

**Beyond the Breach:  
Battle of the Banshees**

**By Candace Nola**

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## **Dedication**

For my muses. For my puddin', the kitty and the sir. For those that said I could.  
For VT, who knew I would.  
For Charity, for my friends and my family and for all those who helped along the way.  
For all of those that opened the door.

Adding a special dedication to Travis Heermann, without your mentorship, I would not be where I am today. I have deep appreciation for all that you have taught me.

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## Prologue

*One year ago.*

Laraya hugged Luka tightly, like she would never let him go again. Tears overwhelmed her as she sobbed, both joy and grief poured out of her, emotions from her journey through the other world threatened to tear her apart. The final battle with the Soul Eater had ended just minutes before the breach had faded from view, the soft shimmer barely visible over the water. Her golden robe still dripped with mud and silver and bright red rivers of blood from her own injuries.

People surrounded her as she rushed across the stream and into Luka's waiting arms, her knees no longer able to hold her upright, the adrenaline gone, her energy drained. He caught her, holding her tightly as the tears began to fall, his and hers. Shock and terror on his face as he held her, trying to ask her 'what the hell' that thing was. She shook her head, questions could wait. She was home. She let herself cry until she was spent and exhausted. Luka finally led her to a picnic bench where paramedics were waiting. As they hovered over her, checking her wounds, her friends stood protectively close by, Luka never dropping her hand.

Questions were being hurled at her from all directions, but she could hear none of it. Her mind was buzzing with energy and light, the high-pitched vibration of the Naman filled her, sang to her, comforted her as she mentally said her goodbyes.

The Naman, all the pretty things, her protectors from the dark, all filled her mind with their songs, their quiet farewells. Raw emotion filled her as the sounds faded and she almost broke down again. She took a few deep breaths to steady herself and slowly her mind began to register the words being spoken around her.

"Where have you been? What's happened? Did someone take you? Were you lost? Laraya? Laraya! Can you hear me?" Slowly, she looked up and around, meeting their eyes, lifting one hand for silence, she tried to decide what to say first. Her voice was hoarse and raspy, most likely from the battle cries that had only just ended moments before.

"Yes, yes, I can hear you. I'm not sure I know exactly what happened. I, I umm I got lost. I think I fell and hit my head pretty badly. Saw a bear, huge bear and it chased me." She stammered the explanation out and paused to think again, as if trying to remember.

She couldn't dare look at Luka or her friends. They knew she was lying; all three had clearly seen her finish the battle with the Soul Eater, shock and terror etched onto their faces as she fought for her freedom and their lives.

She couldn't tell the whole story, not here, not to all of them; someone would have her committed with no questions asked.

"I ran into the woods, but I slipped in a muddy stream and hit my head. I don't know how long I was out, but then I didn't know where I was. I've just been wandering in the dark, trying to get out."

She shook her head slightly, wincing at the memories and the pain, then tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I scared everyone. I just want to go home now, I'm so tired. I'm just glad I found my way back. I just want to thank everyone for being here, for coming out to help. I can't explain how much it means to me, seeing you all here."

Her voice cracked a bit as if she might cry again. The stress and exhaustion were clear on her face, even if what happened to her, was not. The police chief gave her a long look, finally sighed and asked the paramedics if she needed hospital care.

The EMT's finished bandaging her various wounds and checked her for any signs of a concussion. When they found nothing more than superficial cuts and bruises, they seemed satisfied with their exam. After the paramedics cleared her, he told her she could go home but he would need to stop by in a day or two to finish his report. She nodded and Luka helped her stand.

The crowd parted, and he walked her to their car, their friends right behind them. More family, friends and searchers all heading to their cars. There would be more questions soon, she knew that, but for today, she needed silence and her Luka. She hugged people as they passed by her beside the car, each one stopping to hug her or tell her how happy they were she was home. She endured as long as she could and then quietly got in the car, keeping the window up as she buckled her seat belt. A subtle hint that she truly done for today.

People waved as they passed, the last of the well-wishers and rescue party. The police were finishing their write-up at the campsite with the paramedics, and she could see the chief staring across the riverbank where she'd emerged from. He looked concerned as he peered into the gloomy woods beyond. As Luka opened the door on the driver's side, she heard the chief tell the campground owner to close until they could search for bears, as a precaution. She breathed a small sigh of relief. He had bought her bear story.

Stacey and Kyle were quiet in the backseat as Luka got in and shut the door. He turned to look at her, deep into her eyes, asking if she was really alright. Stacey patted her shoulder as she said she was. "I'm fine, really. I'm fine now that I'm here with you all. There's a lot to tell. And I will tell you, I promise, but for now, let's go home." He kissed her gently, squeezed her hand and started the car.

Hovering just at the edge of the woods beyond the stream, a dark shadow appeared right behind the closing veil. Not able to fit through the vanishing rift, the shadow demon and its rider shrieked in rage at being denied their prey. As

the breach slowly sealed, and the shimmer faded, the beast reared up on its hind legs and vanished back into the dark world that Laraya had left behind.

A fading sound trilled above the whispering leaves, sounding their alarm,

" Tsk, Tsk, Tsk".

## Chapter 1 Cries in the Dark

*The banshee shrieked a savage, murderous cry as it sat on the back of the shadow demon, the pair hurtling through the misty woods like a rocket. Creatures of all kinds raced for the forest's edge, for the shadowed trees on the other side. The Jacks and Jills, savage but humanoid-type insects, swarmed the deadly pair, trying to blind them, trying to buy time for the other animals to flee.*

*The banshee thrashed atop the beast, wisps of rags lashing out at the miniature creatures like a whip, slicing dozens of them in half. They dropped, small silver puddles forming around them. Their life-force immediately cocooned them, almost before their wings ceased beating.*

*The demon's razor-sharp fangs tore into a dog-bit, a ferocious combination of a giant hare and a beagle, crushing its throat, tossing the body to the side like an old chew toy. Several more forest creatures followed suit, dying in the jaws of the beast only to be covered in silver blood moments later, another sad burial stone in the dismal wood.*

*She was here. It sensed her, smelled her. The humming in its brain since she slipped into her dream, had been deafening. Her connection to the Naman, the telepathic beings that she put here to protect her, and her other animal protectors almost instantaneous. Laraya was dreaming about the Dark World, and she was wandering close by. The banshee shrieked again, and again, searching for its prey, as the shadow demon it rode crushed everything in their path.*

*It lived only to hunt her, to crush her beneath the jaws of the beast that it rode upon. She put it here, had trapped it here, away from the world she lived in.*

*She had succeeded in killing one of its kind a year ago when she found herself trapped here in the Dark World. But three angry spirits roamed this world that she had created, not just one. Three, savage, murderous souls of men that had been lost to the darkness long before Laraya had been born. The same souls that she had captured in her drawings and had banished here, to exist in her nightmare world, instead of torturing her in her haunted mind.*

*The same evil souls that murdered her parents 25 years before were intent on killing her too, to finish the job. Their spirits had been trapped in this hellish world and banished from their own. They now had one sole purpose; to destroy this place and her. They knew nothing else, remembered nothing else, except their hatred of her. The surrounding woods were thick with it, electrified with her connection, a live wire running right beneath its feet. It did not hear her, but it sensed her presence.*

*The banshee roared as the shadow demon slaughtered more and more forest creatures. Small silver rocks and boulders dotted the night, glittering like stars and the Naman silently cried out to her. Their cries for help entered her sleeping mind like a thunderbolt and her eyes shot open.*



I shot straight up in bed, stifling a scream with one hand. I had been dreaming again, the banshee and the shadow demon were chasing me through the dark woods, hunting me down like before. My body shook and my heart pounded against my chest. Luka already had the light on and was coming to my side to comfort me. He sat down beside me and hugged me close.

"Banshee or the Soul Eater?", he asked softly, gently rubbing my back.

"Banshee and the demon," I whispered back, hating how my voice trembled.

A year later and the nightmares were still haunting me. I had hoped that my journey into the Dark World had been enough to forever put those to rest, but these nightmares were of the Dark World, of the reality of it, the impossibility of it. Not just dreams from a troubled childhood but dreams that contained real monsters, real demons that wanted me dead.

I had killed one, but there were more nightmares over there that I had yet to face. It was only a matter of time before I would find myself stepping through an unknown rip in reality and go hurtling down the rabbit hole once more. I just didn't know when. Luka kissed the top of my head and stood up.

"I'm going to grab you a warm washcloth for your face and a glass of water. Then we will talk, sing, laugh or cuddle until you go back to sleep."

Our nightly ritual now underway, I smiled a bit at his sleepy smile and leaned back against my pillows. He never complained, never made shitty remarks, never ignored my distress. Night after night, we woke from my nightmares together, and we dealt with them together.

We had made a few changes since my ordeal, leaving college life for a small house of our own, a short drive from the city. Our long driveway led to a modest white and green farmhouse, a renovated barn and four acres of land. Luka finished his degree and set up shop as a vet for domestic and exotic pets.

I changed gears completely, giving up my studies in history and leaving college for good. I taught archery classes five days a week in the field behind our house. These changes were necessary for me, and Luka did not object in the least, although my parents didn't really understand.

I would never be caught unprepared again, in this world or the next. My bow and arrow went everywhere I went, along with my fully stocked backpack, which held my golden robe, my hunting knife, canteen and other such supplies. When the time came, I would be ready.

I looked up when Luka came back into the room, taking the warm washcloth from him, I sat up to wipe the tracks of my tears from my face. When I finished, I took the glass of ice water and drank deeply.

Luka took the glass, set it on the nightstand and got back in bed. I moved closer to him and snuggled up to his chest, hoping to go back to sleep soon.

He asked if I wanted to tell him about the dream, but I said no, told him to go back to sleep. He had a long day ahead of him. Within minutes, he was asleep. I laid awake for a long time after, thinking about the dream, thinking about the intense hum, almost a shout, that had woken me.

The Naman were trying to reach me through our bond, that had to be it. Only their connection created that humming sound in my head, like the sound of a live wire directly connected to a generator. I had left them as guardians of the Dark World. They were there to protect the remaining peaceful creatures that were known as the Pretty Things.

The Pretty Things were amazing Technicolor nightmares created from the mind of a terrified child. Black, flying unicorns that I had dubbed pegicorns, and rainbow-colored turtles with razor-sharp Mohawks on their shells. There were walking chimps that fought from the trees, floating jellyfish that stung with electric tendrils, poisonous dancing daisies and deadly barbed sunflowers that stood guard around the meadow in which they lived.

Tonight, the Naman's cry had exploded in my brain like a gunshot, freeing me from the nightmare but not the worry that something more was happening. I did not fall back to sleep that night, the dread and the fear sat in my stomach, like a ball of ice, chilling me to my core.

In the morning, Luka found me standing in our bright yellow kitchen, both hands wrapped around my favorite coffee mug, staring absently out of the kitchen window. The vanilla scented coffee steamed as I gently blew on the top.

"Are you okay, 'Raya? I'm guessing you didn't fall back to sleep." I gave him a tired smile before setting my mug down and wrapping my arms around him for a hug.

"I'm fine. Just trying to figure out the dream. It was different this time. Something was calling to me. Like they are calling to me. But the connection is too weak to fully break through." Stepping back from him, I looked up into his worried brown eyes.

"I'm okay, really. I wish I knew what it all meant."

He smiled but it did not erase the worry from his brow. Brushing a stray hair from my eyes, he rubbed my cheek gently with his thumb.

"You'll figure it out. And whatever it takes to do it, whatever we need to do to set you at peace again, is what we will do. I cannot begin to imagine what it was like there for you, but you'll never have to face it alone again."

He gave me another hug before heading to the coffee pot to fill his Doctor Who mug and heading out to the remodeled barn that now served as his animal hospital. I took another sip from my mug, enjoying the sweet vanilla cream flavor of it.

"Alright, time to go check on Sampson and the others. Are you sure you're alright? I can come back in for a few hours later if you need me. Or you can come out to the office if you don't want to be alone?"

Already, the effects of the sugar and caffeine poured through my system, I grinned at him. "I'm alright. I'm going to go for a run and then practice before my first lesson gets here."

I kissed his cheek and led him to the kitchen door, holding it open for him as he grabbed his phone. "But maybe I will stop in and visit Sampson and the others after my run."

Luka stepped outside into the still foggy morning with the light dew still visible on the grass. "Sounds good. I'll be counting the minutes." With a final wave, he set off down the path to the animal hospital.

A lone car sat in the small gravel parking lot. Ryan was punctual to a fault. We only afforded one assistant on a part-time basis and Ryan was great. He wanted to be a vet too. The 17-year-old loved horses and was an excellent rider. He showed up every morning at six to check on his horse, Sampson, and to feed, water and clean-up after whatever animals were being housed in the hospital and barn that day.

We boarded Sampson free of charge, in exchange for Ryan working for \$10.50 an hour. Ryan was a fast learner. Luka raved about his skills with the animals, especially his gentleness and knack for calming them down. That was a special trait that would carry him far in the vet business. Scared and anxious animals were a daily occurrence and sometimes a threat for a vet.

As Luka reached the parking lot, Ryan came out to meet him, his dirty blond hair falling across his forehead. He pushed it back from his eyes and handed Luka a clipboard. Probably the appointment list for today; the kid was an exceptional assistant and kept Luka very well organized. I smiled to myself before going back inside the house. It was not too long ago that I saw Luka greet his employers and mentors with the same eagerness.

I walked back towards the bedroom to change into my running gear, absently wrapping my hair up into a bun as I went. The humming noise stayed in my head. I tried to focus my thoughts on it now.

Standing quietly in the unlit room, I breathed deeply, in and out, centering myself in the moment, focusing on the humming, in my brain. I focused on the sound, on the color that I saw, tiny gold vibrations in the air.

I heard it, faintly, like a barely there radio station that you just keep missing by a quarter turn of the dial. Minutes passed as I tried to listen for something more, anything more, but there was nothing. It wasn't strong enough.

Frustrated, I flicked the lights on and sat down on the bed to put on my running shoes. My black leggings and long-sleeve sweatshirt would be warm enough for the chilly morning run.

A big open field began 30 yards behind our house and went on for about 150 yards before reaching the tree line. Our entire property was bordered by trees on all sides. If it weren't for the big sign announcing the animal hospital, you wouldn't even notice the turn off to our driveway on the right.

I chose it for both the privacy and the space. I had plenty of room to practice my archery and teach as well as room for Luka's practice but that wasn't all. The dense forest afforded many ways to practice my survival skills away from curious eyes.

The Naman had taught me well during my time with them and I spent hours in the woods every day, training, practicing, and running. I taught myself how to climb trees, swing on vines and how to ride the tops of saplings down to bigger trees. I learned that from watching the warrior chimps from the meadow.

They rode the treetops from tree to tree, vine to vine, never needing to touch the ground. That was a skill I could have used my first couple of weeks in that dismal world. I shook myself out of my daze, stretches complete and reached over to start my play list. I grinned a little as "Crazy Train" began to play and set off into the woods. Luka would be appalled at my selection.

I was across the meadow in minutes and lost to the thick woods. I ran as if the Soul Eater was behind me, snarling at my heels. I dodged shrubs, leapt over rocks and branches, scrambled up high embankments and splashed through the stream that ran through the trees.

I never took the same direction twice, never the same path. The challenge was in not knowing what my obstacles would be or where they were. I ran, blindly, heavy metal blasting in my ears and memories of the Dark World flashing in my mind. I ran as if my life depended on it, because one day, it would.

I came to the tree line at the edge of the field as my playlist ended. Breathing hard, I slowed to a walk and headed to the barn to Luka and Sampson. I would gather my archery equipment on my way back to the field. The sun was high in the sky now and the dew had dried on the grass. The air smelled fresh and clean; a freshly mowed lawn scent mingled with the scent of wildflowers.

Ryan led Sampson out to the training ring behind the barn. He was getting ready to put him through his paces for their upcoming show. Ryan was one hell of a rider. He would do well on the circuit. Rodeo was all he wanted to do. He had the heart and the skills for it, not to mention the horse. I smiled when he glanced up and gave a short wave. I waved back and headed into the office to talk to Luka.

"Good run?" He asked when he saw me.

I grinned and replied, "Yep, ran like hell was chasing me!"

Luka smiled but looked worried. He stood up from his desk and came over to the doorway where I was leaning.

"You know you don't have to worry now, you're safe here." He looked at me concerned. He meant what he said.

He believed it, but he didn't know what I did. Luka didn't know that it wasn't over, not yet. I would go back one day, and I needed to be prepared.

"I know you mean that, and I appreciate it. But it makes me feel better. I'll never be unprepared again, not in this world or the other. I wish you understood."

I perched on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek, and he pulled me to him in a hug. I held him for a minute, breathing him in, loving the moment.

Finally, I stepped back. "Duty calls. I have a lesson at 10:30. That gives me an hour to practice. I'll see you for lunch." I shot him a quick grin and left him standing there in the doorway.

Leaving the barn, I headed up to the shed behind the house and retrieved my bow, my arrows and quiver and some targets and went to set up. The left side of the field was set up with haystacks for targets at 25, 50, and 100 yards away. Walking to each one, I placed new target sheets and headed back to the edge of the field.

I practiced for a solid thirty minutes before I went to gather and replace my targets. All my arrows had landed close to the center circle, but a few had landed too far outside of the bullseye. I wasn't 100% pleased but I'd take it. I went back and started over, concentrating more fully this time. All my arrows found their mark until the hum in my brain, suddenly increased to a roaring wail that shook me to my core.

It was the Naman! It had to be. The golden vibrations in my mind sang out. My shot went wild, hung a far right into the field. I stood there, silent and shaking, concentrating hard.

One word screamed into my brain, like a shot out of the dark, "HELP!" An image of the word lit up my mind. Fiery gold letters sent over the humming link. They were calling me. I tried to answer, silently, like they taught me. With my mental voice, I replied, "I'm here! I hear you!"

I listened for long minutes after, waiting for a reply. I felt the slight breeze on my face, heard the quiet buzz of a bee nearby, heard the quiet rustling of the leaves but I heard nothing further from the Naman. I tried again but got no response. Confused and disappointed, I gathered my arrows and began to prepare for my students.

I met Luka inside for dinner around six o'clock. Luka sliced up a loaf of Italian bread from Mancini's while I finished serving up the stew that had been simmering all day. My stomach rumbled at the sight of the bread and the smell of the stew. Mancini's had the best bread in Pittsburgh, and we bought it weekly.

As we sat down Luka looked at me and said "okay, Raya, out with it. Something is wrong. You've been a bit off all day. Is it the dream?"

I tried to shrug it off, but I needed to tell him. I sighed and began to explain about the Naman trying to contact me, both in the dream and while I was practicing in the field.

He listened patiently, looking more concerned when I told him that I thought I was being called back there. That I thought something was wrong, why else would they be crying out for help? Tears of frustration filled my eyes by the time I finished, and he squeezed my hand.

"First, I don't think you need to go back there. How would you even go back? What happened to you was a cosmic glitch. A freak accident that should have never happened. You were sucked into your nightmare world by some psychic connection. Second, are you sure that's the only explanation? Maybe a sort of auditory memory? Something that happened there that is manifesting as an audible hallucination now?"

The worry in his voice was evident as he concluded his questions. I hadn't really thought of that being possible. I almost died at the hands of a monster that I had only dreamed of before. A monster that does not exist in this world.

I shrugged as I said, "You might be right. Maybe it is something else. Maybe I can talk to Sarah about it. She might have some insight".

It was her suggestion that had given me the idea to draw my nightmares into their own home. I had put so much faith into the idea that I had somehow drawn them into existence in another reality. Just a thin veil existed between our reality and theirs.

A barrier to a reality that I never knew existed until I stumbled across a stream at our family's favorite campground. A veil that kept out all the monsters I had dreamed off. A veil that had opened at the exact right time, on the exact right day.

Luka wrinkled his brow a bit, "Sarah...?" I saw him thinking, so I waited a few seconds. "Sarah, your old therapist?" I nodded.

"Do you think she would see you? She might not even remember you."

I shrugged it off. Sarah Lockhart would remember me. After all, it would be hard to forget a child that you had treated for seven years, especially when they started out mute and having horrible night terrors. Although right after I had turned ten, she stopped our appointments without an explanation.

That had been devastating for my parents and for me. They had to find a new therapist and convince me to trust someone new. Needless to say, I had regressed and refused any more therapy. I wasn't thrilled with the idea of needing to call her after so long, but the mystery started with her. I had to find out what else she might know.

"Let's call her. No harm in exploring other reasons for what you are hearing." He reached over and squeezed my hand gently. "We'll figure it out."

I smiled at him, relieved by his optimism. Luka was my voice of reason, always looking for the alternative, always helping me decide on the best course of action. I tended to react first and think later, which is not always the best response. I agreed to call Sarah first thing in the morning, but I vowed to get to the bottom of her sudden refusal to treat me, all those years ago.

