

The Echo of Her Presence

Archangel: Book 3

Ariel

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Chapter One

Even angel's get sunburnt. Ariel's ivory skin held a light pink glow. The Texan sun was merciless. She gazed across the cattle range searching for her target. The drought had turned the grassy range into a yellowed field of dying grass. Even the usually humid Texan air was so dry the sweat didn't have time to form on her skin. Her long chestnut hair flowed freely about her shoulders in the hot wind, as it brushed against her.

She left her wings extended to shade her bare arms and back. The unhindered sunlight illuminated the brilliant cobalt blue center of her wings, highlighting a vibrant purple hue which sprang from an emerald green base. Her wings ended with a thin tan border. "SPF 50," she muttered, licking her parched lips. "And a side of icy bottled water would make my day."

This was her final stop in the Texas sun. Half a dozen previous locations all led to this last point. Bringing rain to a drought-plagued land was a slow process. This time the very air around her seemed resistant. It took twice as long at each stop than she'd planned. She should be lounging poolside at the hotel right now, out of the mid-day sun, instead of fighting dehydration from foolishly failing to bring any water along. Ariel found the dry stream bed she was searching for and glanced up at the sky. She spread her arms out wide and closed her eyes. Ariel concentrated on the task at hand instead of the headache throbbing in her temples. If she pulled moisture in too quickly, the resulting storms could devastate the entire southern region of the US. High winds, tornados, flash floods, and destructive lightning, running rampant across the land, would not put her in favor with the Big Guy.

She wiggled her fingers as they began to tingle. That was odd. The tingling usually indicated a demon presence. But none were near. She dismissed it as a side effect of the heat. Her thoughts flowed west across Texas toward Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The jet stream ran directly across Mexico from the ocean toward Texas. Then she reached north past New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada to the jet stream that rushed across California and down into Texas. She gently pulled moisture toward Texas. It would take several days possibly a week or more for enough moisture to build and move into the state. She had to bring it slowly to avoid torrential rains that would do nothing more than produce runoff and flooding. "Come on baby, mama needs a long dip in a cold pool." She whispered to the air.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” A deep voice with a southern twang said from behind her.

Her eyes flashed with annoyance as she turned to find a man in a cowboy hat with a scruffy, unshaven face sitting on a horse staring down at her with a pair of steely gray eyes. “I’m minding my own business doing nothing that should concern you,” She squinted at him in the harsh daylight; there was no worry about her wings. Mortals could only see her wings if she allowed it, which she never did.

“You got a death wish?” He snapped and glanced around, “Where is your man? Sleeping one off in his air conditioned dune buggy while you try to get snake bit?”

Ariel sighed and glared at him. He was probably one of those archaic cowboy types who chewed tobacco and slept under his horse. “Relax Hoss; I’m just doing my job. So why don’t you get on with yours? I don’t want to keep you from branding a cow or shooting at something.”

He turned back to gaze at her. His eyes ran down her slender, athletic form. He chuckled. “You’re a bit of a hellcat, but those pretty brown eyes aren’t going to stop a wild hog from ripping your head off. This country is full of them.”

“How fascinating,” She muttered. Then turned and began following the dry stream bed hoping he’d ride off.

“Look, lady,” He called moving his horse toward her, “You don’t seem to understand. It’s 102 degrees out here. We are in the middle of a drought. You don’t appear to have any water on you, and that dusty stream bed you’re following isn’t going to lead you to any. Now, I’m not partial to riding double, it’s hard on the horse, but I don’t see any option at this point. So give me your hand, and I’ll pull you up.”

She stopped and turned to glare at him. The fight had gone out of his face, replaced by a sincerity she couldn’t ignore, but somehow found annoying. “So let me get this straight. You want to be my knight in shining armor and save me from certain death?”

He smiled. He had a kind smile full of perfect white teeth. He pulled off his hat and smoothed back his thick brown hair with one hand. “Lady, I don’t know how you got out here or what you think you’re doing. Frankly, I don’t care. But I’m not leaving any woman, crazy or not, in the middle of the range with no horse and no water. Now I’d like to get out of this heat. Contrary to

what you may believe Texans are tough, but we're still human. I can see you're in a horn tossin' mood, but you need to put that aside. I've got some water in my saddle bag which I am happy to share. Now we need to get going because it's a bit of a ride back to the stables. So if you want to climb up on my horse voluntarily, that's great, I'd prefer it." His smile vanished, "However, if you are going to stand there arguing with me like an empty headed princess, and I have to get off of my horse to fetch your skinny ass..."

"Are you threatening me?" Ariel locked eyes with him.

He sighed and admitted, "Yes, I guess I am. Ma'am, I'm not leaving you behind. You'll die."

"Is it clean water or did you squeeze it out of a cactus?" She asked with the slightest suggestion of a smile and moved toward him.

His face filled with relief, "Don't knock cactus juice. It tastes pretty good after a couple of days without fresh water." He offered her his hand when she reached his side.

His large hand engulfed hers and pulled her onto the back of his horse in one swift movement. She snaked her arms around his waist and tried not to lean against his muscular back. He turned the horse around and gave a sharp whistle. A dot appeared on the horizon which grew quickly into a few head of cattle flanked by two large dogs. He spun the horse around further and started heading west. His hand slipped under her leg and reached into the saddlebag. He pulled out an insulated flask and handed it to her.

"I'm Colton Anderson. Welcome to the Legacy Ranch." He added as she took a sip of the surprisingly cold water.

"Colton Anderson?" She answered, "Rancher, oil billionaire, and hunting expedition expert?"

"The horse gave me away, right?" He chuckled.

She laughed and said, "It was the ten-gallon hat actually. I'm Ariel Williams."

He glanced over his shoulder and urged the horse into a trot. "Nice to meet you, Ariel Williams, are you ready to tell me what you are doing on my property?"

She tightened her grip in response to the trot and leaned against him, "I'm with the American Geophysical Union. I'm researching the drought."

"So you're a scientist?" He said with surprise in his voice.

“And you’re a cowboy.” She countered frowning at him.

“Easy there Missy,” He added, “I just meant you aren’t a tourist.”

“I’m here to determine the severity of the drought.” She glanced behind her as the two dogs moved the handful of cattle closer. The dogs were short-haired and muscular. She smiled, recognizing the breed. Hanging Tree Cow Dogs were hard workers and perfect for driving cattle. There was a young black male with a white chest and belly, and an older brown female with the same markings. She touched the horse’s flank. It was doing well but could use some water. “Your horse needs water, probably your dogs too.”

“Whiskey is doing fine,” He snapped, “Bucket and Ziva are dry, but they’ll make it. I don’t need advice on how to care for my animals.”

Ariel’s eyes narrowed, “I’m sure you don’t, Hoss. But if Whiskey starts foaming at the mouth, I’m stepping in.”

He chuckled, “You’re quite a spitfire. I don’t think I’ve ever met such a feisty scientist before.”

Ariel rolled her eyes, “How many scientists you have met?”

He threw his head back and laughed heartily, “Hold on to your breeches little lady. I not only know a few scientists, My degree is in Business Administration from a little place called Stanford.”

Ariel laughed and relaxed giving into the sway of the horse, “I guess Cowboys do make it off the range from time to time.”

The grass on the range began to lose the speckled yellow and brown from the drought and turned shades of green. A scattering of trees appeared in the distance. Ariel assumed they lined a creek or waterhole. Whiskey nickered and increased her pace. The dogs trotted past them as the cattle sped forward. There was water ahead.

Met paced the length of the white wood framed front porch of Gabe’s two-story brick home. He glanced at the church next door. Built in the 12th century, the once Catholic chapel had been converted into a Baptist Church. It stood proudly in the center of the churchyard. On close

inspection, the tan brick and stone exterior were crumbling in need of repair. He stared at the oversized colorful stained glass windows that ran the length of the church, displaying images of the apostles gathered around Christ in the garden before his arrest. A high stone wall hugged the edge of the church grounds. Similar stone and brick outbuildings lay scattered around the church, including Gabe's house. The complex sat nestled in a small tree-filled valley in the mountains of Southern Italy.

Met's eyes dropped to the peeling paint on the porch floor, "I don't understand, why she would leave without me? We've been partners for over four thousand years. Did I do something wrong? Did I piss her off?"

Gabe tried to suppress a smile. Metatron stood before him in utter dejection. The angel of wisdom was as big as a truck. Yet when it came to women, he was as dumb as a stump. Met had the sleek build of a Navy Seal. His broad shoulders, massive muscular arms, and narrow waist, screamed warrior. Met tied his long white blonde hair back into a tight ponytail. It made him look like a white haired savage. Met was a fearsome sight to behold, yet he had a heart of gold with a definite soft spot for Ariel. Gabe patted him on the back, "Maybe that's the point, Met. I think she needs some space. That's all; it's nothing personal."

Met turned to stare at him, his deep green eyes were dark with concern, "What if she needs my help? She's never taken on an assignment by herself. What if she runs into something she can't handle?"

Gabe chuckled, "Met, she's only ending a drought in the southwestern US. What could happen? If she runs across a rattlesnake or a rabid dog, I think she can handle it. Give her some space. Besides, she's a better fighter than you are. I think she'll be okay."

"Hey," He growled, "No need to get personal...baby daddy."

Gabe laughed loudly and shoved him roughly, "Was that supposed to be an insult?"

Met chuckled, "Take it however you want, renegade. You're the only archangel producing offspring right now, so it seemed appropriate. Who'd have thought, Gabriel the perfect archangel would go rogue and start a family? I would have picked Mike as the most likely to procreate with a mortal before you any day. He's a huge slut."

Gabe stopped before him, “So are you saying I’m boring, and too straight-laced or just plain ugly?”

Met sighed and glanced past him as Gabe’s petite mortal wife, Alyssa, walked outside. Her long golden hair was tied back with a scrunchie that matched the pink color of her short-sleeved, cotton blouse. Her light blue eyes narrowed as she looked at them.

Met asked, “Alyssa, would you be upset if I pounded Gabe into the ground? He’s annoying me.”

She rolled her eyes, “Met, Ariel will be back soon. Why don’t you take Samantha and Cody to the wash house and let them play in the water? You could use a distraction, and they’re bored. Maybe you could teach them some more Italian. Making friends with the locals would be a lot easier if they spoke the language.”

“I don’t know,” Met locked eyes with Gabe, “I think I’d rather pound Gabe into the ground.”

Gabe grinned and said, “Go cool off in the water, Romeo. I’ll be gone by the time you get back. Mike wants me to meet him in Munich. Can you stick around until I return?”

Met nodded, “You know I will.”

Neither angel voiced their concerns about protecting Gabe’s family. The demon community believed Alyssa was destined to give birth to a child that could protect them from the chaos of the End of Days. When Gabe met Alyssa, she and Samantha were running for their lives from the demon horde. Now that she and Gabe had a child, the demon’s attention turned away from Samantha to focus on their baby, Vada. The child of an archangel was a prize the Prince of Darkness was probably slobbering all over himself to capture.

With the help of the other angels, Gabe stole away in the night with Alyssa and the children. He brought them halfway across the world to live on holy ground, the only place where demons could not tread for fear of vanquishment. Here on the grounds of an old Abbey, they were as safe as they possibly could be. But was that good enough?

Met added, “Let me know if you run into Rafi. He went off the grid. Something’s gotten under his skin.”

Alyssa frowned and turned away at the mention of Rafi's name. She headed for the door, "Met why don't you take Vada with you. She loves the water, and I could use a break." She stopped in the doorway and turned back to Gabe, "You will be back soon? Vada's first birthday is three weeks away."

He moved quickly to her side. Her eyes were dark with worry; her brow creased into a frown. She hated being separated from him. He took her hand in his, "It should only be a few days. I won't miss her birthday. I promise."

A child's voice shouted from inside, "Mom! Where's my bathing suit?"

Alyssa smiled at Met, "I guess they overheard my suggestion."

He grinned and moved past her into the house, "Suit or no suit we are going swimming! Grab a towel, and you can swim in your shorts. Get those little legs moving if you're coming with me, I'm not a patient man."

"Angel!" Two young voices chimed in response.

Met chuckled, "Okay then, I'm not a patient angel."

Alyssa turned back to Gabe and asked, "Why does Mike really need you now? What's going on?"

Gabe squeezed her. "The demon community is organizing. They are no longer scattered and acting only on impulse. Someone is bringing them together. Nothing like this has ever happened before. It could be the next step toward the End of Days. We need to find out what they're up to, and squash it before it gets out of control like the pandemic."

She sighed and glanced at the door, "Your skill is communication. How can you help him?"

He kissed her hand, "Mike is the leader of the archangels. He keeps us on track and organized. I preside over the decisions that affect the mortal's relationship with God. If the demons have organized, that means they are preparing a large strike against mankind. I will be the one to determine how to circumvent it. Mike will lead the action."

Alyssa searched his eyes. Gabe saw a flicker of realization cross her face. She said, "Ariel is the angel of natural resources, she watches over the oceans, land, and lesser creatures?"

“Yes,” Gabe smiled, “Just as Rafi is the healer and Met is the educator. He watches over the children and intellect of the world. When the tree of life descends from Heaven; Met will be the one to watch over it. Sela, her strongest attribute is prayer and inspiration. Jed’s gift is mercy and hard work. Bar is the leader of the angel army. Jeri guards the gate between Heaven and Hell. She holds that border steady. But we are all warriors and champions of God. We are all blessed with His gifts, some more prominent than others. Someday soon you will meet the others, all save Jeri, she never leaves her post.”

“Angel army?” Alyssa stared at him. “From the Great War I suppose, but you don’t need them now.”

A sad knowing look flickered in his eyes. Gabe turned and headed toward the door pulling her behind him, “Not today.”

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