, sharp, and bloodied.

"You don't have to do anything but survive," the angel murmured. He flipped the feather as if it was a dagger and abruptly plunged the quill into Darien's chest.

Darien slowly looked down in shock. The quill had disappeared up to where the soft down and barbs began. His shirt was pulled into his skin where the spot began to dye itself crimson.

His breath tumbled out in an unintelligible fashion as pain registered. The beast withdrew the remainder, and Darien collapsed to the carpet.

The golden eyes looked down on him with an unreadable expression. Rigel held the blood-smeared blue feather upright in his claws as he spoke. "If the quill breaks, our connection will be severed."

A blinding light began to shift around the room before it crawled onto the beast and began to consume it. Rigel released the feather and vanished completely in a brilliant flash.

The room suddenly felt very empty and very quiet. The feather flitted down gaily until it came to rest on the carpet.

Darien stared at the ceiling in disbelief. Using every bit of his suddenly

elusive strength, he raised his head to get a glimpse of the wound.

His shirt was torn and darkening outward from the center of his chest, where he assumed his heart was.

He'd forgotten to breathe. Darien haltingly sucked in a breath, and his chest responded with a fresh wave of agony.

This wasn't what he'd agreed to. Rigel had... he couldn't have been an angel. He hadn't looked or sounded like one because he couldn't have been one.

What was he?

2

Darien couldn't tell how long he spent in limbo between worlds, or in a dreamless sleep, or perhaps in a waiting line to get into heaven, hell, or any other haven for the dead that he could imagine might exist.

But when his heavy eyelids finally dared to open, he realized he could possibly be on Alani again... the world in which he'd formerly lived.

The light was blinding, but through it Darien could make out dark beige walls beneath a ceiling dotted with round lights. One of the paintings was so abstract that he might have been floating in its surreal landscape before being ejected here.

For a moment, he wondered if he was at the medical clinic of the Jade Glen Serran Academy, where an army of pine trees would be crouching to peer through the windows.

A dull ache informed him that he was alive every time his chest rose or fell from breath. But he couldn't be truly alive because he was cold... frigid... in fact, he might have been an ice core sample placed there for study.

"Ey! You awake, mate?"

Darien shivered and found his roommate, Garrett Yager, sitting at his bedside. The young man's collection of dark Terruthian features expressed a rare concern.

"Yeah," Darien managed. "Where...?"

"We're in the med center in the Lynx base," he paused uncertainly for a moment before adding, "in Altair... in Valinor. You normally don't talk in your sleep... I'm sorry, mate, but Jade Glen is long gone."

“Right. Of course.” Darien shifted uneasily and wondered what else he might have slipped in his ‘sleep.’ He glanced around for his bearings and realized that the modern room was indeed the medical unit with four beds, a sink, storage closet, seating area, and enough cabinets for three kitchens.

He made an effort to look down and found himself shirtless but covered with a pristine thick-woven blanket. He pulled up on it and found a massive bandage taped to his skin at the center of his chest.

“How’d you manage to stab yourself, you oaf? Aleah said another half-inch in and you’d be dead.” Garrett gave a nervous chuckle. “You weren’t really trying to... um... hurt yourself, right?”

“What? No, I didn’t...” Darien trailed off. What could he say? It probably wouldn’t be prudent to tell this mischievous prankster that he’d seen a mythical beast pretending to be an angel who told him that he could gain some ridiculous power before promptly stabbing him with a feather.

Garrett pressed forward with unease. “Well, you just disappeared without telling anyone where you were. Then I found you... like that... next to your sister. She’ll wake up soon, so you can’t give up, mate. It’s only been like a week, but... well...” he squirmed uncomfortably. “We’ll find a way to wake her up.”

Darien cleared his throat and suppressed another shiver. “I know. I didn’t do it. It was... an accident. I think. I don’t remember.” Darien looked away when his words sounded back at him with their terribly obvious lie. “I’m freezing! Is there another blanket?”

Garrett was out of his chair and stripping the bed across from Darien’s before the request was complete. He moved across the space with a limp before flinging the second blanket over the first.

“Thanks,” Darien offered, but Garrett’s deep brown eyes were squinting at him suspiciously. “W-what?”

“It’s warm in here.” Garrett cautiously laid a hand on Darien’s forehead before jerking it away with a hiss. “You’re on fire!”

“No, it’s cold.” Darien pulled the blankets close enough to him to force out any air pockets. “How long have I been here?”

Garrett watched him for a long moment. “I don’t know when... whatever happened... but you’ve been here for maybe six hours. You lost a lot of blood, so Aleah says you’ll need to stay off your feet for a few days.”

Darien might have groaned if he didn’t agree with the order for the time being. He wasn’t sure he could have conjured the strength to stand if he’d wanted to. “Have you been sitting here for six hours then? How’d you find me down there?”

His roommate nodded. “I knew something was wrong when you didn’t show up for dinner, but when you never came back to our room I was wondering which girl you were smooching. Then I remembered you’ve probably never smooched anyone in your life, and your whale aether was easy enough to sense.”

Darien snorted but decided to let one of the jabs pass. This guy was constantly trying to push him into the death trap of the female heart. Instead he countered, “Whale? How am I a whale? And how could you sense me from so far away?”

“Sensing aether is a piece of cake, mate. You have more than anyone else, but it’s pointless since you don’t know how to use it... so it’s just big and awkward and dumb-looking. Like a whale.” Garrett shrugged. “Look, when are you going to tell me what really happened?”

Darien shuddered under the blankets and clutched them close. “I think it might have been a bird that got into the base through the broken window in that room. He must have, like, flown right into me and stabbed me with his beak.”

He smirked at his on-the-spot ingenuity. The room in which the final showdown with the Lynx had taken place last week truly did have a broken window... along with many other broken things. Several people had died there, and those who remained avoided that room like they might not survive another jaunt inside it.

Also, if they’d found the blue-streaked murder weapon, the bird story would cover it. Clearly he’d fought back valiantly and his attacker had lost the feather in the fight.

Wait. Where was the feather?

Brown eyes stared daggers into him. “The door was closed, mate, and there was no freaking bird. That room is on the top floor, anyway, and you were underground. Are you seriously not going to tell me?”

A commotion became audible before the medical clinic’s door flung open. Two men shouldered through with another young man carried between them.

“Be careful, please!” A young woman cried as the men laid the injured one on the now blanketless bed diagonal from Darien’s. He recognized the girl’s medium skin, silver hair, and round face as Aleah Valinor’s, but the panic in her voice now was uncharacteristic of the healer.

“Is that Raydon?” Darien murmured. The man on the bed was only a few years older than him—probably in his early twenties—but his normally plain face had somehow aged considerably... and not in a healthy way. He sweated heavily as Aleah frantically pulled a chair and trash can up to his bedside and placed both hands on his stomach.

“What’s going on?” Garrett demanded as one of the men turned to them with a face carved from the same gray slate his eyes were sculpted from.

“Keep it down,” Grand Master Levi Emberhawk instructed in his signature authoritative voice. “Three people at Valinor Manor have already died, and seven more are sick.”

“Seriously?” Darien breathed. “Raydon was fine during training. Wasn’t that only a few hours ago?”

Levi growled. “It happened so fast that we’re thinking it might be poison, but it’s not just at the manor. It’s the whole city... and apparently here, too.” He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms.

“Poison?” Garrett whispered. “How could the whole city be poisoned? People pretty much grow and hunt their own food!”

The master shrugged. “We all drink the same water, but only time will tell. It could be something... supernatural.”

Darien clenched his jaw as he caught Levi’s meaning. For the past three and a half years, the world had been plagued by strange occurrences: a never-ending meteor shower, an inexplicable Vanishing of random people across the globe, and an earthquake that had shattered civilization as they’d known it. Next to those, sickness sounded like a stroll through the park.

“What about bottled water?” Garrett wondered. “Or juice or soda—” He cut off when Raydon turned and retched into a trash can Aleah barely provided in time.

“You wanna take that chance?” Levi muttered.

“Okay, everyone out, please!” Aleah pleaded. “Thank you all for everything, but I need quiet. Quickly.”

Levi disappeared as Garrett turned back to Darien with a furrowed brow. “I think you have a fever—”

“I’m fine!” Darien snapped, and the room quickly emptied as he struggled to rise.

Stay down, a voice echoed through his head.

Darien clenched his teeth and glared at the other man who’d helped to carry Raydon in. Jet Valinor sat wearily on a chair across the room as he apparently ignored his sister’s request. As Darien’s mentor in the arbiter gift, Jet had been tasked with training him in the transfer of thoughts and memories... and defense against anyone who might try to steal them.

She said for everyone to leave. Darien packaged his thought in a wisp of spiritual energy and sent it in the arbiter’s direction. He knew he was terrible at mental communication, but at least after his training this past week, he finally

had a vague idea of how to do it properly.

She said she needed quiet, Jet corrected. *If she told you not to run with scissors, would that fix your little self-mutilation problem?*

Darien simmered as he cautiously laid back down. It felt like his wound had been sealed—surely by the young healer—but it retained a sharp soreness.

You're even crankier than usual, Darien growled.

It's 4:30 AM and people are dying for no reason, Jet said. *No one's in a good mood right now.*

Darien suddenly realized that he was boiling. He threw off the blankets but tugged at a white sheet under him, wondering what had become of his shirt.

His eyes widened as a thought struck him. Why did he have chills if his wound had already been healed?

Keep your shields up, Jet ordered. *Your thoughts will interrupt her just as efficiently as your big mouth.*

Well excuse me if I do occasionally think—

"It's fine," Aleah snapped, abruptly standing. She moved to the sink and began furiously washing her hands. Darien glanced at Raydon, who appeared to be sleeping.

"You're out of aether," Jet observed.

The healer released a frustrated sigh. "Even if I had more, I wouldn't know what to do with it. I don't even know what I'm doing." She cut the water off and snatched a hand towel.

"It's not your fault," Jet said quietly. "It's the end of the world. People die."

"Not when they're *my* people!" she shouted, then suddenly collapsed onto the sink, folding her arms over the counter and resting her head on them.

She shuddered as silence sank onto the room. "Hannah was... I'd known her since... well, since Mom and Dad brought me here. How many years ago was that? Seven...?"

Darien frowned as Jet moved to her and silently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"In three hours, she's gone. Just like that," Aleah continued. "For no reason. From drinking water? How could the spring water possibly be poisoned?" Her hands tightened into fists.

"You did everything you could," Jet said firmly.

"Which was *nothing*," Aleah quipped. "Why did Aeo give me this gift if I can't..." Her voice constricted. "I couldn't save her... and I can't save Raydon... just like I couldn't save you."

"Hey." The arbiter's voice grew quiet. "I'm here. Aeo didn't give you the

power to work miracles. But he gave you the power to do more than anyone else can.” He pulled a crinkled golden wrapper from his pocket and popped a chocolate candy in his mouth. “Like stealing my watch.”

Aleah’s lips reluctantly twisted into a mischievous smile. She sighed and pulled a silver watch from her scrubs and handed it to Jet. “You’re getting slower. But that’s a good thing, because I’m running out of chocolate.”

Jet slapped the timepiece back on his wrist as he smacked on the candy. “Well, the crap you steal keeps getting more and more obscure.”

“How is a watch obscure?” Aleah laughed. “It was just sitting on your nightstand, but it took you three days to notice.”

“You’re a thief?” Darien blurted.

Aleah’s glistening jade eyes flashed up at him. “You don’t look good,” she accused. “How do you feel?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Um... I’m fine. Probably just, you know, allergies. I can go now.”

The healer drifted to him. Darien clammed up as she placed a hand on his forehead and frowned. “You have a high fever. Did you drink anything?”

“No,” Darien said quickly. “I mean, I was kind of asleep, so...”

Aleah gave a sidelong glance at Jet before turning back to Darien. “You were found unconscious and bleeding out with a sizable hole in your chest. What happened?”

“I don’t remember,” he said quickly. “Um, maybe it was a bird that, like, flew into me with its beak.”

She blinked at him blankly. “You have a fever. That means your body is trying to fight something off. I found no infection when I healed the wound—”

“I could be allergic... to... the bird.” Darien laughed nervously.

Jet slammed a hand down on the counter. “Lie one more time.”

“You’re getting sick,” Aleah said quietly as she inspected his bandage. “If you want me to help you, you have to tell me what happened.”

“I really don’t remember!” Darien blurted. He couldn’t possibly tell them the truth. It would sound even more ridiculous than his lie, and Jet might skin him alive.

“Was it... Teravyn...?” Aleah asked quietly.

“No!” Darien barked. “She’s asleep.”

Jet gently took Aleah’s arm. “You don’t have any energy left, anyway. Go back home and get some rest.”

She shook her head vigorously. “I can’t leave them. Raydon... is...”

When she trailed off, Darien thought he might know why. He knew that

Aleah and Raydon were a couple, and that Aleah was trying to keep it a secret from her savagely protective older brother.

Black eyes analyzed her for a moment before Jet indicated one of the empty medical beds. "Sleep here, then. I'll keep watch."

The healer bit her lip. "You don't mind?"

Jet grunted and took a seat in a chair across from Darien. He watched her expectantly until she crawled onto the hard mattress and curled its blanket around her. Within a minute, her breathing was steady.

Darien stared at the ceiling. Now that the excitement was dying down, he was able to detect more of his condition, much to his chagrin. He would have expected his chest to hurt from the wound, but it was like his entire body was sore. His pulse pounded through his temples, and his skin had a strange sensation as it slathered itself in sweat. Malaise boasted of its sway over him, and he wished he could fall back asleep.

He could feel Jet's eyes on him, and he dared not return them or indicate his misery in any way. The last thing he needed right now was the arbiter on his case. The man could tell lie from truth like earth from sky.

Darien's aether condensed around his mind at his call, but he felt weak. His thoughts might have been hidden from any other aethryn, but he never felt safe from Jet.

What happened to the feather? he wondered. If he remembered correctly, it had flitted to the floor when Rigel had vanished. But now, honestly, he thought he might have been poisoned like Raydon and hallucinated the entire event.

But if it had been real, Garrett must have seen the feather when he'd found him. The thing was six inches of bright blue, white, and black with his blood marring its quill. How could anyone have missed such an odd sight?

Darien cautiously glanced at Jet to find him hunched over and staring at the floor. The man looked as exhausted as Darien felt.

He cleared his throat. "Uh, hey."

Jet wearily glanced at him but said nothing.

Darien swallowed and gathered his courage. "When we went back to the temple in Jade Glen, you smashed one of the cases and took a feather from it. Why'd you do that?"

Jet watched Aleah's still form for a quiet moment. "Most of our artifacts were stolen or destroyed. The plaque said it was an ancient Serran feather, so I took it to preserve at least one thing I could carry at the time."

"There were plenty of other artifacts, and we could have taken more," Darien recalled. "Where's that feather now? Do you still have it?"

“This is extremely random,” Jet observed. “You have a sudden interest in feathers?”

“You know, for an arbiter, you’re a really bad liar.” Darien met Jet’s glare and refused to back down. “Where is it?”

Darien’s mentor returned his determination with a nonchalant boredom. “Who cares? You’re obviously delirious from fever. Be quiet.”

Darien smiled wide. “Oh, you’re not getting out of this. Tell me: what do you know about the Serrans?”

Jet’s eyes were black ice. “I know they lived thousands of years ago and that they founded the Serran Academies. I also know that I’m going to knock you out if you don’t shut up in about five seconds.”

Darien laughed but hoped he was bluffing. “You also know that they had feathers, since you took one. So they must have had wings, too, right? What has feathers without wings?”

The arbiter sat there like a gargoyle.

“It was a wing that somehow shielded me from a bullet last week,” Darien forged on. “You called me crazy, but I have the memory to prove it. The way it was facing... it must have come from your direction. And when Tera came in, she said she’d been late and thanked you for protecting me. Can you explain that?”

Jet said nothing for a minute that felt like an hour. Then, slowly, he rose and moved to Aleah’s bedside. He placed a hand on her wavy silver hair for a long moment before turning to Raydon and doing the same.

Darien’s heart thumped into overdrive as the arbiter lethargically approached. “Y-you going to put me to sleep? You’d be doing me a favor, really! But you have to answer my questions sometime. I’m not stupid!”

“No,” the arbiter said so quietly that it was hardly detectable. He placed a hand on Darien’s ribs and abruptly pushed his fingers into his skin.

What should have been a mild touch instead elicited blinding pain. Darien arched his back and screamed.

“Get off me!” Darien flailed against his attacker, but Jet had retreated before he could strike him.

“You’ve been keeping your own secrets...” the arbiter murmured, “very poorly.”

Darien held his ribs and snarled. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Jet said. “Seems you’re a little tender.”

Honestly, Darien had no idea how he could possibly be so sore without having received a beating with a lead pipe, but he sneered like a cornered cat

anyway. "It's none of your business. Come within a foot of me again and I'll blast you into the wall."

"What was its name?" Jet asked as he sank into his chair a safe distance away.

Darien wrestled his breathing back under control. "What?"

"The demon who infected you," Jet said pointedly. "What was its name?"

Darien's mouth fell open. "You... he... it wasn't a demon," he croaked.

"You are not a Follower," Jet said quietly, "so no angel of Aeo would have appeared to you."

"I..." Darien's voice caught in his throat. As someone who'd been previously vocal about his vehemence against the creator of the world, he was still surprised himself that he'd decided to surrender his life to Aeo—and follow his half-human son, Joshua—only hours ago... just seconds before the winged beast had appeared.

"I am a Follower now," Darien murmured. "I... I think."

Jet furrowed his brow at him. "Why doesn't it sound like you're lying?"

"I'm not." Darien turned his face away and grabbed for the bundled covers again. His body temperature felt as if it had once more plummeted below zero. "I just prayed and Rigel showed up literally seconds after."

A deep laughter startled Darien into staring at Jet in shock. "Rigel?" his mentor hooted. "What, did you flop the Librus open and pick the name of the most famous arch angel you could find?"

"What is that? Your holy book? I've never even read it!" Darien snapped. "Are you saying he's some big shot, then?"

Jet recovered and rubbed his eyes. "Okay, listen." He stood and moved to Darien's bedside, and Darien raised his hands defensively.

"Don't touch me—"

"Your body is rejecting the changes," Jet said flatly. "Your fever's too high. I give you twenty-four hours to live, and that's if you don't get poisoned by whatever is going around."

Darien blinked at him. "How do you know—"

He cut off with a gasp when Jet pulled a bloodied blue feather from his pocket and held it aloft. Darien immediately reached out to snatch it, but his body responded sluggishly.

"That's mine! Give it to me!"

Jet stayed just out of range. He turned the feather horizontally and held both hands together on the quill. "No. I'm going to break it," he said frankly.

"No!" Darien cried. He lashed out at it and very nearly fell out of the bed.

The world spun.

The arbiter continued unhindered. “If I break it, the connection to the demon will be broken, and you’ll definitely live. But if I give it to you, you’ll keep it intact and you’ll probably die.”

“I won’t die!” Darien yelled. “Aleah already healed me!”

“She healed the wound,” Jet corrected. “But it stabbed you so its blood would infect you, and she can’t do anything about that. It will change your bone and muscle structure, increase your blood capacity, and enlarge your heart and lungs. And in response, your body will raise your fever until you fry.”

Darien stared incredulously at the dried blood on the feather’s quill as his mentor spoke. “He said... I’d have to go through changes. But it’s just a fever. He said I probably won’t die.”

“He lied, Darien!” Jet snapped. “He doesn’t care if you live or not. He’s looking for a human to share a bond with and gain power. Dark angels probably prefer to have an aethryn host, and you’re the only one of us stupid enough to accept—”

“He’s not a dark angel!” Darien snarled.

“You have no way of knowing that!” Jet hissed. “Even if you are a Follower now, humans can be approached by angels regardless of their allegiance. All angels are the same race. They look exactly the same!”

“Well... then...” Darien tripped over his own words. “No, they’re different! Rigel was like a blue jay with a lizard’s body. But the one in your vision was like a black bull that stood on its hind legs. They both had wings but they were totally different.”

Jet paused in apparent surprise, then turned his back in a huff.

“Was that your angel? You use it to scare people in arbiter visions?” Darien demanded.

“Arch angels come in three different flavors,” Jet murmured. “But their appearance doesn’t change if they turn against Aeo... just like a human’s doesn’t change if one becomes a Follower.” He turned back to Darien and flipped the blue feather on its edge, offering the quill.

Darien snatched it immediately. It was unharmed, but here in his hands, it felt so fragile... exactly like any ordinary feather.

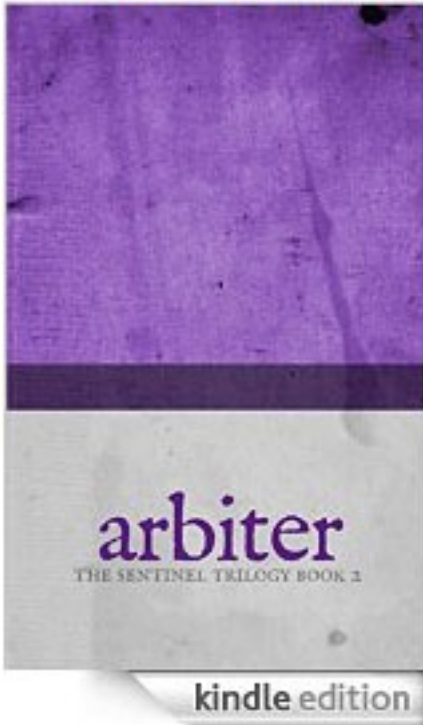
“You didn’t answer my question,” Darien accused.

Jet took a deep breath and glanced at Aleah and Raydon before speaking so quietly that Darien barely heard him. “I wouldn’t call her *mine*... but yes, it was the visage of an angel that you saw. Her name is Kohesh, and she’s quite effective for scaring the daylight out of people.”

Darien's eyes widened. "Then... you're a Serran... and you've been one this entire time?"

"Yeah," Jet said quietly. "And if you swear to secrecy... and if you survive the next three days... I'll teach you how to fly."

Continue the adventure...



amazonkindle

\$ 2⁹⁹



Buy Now

Don't have a Kindle?
Get the free Kindle app
for iPhone or Android.

Coming soon to paperback,
Nook, and Google Play.