



# MERUS IN THE MAKING

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A WASTELAND NOVELLA

**Merus in the Making**  
*(A Wasteland Short Shorty)*

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∞ ONE ∞

I stood next to Adrian as a dutiful girlfriend would, hoping I wouldn't hear any voices in my head tonight. We'd only gone out a few times, and if I freaked out on him, that'd be bad.

Adrian twined his fingers with mine and a fun, tingly sensation crept up my arm. Not to mention the heart pattering. That was fun, too. Okay, I was stupid to even consider refusing his Send Off Dance invitation. He wouldn't bring me to a senior party if he didn't like me. Didn't want to be with me.

I'd tell him 'yes' tonight.

"You look amazing," Adrian whispered into my ear.

His breath held a hint of sweetness to it, like he'd just drank a Pepsi or something. I turned toward the scent and only inches separated my mouth from his. More cheek steamage, and my heart went racing up a few more notches.

The corner of his mouth quirked up as if he enjoyed my discomfort. What was the big deal? A kiss. People kissed all the time. I was fifteen, almost sixteen and so ready for it to happen.

*You will remain pure, Merus.*

I bit back my flinch. No. I did not hear that voice again. I was not crazy. I—

"So. You've never answered me about the dance, Jess." Adrian stepped even closer, and his arms wove around my waist.

Even though football season had ended months ago, it was obvious he still worked out by the bulging biceps locking me close to him. He started swaying, and I took a glance around.

Turned out we'd moved to the make-shift dance floor, and I hadn't even noticed. Even though the music was the newest techno crap I couldn't stand, we held our own pace.

"A girl has to weigh her options. You know?" I stalled, half waiting for the strange, but surprisingly soothing voice to come back. Maybe I was going crazy after all.

I should just jump into things with Adrian. Be reckless and carefree if I was going to spend my days in a mental institution in the near future.

"And..." His hold on me tightened, and I didn't miss the rock hard body he pulled me flush against. Not to mention those wide, hazel eyes staring down at me.

“Um...” What was I going to say again? What were we talking about? What was my name?

“That’s not an answer.” Soft lips traced along my bare neck. That started a whole ‘nother kind of heat stampeding through my chest. I couldn’t catch my breath.

I’d run before, heck, I ran a lot to stay in shape for cheer squad, but this...no this was something else. This was—

*Back away, Merus.*

I shook my head, hoping to dislodge the booming voice. How it cut through the loud music was beyond me, but it was way harsher than last time.

And I wanted it gone.

“No?” Adrian stood straight, loosening his hold on me.

“No. Not no. I—” My voice crackled. I was making a fool of myself. *Yet again.* “I meant yes. Yes. I’ll go with you.”

“Why were you shaking your head?”

“Nothing. Just loud in here.” I shoved my finger in my ear and wiggled it. “I’m hearing things.”

He pulled me close to him again and smiled. “Good. How does a limo sound?”

I nodded, focused on controlling my breathing. What the hell was wrong with me?

“And a corsage?”

Another nod. I glanced around, and the dance song had faded into a slow-moving ballad. The five other couples on the floor clung to one another as they swayed.

“Let’s seal the deal with a kiss.” Adrian’s mouth brushed my earlobe, and I flinched. It was like his lips were fire. “Oh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

I cleared my throat and loosened my hold on him. His full lips curled into a smile, and wide, dilated eyes stared down at me. This was it. My first real kiss.

My mouth watered. Lips tingled in anticipation. God I hoped my breath didn’t smell.

A searing ache sliced through my chest, stealing my breath. I swallowed hard to choke back my whimper.

No. No interruptions. This moment was mine. My first—

Another stabbing pain. An acid-laced knife would have hurt less. I couldn’t help the flinch that time.

Adrian either didn’t notice or ignored it because he kept on. He focused on my mouth and his tongue jetted out, moistening his lips.

*Back away.*

Damn that voice. No. Don’t ruin this.

“What’s that?” Adrian looked at my chest.

A faint glow leaked through my pink t-shirt. Bright. Pulsing. I clasped my hand over it and looked up at Adrian. His blond eyebrows jetted up, and his forehead crinkled.

He’d stopped moving. His jaw clenched tight. Two people stopped beside us, looking at me. One pointed. “What the hell?”

The stinging pulse intensified. I forced out a laugh as I backed away. “It’s just the lights. Someone’s playing a joke.”

No one laughed.

I peeked beneath my hand. Nope. It wasn’t a joke. My chest was glowing. Smack dab over my heart.

Well, shit.

∞ TWO ∞

*You will do great things. Trust me. Do not fear me.*

“Shut up,” I yelled at the top of my lungs as I dashed out of the house.

A line of people stared at me, but the voice rumbling through my mind negated any reasoning I could muster up. So I ran.

And ran.

Down the street and around the corner brought me to Cactus Street. Fifth would be coming up soon. I knew where I was so I slowed down and looked at my chest.

Still pulsing. Not as brightly, but still. It was *freaking* glowing! I pulled the neck of my shirt away from me and peered down at my flesh. The pulse matched my actual heartbeat. Like my skin was paper-thin and there was a flash light beneath.

“This can’t be happening. This can *not* be happening.”

“It is, actually.”

I whirled around to find the man I’d seen in my dreams standing before me. Tall, nearly seven feet if I had to guess. But the kicker was, his wings. They must have spanned twenty feet out each side of him.

He was real? *Oh. My. God.* How—

“Don’t fight it, Merus.”

“What...are...you...talking...about?” My heart pounded so fast I had to gasp for breath between each word.

“You are chosen.” The angel glanced around. “For things not of this world. You must remain pure. For a little longer.”

I backed away from the towering presence. Chosen? I didn’t want it. Not if it meant I’d be a total and complete freak. Which everyone probably thought I was after I rushed out of the house like a maniac.

Away from Adrian. “Oh. God.”

“Do not concern yourself with that boy.” The angel smirked. “He is not yours.”

*Mine?*



“I need to sit.” My legs were about to give out.

His warm hand guided me to a bench about fifteen feet away. I wasn’t quite sure how I made it there, but I did. It overlooked a small, peaceful patch of grass where, normally, it’d be the perfect place to find my Zen.

Not now.

The stranger sat beside me, only inches separating us. My heart slowed, and my breathing evened out. That totally defied logic. I should be freaking out right now because of the whole winged-stranger-thing going on—not to mention the dreams and voice-thing. Instead, a palpable wave of peace washed over me.

“Wait. Where’d your wings go?”

He smiled. “Not very comfortable to sit with them.”

Totally logical, but there he was, sitting next to me like we were old friends. “Um. Mind telling me what’s going on?”

Another smile. He gave the setting sun a serious run for its money in the beauty department. He was an angel, so of course he was beautiful. But still...

“I am Michael.”

I nearly choked on my spit again. “As in Michael. Angel. Michael the Archangel I learned about in church?”

He dipped his head.

“You’re into war and stuff, so you being here can’t be good. And the fact that I’m talking to you like it’s no big deal, that’s freaking me out even more.”

“Such spirit. Strength. And great humor.” He shifted slightly and put his arm around the back of the bench. Warmth radiated from him. Peace. Comfort. Yet his tight, square jaw dared anyone to challenge him. Defy him.

I gulped.

“You are chosen, sweet one. You will bear much. Face even more.” His smile dimmed a notch. “But you are strong.”

“What’s Merus?”

“You will learn. Your time comes quickly.”

“My time?”

“Much will change with you. Many will want you, but you must find refuge with the Guardians to keep you safe.”

I sat straight. “Someone’s after me?” I glanced around. A streak of purple shot through the sky as the last of the sunlight faded from existence. “Why? I didn’t do anything.”

“You *will* do much. But you must be with the Light when you transform.”

“I’m not liking the word transform. Into what? An angel? I think you’ve got the wrong girl. As a matter of fact. I must be dreaming again.” I stood and looked around. Had I fainted again? Was I laying face first in a punch bowl at the party?

Michael laughed again. “Sweet one. You will learn, we never choose wrong.”

“But—”

In a flash he stood, his wings shot out and he whirled around with the grace of a ballerina. I almost barfed at the anxiety coursing through me. My heart clamored to get out of me. My chest burned again.

"I must leave." Michael bowed. "Get to Signot. You will find refuge there."

"Signot?" I couldn't just up and leave. I didn't even have a car. Or a license. And where the hell was Signot?

"Hurry. Your time is limited." His image faded from sight, but not his voice. *Find Beka.*

I buried my hand in my hair and tugged. I'd finally cracked. There must be some schizophrenia in my heritage somewhere, because I was totally and completely losing my mind right now.

"So, having a nice conversation with yourself?" Elizabeth's voice sliced through my foggy brain, and I turned around.

There she stood in all her nerdy glory, watching me.

"Did you see him?" I ran to her. "Michael. Big guy. Wings."

"Um...that'd be a no." She grabbed my shoulders. "You've been drinking."

"No. I haven't I swear. Wait." I stood straight. "What are you doing here?"

"Sasha called me after Adrian called her. Dude. You freaked again. Ran out?"

"They called you?" I was mortified. "What'd they say?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm more worried about the part where I find you talking to yourself and asking about winged men. No wonder they were freaking out." Her focus shifted down. "No glowing chest. If this is all a big prank, I'm going to be really pissed."

"Prank?"

She waved me off. "Spill or you're walking home."

I went on to have the worst case of verbal diarrhea ever. I never confided in Elizabeth about anything, but it was like I had no control over telling her every last detail as we drove home. And even worse, the more I spoke, the crazier I sounded.

Angels? Glowing chest? Merus?

"Not really sure what to say to all that," Elizabeth said as she shut off the car in our driveway. "That's...well...Michael, the Archangel? Really, Jess?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but—"

"No. No. Don't get upset. Um...It'll be fine. Let's just get you to bed. Tomorrow it'll be better. Tomorrow things will look different." She glanced at me and shoved her door open.

She didn't believe that any more than I did. I was crazy and now she knew it, too!

### ∞ THREE ∞

Sleeping was useless. Every time I closed my eyes, Michael and his darn sparkling wings fluttered behind my eyelids.

I shoved the covers off me and swept a glance to Elizabeth's bed. Snoring as usual. A quick peek at my clock, and the blaring red numbers showed me it was way too early to be up, but at least it'd give me alone time with my computer.

I snatched the laptop off the desk and tip-toed into the hallway. A dim light glowed from beneath Mom and Dad's bedroom door. Strange. What would they be doing up this early? I slowed as I passed their door, but didn't hear anything leaking out.

Must have left a light on.

I ambled to the kitchen table and tapped my laptop to life. One click had me at the search engine, and I typed: *Merus*. Sitting wasn't an option for me right now since my nerves were firing a million jitters per second. I just positioned the cursor over *SEARCH* and closed my eyes. Taking in a deep breath it gave me the courage to click the touchpad.

As I blew out the breath I held, I opened my eyes. Just a bunch of nonsense businesses and such. I plopped into the chair and pulled the blasted contraption closer.

"Fine. Try this." I typed, *What does Merus Mean?*

And that's when the fun began. Mostly Latin meanings. But one was the most common. *Pure*.

"Pure, huh?" I clicked on one description and skimmed it over.

*Stay pure, Merus*. Michael's voice echoed in my mind.

I cleared out my search and typed Signot.

Podunk town in northern Arizona came up. Not even five thousand people. Why on earth would Michael tell me to go there? And it was over three hours away. I had no car. Not to mention my parents would never allow a road trip.

The fact I spent my morning looking these things up was enough for the crazy farm.

I pushed away from the table and stood. I needed food.

Mom strolled into the kitchen, dad close behind her, just as I was about to scoop myself a mouthful of Lucky Charms goodness.

“Honey?” Mom’s voice was laced with sweetness. “What are you doing up so early?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” I shoveled in the spoonful of marshmallows.

“Feeling okay?” She inched in, dad close behind.

Oh great, something was up. Dad stepped toward me, smiling. Yep, I was in trouble for something.

A sinking feeling weighed heavy on my chest. “What’s going on?”

Elizabeth tiptoed in and sat at the table, watching me with wide eyes. That was when I knew she’d told.

“Nothing’s going on. Honey, we’re just going to take you for an evaluation at a hospital.”

I choked on a marshmallow. “Did you say *a* hospital? As in...” I couldn’t say the word. The awful, condescending word.

“Just an evaluation.” Mom inched forward, timid, like I might run.

“You!” I bolted up from my chair, screaming at Elizabeth. My bowl of cereal went flying, milk sprayed over my white t-shirt. “You told.”

“Don’t blame her.” Dad reached for me. “She was scared. She’s worried about you. We all are.”

“But I’m fine. I—just—I—”

“You’re not fine. But we’ll help you, Jess. We’ll help you get better. Everything will be okay. We love you.”

“Shit.” I made a break for the door. Dad beat me to it. Elizabeth screamed.

White seared my vision. I melted to the floor, chest blooming with the heat of a nuclear bomb. It spiraled to my lower back. Burning as if a fire pen drew on my skin.

The last thing I remember was my mom’s voice. “Oh, dear God. What’s wrong with her?”

∞ FOUR ∞

A man, blond hair and amber eyes, flickered in my mind. More so, the scar that ran down the middle of his face. It didn't mar his smile in any way. It beamed like the sun. He stood in a distance, watching me, yet not seeing me.

I reached for him, but my fingers went through the image. *Young one.* The words fled through my mind. Had he spoken? His lips hadn't moved, but I'd heard him. More felt him. Deep within my chest.

Then his image faded. Only darkness remained. I didn't know who that was, but I wanted to see him again. Needed to.

For some reason.

"Grab her wrists. Get her buckled in." The voice was stern. "Get me five milligrams Zyprexa and two milligrams Ativan. Stat."

"Honey. Just calm down. Please. Let them help you." That was my mom's voice. Her hand smoothed back my hair like she always did when I was sick or upset. But now? Where was I?

My eyes shot open and met a harsh world of white. Bright lights, but not like I'd been seeing lately. They were florescent. The stench of ammonia and peroxide overwhelmed me.

Sterile.

Shit. I was in a hospital. The psych ward no doubt. What happened?

"Oh my gosh," my mom said with a gasp. "When did she get that tattoo?"

Tattoo? I didn't have a tattoo.

Elizabeth, Mom and Dad stood on one side of me. Mom worked to control my flailing arm.

"I don't know, Mom. I've never seen it before." Elizabeth looked at me and shook her head. Sadness radiated from her, yet I saw a spark of confusion.

Finally my body listened to my command to calm down. I knew it was no use to fight so why was I?

*Get to Signot.*

Oh, that was why. Evidently I was needed in a small town three hours away. I laughed. Maybe I was in the right place after all.

“Honey,” Mom whispered. “Look at me.”

A tear streaked over her high cheekbone as she petted my unruly red hair. I looked up into her eyes, which was pretty much like looking into mine since we both had big, brown eyes.

“When did you get that tattoo on your lower back?”

“I don’t have a tattoo.” I’d never get one. I’d heard those hurt like Hades. They had to be mistaken.

Mom glanced at the nurse on the other side of me, and I followed suit. A plump black-haired lady leaned over me. “You don’t remember getting a tattoo? Are you taking drugs Jessica? Drinking?”

“Of course not. I’ve never touched anything but one sip of beer last year. It’s disgusting.”

Elizabeth laughed. She’d been with me when I’d tried one of Mom’s beers after Elizabeth had dared me.

I never backed down from a dare.

“I don’t have a tattoo. No tattooo...” My thoughts suddenly muddled. Numbing. Confused. My limbs went heavy, and I turned toward the nurse. Sneaky little thing, she’d pricked me with a needle.

Guess I was staying here after all.

∞ FIVE ∞

“So, I brought you some chocolate, but the Nazi receptionist confiscated it.” Elizabeth shook her head and sat in the seat across from me. “She’s probably eating it right now.”

I stared at her, taking in everything she’d said, but I really didn’t care much. About anything. My mind was numb. It was a nice euphoria, actually. Didn’t worry about how I looked. What I wore. Who my friends were. If I was still popular.

Nothing.

Even Michael’s voice had stopped.

Elizabeth leaned on the table, her rust colored eyes analyzing me. “Are you in there?”

I nodded. “Barely.”

Elizabeth, the dutiful sister, came and visited me every day. After they finally let her come in. Evidently I was a bit combative the first two days. But the last six had gone well. It was nice sitting with her.

Though, she didn’t have much good to say about my friends. They’d all decided I was a nutcase. Sasha was actually going to the Senior Send Off Dance with Adrian now.

*Whatever.*

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me,” Elizabeth said.

“And...”

“Have you been telling your shrink the same things?”

“At first, yes. But I’m obviously delusional, Lizzy. That stuff couldn’t have happened.” Though I said the words to my sister, I didn’t believe them. The more I sat here in my stupefied state, I meditated on what had happened. What had landed me in this psych ward. And I believed it happened.

Hell, I’d even gotten a tattoo on my lower back out of nowhere.

Elizabeth patted my hand. “I know you don’t believe that. And...well...I found out something about that tattoo on your back.”

Leave it to my brainiac sister to research.

“It’s like the symbol of infinity or something. I found a couple weird sites that called it the Mark of Elpida. It’s got Greek roots. Means Hope.”

“Hope.” I said the word and familiarity rang through to my heart. “Merus means Pure.”

“Pure Hope?” Elizabeth whispered. “Shit.”

I flinched at my sister’s language. She *never* swore. Along with the list of her nevers were no makeup, no drinking, no fun, no...but she was keen on research. Studying. Figuring things out like the little genius she was.

“Don’t tell me you believe me now.” I laughed. My thick, dry tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Damn medication.

She didn’t answer, only looked at her fingers.

“Lizzy?”

“I believe you, Jess. I’m sorry.” She leaned forward and grabbed my hand. “I’m so sorry I told. I was scared. I—”

“You believe me?” I must have heard her wrong.

Elizabeth nodded then scrubbed her face. “You said that angel said you don’t have much time. You need to get somewhere, right?”

I slouched into the hard, wooden seat. “Signot.”

A spark lit Elizabeth’s eyes. Almost as if she believed me. That she really thought I’d seen an angel and was meant to be something called a Merus.

*Your time nears.*

For the first time in nearly eight days, Michael’s voice came pounding back out of nowhere, and with a vengeance.

“What?” Elizabeth’s eyes went wide.

“Nothing.”

“You lie.”

I glanced around. The techs were at their little counter talking amongst themselves so I leaned toward Elizabeth. “If I tell you, you can’t say anything.”

“I promise.” Guilt seeped out from her dim eyes. A heaviness flooded me as if I shared that guilt, so I knew it was potent within her.

“Michael said my time is nearing.”

Elizabeth’s nostrils flared. “When did he say that?”

“About five seconds ago.”

“Shit.” She clamped her jaw tight, and a tear streaked her cheek. “I heard it, too.”

I was stunned silent. Couldn’t even breathe. She’d heard the voice?

“Okay, Jess.” She stood. “I think it’s about time we leave.”



∞ SIX ∞

I sauntered down the white-laced hallway to my single room. Single because the girl who'd shared it with me was released yesterday, though in my opinion, it was way too early. Even I was more stable than she was, and I still heard voices.

Cue in Michael. *The Light provides.*

I glanced around to make sure I was alone, and whispered, "Oh yeah? Then why am I here?"  
*You won't be for long. You are not alone.*

With those words spoken only for me to hear, my confidence swelled. My hope bloomed. But then the flashes started.

A man, long dark brown hair, nearly black eyes faced off with a guy, tall, like a football player. He snarled. Fangs dropped and black claws shot out from his fingertips.

Another image of a woman, maybe five ten, long straight blond hair, dancing.

Another flash and that same woman held a sword.

I steadied myself by palming the wall next to my bedroom. I forced myself to stand straight as the images started to repeat in my mind. I just needed to make it to the sanctuary of my room. I couldn't let anyone see me like this.

Finally alone, my heart started hammering. My chest burned. I stood before the mirror and lifted my shirt. Beneath my white bra a light pulsed. Bright but small. I leaned in. Was that the shape of a heart?

"Michael?" I whispered as I let my shirt fall down, covering the glow. I pressed my hand over it. No heat or anything. My thudding heart was all I felt. "Michael?"

Silence. That wasn't fair. He could come whenever he wanted, but not when I needed him?

Another image flashed. That same man. Blond hair. Scar down the middle of his face. But it was that very face that brought me peace. Not like the scary one with fangs. Who was that? What did he have to do with anything?

I settled onto my bed as I rubbed my chest. Not that it hurt, it was more out of nerves. It was almost comforting. Deep down I knew everything would change when I went to Signot.

What about my parents? Elizabeth?

*The Light provides.*

“Oh, *now* you show up.”

An image of Michael appeared, sitting beside me on my bed, yet the mattress didn’t register his weight. More like a ghost. It still didn’t detract from his beauty.

Or his lethality.

“Hello, sweet one.” He reached out and touched my cheek, and even though he was translucent, I felt it. “Lay back, appear to be sleeping so we can talk.”

I followed his instructions, suddenly very tired.

“Tell me what’ll happen, Michael? With my mom and dad. My sister.”

“You will leave them behind.”

I knew that should scare me. But it didn’t. Nothing did when Michael was near.

“A time of preparation is coming. You will learn much in your slumber.” Gentle hands caressed my hair.

“Slumber?” I wasn’t exactly sure I’d said the words, but they must have come out right since he answered.

“Your body will change into something miraculous. You need time.”

“Now?”

“No. Soon. You must get to the Guardians. Elizabeth will help.”

“She heard you.” I yawned and pulled the blanket over me. “She believes.”

“Indeed.”

“How will she get me out? She’s only seventeen. I’m the strong one. I—”

“She will be strong for you. Though very frightened, she will prevail. You must help her, Jessica. Believe in her. She is scared. Unsure.”

“So am I. I don’t know if I want to be this Merus.” I told my eyes to open so I could look at him, but they didn’t listen. I just focused on his resonating voice. It lulled me into sleep, but his words followed, tickling my brain.

*Together, you will be strong. The Light will provide. Search out Beka and all will be well.*

“Beka,” I whispered, the sound of my voice faded.

I would find her. I would be this Merus. Even though I was scared and unsure, I knew it to be true. I trusted...the Light.

## ∞ SEVEN ∞

I followed Sergeant Treybird into the hallway and to the tech station. After a few minutes of paper work, she led me toward the front doors. I hadn't been outside for anything other than the one hour per day supervised exercise time.

But today was different. I was going to walk into a new life. One filled with swords, according to the images I saw last night before falling asleep. A shiver slid through me, but I reined it in. I needed to be strong. Like Michael said.

Especially when I took one look at Elizabeth.

Even through the glass doors separating us, I could see her shaking. Her face was white, and she chewed on her bottom lip. Totally a nervous habit. Amazing to think *her brain* housed the smarts to get me out of here when she looked so nervous and skittish at the moment.

If she wasn't careful, she was going to get us caught.

Treybird stomped through the doorway once the techs beeped it open, and I followed, giving one wave to Orderly George as I stepped into the lobby area.

He smiled. "See you at five, Jess."

He was such a sweet person. Truly loved his job. But I was glad I was *not* going to be seeing him...or any of these guys again.

Hopefully.

Treybird handed Elizabeth a brown paper bag. "Meds. Nine-thirty sharp. Not nine twenty-nine or nine thirty-one. Do you understand me?"

Elizabeth nodded slightly.

"That's not convincing, young lady. Where are your parents?"

She cleared her throat and glanced at me. I nodded, hopefully egging her on.

"Um." She cleared her throat. "Meeting at ten...at the restaurant."

"Pretty early in the morning for an anniversary surprise." Treybird glanced at me.

Elizabeth slouched and studied the tile floor.

I stood straight. “Oh. Don’t worry, Lizzy. She had to tell me. Treybird doesn’t think I’m ready for surprises yet.” I inched toward my sister. “It’ll be a great surprise for Mom and Dad’s thirtieth wedding anniversary.”

Elizabeth nodded.

I glanced at Treybird. “Oh. And it’s so early because we’re meeting at IHOP for their favorite chocolate chip pancakes.” I turned my full attention to the looming tech. “It’s a family joke.”

“How thoughtful.” She didn’t smile “What time are your meds?”

“Nine-thirty sharp, sir—er—nine-thirty.”

Treybird grinned, and I thought she secretly liked being called sir. But I didn’t want to go down that road.

I backed toward Elizabeth, reaching for her hand. She’d yet to say another word. But she looked the picture board of panic at the moment.

No wonder everyone thought I was the older sister. *Come on, Lizzy. Hold on.* I willed my thought into her. “Thanks, Ms. Treybird. See you at five.”

I waved. The big woman crossed her thick arms over her chest.

I huddled up next to Elizabeth as we made our way toward the last set of doors separating us from the outside. “Ready?”

She squeaked out a, “Yes. Yes.”

“Come on. You’re looking a little guilty, you know?”

“I’m guilty of lots of things. I’m just trying not to puke right now if you don’t mind.” Elizabeth stumbled forward.

The bright sunshine lit up the windows before us. Only five more steps to freedom.

Of course alarms sounded.

“Shit.” I leapt forward to the doors and thrust them open. “Come on.”

Elizabeth ran beside me.

“Where are you parked?”

She pointed to the right. I heard the doors open behind us. “Stop!”

That was Sergeant Treybird’s voice. We were screwed. I didn’t even need to look. “Run, Lizzy. Run.”

She charged out front, digging in her pocket for the keys.

“Mom’s car? How’d—”

“Escape now, details later.”

My chest exploded in heat. Pain quickly followed. My legs morphed into thick, heavy appendages. What. The. Hell.

I stumbled against the back end of the car and held myself up. Elizabeth hopped in and revved the engine to life as I made my way to the passenger side. Finally, I got in.

The surroundings blurred by as Elizabeth squealed the tires getting away from the hospital. The burning and pain subsided as I clutched my chest. It must have been glowing again.

“There’re going to be Amber alerts all over within minutes.” Elizabeth’s eyes darted left then right like a pendulum, looking everywhere.

She steered the car onto Main Street, toward the city. “Wait. Where are you going?”

She glanced at me. The color had finally flooded back to her cheeks. “We need a new car, and I know just where to get one.”

∞ EIGHT ∞

Elizabeth turned into the airport parking lot. “Dad always parks in the same spot.”

“Lizzy. What are you doing?” I rubbed my chest. The pulsing ache had passed, but it left something that almost felt like heartburn. But last night, and then again today, things felt harder. Heavier. When the burn ignited, it made me sluggish. Tried to drag me into sleep. “They’ll just track Dad’s car.”

“He’s in Montreal on business. Not expected back for three days. We have three days of his car to use. They’ll be looking for Mom’s.”

“Wow. That’s smart.” Unless the authorities called Dad and he came home early from his business trip, but I kept that to myself. Elizabeth was doing so well.

Within fifteen minutes, we located Dad’s black Bronco and loaded up. Elizabeth had packed some food and drinks in a cooler so we were set for our three-hour drive to Signot.

As long as no one caught us. That’d ruin things pretty quickly. But I suspected Michael was looking over us.

At least I hoped he was.

“Mom’s got to be freaking,” I said as I bit into an apple.

“I’d venture a big yes on that one.” Elizabeth maneuvered the car onto the highway. “Shit. Not much gas.”

“Potty mouth.”

“Well, look what you turned me into. I’m a car thief, kidnapper. Why not add potty mouth to the list of atrocities?”

“Thank you, Lizzy.” I brushed my hand up her arm and gripped her shoulder.

A wave of subtle light flashed before my eyes, and I saw her. Only she was older. Maybe thirty or forty. Three kids rolling around in a room. She was laughing. The kids were giggling.

“Jess?” Elizabeth’s voice broke through the vision.

“Oh. Yeah.” The vision hadn’t been so shocking. Just subtle. Gentle flashes. That must have been her family. Yes, that felt right. I noticed I hadn’t been with her, though. That freaked me out a little, but I stuffed it down.

I had to stay strong. It kinda sucked that I, a freaking fifteen-year-old, had to stay strong for everyone, but I would.

“You’re welcome. I can’t explain it, but I know I have to help. That voice. Deep. A man. It resonated in my mind like a nudge. Gentle but threatening like, you better do what I say or else.”

I laughed. That sounded like Michael. “I’m just glad I’m not crazy.”

“Or we both are.” She smiled and patted my knee. “You’re not crazy. But what does all this mean? Do you know?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you, Lizzy. It’s pretty big.”

“You’re right. The less I know, the better, I think.” She nodded. “Gas station ten miles. I don’t have much cash, but enough for a tank to get us up north. Not sure what we’ll do once we get there, though.”

“The Light will provide.” The words came out of my mouth before I even realized it. Yet as I said them, I felt them. It was true.

“The Light, huh?” Elizabeth said.

“Gosh. That just kinda slipped out.” I shook my head. “Lizzy. I feel like I’m losing my mind. Like I really am crazy, but not. Dreaming, but not. You know what I mean?”

“I do, Jess. And, I changed my mind. Can you tell me a little bit?”

“I don’t know much. I’m going on faith here. But I think I’m important for something. That in Signot, things are going to change for me.” I coughed. “That I’m going to change.”

“How? What do you mean change?”

“Not sure. Into a Merus I think. But I don’t really understand. Merus means Pure. So I’ll change into something pure?”

“Doesn’t make sense. But that mark on your back. That means Hope. So, you could be right. You’ll bring hope, maybe. Hope to those who have none.”

The nerves tightened my stomach. How could I, a puny little teenager be something important, let alone bring hope to someone. Or a bunch of people. Or whatever. This was too big. I think I’d rather worry about having a zit on the end of my nose for senior pictures or something.

I scrubbed my face with my hands, teetering the line of panic and faith. Like one push would tip me off, then the next minute no push could budge me.

Maybe I did belong in a mental hospital.

Elizabeth steered the car to the exit ramp. “Let’s eat something quick. Fill up and get to where you’re supposed to be. I’m with you, sis. I’ll take care of you. I’ll figure it out.”

Boy, I sure was seeing a different Elizabeth today. Except for the little lapse of panic at the hospital, she really had stepped up.

The phone in the cup holder beside me shrilled to life and scared the crap out of me.

“That’s Mom’s ring tone.” Elizabeth maneuvered the car next to a gas pump. “Just leave it.”

I picked up the phone. Mom’s face scrolled across the screen. Those eyes haunted me. She must be so worried. Scared. Confused. Kind of like me and Elizabeth.

But this had to be done. Somehow, I knew it. I set the phone on my thigh and watched it go silent. Soon a text followed.

*Lizzy. Jess. Please. Please. Are you okay?*

“Maybe after all this is over we can go back home?” Elizabeth shut the car off. “You think?”

I looked at her and took in a deep breath. “You, possibly.” I glanced down at the phone. “But I have a feeling I’ll never be able to go back.”



∞ NINE ∞

“I am so sick of being in this car, Lizzy.” I curled up in the back seat, hugging a blanket we’d gotten from the thrift store.

“Me, too.” She was cuddled up in the front seat with a jacket. “It’s colder up here at night. That’s so not fair.”

Darkness encapsulated the car. We’d been up here for a week with no sign from Michael. No food left. No money. Nothing but the car parked in a dark spot for the night so we could try and sleep.

We hadn’t found anyone called a Guardian or a woman named Beka. Not that we knew where to start looking for either of those things.

White flashes and visions or whatever they were kept me up most every night. Strange images. Sword fights. Ancient times. They were of Michael. I could tell. I watched his life like a movie, almost. Or parts of his life.

So much of it was battle. Sacrifice. Love. Dedication. It poured into my soul. Sometimes I didn’t know whether I was awake or sleeping. And I think Elizabeth was starting to get really scared. The panic I’d seen at the hospital when she’d broken me out resurfaced. Frequently.

But she stayed with me. Did the best she could to find us food. And she always let me eat first.

As if on cue, my stomach roared.

“Dang, girl. That was louder than my alarm clock at home.” Elizabeth looked over the seat.

“Sorry.” We hadn’t eaten today, and it was showing.

“Look. I’m going to go try and rustle us some food.”

“Let’s just wait until morning.”

“No it’s okay. It’s early yet. I saw some cute guys go into a bar across the street, I’ll see if I can cozy up to them, mooch some food or money off them.”

“Cozy up?” I laughed. Like she’d ever use her feminine ways to get food. I didn’t think she had feminine ways.

Then again, she'd been finding us food since our money ran out a couple of days ago. So maybe I'd underestimated her. She shouldn't have to carry such a big burden.

My chest ignited beneath the blanket I had wrapped around me. I couldn't hold back the grunt before it leaked out.

"You okay?" Elizabeth popped her head up.

"Yeah. Just hungry."

"No more visions? You sure you're okay?"

"Tired. Hungry. I'm fine. Really. Don't worry."

"Well, just hold on. I'm going to see what I can rustle up."

"Rustle. Cozy." Like she'd get a cool guy to give her food or money talking like that. "Let's just go to the homeless shelter."

"No. Not two nights in a row. Don't want anyone looking for us."

"Smart." My thoughts jumbled. My body felt heavy. Warm. And my chest pulsed. "Go." I needed her gone for this episode. I hated when she saw me like this. All woosy. Light headed. Flaky. She'd never seen my chest glowing so intensely before. I'd only told her about it. So, if I was going to light up, I wanted her gone. That'd freak her out for sure.

"Okay. See you soon." She jumped out of the car.

"Lizzy?"

She leaned back in. "Yeah?"

"Love you." The words came out with a whisper, but the darkness tugged me under. I vaguely remember hearing her say, "Don't worry, Jess. I'll be back with help."

*It is time, sweet one.*

"No. Can't. Haven't found...Beka."

*Shhh. All will be well.*

My body floated, darkness wrapped around me like a blanket. I'd always figured darkness would be cold. Lonely. Instead, I felt warm and protected. Michael was near. I could tell.

*Michael*, I called out to him with my mind. My voice no longer worked.

*Shhh.*

*What's happening?*

You will be made anew. Pure Light. The Merus. Expunging the evil doers with merely your touch.

Evil doers.

Demons.

My heart sprinted into a race against logic. Demons? *I don't understand, Michael.*

*You will.*

In that instant, streams of knowledge flooded my brain. In a flash I knew what a town-sword was. Visions of fanged, red creatures exploded within my mind. Tall, glowing people, Guardians. Yes, they were Guardians. Battled the creatures. They fought for Light. *The Light.*

My chest pulsed.

More information streamed. I only grabbed onto bits and pieces, but knew my mind was absorbing it all. Learning. Millennia of information. Faces flashed. Swords. More faces.

Then one settled into focus.

Blonde. Six foot three and easily two hundred pounds. Pure muscle. Amber eyes. And that scar. That intriguing, beautiful scar. It alluded to much experience, yet his sparkling eyes held a hint of innocence. Naivety.

Like me. Only he was a warrior. Fiercely loyal.

*Mine.*

Michael chuckled. *Strong indeed, sweet one. You shall be The Merus. One to change the face of the earth. Upon awakening from your slumber, you will be shed of your human life.*

Elizabeth? My Parents?

Do not worry, young one. We will take care of everything.

I'm scared, Michael. What if I fail?

You won't. Do you accept your new role in this universe, sweet one?

Yes. The answer came without a doubt. Some fear, but no doubt. I was meant for this.

*It is done.* His voice boomed, shattering me from the inside out. More flashes bombarded me. Swarmed my mind.

*When will I awaken?*

When it is time. You have much to face. You need to fortify.

How will I stay safe? Am I with you? Are you guarding me and Elizabeth?

You have a protector of a...different kind. David will care for you as part of our plan for you both.

The Guardians. They found me.

Silence stretched out into a long, bated pause.

*Michael?*

Faith, young one.

Faith in The Light.

If you enjoyed **Merus in the Making** you won't want to miss Lynn Rush's other stories in the **Wasteland Trilogy**. Here is a special excerpt from **Tainted**, the final installment of the **Wasteland Trilogy**, which is Jessica's full story with the wonderful man she had visions of throughout Merus in the Making.

## **Tainted Preview**

**Lynn Rush**

## ONE

I wasn't sure what I was running from, but one thing I did know: I'd die if I didn't keep moving.

Even though my Jess had been killed on that slab of concrete, which felt like eons ago, I needed to stay alive.

Wasn't quite sure why, considering the agonizing pain that ripped through my chest every time I visualized her.

Flowing red hair. Shiny plump lips.

The only thing I remember after watching her lifeless hand flop over the side of that slab was me running, barefoot and bare-chested. Yet, as I looked behind me, I saw nothing chasing me.

I had no idea how much time had passed since Jess died. What had happened. Where I was. And why I was half-naked, running down a gravel street.

The unforgiving stones shredded the bottoms of my feet. My lungs burned as if I breathed acid. How long had I been running? From what to where?

Streams of light cut through the blanket of darkness tucked tight around me. Trees flanked me, and a black void ate up the road ahead. The roar of an engine revved as the lights neared. Its noise ricocheted off the trees.

I skidded to a stop and cleared the shrubbery to the ditch.

No snow, leafless bushes, jumping cactus and only a subtle chill in the dark air. The desert? I'd been to Arizona enough times to recognize the terrain, but I couldn't be sure. Darkness limited my vision. Not a moon or cloud or star in the sky.

I felt detached from my body, tired, yet hyped up with energy at the same time. Sweating and chilled.

Maybe I was dreaming? Maybe Jess's death was all a nightmare.

Loud thumping music vibrated the air as a vehicle approached. I shoved my hands through my hair.

Wait. My hair was short? I'd always worn it long.

Right... I'd cut and dyed it back when Russell, Annabelle, and I were on the run from... The name escaped me.

Jess's death flashed before my eyes again. The darkness, the blood, the pain.

I shook her image from my brain and trained my focus on the approaching car. It melded into the night with its sleek black exterior. Why was it slowing down?

Not slowing, but stopping. Directly in front of me.

I crouched.

The window rolled down with a whirl. "I know you're out there." The voice was female. Airy, yet alluring.

I froze.

"Saw you running." She coughed. "Half-naked by the way."

Out the window came an object. It landed three feet away. A white shirt. I glanced back to the car and squinted, trying to see in.

"Light on," the female said.

Illumination from the interior light spilled over a woman with long, black hair and shiny red lips. From what I could see, she wore a snug tank top, but the rest of her body disappeared behind the car door.

"Or don't you need a ride?"

I reached for the shirt and squirmed into it. The fabric stretched tight across my chest, but did its job shielding me from the cool air. "Where are we?" I asked as I stepped forward.

A thorn pierced the bottom of my foot and anger boiled up. Anger deeper and darker than I'd ever known since becoming a Guardian almost four centuries ago. My heart hammered and blood ran white hot through me.

"Guardian." I huffed. The minute Jess was taken from me I cursed that calling. It was the last straw. Nothing but sacrifice on my part for nearly four centuries and where had it gotten me?

Alone. Deprived of a life-mate.

If only I could remember what happened after that night at the altar. The night *she* died.

"Come on. I'll give you a lift into town," the mystery woman said. "Unless you'd rather run twelve miles." The engine revved again and the light clicked off, covering the female in darkness.

How did I get twelve miles outside civilization? I edged toward the road, scanning my arid surroundings. I bent at the waist and peered into the car. "How are you here?"

"Hard to miss a deliciously sweet, half-naked body running down the middle of the road, you know?"

I couldn't quite make out the female since she'd turned out the light, but I imagined her smiling. Did I know her?

"Get in. I don't bite...too hard." The door clicked open, and the light turned on again. Her dark eyes scanned my body, and the corner of her mouth hiked up in a crooked smile.

I calmed myself, listening for my Instinct, but it was silent. Probably dormant since I'd cursed the Guardians. Cursed Michael.

I hopped into the bucket leather seat and slammed the door shut. "Where am I?"

"You're welcome." The woman cranked the gear into drive and the car lurched forward. "Oh, and you're in Fillmore, Arizona, Durk."

I nailed her with a look. "You know my name?"

"Of course I do." She shook her head. "Maybe I should make you walk back into town if you can't even remember my name."

"Explain this to me."

She held my gaze for several long seconds, which probably wasn't smart considering she was driving. "You're serious. You don't know me?"

I glanced around the leather-clad car, striving for a memory, something familiar about her and this vehicle. A heavy scent of rose slammed into me. It emanated from the woman. Perfume probably. A hint of leather and tree bark dusted the air as well.

But no memories.

"Shit, man. We hook up at Jack's Bar and twenty minutes later you don't know who I am?"

"Hook up?" My gut clenched at the thought of being with this woman. I would never betray Jess like that.

Then again, Jess was dead.

I tugged at my hair until my eyes stung. Why couldn't I remember? I was last in Flowing Brook, Colorado, helping Russell, David, Andrew, and Annabelle rescue Jess from someone. Something. Cronetti. Yes. Cronetti had taken her—no Jess had *let* him take her.

So careless about her safety. So innocent. But she didn't deserve the death Fate threw at her. She was the Merus.

She was mine.

"Look. Don't have a coronary. You married or something? Jeez." The car veered around the bend, and beams of light splashed against the thicket lining the narrow, gravel road.

"I had sex with you at a bar?" I bit back the vomit. I would never have done that. Guardians didn't have casual relationships, especially me. Because I'd always only wanted Jess.

"Didn't have time to get that far, but we were getting warmed up until some Neanderthals started picking on that girl." The woman tossed me a glance. "You sure are some knight in shining armor, you know?"

Flashes of memory hammered into me.

A young girl. Long red hair. Two leather clad men harassing her. She couldn't escape. No one would help.

An explosion of anger had ignited within me. The men paid for their actions.

Severely.

I'd run into the woods surrounding the bar and stripped out of the blood-soaked shirt and ran. Just ran.

"You really don't remember?"

"I'm remembering some now." I swallowed down the bundle of nerves lodged in my throat. "But nothing before tonight. Do you know me? How I came to be in this town?"



The trees began to thin as we neared the outskirts of a city. From the glow of lights emanating, it appeared fairly large.

“Naw. You just showed up at Jack’s tonight, looking all kinds of sexy and dangerous. Just what I like in a man.” She winked.

“What’s your name?”

“Vivian.” She coughed. “But you can call me Viv.”

“You just happen to carry an extra man’s shirt in your car?” I glanced into the back seat.

“Yeah, well. You’re not the first guy I’d brought into my car.” She shrugged.

“We were...in your car?” Dread stormed through me.

“No. I was just sayin’...”

This Viv was strange. Dressed in skimpy clothes, frequenting a bar alone, and looking to hook up with a man she didn’t know.

What had *I* been doing at the bar? And why the hell would I even consider hooking up with someone, let alone a human? Especially with the death of my mate so fresh on my mind.

Something reeked of demon influence.

Driven to write, Lynn Rush often sees her characters by closing her eyes and watching their story unfold in her mind. Lynn Rush is a pen name that is a combination of two sources – Lynn, the first name of her mother-in-law, who passed away and Rush – since the author is a former inline speed skater and mountain biker. All of Rush's books are dedicated to Lynn, her namesake, and a portion of the proceeds benefits cancer research and awareness.

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~~~See you in the paranormal~~~