



a phantom of
truth

A Shade of Vampire, Book 76

BELLA FORREST

A SHADE OF VAMPIRE 76: A PHANTOM OF
TRUTH

BELLA FORREST

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MAIN CAST LIST

- **Amelia** (daughter of Erik and Abby Novalik – vampire)
- **Eva** (daughter of Azazel and Tamara – druid/lamia/vampire)
- **Herakles** (creation of Ta'Zan – Faulty)
- **Raphael** (creation of Ta'Zan – Perfect)
- **Riza** (daughter of Horatio and Aisha Drizan– jinni)
- **Taeral** (son of Sherus and Nuriya – fae-jinni)
- **Varga** (son of Ashbik and Ruby Goode – vampire-sentry)

FAMILY TREE

If you'd like to check out the Novaks' family tree, visit: [**www.forrestbooks.com/tree**](http://www.forrestbooks.com/tree)

TAERAL

My heart was broken a thousand times over, yet I still couldn't bring myself to yield before Brendel and the Hermessi. We'd come too far. We had Eirexis and Zetos already. Phyla was missing, and was the last piece to complete Thieron, Death's scythe, an instrument that had absorbed a lot of her power. I had been trusted with this mission, along with Eira and Lumi. The three of us had been marked by Death, immortality forced upon us at least until we returned Thieron to her.

Amelia, Raphael, Nethissis, Riza, Herakles, Eva, and Varga completed our crew, and we were also joined by Seeley, an envoy of Death herself, the Widow Maker, and the Soul Crusher. Widow and Soul were free agents now, but they'd chosen to help us. Kabbah completed the set of extraordinary allies, occupying Fallon's body to amplify his own powers.

After all, what kind of world would they be looking at if they let Brendel get away with her ritual? Nothing but death and destruction awaited, simply because the Hermessi had gotten into their heads that a reset button needed to be pushed. That everyone needed to be wiped out, just so the elementals could start over again. Too many lives would be lost for the antiquated tradition.

Brendel had taken my father to deter me from pursuing Thieron. He'd already fallen under the Hermessi's influence at the time. Derek and Sofia's crew had brought him back, along with the Hermessi children held captive on Yahwen. But Brendel had somehow found out that they'd been brought to The Shade. Even after I'd maimed her with an incomplete Thieron, she'd managed to pull herself together. She wormed her way into the Earthly Dimension and snapped my father's life-chain, killing him in the process... Her revenge for my obstruction.

I still had a shot at saving him, though. According to Soul, I could use Phyla to revive him.

Shortly after killing my father, Brendel had vanished, gone from the Earthly Dimension. We knew the next time we saw her there it would bring the end of days, since the ritual would be complete. We were quick to prepare for the next part of our mission. Our destination was Aledras, where Soul said we'd find Phyla.

We were given a small shuttle to fly while on the planet. Lumi and Nethissis packed it full of serum batteries and put together a fortified interplanetary spell around it. The two

of them worked together to steer the whole damn thing. We only had soil samples from Yahwen, courtesy of Derek and Sofia. From there, the swamp witches would have to push the interplanetary spell to Aledras, which was pretty much next door.

"It's been bugging me all night," Raphael said, disrupting my thoughts. "How the hell did Brendel know where to find Sherus and the children? Derek and Sofia's mission was literally on a need-to-know basis. No one in GASP would've told that elemental bitch about it. They didn't even mention Yahwen by name while they were on Calliope or anywhere else outside the Earthly Dimension. It doesn't make sense."

I shook my head slowly. "She had help. I told you. Someone or something helped her. Maybe not GASP. Maybe it was one of the rebel Hermessi... I don't know."

"Nah, Ramin would never—" Amelia started, but Kabbah cut in.

"The rebels would rather die than tell Brendel where we took their children," he said. "If you want to look for culprits, you won't find them among the resistance. Brendel had outside help, not only finding the children, but also recovering from the blow you delivered and breaching into the Earthly Dimension. That was no easy feat. That was heavy-duty, transcendent magic."

I shrugged, struggling to get the image of my father's spirit out of my head. "Any culprits in mind?"

The interplanetary spell hurtled across space, traveling through hundreds of galaxies as it made its way toward the In-Between's oldest twenty-planet solar system. We'd slipped through the portal from The Shade into Calliope, and we'd taken the shuttle from there. Quiet. Unseen. Unheard.

After what had happened with Brendel and my father, we'd had very little time to act. Derek and Sofia shut the portal down with Corrine's help, allowing only certain people through, and always under strict monitoring, just in case Brendel or some other Hermessi might be brave enough to sneak in.

I left my father with my mother and Corrine, knowing that he'd be well looked after while I was gone. Thankfully, Seeley had left my father's spirit visible to everyone, making it easy to talk to him, to comfort him. My mother's heart was torn to shreds, but at least she was with him, leaving Aisha and Horatio to deal with the Fire Star kingdom and its administrative matters. Being with my father mattered more than anything to her, at this point.

Armed with Devil's Weed (sewn into our combat suits), pulverizer weapons and magic paraphernalia, as well as Yamani's scythe and two thirds of Thieron, we'd settled into the shuttle, getting a full-screen view of the cosmos through the windshield. Thousands of galaxies unraveled before us, spirals of stars and planets, many of them still undiscovered. For a moment, I wondered if there were worlds on them, living creatures who were at risk of complete annihilation because of Brendel's stupid ritual.

We'd been out for a couple of hours, having left Eritopia behind. Kabbah had liaised with the rebel Hermessi for assistance on Aledras. We knew Brendel and her cohorts would likely be waiting for us down there. After all, we were coming for Phyla. The last piece of the puzzle before Thieron was ready to be returned to Death. Brendel had been the one to steal it from Death, the one who'd broken it into pieces and scattered them

across the In-Between and the Supernatural dimensions. She would never stop hunting us, even if we succeeded and made it back to Mortis. Until the last moment, Brendel would seek to keep Thieron out of Death's hands, by whatever means necessary.

"No culprits in mind, no," Kabbah finally replied. "But I will personally vouch for the rebels. Even those who only turned against Brendel after their children were taken from Yahwen. It's got to be someone else."

"We can spend an entire day assuming and passing theories around, if you want. But we have better things to do than contemplate the unknown," Lumi interjected. "Let us focus on what we do know. The Hermessi children are safe in The Shade, at least until the ritual. Afterward, the Hermessi will have enough power to spill out of the Supernatural Dimension and the In-Between, right into the Earthly Dimension."

"I hope it doesn't get to that." Eva sighed, leaning into Varga. We were all strapped in our seats, weapons and backpacks at our feet. Lumi and Nethissis stood by the ship's control panel, though there wasn't much use for it yet. Once the interplanetary spell wore off, they'd have to move back and allow Varga to fly the shuttle. That would only happen once we pierced Aledras's atmosphere.

"What about Derek and Sofia? What will GASP be doing while we're out here risking our necks to complete Thieron?" Herakles asked, his hand covering Riza's. He squeezed it gently once in a while, prompting her to steal a glance at him.

"They're keeping the portal under control, with Ibrahim's help," I said. "And they're taking care of the Hermessi children. Getting to know them, trying to sway some of them against the Hermessi... Many of them come from worlds we've yet to explore. It would be a shame if we didn't try to pinpoint as many of their origin planets as possible, while we're at it."

"And the sanctuaries?" Herakles replied, his brow furrowed.

"Under witch supervision, just like before. I know Kelara is also helping on Calliope. I'm not sure about the other sanctuaries, though," I said.

Seeley smiled. "Kelara is dependable. Calliope is safer with her on it, at least where the fae spirits are concerned."

Amelia checked her tablet. It had been beeping every other minute—notifications of incoming messages. The corner of her mouth ticked as she looked at me. "Harper says there's a Reaper in every sanctuary now, visible to the living. Only for the purpose of communication and coordination."

"Right. The one part of the job I will not be missing," Widow muttered, stretching his legs next to Soul.

"Oh yeah, you two are free now. Have you thought about what you'll do after this whole Hermessi thing is over?" Raphael asked.

Soul offered a cold grin. "We have two choices, my friend—"

"Friends don't break the legs of their friends' girlfriends," Raphael shot back.

Soul thought about it for a moment, then chuckled softly. "We have two choices. We continue to exist as we are, in this immortal limbo, or we move on into the world of the dead."

I had to give Soul credit. He could've taunted Raphael over Amelia's injuries in his

puzzle, but he didn't. I figured Widow must've taught him that blurting out whatever festered in his sick mind wasn't always the best of ideas. We had a long voyage ahead of us. The last thing we needed was unnecessary conflict.

Soul and Widow were de facto allies, but they weren't the easiest to be around. They'd been locked inside Zetos and Eirexis, respectively, for millions of years. Their social skills were beyond rusty. They were practically nonexistent. But their intentions were—for the most part—good. And their abilities mattered in the bigger picture. Soul and Widow no longer had the mojo they'd gotten while locked inside Zetos and Eirexis, but they still had impressive powers. Widow was pure force, in both attack and defense. He was practically unbreakable. And Soul could still manufacture mind-boggling and nerve-wracking puzzles in small interdimensional pockets, in which he could trap the enemy. Seeley had his Reaper magic, as well, symbols and whispers that aided his scythe in delivering potentially crippling blows.

We were doing much better now than a few days ago, for sure.

But my father was still dead, and I had to do everything I could to save him. The worst part was that I knew the kind of hell awaiting us on Aledras.

"She knows we're coming," I said slowly, staring at the starry field ahead of us. The interplanetary spell's light bubble was discreet and iridescent, giving us a full view of the vast space we shot through.

"Brendel?" Eira asked, giving me a concerned look.

I nodded once. "She won't let me have Phyla."

"We've planned for this," Kabbah assured me. "All you need is a few seconds with Phyla. We've got you covered."

"How do you know that's all it takes?" I replied.

He smirked. "You do remember what happened the last time you cut her, right? Think of the damage you'll do to her if you mount Phyla on the blade and complete Thieron."

"So, what, she'll be scared of it? I'm not a Reaper. Not yet... I don't have Death's swing on this kind of stuff."

"And yet, you practically disintegrated her," Soul replied, clearly amused. He irked me. He knew more than he was telling us, but I couldn't force it out of him. He'd drop bombshells when we least expected them. That was his *modus operandi*, and I had already gotten used to it. "She knows better than to take you on again."

I felt my brows pull into a frown. "What do you think she'll do, then?"

He thought about it for a moment, then offered a shrug. "No clue whatsoever. I've only met her once, so..."

"She might come after us," Amelia suggested. "The killable ones, I mean."

"Brendel just killed his father, and Taeral is still going after Phyla. I doubt killing us, too, will make a difference," Raphael said, crossing his arms as he leaned back into his seat.

"So, the bottom line is that we have no idea what Brendel will do, only that she'll stop at nothing," I grumbled. "Great. Another dollop of potentially deadly unknowns."

Seeley shot me a half-smile. "That's usually the fun part."

"You sound a little too much like Soul right now," Widow retorted.

"Don't insult me," Seeley said, prompting Soul to put on an offended pout.

"Hey, I can hear you. I'm right here, fellas."

Kabbah chuckled, running a hand through Fallon's dark hair. "It doesn't matter. We need to get to Aledras first. Whatever security Brendel had around Yahwen, rest assured it'll be doubled or tripled for Aledras. She's hanging by a thread, now. She thought she had it all neatly wrapped up, ready for her to unravel. You've been a massive thorn in her side, Taeral. Getting Phyla will probably hurt."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of encouragement?" I quipped, training my mind to steer clear of my father. The grief was difficult to deal with, but I needed a clear head for this. There was no room for errors of any kind.

"No one's ever stood up to Brendel like this, besides Death," Kabbah replied. "I'm not one to speak lightly, so I mean it when I say you and your friends have proven yourselves to be truly worthy adversaries. Personally, I wouldn't want to be your antagonist, ever. You may not have my power, but dammit, you're a resourceful bunch, and that in itself can be a deadly weapon."

Despite the fear and the pain I'd been carrying with me since the beginning of this ordeal, I couldn't help but feel emboldened by Kabbah's words. Glancing around, I quickly realized I wasn't the only one feeling like this. Varga was beaming. Eva was all smiles, her chin up and proud. Amelia stifled a grin of her own, while Raphael's chest swelled. Herakles and Riza exchanged sparkling glances, and Lumi gave me a confident wink.

"He's right, you know," the swamp witch said. Next to her, Nethissis nodded her approval. "We're giving Brendel a run for her money. Maybe we'll lose in the end, though I sincerely hope we don't, but at least we're making her sweat a little."

Soon enough, Aledras's planetary system would glimmer ahead. There would be Hermessi there, orbiting the planet, ready to intercept us. Chances were we'd be pummeled into oblivion if we didn't stick to our incursion plan. But one thing was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Brendel had done too much harm already. There was no way I'd walk out of this without Phyla in my hand. Absolutely no freaking way.

AMELIA

Throughout the journey, we went over all possible scenarios regarding Phyla. Where we might find it, what sort of resistance we'd encounter, what the challenge would imply. For the latter, we frequently looked to Soul and Widow for counsel, but they both refused to go into detail. They wouldn't even tell us what the Phantom's ability was.

"It'll ruin the fun," Soul claimed, only half joking.

As we approached Aledras and Yahwen's solar system, I could feel my nerves tightening and putting a dent in my otherwise unbreakable resolve. I thoroughly disliked not knowing what we were getting ourselves into, especially after Soul's puzzle rooms. Widow had already broken us with Acantha's sacrifice, but I worried the Phantom would be worse than the first two challenges combined.

"We're not here to have fun," I said, scowling at Soul. It did not faze him. Not even a bit. "We're here to save the freaking world."

"Sorry, I wasn't specific. It'll ruin the fun for me," he replied.

I glanced at Widow. "Do you feel the same way?"

"Free Reapers or not, we're bound by a code of honor," Widow replied. "We only speak of our own affairs and abilities. We chose to come with you in order to keep the Hermessi away while you take on the Thieron challenges. We're not here to make it easier for you. Perhaps you don't understand our reasoning, but maybe someday you will."

Lumi shook her head slowly. "They want us to figure things out on our own. Even now, they're testing us. They'll never tell us about the Phantom, not until after we deal with him ourselves."

"Her," Soul interjected.

"Huh?" I asked, frowning.

"The Phantom. We usually refer to the Phantom as a female," he explained.

Widow sighed. "Though we're not entirely sure ourselves."

"Huh? How can you not know?" Raphael blurted. "Or is the Phantom covered up from top to bottom, so you can't tell?"

Soul and Widow exchanged glances. Soul chuckled bitterly. "I guess you could say that."

I rubbed my face, frustration testing me again. "This is why I don't like you, Soul. Your ambiguity drives people up the wall."

"I second that," Taeral cut in, one eyebrow raised. "You love riddles. It's annoying."

Soul grinned, bright and serene, definitely proud of himself. "Puzzles, too, if you didn't already notice. And yes, I'm annoying. I'm cold. I'm a functioning psychopath, as you like to say. And I wouldn't change a thing about it. I embrace it, in fact. Wanna know why?"

"Pray tell. I'm dying to understand how you're so happy with being an absolute ass—" Herakles shot back, but Riza cut him off.

"Ass. Just ass. An absolute ass."

"I was going to go deeper than that, but okay," Herakles grumbled.

"When you're staring eternity in the face, you have room to grow. To experiment. To try different personalities. People are born, they live, and they die around you. Over and over again. It never changes. The seasons are on a loop. Life itself is on a loop. It springs, it develops, it dies. It springs once more, it develops, it dies. And so on. After millions of years, or maybe billions, even, the only thing that matters to me is that I'm comfortable with myself. I am the only constant. Everything else around me lives and dies, but I'm basically eternal. If I don't like who I am, I change. But then, I get bored. So I change again. I've tried on different personalities, you know. I tried to be good. I was evil at one point, too. Pure evil."

Widow laughed. "Right. I remember that. You were the demise of an entire planet."

"Right. Gormon, from the In-Between's early days," Soul replied, then shifted focus back to me. "Point being, my darling Amelia, it doesn't matter what I'm like. I'm not here to please you, and I'm certainly not here for you to like me. You'll die someday. Maybe in a hundred years, or in ten thousand years. You'll die, and I'll still be around. So, yeah. I'm pleased with myself. It's who I chose to be. You should try that sometime. It's almost cathartic."

Nethissis smiled, downright fascinated. Not that I could blame her. Despite the animosity, I, too, found the Reapers interesting. In a way, I thought they had more in common with vampires than with anyone else. We also treaded between the living and the dead, in a certain sense. Never truly belonging anywhere, looking at forever ahead. "And Death was okay with you behaving like that?" she asked.

Soul shrugged. "We don't operate on notions of right or wrong. I called myself evil to make it easier for you to understand, but I don't care for such moral constructs. And neither does Death. She always thought we were best left alone, to learn and discover ourselves and the constantly changing world around us. The later generations of Reapers are more or less mindless drones—"

"Hey!" Seeley snapped. "Not cool."

"—but we were pure. The First Ten, at least. We're pure products of Death. We have distinct personalities and abilities. We use them selectively, as Death allows us, or solely based on our whims, too. I might save your ass today and drown it tomorrow, and there's nothing you can do about it. Free will, shall we call it?" Soul continued, ignoring Seeley's narrowed eyes.

This was an interesting exchange. Soul was basically telling us not to trust him or any

of his colleagues. Their allegiance was only to Death and to themselves. We didn't really matter. Their support could easily veer into an offensive, and they didn't need a reason to turn on us.

It was a chilling thought, knowing that these Reapers could become our enemies overnight. But tomorrow had yet to arrive. They were still our friends today. Maybe that was the point of it all. Enjoying the present. Seizing the moment because we didn't know what the future might bring. After all, what was friendship and loyalty to a Reaper, whose sole purpose had been to collect the souls of the dead? And what was friendship and loyalty to a Reaper who'd spent millions of years bound to an object like Thieron? They didn't think like us, so it made sense not to expect much from them. I decided I was better off feeling grateful that we had them on our side today.

"We're approaching Aledras," Lumi announced.

We could see the entire system open up before us. Perfect marbles in shades of green, blue, white, and orange, orbiting a massive star. It was likely five or six times bigger than Earth's sun, and its light stretched out, casting the planets around it into daytime.

"There's a welcoming committee," Nethissis added, clicking her teeth.

Taeral looked at Kabbah. "Where are our friends?"

"Give them a moment," he replied, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He closed his glowing green eyes for a few seconds, taking deep breaths. The air around him rippled and hummed. I figured it was the most I'd see from a Hermessi calling out to his allies, telepathically, from the body of a vampire-fae like Fallon. When he opened his eyes again, he gave us a satisfied nod. "And here we go."

There were dozens of hostiles orbiting Aledras. Fire, Earth, Water, and Air Hermessi alike, summoned by Brendel to defend Phyla. Yahwen was practically next door, also heavily guarded by elementals. We'd already abandoned the idea of destroying it, thus rendering the oldest twenty-planet system mythos undoable. The Hermessi were guarding the entire cluster, and we didn't have the firepower needed to obliterate a planet under these conditions. It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but, since the Hermessi's influence over the fae had grown, so had their power.

Our only choice remained with Thieron, and Brendel wasn't going to make that easy. From the looks of it, in fact, we were looking at a vicious fight ahead. The Hermessi looked like angry comets, with fiery tails and enough speed to skewer our interplanetary bubble, if they took aim.

"This isn't very encouraging," I murmured, staring at the view beyond the shuttle's windshield.

The Hermessi quickly abandoned their positions and flew toward our interplanetary bubble spell. Nethissis and Lumi touched the hand panels, which lit up white and engaged the serium batteries. From this point onward, the swamp witches had to steer the spell and protect it from the Hermessi. We didn't have a sample from Aledras to establish our destination, after all. The spell was taking us to Yahwen, Aledras's neighbor. So we needed the witches to get us to our actual destination. Once the atmosphere was breached, the spell would wear off and Varga would take over the shuttle.

"They're picking up speed," Varga said, his gaze fixed on the hostiles.

They came at us like interstellar missiles, shooting through the cosmos at incredible speeds, eager to break us down into the tiniest of particles. Kabbah chuckled. "Yeah, but we're not alone anymore," he replied.

From behind us, dozens of rebel Hermessi bolted forward in formations of five to eight elementals. They were just as powerful and determined, since we'd taken their children to safety in The Shade. The tables had turned, and we were no longer the helpless wisps of a dying civilization. We were strong. We were determined. And we had allies who would stop at nothing until we got Thieron back in Death's hands.

The clash was frightening and spectacular. Thousands of miles ahead, the rebel and the ritual Hermessi rammed into one another, causing colorful explosions to burst outward. The shockwaves that followed bumped into our spell bubble, which Nethissis and Lumi fought hard to steer downward.

"Everybody, hold on!" Lumi shouted. "It's about to get really bright and intense."

I knew exactly what she meant. The Hermessi were relentless in their attacks, but our allies were equally determined. They didn't give the guardians of Aledras a second to come after us. Our spell bubble descended and moved past the warzone, where the elementals pummeled one another. The violence erupted in orange, blue, green, and white starbursts. Sparks flew, expanding in disks of light and raw energy, as the Hermessi waged their battle.

My heart thudded, wrestling against my ribcage. My pulse raced like a furious eastern wind through the valleys of The Shade. But Raphael took hold of my hand and refused to let go. I looked at him, momentarily losing myself in the tranquility of his peculiar eyes, one green and one blue. He smiled. "Quite the welcoming party, don't you think?" he asked, his voice low.

I knew he was as worried and as scared as I was... as we all were. But Raphael wasn't the type to show it. No, he sat up straight, his chin up, his gaze stern as he looked beyond the windshield.

Following his focus, I turned my head and saw Aledras growing bigger and bigger as we approached it. Lumi's voice made me all giddy. "We did it," she said. "We got past them."

"Told you. Ramin is a Hermessi of his word," Kabbah replied. Indeed, Ramin had promised he'd assist, and, since the children had been taken from Brendel, many of the rebels she'd swayed into her service had turned against her once more. "Every day, more Hermessi join our ranks. Our resistance has never been stronger."

"That being said, we have no laurels to rest on," Lumi warned. "Some will make their way back to Aledras as soon as they get their chance. And I have a feeling the local Hermessi will be looking for us, as well."

Varga got up and took his position by the control panel, next to Lumi and Nethissis. "That's fine," he said. "This shuttle is fast and has cloaking functions, plus we have Devil's Weed crammed into every damn nook and cranny."

Aledras was beautiful, even before we breached its atmosphere. We could tell from the colored streaks that it had a healthy climate and a good balance between land and

water. We'd yet to see beyond that, but I was definitely curious.

Kabbah winced from some kind of discomfort. "Our allies are taking serious hits, but they're holding the enemy back. We should hurry."

"The spell is fast enough," Lumi replied. "We're doing our best here."

And we could all tell. Beads of sweat dripped down her temples and cheeks. Nethissis was panting, drawing energy from the serium batteries and channeling it into the spell. The destination had been set for Yahwen, so it took a considerable amount of effort for the swamp witches to pull away from it and drive us into Aledras, instead.

The atmospheric breach was the hardest part. The interplanetary spell bubble trembled and groaned its way through. Even the shuttle seemed affected, its metal frame creaking and protesting against tremendous amounts of pressure. But we did it. We pulled through, and I breathed a sigh of relief, even though it was only the beginning of our third quest.

"I think you can disable the spell now," Eva suggested. "Varga can put the shuttle into camouflage and fly us wherever we need to go."

Lumi nodded once and whispered a spell designed to disrupt the travel bubble. She gripped Nethissis's hand, and Nethissis joined her in uttering the last lines. The faint sheet of light that had surrounded us faded away as Varga switched the shuttle's ignition levers. Suddenly, the vessel roared to life, its grumble quickly shifting into a soft, barely audible hum.

"It functions on a combination of serium and solar power," Eva explained. "We needed a discreet mode of transportation."

Herakles giggled. "Well, look at you, future Lady of the Lamias, so well-versed in flight technology."

Eva blushed, giving Varga a quick smile. "I learned from the best."

Varga had spent the better part of the year training with some of GASP's most experienced pilots. He'd tested different planes and shuttles, both on and off the planet. If there was anyone on our crew I fully trusted with manning this vessel, it was Varga. I also found Eva adorable. She'd been learning things she wouldn't have otherwise, just by spending all her time with Varga. Who said romance doesn't have an educational application, huh?

"Whoa. Would you look at that," Eira gasped, her eyes wide as she stared ahead.

I could easily see why she was already in awe of this place. Aledras was stunning, and then some. "It's like a dream world," I murmured, taking it all in.

The oceans were wide and dark blue, with islands sprinkled across. The continents weren't that big, but there were at least twelve of them, from what I could see. And they were all green, lush with life and deep forests that went on for miles and miles. The beaches were golden and sandy, foamy waves lazily lapping at them.

As we descended farther, the truly astonishing details came into focus. The entire planet was inhabited, but in a way that didn't seem to disturb the environment at all. Cities were built above the tall forests and around the giant lakes, always at least fifty feet off the ground, supported by what had to be a heavy and complicated pillar system. We couldn't see them from above, which made them look like floating cities. Every single

settlement was constructed from white marble or shimmering stone. Towers reached for the clear sky—thousands of them, slim and pointed, slightly iridescent mother-of-pearl guardians overlooking their cities.

There were bridges and suspended roads made of white stone connecting every settlement. The end result was truly spectacular on each continent—a conglomerate of white cities interconnected by equally white roads, as if the spider-web of an extraordinary civilization had stretched over this world, respectfully coexisting with the never-ending forests. The bridges crossed entire oceans, dozens linking continents and cities all over Aledras.

"This is the least obtrusive civilization I have ever seen," Lumi said. "And I've visited my fair share over the course of ten thousand years."

Soul sighed. "You should've seen the Mathusians," he replied. "A small planet about six galaxies away from the Witches' Sanctuary."

"Back in the Supernatural Dimension?" I asked.

He nodded. "Mm-hm. Their cities were literally suspended. They'd discovered magnetism and its applications rather early on. By the time I found them, more than ten million years ago and before I was bound to Zetos, they were already significantly more developed than any other world in that dimension."

"What happened to them? Do they still exist?" Riza asked, her amethyst eyes twinkling with curiosity. I could almost hear the travel plans swooshing through her mind.

"Nope. A comet rammed into their planet, and they were wiped out of existence," Soul replied. Widow chuckled at his side. "They didn't have space flight technology. They saw the thing coming, and they couldn't do anything about it."

"You're a downer," Raphael muttered.

"Reality is a downer," Soul replied dryly.

"You could've helped them," I said.

"Oh, spare me the self-righteous crap," Soul shot back. "Life is tough. Some make it, some don't. I have no place messing with the laws of the universe, and neither should you. Besides, I didn't know of any space flight technology at the time, and I wasn't allowed to intervene, anyway. They were doomed. They died. End of story. Stop shoving your imagined guilt down my throat."

My cheeks burned. He made a good point, as much as I disliked him. We couldn't save everyone, and neither could he. We'd taken it upon ourselves to do it, but it wasn't right of us to expect the same from him. He was a Reaper. Not a GASP officer. Not a hero of any kind.

"Are we not messing with the laws of the universe now, though?" Eva asked, slightly amused. "Gathering pieces of Thieron for Death and whatnot?"

Seeley smirked. "Technically speaking, we're helping restore the laws of the universe, which the Hermessi have been tampering with. There's a difference."

I had a hard time focusing now. I simply could not look away from the beauty of Aledras. All that pristine white, carefully constructed above the emerald forests, the sapphire lakes, and the tourmaline oceans, across the golden strips of desert and the ruby mountainsides. This place was the crown jewel of its solar system. Artificial and

natural architecture had met each other halfway, creating a truly stunning world.

"I'm dying to know what the people are like here," I said. "I mean, you've got to be some kind of superior species to come up with this system, right?"

"Probably," Taeral replied. "I think we'll get our chance, soon enough."

He got up from his seat with incomplete-Thieron in his hand. Only then did I notice the intensifying glow that had taken over the sculpted handle and the blade.

"I take it we're close?" Varga asked, looking at the scythe, his hands firmly grasping the shuttle's flight controls.

Taeral pointed ahead. "Keep to the north. It's somewhere down there."

At least we had two thirds of Thieron telling us that we were on the right track. But I had to admit that I was feeling more uneasy now than earlier, before we'd breached Aledras's atmosphere.

"Guys, gals... Reapers... has anyone noticed something weird?" I asked, my voice uneven as I got up and walked over to Varga, Taeral, Lumi, and Nethissis.

"Define weird," Soul said. "We've got different kinds of it in this shuttle alone."

"Where's Brendel?" I replied.

That was a good question. I knew it. They knew it, too. And no one had an answer. Yes, we'd slipped past the guardian Hermessi with the help of our allied elementals. And sure, we had incomplete-Thieron guiding us toward Phyla. We had Devil's Weed on us, too. But even so, we should've seen some sign of Brendel or ground-based Hermessi at least reacting to our arrival before Varga had switched on the shuttle's camouflage.

I'd expected more opposition upon reaching the planet. Not less.

And it was a tad disconcerting.

Violence in outer space was chilling, but perhaps not as frightful as close combat. Watching the Hermessi go after one another had been quite the thrill, but I knew how it would eventually end. One or more of them might die, regardless of their allegiance, leaving their worlds vulnerable to accelerated extinction unless their children ascended in their place.

However, such efforts would be futile before retrieving Thieron and stopping the ritual. We were so close to the end now. What sense would it make to give the people of one planet or another a day or two more, when Brendel was just around the corner, looking forward to wiping them all out at once?

Down here, on Aledras, it was calm and beautiful. But the smell of danger thickened the air. Above, we could see lights glimmering in the clear blue sky—mere traces of the ongoing battle between the Hermessi. Below, the cities unraveled in pure white... quiet, ignorant to our existence.

"I don't like this," Taeral started, as Varga piloted the shuttle. He was paying close attention to incomplete-Thieron's intensifying glow. "She should be here. Brendel should be here."

"Maybe she is, and we're just not seeing her yet," Raphael replied.

"What if she's back near Eritopia, looking for another way into the Earthly Dimension?" Amelia asked, then quickly changed her mind. "No, that's not right. She'd never leave other Hermessi to handle us and Phyla. Not with everything that's at stake."

Herakles exhaled. "What are the odds that we did things right, this time? We've got enough Hermessi on our side to tackle the hostiles. We're practically invisible with the shuttle and nearly impossible to detect with the Devil's Weed. Maybe we'll have an easier time with getting Phyla than we did with Eirexis and Zetos."

"Let us not fool ourselves," Lumi replied. "Brendel is cunning, and she always seems to have a plan B in motion, at every turn. Her stint in The Shade was proof of that. Phyla is the last piece of the challenge, and chances are it'll be the hardest to get to, not necessarily because of the Phantom but because of what measures Brendel might've already taken to stop us from reaching it."

"We'll have to wait and see," Nethissis chimed in. "But I do agree with Amelia. Brendel wouldn't miss this for the world. I think we'll see her again soon enough."

Chances were that Brendel, too, had learned from our previous encounters. Showing up with her Hermessi allies and pink water monsters had not been enough to stop us. We'd still gotten Eirexis and Zetos, despite her opposition. If Brendel wanted to get ahead of us on this one, she'd have to try something different. But we couldn't back down. We were in her crosshairs because we had no other choice but to try and retrieve Phyla. Our quest was straightforward. Her methods weren't.

"From the looks of it, I think we're headed for what must be the capital city," Taeral said, glancing ahead.

Before us, a massive structure opened up in the heart of a giant cluster of white buildings, mother-of-pearl towers, and swirling alleyways. Most of the houses didn't go above three floors, and there was beauty in the simplicity of their design. Spots of green adorned most of the streets, while flowers grew around the white metal streetlamps, just beneath the lights.

"What in the world is that?" Varga asked, pointing at the center of the city. It was the structure I'd already noticed, though I'd yet to understand its purpose. It consisted of hundreds of circular stairs with a shrinking diameter from the top to the bottom. At the city's level, it looked like a giant plaza, with people resting on the steps. It was pretty crowded, as many moved up and down.

Below, as the steps shrank, there was mostly darkness. I had a feeling it went all the way to the ground level, deep in the woods beneath the city. "We'll have to get closer to see," I said.

"I'll land us on the edge of the city," Varga replied. "There's a clear landing area on the southern outskirts."

He maneuvered the shuttle toward it, where the houses were smaller and more tightly huddled together along a network of narrow alleys. We made a safe and rather discreet landing, fortunate that there weren't any souls around.

As we got out of the ship, we marveled at the silence.

"We couldn't have been that inconspicuous," Nethissis said, closing the shuttle's bottom hatch. We'd packed everything we needed for this trip, pulverizer weapons and invisibility spells included.

Chewing on one of the latter and putting our red lenses on, we waited for Nethissis to cast an additional cloaking spell on the vessel, just in case. We trusted magic more than technology in these instances. The Reapers kept themselves visible only to us for the time being. That way we were all unseen but only to those outside our group.

"Where is everybody?" Raphael asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

We heard footsteps rushing out of the nearby houses and up the alleyways that led toward the city center. No longer visible, we followed the sounds. Soon enough, we found ourselves in awe of two distinct aspects of this world. First, the people. The Aledrasians were beautiful, almost ethereal, with long lilac hair and purple crystal eyes. They seemed like a fluid cross between jinn and fae, clad in silver and golden silks. There was no social distinction among them that I could see. There were no visibly richer or poorer Aledrasians. They all wore similar garments and minimalist jewels, moving in unison as they crowded the streets and headed for the city center.

"I think we should follow them," I whispered, following their gazes to the sky.

The second aspect came into focus. They were all surprised and intrigued by the lights rushing across the endless cerulean blue of Aledras's heavens. We knew those were the Hermessi, but from what we heard, the Aledrasians were convinced that the display was some kind of message from their gods.

"The lords are rising," one male Aledrasian said to his son. "We should go to the fountains, stay close to our lord's power for this."

"Oh, it's so exciting!" a female chimed in, joined by her sisters—I assumed they were sisters, given their glaring physical similarities. They shared the same sharp cheekbones and full lips, and they even matched their necklaces and bracelets, as if to gleefully declare that they were triplets, part of the same genetic set. "We've never seen anything like this before!"

"Do you think it's the gods?" one of her sisters asked, eyes wide with wonder.

She shrugged. "It must be! The legends are true, then, that the gods, the lords themselves, will descend upon Aledras. And we are alive to witness this!"

It took a lot of energy to stop myself from walking up to them and crushing their dreams with the harsh reality. But if there was one thing we'd learned in GASP, it was the respect we had to show toward other cultures, especially those who'd had no previous contact with our people. Even in these circumstances, we had to tread carefully. Some cultures were stiffer and much more fragile than others. Many didn't even believe there were other creatures alive beyond their world.

On top of that, we needed to keep a low profile in order to get as close to Phyla as possible. Hopefully, if we survived this mayhem, I might get a chance to travel here, someday, and engage these people in meaningful conversation. Today wasn't the right time for that.

"Stay close to the walls," Varga said slowly.

We kept a distance of about twenty feet from the nearest group of Aledrasians rushing into the city center. Many of them tripped and stumbled into one another, unable to look away from the lights in the sky. I had a feeling they weren't at all familiar with the Hermessi, which didn't come as a surprise. After all, most of the elementals had been dormant before last year's Blackout.

"I don't think they know about the Hermessi," I said.

"Not necessarily a bad thing," Soul replied, pursing his lips as he watched the Aledrasians hurry down the alley ahead.

This was a beautiful place. The air was clean and fresh, and flowers exploded in white marble pots at every window, along with the rosy blossoms that adorned the streetlamps. The people moved in a more or less orderly fashion, despite their gawking and tripping. There was a sense of a deeply rooted culture here, and I found it impressive.

There was balance and peace on Aledras. They didn't strike me as a warring nation. They respected nature and clearly had a soft spot for shiny things, including the very stone that built their cities.

The center was downright breathtaking. What we'd seen from the shuttle had barely scratched the surface. The plaza was enormous, with marble cubes neatly stuck together

in an outward spiral from the step structure in the middle and all the way to the artesian fountains that framed it. Hundreds of Aledrasians had already gathered here, their heads tilted as they wondrously stared at the glimmering sky.

Incomplete-Thieron was even brighter now. "We're really close," Taeral whispered, looking at it. He shifted focus to the step structure, from which more Aledrasians emerged, some holding their children's hands. "I think it's down there."

I moved closer to one father with his two daughters, who seemed downright ecstatic. "Daddy, is that how everyone feels when they get close to the god stone?" one of the girls asked, lilac curls framing her round, pearlescent face.

"Yes. Some of us feel its intensity deep in our tummies. How did you experience it, Lina?" the father replied, smiling at his second daughter.

Lina was worried. "Like monsters in my chest. It felt cold."

The father didn't like the sound of that. He knelt before her, hands gently squeezing her shoulders. She looked too small for the layers of silvery silk she'd been wrapped in, and the oversized belt around her waist didn't help. Little Lina didn't strike me as a regular Aledrasian, but rather a misfit of sorts. "It scared you?" her father asked.

She nodded. "It was so cold. Like Mommy when she went to sleep and never woke up."

"Nonsense! The god stone is warm and loving and full of sunlight!" her sister shot back, quite irritated. "We all feel that. You must be crazy!"

"I'm not, Mala!" Lina replied, pouting.

"Now, now. Don't be mean to your sister, Mala," the father said. "Lina is entitled to feel whatever she wants. The god stone won't judge her or think less of her."

Soul chuckled softly by my side. We'd stopped about ten feet away from the little sisters, the steps descending to our left. "I think Lina over there is going to become a Reaper after she dies," he said under his breath. "What she's describing is the true effect of Phyla. All Reapers feel it when it's near."

"Do you feel it now?" I asked him.

"Oh, yeah. It's like an iceberg growing inside you," Soul replied, giving Widow a nudge. "Isn't that right?"

"I can't say I like it," Widow hissed.

"No one really likes it," Seeley shot back. "It's a reminder that we'll never be alive again. Living as a Reaper can be good, especially for those of us who forget what we truly are. Phyla is famed among us for its effect. Even when mounted on Thieron, it reacts like this to the living, the dead, and those in-between."

"And Phyla is supposed to resurrect my father," Taeral whispered. "How does a stone with that kind of life-giving power feel so damn dead?"

Soul grinned at him. "I take it you share Lina's feelings, future Reaper?"

"Yeah." Taeral sighed. "It's like the joy of life is being sucked out of me. Literally."

"These people are worshipping Phyla," I concluded, moving away from the group and turning to face the steps. Below, it seemed endless. Hundreds of marble circles, each smaller than the one above. At the bottom, darkness reigned, and from it... I could feel the energy rippling upward. It tickled my senses, but it didn't fill me with the gloom that

Taeral and little Lina had described. I couldn't help but smile, thus knowing that I wouldn't become a Reaper myself after death. Hopefully, that event would take place much later than Brendel wanted. "They call it the god stone. It has to be Phyla."

"Two thirds of Thieron here might agree with you," Taeral replied.

Varga looked up at the sky. "They call those lords. Do you think the Aledrasians' mythology is in any way linked to the Hermessi?"

"I doubt it," Lumi replied. "There is absolutely no sign of Hermessi worship anywhere. Not a single symbol."

Eira nodded. "She's right. So far, every nation that has worshipped the Hermessi has used the same elemental symbols, which means that the Hermessi faith transcends all time and space, in a way. I think these people can simply sense Phyla's power, and they've built a mythology around it."

"And their city, too, it seems," Raphael cut in, pointing at the steps. "I'm willing to bet that's the dead center of the capital, right here."

"Phyla's down there for sure," Taeral said, noticing how incomplete-Thieron got brighter with each step he took toward the descending structure. "Beyond any doubt. We found it."

Raphael took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Which brings me back to our earlier gut-twisting question: Where the hell is Brendel?"

Still a good question, I thought, to which no answer had revealed itself. Our only way was down, from here. Phyla was at the bottom, likely embedded in the forest floor where Brendel had dropped it almost five million years ago. There was no way she'd let us get to it, but she was nowhere to be found.

As much as I loathed hoping she wouldn't show up, part of me was actively engaged in that exact thought. What if Brendel was being held up somewhere? What if this was our best chance to get Phyla, undisturbed by that lunatic?

Without giving it a second thought, I rushed down the steps. I had no intention of standing here waiting for Brendel. No. The time to act was now, no matter what fate threw back at us. We needed Phyla. We needed to survive.

"Eva, wait!" Varga whispered after me.

Smiling, I motioned for him to follow. "Come on. No point in waiting around for the queen of crazy to show up!"

The rest of the crew was quick to agree. Soon enough, we were all racing toward the bottom, one marble step at a time. My mind was engaged in a single, principal thought: Phyla. The last item we needed to secure a future for ourselves and every other living creature in two of the universe's dimensions. For Varga and me. For my uptight mother. For little Lina and Mala, too. They deserved better than what Brendel had in store for them.

TAERAL

Eva was right. There was no point in waiting for Brendel to show up, nor was it healthy to waste any time wondering where she was or what she was plotting. What mattered was that we were here, now, and Phyla was within our reach.

We made our way down the stairs, unseen and quiet, listening to the people around us. From what I could tell, most of them had been admiring the stone below, but they were currently distracted by the murmurs coming from above. They climbed the steps, heading for the plaza so they could see what all the fuss was about.

"Kaffi looks pretty," a little Aledrasian boy told his mother. "It felt so warm and soft standing so close to it!"

She smiled down at him, then took his hand and helped him up the steps. The boy was only a few years old, not tall enough to move as fast as she could on this structure. "Kaffi gives us light and kindness, my dear," she said. "It's a gift from the lords above."

"She means Phyla," Eira whispered to me, as we descended past the mother and son. "They're calling it Kaffi. I heard a few more using the same name."

Few Aledrasians were left on the bottom half of the step structure. It got colder and darker, but lights began to emerge from beneath the white marble stairs. I stopped for a moment, just to take it all in. The Aledrasians had accomplished quite the architectural feat here. The steps were basically marble rings, flat and positioned on top of one another. Metal rods kept them in place, but there was some other gravitational force at play here, which stopped the entire complex from wobbling.

As the natural light dimmed, I could see the forests clearly between the marble steps. Streaks of deep green and floral splotches here and there. I could hear birds' trills not far from here. Rustling through the tree crowns... Nature was serene and tranquil here, just beneath the city.

"I think I see the bottom," Eva said, farther down than most of us.

We passed the last Aledrasians as they headed back up to the plaza. Personally, I was in sheer awe of them, genuinely impressed by how these people had built their cities and developed their culture. Lumi was right. There was no sign of Hermessi worship from what we'd seen, but the Aledrasians seemed to have spun their own tale around Phyla. It spoke of kindness and warmth, balance and spirituality. The very opposite of what the Hermessi had come to represent. It also broke my heart to think that, within days, this

entire civilization could be swiftly and mercilessly removed from existence. It just wasn't right.

Darkness dwelled at the bottom of the stairs, but the closer we got, the more step lights came on. They were pressure-sensitive, it seemed. Whenever my boot reached a stair, a gentle white light beamed from beneath. I worried the nearby Aledrasians might notice this, but they all had their gazes fixed on the top of the structure and the sky above it, too busy to spot the steps lighting up, seemingly on their own.

"There it is," Soul muttered, pointing at a shimmering glass bell nestled right at the bottom in the last circular step. The structure got narrower down here, allowing no more than twenty people to stand around the glass bell. Beyond, I could see Phyla.

"Oh, wow," I heard myself murmur, my gaze fixed on the very thing that had brought us all the way here.

Phyla was beautiful and simple. A perfect sphere, black yet iridescent, with thousands of colors flickering across its polished surface. It hovered inside the glass bell, though it appeared to be motionless. And I felt the chill running up my spine, spreading through my arms and legs, before rushing back to clutch my heart so tightly, I worried it might get crushed. The coldness I'd experienced earlier was merely a blip compared to how I responded to Phyla now.

And only because I would someday become a Reaper. Fascinating, how the universe worked, filled with sensations and little details that made all the difference between some kind of afterlife and an inevitable eternity.

"Phyla..." Lumi managed, her eyes wide. The blue rings around her white irises lit up, as if her swamp witch being was resonating with the stone.

We were all speechless. Muted before Phyla. It demanded our full attention, our adoration... our everything. It had been here for over four million years, hovering just a few inches above the ground, unwilling to hide itself. The world had built itself around it, and Death had no idea that it had been on Aledras this whole time. Amazing.

Glancing around, I noticed the many tree trunks that guarded the bottom half of the step structure. They reminded me of The Shade's redwood forest, just as tall and imposing. It was quiet, as if nature itself was reverent before Phyla.

"I'm still intrigued by the fact that the Aledrasians have no idea what they've been living with," Amelia said, a smile stretching across her lips. She gave Raphael a brief, soft glance. "We did it. We found it."

"Look at how the light plays on it," Nethissis replied, unable to contain her admiration. She stood closest to the glass bell, her hand slowly reaching out to touch it.

Seeley caught Nethissis's hand in his, gently pulling the young swamp witch back. "Hold on. We don't know what the glass does, just yet." A split-second later, he broke physical contact, his fingers trembling, ever so slightly. No one noticed, not even Nethissis, but I'd caught it and, judging by the briefly startled look on his face, so had Seeley.

"Surely, it's some kind of protection," Riza said. "It's the Aledrasians' most precious object. They wouldn't want anyone touching it."

Herakles chuckled. "Oh, no Aledrasian would want to touch it. Remember, if you touch

it, you activate the Phantom's challenge. Imagine how many people must've died this way, before they realized it should be kept under the glass."

The mere thought made me shudder. After what we'd already been through with Widow and Soul's nearly crippling challenges, I could only imagine what the Phantom's entailed and what it must've done to the ignorant few who'd likely tried to touch it.

"I'm willing to bet some of the early Aledrasians definitely tried to get their hands on it," Raphael replied, stifling his bitter amusement.

"It wouldn't have ended well," Soul chimed in, grinning like a true devil. He seemed to enjoy this particular conversation. He was partial to other people's suffering. However, as he'd said earlier, Soul was who he wanted to be. There was no point in judging him or urging him to change his ways. All we could do was take advantage of his support, for who knew how long we'd have it, anyway? "The Phantom is a force to be reckoned with."

"Do you know what her challenge is about?" I asked him.

He shook his head, but the faint smile he displayed made me doubt his sincerity. Soul had a way of speaking in half-truths, enough to get the likes of me confused. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. It's not my place to disclose such information. It's not Widow's, either."

"Whatever it is, it can't be worse than what you did to us," Amelia muttered, scowling at Soul, then at Widow. "You both hurt us in ways we'll never truly recover from."

Widow lowered his head. "If you think it'll be easier with the Phantom, you're in for a gruesome disappointment."

"It doesn't matter," I said, interrupting the cold staring competition between the members of my crew and the Reapers. Seeley nodded his agreement. "We're here now, and we have Phyla right in front of us. This is what will save my father, and this is what will save all of us. Our worlds, our people... everyone."

Seeley stepped forward, cocking his head as he glanced at Phyla for a moment. "This will go on Zetos, won't it?" he asked.

"It powers the blade, yes," Widow replied.

"It gives true death and true life," Soul added. Both ancient Reapers gazed at Phyla with what I could only describe as adoration. They worshipped it, perhaps more than the Aledrasians ever would. Maybe it was because they knew and understood its purpose, its value, more than any living creature could.

"Okay. So, what now?" I asked, mere inches from the glass bell. Incomplete-Thieron was glowing white with an intensity I'd never seen before. I risked temporary blindness just by looking at it.

Soul shrugged. "You go in. I doubt the Phantom will let any Reapers into the challenge, much like I kept Widow and Seeley out."

"What will you do?" Amelia asked.

Kabbah frowned. "They'll stay out here with me. Someone needs to protect you all from the Hermessi. It's only a matter of time before—"

Screams tore through the plaza high above. Distant booms echoed. The entire city rumbled, and we could hear the pandemonium unraveling. I didn't need to imagine what was happening. I already knew, and I'd seen it before. Innocent creatures were being

attacked and killed by the Hermessi, who'd finally made it to the surface of Aledras.

"They're here," Kabbah continued. "They'll come straight for us. It's better if I defend you, along with the Reapers."

My heart thudded nervously as I realized what would soon happen. The Hermessi were coming for us, and they were ready to kill and maim anyone who stood in their way, including the Aledrasians, who had no idea we were down here, in the first place.

Being unable to help them tore me apart on the inside, but I couldn't go up there now. Phyla was right here, waiting to be claimed. We'd come too far to let the Hermessi distract us from our core objective.

I gave Kabbah and the Reapers a brief and thankful nod. "We'll try to move as fast as we can, I promise."

"Be careful," Soul said. "Nothing is what it seems with the Phantom. That's all I can tell you. Whatever happens next, remember that," he added, and pointed a finger at Amelia. "You're the brainy one. So make sure you keep it in mind. Repeat it to yourself as often as you can. Nothing is what it seems."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Amelia asked, genuinely confused.

"Come on, let's go," Raphael said, and took her hand in his.

The crew made sure they were physically linked. A second later, I teleported them inside the glass bell. Phyla was in the middle, as we surrounded it. In here, it felt even more intense. The winter winds blew through me. My pulse raced and faltered at times. My skin rippled with goose bumps, as I understood the power infused into this spherical gemstone. I found it increasingly hard to breathe around it.

Outside the glass bell, trouble loomed. We saw the bodies of several Aledrasians tumbling down the upper steps, until they came to a halt, lifeless and bloody. Fireballs of elemental colors rushed down toward us, flickering angrily as they sought us. Kabbah, Seeley, Soul and Widow revealed themselves, their backs to us as they surrounded the glass enclosure and prepared for what would likely be a violent and bloody attack.

"I think you need to touch Phyla," Lumi advised me. "And do it quickly, before..." Her voice trailed off. An orange light caught her attention, somewhere to our right. Fire seeped through the bottom steps, like liquid flames of amber, until it built up into a familiar, blazing figure. "Crap. Brendel."

She'd made it. Had she been waiting for us to get down here? Had she been running late, for some reason? Frankly, I had no interest in knowing. Phyla was within my reach, and Kabbah was quick to try and intercept her. Brendel wasn't going to stop us now.

"Don't do it, Taeral," Brendel said. Kabbah's hands lit up green, emerald fireballs forming and spinning in his palms. "You can't stop me. I won't let you."

"Too late," I replied, my hand shooting for Phyla.

The other Hermessi darted down the steps, but the Reapers cast ample defensive spells against them with their scythes and Death magic. Kabbah hurled two fireballs at Brendel, but she slipped past him and through the glass bell.

My throat closed up in terror. I hadn't seen this coming. I hadn't thought she could do this. Phyla was supposed to be warded against her. What's happening here?

But it was, indeed, too late. My fingers were already wrapped around Phyla. But

nothing was activated.

My crew and I moved closer together, and I kept my hand on the sphere. Brendel stood in front of us, inches from Phyla. I couldn't see her expression, but dread was already freezing my blood vessels.

We were inside the glass bell, with hell itself breaking loose outside, while both Phyla and I were within Brendel's reach. She couldn't kill me, and she couldn't take Phyla... but there was all kinds of other damage she could inflict upon us.

Why isn't Phyla doing anything, dammit?!

TAERAL

"*I* was wondering when you'd show up," I said, my tone flat and unwelcoming.

Brendel didn't move. It scared me the most. I would've expected an instant attack, but all she did was stand, right in front of me, while I desperately held Phyla and nothing happened... I felt incomplete-Thieron humming against my thigh, but that was all I was getting in terms of mystical and Deathly reactions. It wasn't enough. There was supposed to be more.

"Come out here and face me!" Kabbah snarled at her, banging his fists against the glass bell.

Brendel just glanced at him, her voice smooth and relaxed. "See? There's a downside to wearing a body to amplify your powers, Kabbah. The vampire-fae body won't let you in without a teleporter. And if you leave Fallon's body behind to come at me, one of the other Hermessi will take over before the poor boy can even object, while you will be considerably less powerful and pretty much on the same level with me. You don't want that, do you, Kabbah? You want strength, so you can try and kill me. It must be sad for you."

Everything she said was painfully true, and Kabbah knew it. A muscle ticked nervously in his jaw as he gave me a frustrated nod. "Good luck, boy."

"Thanks," I whispered, as he turned around and focused his elemental power against the incoming Hermessi. The entities hurled themselves at him—large spheres of raw energy—but Kabbah cast his green fireballs in return, delivering consistent and considerable damage among them. The Reapers helped as well, drawing protective symbols with their scythes along the marble steps. Widow took the occasional break to throw energy pulses at the Hermessi, while Soul split open several interdimensional holes and pushed some of the elementals inside. They'd be gone for some time, the enemy's numbers now slightly thinned.

But nothing that Seeley, Soul, Widow, and Kabbah did would in any way help me or my friends. Brendel was inside the glass bell with us, watching me intently. I could feel the fire burning in my throat.

I took incomplete-Thieron out, keeping one hand on Phyla. I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to pull it back, anyway. It was as if I'd been fused to the damn thing, even though nothing else was happening. "You know how much damage I can do with this," I

said. "You can see me holding Phyla, right now. You can't be foolish enough to think you can stop us. I told you. You're too late."

"Am I, though?" Brendel replied. "You can't kill me with just two thirds of Thieron. Sure, you can hurt me, but I'm slightly more experienced now than when we last met on the battlefield. Also, it seems to me like Phyla is the one holding you, not the other way around. I admit, I've seen the occasional Aledrasian trying to touch it, but no one got stuck to it like you. I fear it's not a good sign, Taeral. And last, but certainly not least, I'm not late. I took my time."

"Why?" I asked. "Why take your time, when you knew I was coming here?"

"A better question to ask is why the hell isn't Phyla reacting?" Lumi hissed, her skin glimmering in shades of pearl and amber. The Word was quite responsive in Brendel's presence, as if it had finally understood what was at stake. It was displaying its magical strength before the most dangerous of the Hermessi. Better late than never, I thought.

"I don't know. But, I admit, it's a pleasant surprise. I thought I might have to wrestle you for it," Brendel said, sounding downright amused.

"You can't touch Phyla," I replied.

"No, but I can touch you, your friends, and everyone you've ever loved. I think I've already shown you what I can do and how I retaliate. And yet, here you are, being stupid. Your father's death wasn't enough, Taeral? Shall I go ahead and kill Amelia, Raphael, Riza, Herakles, Varga, and Eva, too? What about Nethissis? I know Lumi and Eira are untouchable, but the rest of your crew isn't. Or are you more responsive when the lives of complete strangers are at stake? Should I perhaps burn Aledras and everyone on it to the ground, for you to understand that opposing me is futile?"

Fury burst through me like relentless wildfire. The chills that Phyla had sent through me were melting, and anger soared, tickling every nerve ending in my body as I gave Brendel a hard, dry smile.

"The Aledrasians and everyone I care for will die, either way," I said. "If not today, at your hands, it'll be tomorrow, or the day after, or whenever you and your cohorts get the five million fae you need for your ritual. Unless I complete Thieron and have Death stop you."

"They don't have to die," she murmured, so softly I almost didn't catch it.

"What?" I asked, my hand gripping incomplete-Thieron so tightly, my knuckles turned white. I wanted to hit her, just enough to disable her. But I needed her focused away from the scythe. I needed to keep Brendel talking until I could raise my weapon and cut her. It wouldn't kill her, but it would disable her for long enough for us to figure out what the hell was wrong with Phyla. I worried Brendel was right. I'd tried to pull Phyla back, but it wouldn't even budge. Something was off here.

"I can spare these worlds you're so desperate to save," Brendel said. "If you all bow before us. If you all worship the Hermessi."

Silence settled inside the glass bell. I hadn't expected this.

"Is this some kind of trick?" Riza asked.

Brendel shook her head. "No trick. I've consulted with my brethren. We will have all the power we want through the ritual. Once it's completed, I'm sure we'll be able to

exercise mercy, not just destruction, if you all agree to worship us. For we are the true forces of the universe. No one else."

"Five million fae would still die for this ritual, wouldn't they?" I replied.

"Yes. Such power cannot be attained without sacrifice."

"And you expect us to trust you not to destroy us all if we don't return Thieron to Death?" Amelia asked, raising an eyebrow. "After you've been droning on about killing every living creature from the moment you emerged? Seriously?"

I raised my Thieron hand, politely motioning for the crew to stop talking. My resolve was stronger than ever, but even I had to admit that Brendel was playing a new game now. She was trying a different angle. At least she wasn't a hundred percent obsessed. Just ninety percent, actually, leaving some wiggle room for alternative approaches.

"Brendel, even five million is too much life loss just for you to get more power and pretend you're gods. Because that's what this is all about, basically," I said. "You've lied before, and none of us are stupid enough to trust you. I'd like for you to stop killing, and the only way I can get you to do that is by completing Thieron and restoring Death's full power. You see, Brendel... you're not the true forces of the universe. You're just frustrated underlings, tools with delusions of grandeur. Nothing more, nothing less."

Brendel sighed, her fiery chest rising in the process. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Taeral. I really hoped I could talk some sense into you. Clearly, you're not even worthy of worshipping me. I'll just burn your friends alive and force you to watch, then."

The urgency of what would come next struck me in the chest with the brutal force of a sledgehammer. "I want Phyla," I mumbled. "I. Want. Phyla."

Brendel's flaming figure swelled, threatening to swallow us all. Eira, Lumi, and I would survive, but not without experiencing the horror of being burned alive first. The rest of my friends, however, would perish.

Seeley noticed the change in Brendel's size and tried to get to us, but... he couldn't. He hit the glass bell with his scythe, but he barely left a scratch. Brendel laughed. "You people really haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

"What is she talking about?" Seeley shouted, desperate and banging his scythe and his fists against the unbreakable glass. "What's going on?"

"His Reaper powers aren't working," Nethissis managed, the color draining from her cheeks.

"Not on this glass, no," Brendel said. She knew something we didn't.

"It doesn't matter," I replied, tightening my grip on Phyla. Deep down, I knew that this was my last chance to save everyone, including my father. And regardless of whatever tricks Brendel was using to torment us and to keep the Reapers away, I had to keep at it. I had to get Phyla. "I said, I want Phyla!" I shouted, from the bottom of my lungs.

Brendel reached out to either touch me or hurt me. She laughed. I heard Seeley punching the glass, cursing at her. I heard the swooshes and rumbles of Hermessi fighting Soul, Widow and Kabbah. I heard my own heartbeat frantically thudding in my ears.

And I heard a low ringing... something I hadn't noticed before. It got louder.

"What's... no, what's happening?!" Brendel croaked, sensing something was about to unfold. Something she hadn't planned for. Something I'd been waiting for already. "No!"

"I want Phyla." I repeated my statement, knowing that the right person had finally heard me. I could feel the cold rush prickling through my arm, the chills spreading once more. This time, however, it felt different. Remarkably intense. But also very right.

I smiled at Brendel. In her sudden desperation, she tried to take Phyla away from me. The moment she touched it, the sphere exploded into an endless mass of white light. She cried out. "No! No! No!"

It was too late, indeed. The Phantom had finally heard my call. Warmth coursed through me like the sweetest sleep. Whiteness enveloped us all. I couldn't see anyone anymore. Not Eira. Not Lumi or Nethissis. Not Riza or Herakles. Not Amelia or Raphael. Not Eva or Varga. But I could somehow feel them inside me, worming their way through my softening head. I sensed the fiery fury of Brendel, as well.

"She's trapped," I whispered.

Giving in to the expanding light, I succumbed to the deepest sleep. I was weightless. Formless. Mindless. There was a challenge afoot, and I had no idea what it would be like. I only knew I had to do everything in my power to walk out of here with Phyla. No matter what.

SEELEY

Despite my nature and abilities, I was overwhelmed. Even Soul, Widow, and Kabbah were having trouble against the deluge of Hermessi still pouring in from the top side of the step structure. Whenever we pushed back and injured some enough to disable them, at least for the time being, more elementals came down from above.

It just wouldn't stop.

And there wasn't enough Reaper magic in my arsenal to do much other than hold them back. In many ways, the Hermessi and the Reapers were on similar levels. Ancients like Soul and Widow had more of a kick in their heels, but it still wasn't enough. Kabbah's attacks were devastating, and the Hermessi who came at him paid dearly for underestimating him—or maybe they weren't underestimating him; maybe they were simply desperate to attack him, to hit us as hard as they could, to stop us... to prove to Brendel that they were still in her service, loyal to her and the ritual.

I could handle them all, though. I could vanish and reappear in other places, in blind spots from where I could deliver meaningful blows. Yet nothing had prepared me for this glass bell. The Reapers and I had chosen to stay behind because we knew the Phantom wouldn't pull us into the challenge. However, we'd retained the idea that we could still go in, if needed, even just for protecting Taeral and his crew's bodies from outside interference.

Something was off here. Something wasn't clicking. Brendel was using magic otherwise unknown to the Hermessi to keep Reapers out of the glass bell. I knew it had to be Brendel because the Phantom's protective magic had allowed Taeral inside. This was all Brendel. It angered me, but it also worried me. Being able to keep a Reaper out of a glass enclosure wasn't part of a Hermessi's portfolio, no matter how powerful said elemental was. No, this was... this was something else.

"She's using some kind of non-Hermessi mojo," Soul said, after he hurled another elemental into one of his interdimensional puzzle rooms. I felt no pity for them. If they suffered inside these products of Soul's power, they deserved it.

"Non-Hermessi? That's what you're going with?" I shot back.

The glass bell was filled with white light now. I couldn't see a thing. Not even Brendel. A hum burst from inside and spread outward like a soft echo. It brought all the Hermessi

to a sudden halt.

Before I even realized it, the battle had been... paused.

The Hermessi retained their colorful, massive fireball forms, but they pulled back up, putting about fifty feet between us. It left Soul, Widow, and Kabbah understandably confused, since none of the elementals spoke about it.

"What the hell is going on here?" Kabbah grumbled, his hands still glowing green, ready to send out more crippling blows against the Hermessi. Only, he had an honor code. A warrior's ethic. He didn't strike those who didn't attack him. At least, not in these circumstances.

"I don't know, but we should still beat them all to a pulp," Widow said, his enormous scythe glinting with thirst for violence. "They're not suddenly going to befriend us."

"They've stopped because they know what's happening." Soul cackled. "It doesn't matter what you do to them. They're stunned. Aimless. They have no idea how they'll get out of this."

Kabbah shook his head slowly, glowering at Soul. "You're not making much sense."

"Look at that light," Soul replied, pointing a finger at the glass bell. "What do you see?"

"Light?" Kabbah shot back sarcastically.

"It's not just any light. The challenge has begun! The Phantom was awakened. She obviously took an extra minute or two to get out of bed, so to speak, but she's back up and running," Soul said. "Do you see Brendel anywhere?"

"Holy crap," I managed, understanding the point he was trying to make. "She's gotten herself trapped inside the challenge with the rest of them?!"

Soul grinned. "You get the top prize, handsome!" He walked down the step, no longer concerned with the Hermessi. "They know that it's too late for them to do anything. Especially with their leader temporarily trapped in the Phantom's challenge. There's no sense in fighting us if Brendel doesn't emerge victorious. They're mindless tools on their own."

"You've got that part right. Most of them have no shame or sense of self," Kabbah said, the glow in his hands fading as he shifted his focus back to the glass bell. "I suppose we'll find out whether we still fight or not when Taeral gets out of there."

"Yup. We're all worthless right now. This was always about Taeral," I replied, putting my scythe away.

Soul gave me an intrigued half-smile. "Let's see what the Phantom has to say about all this. I was nice enough to say hello during my part of the quest." He banged his fist against the glass. "Hey, Phantom! Come on out, you creepy little fiend! I know you can hear us! I know you can see us! Come here, salute your brothers. It's been a long time, sister!" he shouted.

We waited for what felt like forever, but nothing happened. The glass bell continued its dull hum, and the light filled it, beaming white and impenetrable. We were stuck on the outside, looking in, surrounded by hostile Hermessi who'd decided to take a break from all the fighting.

Above, in the plaza, I knew they'd laid waste to many Aledrasians. I didn't need to see

them to be aware of how many must've died already, simply for being in the way. We'd heard the screams and the sounds of Hermessi tearing into this city, hurtling toward us. These creatures showed no mercy, and for that alone I hoped we'd get Thieron back to Death, so she could clean the entire pantheon of elementals and make new ones. Decent ones, like Ramin and Kabbah. Like Inalia and Acquis and the many others who'd become rebels, battling their own siblings to protect the living.

"Phantom! Come out!" Widow barked. "Your brothers are here! We've missed you!"

"Didn't peg you for the sentimental and brotherly type," I muttered.

"He's not," Soul whispered. "He's just yanking her chain. We both promised her the beating of ten thousand lifetimes when we saw her again. She's got some bad jokes in her arsenal, and I've yet to give up on the idea of teaching her a valuable lesson."

"Isn't she older than you? Didn't you say that yourselves?" Kabbah replied, slightly amused. To most people, Reapers came across as cold, mission-oriented... mindless drones, like Soul had recently put it. Most of us were like that, as much as I disliked admitting it. But the First Ten were different. They put the "family" in "family drama," so to speak. They were capricious, combative, passionate, whimsical, and intense. And they cared very little for what the others thought about them—that much I'd learned from the time I'd spent with Soul and Widow so far.

"Only by a couple million years," Widow shot back. "Not exactly a deterrent. She loved pissing us off, and she went inside Phyla without paying for her pranks. She knows what's coming to her."

"Maybe that's why she wasn't in such a rush to awaken and unleash the challenge." Soul giggled. "She probably knew it would lead to her release and subsequent ass-whooping. The Phantom is a coward."

"A coward!" Widow growled.

"What can she do? What's her special gift?" I asked. "I know each of you has one. You, Widow, you're strength incarnate. The grunt. The bone-breaker, I suppose."

"The brawn." Soul scoffed, earning himself a slap over the shoulder from Widow. It was meant to be light, but Soul still winced from the pain. I had to admit, it did give me an ounce of satisfaction. Soul had earned a couple of supernatural beatings of his own, already.

"And you've got your interdimensional chambers... I guess the puzzles, too. Some sort of manufactured realities?" I continued, crossing my arms.

"More like high-definition illusions," Soul said. "But those were more or less courtesy of Zetos. My basic skills are much more reduced. However, let's just say yes to my special ability. I play with... space."

"What does the Phantom play with?" Kabbah asked.

"Trust me, you really don't want to know," Soul said.

"Oh, but I do," Kabbah replied.

"You don't. And, like I told Taeral, I won't tell you, anyway. It's between the Phantom, Taeral's crew, and... Brendel." Soul laughed briefly. "Oh man, I wish I could be there to see her. She probably has no idea what's coming."

Widow looked away. He was tempted to speak up, to tell us, but he must've sworn

himself into silence regarding the challenges and his brothers and sisters' abilities. And I had no source of knowledge to dig into. Until recently, I wasn't even aware that the First Ten were a thing. I'd heard about the early Reapers, but only in distant rumors and tales older than time. I'd never come face-to-face with one before. Let alone three.

I hadn't heard from Death in a little while. She'd made a habit of leaving whispers in my head, sometimes. But she hadn't done that lately, either. I reached out to her telepathically, inwardly calling out her name. Maybe she could tell me something about the Phantom. Perhaps I could sway her into advising me on an exit strategy—sooner or later, Taeral and his people would come out of there, and so would Brendel. The Hermessi were still and quiet now, but they were bound to go wild upon her return.

We were all too damn close to the very end of the ritual and the world. None of us could afford failure. Not our side, and certainly not Brendel's. The quest required that Taeral complete Thieron and deliver it to Death personally. So it had been written into the ether, and so it had to be done. This left Brendel with another window of opportunity, another chance to attack and hold us back, at least, until the ritual was completed.

"If Thieron doesn't reach Death in time, what happens?" Kabbah asked. "The ritual just goes on, and we get all the power, right?"

Soul nodded. "Pretty much. Thieron will be useless. It won't be able to kill a Hermessi anymore."

"I still can't understand how the universe allowed such a gaping loophole to exist." Widow shook his head. "It makes us all look like idiots."

"What is Death saying?" Soul asked me, trying hard to keep a straight face. I was either way too transparent, or he'd simply deduced the truth all by himself.

My shoulders dropped. "I can't reach her. She's not saying anything."

"Go figure. Right when you need her the most," he replied, exchanging glances with Widow. It pissed me off.

"Do you two know something I don't?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Soul said. It took every ounce of strength in my being not to slit his throat with my scythe. Killing another Reaper without a legal reason was strictly forbidden. I also wasn't sure I could kill one of the First Ten.

"I'll be Team Phantom if you don't tell the truth," I replied with a smirk.

It seemed to irritate both Reapers, and it drew a faint chuckle from Kabbah.

"I don't know what's up with Death," Soul said, "and neither does Widow. You all know we haven't heard from her since she put us inside Thieron. Frankly, I'm quite offended by that, but she probably knows what she's doing. I'm not foolish enough to judge her. I can't tell what she's doing or planning, but I do know what the Phantom's about to bring down on your friends. It's not going to be pleasant, and it certainly won't be easy for them to survive and get out... not to mention grab Phyla while they're there."

"So, what, we just wait here?" I asked, anxiety threatening to mess with my clarity.

"There's nothing else we can do. Our jerk of a sister refuses to come out. Death isn't picking up your calls. We're surrounded by scared and confused Hermessi. There's a bloodbath above, for sure, with lots of Aledrasian Reapers hard at work already, but we can't count on them for any kind of assistance because of damn Reaper rules. So, yes, we

just wait here until Taeral emerges from this. Victorious or otherwise," Soul said firmly.

I hated being in the dark more than anything, but I hadn't been left with a better choice. Soul and Widow were determined not to disclose anything about the Phantom. Taeral had been pulled into the last challenge of Thieron, though, and the fate of all the living rested in his capable hands.

Deep down, I wanted to put my faith in him. After what Death had told me about Taeral, I knew he was the universe's best chance for a permanent restoration of balance among the natural forces. But Brendel had proven herself to be a worthy adversary, to say the least.

What truly scared me were her resources. They reached far beyond the scope of even the most powerful Hermessi. I would've wanted Death to tell me if she knew something about this. Knowledge, in these instances, wasn't just power. It was the slight but fundamental difference between victory and defeat.

SOFIA

The Shade was still the safest place to be, especially for the Hermessi children, despite what Brendel had managed to do. After killing Sherus, she'd been unable to stay in our dimension, and none of the other elementals had broken through, either. We'd sealed the portal into the Supernatural Dimension and the In-Between, just to be safe.

The children were divided into two groups. Those who'd turned to Brendel's side had been cuffed with charmed crystals and were held in locked houses along the northern side of The Shade's extension. The friendly ones had been allowed free movement, though we'd tagged them all with discreet magical charms, just so we'd know where they were at all times. Given the circumstances, it was the best we could do.

Rose and Caleb helped with the Hermessi children, making sure they had everything they needed in their temporary homes. Vampires, werewolves, and dragons stood guard by the hostiles' doors throughout the day. Ibrahim assisted with additional security measures, placing magic on the windows and on every surface that could be broken.

There wasn't much we could do for the affected fae. They were safe inside the sanctuaries, but they'd already fallen under the Hermessi's influence. We knew from Kelara that the Reapers were there to protect them, and after what had happened with Crane, we knew it was only a matter of time before another fae died, then another.. and so on. I was terrified for my son and my family, but I couldn't show it. I couldn't let it cloud my judgment.

Derek felt the same way, so we relied on each other, as always, to stand tall, proud, and determined to protect our people and to save our loved ones. Early in the morning, the two of us joined Sherus's spirit in his glass house, where Corrine had settled to keep watch over his body, as well as to give him some company. I could only imagine how it all felt for our dear friend.

"How is he holding up?" I asked Corrine as she came out to greet us. We could see him standing next to his body, which shimmered in soft shades of pink, courtesy of the witches' preservation spell. Sherus gave us a faint smile, but it was impossible for him to hide his sadness. His insurmountable grief.

"As good as anyone else in his situation." Corrine sighed. "He's a tough cookie. Definitely has a king's spirit, even in death. I think it works to his advantage, because

he's pretty far from freaking out."

Derek nodded. "Sherus is strong. I presume the hope of being resurrected with Phyla keeps him going, as well."

"Nuriya is coming back soon to stay with us," Corrine replied. "She had an emergency meeting with Horatio and Aisha about the Fire Star fae sanctuary."

I frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"I'd say no, as in nothing out of the ordinary, but our new sense of ordinary is... broken. More fae are falling under the Hermessi's influence. You know we're past 4.5 million by now. Every affected fae feels like a punch in the gut for all of us."

"And there's an increasing sense of added urgency, I suppose," Derek muttered. "There isn't anything we can do. It's killing me."

"Taeral and the crew are on this. I know they made it to Aledras. Amelia sent us a brief message before they landed," I said. "We'll have to wait and see. I dare not reach out to them for at least a few hours. I'd rather let them contact us, to tell us they did it."

"We wouldn't want to disturb them while they're out there, anyway. There's not a thing we can do to help them, but we can stay out of their way," Corrine agreed. She motioned for us to go inside. "Come on. Sherus is in dire need of company. I've been a tad cranky since we got back and he... well, died. I'm not the best person to be around, at times."

We went in, and Corrine locked the door behind us. There were symbols etched into the frame, which lit up yellow, and she turned the key. The protection spell was activated upon locking the door.

"Sherus, buddy, how's it going?" Derek said, his tone amused. Making light of this situation was certainly better than sitting around all gloomy and moping. My husband had come a long way since The Shade's early days.

"Just chilling, waiting for my son to revive me. Now there's a phrase I never thought I'd say out loud," Sherus replied.

"I wish I could hug you," I murmured, giving him a soft smile.

Sherus's spirit was subtle, almost transparent. He mirrored my expression. "I'd like that. But you can do that when Taeral is back. Any word from him yet?"

Despite his condition, Sherus was still more worried about his son than about himself. It didn't come as a surprise. A father's love was timeless and fierce, unbroken and indelible.

"We know they landed on Aledras. They've still got a difficult road ahead," Derek said. "They'll be in touch once they have Phyla."

"From there on, it'll be a quick trip back here to get you back up and running, then to Mortis to hand Thieron over to Death," Corrine replied, taking a seat in one of the armchairs.

A knock on the glass door made us all turn around. Nuriya stood outside, her golden eyes glimmering tearfully at the sight of Sherus. It wasn't something she could control. For all her strength, Nuriya was deeply in love with her husband. Losing him had broken something inside her, and I worried she'd never be whole again, even if Taeral succeeded in his mission to revive Sherus.

Corrine got back up and unlocked the door, allowing Nuriya to come in. "I spoke with Ibrahim. He was by the portal to let me in," she said, then smiled at her husband. "My darling..."

"I would hold you and kiss you, but I'm afraid my condition does not permit that," Sherus replied, trying not to sulk. I knew that, deep down, he was aching to touch his wife. His soul mate. His queen.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"The same. Still no Reaper in sight," he said.

"Have a seat," Corrine replied, inviting Nuriya to settle in the armchair next to hers and closest to Sherus. We joined them, sitting on the loveseat in front of his crystal casing. For a while, none of us dared to speak, allowing an awkward silence to take hold as we all looked at Sherus and he glanced back at us.

"You know, there's one thing I forgot to ask, given all this madness," Corrine finally said, clearing the weight from my shoulders. "Sherus, did you have any idea about your Hermessi heritage?"

He thought about it for a moment. "No. I never considered it a possibility. The Hermessi were just distant legends among my people. Stories lost over time, not something in any way related to who we are and what we can do."

"Do you still have a claim to the throne, then? Or will it go to your sister?" Derek asked, scratching his chin. A faint stubble was emerging, and he'd had little to no time to worry about it. Not that it bothered me. On the contrary, I'd found comfort in brushing the tips of my fingers against it as we both lay in bed last night.

"I'm still a product of my mother and father, technically speaking," Sherus explained. "A Hermessi's presence in my father's body modified my genetic structure, gifting me with abilities I'd easily considered part of my fae nature. You can run one of your blood tests on me, if you'd like. It'll prove I'm right. While I was under the influence and held on Yahwen, I heard the Hermessi children talking about this. They all seemed to agree. It didn't make their mothers or fathers any less real or natural. I doubt I'd have trouble retaining my throne now. Well, except for the fact that I'm dead."

Nuriya exhaled sharply, tears threatening to roll down her cheeks. She wiped them quickly and put on a weak smile. "Our son will do everything he can to save you, my darling."

"I know he will. We've raised a fine man, you know that, right?" Sherus replied.

She nodded. "A great man. An honorable creature. A powerful fae-hybrid. A soul like no one has seen before, in fact. And you're partly to blame."

"Ugh. He's also one quarter Hermessi, it seems," Corrine said. "That explains his powerful fire abilities. I've always been in awe of yours, Sherus, but I didn't think it was the Hermessi strand that powered it. It does explain Taeral's, too."

"You know, there's something else that's been bothering me about all this," Derek replied, changing the subject as he leaned back into the loveseat, one hand resting on my thigh. It was enough to warm me up on the inside—a feeling only Derek could give me in the absence of sunlight. "How did Brendel know to find us and the children here? How'd she get in?"

"We've talked about this already, and none of us could come up with a reasonable assumption." Corrine scoffed. "We only know that she had some kind of help, especially after the blow that Taeral gave her with two thirds of Thieron."

Nuriya frowned. "What kind of help? Magic? Fae? Other Hermessi, perhaps?"

"I don't think so. She would've come into the Earthly Dimension sooner, just to mess with us. No, it's something or someone else, and I think that we should find a way to look into it. It's nagging me, and it's obviously bothering Derek, too."

"The more we know about Brendel and her methods, the better prepared we'll be," Derek said. "She will retaliate for Phyla, too. She will stop at nothing. Knowledge has helped us before. It got us the Hermessi children. We should keep working the intel angle. I've asked Harper to reach out to Ramin through their special bond. He might be able to make some inquiries. Emphasis on 'might,' of course. I'm pretty sure he's busy fighting off the ritual Hermessi as we speak..."

There was a constant tension flowing through the GASP federation. A feeling that the worst was yet to come, and that, once it did come, we'd all be smack in the middle of it. Our fae were falling, more every day. The ones already infected were struggling to keep the last links on their life-chains alight. And we were helpless before them.

"Where are the others?" Nuriya asked. "On my way through the redwood forest, I noticed very little movement."

"Ah. It's visiting day," Derek replied. "I've allowed a few hours for families to spend time with the affected fae. That's why Ibrahim is manning the portal today."

"That's very kind of you," Nuriya said. "What about the fae relatives? Are they allowed to leave quarantine?"

"I'm afraid we can't take that risk, given the high number of victims." Derek sighed. "Only the non-fae, for now."

I worried about River. I knew she'd gone to Calliope to see Ben, along with Lawrence, Blaze, and Bijarki. Most of the Novaks were strong, almost impossible to break, but I'd sensed something in River, a faint thought that maybe she was close to caving in. She'd lost Ben before. She'd had her heart broken already. To have this happen, on top of everything else they'd already been through... it would've been too much for anyone.

River was a good and honest woman. She stood to lose the most in this. Not just her daughter and granddaughters, but her husband, too. I'd almost become a widow myself, many years ago. I remembered the dread, the fear of life without my husband. I wouldn't have wished it upon anyone else... not even my worst enemy.

"What do we do next?" Sherus asked. "We clearly can't do anything more for the fae, other than... I don't know, strengthen security?"

Derek smiled. "Both feet in the grave, yet you're still head of operations. You, my friend, are one hell of a workaholic."

Sherus chuckled. "Anything to keep me busy."

"It's good. It's a great mindset to keep," Nuriya chimed in, giving Sherus a most loving look.

"But you're right," Derek replied. "We're in the process of adding more non-fae agents to all the sanctuaries across the federation. There's now one Reaper visible per

sanctuary, as well. Kelara convinced them. It'll make communication with the Reapers much easier, going forward."

"What about the quarantines?" Nuriya asked. "It's just about impossible to institute on fae planets. What can we do to protect our people?"

"We instituted the curfews," Sherus replied, shrugging. "I don't know what else we could do."

Corrine leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees. "We could assign more troops to patrol the city streets?"

"We're stretched thin enough as it is," Derek replied, genuinely disappointed. "A substantial part of our force comes from fae agents, who are now either under the Hermessi's influence or practically boiling in quarantine."

"I hate to say this, but I think this is one of those times when we old folks must sit back and let our youth save the day," Sherus said, grinning ear to ear.

"Who are you calling old?" I retorted.

Derek pursed his lips. "He's centuries older than us. I find that ironic."

"But he's right," Corrine said, in her infinite, though slightly cranky, wisdom. "The future belongs to our young ones, and, right now, they're out there doing everything they can to retrieve Thieron, support the Hermessi rebels, and protect the affected fae. We've had our share of adventures with Yahwen. It's time for us to settle back as advisors, teachers... parents and grandparents..."

"Tell you what. If we stop the ritual, I will gladly take a back seat," Derek replied.

It took me by surprise. "Wait, what?"

Derek was so attached to GASP, I doubted he'd ever part from it or hand the reins over to someone else. To be honest, I was just as devoted, but I'd still fantasized about retiring, someday. We'd had our fill; we'd almost died one too many times already. And if we were to survive this and eventually adopt a human child, I knew we'd have to be full-time parents. While we weren't getting physically older, our minds were tired.

"Maybe it's time," Derek murmured, giving me a weary look. "I'm not quitting GASP, don't get me wrong. But maybe we could cut down on our involvement. We've got plenty of younger generations who've already proven their worth."

Corrine laughed lightly. "I mean, you've met my granddaughter, right?"

I couldn't help but chuckle as well. Maybe it was time. I'd wanted it, too. A bit more freedom of movement. An extra hour or two with my husband and our future third child. Weekends with the grandkids. A trip to one of the new planets we'd discovered through GASP. Immortality didn't have to be all about GASP. Not always.

Maybe we'd both resume more active roles in about a hundred years, if we were bored, somehow. Listen to me, dreaming about the future, when the future isn't even written yet.

Not only wasn't it written, the future was in danger of vanishing from existence, at least as far as we were concerned. But it was also what had driven us until now. We had two choices here. Keep dreaming of it and fighting for it or give up and let the fires of the Hermessi consume and destroy us.

Taking my husband's hand in mine, I smiled at him. "Partial retirement doesn't sound

bad at all, Derek. Why the hell not, right?"

If we survived this Hermessi ordeal, we could change everything about our lives. We could delve into the unknown. Maybe get into some kind of supernatural trouble again, or have the occasional boring Sunday, now and then. If we survived.

RIVER

No matter how many times I came to the fae sanctuary on Calliope, it did not get any easier. The weight in my chest refused to go away. The knots in my stomach tightened whenever I set foot inside this place. My husband, our daughter, and our granddaughters were in here, so deep under the Hermessi's influence that there was nothing we could do to help them. Such bitter irony, for GASP to have come so far, to have garnered support from so many powerful species and gifted supernaturals... yet we were all useless before the Hermessi.

I cried myself to sleep and washed my face with cold water every morning, so others wouldn't notice my puffy eyes or worn-out skin. This entire experience had aged me, despite my vampire nature. Grief and the fear of losing my loved ones took a heavier toll on my body than time ever would, even without vampirism.

I was tired. But I couldn't surrender. I couldn't give in. Ben had come back to me before. In my mind, that moment was fresh and bright and the very source of this last sliver of hope I had left. However, it was out of my hands. Taeral and his crew were at the center of it. All that was left for me to do was stay by my husband's side, to spend whatever moments we had left together.

"Hey, River," Arwen said, greeting me at the sanctuary door. Glancing past her, I could see others had come to visit as well. It was a controlled environment, though. There were no fae allowed, since they were high risk. Non-fae were also targeted by the Hermessi cults these days, but security around the sanctuaries had been tightened to a military degree. The witches made sure we were checked from top to bottom, inside and out, before being allowed entry. "How are you holding up?" Arwen asked.

"As well as anyone in my shoes," I replied, offering a bitter smile. "How is he?"

"He's okay. Stable. Grace, too, and the girls. So far, they're standing strong."

She escorted me to the crystal casings, not because she had to, but mostly because she was clearly worried about me. There wasn't much I could hide from Arwen, even with cold water compresses.

Around us, people had come to see their loved ones. I caught a glimpse of Zeriel sitting next to Vesta's casing. He looked up, and our eyes met. There was silent agreement between us, a common suffering that we shared. It warranted a slight nod from each of us, as if to say, "I'm sorry you're going through this, but you're not alone."

I reached Ben's casing, once again feeling my breath cut short at the sight of him. "His glow is more intense," I mumbled. His skin was almost incandescent, as opposed to the amber shimmer from the first days of his affliction. Next to him, I could see Grace, Vita, and Caia. They, too, shone brighter than ever. As eerie and as beautiful as they looked, it scared me. It meant that the Hermessi's influence was dangerously close to completion. Any day now, their souls would leave their bodies, and the Hermessi would take them over. Any day now, I would lose my family.

"It's amplified by the fae numbers." Kelara's voice startled me. She revealed herself, appearing out of thin air, right next to me. "The more of them that fall, the brighter they all shine."

"Kelara has been helping," Arwen said. "Passing messages along from the fae spirits to their loved ones."

"It's the least I can do." Kelara sighed.

My heart skipped a beat. I'd yet to hear from Ben myself, but I knew we'd get to speak today. Kelara had been overworked these past couple of days. None of the other Reapers had shown themselves, and they had no intention of making it easier on her. They hadn't approved of Kelara's decision to make herself visible to the living, and, according to Arwen, there were still heated discussions among them.

"It's a shame you're the only one doing it," I said. "The others could pitch in."

She shrugged. "They could. But they won't. I broke Reaper rules, not Death rules, so there isn't anything they can do to punish me. They can still give me the cold shoulder, but I don't really care about them. I care about doing what's right. In this case, none of the events unfolding are natural. Therefore, we shouldn't behave like any of this is normal. That's what my colleagues refuse to understand... or maybe accept. Their routine was disrupted, you see. A routine that many of them have been at for centuries."

"And that's why they're sulking?" I replied.

"Pretty much."

"This is ridiculous!" I said, raising my voice, knowing that all the Reapers could hear me. "Are you so afraid of breaking one measly rule in the midst of all this nastiness? Are you agents of Death, or are you cowards?! People want to talk to their loved ones before they're gone! My husband isn't dead yet! My daughter, either! My dear granddaughters, my friends! They're all here, desperate to speak to us, and you're keeping them away from us. It's ridiculous! Grow a pair and show yourselves! Help us speak to them, at least, if you won't show them to us!"

Moments passed in awkward silence, as I drew everyone's attention upon myself—living, comatose, and beyond. I was aware that I had many eyes on me, but I didn't care. There was so much anger, so much frustration festering inside me. It just didn't seem fair. The Reapers could do better, given what was going on.

"Screw your rules," I added. "Do something right, for once."

I must've said something right. A few seconds later, Reapers appeared in their black-and-white uniforms, with galaxy eyes and scythes holstered on their leather belts. Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed, realizing that these creatures had been here this whole time. The sanctuary looked twice as crowded, and I was but a blip inside it. And yet, I

seemed to have accomplished an interesting feat, according to Kelara:

"And I have spent hours trying to reason with them about this," she muttered, her brow furrowed. "Assholes have more respect for a living woman than for me."

"I think River managed to shame them, that's all." Arwen chuckled. "And it already doesn't matter anymore. They've made themselves seen, now. It should make your job easier, too."

Kelara smiled softly, watching the Reapers engage with the families of the fae they'd been guarding. Most of them kept solemn and straight faces, but some were visibly warmer and even sympathetic toward the living and their plight. It still bothered me that I couldn't see Ben myself, but this was better than nothing. I'd learned years ago to take whatever I could get, especially in dire situations like this.

"Ben wants you to know that he loves you, though you know that already," Kelara said. Her words floored me. My knees turned weak, and I placed a hand on Ben's crystal casing. "He's here with your daughter and granddaughters. They're all rooting for GASP."

My vision became hazy. Tears were working their way up, glazing my eyes.

"Grace says you must be strong," the Reaper I assumed to be my daughter's added. His name was Malleus, from what Kelara had told me before.

"Caia and Vita are both with you, and they're wondering if there has been any news from Taeral since they left for Aledras," a third Reaper said.

"Are you watching over them both?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"Well, not all of us have the balls you demanded, it seems," he shot back, clearly amused. "I figured there was no harm in speaking for both girls. I'm Rudolph. I watch over Caia and Vesta, for now. Tomassin is looking after Vita, but he's a bit shy..."

"Yeah, we're not perfect," Kelara grumbled. "But even so, it's kind of rich you showed yourselves despite my numerous pleas. It's insulting."

Grace's Reaper, Malleus, sighed. "Circumstances and mindsets have begun to change since you last asked us to do this. Some of us are still quite stiff. But, like the witch said, it doesn't matter anymore. You're better than feeling offended by any of this, Kelara. It's not about you."

"I wish I could see Ben," I said, feeling my lower lip tremble. It took a lot of self-control not to break down crying at this point.

Kelara gave me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. That, I definitely cannot do unless Death sanctions it. Punishments for disobeying Death are difficult to process. You wouldn't understand, but I'm kindly asking that you at least trust me when I say that we simply cannot break the most fundamental rules."

I nodded slowly. "I get it. I hate it, but I get it."

"Ben says you look beautiful even when you're crying," Kelara replied, her voice uneven. I had a feeling all this was getting to her, as well. "He thinks you should sleep more. You need all the rest you can get."

"Easy for him to say. He's been sleeping for weeks now," I said.

Bijarki came in, accompanied by Marion and Blaze. They were the last to arrive among the Novaks' spouses. Lawrence had been here for quite a while and was now engaged in conversation with Grace's Reaper. The guy rolled his eyes whenever he had to

tell Lawrence some of the sweeter things that Grace said, and I found it kind of cute and funny. I chose to focus on that, instead of crying my bloody heart out over this.

"How are they? How come all the Reapers are out?" Bijarki asked, quite confused. "I thought Kelara was their representative or something."

Arwen laughed. "River shamed the Reapers into showing themselves."

"Oh, good. It was about time," Bijarki replied, giving me a thankful nod. He settled by Vita's side, while Blaze moved next to his beloved Caia. Rudolph bounced messages between them and their husbands, occasionally chuckling at the spicy jokes Caia hurled at Blaze and pretending to gag at the sound of Vita and Bijarki's lovey-dovey conversations.

Soon enough, everyone was able to talk to the sleeping fae, and some of the tension seemed to fizzle out of the sanctuary. It was one thing to be able to stay by your loved one's side, and an even greater thing to be able to talk to them. I understood why there were smiles and tears all over the place now.

"How is Ben's life-chain looking?" I asked Kelara.

She hesitated, glancing at him, presumably, since I couldn't see my husband with my own eyes. "There are two links left, I'm afraid. And one of them is beginning to show signs of influence."

My heart literally hurt, as if the Hermessi themselves had reached into my chest and clutched it with all their strength. "How is he feeling?"

"He's okay. Desperate to live. Definitely not ready to let go yet. The two of us disagree on the matter, but I have to admit, I appreciate his resilience," Kelara said.

Arwen grinned. "You think it's his time to go."

"I think he's well past that. He should've been dead years ago."

"Kelara, my husband beat death. He's done it before, and he might do it again. Maybe you think it's unnatural and unfair, but he had the opportunity, and he took it," I said.

"It doesn't make it right. Anyway, that's beside the point. I just wanted to tell you that he hasn't given up. I think it matters for you to know this," Kelara replied.

I leaned against my husband's crystal casing, sometimes glancing at my daughter and granddaughters. I would've given anything to be able to hold them all in my arms again—provided that Taeral completed his mission, that was a possible future. I understood where my husband got his unbreakable will to live. It stemmed from this precise thought that maybe, just maybe, Taeral and the crew would get Thieron back to Death before the five millionth fae was struck down by the Hermessi's influence.

"How are the other fae looking?" I asked Kelara. "In terms of life-chain integrity, I mean."

"Some have one left and contact with the other spirits isn't helping as much as before. The more fae that fall ill, the stronger the Hermessi get. It's been a tug of war till now. But the scales don't stay in balance for long," she said. "So far, so good, if you ask me. No other fae seems to be close to dying prematurely, like Crane did. But once they hit five million... it's over."

"Have you heard about what Brendel did in The Shade?" I replied. I'd yet to address that with Kelara, and I'd had this nagging feeling that she might know what that whole

stunt had been about. We were all in the dark about how Brendel had made it into The Shade in the first place, especially after the damage that Taeral had delivered.

Kelara nodded once, a fine line forming between her arched eyebrows. "Personally, I am baffled. The Earthly Dimension is rather difficult to access by outside Hermessi. The In-Between and the Supernatural Dimension, as you call them, are much closer to one another, in terms of space curvature. But Earth's... well, it's not easy. I've spoken to the other Reapers about it, but no one knows how that was possible."

I didn't like this. It felt weird. There was something we were missing here, surely. But without knowing what, exactly, it was difficult to even theorize on the matter.

"We're still wondering how Brendel even knew to come after the Hermessi children in The Shade," Arwen chimed in. "We kept the entire mission secret, even from the higher-ups in GASP. Yahwen and the children weren't even mentioned in conversation outside Earth. And we know for a fact that the ritual Hermessi didn't follow the shuttle. The surveillance systems and additional spells would've picked something up."

"I'm even more astonished that she was practically dismembered by two-thirds of Thieron, and yet, mere hours later, she was able to pull herself back together and infiltrate The Shade," I said.

It drew unexpected attention from Kelara. Her frown deepened. "What?"

"Taeral put Eirexis and Zetos together when he found Zetos on the bottom of the ocean, on the Fire Star," I replied. "He hit her with it. She was broken into hundreds of fiery pieces, thus breaking whatever ancient magic hold she had on their ability to teleport. That's how they got out of there."

Looking around, Kelara seemed to be thinking about something. This was new and valuable information for her. It didn't take a master psychologist to figure that out.

"It takes some special kind of mojo to heal the blow of a scythe, especially Death's, incomplete as it is," she murmured.

"What are you thinking?" Arwen asked her.

Kelara shook her head. "I'm not sure yet. But I'll have to make some inquiries about..." her voice trailed off as a rumble echoed through the sanctuary.

Before any of us could even register the subtle change hanging heavily in the air, the ground started to shake. It was some kind of earthquake, and I was quickly knocked down by the powerful vibrations.

I heard Kelara shout at the other Reapers, but I didn't register all the words. "Protocol Five," she'd said, though I had no idea what that meant.

The crystal casings clinked against one another as something tore beneath the sanctuary. My heart jumped in my throat, acknowledging the panicked looks on everyone's faces. No one had seen this coming. No one knew what it was. But it didn't show signs of stopping. Worst of all, I figured it had something to do with the Hermessi, but I couldn't understand the endgame.

The fae were pretty much theirs already.

VESTA

I'd finally been able to have a more constructive conversation with Zeriel, thanks to Rudolph, who'd finally "grown a pair," as instructed by an understandably frustrated River. We'd talked about my condition and what Zeriel had been up to these days, assisting GASP on different Hermessi-related matters. We could finally talk without me having to pull ghost-like tricks. To be honest, this was much easier.

But it had all come to a sudden halt with this unexpected earthquake.

"What's going on here?" Zeriel asked, on the ground, his voice shaking as roughly as the ground beneath him.

"Rudolph?" I croaked. "This isn't right."

Rudolph was as shocked as the rest of us, judging by the look on his face. "I don't know. It's not supposed to... oh, crap," he replied, seemingly realizing something. "It's the Earth Hermessi of Calliope. Wei."

"What?! Why? Why is he doing this? What is 'this,' exactly?" I shot back.

All around us, the living were having trouble standing. Some had fallen down, much like Zeriel and River. We weren't affected by the laws of physics here, and neither were the Reapers, but it didn't make this any less weird or any less frightening.

"You all need to evacuate!" Kelara shouted, her voice booming throughout the sanctuary. "All of you who are awake and living! You must leave now!"

"What is she talking about?" I gasped, suddenly understanding that Zeriel was among those awake and living who needed to go.

Rudolph listened carefully to the grumbling coming from around the sanctuary. The earth was literally splitting around the structure—I recognized the sounds. As a four-element fae, I'd done my fair share of earth manipulation. Whatever was going on here, it involved the entire sanctuary and the ground on which it stood.

"Rudolph!" I called out, in desperate need of someone to clarify this unexpected mess.

He gave me a startled glance as the sanctuary was jolted upward with an unbearably loud screech. People fell over, some holding on to the crystal casings closest to them in a desperate bid to stay upright. They wound up wobbling and hitting the floor. Several crystal casings were toppled, as well, but fortunately didn't break. The fae inside shifted due to inertia, but there was no visible harm done.

"Arwen! Get everybody out, now! The Hermessi are taking over the sanctuary!" Kelara screamed, then looked at River. "You have to go!"

Of course, no one wanted to leave. Nobody wanted to forsake us in here, despite the ground shaking and the sanctuary basically wobbling like a coin dropped on the floor. River cursed under her breath, but she grabbed Lawrence, Blaze, and Bijarki and dragged them out of the sanctuary.

Zeriel managed to pull himself back up. "Tell Vesta I'm coming back for her," he said to Rudolph. "This isn't over."

"No, it's not," I replied, though he couldn't hear me.

"She knows." Rudolph sighed, giving him an encouraging smile. "Now, go. It's safer for you outside."

Tearing up, Zeriel turned around and took a few more visitors out with him along the way. Soon enough, more of those who'd come to see us were gone, jumping out of the sanctuary. Others were expelled with Reaper magic, as Kelara and her colleagues drew symbols on the floor with their scythes and whispered spells that made the people disappear. I assumed they'd reappear outside, as far away from the sanctuary as possible.

From where I stood, I had a pretty good view of the world beyond. The sanctuary shook less now, but it was definitely a few feet off the ground and constantly rising. My blood ran cold, spiritually speaking.

"Rudolph... Please tell me what this is about. Are the Hermessi taking over the sanctuary?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

It was just us now, spirits and Reapers. Even Arwen had been pushed out. We were on our own, being pulled farther away from everything and everyone we knew. It scared me beyond comprehension, and it became increasingly difficult for me to keep it together, let alone concentrate.

"I have a clue... well, more of a deduction, really," Rudolph finally said.

The shouts of people emerged from below, as the sanctuary was lifted higher up in the sky. All we could see now was the never-ending blue in the tall windows. The wind blew through the open doors, howling and raising imaginary hairs on the back of my neck. Everyone wanted to help us, but... no one could.

"I'm all ears," I whispered, unable to take my eyes off Ben, Grace, Caia, Vita, Lucas and Kailyn. They looked as terrified as I felt.

"The Hermessi have gone past 4.5 million fae." Rudolph sighed. Kelara joined us after a quick tour of the sanctuary, having made sure that the spirits were okay and having helped the other Reapers pull the fallen crystal casings back up. "They're likely preparing for their grand finale now. When five million fae are hit by the Hermessi's influence, these sanctuaries will probably act as beacons of concentrated power. They'll destroy every living creature in their path."

"Oh, God," Caia blurted, and covered her mouth, eyes wide with horror.

"You mean to tell me we actually made it easier for the Hermessi to destroy us by putting all the affected fae in these sanctuaries?" Vita asked.

Kelara shook her head. "No. It would be bad either way. This is just their method of

telling you all that you're done for, so to speak. With the affected fae put in clusters like this, they found it more imposing as a statement, I suppose. Lifting the sanctuaries off the ground and aiming all the dormant power inside them at the people."

"It's evil. It's friggin' evil," Lucas growled.

"They're turning our sanctuaries into weapons of mass destruction," Kailyn replied.

We were less than five hundred thousand fae away from total annihilation. Taeral was out looking for Phyla, from what we'd been told. GASP was practically helpless in this last stage of the ritual, and we had no idea how this would end.

The end was closer than ever before, and I didn't know how to cope. Anger seemed obsolete. Despair, rather unbecoming.

"What do we do?" I asked, shaking like a leaf.

Kelara exhaled sharply. "I don't know. There's nothing you can do. Nothing we can do, either. It all rests with Taeral."

As much as I wanted to trust him, along with his crew and Seeley and anyone else they'd managed to get on their side in this quest, I couldn't help but cry on the inside. Would they be enough to save us, to stop the Hermessi, this time around? Would they find Phyla in time and put an end to this wretched ritual?

Or had that been my last moment with Zerial?

KAILANI

I got to the sanctuary as soon as the alarms started ringing in Luceria, only to find the actual building hovering fifty feet above the ground, chunks of stone and dirt still falling from the bottom. This had to be a combined effort of the Earth and Air Hermessi, and not just Earth, as we'd had initially assumed. Their powers had grown beyond our ability to understand them. The sight was utterly shocking, and it took me a while to process what was going on. Hunter, Serena, and Draven had joined me, and I'd teleported us across the realm to reach the sanctuary quickly.

"What in the world..." Serena managed, gawking at the structure as it hovered in the air, its shadow cast over the hole it had left in the ground.

"The Earth Hermessi," my mom said, gasping as she reached us. There were people gathered all around the hole, including River, Bijarki, Zeriel, and the others who'd come to see the fae. None of this made sense. "Wei. He took the sanctuary away from us."

"And Air. Air is involved, as well, with how the whole building is hovering up there," I added.

"What do you mean?" Serena asked, still grappling with the concept. "Wei was supposed to be on our side! We got the Hermessi children away from Brendel. I... I don't get it!"

The air rippled below the sanctuary, now a massive dome made of stone and glass, overlooking this part of Calliope—quiet and filled with people whose lives we'd so desperately tried to protect. They were literally out of our hands now.

"Kelara kicked us all out," River said, accompanied by Lawrence, Bijarki, and Blaze. Zeriel stayed back with the others, a few feet away from us and looking up at the sanctuary. I could only imagine what was going through his head. The helplessness he had to put up with. "It wasn't safe for us to be in there, apparently."

"What's their endgame, here?" I asked.

"I heard Kelara before she sent us out," River replied. "She mentioned something about the Hermessi being past 4.5 million fae and ready to take over... preparing for the ritual's final stage."

"Where does the sanctuary fit in here?" Draven asked, his arms crossed. As ruler of Eritopia and of Calliope, in particular, this had to sting for him. There was nothing worse than being in a position of power, yet unable to do anything to protect your people.

"The fae bodies," Mom said. "They'll be weapons against us once the Hermessi hit their magic number."

"With so many in one place, I presume that means a lot of concentrated elemental energy," I replied. "A Hermessi death ray, huh?"

"Pretty much," River murmured, glancing up at the sanctuary. "I fear this will happen in other worlds, as well."

Serena groaned with frustration. "So, what the hell do we do? Should we do something? Ideally without arousing anger from the Hermessi? The active Hermessi rebels are out on Aledras, helping Taeral and his crew. We're just about on our own here, by the looks of it."

"How do we protect our fae now?" Mom added. The pained look on her face broke my heart in a million bits and pieces.

There was nothing we could do, and no one dared say it. But it was an undeniable truth. We were stuck on the outside, unable to protect our loved ones. The sanctuary had been taken out of our reach, and the winds were rising, thickening and buzzing as they rushed above our heads.

Blaze huffed, a muscle clicking in his square jaw, close to breaking point. "I'm not sitting here on my ass while my wife is up there, helpless against these bastards."

"Technically speaking, neither Caia nor the other fae are truly helpless. They still have Reapers with them," Mom said, trying to reassure him. But the young dragon could not be consoled.

He slipped out of his clothes, prompting most of us to look away until we heard his bones crack and his leathery wings flap as he shifted into his fire dragon form. He shuddered from head to spiky tail, his scales rustling as he took flight and headed for the sanctuary.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Hunter muttered, watching him with great concern.

"What is he hoping to get out of this?" Draven asked.

"I doubt Blaze knows, exactly," Mom said, letting a deep breath roll out. "He loves Caia. He will do whatever he can to keep her safe."

While that was beyond reasonable and heartwarming, it was also insanely reckless. We didn't know how the Hermessi would react to his approach, now that they'd seized the sanctuary for themselves. I was ready to give points to Blaze for trying, though.

He flew upward, roaring furiously as he circled the sanctuary several times. He tried to land on the stony edge just outside one of the doors, but a gust of wind pushed him to the side. Another hit him from below. In less than ten seconds, multiple currents pummeled him from different angles, disrupting his ability to fly in his desired direction.

The Air Hermessi of Calliope knocked him down, eventually. Blaze landed with a humiliating thud in the hole where the sanctuary's foundations had been laid. He came back with a scowl and a few bruises, putting his clothes back on without a word.

"They clearly don't want us anywhere near the fae," Hunter concluded, his tone clipped.

"Their strength is growing, and the fae spirits' efforts to retain the last links on their life-chains are beginning to fail, as well," Mom said. "By all accounts, it's not looking good

for us."

Kelara materialized in front of me. Her expression matched mine, darkened with alarm and empathetic concern. She felt our pain, and then some.

"You all need to get as far away from this place as possible," she said firmly. "The Hermessi will use the sanctuaries as weapons, and you can't be anywhere within their reach."

"When they reach five million," I replied. "Not sooner, right?"

"Right. Still, none of you are safe here," she insisted. "Whatever protection methods you have at your disposal, now is the time to use them. If Taeral fails in his mission before time runs out, every sanctuary will become a beacon of deadly and destructive power. If GASP has any hope of survival—"

"There is no survival if the Hermessi complete their ritual!" Bijarki snapped. "They'll kill us all! They'll be strong enough to go into the Earthly Dimension, too, and wipe out everyone who lives there!"

Aiden muttered a curse. "I'm not leaving my wife up there. Your mother," he said, looking at Hunter. There was just so much ache between us all... so many lives at stake. I couldn't bear the thought of losing a single fae to the Hermessi, not to mention an entire planet. Losing to these monsters was simply unfathomable, and yet it had become obvious that we'd have to prepare for this very worst-case scenario.

"We should follow Kelara's advice," River said. As always, she stepped up as the voice of reason, even though she had the most to lose if the fae died. Her entire family was trapped inside the sanctuary, hanging by a thread. "There's nothing more we can do for our loved ones from down here, and you all know it."

"What do you suggest we do, then? What if they die and—" Marion choked up, unable to finish her sentence, as tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. She'd been crying for a while now, her eyes red and slightly swollen.

"We focus on those we can still protect," River replied. "Namely, everyone else outside the sanctuary. They need us now, more than ever."

Serena pressed a button on her comms earpiece. She closed her eyes for a moment, keeping them tightly shut as she spoke. "The other sanctuaries have been yanked out of the ground and suspended in the air, as well. Neraka, Persea, Strava... Every single planet in our federation and beyond has been seized by the Hermessi."

"We need to make sure no one tries to get near them, going forward," River replied. "For their safety, most of all. You've all seen what they did to Blaze, simply for trying to get inside."

Blaze sighed, squeezing his left shoulder. He winced from a mild degree of pain, but I knew it would pass quickly. The fire dragon was one hell of a tough cookie. And so was Caia. Every other fae in the sanctuary, too, for that matter. I wished I could come through for them, but River was right.

"Focus on building a first line of defense," Kelara advised us, while Serena stepped to the side to communicate some instructions to the other GASP officers on the line. It was time for Calliope to liaise with the rest of the federation for this next stage. "The closer the Hermessi get to five million fae, the stronger they become. They tried to use Crane's

body, and they'll do more test runs before the ritual is completed. They might even force out an energy beam here and there, just to see how much of a grip they have on the not-yet-dead fae. We haven't excluded that possibility among our Reaper ranks, and neither should you."

"You think they'll try to use the fae as weapons against us before they get full control of their bodies?" Zeriell asked, joining our concerned group. His hands shook at his sides—likely a mixture of fury and dread.

Kelara nodded. "It's a possibility. Like I said, keep all options on the table and focus on protecting the others who still live on Calliope. It's the only thing you can do."

"It'll help keep me from blowing another fuse, for sure," Blaze grumbled.

Lawrence sighed, hands resting on his hips. "Fine. We'll do whatever it takes. But I need your word, Kelara, your sworn word that, whatever happens inside that sanctuary, you will let us know. You've got no issues with space here. You can zap yourself around quicker than a witch, or a jinni, even... so I expect you to keep us in the loop."

"I will. I promise," she replied.

We all had to get out of here. As much as I hated it, it was healthier for all of us. Measures needed to be put in place across the board. The first thing we had to do was to evacuate the surrounding area on a two-hundred-mile radius. If the Hermessi got their five million fae, it wouldn't matter how far we took the people, but, like Kelara had said, we could still protect as many innocents as we could until then.

The last thing we needed on top of this increasingly disastrous mess was the Hermessi testing their sanctuary fae "weapons" on us. In my mind, I sent all my hopes over to Taeral. Our fate was in his hands.

HARPER

If someone had told me this would happen, I would never have believed them. Caspian and I stood on the edge of a bowl-shaped hole that the fae sanctuary had left behind. Fiona and Zane had joined us as we stared at the building high above in the air.

As per protocol, all vampires had masks and hoods ready to pull on at any given moment during the daytime. I liked the warmth seeping through my clothes. It was the only pleasant thing to come out of this situation. We'd come to the sanctuary to check on the fae in our care, only to find ourselves expelled by the Reaper in charge—the only one who'd shown himself to us. A rather creepy fella named the Spirit Bender. Courteous and polite, but there was still something about him that chilled me to the bone.

He'd warned us to leave the moment the ground had started shaking. We'd refused, since we cared about the people in the sanctuary, but the Spirit Bender didn't care. He drew his magic onto the floor with his scythe. Moments later, we were down here, looking up and wondering what the hell was going on.

By now, we'd already learned from Serena that this was happening across the entire GASP federation. The Hermessi were taking over our fae sanctuaries, gleefully preparing for the final stage of their ritual. The end was nigh, and no one among us was anywhere near ready to accept that.

How could we, when Taeral and his crew, aided by Ramin and the Hermessi rebels, were still out there, doing everything in their power to get Phyla and return a completed Thieron to Death? How could we accept defeat, when salvation was literally within our reach? If there was one thing I'd learned from my parents, my siblings, my grandparents and great-grandparents, it was that giving up only made sense in the face of certain death, at the moment of that one last breath. That was it. At any other moment prior to that, there was still a chance we'd make it, and this had been my mantra for years. It had been my mindset upon defeating Shaytan, as well.

"How many fae are in there?" Pheng-Pheng asked. She'd rushed here as soon as she'd heard the news, accompanied by several other Manticores in her tribe. Not that they could do anything about this. But I did appreciate her speedy response and wholehearted desire to assist.

"About a hundred," Caspian said.

"I heard from Serena," Pheng-Pheng replied. "Do we switch into a defensive mode? Consider them hostiles?"

"It's not their fault, little stinger," Zane said, scowling at the sanctuary. "The fae are innocent."

"But they'll still be used as weapons. So, what do we do?" Pheng-Pheng shot back. "I have a mother and a little brother to protect. My people must survive."

"There's not much we can do, I'm afraid," I said. "Serena and River think we should prepare for attacks, since the Hermessi are likely to test the fae before they reach five million. I mean, we can definitely do that, almost effortlessly, but in the end, if death becomes a certainty, there is nothing we can do."

"You sound defeated," she replied, narrowing her almond-shaped eyes at me.

"I'm being realistic! If the Hermessi complete their ritual, we're all dead, and you know it. Fortunately, that has yet to happen, so there's no point in despairing. But we can't deny what could potentially take place, either."

Fiona cleared her throat. "Do you think the Spirit Bender will come down here to talk to us, to maybe tell us more about what's going on?"

"This is the closest the Hermessi have ever gotten to completing the ritual," I said. "I doubt he knows anything, especially with Death so far away and unable to stop this until she gets Thieron back."

Caspian sighed. "What about planetary evacuation? If we're not here when the end comes, what can happen?"

"Are you ready to live out the rest of your days in space?" Zane replied, raising an eyebrow. "If we evacuate the entire planet now, by some miracle of science and magic, and we stay away from Neraka, what do we do afterward? The moment we set foot on an inhabitable planet, the Hermessi will roast us, since their agenda is to annihilate all life. Heck, I don't think we'd be safe lingering in space, either, come to think about it. You know what they did to Ramin out there, on the moon, and Harper witnessed it firsthand. Imagine how they'll obliterate us mere creatures. No, planetary evacuation is not a solution."

"The Earthly Dimension would've been a nice route," Fiona murmured. Since she'd become a mother, Fiona had gotten truly fierce about surviving. She was ready to do whatever it took to save her husband and daughter, and I completely understood where she was coming from. I wanted a future, as well. I wanted to be able to contemplate having children, now that Caspian and I had finally tied the knot. We deserved to live beyond tomorrow. "But if the ritual is completed, that won't be safe, either."

"Has anyone considered the possibility of another dimension existing, perhaps?" Pheng-Pheng suggested, one hand resting on her short sword.

The wind howled around us. The woods nearby moaned, shrieks cutting through the sky above. Nature had been disturbed on Neraka. Birds and animals displayed erratic behavior. Nothing made sense anymore. Daytime and nighttime cycles were mixed up and broken. Creatures that normally hunted at night came out during the day. The tides rose abnormally high. The temperatures fluctuated. Everything about Neraka spoke of impending doom, as if the planet itself was letting go, preparing to face the inevitable.

But it didn't feel right.

Everything that the Hermessi had been doing was taking its toll on the very planets they claimed to protect and nurture. They wanted to wipe everything out. They desired a clean slate, so they could start over. What a foolish thing to do, after all the wonders they had helped bring into existence.

"The In-Between is sort of a membrane between the Supernatural Dimension and the Earthly Dimension, as far as we know," I said. "There have been theories about other facets to this universe, but we've yet to find any proof of existence. We don't have time to go looking for a fourth dimension now. If we survive this wretched hell, maybe. But otherwise, our energies are best spent elsewhere."

Pheng-Pheng stepped back from the edge of the hole, her tribesmen flanking her on both sides. "I'll go take my queen-mother and family to safety, then."

"Try going underground," Zane suggested. "If the Hermessi decide to test their newly acquired weapons, like Serena said, they'll be looking to fry the surface, as it would be the most handy."

"We might have a shot at survival, at least until the ritual is finished, if we stay underground, then," Pheng-Pheng replied, nodding slowly. "That makes sense."

"In that case, we should focus on evacuating the Imen from all their cities, as soon as possible," Fiona said.

I took a deep breath, glancing over my shoulder at White City, rising proudly with its mountain. The sea roared to its east, and the blue sky crowned it beautifully, like an endless sapphire. What a shame it would be if the Hermessi wiped it all out.

"Caspian and I will handle that effort. You make sure all the daemons are back underground, from wherever they might've gone," I replied. "It's the best we can do in these circumstances."

Fiona thought about it for a moment, her eyes glassy with tears. "Right now, all I can think of is being with my baby girl and my husband, somewhere as far away from all three dimensions as possible."

Zane put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, pressing his lips against her forehead. "I'd be up for that, if it were possible," he said. "But it's not. The next best thing is that we flip these sons of bitches off and keep our people and our family safe for as long as possible."

I slipped my hand over Caspian's, squeezing gently. He gave me a soft glance. "It's not over yet," I said to him. "There isn't much we can do to stop this, but we can at least prolong the inevitable as best we can, if that's what the universe has planned for us."

"I'm with you all the way, Harper. From now until eternity and beyond. I take my wedding vows seriously," he replied, the shadow of a smile fluttering across his handsome face.

What a lucky girl I was, to have stumbled into a Hermessi apocalypse with a creature like Caspian by my side. Even if we failed, at least we were together. Even if nothingness awaited beyond tomorrow, at least we'd die together. Such a sad thing to think, yet so... wholesome and calming.

I looked at Pheng-Pheng and smiled. "You take care of your people," I said. "If we're

lucky, we'll see each other again soon. If we don't, let me just say that your friendship means the world to me. You're a fearsome fighter."

She tried hard not to get emotional, but we both knew this wasn't the time to hold anything back. She hugged me, her arms wrapped around my neck. I laughed lightly, welcoming her warmth.

"It's been an honor," she whispered in my ear, then slid down and moved back. "Let us hope Taeral pulls through and saves us all. If not... I shall see you all on the other side."

She turned around and left, joined by her fellow Manticores. Her words rang in my head, simmering into a dull echo that would never leave me—not until the very end. Pheng-Pheng was right. If this was, indeed, the end, so be it. I'd become a vampire to put off dying for as long as I could. I loved life too much, and I'd learned to love it even more since I'd crossed paths with Caspian. But if I was doomed to die in a few days... at least I was dying in the arms of my soul mate. It was more than I could've possibly asked for.

Glancing up, I noticed the Spirit Bender standing in the sanctuary's open doorway, looking down at us. He seemed sympathetic to our situation, though I could barely categorize that straight line on his face as a smile. I hadn't met other Reapers, but he still struck me as above average, as far as weirdness went. There was just something off about him.

Maybe he was older than Neraka itself. Maybe he knew more than he was telling us. Maybe he had some dark secrets of his own, outside the scope of Death. I wasn't sure, but I was willing to bet that any of the three contributed to that aura of mystery that he'd surrounded himself with. He called himself neutral in this war between us and the Hermessi, much like all the other Reapers, but he spoke with a sense of knowledge that went beyond the scope of what he'd been assigned to do.

I hadn't had many conversations with the Spirit Bender since he'd revealed himself as the Reaper representative for the Nerakian sanctuary. However, he'd come across as erudite in the affairs of the living, the dead, and the elements.

"Do you think we could get him closer to our side?" Caspian asked, following my gaze.

"We could try," I said. "Anything is worth a shot at this point."

"If you're thinking of getting him to... I don't know, fight against the Hermessi, forget about it," Zane replied dryly. "From what River has already told us, these are cold and heartless jerks, focused solely on reaping and doing their jobs. We're better off on our own out here."

While his reasoning made sense, I had a hard time accepting it.

The world was ending. The Hermessi were about to pull the plug on every single creature that lived and breathed across three known dimensions of the universe. More than 4.5 million fae had fallen under their influence, and they were now being taken from us and prepared to be used as weapons.

If Taeral failed in his quest, we needed all the help we could get to avoid total annihilation. And if that meant breaking bread and shaking hands with a creepy-ass Reaper, then I was more than happy to give it a shot.

It was better than nothing.

A M A N E

Since the Blackout and the discovery of Derek's day-walker ability, Amal and I had spent most of our days studying his blood and looking for the exact change that Ta'Zan had made to the vampire's genes to allow him to walk in the sunlight. Ridan and I had been happy together, discovering the pleasures of an intimate life, of being a couple... of being soul mates. Strava had come a long way, too, with Douma and Dmitri helping us keep a balance among the people.

The Faulties, the Perfects, and the Arch-Perfects had achieved a longstanding peace, aided in part by the native Draenir. The diamond coliseums of Ta'Zan were gone, replaced by our own majestic structures. We'd dedicated our lives to things we considered to be good: tranquility and prosperity, progress and discovery, harmony and wellbeing. It beat serving Ta'Zan, for sure.

But all that had come to an end upon the emergence of the Hermessi as a new enemy, far worse and significantly more destructive than Ta'Zan. Amal and I had had to put our research into Derek's blood on hold, focusing on the fae sanctuary and on devising whatever technology was needed to support GASP in their mission to stop the Hermessi's ritual. I spent less time in my lover's arms, and I felt the anguish of losing everything I'd fought so hard to attain in the blink of an eye.

Ridan understood all this, perhaps better than most, which was why he gave me all the space I needed to get things done. He'd focused the last couple of days on guarding the fae sanctuary. There weren't many on Strava—perhaps eighty or a little more than that—but they were in our care, and we needed to do everything we could to keep them safe.

Personally, I'd felt a sigh of relief upon meeting the sole Reaper who had revealed himself to us as a representative of his brethren, as an agent of Death and protector of souls. I'd welcomed the assistance. It had felt as though we weren't alone in this anymore. That there was a higher power out there that didn't agree with what the Hermessi were doing.

Our own elements were unknown to us. We'd never spoken to Strava's Hermessi, except for Aya—she'd aided us in the Blackout, but we'd seen and heard little of her since she'd first named her brethren as being the ones responsible for the exploding fae incidents. We also knew she'd become one of the rebels, but that was it. We hadn't

encountered any of the Hermessi's pink water beasts, either. We hadn't felt their wrath or aggressive behavior. As far as I could tell, the rest of our Hermessi were as neutral as they came. That being said, I couldn't guarantee that they didn't have a hand in the ritual, or that at least one of them didn't associate with Aya and the rebels.

Even so, I'd felt as though I'd had a handle on things, for the most part.

Until the ground shook beneath my feet, and Daryon, the Reaper, cast me and my sister out of the sanctuary before it was lifted up into the sky. Now, we stood about fifty yards away from where the structure had just been, listening to GASP comms and wondering how the hell we'd pull ourselves out of this particular debacle.

Ridan didn't even bother trying to get back inside the sanctuary after hearing about Blaze's attempt back on Calliope. No matter what angle we looked at this from, it didn't feel right to us, nor did it seem fair. We'd have thought that our local Hermessi—or at least half of them—were not fans of the ritual, so I couldn't understand why they were doing this, until Amal offered a theory: maybe foreign Hermessi had come in to assist and lift the sanctuary off the ground and away from us. Of course, we communicated our thoughts to the rest of GASP, but we wouldn't know for sure unless we spoke to Aya. And therein lay the problem. Our Hermessi could not be reached, and there was only so much we could do in attempting to establish a connection with entities that didn't wish to speak to us. Naturally, we were all hurt and confused by all of this.

"I must admit, I haven't felt this scared in a long time," Amal said.

Her words surprised me. If anything, Amal had always struck me as colder and more resilient than me. I'd chosen freedom in the wilderness to appease my emotions. I was the one whose heart jumped out at the thought of Shills and Titans invading us if we acted against the Hermessi. Amal had persistently been the one to keep going, regardless.

"It has cosmic proportions, I'll give the Hermessi that," I replied. "You don't think we'll make it?"

"I cannot say. What scares me is that I have no control over the situation." Amal sighed. "At least with Ta'Zan I knew where we stood. He was still a creature, with habits and thoughts and dreams. The Hermessi are practically older than time and determined to implement what is literally considered a complete mass extinction. There is no reasoning with the likes of Brendel."

"Maybe Taeral will succeed," Ridan chimed in, hopeful as ever. It only made me love him more. "He's got two of three pieces, already."

Amal nodded slowly. "Maybe. I just don't like being unable to do anything about this. You heard the Reaper. He and his ilk will take care of the fae. We're better off protecting ourselves."

"There's not much we can do, though," I murmured. "Our buildings are strong enough to withstand powerful elemental attacks, but I don't know how the fae will function as weapons of the Hermessi. Therefore, I'm not sure what sort of damage they'd be able to inflict, pre-ritual-completion."

"I spoke to Zane a few minutes ago," Ridan said. "He suggested we take our people underground, for the time being."

"It won't save us from the Earth Hermessi, when the time comes," Amal replied.

"But it might keep us safe from the sanctuary fae," Ridan insisted. His brow furrowed.

"Where are Douma and Dmitri?"

"Gathering the Perfects into the capital for an assembly. We should head out there," I said. "I've already sent word to the Faulties and the Draenir to attend, as well."

"What are we supposed to do there?" Amal asked, pursing her lips.

I offered a slight shrug. "Discuss our options. We have enough ships to evacuate the planet, if push comes to shove. The rest of the federation isn't as lucky, though their witches are working on some solutions."

"The Hermessi will still come after us," Ridan said, rubbing the back of his neck. "If Taeral fails with Thieron, there will be no place for us to hide. Even out there, in space."

Awkward silence settled between us. I knew Amal had more to say, but she didn't say it. There was a mild sense of animosity between her and Ridan, though nothing antagonistic. It had more to do with me and the time I spent with each of them. My sister and my boyfriend each wanted me all to themselves, and, while that had been endearing, it had placed a certain amount of tension between them.

These latest Hermessi events had accentuated the mild discomfort, since Amal and Ridan often contradicted one another over what needed to be done and how. I'd successfully mediated most of these conversations, but I had a feeling it was also some kind of competition between them. The brightest of the two would somehow come out as the victor.

Even so, my sister knew when to back down. She didn't have the heart to fully obliterate him, though she probably could. Ridan was stubborn and relentless, and not always right. But he was also noble, loving, and loyal, and Amal was able to appreciate that, for which reason she gave him the occasional win.

"You know what the real irony is in all of this?" I asked, after a while.

Amal and Ridan looked at me. I glanced up at the sanctuary, the northern winds whispering above us.

"It all started with the Blackout," Amal replied, as if reading my mind. We were twins, after all. It never came as a surprise. She and I would forever be linked. Smarter together, softer apart.

"We awakened the Hermessi because it was our only shot at saving ourselves and the rest of the world," I said. "We had no idea what kind of evil we were unleashing upon the world."

Ridan crinkled his nose. "How could you have known? The Hermessi didn't come with a manual. We all thought they'd just go back to nurturing their planets and whatever."

"Our ignorance was our undoing," Amal said.

"It's not our fault. Trust me, I'd be the first to admit it if it were. But this has nothing to do with us. We did the right thing. We did the best we could to preserve life and to stop Ta'Zan from infecting an entire dimension," Ridan shot back.

"And now, the Hermessi are looking to destroy life as we know it, as well. On an even larger scale," Amal continued.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, enough with the drama already. Yeah, it's painfully ironic. It's

why I mentioned it in the first place. But dammit, this isn't the end. Not yet. There's still some fight left in me, and I intend to use it all up. Are you with me?"

Ridan smiled. "You know I am."

"Fine. Just don't expect a miracle," Amal replied dryly.

"Let's get our people to safety, as far away from the sanctuary as possible, before anything else. Let's hope Taeral pushes through with his mission," I said. "Let's start there and figure out the rest later."

They both nodded in agreement, though I couldn't help but think that maybe we wouldn't get a "later" to worry about. Regardless, my resolve was still strong. Ridan's fire had spread in me, in a way. His iron strength, his fierce resilience... He'd rubbed off on me, and I'd learned a lot from him.

If anyone could look the apocalypse right in the eye and say, "Not today," it was Ridan. And I planned to do the same. The game hadn't ended yet. If our collective efforts couldn't fix our problem, love would at least keep us together when the grand finale came around. No matter how this ended, I had two of the most important people in my life with me. I wouldn't be alone.

VESTA

The hour that passed felt painfully slow.

We were stuck in a sanctuary that hovered more than fifty feet above the ground. Around us, the winds screamed and whistled, the currents fluttering against the stone walls and making the windows judder. On our own, assisted only by Reapers who were as intrigued by this new situation as we were, there wasn't much we could do—aside from steering clear of absolute despair.

"Gotta say, it's not looking good for us," Lucas grumbled, his arms crossed and his brows pulled into a dark scowl as he stared at his body, which was glowing brighter than ever in its charmed crystal casing.

"It didn't look great before we got hijacked by the Hermessi," Kailyn said. "We're in their hands now."

"Hey, it's not over yet," I replied. "Tae and the gang are still out there, making Brendel sweat bullets."

"Meanwhile, the Hermessi are preparing to use our bodies as weapons." Ben sighed, giving his daughter a sad look. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, honey." He glanced at Vita and Caia next. "And you two... You don't deserve any of it either."

Caia smiled. "I don't know why you're apologizing. It's not like you caused it. And don't give me the family line, according to which you're supposed to protect us. None of this is on you."

"It's the Hermessi," Vita agreed.

Grace placed a hand on his shoulder, his spiritual essence lighting up briefly under her touch. "Dad... I don't think we've been through worse, but I haven't lost my faith, and neither should you. Vesta is right. Tae is on it. He's made it this far."

"Farther than anyone who undertook the challenge, if I remember correctly," Ben replied, nodding slowly. "You're right, it's too soon to despair."

"That's not entirely accurate." Lucas chuckled. "It's a damn good time to despair, but we can choose not to. It's what has helped us pull through so far."

Looking around, I could see the Reapers were concerned. They knew what this was. They understood. It didn't make it any easier on them, though. Kelara, in particular, didn't hide her emotions. She stood in a corner of the sanctuary, away from our group, seemingly talking to herself.

Remembering Seeley's account of Reapers' telepathic connections, I figured she was actually talking to someone. Quietly, I left the Novaks in their cluster and carefully approached Kelara. Lucky for me, my life-chain was long enough to reach her.

"Can you please just tell me the truth?" Kelara said, gazing out the window. "Can you say something, anything? I know you've got your plate full, but I really need some guidance here."

She waited for an answer, but, judging by the look on her face, it didn't come. Maybe there wasn't anyone on the other end of the line. Kelara was disappointed, yet she quickly perked up when she noticed me watching her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything," I mumbled.

"No, it's okay. I'm not trying to keep secrets from you at this point. We're too far down the rabbit hole, and it's only getting tighter and darker."

I decided that it was worth a try to at least ask a few things, since she didn't seem willing to shoo me away for being curious. A precious window of opportunity with a Reaper—such instances were phenomenally rare, according to Seeley.

"Were you trying to reach out to someone specific?" I asked.

She looked at me, her galaxy eyes wide, yet surprisingly filled with emotion. "Yes."

"Mind if I ask who?"

Kelara shook her head. "Death. I was trying to talk to Death. Maybe Seeley has already told you that we all have a telepathic connection to her, but that she only answers to the upper circles. Seeley and I are just two exceptions of lower-circle Reapers to whom Death actually speaks."

"Yeah, I remember something along those lines. So, she's not answering?"

Exhaling sharply, she shook her head again. "I've been trying to talk to her for a while now. A whole day, at least. But she hasn't responded. All I'm getting is radio silence, and I don't understand why. She never does this. Not with me, anyway. She's always there to answer my questions or to tell me I'm not privy to certain information, but she never, absolutely never, leaves me completely in the dark."

Looking at the other Reapers once more, I noticed there was more tension weighing down on their shoulders. Kelara, by contrast, was more alert and determined, if only by posture alone. It was as if she knew or understood something they didn't, and I needed to know what that was.

"What worries you, exactly?" I asked. "That she's not answering?"

"Well, that too, but there's something else, and I think only Death has the information I need," Kelara replied, one hand fiddling around with her scythe's handle.

"What's going on, Kelara? Please tell me. We're in terrible shape already. Secrecy is just not a good thing to hold on to right now."

I wasn't sure she'd sympathize with my state, but she did. Kelara's pained expression as she tucked a lock of hair behind my ear nearly broke my heart twice over. My entire being hummed from her touch—the spirit reacting to a Reaper's soft caress.

"Brendel knew too much. The Hermessi children's Shade location. Recovering so quickly from Thieron's blow, even though it was still missing a piece," Kelara said. "I'm worried. I'm inclined to believe that there's a Reaper out there helping Brendel with this

information, and the thought alone makes me shudder.”

I stilled, suddenly aware of what she was implying. No wonder she was downright terrified. The prospect of a Reaper, one of Death’s own, conspiring with Brendel was absolutely horrendous, and it could lead to a catastrophe far greater than just the world being destroyed by the elementals.

It signaled the existence of a traitor among Death’s ranks—the very entities that were supposed to be impartial and were obviously forbidden from fraternizing with the living and the Hermessi. I felt the chill of such potential betrayal traveling down my spine.

“Are you sure?” I murmured, unable to look away from her.

“What’s worse is that I don’t think it’s one of us lower-rank Reapers. Healing a wound inflicted by even two-thirds of Death’s scythe requires some serious, old-school mojo. Not the kind I or Seeley, or anyone else here, for that matter, would know about,” she said.

That just made me feel worse. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“I can only think of one of the First Ten. The very first Reapers that Death made, tens of millions of years ago,” Kelara replied. “You know of the Widow Maker, the Soul Crusher, and the Phantom by now.”

“Yes, they were bound to pieces of Thieron. Tae released Widow and Soul, and I have a feeling he’s dealing with the Phantom as we speak,” I said, increasingly alarmed. “You mean to tell me there are seven more of their caliber?”

“Pretty much. I know of one still hanging around our kind, but the other six have sort of vanished, and no one can find them. We’ve heard legends about them. Most of us have never met one, not even the one who remains. But I’m willing to bet the traitor would be a First Tenner. The more I think about it, the more sense it makes.”

“But what happened to the others, that they vanished the way you say they did?”

Kelara shrugged. “No one could tell me. I’ve asked my superiors more than once. But none could answer. Widow, Soul, and Phantom were linked to Thieron, lost across the In-Between. At least they were somewhere. And I know this other First Tenner is on Neraka, in the fae sanctuary, but I’m told he’s not very communicative. Maybe he could tell me where the others are.”

“Who are these First Ten? Do they all have their own insane abilities, like Thieron’s guardians?”

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Leaning against the window frame and surveying the outside world, Kelara proceeded to count the First Ten, using her fingers. “The Unending came first. He’s the biggest mystery, as far as I’m concerned. There aren’t even rumors about the guy. But given that he’s literally Death’s first Reaper, I’ll say this: I would not want to meet him.”

“And yet you might.” I chuckled bitterly. “If you decide to investigate this traitor Reaper issue.”

She gave me an alarmed look. Somehow, my conclusion had surprised her. It shouldn’t have. It was obvious that she was dying to go out and unravel this mystery before Taeral and the others got hurt or worse.

“Second came the Widow Maker, followed by the Soul Crusher and the Phantom,” she continued. “The Spirit Bender was the fifth, and he’s the one who stuck around, but keeps

mostly to himself these days. Does his job, keeps a low profile, doesn't talk much. Most Reapers don't even know how old he is or that he's still working among them. We don't generally communicate as much as you'd think. Anyway, the Time Master was next, then the two sets of so-called twins. Nightmare and Dream, and the Night Bringer and the Morning Star."

"Morning Star?" I replied, raising an eyebrow.

"Forget the human lore," Kelara said. "He's got nothing to do with that, trust me."

"Okay, so what can these guys do? We know Widow is brute force and all that, and that the Soul Crusher loves his interdimensional pockets and puzzles. What about the others? The Phantom et al?"

She lowered her head. "I wish I knew. I'd be the first to tell Seeley, you know. I have no idea, but I think the Spirit Bender might be able to fill in some gaps for me."

"Then go," I said.

Kelara frowned. "Such a mission wouldn't be sanctioned, and I can't reach Death. Were you not listening earlier?"

"So what? Just leave Ben with Rudolph, Caia and me and go figure out what the hell is going on! I'm pretty sure Death will reward you if you find the traitor. Most importantly, as long as he's out there, our survival is at even greater risk. Death gave Tae his mission because she wants to stop the ritual. Whatever this guy is trying to pull off by helping Brendel goes against his own maker. I think that takes precedence here. Babysitting Ben is a literal waste of time for you."

She thought about it for a while, and I waited patiently, already knowing what she would do. Kelara had more in common with Seeley than she thought—including this look that said, "I'm about to get into a world of trouble, but I probably won't regret it."

"You're right," she ultimately said, turning to face me again. "I'll leave you and Ben in Rudolph's care... I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" I laughed. "It's not like there's much left for you to do here, given that... you know, the sanctuary is friggin' hovering, placed under embargo by the Hermessi!"

She wanted to laugh as well, but she couldn't. The world was filled with terror, and there was the possibility that one of her own had been responsible for at least part of it, by aiding Brendel.

Watching her as she walked over to Rudolph and told him what was happening, I couldn't help but worry. Kelara was putting herself at great risk—not before Death, but with the very Reaper she was about to unmask. I was certain that someone like him would not go down easy, and as far as I remembered, these First Ten fellas were significantly stronger and more powerful in terms of Reaper magic.

Even so, it needed to be done, and I had to admit, there was newfound respect in my mind for Kelara. She was every bit as intuitive and relentless as Seeley. Something didn't seem right, and she was more than ready to investigate and fix it. It spoke volumes about her character.

Whatever she was about to uncover, my only hope was that she'd make it out of it in one piece and be able to tell us everything. We deserved the truth, regardless of how

horrible it was. Death's silence was concerning as well, but I didn't even want to theorize about the reasons for it. Death and Reapers were well above my pay grade, yet they were the last thing I'd ever deal with, if the Hermessi got their way.

KELARA

Rudolph did not take kindly to being left with two extra charges instead of one. Nevertheless, I managed to persuade him to take care of Ben, along with Caia and Vesta.

"You're making my life hell," he muttered, practically pouting.

"It's for the greater good. Besides, Ben's an angel compared to chatty Vesta over there," I said, nodding at her as she made her way back to the Novak cluster. I kept Rudolph at a reasonable distance from them, not wanting anyone to hear about my plans. The fewer people who knew about them, the better.

"Where do you need to go that you have to leave me here with them?" Rudolph asked me, somewhat worried.

"I can't tell you," I replied. "But it's in our best interest, believe me. Just make sure the souls in our care don't get into any trouble. I have no idea what the Hermessi are planning next, but based on what we've seen so far, I doubt this will end well," I added, motioning around me at the sanctuary.

"Just be careful and come back quickly, okay?"

I gave him a soft smile. "I'll do my best. Also, don't let Malleus and the rest of his bunch bully you in any way. You're under Seeley's and my protection."

"I don't need your protection." He scoffed, making me chuckle.

"You most certainly do with these old jerks. Don't let them get to you. Don't engage them in any conversation regarding me or Seeley. They love a good gossip."

"Which is ironic. We're supposed to be better than that," Rudolph said.

"Meh, yes and no... Remember we were once living creatures, too. Some character traits follow us beyond death," I replied.

I bid my farewells to the Reaper crew, stating that I'd be right back. I didn't wait for their replies. Giving Vesta a brief nod, I made myself disappear from everyone's sight, then zapped out of the sanctuary.

On the ground, the atmosphere was tense. Most of the fae's earlier visitors had been sent away, for their own safety. River stayed close, joined by Kailani, Draven, and Serena. Everyone else had gone back to Luceria and Mount Zur to organize a mass evacuation process. The farther they all got from this sanctuary, the better. I'd been persistent in my advice.

"Seeley, are you there?" I called out, unseen and unheard by the living as I walked toward them. My telepathic connection to Seeley never failed, but he didn't answer straightaway. Several minutes passed in what felt like the heaviest silence, while I wondered how much of what I'd been thinking about the First Ten would turn out to be true. If even a small percentage became reality, we were essentially screwed.

How would I find the traitor? How would I stop him? I was a puny ant compared to any of the First Ten, and Death wasn't receptive to my pleas for help. I felt awful, basically on my own in the middle of the kind of mystery that could easily become the Reapers' undoing. Nothing tarnished our species worse than a double agent, especially in these circumstances.

"Kelara. I'm here." Seeley's voice came through. "Is everything okay there?"

"Not really," I replied and proceeded to tell him about the sanctuaries rising, the Hermessi reacting to any of the living who tried to interfere, and our expulsion protocol. Seeley wasn't happy. In fact, he released a flurry of some of the most profane curse words I had ever heard—which was such a startling contrast to his dapper look and demeanor.

"How are the others handling it?" he asked me after a long pause.

"Don't worry about them. They're Reapers, just like you and me. What's the deal on your end? There hasn't been much communication with GASP for quite a while, now."

"Ugh. It's... complicated. Let's stick with that."

"You're not answering my question. Did they find Phyla?"

"Sort of. I mean, they found it. I think the challenge has begun, as well, but all we can see is bright light beneath a glass bell. We're not allowed in there."

"We? You mean Reapers?"

"Exactly. Soul, Widow, and I are stuck on the outside," he said. "And Kabbah with his Fallon meat suit."

"Do you know what the challenge is about?"

"I think Soul knows, but he's not telling me anything, the sick jackass. I imagine they're bound by some code of silence surrounding Thieron and the process of retrieving it. They've kept it more or less under wraps from the very beginning," Seeley explained.

"And Brendel?" I asked.

"That's the intriguing part. We think she got sucked into the challenge, as well. I couldn't get beyond the glass bell, but Brendel could. However, before she managed to do something, the light exploded, and it all came to a sudden halt. The other Hermessi are here, hovering silently, doing absolutely nothing. It's weird."

"What's even weirder is that Brendel got inside the challenge. I thought that was impossible," I replied.

"You and me both. But, then again, the First Ten are clearly secretive beyond the norms of common sense, so I'm not going to assume anything, going forward. Everything can be questioned, as far as they're concerned."

I braced myself for what came next. I'd been formulating my thoughts rather carefully, looking for the right way to tell Seeley about my suspicions. A couple of yards to my right, River stood with Kailani, Draven, and Serena, discussing options around the sanctuary.

Unfortunately, none of their escape scenarios seemed feasible, as long as the ritual was still so damn close to completion. If anything, things were about to get much worse.

"Speaking of the First Ten," I said to Seeley, "I think we might have a problem."

Seeley didn't reply, but I knew he was listening. I could feel the tension thickening the air, even with the millions of miles currently between us.

"I suppose you've wondered about how Brendel found out about the Hermessi children's Shade location. About how she was able to heal so quickly after Taeral hit her. About how she managed to reach the Earthly Dimension in the first place," I continued.

"Most certainly, yes," he said.

"And you won't think I'm crazy if I tell you that I suspect one of the First Ten of having played a part in it."

"I..." He paused. "No. What made you reach that conclusion?"

"The level of knowledge she has is impossible for a Hermessi, no matter how powerful and how old Brendel is," I replied. "Especially where Thieron was involved. I'm convinced she had help, and that someone with inside intel was able to get her out of the state Taeral had left her in back on the Fire Star."

"It couldn't have been Widow or Soul," he said. "They've been with us the whole time, and I can't find a motive for them to even think about such terrible betrayal."

"Right. And the Phantom is still inside Phyla," I added. "So let's cross those three off the list. It still leaves us with seven potential culprits."

He sighed deeply. I could imagine him running a hand through his black hair, like he always did when he had trouble finding a way to express dark thoughts in clear sentences. It wasn't in Seeley's nature to suspect fellow Reapers of wrongdoing, and I remembered how hard he'd taken Yamani's actions.

"Are you sure it would be one of the First Ten, and not one of the higher-circle Reapers?" he asked.

"I doubt it. Like I said, what Brendel pulled off is not something any of us or our superiors would be able to assist with. It's as close to pure Death magic as I can think of, which is why I'm looking at the First Ten."

"Fine. Okay... What do you intend to do, then?"

"I was hoping you could get Soul or Widow to talk to me, before anything else. I plan to investigate this, for sure," I said.

Silence settled between us for a minute or so, before Seeley gave me his response. "I can try. It's all I can promise you, Kelara. They're not very sociable. I mean, with us it's a little different, since we're basically in the same boat here. But I'll try."

"Thank you. It's all I'm asking."

Moments later, an unfamiliar voice slithered through my head as I glanced up at the sanctuary. Clouds gathered around it like cotton-candy snakes, further isolating the structure from the rest of the world. I didn't like the view, knowing it had the Hermessi's touch, but I couldn't do anything about it. "I hear you've been asking for me," the voice said, sending chills beneath my skin. "I am the Soul Crusher, breaker of space and... well, souls. How may I be of assistance today?"

"Dear lord, you're as creepy as they said you'd be," I managed.

He laughed. "I'll consider it a compliment. What do you want, Kelara? I'm busy staring at inactive Hermessi while a bunch of living creatures try to make Thieron whole again. I am heavily entertained."

"If that was sarcasm, you need to work on it," I replied dryly. "Anyway, thank you for talking to me. I want to know more about the First Ten."

"Ah. My brothers and sisters. Your friend here says you think one of them might be involved with Brendel?"

I felt a frown drawing my eyebrows together. "You don't sound surprised."

He laughed again. I found the sound of his voice to be quite irksome, but I needed him to tell me everything he could about the First Ten. "I'm not. If there's one thing you should know about Death's first creations, it's that they're unpredictable. Well, we're unpredictable."

"And would you help Brendel? Would any of you help Brendel?" I asked.

"That's a tough one, I admit. I'm not sure. You see, there's one aspect of the First Ten that rarely appears in any conversation. We were handpicked by Death. We didn't get a say in what we wanted to do in our afterlife. We were made, and then we stayed by her side, whether we liked it or not. Those were the early days, anyway, and I suppose not all of us adjusted properly."

"So, you think one of you might've done it."

"I've been out for too long to tell you who. Remember, I've been locked away inside Zetos for a very long time. Widow's been out of the loop, as well. Not to mention the Phantom. But I know the Spirit Bender was the loyal sort. He stayed by Death's side as she made the next generations of Reapers. He kept in touch with the others, too, even when Death didn't."

"Why didn't she?" I asked.

"Oh, honey, that's a conversation we can save for another time. Just don't expect her to have feelings or a moral compass. She doesn't abide by the codes of the living, much like us. Her whims are her own," Soul said. "Anyway, in short, if you want to know something about the First Ten, you're better off talking to the Spirit Bender about it. If you can find him."

"He's on Neraka," I replied. "I planned on talking to him anyway. I was hoping you'd have more insight before I go there."

"Kelara. You're a young Reaper. A lower-circle agent of Death. I don't have much to tell you about my brothers and sisters because, well, where's the fun in that? But I can warn you... you're in way over your head. If you're to proceed with this, you had better tread carefully. The First Ten have little regard for their fellow Reapers. They've been around for too long to care about anything."

Taking it all in, I quickly became comfortable with the risks that I was about to take. None of the upcoming tasks would be easy, but I couldn't sit on the sidelines anymore. Since my superiors had told me to stay put and not question any of their orders, I was determined to do the exact opposite.

"Thank you, Soul. Even that little bit of information helps," I said.

"Oh, don't thank me yet. The Spirit Bender is not easy to talk to. At least, he wasn't

when I last saw him. But he's a strict little bugger; I doubt that's changed. Just be careful, Kelara. First Tenners can do a lot of damage to Reapers."

"Why didn't Death limit your powers, if you were so powerful?" I asked.

"I don't think she cared. We were all her subjects. She didn't think we'd dare upset her in any way. But, since she lost Thieron, Death also lost her ability to find the First Ten and punish them if they got out of hand. I mean, after all, she couldn't find us in Thieron. So, my brethren have been pretty much on their own for the past four or five million years."

I found it sad. To have had so much power and authority over us, and to have lost so much of it with Thieron. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty, even for Death, but what good did that do in this case?

Moving away from River and the others, I prepared myself for the journey ahead. Treading space to Neraka wasn't the difficult part. Getting the Spirit Bender to talk to me was the real challenge.

But it had to be done. Someone needed to find out if there was a traitor among us, no matter the risks. I worried about Seeley, Taeral, and the crew. The fight to get Phyla had already begun, which meant that the traitor Reaper was also likely on the move, weaving his web and preparing the next steps of his betrayal.

I had to find him before he did something to disrupt Taeral's mission.

AMELIA

The sun warmed my face.

It felt so sweet... I hadn't experienced that in a long time, I thought. Since I'd become a vampire, to be precise. My eyes peeled open, and for a brief moment, I wanted to cover myself quickly, before my skin caught fire, remembering that I was still a vampire.

But nothing happened, except the bliss that inundated me as I basked in the morning rays of sunshine. I wasn't alone, I realized. A pair of strong arms were tightly wrapped around me, holding me close. I felt his body, his tall, athletic frame, and his taut muscles against my back. It seemed... familiar.

Turning my head, I found Raphael sleeping serenely in our bed. Our bed in our own tree house in The Shade. In The Shade, where there was day and night again. Since Amane and Amal had identified the protein in Derek's blood that allowed him to walk in the sun as a vampire, things had changed for my species.

The darkness spell had been lifted from The Shade, allowing a natural cycle to take place. We had mornings, now. And noon. Afternoon. Evenings... and the nights with a big moon and starry sky. The sweetness of it all made me smile for a few seconds. Until the distant memory of a dream came back to me.

I was with Raphael, Taeral—out of all people—Eira, Lumi, and Nethissis. Ah, what weird pairs we'd made. Varga and Eva, the future Lady of the Lamias. Riza and Herakles. And there had been Reapers aiding us, as well. I had glimpses of it in the back of my head. Moments that seemed impossible, now that I was fully awake and remembering.

Our tree house was gorgeous, from what I could tell. And my mind had trouble sitting still. I wanted to think about the dream some more. It had seemed so real. So horrifyingly real! But the pale orange organza curtains fluttered in the morning breeze, pulled back to bathe the entire bedroom in golden light. I had a vanity table in the corner, with an oval mirror and most of my skincare products neatly displayed beneath it. Raphael had stopped to kiss me on the back of my neck, more than once, during my evening routines. Our bed was huge. The mattress was all memory foam, and it got us as close to sleeping on clouds as anyone might've hoped.

Birds sang in the redwoods nearby. I was willing to bet there were plenty of nests above our home, too. Raphael tightened his embrace, making me giggle. This felt so

strange, yet so natural. We'd been together for months, from what I remembered. I glanced up at the ceiling and noticed the glow-in-the-dark stars I'd mounted on it when we'd first gotten the tree house. Looking back at Raphael, I found him awake, his blue and green eyes darkened and filled with the kind of intensity that made the blood rush to my head.

"Good morning, goddess," he whispered.

Every word was glazed with honey, and I savored them all. Smiling, I brushed the tip of my nose against his. "Good morning, my love."

It felt right. I should've been happier about this, but there was a nagging feeling, an aftertaste of a bad dream. It lingered on the edges of my consciousness. How could a bad dream have such an effect on my reality?

"You're not yourself this morning," Raphael said, instantly picking up on the discrepancy. I shouldn't have expected less from him. Raphael knew me better than anyone. Even better than my parents. He recognized every single shift in my behavior, every subconscious hint that my body language gave off.

I kissed him, looking to anchor myself deeper in this world. "I had a bad dream," I said, my lips moving against his. They were so soft, so warm, and intricately designed to bring me to the very peaks of existence. "It felt so real. I'm still adjusting to reality."

Raphael watched me intently for a minute or so, adoration glimmering in his mismatched eyes. I loved the way he blinked slowly at the break of dawn, his eyelashes lazily arching upward, thick and black as they cast their shadows. They were partially responsible for his permanent bedroom-eyes look, though he'd repeatedly stated that I was also to blame for that.

"What was the dream about?" he asked, one hand moving up and tracing invisible lines along my spine. Only then did I realize that I only had a thin layer of silk on me, a short camisole with spaghetti straps through which I could feel the fresh morning air. The subtle chills made me cuddle closer, my body demanding Raphael's natural heat.

"It was insane, though I barely remember parts of it," I replied. "The Hermessi had gone crazy after the Blackout, trying to kill us all. We had a crew... We went out looking for Death. We dealt with Reapers and all kinds of monsters. Weird, I tell ya."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Did it involve Taeral?"

I nodded. "How'd you know?"

"I think we shared a dream, Amelia," he said, his expression shifting between fascination and concern. "Is that even possible?"

My hand came up, cupping his handsome face. I reveled in the feel of his sharp jawline, short, sun-kissed stubble covering most of it. It tickled my skin, but I loved it. I brushed my thumb over his lips, my heart already racing. We still couldn't get enough of each other. There were days when we didn't even leave the tree house—why would we? I'd thought. We had everything we needed here, and peace had been reigning over the In-Between, the Supernatural Dimension, and The Shade ever since the Blackout. There was nothing for us to worry about. It had all been a dream.

"I think anything is possible in this world," I replied, my fingertips delightfully tingling as they traced the sharp contour of his face. "It's weird, but not unheard of."

"I don't remember much of it either, only that I really wanted it all to end so I could be with you," he whispered. "It was all I cared about. Stopping them all. Making a future for ourselves."

"Maybe we talked about some of this stuff before. You know, over coffee or during dinner. Little bits of conversation that got stored inside our subconscious and somehow manifested in the form of dreams."

"Like you said, anything is possible. I, for one, didn't think you'd ever be into me," he replied, a lazy smile drawing his lips up. I licked mine, already yearning to kiss him again. His hands caught my waist, pulling me against him.

"Why would you not think that? You're a Perfect. You could have anyone you want," I said, as he brought his face closer to mine. Birds sang just outside our window, filling my heart with pure, unadulterated joy. This was the most beautiful moment of my life, and my life was filled to the brim with such extraordinary snippets.

He kissed the tip of my nose. Raphael could be so gentle, so delicate sometimes, that it alone was enough to bring me to tears. "I may be a Perfect, but that's just a fortuitous gene cocktail. You, my love, on the other hand... you're truly perfect."

It was enough to make my vision blurry, my eyes wet as I kissed him deeply, with all the love I had in me. It felt incredible to be here, sharing a bed and a life like this. I'd been blessed by the universe, in a way.

He amplified every sensation as he took control, rolling us over. Raphael was on top, and I sank into the mattress, giggling as he proceeded to drop thousands of kisses on my cheek, the side of my neck, and all the way down to the collarbone.

"You are, I'm serious," he said, continuing his conquest of every inch of my body, moving downward and cutting my breath short.

"I'm what?" I asked, the oxygen nearly cut off from my brain as Raphael teased with his lips, drawing hot, wet, swirling lines with his tongue. Worshipping me...

"Perfect. You're more of a Perfect than I ever will be, and that brain of yours plays a crucial role in this. I've told you before, Amelia. Intelligence is sexy."

I laughed, but quickly sucked in a breath when he came back up, my legs wrapped around his waist, tightening as our bodies moved in sublime unison. Our souls met halfway through, in sync with one another. The atoms in our beings sang odes of joy and happiness as we made love into the late morning.

We never broke eye contact, and I could feel him peering straight into my soul, while I peeled away at the layers of blue and green in his gaze, searching for the spark I'd seen in him since day one. My name lingered on his lips as we climbed our spiraling staircase, and I cried out his when we exploded in colorful waves of ecstasy, falling back into the sky and disintegrating completely, before we were reunited between the silken sheets. Forever mine. Forever his.

I had a hard time remembering the day we'd met, or the moment that had made me think that yes, Raphael was the one for me. Looking back, I couldn't even identify our first kiss. But everything between us felt so natural, so sweet and wonderful. The dream became increasingly distant, mere smudges of darkness and angst, certainly not something I wanted to be a part of.

In the end, a night's vision didn't matter. This right here, this mattered. I could feel him. I could smell him. I could touch him and kiss him. This was real, and I pushed all my suspicions away, rejecting the very concept that what I'd dreamt had not been a dream at all.

I melted in his arms as we caught our breaths and reveled in the afterglow, as we whispered sweet words to one another and strengthened promises we'd made before. This was the only reality I wanted or needed. The sensations were all too vibrant, downright palpable.

It was a dream. All that horror... It was just a dream.

TAERAL

I'd had the strangest dream. For a moment, it had seemed real. Maybe a little too real. It had made me sit up in an abrupt awakening, panting and sweating from those fabricated ordeals. Looking out through the tall window in the kitchen, I couldn't help but marvel at the Fire Star's beauty. To even think that the Hermessi we'd awakened would turn against us like in my nightmare was simply preposterous. An insult, even, to the elements that fueled our worlds. That fueled me.

There was hot coffee in my mug, sweetened with red-bee honey and gleryon milk. Outside the capital city, I remembered the gleryon farms, where the majestic animals were raised and cared for, by royal decree. Gleryons had once been a little too close to extinction, but they'd made a remarkable return into the mainstream. And what a good thing that was, I thought. Their milk was delicious, with a hint of sweetness that I hadn't tasted in any other milks across the In-Between, the Supernatural Dimension, and even The Shade.

"What am I doing, thinking about Fire Star cows?" I muttered to myself.

It had been a strange night. No wonder my brain needed a solid reset. But it felt nice to be here. To know that this was real, and not what I'd dreamt. My mother's villa was conveniently positioned about a mile from the imperial palace, on the west side of the capital city. Everything around me made sense, but it felt... foreign. Why did we live here? Why weren't we in the palace, where we belonged?

My mother was the queen, the beloved jinni queen. My father was the king of the Fire Star. And a Hermessi child? No, I'd dreamt that part. The line between reality and my frazzled subconscious was still blurred. I'd hoped the coffee might fix that, but I didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

I hadn't seen any pictures of my father in this place. Only smiling portraits of my mother and me. It had made sense when I'd first passed by them, through the ground-floor hallway, but it didn't anymore. Something, someone was missing. My father. Yes, my father was missing.

"What is wrong with me?" I asked myself, hoping it would trigger an answer from my waking brain.

"Nothing is wrong with you, my darling," my mother said, startling me.

I hadn't even seen her standing in the wide arch that opened into the hallway, leaning

against the frame and watching me with a warm smile on her face. Her lower body was misty gray, hovering above the marble floor, and she wore a dark blue velvet tunic with gold buttons and delicate embroidery on the sleeves and raised collar. She wasn't wearing her smaller crown, and I found that odd, because I'd rarely seen her without it.

"Why are we living here?" I mumbled, clutching my coffee with one hand as I turned in my chair to look at her. My mother frowned, confused by my question.

"What do you mean?"

"Why aren't we living in the palace, where we're supposed to?"

My question surprised her. She seemed worried, as if I wasn't making any sense. I'd spent the past hour trying to fill in the gaps, but I had many blanks I'd yet to clarify. This was all real. I felt the cold tabletop and the ceramic mug. The floor beneath my boots. I heard the birds outside. I tasted the sweet and milky coffee. It made sense. And yet, it didn't. I'd been so consumed by the previous night's dream that it felt as though I was still haunted by it.

But when the cloud was lifted and the real world set in, I still had questions left unanswered. Important things that had somehow slipped through my fingers, questions that, for the life of me, I couldn't find the answers to.

"Are you serious, Tae?" my mother replied, moving slowly toward me.

The sun burst through the windows, bathing everything in its reddish gold light. Reflections from the brass vessels and chalices displayed on the counters jumped across the room, creating a mesmerizing visual effect.

"I'm sorry. I had the strangest dream, and I'm having a hard time grasping reality. I'll be okay, don't worry about me. But, you know, just humor me on this," I said, unwilling to let go. There were things I needed to know. Things I was supposed to know but didn't. Despite the shame burning in my cheeks, I had to get some answers. "Why aren't we living in the palace? Where's Dad?"

My mother looked as though I'd just punched her in the stomach. I instantly regretted my persistence, but I also had to keep going. Clearly, something had happened, and I'd fallen out of the loop somewhere along the way.

"Tae... Are you unwell?" she murmured. Placing a hand on my shoulder, she gave me a long, pained stare.

I shook my head in a bid to comfort her. "I'm fine. I swear. It's just... I don't know how to explain this, but this dream I had. It was so intense, so all-consuming, that I'm simply not sure of what is real and what isn't anymore. I don't mean to cause you any harm, and rest assured, I will seek a witch's help for this strange feeling of mine, but in the meantime, can you just tell me?"

My mother let a deep sigh out of her chest, but she understood and accepted what I thought was a pretty shoddy excuse—though it was the only one that made any sense. "Your father and his sister, Lidera... They died during the Blackout. The Hermessi's awakening was simply too powerful for some of the one thousand and one fae present on Strava at the time."

Grief gathered in the pit of my stomach, a puddle that burned and ate away at everything in its path. My chest ached, and I suddenly wanted to go back to not knowing,

or even back to the dream, where my father's spirit was still present. Where I'd still had a chance to save him by finding... "Phyla," I managed, confused once again. What a fickle thing the brain was. My mind refused to grasp certain things, and my father's death was one of them. Of course, I felt awful for my aunt as well, though we'd never really been close.

My father had died a while back, then, and I'd woken up thinking I'd find him here. That my dream had been the worst thing to happen. This had to be reality, in that case. Reality always outmatched the dream in terms of pain and anguish.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I really am," I said, my voice trembling. It took a considerable amount of effort not to break down crying. There were still mysteries about my life that needed some additional unraveling, and my mother had the answers. I'd been truthful in one part of my earlier statement—I'd definitely seek assistance from one of the GASP witches. That dream had done quite a number on me, and I couldn't figure out why.

"It's okay, honey. I guess we all deal with trauma in our own way, in our own time," she replied, rubbing my upper back in slow, circular motions. She always did this when I was sad. My earliest memory involved this particular touch of hers. Soothing and calming. Nothing like a mother's touch to make you feel better. "I think you've been holding this in for a long time, and it finally manifested in this terrible dream you say you had. Maybe this is your way of coping."

I felt terrible for having just made her relive what had to have been one of the worst moments in her life. My mother's love for my father was unending—so strong and intense that nothing, perhaps not even death, could truly break them apart.

"As for why we're not living in the palace anymore... I hope you remember that I renounced the throne," she added. I wasn't sure what came as the bigger shock, my father's death or my mother's decision to surrender her right to rule over the Fire Star.

"Shouldn't I have had a say in that?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You did. You're the one who came up with it. You said your aunt could continue Sherus's lineage better than you or I ever could. I'm a jinni; you're a hybrid. You know the Fire Star fae are quite strict about bloodlines here. They never truly liked me or my relationship with Sherus."

"That's insane," I breathed, not believing any of it.

My mother straightened her back. "Tae. You've had a rough night. That much we both agree on. Shall I get Corrine to come see you as soon as possible?"

I was baffled and unable to react. My world was hanging by a thread and falling apart at the seams, and I couldn't understand why. Every fiber in my body told me that this was real, that this had been happening since the Blackout, but I had a hard time even registering all the words that had come out of my mother's mouth.

"My aunt... Which one? I thought Dad only had one sister," I managed, but I didn't get an answer, as the doorbell's stringent chime interrupted us. In a split second, the entire conversation drifted out of my head. It was as if there was someone else behind the wheel in my head, forcing me to look away and go down a different path. I didn't want to, but I didn't have a choice.

"Oh, that's got to be Eira! She did say she was picking you up this morning," my

mother said, lighting up like the sun.

"Eira."

Her name made me feel warm on the inside. I had an image of her in my mind, something left over from what was now just a faint memory of the dreaded dream. Strangely enough, even with it fading away, reality wasn't getting any clearer.

My mother rushed to the front door, and I followed, moving almost mechanically. Eira was the one creature I felt would bring light into my darkened soul. The morning had started out with great difficulties. Maybe she could make it all better.

As soon as my mother opened the door and I found myself staring at Eira, I knew, I just knew, that she belonged here, smiling at me the way she was.

"Good morning," Eira said, holding up a small woven basket of pastries. "I thought you'd like these. The baker down the street makes some phenomenal doori bows."

Indeed, they looked delicious. Pastry bows glazed with honey and sprinkled with dried berries. If I remembered correctly, they also had a sweet, vanilla-like filling. My mouth was already watering. How was my body so accustomed to this scene, when my mind was still half in and half out?

"Oh, thank you, darling," my mother said, taking the basket and giving Eira a short but heartfelt hug. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Eira seemed alarmed. "Sore eyes? Why? What happened?"

She walked over and put her arms around my waist. Pushing herself up, she kissed me, and I felt as though gravity was suddenly gone from this world. Eira tasted of sunshine and honeycombs, and we were... we were together. Why hadn't I remembered that? Why was this surprising, when her gestures toward me came so naturally to her?

I hugged her, exhaling as I pressed my forehead against hers. I needed this so much. A smile spread on my face, refusing to go away. "I just had a rough night," I said. "Nothing to worry about. It's all gone now."

Eira watched me intently for the better part of a minute, then tilted her head back slightly, as if to get a better look. "Are you sure?"

"I hope so!" my mom exclaimed. "Tae had an awful dream. He woke up with severe memory gaps. I'm worried someone might've put some kind of hex on him."

That didn't sound so far-fetched. "Why would anyone do that?" Eira asked her.

"I have no idea. Tae is a good soul. Honorable and kind," my mom replied, genuinely concerned. "But I will definitely ask Corrine to come over and check up on him."

"Mom, it's cool," I said, beaming at her. "I'm all better. Eira's here."

They both laughed, and Eira kissed me again. It would've been rude to stop her, when her lips were so soft, her heart thudding in her chest and sending echoes into mine. We were a pair, for sure. It irked me that I couldn't remember how we'd met, but this moment was simply too nice for me to spoil it with my lapsing memory. Mom was right. Corrine would definitely be able to help.

"Well, I'm glad to know I have that effect on you," Eira said.

"How is the Water Fae Division coming along?" my mom asked as we went back into the kitchen. She placed the basket on the breakfast table, while I helped take out some plates and napkins. Eira was quite familiar with this place, it seemed, as she helped

herself to some coffee. She liked hers black.

"The what now?" I replied, forgetting to play along. That was the trouble with a confused mind trying to fit in. I'd deceived myself into thinking I could pull this off. Instead, I drew curious glances from both my mom and Eira.

"The Water Fae Division," Eira said. "We established it six months ago, when I first came here from Akvo. GASP decreed there should be elemental divisions on every fae planet, so none of the life-giving elements would be underrepresented in case of an emergency or a crisis."

"Right. And you're a water fae," I said. Why did I find that odd?

She laughed lightly. I loved that sound. Like a forest creek singing. "Yes, I'm a water fae. Pretty sure that was the main spark that got us started, in the first place."

"Yes. True. I'm a fire fae, among other things. You're water. Makes sense." I sighed, unwilling to go through the motions of asking for clarifications again. My mother shot me another worried look, and I didn't want to get her riled up after our earlier conversation.

But Eira was incredibly observant and tactful, I realized, as she took the liberty of kindly reminding me how we'd ended up together in the first place. My gaze wandered between her ocean-blue eyes and the way in which she tore her pastry ribbon into smaller pieces, crumbs spreading over the small plate.

"It was my very first day on the Fire Star," she said. "I'd never been here before. And you were part of the GASP envoy that was sent out to greet me and my team. You didn't think water fae were needed to secure the peace here, until those rebels started attacking the queen's caravans outside the city."

"The rebels," I replied, hoping she'd elaborate.

"Not everyone liked us in the royal family," my mom interjected, "but there were plenty who supported us and didn't want us to step aside. Even though I made a formal statement and urged people not to stand in the way of fae bloodline succession, some went ahead and organized rebel crews in a bid to take the queen down."

"And since they were all fire fae, they set a lot of places on fire," Eira continued. "Including cultural treasures of the capital city, might I add. Us water fae came in handy."

I chuckled softly as she popped a pastry piece into her mouth, chewing and grinning slyly. Oh, she'd won that functionality argument, for sure, and she loved gloating about it. To be fair, I enjoyed seeing her like this, as well. The Eira before me was rather different from the one in my dream, whose grief still haunted me. We'd lost a friend, she and I.

"And Inalia?" I asked, a mere shot in the dark, checking to see what else I'd dreamt wrong. Eira's smile faded, and, for a moment, she looked as though she had trouble swallowing. Once she was done, she took a long sip of her coffee and gazed into my eyes.

"She's buried in the Military Resting Place, on the southern edge of the capital. She died saving us. The insurgents had bows and arrows, which we didn't see coming," she said. "Tomorrow is the five-month anniversary of that battle."

I nodded slowly, waiting for her to either change the subject or keep going. Either way would've been fine for me. But my mother had a better idea.

"I'm making another batch of fresh coffee. Do you kids want some?"

Checking my cup, I gave her a smirk. "First of all, kids? Seriously? Second, yes, please. Your coffee is way better than mine."

"It's all in the water temperature, honey," my mom said, putting the kettle on.

"I'll have some coffee, too, please," Eira replied. "I didn't sleep all that well, either."

"Oh? What happened?" my mom asked, her back still to us as she fiddled with the French press, a gift from Derek and Sofia.

"Just a bad dream," Eira said, a half-smile drawing beautiful fine lines at the corners of her mouth. "Guess you're not the only one who had a rough night."

Suddenly, I was intrigued, the wheels in my head turning faster than usual. A sort of what-if proposition began to take shape, and I gathered the courage to ask. "What was the dream about?"

Eira thought about answering for a few moments. Silence reigned supreme in the kitchen, with the exception of the kettle water bubbling as it reached its boiling point. My mother's attention was also focused on Eira, who eventually decided to tell us.

"It was creepy. The Hermessi were trying to destroy us all. Some kind of ancient ritual. I wasn't a water fae. I wasn't even from Akvo, but I had water abilities because I was a Hermessi child." She paused and laughed, shaking her head as if unable to believe the inner workings of her subconscious. In that respect, I completely understood her. "Like I said, creepy. Crazy. But ultimately unimportant."

I wanted to agree. With all my heart, I wanted to agree. But dread was already creeping up my spine, pulling alarm bells, warning me that something was terribly off with this picture. Eira had described bits of the same dream I'd had last night.

What were the odds of the two of us dreaming the same thing? And what were the odds that my mom wouldn't flip out if I told her about it? A few deep breaths later, I gave Eira a warm smile and made a decision to talk to Corrine about this, first. If anyone could help shed some light, it was her.

But even with that resolution in mind, I worried. Was I under some kind of magical influence? Was Eira affected, as well? Had someone toyed with us, warping our reality to the extent where we'd woken up doubting our entire existence? Eira seemed okay with her experience, nowhere near as concerned as I was. Maybe she'd coped with it better.

I could try and follow her lead, at least, and brush it all off. In all fairness, we were looking at a bright and sunny morning, with great coffee and delicious pastries. I would've been a fool to spoil any of it.

Varga and I had been together for months. That thought had been the first thing that had calmed me down, shortly after I'd woken from one of the ugliest and most terrifying dreams I'd ever had. I'd woken up in bed, all alone, the chills of morning making me shiver. I'd expected to feel Varga's arms around me, until I remembered that he'd been summoned to an early meeting with his parents.

Slipping into a long, white cotton dress which left my shoulders bare and some of my golden-emerald scales glinting in the natural light, I pulled my hair up into a loose bun and made my way down the stairs. Barefooted, I enjoyed the feel of the cold stone against my soles, my toes wiggling.

The Nevertide castle never ceased to amaze me. A majestic structure with tall watchtowers and solid stone brickwork, it inspired awe and reverence from the outside. It demanded attention and respect, and it was damned near impossible to breach in the event of a war—though we hadn't had a single significant conflict since the Blackout. It turned out there was peace after Ta'Zan.

The interiors, however, were exquisite and elegant. Enormous paintings and antique weaponry adorned the stone walls, while rich velvet curtains framed the giant windows. The northern, upper-level windows were made with stained glass, which fractured the light and filled the hall and the rooms with flakes of red, green, yellow, and blue. I loved the furniture as well. Every piece was built from sturdy, prized woods, beautifully sculpted and perfectly matched to every space inside the castle.

I had often found myself gazing at the wrought iron chandeliers hanging from the tall ceilings, candles flickering at all times of the day. Despite its epic feel, the castle was warm and welcoming. Maybe it had something to do with the people who inhabited it. Ash and Ruby were exceptional rulers, kind and generous and just in their decisions. Varga took after them both—a perfect combination of might and goodness that had made me fall so deeply in love with him.

Descending from the first floor, where Varga and I had been set up with our own chambers, I took a moment to admire the grand hall, the very center of the castle's living quarters, which branched out into the other wings through wide and well-lit hallways. The servants buzzed around, each of them smiling and looking forward to another day. Considering how Hazel had first found this place, the change in the overall atmosphere

was significant. Everyone was happy, including me.

But this morning I'd found myself bothered by a lingering feeling, and I was convinced it had something to do with my nightmare. It had taken a lot of breathing and pacing around the bedroom to get a full grip on reality, to remind myself that we hadn't heard anything from the Hermessi since the Blackout and that everything was okay.

However, there were troubling gaps in my memory, and it worried me. I felt as though I'd had some kind of out-of-body experience and missed a few steps on the way back to consciousness. I wasn't running from fiery Hermessi anymore. I wasn't fighting for my life or helping Taeral find pieces of... what was the thing's name again? Thieron. Right. The three pieces of Thieron.

I chuckled inwardly as I reached the bottom of the stairs and made my way toward the breakfast room. Of the many ground-floor chambers in the palace, some had been left unused after Tejus's victory, so Varga and I had recently come up with the idea of turning one of them into our own personal breakfast room.

"Good morning, Miss Eva," one of the servants greeted me as I opened the door to our special little spot.

"Good morning, Angela," I said, smiling. She was one of the few people we'd retained on staff, and she was always the first one to arrive, ever happy to prepare breakfast for us.

Already setting the breakfast plates and the appropriate tableware, Angela measured me from head to toe. "You look spectacular today. Simple is always better, especially with your build."

"Thank you, Angela, you are most kind," I replied, then motioned for her to stop setting things up. "Don't worry about breakfast today, please. I promised Varga I'd make him something."

Angela stilled, seeming slightly disappointed. "But I was going to prepare your favorite cinnamon toast."

I laughed. "That is much appreciated, but just take a break for today. You can do the toast tomorrow. I still know my way around a kitchen, and, while I'm not exactly an expert chef, I'd still like to be able to surprise my boyfriend now and again."

"Ah. I understand and respect that. I keep telling the prince he's ridiculously fortunate to have you. This is definitely one of the reasons why."

Giggling mostly to herself, Angela excused herself and left the breakfast room, while I raided the fridge for some of my favorite ingredients. Elonora and Nevis had brought over some special cheese varieties from Neraka during their last visit, and I was dying to try them. Filling a wooden platter with dozens of small chunks which ranged from creamy to heavily matured, I thought about last night's dream some more.

The more I did that, the less sense it made.

I was happy here. I loved Varga, and he loved me. We'd met...

"Wait. Where did we meet?" I muttered, stopping in front of the breakfast table with the platter in my hands. I'd basically blanked out, trying to remember a most basic and key point in my life. How had we met? I'd moved here from Calliope. I hadn't spoken to my mother in a little under a year, since I'd become a vampire. It hurt me, but I'd learned

to live with it.

Sighing, I placed the platter in the middle of the table and completed the ensemble with plenty of fresh bread and fruits, along with several small jars of what Varga liked to call "chutney" and his favorite honey—a thick, dark brown liquid with a smoky top note. I liked it as well, so I took a moment to unscrew the lid and smell it.

Closing my eyes, I wondered what it reminded me of.

Nothing. It reminded me of nothing. I'd never smelled it before, which was absurd. I liked this honey. I'd tasted it before. Surely, I'd smelled it, too!

"Dammit." I cursed under my breath and added some linen napkins, neatly folding them in rectangles and placing the cutlery on top.

I walked over to the windows and pushed them open, letting the sun come down. The golden rays warmed the grayish stone and my heart along with it, as I mentally thanked Amal and Amane for having made our vampire dreams come true. Finally, we were all day-walkers.

Looking out, I followed the green, rolling hills that surrounded the castle. Houses had been built on them, and small roads snaked between them and around the castle. I could hear the stream flowing below. It provided the entire city with fresh water, and it enabled the growth of some truly extraordinary orchards just north of here.

"Good grief, you're stunning." Varga's voice came through, prompting me to turn around. He stood in the doorway, already fitted into his leather uniform. His prince crown rested atop his head, brownish-blond curls slipping through the Celtic-style golden knots of the relatively simple but elegant band.

I'd been lingering between a dark dream and this sweet reality all morning and seeing Varga for the first time since I'd awakened felt like the greatest reward. I bolted across the breakfast room and jumped into his arms. Varga was more than happy to catch me, as I held him tight and kissed him.

He moaned coarsely against my lips, but I didn't let go. I needed his embrace. I needed to feel him, all of him, to remind myself that this was my life... that the horrible dream had been just that, and nothing more.

"And good morning to you, milady," he said when I paused to take a breath. "I take it you're hungry?"

I gave him a playful smile. "For what, exactly?"

"I'm not sure," he started, narrowing his eyes as he glanced past me at the breakfast arrangement. "Is it the cheese, or is it me?"

"What if it's both?"

Varga's eyes widened in faux shock. "Let's start with the cheese," he whispered. "Otherwise, we'll vanish in the bedroom and forget to eat again. We have priors."

We both laughed, and he let go, allowing me to stand on my own. That came with some difficulty, it appeared, as Varga's kisses always made my knees extra soft. We took our seats at the table. Angela had already left a full pot of coffee and a pitcher of cold milk for us.

"How was your meeting?" I asked, as we both proceeded to fill our plates with a combination of cheese, fruits, and smoky honey. I froze, my hand stuck in midair with my

plate, thinking that something wasn't right here. "Are we supposed to eat this?"

Varga looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"This is food. It makes us sick."

That was the first thing I'd been told prior to becoming a vampire. That food would not go down well anymore, and that my only pleasure of tasting anything other than blood would come from drinks, like coffee, tea, or even spiced rose water.

"Not anymore. The day-walking protein fixed that, too," Varga said, frowning as if I'd just said something crazy. But there was doubt in his eyes. I could see it. I could feel it, because we were both deep in our sentry bond. We'd already made love. Why was this thought so peculiar? "Don't you remember? We've been enjoying food for a few months now, since they gave us the serum."

I nodded slowly. "Right... Yes. The protein. Are you sure?"

"Of course," he said, smiling. He was concerned. I felt that, too. I worried him, and I hated the thought of causing him any kind of distress or discomfort. "I would never hurt you. Most importantly, I would never hurt myself. The day-walking serum was one of the best things that ever happened to us. We get to eat cheese again!"

I tasted the creamy one first. Slightly tangy, it paired perfectly with a plum from the northern orchards. The flavors exploded in my mouth, and I nearly cried at how good it was. Varga watched me intently as I ate a more matured piece next, with a smidge of smoky honey.

"I could die right now, and I'd be happy," I said, my mouth full and tingling with delight.

I dared not question any of this, now. My taste buds were real. This wasn't a dream. I'd left the dream behind, and it had been nasty enough that I was left with no sense of regret. None whatsoever. But Varga had his eyes on me, and all I could think of was getting the both of us back in our chambers, so we could make sweet love till noon. The night before had been... sensational. I reveled in the flashbacks, in the way my skin tingled just from the memories of our bodies and souls bonding. This was true happiness, and we deserved every little bit of it.

"You seem a little off this morning," Varga said after a while.

I wondered whether I should tell him about the dream. We'd never kept secrets from one another. What was the point in starting now, and over such a frivolous thing?

"Ugh... I had a really disturbing dream," I replied, working my way through the cheese plate. I definitely loved the smoky honey. Almost as much as I loved Varga. Even so, I still couldn't believe I could eat food again. Why did the thought still bother me, when I knew about the day-walking protein's effect on us?

"Care to share?" he asked, no longer eating. Even while pouring himself another cup of coffee, he barely took his eyes off me. I waited to see whether he'd spill any on the pristine tablecloth. It would've earned him a snarly scowl from Angela. He didn't get a single drop outside his cup.

"Where would I start? It was insane. Intense. Surreal. Awful..."

"Do you remember it all?"

I shook my head. "Not anymore. It was horrifyingly fresh when I first woke up, but

now most of it has faded. I remember less now than I did five minutes ago, in fact."

He thought about it for a moment. "What do you remember?"

"That's a good question. Let's see. You and I... We were on a crew, fighting the Hermessi. I'm not sure for what anymore, but it was definitely something that would help us save our worlds, across three dimensions. The stakes were huge. Taeral was key..."

"His father had been killed by a Hermessi," Varga interrupted me, his expression frozen somewhere between troubled and bewildered. It made my heart sting. How did he know about Taeral's father?

"How could you know that?" I asked. "Did I talk in my sleep?"

"No. I think I dreamed more or less the same thing," Varga replied. "I barely remember any of it, but now that I'm listening to your account of your dream, I can't help but notice some similarities."

My blood ran cold. Perhaps I should've been more alarmed, but there were perfectly reasonable explanations behind what sounded like a shared dream. "Is it because of our soul connection? I mean, we've been feeling each other's emotions and even understanding thoughts since we... you know, since we first made love."

When was that?

He grinned at me, his green eyes glimmering playfully. "Still shy to talk about our physical relationship? That's so cute. I mean, especially for you, the hot princess Lamia."

I laughed, roses blooming warmly in my cheeks. "What can I say? Despite my coolness, I'm quite the prude."

He reached out, covering my hand with his on the table. Biting his lower lip, he cocked his head, his gaze darkening to the point where I thought he might just sweep me up and take me upstairs, so we'd forget about everyone and everything for the rest of the day.

"You're anything but a prude, my love. Just adorably shy in certain respects, that's all," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "But us sharing a dream isn't entirely crazy. My mom and dad sometimes dream together. Remember, Elonora was recently weirded out by her first dream experience with Nevis. Though I think Nevis was definitely the more traumatized of the two," he added with a short chuckle. "Didn't you see him last night, during dinner, when Elonora told us about it?"

I sighed, lowering my gaze for a moment. I did remember that. "So it's not that weird."

"Nope. Our subconsciouses chose a surprisingly complex topic, I'll admit," he replied, pursing his lips. "I mean, out of all the things we could've dreamed about... Yikes."

"I know, right? Where did the whole Hermessi thing come from, anyway?"

Varga shrugged. "I don't know, but if it makes you feel any better, we can talk to my mom and dad about this later. They might be able to shed some light."

"That sounds like a good plan."

"Oh. I almost forgot! The whole dream thing almost derailed me," he said, standing up and searching through his pockets. "I'd been working up the courage, and I found you here, by the window, in that dress... and I just sort of lost my train of thought. You often do that to me. I think I've told you before. That you do that to me..."

I watched him, quietly, as he kept looking for something in every single pocket on his

combat suit. His brow furrowed, and he nearly broke into a cold sweat. I felt his brief panic, followed by a much-welcomed release of stress.

"I've been thinking of ways to do this, but you're so honest and straightforward, I felt like nothing would do you justice except for me to be just as honest and as straightforward."

"You're yammering," I said, somewhat amused. "You don't usually yammer unless you're nervous."

He froze, then laughed nervously. My chest became too small for my heart. "I'm definitely nervous."

"Why?"

Varga took out a small, black velvet box from his back pocket and got down on one knee in front of me. A second later, I burst into tears, instantly understanding the significance of this moment and what was about to happen.

"Because I'm about to ask you to marry me," he replied, opening the box to reveal a stunning sterling silver ring with a delicate, heart-shaped diamond surrounded by tiny rubies.

My breath got cut off. My stomach fell somewhere on the floor. And my love for him became so unbearable, so full and gargantuan and blissful, that I thanked all the stars and the gods in this universe and the next for having brought Varga into my life. It didn't matter that I didn't even remember how we'd met—maybe I should've been more worried about this specific detail but... Varga was proposing.

"I would like you to be my wife, Eva," he continued, his voice breaking with raw emotion. I felt it all, rippling through me like unforgiving waves of fire and ice. "Will you accept me as your husband so that I can spend the rest of my possibly insanely long life doing everything in my power to make you feel happy and complete?"

This was something I'd only imagined, whenever I'd found myself alone. A tiny hope I'd dared not ever speak of, for it was fragile and delicate enough to be swiftly crushed by the gale of reality. And still, here he was, down on one knee, holding up a beautiful ring and asking me to be his wife.

A dream come true. The only dream I wanted to be true, and nothing like what I'd experienced last night. A brief snippet of our first kiss came to me, and I felt relieved for a split second, until I realized that I was remembering the nightmare. We'd first kissed during our fight against the Hermessi. No, that wasn't real. That didn't happen.

"Varga... I..."

His eyes were glassy, tears twinkling as he waited for a response. Varga was a simple man, as far as communication went. He didn't have many words, but what he said to me was always heartfelt and sincere. I couldn't have wished for a better proposal.

"I'm on the edge of my seat here, sort of," he replied, and pressed his lips into a thin, nervous line.

"Varga, I would like to spend my life with you, marriage or no marriage involved," I said. "I love you more than anything, and I know you love me just as much, if not more, because I can feel you glowing inside me like the brightest sun, and... yes, I will marry you. Yes. A thousand times yes!"

Almost remote-controlled, he put the ring on and swept me up in his arms, showering me with hot and sweet kisses. As his mouth consumed me, I forgot about that wretched dream. I ignored the gaps in my memory.

None of it mattered anymore, as he carried me out of the breakfast room, determined to complete his marriage proposal with the deepest body and soul bonding that we were both capable of. My pulse raced with anticipation, our gazes locked. Varga took me upstairs and back to our apartment, and I was more than happy to spend the rest of my days basking in this kind of happiness.

I kissed his cheek, and his breath hitched. He used his foot to kick open the door. Our bedroom awaited, with silk sheets and fluttering satin curtains. Our future awaited, our hearts pounding, desperate to reconnect in a thousand ways.

"I love you," he said to me.

"Lucky for you, it's mutual," I replied.

VARGA

I'd done it. I'd finally done it.

For weeks, I'd been trying to find the courage to do this. My father had been right, as it turned out. It was better to do it quickly and get it over with. My mother had suggested a candlelight dinner, at least, but I'd thought it to be too ritzy for a creature like Eva.

She'd been raised by the hot river Pyro, in the southern lands of Calliope. She'd been trained to be a princess, and she'd chosen the path of a warrior. Eva had broken many rules to become the best version of herself, and that freedom had come with a cost. It had also brought her into my life, though, much to my shame, I'd been having trouble remembering how the two of us had gotten together in the first place.

Last night's dream had been such a tempestuous affair, it had taken most of the morning for me to realize the kind of unexpected damage it had done. Even so, I didn't let it get to me. The memory gaps were bound to fade away. I'd soon remember the most important moments in my life with Eva. Last night would only be remembered as a peculiar disturbance. Unexplained, at worst.

The moment she'd said yes, I'd become the most fortunate and complete creature in existence. Nothing else mattered, especially not one creepy—and apparently shared—dream. We were together. We were one. And nothing would stand in our way.

Later in the day, after we finally managed to leave the bed, Eva and I summoned my parents into the throne room. We both stood in the middle of the hall, shaking like leaves, surrounded by amber lights and silent sentry guards in their ornate armor. The king and queen had yet to arrive. On top of that, Eva and I had made it earlier than scheduled, leaving us with a few spare minutes to steal kisses from each other in between giggling sessions.

"Do you think they'll be happy?" Eva asked me, one hand slipping around my waist. I leaned down and kissed the side of her neck, my lips brushing over her luscious scales. She felt amazing. Every inch of her. And she sensed everything—in fact, the scaly portions of her skin were much more sensitive, her pulse instantly spiking whenever I kissed her.

"Why wouldn't they be? My mom and dad love you," I replied, raising my head to look into her arresting amber eyes. "My sister is crazy about you. I think the three of them will happily marry you, if I won't."

She laughed, and it was the most wonderful sound my ears had ever been blessed with. "Good. Though I'd rather just marry you and not complicate their lives via polygamy."

"Hah, gorgeous, fierce, whip-smart and with a sense of humor. I really am the fortunate one in this equation."

"And don't you forget it," she shot back, scrunching her nose.

I kissed her, until the sound of a door opening made us pull away from each other. Pure reflex, really, since the guards had already awkwardly and silently witnessed our lovey-dovey smooching.

My parents came in from the side and walked over to hug us both, before they sat on their regal thrones. I was suddenly transformed into a little boy, unsure of what I'd say and how I'd say it to fully encompass the importance of my decision to propose to Eva, and the auspicious outcome of her acceptance. In other words, I was rendered speechless before two of the most important people in my life.

"So, what did you want to talk to us about, my son?" Dad asked, resting one elbow on the sculpted armrest of his throne. The entire thing was a masterpiece, crafted from rare black wood, encrusted with precious metals and gemstones. He'd made sure that his throne was identical to my mom's, as they ruled equally over Nevertide, leaving antiquated traditions behind in the darker days.

"We have news," I said. "And we wanted to share it with you first."

"Ah. You finally proposed," my mom replied, smiling broadly as her gaze found the ring on Eva's finger. "And she said yes. Good!"

I blinked rapidly, trying to think of a worthy comeback. Nothing sprang to mind, but Eva was quick to save the day. "My only hope is that you will welcome me into the family. It would be my greatest joy and honor to carry the Goode name."

"Forgive me, Eva, but you're the one honoring us. We couldn't have thought of a better match for our son," my dad said.

I was happy, though I could've been happier, for their reaction felt a little distant. I wanted to say something about that, but I'd had the most incredible day with my fiancée, and I didn't want to ruin it. Eventually, I caved in and spoke up.

"A bit more enthusiasm would be greatly appreciated." I replied, giving my parents a strained smirk.

My mom sighed. "Honey, we knew this was coming, and we're genuinely happy for you. I'm just relieved you finally took the step."

"That being said, I'm already looking forward to the wedding," Dad said. "It'll be the greatest event in the recent history of Nevertide! The crown prince is getting married!"

"Oh, yes! We'd better bring the court's chancellor in to assist you with all the preparations," Mom added. "The flowers, the food, the drinks... the event hall, the furniture, the decorations. The wedding cake! We have to get it custom made. My, I'm already overexcited." She laughed.

"The guest list, as well," Eva said, smiling.

I walked closer to the thrones, and she moved with me, our hands linked. "Yeah, it's going to be quite an affair." I chuckled, deciding to no longer mind the small and irksome

details in the grand scheme of things. My parents were happy for us. There was no doubt in my mind about that. All I needed to do was lower my expectations in terms of reactions—though I could still remember how my mom had squealed when Elonora had announced her engagement.

My proposal paled in comparison, since it had barely torn a "We knew" out of my mom. Shaking that thought away, I held my Eva close as we went over the most basic parts of the upcoming wedding.

"We'll need to set a date," my dad said. "It'll be a national holiday!"

"I'll ask Angela to help us with drawing up the guest list," Eva replied, looking at me.

For a moment, I thought I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here, right now. The way her gaze softened whenever it found me... it was the best thing in the world. But the dream from last night decided it wasn't done bothering me. There wasn't much to remember from it, but I had a clear picture in the back of my head about the crew in which I'd found myself, along with Eva.

"We should throw an engagement party, first," I said, almost out of the blue. My mouth had gotten ahead of me. "Soon. Maybe this Friday. We'll invite our closest friends. Amelia. Raphael. Herakles. Riza. Lumi and her apprentices—"

"Right, Nethissis and Acantha," Eva replied, somewhat absently.

"Taeral and Eira, too," I added.

"Those are your close friends?" my father asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow. He had a point, I thought. Going back through the memories of my life, what moments had I shared with those I'd mentioned, other than the occasional GASP training session or exploratory field mission?

"I think we only met Herakles once or twice," Eva murmured.

"It doesn't matter. Let's ask them," I said, driven by something I couldn't quite explain. "And Seeley, too."

Eva paused, briefly glancing to the side. "I don't think he's real..."

"Did I dream him up, then? What was he?" I asked, scratching the back of my neck. I was beginning to feel awkward, as if something fabricated had slipped into my reality, throwing me for a loop.

"I think he was a Reaper... or something," Eva murmured, giving me a concerned look. I'd blurred the line, and I'd startled her.

"What are you kids talking about?" Mom interjected.

"A dream. I think Eva and I had the same dream last night," I said, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. It felt good to say it out loud. It made more sense now, uttered in front of my parents, since they'd had no place in my dream, in our dream, other than being part of the worlds we'd so desperately wanted to save.

It piqued my mom's interest. "You shared a dream? That's rare."

"Didn't you and Dad have one or two of your own?" I asked.

"Not this early in our relationship, no," Dad replied. "It takes years to build that kind of synergy between two souls, where dreams are concerned. Eva is a freshly made sentry, and her powers are naturally intense, but not intricate enough to step into the realm of dreams, as well. That needs work. Frankly, I'm impressed."

"You need to tell us all about it, and then we'll focus on your engagement party. I'll be more than happy to assist with the arrangements," Mom said. "In times of peace, my administrative duties are rather reduced."

I nodded enthusiastically, hoping that if I told them everything I'd dreamt of last night, it would all disappear in a puff of smoke, and my life would return to normal. I'd just proposed to the love of my life. I didn't want this stupid nightmare to haunt me and spoil the upcoming precious moments I'd have with Eva.

Judging by the look on her face, she felt the same way. I didn't even need to tap into our soul connection to confirm that. We both wanted to get this dream business over with. Maybe it was all about our sentry bond. Maybe we were stronger as a couple than my parents or most sentries ever were. Maybe we were special.

Any other explanation worked, as long as it defeated the persistent itch I'd been carrying since this morning—that I was still dreaming. That everything I'd considered to be a bad dream was, in fact, a reality I'd somehow left behind. But how could reality be forgotten so quickly and to such an extent?

Might as well get it out of my system, I figured. There were greater, more beautiful things ahead, and they all revolved around my union with Eva.

RIZA

A couple of days had passed since the most startling dream I'd ever had. My life had regained most of its balance, though there were still times when I looked back on certain key moments and found them to be... off. I knew they happened and that I'd been a part of them, I remembered every second of it, but it all felt, for lack of a better word, fabricated. As if these memories weren't my own.

I had spoken to my mother about this, and she'd assured me that it was just the aftermath of an intense dream, and that she'd experienced something similar in her youth, as well. Somehow, I hadn't found that argument very convincing. I couldn't keep digging into it, though, unless I wanted to come across as being on the verge of some kind of mental breakdown, where the line between dream and reality had become so blurred that I was basically losing myself in the process.

So I kept going, attending to my daily tasks and now preparing for Eva and Varga's impromptu engagement party. Even this particular affair felt strange to me. They'd chosen Taeral's mansion on the Fire Star to host the shindig, when they could've easily had us all come up to Nevertide, at the castle, where they belonged.

On top of that, why was I even invited? I barely knew them both, since most of my missions had involved other parts of the Supernatural Dimension and Earth. We were friendly, sure, but I'd been told that the engagement party was a rather private affair, with just a little over a hundred guests. Eva and Varga were quite popular, and I had no doubt that those 100+ close friends could've easily excluded me.

My parents had both said I should go, since Varga would one day assume the throne to Nevertide. He and Eva were also highly esteemed members of GASP. Even if our paths didn't cross much, the day might come when I'd need their favor or assistance. "It's good to keep certain people close, no matter what," my father had said.

What made me truly nervous was the thought of seeing Herakles again. I'd been crushing on the guy since our first training mission together on the Fire Star, less than a year ago. We'd repeatedly met afterward, and I remembered each encounter with crystal clarity. He made my heart jump frenetically in different directions. I was lightheaded whenever he gave me one of those sly, sideways smirks of his. But Herakles was known as a conqueror of ladies, a classic womanizer, certainly not someone I would've wanted to be with. He had heartbreak written all over him.

Even so, I couldn't really stop the giddiness from taking over as I slipped into a pair of black pumps and took a quick gander at myself in the tall mirror. My hair fell loosely, framing my face in dark curls. Long silver earrings poured down from my ears, clinking whenever I moved. I'd picked a floral cocktail dress with lilac, white, and black accents, and I felt as though it did a great job of outlining my figure. I'd put a lot of thought into this outfit, knowing I'd see Herakles again. No longer chastising myself for my emotions, I'd decided to embrace them instead and see if I could get a reaction from Herakles.

I didn't want to be the one going after him, but I was willing to leave various openings for him, should he dare to pursue me. Spraying a Corrine-signed perfume essence behind my ears and knees, I gave my mirror reflection a quick wink, grabbed my black sequin clutch, and rushed out the door. Corrine's fragrances were rife with naughty bits of magic that helped their wearer draw attention from those they desired. She'd given me the vial months ago, but this was the first time I'd used it.

"There she is! Finally!" my mother exclaimed as I came down the stairs.

"Come on, Riza. We're going to be late," my father said, following up with a broad smile. "You look absolutely stunning, my darling."

"Thanks, Dad," I replied, blushing like the little girl I sometimes still was to him.

He opened the door, and sunshine poured into the hallway, spreading across the walls and marble floor in vibrant shades of amber. The afternoon sun was my favorite part of the day, and I had been enjoying every moment of it in The Shade since the day-walking cure had been made. The thought alone reminded me that something was off, but I swiftly focused on my parents instead. I didn't want anything to ruin tonight, since I'd be in the same room with Herakles for the first time in weeks.

But even my parents felt a little off. I loved them, yet I felt as though there could be more to them than there was. You're not making any sense, Riza. That damn dream really messed you up.

"Ready to go?" my mother asked, and I nodded briefly.

"Looking forward to seeing Herakles again?" my father added, prompting me to respond with a frustrated groan. "Oh, you're just so cute when he's around. So shy. So not you!"

"Do we really have to talk about the guy? I barely know him," I replied.

We left our home in The Shade and made our way through the redwood forest, heading toward the witches' portal. It was only a few minutes' walk, but I was already contemplating teleportation to avoid what was bound to be an awkward conversation. My parents were pretty cool and respectful of my choices, but that never stopped them from poking and prodding when they felt like it.

"I just think it's a great opportunity for you to talk to the guy and see if there really is something between the two of you," my mother said.

"You can't tell us you don't like him, since both your mother and I have already noticed the stolen glances the two of you exchange. Not to mention the extra mile you go in terms of dressing up for any event where Herakles will be present," my father added.

"I'm not going to hit on the guy. He's a renowned skirt-chaser. If he wants me, he knows how to...you know, do it," I shot back.

My mother laughed. "Honey, I doubt he'll have the courage. He's clearly a womanizer with women he doesn't have true feelings for. That's the thing with love, even in its earliest stages. It changes you; it changes your demeanor."

"You realize that the girl isn't like the others, so you certainly can't treat her the way you do others," my father added. "For what it's worth, I think he's contemplating ways to reach out but has no idea what will please you and what won't. It's kind of cute. It means his intentions toward you are serious."

"Wow, you two have given this a lot of thought, I see," I muttered and breathed a sigh of relief as the portal shone across the clearing. "Finally."

"We just want you to be aware of the possibility that he's not making the first move because he's shy. His true self won't allow him to... you know, chase you around," my father said.

"Is there something you two know that I don't?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at them. "Has Herakles spoken to you, perhaps?"

My mother chuckled as she prepared the portal for our destination. The gray mist turned amber, signaling that a connection to the Fire Star had been made. "We haven't spoken to him, obviously. It's just that your father and I are old and experienced enough to know this stuff and spot it faster than you ever will. Also, Kailani has mentioned a thing or two about how you and Herakles behave when you're close to each other."

"Ah. That witch," I grumbled.

We walked through the portal, and the In-Between expanded around us. Trillions of stars spattered across the black cosmos. Galaxies swirling and twinkling in the distance. Pink-and-orange stardust streaking across our field of vision. I found it enticing, more than before, but why? Maybe it had something to do with how the Hermessi used it to travel through space and across greater distances.

What the hell am I talking about? We haven't heard from the Hermessi since the Blackout. Riza, seriously, get a grip.

By the time we passed through the portal on the Fire Star, my head was ringing. My parents were incredibly relentless when it came to my love life. They rarely got involved, but when they did, by the stars, it got intense! This whole Herakles bonanza was already starting to wear me down, even though their intentions were good.

"I'm just saying, maybe give the guy some help and talk to him," my father said.

"Can we just stop talking about him? Please? If you want Herakles so badly, why don't the two of you date him?" I retorted.

My mother took my hand along with my father's and teleported us outside Taeral and Nuriya's mansion. It felt weird to look at it. I could've sworn they were still in the palace. The thought was a mere blip, though, vanishing about as quickly as it had emerged.

The mansion was a superb display of red brickwork. The French-style windows with window frames provided an elegant contrast to the overall masonry and the dark gray slate roof. Sprawling over two levels, the house had a flower garden at the front and a massive open space at the back, where most of the fun stuff was happening.

Blossoms burst along both sides of the path leading from the gate to the front steps, in soft shades of red, orange, and peach. Taeral and Eira stood by the gate, the two of

them beaming as they welcomed us onto the property.

"Aisha, Horatio. Riza, it's such a pleasure to see you!" Taeral said.

He and Eira struck me as the most vibrant and alive people I'd come across for the past couple of days, at least. Could it have something to do with the dream I'd had? There was a sense of familiarity between us, and I couldn't quite put my finger on what had triggered it. Taeral and I went way back, since we were related. We'd practically grown up together, and yet looking at him now... I felt like there was something more to us.

"How are you two lovebirds doing?" my father asked, smiling at the young couple. I did remember being surprised by this particular pairing. Fire and water didn't really go well together, not even among the fae, but Taeral and Eira were a fantastic couple, and they were deeply in love with each other. It didn't take a sentry to tell that much.

"We're good, just thrilled about Eva and Varga!" Taeral replied. "What a surprise, right?"

I nodded. "I didn't know you were close friends. I mean, hosting their engagement party at your house is truly a wonderful gesture."

Taeral blinked several times, struggling to keep a smile on. "We have had some bonding, shared experiences over the last year, at least," he said. "Varga is a good man. I couldn't have thought of a better soul mate for him."

"And how'd you meet Eva?" I asked. Part of me was irritated because I knew most of the interactions in GASP, and I was convinced that none of this was natural. Varga would've held his engagement party back in Nevertide. He didn't hang out with Taeral. I hung out with Taeral, along with Dmitri and Jovi. Varga and Eva really weren't anywhere in our close circles. The inconsistency still bothered me, it seemed.

"From GASP," Taeral answered, but I could feel him wavering.

Like a wolf catching the scent of blood, I focused on him. "When? How?"

"I think it was during one of the post-Blackout briefings on Calliope, wasn't it?" Eira interjected, eyeing me worriedly. Was I treading on sensitive territory, perhaps?

Taeral nodded. "That's right. Yeah. During one of the post-Blackout briefings. Yes."

If that was the truth, why wasn't I buying it? Why was I even suspicious? What in the world was wrong with me, and how could I pull the plug on this sort of behavior? I gave my parents a sideways glance and noticed their concerned looks. Yeah, you're not the only ones thinking I'm weird right now.

Minutes later, I'd already grabbed a crystal flute filled to the brim with spiced rose water. My parents were busy chatting with Ash and Ruby and Nuriya, while I lingered to the side of the main lounge room, where the bar and hors d'oeuvres table had been set up. The place was filled with familiar figures, most of them friends and relatives, as well as a plethora of Calliope GASP agents, many of whom were proud to declare themselves Eva's friends.

There was no sight of her mother, the charming and sometimes venomous Tamara, Lady of the Lamias. I'd heard that there was some tension between Eva and Tamara, and

that it had to do with Eva's decision to become a vampire. A quick question ended this train of thought: Who'd told me that? Where had I learned this from?

Shaking my head, I gulped down the entire flute and made my way to the bar for a third refill. The more people present, the more anxious I seemed to get. Eva and Varga came into the room, cheered by all. I left my empty glass on the bar and walked over to them, taking their gift—nicely wrapped in a small, colorful box—out of my clutch.

"Congratulations, you two!" I said, smiling at them.

Eva was gorgeous in a long, emerald-green silk dress, her black hair flowing down her back. Varga looked handsome and regal, having opted for one of his official Nevertide tunics made with black leather and fine silver embroidery across the chest, high collar, and shoulders.

"Thank you, Riza," Varga replied, as Eva accepted my gift.

"It's just a small thing to sort of mark this moment. I do hope you'll like it," I said, then glanced around the room to make sure my parents weren't around to hear me. "My mom picked it out. She usually has great taste, but if you decide not to wear them, I promise we won't mind."

Eva laughed lightly as she opened the small box to reveal a pair of matching emerald rings. They were simple, slim bands made entirely from emerald, beautifully sculpted and engraved with words my mother had considered fitting for their engagement. Eva read them out loud.

"'Love is an endless river. Marriage is the boat.' Oh, wow, these are incredible, Riza. Thank you," she said and hugged me.

My heart swelled. I seemed to enjoy her embrace, even though I'd only met Eva once or twice. And there it went again... that sense of familiarity between us. I dared not think of the dream again, but I had a feeling I would, more than once, by the end of the night.

"We'll definitely wear them," Varga replied, admiring the rings in their jewel box. He seemed genuine. "This was sweet and thoughtful. It's truly appreciated."

"Come join us on the back terrace," Eva suggested, frowning as she looked around the room. "It's getting kind of crowded in here."

I was a little claustrophobic already, so the back terrace sounded like an excellent idea. I grabbed a fresh, filled glass from the bar and walked out with Eva and Varga. We moved through the circular hallway and reached the back of the mansion, where two large French doors opened onto a massive red stone terrace. Tables had been set all over it, with a larger one in the middle, and each had been covered in smooth linens and silver tableware. Floral arrangements were sprinkled here and there, matching the orange-and-red bursts from the garden that sprawled beyond.

"Oh, wow, this place is gorgeous," I breathed, taking it all in.

"And there's a hot tub on the roof. You can't see it from down here," Eva replied, wearing a devilish smile. "I, for one, am looking forward to trying it out tonight."

"Crap. I didn't bring a bathing suit," I whispered.

She gave me a wink. "Worry not. I brought a few, just in case."

I wanted to thank her, but I was quickly distracted by the sight of Herakles, who was exploring the back garden. He looked devastatingly handsome in his GASP tunic,

occasionally sipping from a glass of spiced rose water. Various ladies buzzed around him, giggling and stealing glances at him, but he seemed completely uninterested. Heck, the rose bush he was gazing at seemed more enticing than the gorgeous creatures who vied for his attention.

"Herakles!" Varga shouted, and waved his hand, prompting me to groan with frustration.

"Why would you do that?" I mumbled, mostly to myself.

Herakles spotted us and instantly smiled. He made his way toward us, leaving the swooning ladies and fragranced flower bushes behind. Seconds later, he had dashed up the stairs and reached us.

"You two looked busy, so I didn't want to pry you away from your social interactions," Herakles said, shaking Varga's hand. "I've already congratulated you, anyway. Didn't want to seem redundant."

Varga chuckled. "Nonsense. I was looking forward to getting back out here with you and the others. Both of us were, in fact."

"Yeah, it's a great party and all, and we tried to keep the party small, but you know how these things turn out," Eva added.

"You invite fifty and a hundred show up? Yes, I know," Herakles replied. Looking at me, his gaze darkened slightly, just enough to send my pulse racing. Were my parents right? Was he really into me and just didn't know how to approach me? "You look hot as a midsummer's day."

His tone was sharp. His confidence clearly not lacking. My parents were talking out of their asses.

"Thank you, I guess?" I replied dryly and downed half of my spicy rose water.

"I'm serious. The dress works like a charm. It brings out your eyes," he added.

What was happening? For months we'd been hovering around one another, unable to go beyond the basics of a most simple conversation, and now he was hurling compliments at me as if it was the most natural thing to do. And to make matters worse, I had a distinct recollection of us kissing, more than once, even though we'd never touched outside the practice ring—and none of the sparring had involved smooching, obviously.

"You look handsome, as well," I managed, barely able to hear myself.

Eva and Varga's eyes were on us, grins stretching across their faces. My parents, version 2.0. My thoughts trailed off quickly when Amelia and Raphael joined us, both of them smiling and chattier than ever.

"Man, it is getting packed in there!" Amelia blurted, one arm resting around Raphael's waist. "We needed to get some air."

"You're more than welcome to join us," Eva replied. "We were just about to go sit by the fountain."

The fountain. I glanced beyond the enormous flower garden. The palace rose in the distance, atop a row of green, wavy hills. But at the very end of Taeral and Nuriya's property, a beautiful white marble fountain had been built. Its centerpiece was a sculpted male figure holding up a scythe—unlike the rest of the fountain, however, the scythe

looked real, with an ivory handle and a small curved blade. The name Yamani sprang to mind, though I had no idea who or what to link it to.

Water gushed around the statue, playfully twinkling in the sunlight. The sunlight. I briefly looked at Varga, Eva, and Amelia. How were they not burning up? My first thought was to push them back inside the house, until I remembered the day-walking cure. That had happened. It was real. My mind was playing tricks on me again, warping my consciousness and infusing my truth with a dream I could barely remember.

As if summoned by some kind of mystical, common force, we descended the stairs in a small group, exchanging short opinions about the engagement party and about the upcoming wedding party. Eva and Varga had yet to set a date, saying they'd both felt they had to get a few more pressing things out of the way.

"What things?" I asked.

During our walk toward the fountain, I noticed Lumi with her five apprentices standing near a canopy bed. Taeral followed my confused glance. "That's a canopy I set up for my mom to enjoy on the sunny days. She usually retreats there with a good book and a pitcher of lemonade," he said.

"What things?" Varga replied, drawing me back to my initial question. He and Eva looked at each other. "We're not entirely sure, but we've both decided not to hurry into it."

I stopped questioning everything that was being said in this conversation, quietly accepting that it was all just a dollop of weird and that it may continue to feel that way for a few more days, at least.

My attention was torn between Herakles, as I could feel his eyes on me, and Lumi. She saw me from across the garden, watching as we reached the fountain. Of her five apprentices, Nethissis seemed the most alert and interested in our group. The rest of the world seemed to have vanished somewhere behind. Our parents and uncles, our close friends and allies... none of them mattered.

Being with this group, right here, felt right, even though it made little sense. There weren't many words between us, but it was more natural for us to be together than to exchange pleasantries with anyone else.

Not long after we settled by the fountain and let Eva and Varga tell us more about the proposal and their plans for the future, the hairs on the back of my neck sprang upward. Looking to my right, I took a deep breath, my eyes meeting Herakles's. He'd been silently staring at me, and he didn't seem apologetic about it. In fact, his lime-green eyes glimmered with renewed interest and a sense of familiarity that hadn't been there before. Flashbacks from my dream played on a loop at the bottom of my consciousness, making it harder for me to concentrate. I remembered the feel of his lips on mine and the hunger that had made us so ravenous for each other.

Murmurs trickled out from the mansion as the guests on the terrace moved aside to make room for someone. As soon as I saw her, I felt a pang in my stomach. A painful twist that screamed in alarm.

"The queen," Varga murmured. He was as surprised as the rest of us. "What is she doing here?"

"I think my mom invited her." Taeral sighed.

The queen of the Fire Star. I'd met her, at some point after the Blackout. She was accompanied by six of her fae guards, each of them clad in sparkling gold armor. "She's so beautiful," I whispered, unable to take my eyes off her.

Her hair was long and bright red, scarlet curls that seemed to go on forever. The sunlight got caught in them, casting amber reflections here and there. Her fiery orange eyes were fixed on us, and I suddenly felt tiny and insignificant. At the same time, dread quietly crept up beneath my skin. My instincts told me to run, but I couldn't. What reason would I have to offend the queen like that?

She walked down the garden path, followed by her guards, Ash and Ruby, and Nuriya. Her dress was made of the finest velvet, with stylized flames embroidered along the hems and working their way up the tight sleeves. The blaze covered her chest, pouring into the shape of a sun, which had been elegantly enriched with hundreds of precious diamonds and amber gemstones. A crown glistened on the top of her head, but it did not shine as brightly as her eyes did, in this moment.

"All hail Queen Brendel!" one of the guards announced in a heavy tone.

We instantly shot to our feet and bowed before her. My heart had already leapt in my throat, but I refused to give it any attention. My mind had been playing tricks on me for two days straight, and I was certainly not going to succumb to it now, in the middle of an engagement party.

"Your Majesty, you honor us with your presence," Varga said reverently. "I didn't know you would come."

The queen stopped in front of us and smiled gently. "Please, do not be worried. It's only a brief visit. I knew I had to come see you and congratulate you myself. An engagement is truly a good cause for celebration, and I believe that you and Eva have earned your shot at happiness."

"You are most kind, Your Majesty," Eva replied. "Please do join us for dinner later. We would love to have you as our honored guest."

The queen nodded slowly, her burning orange eyes locked on Eva's face. I couldn't shake the uneasiness, but I couldn't act upon it, either. Dammit, Riza, Sherus still being king was part of your dream. Stop it.

"It would be my pleasure. You and Varga have done truly heroic things during the Blackout, and you are two of GASP's most valuable fighters. I felt I had to be here today," the queen said. Looking back, I knew Varga had played a key part in the Blackout, since he'd been one of Ta'Zan's first prisoners. But Eva... Where did Eva fit in? Glancing at her, I tried to remember whether she'd even been on Strava at the time or not. "I have brought you a gift, as well," the queen added. "It's been in my family for generations."

She motioned for one of the guards to bring forth a crystal box with a golden latch. Inside, we could clearly see a most startling and intriguing gemstone. Perfectly round and black, with shimmering reflections traveling across its surface whenever it was moved. The mere sight of it filled me with an avalanche of sweet emotions, ranging from hope to

bliss, and everything else in between.

"It's absolutely stunning," Eva said.

"My ancestors named it Phyla, and it is said to have a beneficial effect on those who live around it," the queen explained. "No one knows where it was found or who polished it to such perfection, but I felt you would welcome it into your lives. It could mark the beginning of your new adventure together... marriage."

We all laughed, though I could barely muster a decent sound. The more I stood here, with these people and in front of Queen Brendel, the more out of place it all felt. As if none of this was supposed to happen. As if we were all meant to be somewhere else, doing something different.

Varga invited us and the queen to head back to the terrace, in anticipation of dinner. I stayed back, wearing a plastic smile and watching them all go up the path, talking and chuckling with Her Majesty. There was a sour taste in my mouth, and my flute was empty. I desperately needed a refill.

"I could've sworn Sherus was still the king," Herakles said, startling me.

"Jeez," I yelped, giving him a scowl. I hadn't even realized that he was still here and not with the rest of the group. "You sure know how to sneak up on people."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "I've been standing next to you the whole time."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I got confused for a moment. Wait... rewind. What was that about Sherus?"

Herakles shrugged, looking at the queen as she moved farther away from us. "I don't know. It's something I dreamed. It felt so real. I guess I'm still carrying pieces of it with me. Forget I said anything."

I broke into a cold sweat, my mind suddenly razor sharp as I considered every single one of his words. "No, no. I need you to tell me everything. You had a dream in which Sherus was still king?"

"Yeah. But I think he died, and that Taeral was trying to bring him back," he replied, then shook his head slowly. "Seriously, forget about it. It's been a weird couple of days for me."

"When did you dream this?"

My relentlessness surprised him. "Two nights ago. Hence the weird couple of days I just mentioned."

"Right. And Brendel wasn't the queen in that dream."

"No, Sherus was king," he said, and chuckled. "You and I were an item in it. It's how I remind myself that it was just a dream."

But there was a tinge of bitterness in his voice. It matched everything I'd been feeling until now, and the entire world threatened to come crashing down on me as I realized the truly odd thing about this discussion: Herakles and I might've had the same dream, two bleepin' nights ago. Coincidence? Deliberate? Some kind of evil mojo?

My whole face burned, the memory of us kissing coming back to punch me in the head. Herakles watched me intently, his brow slightly furrowed, as if he was waiting for me to say something. Should I tell him about this? What are the odds he won't think I'm crazy?

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I exhaled. "I think we need to talk."

TAERAL

Half an hour later, as the sun went down beyond the palace hills, we were all seated for dinner. For some reason, Varga and Eva had placed the name cards so as to make sure we were together, along with Amelia and Raphael, Herakles, Riza, Lumi, and her apprentices. I was at the head of the long table, with Eira by my right side. Eva and Varga were on my left. Our parents and close friends had been positioned at the other half of the table, with Queen Brendel heading that side.

We occasionally smiled and nodded at each other, bouncing between conversations. Smaller tables had been set up around ours, and candlelight cast its amber sheen over the guests' delighted faces.

It looked like a great party so far, even though I'd yet to figure out how I'd been pulled into this group of ours, and why it made so much sense that I should be with them. Of course, Eira was a crucial part of my life, and Riza was my cousin and good friend, but everyone else didn't really fit. Yet, I felt relieved to have them here.

There was laughter. Cheers rippled across the tables as the catering staff brought out the first course and refilled our spiced rose water pitchers. Music played in the background—my mother had hired a local band to play their crystal violins for the event. They were ridiculously talented, and they knew how to blend in. It had taken me a while to find them, settled in the western corner of our terrace.

"You were so kind to host our engagement party here, Tae," Varga said, breaking my line of thought. "I know I've thanked you before, but I feel the need to do it again."

I smiled. "You're most welcome. I don't know why, but it was just the right thing to do."

Had it been the right thing, though? I had never done something without proper motivation, yet with Varga and Eva I'd acted on instinct. Even now, I hadn't been able to figure out what had pushed me to insist that the party be hosted here, on the Fire Star, in my house. I only knew that we all had to be involved, somehow.

I didn't regret my decision. The party was fantastic, glowing with joie de vivre and good humor. I loved the sound of glasses clinking as Eva's and Varga's names were called out from all over the terrace. The atmosphere was excellent, warm and friendly.

But as I looked at our uncanny group, I wondered... How had we all ended up in this precise moment in time?

"What's on your mind?" Eira asked me, her voice low.

"Nothing. Just... it's been a strange couple of days," I said. Corrine had not offered me a satisfactory response regarding my strange dream, and she couldn't tell me why Eira had had the same experience. She did, however, confirm that there wasn't any kind of magic at play. It was natural. Peculiar, but natural. She'd hinted at Eira and me being soul mates as part of the reason why we'd shared the dream, but it wasn't enough for me. I'd thanked her and moved on, the dream and this reality still overlapping in some instances. "I feel like we've sat like this before, at a big dinner table."

"Like this, you mean with this group?" she replied, nodding at Eva, Varga, and the others.

"Yeah. I'm not sure when or how. It could be the damn dream again."

She chuckled. "Yeah, we've both had some weird déjà vu moments lately. But it's a great party. Your place was definitely the right choice. Unexpected, sure..."

"It didn't make sense to you either, huh?" I asked, slightly amused.

"Tell you what. Let's get some of the weird stuff out of the way, since Eva and Varga are here with us," Eira said, and looked at the happy couple. "Hey, you two doves, quick question, because both Tae and I were wondering. What's up with the seating arrangements? I would've expected you to be with your parents and stuff."

Eira and I had actually wondered about this briefly, when the name cards had first come in. I did admire her tenacity and desire to relieve me of what she referred to as "unnecessary stress."

Varga smiled. "Well, it was kind of weird. I mean, I'm having a hard time finding the right words to explain what went through our heads when we—"

"We had a dream." Eva cut him off, her expression firm. "Varga and I had a shared dream, and in it, we were all a crew like this. You, Taeral, Riza, Herakles, Lumi, Nethissis. That's what my fiancé refers to as the weird part. It felt like the natural thing to do, to be honest. I sense that, even though we're not all as bonded as we'd expect, we should be together in moments like these."

Riza cleared her throat. Shortly afterward, I realized that the entire dream crew was watching us, alarm flaring across their faces. It made my stomach churn and my chest tighten, as if a missing piece of the puzzle was about to drop and set us all ablaze.

"You had the same dream? You and Varga?" Riza asked, almost whispering. Her hand clutched the spiced rose water flute, and I worried the glass might break if she tightened her grip on it.

Eva and Varga both nodded simultaneously. "It's strange, but not unheard of. Apparently, sentries whose souls have bonded like ours can, in fact, share dreams. Emphasis on the plural form," Varga said. "Of course, according to our parents, we're too early in our relationship to exhibit such reactions, but it still happened."

Riza and Herakles exchanged concerned glances. This was the closest I'd seen them throughout the evening, and only now did I realize that there was something going on there. Their rapport had changed significantly from the fountain out back all the way to the dinner table.

"When did you have that shared dream?" Riza asked. Slowly, my mind began to buzz,

my intuition following the jinni closely. Eva and Varga weren't the only ones with a shared dream. Eira and I were part of the mystery as well.

"Two nights ago. Why?" Eva replied, as Varga's hand covered hers on the table.

Herakles scoffed. "You've got to be friggin' kidding me."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Amelia burst out, downright insulted. "Did you tell them about our dream?" she hissed at Raphael, who was just as startled.

Suddenly, the conversation derailed into a jumble of confusion and exasperation, and I had little time to convey my own issues about this shockingly identical topic.

"I didn't tell anyone," Raphael replied defensively.

"What... What do you mean?" Eva asked, even more confused.

"What about you, Tae? Eira? Did you dream about all of us together, two nights ago?" Riza asked. Unlike the others on this side of the table, she was remarkably calm.

Lumi sat next to her, along with Nethissis and the other apprentices. I looked at Acantha briefly and felt an ache in the pit of my stomach. I'd watched her die in my dream. I was remembering again...

"We did, yes," I said after a few seconds.

"I take it the nine of us had the same dream, then?" Lumi interjected, pointing a finger at herself and at Nethissis to complete the crew count. "Taeral, Eira, Raphael, Amelia, Riza, Herakles, Eva, Varga, Nethissis, and me. Am I getting that right?"

"How are you so chill about this?" Amelia mumbled, her eyes wide with shock. "How can this even be? It doesn't make sense."

Lumi smirked, as if none of this baffled her. I wasn't sure whether it should help calm me down or freak me out more. "If there is one thing I've learned in my long life, it's that we should always listen to our instincts, regardless of the circumstances."

"What about you, Acantha?" I asked. "Did you dream about this, too?"

Acantha didn't reply. She just stared at me for a second, then got up from her seat and quietly left the table. I watched her move toward the gift table, where all the presents for Eva and Varga had been placed, including the gemstone from Queen Brendel. No one seemed to notice Acantha anymore, and I found that strange. She'd been part of our dream. She'd died in it.

"I take it that's a no?" Raphael muttered, slightly befuddled by her behavior.

"What was your shared dream about?" Amelia asked, looking at Lumi and Nethissis.

The witches told us everything they remembered—though there wasn't much left from their recollections. Awakening and consciousness had taken their toll, consuming significant parts of their dream.

Even so, it still made my blood curdle, because everything they did tell us matched Eira's and my shared dream, word for word. It was incredible for four of us to have experienced the same thing in our sleep and on the same night.

Eva gasped. "Holy crap, it's pretty much the same thing Varga and I dreamed."

Soon enough, we were on the same, utterly astonishing page, and none of us knew how to deal with it or what to make of it.

"So... We were a crew. We were fighting the Hermessi. One of them was the ringleader, but I don't remember her name," I said.

Raphael shook his head. "Me neither."

"And I was looking for Death... or her scythe... or pieces of it. We had discovered Cerix and a few other foreign worlds in the process, as well," I continued, giving Eira a worried glance. "You were a native of Cerix, not a water fae."

"Yeah, pretty much." Varga sighed. "This is so unbelievably weird. Weird!"

"I think we've said 'weird' about a hundred times, so far," Amelia murmured, leaning back into her chair.

"What does it mean?" Eira asked, staring at her half-empty glass. "Why us? And why that specific dream? What is it supposed to tell us?"

No one had an answer, but Lumi raised a hand to draw our attention. "We could speak to Corrine or one of the more seasoned witches about this," she said. "Maybe someone is toying with us."

"Nah. I already spoke to Corrine the other day, when I was still getting the dream and the real world confused. For a while, I was convinced my father was still the king of the Fire Star."

"Hah," Herakles blurted, giving Riza a satisfied grin. "Told ya."

Silence settled across our side of the table as the mystery continued to sink in and dig its claws even deeper. As if guided by some invisible force of destiny, we all turned our heads to glance at the other end of the table, where Queen Brendel sat.

She was being entertained by my mother and Varga's parents, and she was laughing wholeheartedly, while I wondered how she could be my aunt. My pure fire fae aunt who'd been chosen to lead since the Fire Star had not accepted my mother's reign after Dad's death. Ugh, even going over it feels complicated.

Brendel must've sensed us all watching her, because she looked at us and stilled. Her brows furrowed, but she smiled nonetheless, giving me another polite nod before she resumed her chat with my mother.

"We were all in the same—" Amelia said but was interrupted by a spine-tingling scream that cut through the night and rattled the entire terrace.

We all sprang from our seats, our reflexes humming as we found the source of the shriek. Kailani was on her knees, holding a collapsed Acantha in her arms. Something had happened, and we'd all missed it.

In less than a second, we gathered around her, trying to make sense of the situation. Acantha was pale and unresponsive, and Kailani was working some heavy-duty swamp witch magic to help her. Nothing worked.

"She's not breathing," Kailani cried out.

Varga dropped to his knees and tried to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He interrupted the air infusion session with chest compressions, as we all stood around them, frozen and terrified by what was becoming less of a prospect and more of a reality. Acantha wasn't coming back to us.

"Come on, Acantha. Breathe," Varga said, and continued the chest compressions, while Kailani checked for a pulse.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Nothing."

It had happened so fast, so unexpectedly, that none of us knew how to react. Lumi

joined Kailani and Varga in trying to bring Acantha back, but there wasn't enough magic in this world to revive the dead. Acantha was already gone.

The rest of the party guests gathered around us. I recognized my mother. Derek and Sofia. Queen Brendel. Ash and Ruby. Caleb and River. Claudia and Yuri. Elonora and Nevis. I knew everyone here, and, as they all stared down at Acantha, I couldn't help but feel like... like they weren't really present.

I heard Nethissis and Lumi's sobs. I saw the tears streaming down their faces. I recognized the grief in Eira's eyes. I noticed that our so-called dream crew was deeply pained by this loss. Everyone else, however, resembled statues, not living people. I could feel the sorrow stemming from Acantha's death. I wasn't so sure about the others around us.

My gaze settled on Brendel for a moment. There was life in those eyes, but no sympathy. She kept a stern look on her face. Even so, she still didn't quite fit in.

TAERAL

This engagement party was beginning to devolve into a third-rate murder mystery. No one knew what had happened to Acantha, but we'd all agreed it couldn't have been natural. As Eva and Riza consoled a deeply broken Nethissis, Lumi took a few moments to analyze Acantha's body, checking for marks or anything out of the ordinary—the slightest hint of foul play.

"She was a healthy young Bajang," Lumi said, her hands glowing white as she moved them up and down Acantha's torso. "This didn't just happen."

Kailani sighed, rubbing her face and wiping the tears away. "We can't find a cause of death. There's no trace of needles, no injury. None of my spells have detected any poison in her bloodstream. I'm honestly out of ideas here."

The crowd murmured around us, but no one made any sense to me. My heart drummed in my ears, and I was too busy counting my breaths to listen to people around me talking. Surprisingly, the dream crew's voices came through, loud and clear. With Acantha dead, however, I didn't think this to be the right time for us to further explore our shared dream, as shocking as it had been to realize we'd been in it together.

Queen Brendel stepped forward, flanked by her loyal guards. "An investigation should take place," she said. "If someone is killed in my land, I would like those responsible to be found, judged, and punished accordingly."

I caught glimpses of people nodding, but I didn't like the way so many of them approved. "Your Majesty, if I may," I replied, getting up from my crouching position beside Acantha's body. "While this incident may have happened on our Fire Star, the victim is a member of GASP. Therefore, we should be the ones investigating the death of one of our own. I say this respectfully, of course."

"That's not how the kingdom's laws work, Taeral. You know better than that," Queen Brendel shot back, tension stiffening her shoulders.

I felt Eira by my side, her hand gently brushing against mine in a bid to remind me that she was still here, ready to back me up. Looking to my right, I noticed that the others in our dream crew shared my opinion—and some kind of animosity I'd been harboring toward Brendel, though I couldn't quite figure out its origin.

"Your Majesty, the Fire Star has signed a cooperation treaty with GASP," I said, standing my ground. "According to its principal subsections, should any harm come to

members of the federation, locals or otherwise, the Fire Star will aid GASP in investigating and punishing the offenders. The treaty was signed and validated many years ago."

"A crime was committed in my kingdom," Queen Brendel hissed. "Before the treaty, we have our laws. They precede GASP."

"That's not how this works," Amelia interjected, but Queen Brendel raised a hand to silence her, her gaze fixed on the gifts table.

"Where is Phyla?" Queen Brendel asked, her voice chillingly low. "It was right there, on the gift table, minutes ago."

Somehow, the collective attention was swiftly drawn away from Acantha and onto the gift table, mere feet away. I remembered having seen Acantha here, moments before the scream had pulled us from our seats. This entire moment was surreal, and I had a difficult time making sense of it. Even my reactions were tempered. I would've been a lot more visceral in my approach, but I'd come across as mellow instead. What's happening here?

Everyone was now wondering where Phyla had gone, their short attention spans worrying me. Indeed, I couldn't see the black gemstone anymore, either, though I clearly remembered it in its crystal box, on top of the other gifts. It was definitely gone. But so was Acantha. A life had to count more than a pretty stone, even if that stone had stirred some funny feelings in me.

"Where is Phyla?!" Queen Brendel was downright furious.

"Acantha just died," Eva replied, understandably irritated by the sudden and seemingly unimportant change of topic. "Surely, that takes precedence?"

"The gemstone is extremely rare and of inestimable value," Queen Brendel said. "I brought it thinking it would be safe with you. You don't understand what loss it will be, if it's never found again."

"Enough!" Lumi snapped and got up, shaking with anger. The queen's guards tightened their formation around her, as if Lumi was some kind of threat to her. Again, I heard myself thinking that none of this made sense, yet it all seemed familiar, in one way or another. "Maybe Acantha's death and the gemstone's disappearance are connected," Lumi added, working on her demeanor toward Queen Brendel. "We should investigate both accordingly. But I agree with Tae on who would lead. This is a GASP affair."

"No, it is not. The moment Phyla was taken, it became the Fire Star's affair," Queen Brendel retorted. She motioned to her guards to spread out. "Secure the mansion. No one leaves until they're searched. No one is to leave the Fire Star without my express approval. And summon the investigators to join us."

"This is insane," Riza exclaimed. "Derek, Sofia! What the hell? We're GASP. Acantha was GASP! We should be dealing with this!"

But Derek and Sofia didn't seem so convinced. "I'm afraid Queen Brendel is right," Derek said. "I'm sure Her Majesty and the investigators will do a stellar job, and we'll do everything in our power to assist them."

"Rest assured, I will reach out if I need help," Queen Brendel replied, visibly satisfied with their response.

What the hell, Derek?

The crowd dispersed away from the terrace as the guards directed them inside the mansion and through a search filter. One guard patted the rest of us down, looking somewhat disappointed that they'd not found Phyla on me, or Eira, or anyone else from our table. I was left by Acantha's side with the dream crew and Kailani, while Queen Brendel took a minute to properly survey the gift table, as if a third or fourth look would reveal Phyla there.

"Doesn't the name sound familiar?" Eira asked me, nervously watching the queen.

"What, Phyla?" Amelia replied. "Yeah, I've heard it before."

"But where? And please, don't tell me in the dream, because I will snap," Herakles shot back. I shushed him, briefly checking to see if the queen had heard us. Lumi was right. It was time I listened to my instincts, which were now warning me to keep any dream-related discussions out of the queen's earshot.

"Let's address that a bit later," I said to him, hoping he'd gotten my message.

One of the guards rushed back to Queen Brendel. "We've brought one of our local witches to tag all the guests. It should help us keep track of them, in case they think of skipping."

"Good. Thank you, Aledras," Queen Brendel replied, and the guard bowed respectfully. She looked at me, as if waiting for my response, but all I could think of was that I'd heard that name before.

Phyla. Aledras. Brendel.

They were all connected somehow, but not in the way I was seeing them now. Squeezing Eira's hand in mine, I gave the queen one last nod and turned away from Acantha's body. Lumi had already ushered the rest of the dream crew down the stairs and deeper into the garden. Eira and I moved to speak to them, when the queen's sullen voice stopped me cold in my tracks.

"Please, don't take this personally, Taeral. I have great respect for you and your mother. But your father isn't ruling this kingdom anymore. I am. And I have a different set of rules, each carefully designed to serve my people," she said. "I will find out what happened to Acantha, and I will retrieve Phyla as well."

"I thought it was an engagement gift to Eva and Varga," I replied, glancing at her over my shoulder. "Shouldn't they be left to handle it?"

"I withdraw my gift to them," the queen declared. "I'll send them a nice basket, instead. I wanted Phyla to be safe with them. Clearly, it's not. So I want it back."

I shook my head in genuine dismay, but I didn't engage her further. She pissed me off more than anyone, and I didn't want to say something that might get me or the others in trouble. Besides, the issue of our shared dream was still due to be discussed, and I had a feeling we'd find a common thread linking it to Acantha and Phyla.

It was just a hunch at this point, but nothing sounded impossible anymore.

AMELIA

We went back to the fountain, startled by the events of tonight. What had first been a celebration of love had quickly turned into a pile of darkness and unexplained mysteries, to which we were all connected, somehow.

Queen Brendel took a personal approach in her investigation, first demanding to speak to Taeral's mother and Varga's parents. The body searches had yielded nothing. Soon, it would be our turn to answer some questions, but we needed to dig into this shared dream issue first. I caught glimpses of Queen Brendel ordering her guards and the newly arrived investigators to spread out and search the entire mansion. Taeral was thoroughly displeased but didn't comment on the matter any further. She'd already taken over.

"Has anyone noticed that she's basically as confused and as dazed as we are?" Varga asked, his eyes glimmering gold as he watched the queen. "Interestingly enough, I can't see her aura. But her face does all the talking, anyway."

"Okay, add that to the pile of weird, then," I grumbled, crossing my arms as I settled on the edge of the fountain. Raphael put his arms around my shoulders, pulling me close, and it was the closest I'd get to any form of comfort tonight. "We have so many questions unanswered."

"Then let's start from the very beginning," Lumi replied. "My apprentice is dead, and I need to understand what happened. Brendel's Phyla hysterics are ill-fitting, as well."

"What do we all remember, from the Blackout onward?" I asked, looking at the group. It felt good to be around them, even though we didn't know each other as much as I would've hoped—or dreamed of. "It's kind of hazy for me, to be honest. I still have some blank spots in my memory."

"You, too?" Taeral sighed. "Then it's a common state among us dreamers."

The group nodded, which prompted me to continue. "Then let's get to the dream. None of us had really talked to one another until we were brought together for a mission," I said. "That's how I remember it, anyway. Some Hermessi was wreaking havoc, making fae explode."

"Right. It was the Fire Hermessi from a foreign planet," Eira added. "The one I was supposedly from," she added, chuckling softly. "The subconscious is a marvelous thing."

"But that Hermessi was only trying to help," Lumi replied. "There was a cult. We were

chased around for quite a while. Then the fae started getting sick?"

We thought about it for a moment and nodded again. Nothing is what it seems, I thought. I'd heard that before. It had been said to me, repeatedly, as a warning, but I couldn't remember when or by whom.

"Including Taeral's father," I said.

Taeral's forehead smoothed, his gaze burning amber. "He was still king."

"Yes. Then what?" Lumi asked, pressing her fingers into her temples in a bid to release some of the tension that had begun gathering. We were all feeling it.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I remember Reapers, agents of Death," Varga said. "They somehow got involved, or we discovered them. Oh, and Death herself. She gave us a task."

"Does that sound familiar to everyone?" I asked, and got a third set of nods from the group. It was enough to form a solid theory with what I'd gathered so far. "Then it's clear. We definitely experienced the same dream. We're all dealing with memory gaps in the real world, now, as well, while the dream continues to fade away, until we won't remember anything anymore."

Riza clicked her teeth. "Do we have any idea as to what might've caused it?"

"I don't think so, but let me ask another question," I said, also watching Brendel and her guards on the terrace. She kept looking back at us, and I didn't like this much attention from her. It gave me the chills. "What is the very last thing that we all remember from the dream, prior to waking up?"

That was a tough one. It required several excruciatingly long minutes for each of us to dig deep into the recesses of our minds for a concrete answer. In the end, however, we didn't come up short.

Herakles was the first to speak. "We'd just reached another planet. Strange place. Interesting people. They all dressed the same—"

"Lilac hair, right?" Riza replied, smiling. "Yeah, I remember that."

"What was the planet's name?" Lumi asked.

Taeral sucked in a breath. "Aledras."

"What, like the queen's guard?" I asked, only slightly less confused than an hour ago. Some elements still didn't click the way they should've, and this name was one of them. "Have any of us ever met the guy before, to remember his name and process it in our dreams?"

Heads shook. "Could it be mere coincidence?" Raphael suggested.

"No, I don't think so. I had coordinates for it. Actual, clear number sequences that gave me an accurate location. I remember Phoenix had helped, along with—"

"Ramin," Taeral breathed, finishing my sentence. "Ramin, the Fire Hermessi of Neraka."

"The same one who helped Harper defeat Shaytan?" Riza asked, pursing her lips as she dug deeper into her memory and answered her own question. "Yeah, him."

"Could that planet be real, then?" Eira said to me. "Do you think you could check those coordinates, if the numbers still come to you?"

I sighed deeply, wondering about that myself. "Maybe. I can definitely try. But there is

something else that's been bugging me since I woke up, and I know it might sound crazy, but it kind of makes sense when you look at it from all angles. What if what we dreamed was real?"

Lumi was the first to react, straightening her back and affixing her white-blue gaze on me. "Our experience with the Hermessi, our quest for that lady Death? Aledras? You think we lived through all that? Actually lived through it?"

It didn't sound that crazy anymore. After two days of scratching my brain and trying to understand my condition along with that dream, it was the only scenario which made more sense than magic spells or mere coincidence. The latter was downright laughable, in hindsight.

"What are the odds that we, specifically, shared such a detailed dream?" I asked.

Taeral muttered a curse, looking back at the terrace. I followed his gaze and saw the queen's guards walking down the path, their eyes on us. "Whatever this is, we'll have to talk about it later," he said. "There are too many people watching us right now, and Queen Brendel has already made this a rather hostile environment."

"Even our loved ones shouldn't be included in this conversation," Varga added. "I didn't like the way my parents, and Derek and Sofia, handled the whole Acantha issue."

"For everyone's safety, let's keep this to ourselves, for now," Lumi advised. The guards were getting closer, and, with their approach, my anxiety levels began to spike once more. The only thing that stopped me from unraveling was Raphael. My rock. My Perfect.

"We'll meet in a few hours," Taeral said. "I'll get in touch and set up a place and a time. In the meantime, we should just... you know, go with the flow. Cooperate with the guards, the investigators and all that."

I recognized Aledras as one of the guards coming to talk to us. He was the first to speak when they reached us. "The investigators would like to ask you all a few questions."

We all complied with the request, though, deep down, we were still miffed about how Queen Brendel had booted us off an investigation that was clearly part of our jurisdiction. Varga had been on point with his concern regarding Derek and Sofia. I would've expected more opposition from them.

It didn't sound right. It didn't feel right. None of this is right!

TAERAL

Closer to midnight, the estate had been fully cleared, and we'd answered all of the investigators' questions. Granted, I would've delved deeper into these interviews, but the Fire Star officials did not operate according to the GASP handbook. I would've kept everyone on the premises until we spoke to them, without allowing anyone to leave—that had been the queen's first mistake.

But it wasn't our investigation, as she'd so clearly put it.

Acantha's body had been taken to the local mortuary for an in-depth analysis, which was to be carried out by the queen's physicians. I did manage to get Corrine and Ibrahim involved, and they would assist in the autopsy over the next day. Lumi and the remaining apprentices had been considered too personally involved to be a part of this—Kailani included—but at least we had her grandparents there, keeping an eye on things.

Even so, I still worried. Nothing about this affair seemed right, but I couldn't pinpoint what was wrong, besides Queen Brendel's insistence on leading the investigation. She was a head of state, and not an experienced GASP operative, which made us doubt her methods, to begin with. However, she was the queen of the Fire Star, and her word was law.

From what I could remember, I wasn't sure when or how Brendel had come into our lives. I only knew that, after my father and Lidera had passed away during the Blackout, Brendel had emerged to take over the throne.

My mother and I retreated into the ground-floor tearoom of our house, with Queen Brendel as our guest. Eira was out, along with the rest of the dream crew, and they were waiting for me to update them as soon as the queen left my house. Her guards waited in the lobby, quietly standing close to the doorframe, where I could see them. Their presence made my skin itch. It felt as though I couldn't trust my own fire fae people.

"I'm sorry the celebration was ruined," Queen Brendel said, as my mother filled her porcelain cup with a fresh batch of rose tea. She took a sip and smiled. "This is wonderful. Where did you get it?"

"From our garden," my mother explained. "Half of the rosebushes out back are used for our tea. The petals are big and flavorful enough to produce a hefty amount each year. We never run out."

Why were we talking about tea?

"Do you know when we'll get the autopsy results for Acantha?" I asked, steering the conversation back into focus.

"Hopefully by the end of tomorrow," Queen Brendel replied. "I do hope GASP will meet us halfway and let my people do their jobs."

"Corrine and Ibrahim are there to assist the physicians, Your Majesty. Nothing more, nothing less. Like I've said before, Acantha was a member of GASP. She may have died on Fire Star territory, but the federation still needs to at least be involved in the investigation surrounding her death," I said firmly.

Queen Brendel nodded. "I agree. I wouldn't have wanted you kept in the dark, anyway. I do regret having to rescind my gift to Eva and Varga. I hope they'll find it in their hearts to forgive me."

"It was a little awkward," I said. It got me a scoff from my mother.

"Taeral, please, be respectful to our queen."

"I'm just being honest," I shot back, almost not recognizing the fierce and sassy Nuriya who had brought me into this world and had raised me to speak my mind when something didn't feel right.

Queen Brendel laughed lightly. "Please, Nuriya, let the boy be. It was awkward, indeed. To be honest, I had doubts about gifting Phylato to begin with, but it felt like the right thing to do at the time. It gives people such good feelings... When it vanished, however, I was furious. I felt betrayed. It made me realize that I shouldn't have taken it out, in the first place."

"I'm sure Eva and Varga are fine with it," I replied. "I think they're a bit more worried about Acantha's death, at this point. There might be a killer on the loose."

"Nuriya, I want you to know that I will never forget your gesture," Queen Brendel said, the conversation once again falling off its original path. "Surrendering your claim to the throne was a brave thing to do. Braver than standing against the odds and leading the Fire Star, even when many of its people didn't want a jinni or, in Taeral's case, a half-jinni ruling over their kingdom."

Where the hell was this coming from? For a moment, I felt like an unwilling participant in a play that had been written and set in motion with zero input from me. No one had asked me to be a part of it, yet here I was, stuck and boiling on the inside, unable to wrap my head around the incredibly short attention spans of the people around me.

My mother sighed deeply. "I don't regret my decision. It gave me more time to spend with my son, to work with GASP on other issues. I think we were better off this way."

"Lidera would've made a fine ruler, had she survived the Blackout," Queen Brendel said. "I would've begged her to do it. I never really wanted to be queen, if I'm completely honest. But when the nation needs you, you can't refuse."

"Your Majesty, I do think you should engage GASP on the topic of autonomy for the Fire Star, at your earliest convenience," my mother replied. "Sherus signed a treaty with the federation, and he stuck by it until the day he died. Your policies are significantly different from his, in terms of GASP cooperation, and I fear that many in the federation's leadership are somewhat confused regarding your intentions."

"I want the Fire Star to be free and unrestrained by outside forces. We're not violent

or dangerous people, and I think we'll be fine without too much influence from GASP," Queen Brendel said. "That is all. But you are right. I'll arrange a meeting with Derek and Sofia as soon as possible and clarify these things, so we all know where we stand."

She looked at me when she said that last part, as if I were the confused one in the room. It felt a tad insulting, but it wasn't the right time to get on her nerves. Seeing my mother so submissive in front of Queen Brendel didn't sit well with me. She was nothing like the woman I remembered.

"Mom, do you remember that day? The Blackout?" I asked, carefully checking her and the queen's expressions. Following my instincts, I decided to see what I could learn about my father's death, since I still couldn't remember it myself.

My mother gave me a startled look. "Like it happened yesterday. Why?"

"How did Dad die, exactly? At which point during or after the Blackout?"

"You were there, honey. You saw it happen."

"Can you just tell me, please?" I replied, feeling Brendel's gaze burning into my head. I leaned back in my chair, trying to assume a relaxed position. The conversation was surreal enough as it was; my partial amnesia shouldn't have been too far-fetched. "Remember, that dream I had is still messing with my mind."

"What dream?" Queen Brendel asked, frowning at my mother.

"Nothing, just a nightmare that felt too real. I've been having trouble remembering bits and pieces of my life since. Confusing reality with the dream at times, too," I said.

"Your father and Lidera were next to each other. You were with them. The Hermessi had awakened, and they were manifesting their incredible power through you. The pulse that wiped the Perfects' memory was brief, but memorable, to say the least. Shortly after that, your father collapsed first. Then, Lidera. A dozen more died that day, and we knew the Hermessi's power was to blame," my mother explained. "They had just saved us, though. As much as it hurt, we considered Sherus, Lidera, and the others to be casualties of war. Your father died a hero."

"The Hermessi's effect on him was simply too much," Queen Brendel concluded.

"Which is weird, because my dad was a Hermessi child, after all," I said, and instantly regretted it. I'd just mentioned something from my dream, not from real life. My mother was stunned.

"What did you say?"

Queen Brendel, on the other hand, was intrigued, her curiosity stirred. "A Hermessi child? Where did you get that from? What is a Hermessi child?"

My blood ran cold, knowing I had to get myself out of this jam before someone slipped a straightjacket on me. "Nothing. It's nothing. I got confused. Please, forget I said anything." I got up and offered a polite bow. "I need to go to bed early. It's been an incredibly long day. If you'll excuse me."

"Taeral," my mother called out, but I was already dashing across the hallway, past the guards, and up the stairs. I heard her apologize to the queen. Brendel told her it was okay, that it had been a difficult day, not just a long one.

I'd gotten confused between the dream and reality again, and it scared me. I hadn't even realized I'd mentioned my father's Hermessi origins until after I'd opened my mouth.

I felt awful because I must've freaked my mother out, too.

But my brain was bombarded by these strange and intense sensations. It felt as though I was literally trapped in the wrong version of my world. Everything I'd experienced since I'd woken up from that dream had only served to amplify this thought that maybe, just maybe... I'd slipped between parallel universes or something. My mother was my mother but not really. My father had died, but not the way she'd said. The more I pondered this, the worse it all felt.

TAERAL

*M*y room was a haven, given everything that had happened. As soon as I walked in and closed the door behind me, twisting the key in the lock to make sure I had all the privacy I wanted, I felt as though I could breathe again.

It was quiet, and fresh air poured through one of the half-open windows. Night enveloped the world outside, giving me a glimpse of a starry sky and the blossoming trees below. "I might just be losing my mind," I whispered. If that were true, it would've meant that Eira, Riza, Herakles, Amelia, Raphael, Eva, Varga, Lumi, and Nethissis were also going crazy, and that we weren't sharing a dream, but rather a pretty disturbing psychosis.

Without any answers, and with everything unfolding in such an illogical manner, it was difficult for me to identify what was real and reasonable, and what was insane and nightmarish. Sometimes, these two threads intertwined, as well, further confusing me.

I nearly screamed when I saw the whole dream crew outside my window, hovering in midair and watching me. Riza's magic was responsible, judging by the way in which her hands were out, the air rippling around her. I remembered she'd done it before, more than once, and not just with herself.

Catching my breath, I rushed across the room and opened the window, allowing the group to climb through.

"I said I'd let you all know when it was safe to talk," I hissed, glowering at Raphael and Varga, in particular. I'd expected them to understand that.

Lumi smirked. "I have magic. I can eavesdrop and spy on people. You remember that, right?"

Sighing, I collapsed in one of the two armchairs in the corner of my room, while Eira sat in the other, giving me a concerned look. "You were watching and listening this whole time, then," I said.

"We had to," Eira replied. "We were worried about you."

The others settled on the floor and on the ottoman at the foot of my bed. Based on their expressions, they were as tired and as wary as I was. We weren't just sharing a dream—or psychosis. We were also sharing trauma, fear, and confusion. This was new and strange to all of us.

"Once you left the queen and your mother, we knew we could meet you up here," Lumi said. "The guards had no reason to suspect you of anything, so you were in the clear."

"Plus, we couldn't wait another moment!" Riza exclaimed. "We're still reeling from what happened earlier, and, to be honest, I think we have even more questions now than before we sat together and realized we shared this stupid dream."

Varga chuckled softly. "Let's start with the—pardon the pun—crown jewel of the evening. Not that Eva and I were in any way offended, but what the hell was up with Queen Brendel's decision to take back the engagement gift after it turned out to be missing?"

"What is going on here?" Eva added, looking at me. "What was she thinking, and what is so damn precious about that stone that made her react the way she did?"

"You know, she's got the royal guards out patrolling the property and knocking on doors all over the city," Herakles replied. "They're all desperately looking for Phyla."

Raphael sighed. "They did a body search of everyone who left the house, shortly after Acantha died and Queen Brendel took over. They didn't find it."

Lumi got up and started pacing the room, her mind moving and linking the pieces of the puzzle together. I recognized the look in her eyes. I'd seen it more than once, usually before a breakthrough.

"Brendel gave Phyla as a gift, claiming that it made the people around it feel good. I think it's got something to do with the gemstone's properties," she said. "She thought it would offer Eva and Varga some kind of emotional relief. That it would make them happy. As soon as she realized it was missing, though, she decided she wanted it back. And we all heard her downstairs, unbeknownst to her. She regretted giving it away in the first place. Doesn't anyone find that weird, for someone as assertive and as determined as she is?"

We all thought about it for a moment, and it made sense. It was odd, indeed, and we nodded our approval, keeping our eyes on Lumi the whole time. "She's also quite passive-aggressive toward GASP. I didn't remember her being like that before."

"Personally, I don't remember her at all. I know about her. I should be able to look back into the past and see or hear her, but I can't," Amelia said. "But here's the thing. If we look back at our shared dream and consider it real, we'd have every reason to fear and loathe Brendel."

"Why, though? Was she in it?" Raphael asked.

Amelia nodded. "I remembered just now. She was leading the Hermessi. She was a Hermessi..."

"My head is going to explode." Herakles sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Hold on," Lumi said, freezing as her gaze wandered across our group. "What if it wasn't a dream? We've asked this before, but we need to ask again, this time with a little more oomph. What if our shared dream wasn't a dream at all, but a real experience?"

If the first time we'd said it out loud it had sounded far-fetched, this second time it didn't. It was worryingly possible that Lumi was right. That we hadn't dreamed it at all. That it had actually happened.

"I might have a theory," Amelia murmured. She had our full attention. "It would make more sense than everything that has happened here today. And, to be honest, I've been remembering more and more from the dream over these past couple of hours. And it, too, falls in line with this theory."

"Would you mind telling us the theory, then?" Nethissis replied.

"This here... This is the dream," Amelia said. "And what we dreamed... it really happened."

I'd thought about this possibility as well, but I'd thought that this world was more real, since there was no way I'd be able to get my father back. But as I looked back on the dream some more, I realized that Amelia had a point. Things that I'd forgotten were beginning to come back to me, and maybe it had something to do with our collective ability to acknowledge that this... this here was not the real thing.

"If I'm right, and this is the dream, then someone went to a lot of trouble to make it feel so real," Amelia continued. "It takes some mad kind of skill to pull something like this off."

"So, what, our realities are switched?" I asked, gradually accepting the possibility. "We're actually dreaming now?"

"It sounds insane," Riza mumbled, but the terrified look on her face told me that she was considering it, as well.

"Is it, though?" Lumi replied. "We all remember landing on Aledras, looking for Phyla. It can't be a coincidence that we're looking for Phyla here, as well."

"Its purpose differs," Raphael remembered, lighting up. "Phyla was the last piece of Thieron. Death's scythe. The tool she needed to stop the apocalypse—"

"Which Brendel had started," Amelia added, horror truly sinking in.

"And Brendel had stolen Thieron in the first place," Eira said.

"We'll need to dig deeper into our memories of the dream. Or not-dream, if you will," Lumi replied. "I think there's something in it, something we're all forgetting. It might clarify everything."

A loud bang made me jump. The door burst open, and Queen Brendel's guards spilled into the room, fires burning menacingly in their bare hands. The queen appeared in the doorway, joined by my mother.

"I thought you would've been better at conspiring against me," Queen Brendel said, her expression stern, her orange eyes flaring angrily.

My mother was crying and looking at me with a mixture of disbelief and disappointment, and I had no idea what was going on here. "How could you do this, Taeral? How could you do such a horrible thing?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

The rest of the dream crew got up, each of them ready to fight their way out if they had to. I had a feeling it might be our only option, if this was somehow a situation manipulated by Queen Brendel to use against us.

"Our investigators have come forth with several suspicions. All of them link you and your friends here to Acantha's death and Phyla's disappearance," the queen said. "I have to say, I didn't believe it when they first told me, but to find you all in here... it's rather

odd."

"Mom... Are you serious?!" I blurted, trying to get my mother to see how senseless and ridiculous this entire conversation was.

"What the hell?!" Amelia snapped. "We had nothing to do with Acantha's death! We were at the dinner table when she collapsed! Do you even know the cause of death yet? You said you'd get results by tomorrow evening."

"And why would we have stolen Phyla?" Varga asked. "You'd just given it to Eva and me. We didn't need to steal it. It was ours already!"

Queen Brendel didn't seem to care about the flawed logic here, and neither did her guards. The worst part was that my mother was still by her side, staring at me with genuine anger and dismay.

"Oh, Taeral. Your father would be furious if he were still alive. What were you thinking?" she cried out.

I pointed an angry finger at her, gritting my teeth, unable to control my bubbling rage. "Don't you dare bring him into this! It's all a conspiracy. How can you not see this?!"

Queen Brendel sighed, while my mother just sobbed and continued blaming me for tonight's horrible events. It broke me on the inside, but it also pushed me into accepting Amelia's theory. None of this was real. It couldn't be. That meant that my mother wasn't real. That she was still back in The Shade, with... my father's spirit.

"If you weren't conspiring, why are you all meeting up here in secret?" Queen Brendel asked. I hated her more than anyone, and thinking of her as the Hermessi foe that had caused all of that pain in the not-dream... it made me want to end her, right here, right now.

"If this is the dream, how the hell do we wake ourselves up?" Eira murmured.

"They're following some kind of script," Lumi said, frowning as she measured the guards from head to toe. "We're unwilling players in an invented reality."

"You are all under arrest for conspiring against the queen of the Fire Star and for the murder of Acantha," one of the guards declared and took out two pairs of crystal cuffs. I recognized those. We'd used them on fae who'd fallen under the Hermessi's influence in the not-dream.

The other soldiers produced pairs of their own, closing in on our group.

"Tae, just go with them and confess to your crimes," my mother said. "Please. Do the right thing."

"She's right," Lumi replied, looking at me. "Let's play along. Let's see what happens. Don't worry about the cuffs."

"You make it sound like a walk in the park," I retorted. But she was right. Lumi was a powerful swamp witch. She probably had what it took to break those cuffs, if needed. If this was going somewhere, we had to see for ourselves.

As much as I loathed to admit it, I was as curious as Lumi about all this. If it was made-up, where would it lead? How would we get ourselves out of this mess and back into true reality? Who was what, and where did we stand as a group?

Going to a Fire Star prison made me awfully uneasy, though. The odds were already stacked against us. Bogus accusations. Even my mother had turned against me. My group

was already baffled and concerned upon concluding that the dream was most likely real. The last thing we needed was more theatricals and confusion.

"We'll figure something out," Eira said to me, squeezing my hand. "We will."

Gazing into her blue eyes, I found a flicker of hope. A resolution that, no matter what, at least we were all in this together. Whatever this nonsense was, we'd find our way out eventually. This had to end. We had to return to the truth, for the truth would set us free.

SEELEY

We'd been down here for hours, virtually useless. The glass bell was filled with white light, and there was no sign of Taeral, the crew, or even Brendel anywhere. The general assumption was that they'd been sucked into the Phyla challenge, but I had no idea what that entailed, and Soul and Widow were both keeping their mouths shut about it.

The strangest part was that the entire battle had come to a sudden halt. I'd yet to work up the courage to go back up and see the damage that the Hermessi had done upon landing, but I could still hear screams and wails from far away. They'd killed plenty of Aledrasians in this city, for sure.

Now, all the Hermessi stood quietly, scattered down the circular steps around us. The air was thick enough to suffocate anyone living who got caught here between us. The only one who partially fit the bill was Fallon, whose body had been taken over by Kabbah. And Kabbah was growing increasingly impatient.

"What the hell are they doing down there?" he asked, then pointed at the Hermessi. "And why are they all frozen and muted? It's not what I expected."

"Therefore, you are startled and anxious about a situation over which you have no control," Soul concluded with a dry smirk.

"And you are seriously getting on my nerves. You're lucky you're already dead," Kabbah shot back, his eyes flaring green.

"Is our maker saying anything?" Widow asked me. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell from the sound of his voice that he, too, was losing his calm in this situation. At least on the Fire Star we'd all been busy fighting and keeping the Hermessi at bay. Waiting wasn't a strong suit for any of us.

I shook my head. "I haven't heard from her for a while."

"That should concern you," Soul replied.

"Did I say otherwise?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

"You didn't say anything. It leaves room for assumptions," Soul said.

Kabbah scoffed. "You need to start telling us the truth. What's going on inside that glass bell? What's the challenge about? They've been in there for hours!"

"And you've been out here, fidgeting like a hyperactive toddler. Is that it?" Soul replied, focused on pissing Kabbah off.

"Your snark is counterproductive," I interjected.

"My snark is exquisite, and you're just jealous!" Soul snarled.

"Just tell us the truth!" Kabbah shouted.

Widow put a hand on Soul's shoulder. "We should tell them. They can't do anything about it, anyway."

"That's the thing. If we tell them, they'll freak out, and they won't be able to get involved. It serves no purpose whatsoever," Soul said, his tone softer when addressing Widow. I found that somewhat endearing. It turned out the psycho still had a heart.

"For our peace of mind, at least," I replied, adopting a more peaceful demeanor.

Aggression didn't really work on the Soul Crusher. He couldn't be intimidated, and, unlike on previous instances, Widow wasn't forcing him into talking. I figured they were both unsure as to whether they should tell us or not.

"You're not going to like it," Soul warned me.

"I didn't like your gig, or Widow's either, but here I am, still standing," I replied with a grin. It was enough to finally make him cooperate.

Soul took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, as if gathering his thoughts into a coherent sentence. "Our Phantom is a master of invented realities. She destroys the fine line between a dream and the conscious existence."

"Whoa," Kabbah gasped. I'd never seen the Earth Hermessi as bewildered as he was in this precise moment. It was truly an intriguing sight to behold. The brave and brazen elemental had finally heard something that had knocked his socks off.

"Right now, Taeral, his crew, and Brendel have likely been sucked into one of the Phantom's invented realities," Soul continued. Widow nodded by his side in silent agreement. "It looks real. It sounds real. It feels real. She is very good at her job, I'll give her that."

"Let me get this straight. They're stuck in a dream," I said, a knot tightening in my throat. "And they don't know it's a dream."

"Probably not. They'll have to figure it out," Widow replied. "Time flows differently inside the Phantom's world. It could be years in there and hours out here before one of them gets to Phyla first. That's the challenge. Moving through the dream and getting Phyla. Following their instincts. At least, that's how I see our sister playing all this out, though I'm not certain of the specifics."

Soul laughed, but there was bitterness in his voice. I had a feeling he knew the Phantom better than most. "She'll want to test them and their ability to listen to their instincts, to discern truth from lies... to get back to the surface. She's more powerful than Widow and I put together, and she takes her role as Phyla's guardian seriously."

"Hold on, so Brendel and Taeral got sucked into the challenge? I thought Brendel couldn't touch Phyla," Kabbah said.

"Ah, you're the sharp one here," Soul replied. "You're right. She can't. But I've got a feeling that Phyla allowed her to participate just to mess with her. Remember, she's being powered up by Phyla, the stone of life and death. That's turbo mojo, right there."

"If Brendel reaches Phyla first, it'll be over for Taeral. It doesn't matter that she can't use it. What matters is that Taeral will lose the challenge and get himself ejected. If they

fail, Brendel will win this, because Taeral and the crew will have to get past her again in order to try again, and there is simply no time for that," Widow continued.

Glancing around at the statue-like Hermessi, I finally understood why they were behaving like this. They knew what Brendel was doing, and it was a question of still bothering to fight if she was about to lose the challenge to Taeral and his team. Why fight us if she was about to be defeated? If Taeral got Phyla, it was technically over for them and the ritual. But if Brendel came out the victor, the Hermessi could simply resume fighting by her side.

Spineless bastards.

"It's like beating the computer at a game," I whispered. Looking at Soul and Widow, I wondered if there was any way we could help. "Why haven't you called out to her yet?"

Soul giggled. "Oh, Seeley. You don't want to meet our sister. Trust me. If you think I or my brother are creepy and heartless, wait till you see the Phantom. I mean, you will see her if Taeral wins this."

"Can she not be swayed into helping them?" Kabbah asked.

"The protection spells compel her to stay true to her goal. Only the worthy can be given Phyla, and her challenge is clear and irrevocable," Soul said. "The Phantom is more into the rules than the rest of us ever were. Without being in there, however, I cannot tell you whether she's making the dream easy or hard on them. We can spend what time we have left here speculating, if you wish."

I shook my head. "No, thanks. That'll just mess with my stress levels."

Without being able to reach Death, there wasn't much that was left for me to do, other than wait for Taeral's crew to emerge—hopefully with Phyla. I was curious about Kelara's quest to find the traitorous First Ten, but I also worried about her. Soul and Widow had both said that they didn't know who the culprit might be among them, but I didn't exactly trust them.

They had a habit of withholding precious pieces of information, and I feared that involved their own suspicions regarding the First Ten. If someone had helped Brendel after the Fire Star incident, they had to pay. Such brazen actions against Death could not be tolerated or forgiven.

Too many things had gone wrong already, in the greater scheme of things. A treacherous Reaper could easily tilt the balance back into chaos and destruction, going against everything we'd all worked and fought for until now.

Death's silence wasn't helping.

KELARA

Seeing the Nerakian sanctuary high up in the air had a certain creep factor to it. It reminded me that the Hermessi had taken over, not only over Calliope's infected fae, but all over the In-Between and the Supernatural Dimension.

I recognized some of the GASP members present and worriedly watching the structure to which they no longer had access. I knew them from what Vesta and the Novaks had told me, and also from information I'd gathered from other Reapers in the area. The beauty of being a Reaper was that knowledge was never out of reach. All it took was a telepathic connection and the right questions to ask of one's colleagues.

Of course, the communication network between Reapers was anything but perfect. Intel still got lost along the way. Secrets were kept and ferociously guarded. Not everyone was as forthcoming as they should've been, and even the superior circles of Reapers were limited in their ability to intervene. Looking back now, I understood just how deeply missed Death had been. Without Thieron, she lacked the reach she'd needed to discipline those who got out of line.

Fiona and Zane stood out, since the former was petite and the latter was basically a horned mountain. Harper and Caspian were easy to pick out, as well, solely by their leather uniforms and silver badges. The vampires and the Maras present had their heads covered to protect them from the sun, but I didn't need to see them to understand how truly terrified they were. Dozens more from GASP had joined them in their survey of the sanctuary, but there was nothing more they could do, other than watch it all unfold.

The Hermessi were well past the 4.5 million mark, and they were steadily headed toward the final number. Once they reached five million, all the fae would be turned into weapons of mass destruction and entire worlds would be annihilated. It all depended on Taeral's ability to complete the Thieron challenge, and there was a part of me that worried he might not pull through. I despised any kind of pessimism, but given everything that had happened and Brendel's unexpected edge, I had to admit, it wasn't looking peachy.

Maybe if I identified the treacherous Reaper, I'd be able to even the playing field more. Without a moment left to waste, I transported myself inside the sanctuary. Up here, it was quiet, with the exception of the howling winds outside.

The fae spirits were all mortified, eyes wide as they murmured to one another. Most

of the links on their life-chains had turned black, with only one or two left glowing. Much like the Calliope fae, these people were hanging by mere threads. Their Reapers didn't look any more chipper than they did. Confusion and concern reigned supreme, and all their gazes turned to me as soon as I revealed myself.

I recognized some of them. We'd crossed paths before, in different, less troubling circumstances. I walked up to one of them, a middle-aged-looking former fae named Oskian. His eyes lit up when he remembered me, and he smiled. "Kelara. What are you doing all the way over here?"

The Nerakian Reaper uniforms were pretty cool, unlike my Earthly pantsuit. They were made entirely out of black-and-white leather, tightly wrapped around the Reapers' upper bodies and unraveling in long, wide, loose strips toward the bottom. If they were to spin really fast, the visual effect of black-and-white lines swishing in a circular pattern would've been a pleasure to observe. I had to admit, Oskian wore his with enviable grace, his slender figure made taller by the sharp contrast.

"I'm here on some business," I replied politely, checking the sanctuary with one long look. The building reminded me of an ancient Hindu temple, with rounded shapes and plenty of mosaic details that offered a certain visual fluidity to the entire building. There was no glass on the windows, but given that it was constantly warm, even hot throughout the day and the night, there simply had been no need. "How are things here?"

"As well as you'd expect, given what just happened." Oskian sighed, briefly checking his fae spirit. She sat on the floor, her back against her crystal casing, weeping into her palms. It broke my heart a thousand times over. "We're offering all the support and comfort that we can, but I fear we're hurtling toward the inevitable now."

"Yeah, don't hold your breath yet," I said. "I know the Spirit Bender is around here. Do you know him?"

Oskian thought about it for a few seconds. Frowning, he shook his head. "I don't know the name."

"He's an old Reaper. Really, really old. One of the First Ten, to be specific."

"Whoa. I mean, I don't know all the Reapers here. If he's around, I might not be the right person to ask. Are you sure, though? That he's a First Tenner? They're basically legends around here, these days."

"Oh, trust me, they're real," I replied. "I was told he was the Reapers' representative to GASP down here."

Oskian gasped. "Oh. Spirit. Right. Damn, I didn't make the connection straightaway. How foolish of me." He laughed nervously. "Spirit. The Spirit Bender. Okay... Yeah, he's definitely here. Over there," he added, pointing to the northwestern corner of the sanctuary. "He's not in the best of moods right now. He's generally quite cranky, in fact."

"He's not the only one," I grumbled, and gave Oskian a thankful nod. "I'll see you around."

Making my way across the sanctuary, I took a few moments to take in the entire scene. All the crystal casings had been displayed in concentric circles around a cluster of serious batteries. The cables spread out, connecting the batteries to every single casing. The fae bodies glowed bright orange, and the sight of them would never stop chilling me

to the bone.

Upon reaching the Spirit Bender, I knew I should've recognized him sooner. He didn't wear a Nerakian Reaper uniform, but what had to be his own. It was made of black silk which flowed smoothly down his long arms and legs, caught around the waist with a white band. His scythe was strapped to his back, and its shape struck me as odd, with a long handle and a double-half-moon-shaped blade. I imagined it could deliver horrendous damage in battle.

But there was something else that made the Spirit Bender stand out. He felt different. There was a coldness surrounding him that sent shivers down my spine. The closer I got to him, the frostier it got. It was as if an entire arctic continent had been stored inside him. He saw me coming, but he didn't move or react in any way.

"Hi. I'm Kelara," I said, noticing how the other Reapers and souls kept a certain distance from the guy. It worried me, but I was too busy being in awe of him. The Spirit Bender was millions of years old and one of the first Reapers ever made. If anyone had a rich tale to tell, it was him and the other nine in his lot. "You don't know me, but I—"

"I know you," he replied. Stars gathered in his black eyes, slightly different from those of other Reapers. There were reddish and blue twinkles here and there, as if his gaze had captured the births and deaths of many galaxies. My mind went blank for a moment, and I found it difficult to speak, while the Spirit Bender, on the other hand, seemed rather amused.

"You... You do?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You're one of two Fifth Circle Reapers who talk to Death. Your reputation precedes you."

I'd told a few Reapers about me and Seeley, but I hadn't thought the information would've reached the Spirit Bender, of all people. It was odd and surprising, but not entirely out of the ordinary. He had enough insight and experience to make it his business to know things about other Reapers, especially those who didn't quite fit the regular pattern.

"I'd ask who told you, but you strike me as a discreet individual," I said.

He nodded once. "You assume correctly. But I must say, hearing Death's voice is a rare and precious privilege. I hope you cherish every word she gives you."

Despite his talking, I couldn't help but categorize him as the most closed-off Reaper I'd ever come across. His body language said nothing. His tone was flat and empty. His expressions were, at best, barely animated. My instinct told me to be careful, and there were plenty of reasons for me to listen to that inner voice. After all, the Soul Crusher hadn't had the nicest things to say about his siblings.

"I'm always honored and humbled when she speaks to me, though I haven't heard her in a while," I said, checking for a reaction. Absolutely nothing. "I'm here to talk to you about your siblings. The First Ten."

He took a deep breath, leaning back against the wall. "Go on."

"Something happened on the Fire Star, with Taeral and Brendel. I suppose you're aware of the progress made in recovering Thieron."

"I've heard the summary, so to speak, yes."

"Thing is, Brendel recovered way too fast after she was struck with an incomplete Thieron. On top of that, she had information that none of the living or the other Hermessi would've been able to provide—except for the rebels, of course, but they were out of her reach."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure about that?"

"No one outside Derek and Sofia's mission circle knew that the Hermessi children would be taken to Earth," I said. "Yet Brendel did. It has led me to suspect that a Reaper might've helped her. Specifically, a Reaper powerful and knowledgeable enough to heal the damage inflicted by Thieron on a Hermessi. A First Tenner, since most of us have never even met Death or laid eyes on her scythe."

"And you suspect me?"

The way he asked made me shiver. Should I suspect him?

"I'm keeping doubts about everyone, right now. There is too much at stake. The one thing I'm positive about is that, if there's a Reaper out there helping Brendel, he or she is committing high treason against Death, against the living, and against the Reapers," I replied. "I cannot stand by and do nothing. So, here I am, asking questions."

The Spirit Bender took a minute to respond, occasionally glancing past me at the others. When his dark gaze settled back on me, my whole being vibrated with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Was this just an act? Was he as peculiar but also as loyal to Death as Soul and Widow? Or was he one of the crooked?

"First of all, any conversation pertaining to my siblings should take place elsewhere," he said. "Mostly because they left and they value their privacy. The last thing they want is for someone who overheard the two of us talking to go out there and look for them, like gushing fans of sorts."

"I respect that."

"Second, I need you to put any suspicion you have of me aside. I've been here, working for Death, since the beginning of time. I already knew you were coming to ask about the First Ten, and the reason behind such an inquiry," he added, slightly amused. "I didn't tell you because I find it polite to let a person speak. And I don't like gossip, unlike the Reapers who overheard you and notified me of your arrival."

A couple of names popped into my head, but I doubted the Spirit Bender would tell me which of them had run their mouths about me and my mission. Instead, I crossed my arms and raised my chin in sheer defiance.

"I'm not into gossip either," I declared.

"Good. Because what I'm about to tell you is sensitive information, and my brothers and sisters would tear me to shreds if I wasn't careful about disseminating such knowledge," he said.

"Your help is greatly appreciated. I would've spoken to Soul or Phantom about this issue, but they have concrete alibis and the timeline excludes them. Whoever is helping Brendel has been operating recently; otherwise, I'm sure I would've seen more unnatural interference against the living," I explained. "So, thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, Kelara. I might not have what you seek."

"What matters is that you're willing to help," I insisted.

"I will say one thing. It took a lot of courage for you to seek me out. It will serve you well later. I chose to stay and serve Death when the Reaper Circles were established, but my siblings still want to be left alone. They won't take kindly to strangers."

He walked toward one of the sanctuary's doors, taking his scythe out. He drew a series of symbols along the doorway and mounted the weapon on his back again. His fingers brushed along some of the inscriptions as he whispered an ancient spell—one I'd never heard before. The entire sequence lit up blue, and the air rippled in front of us.

The Spirit Bender gave me a sideways glance. "Come. Let's go for a walk."

He went through, vanishing completely. My heart skipped a beat, but I was too far down the rabbit hole to pull back now. The only way was forward, and it involved a lengthy conversation with the creepiest and most eloquent Reaper I'd ever come across. Also, one of the oldest in existence.

He'd poked fun at others for behaving like giggling fans around the First Ten, but I wasn't far from that type of behavior. I was just better at keeping my cool. I stepped through the doorway and followed him across space as the world warped around us.

Whatever this shortcut was, it was taking us to places I'd never seen before.

KELARA

Moments later, we were light-years away from Neraka, treading stars in places that didn't seem even remotely familiar. The spell that he'd worked allowed us to literally walk through an invisible wormhole, from which we could see everything warping around us. It had helped us cover a greater distance in a shorter period of time than a usual Reaper walk. Upon reaching our destination—of which I knew nothing—the entire cosmos came back into focus, and a gigantic galaxy opened up before us.

There was a super massive black hole at the very center, and billions of reddish and bluish stars moved around it. That was the power source of the entire galactic structure, allowing it to travel through space at incredible speeds.

It occurred to me then that the blue and red glimmers I'd seen earlier in the Spirit Bender's eyes were eerily similar to those in front of me now. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, noticing my dropped jaw.

"I've never been here before. It's incredible. Where are we, exactly?"

"We're in the Morganian Cluster. Noted by ancient Druids of Eritopia. One of their delegations made it this far, which still impresses me, to be honest. There's a place down there I think you'll appreciate."

I followed him through the stars and along the swirling paths of purple stardust, until we reached a strangely beautiful planet. It was twice as big as Neraka, at first glance, and its surface was covered in varied shades of indigo, lilac, pale blue, and black. It looked like something out of a fantasy book, prompting me to wonder if it was even real.

"Is it inhabited?" I asked, as the Spirit Bender teleported us to the ground to avoid the rough atmospheric entry. If there was one thing I loved most about being a Reaper, it was this ability to travel worlds and galaxies as if taking a really long walk through a gargantuan park.

"Scarcely, but yes," he replied. "It's a rather hostile environment, as opposed to most inhabited planets. But the people here have managed to make it work."

We stopped in the middle of a plain. Black-and-indigo mountains rose around it, with sharp peaks that poked through the cloud canvas above. There was no grass. No vegetation of any kind—only purple crystals serving as the ground. The red sun's light glinted across the minerals, throwing flakes of color all over. The winds blew softly, warm

and delicate, rustling some crystal pebbles along the way.

It took me a while to register everything around me, but when I was done, my conclusion was simple. "It's some kind of crystal world. Right?"

"So to speak. Yes. There are several patches of lush vegetation where the ground isn't covered in this purple crystal, and that's where life flourished," he said. "This world is called Desplan. It's peaceful, rather savage, but simple. The creatures here lead simple lives. Don't hold it against them, though. They are very welcoming to other people. If you reveal yourself to them, they might even worship you."

He was smiling, and I would've loved to learn more about Desplan. It was a stunning place, and I was certain I'd have a field day just exploring it, from north to south and from east to west. But there wasn't much time.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked him.

The Spirit Bender sighed, hands resting behind his back. I had a hard time assigning him to any known species, but, to the best of my knowledge, I figured it was safe to say he was some kind of early fae. His frame was tall and slender; his ears were pointed; his hair was pale blond and cut short. His limbs were longer than any fae's I'd met, though. His facial features were extremely sharp, and I was willing to bet I could crush a watermelon against his cheekbones. He moved like a ghost, and his voice could easily be confused with the wind.

"It's quiet," he said. "I like this place. I sometimes come here to just think."

"Tell me about the First Ten. I assume we don't have to worry about any kind of eavesdropping here."

He walked slowly, and I stayed by his side. I was occasionally distracted by flocks of giant crane-like birds that flew overhead. I heard water flowing somewhere not far away, maybe at the base of the black mountains ahead, or beyond.

"When my siblings and I were first made, the world was still young," he said. "The In-Between was a mere blip, still expanding. The Supernatural Dimension, as your GASP friends call it, was only a handful of stars. We were what today's scientists of Earth, where you're from, might call proto-humanoids. Few and far between, with very little understanding of the universe around us. I was the fifth made, and I was just as confused as those before and after me."

"Confused?"

"Well, no one asked us if we wanted to become Reapers before we died. We barely perceived death at the time, beyond it being a natural end to things. Imagine my shock when I died and found myself standing before the real Death. At first, I thought it was just a bad dream. She told me I had an eternity ahead of me, and that someone needed to help her collect the souls of the dead and usher them into the next world."

"Were you unhappy?" I asked.

The Spirit Bender nodded faintly. "Maybe a little, in the beginning. I think I forgot how to be angry after two or three million years. It didn't matter to me. I did my job. I learned to accept my immortality and my place in the great plan of existence and death. Someone had to reap souls, right? My siblings reached the same conclusion, eventually. The world developed, the populations grew, and, before we knew it, the First Ten were

no longer enough. Our limited omnipresence was strained, and Death decided it was time to make more of us. However, she went easy on the recipe during this second batch."

"What do you mean?"

"She'd infused us with great powers. She didn't want another line of us. Not that she feared us or anything. I guess she just didn't see a need for the next generation to have abilities like ours. We'd been novelties to her. An opportunity to experiment, to figure out what she could do. Despite what many among the living think, Death is not destruction, but merely the end. That being said, Death can also give life. It's how it's always been. With the Reapers that came after us, it was more a question of necessity than one of creation. She needed more of them to collect souls."

We reached the edge of the plain, where a river flowed. The crystal covered it here and there, and the stream seemed to originate from somewhere up the mountain. Tracing it, I noticed a round opening into the black-and-indigo crystal—a cave of sorts. The Spirit Bender followed my gaze and nodded once. "We're going up there. I want to show you something else."

"Okay. So, what happened next?" I asked as we climbed up the mountain. Given our nature, we didn't have issues with the jagged crystals on the ascending ridge. We moved slowly but smoothly upward, following the stream. The higher we reached, the colder it got.

The winds intensified as well, and I was willing to bet they were icy and biting after nightfall.

"The First Ten were reassigned to leadership positions, at first," he said. "We were tasked with selecting new Reapers among the living. The worlds kept growing and expanding, so we ended up building an entire network of Reapers, complete with leadership circles."

"The Seven Circles, you mean."

"That's right. My siblings and I agreed at the time that some order was needed for things to run smoothly. The more people we had to guide into the next world, the greater the Reaper's individual workload. Death got busy with her own projects, though, if you were to ask me what those were, I wouldn't know. At first, she used to speak to all of us through telepathy, it eventually faded out. Soon enough, Reapers beyond the Third Circle never even heard her voice. The First Ten became redundant after a while. We'd set up the Circles so well, and our underlings were so loyal and well-organized, that we simply had nothing much left to do."

We reached the grotto from which the river came. It wasn't the origin, I realized, and it wasn't an actual cave, either, but a tunnel. There was light at the end of it, and I wondered what we'd see on the other side. The Spirit Bender motioned for me to follow him, and we moved carefully along the edge of the stream. Its rushing sound echoed around us, while I brushed my hand against the nearest wall. Sharp black crystals poked out in broad clusters. If I were still alive, I'd have cut myself, more than once.

"We got bored. At one point, our first brother, the Unending, summoned Death with all ten of us present. He told her that we no longer had a purpose, and we felt lost. She listened to each of us, patient and careful in her replies, then commended us for the

stellar job we'd done with the Seven Circles. Death gave us our freedom then. She said we were free to do whatever we liked because we'd served her well, but she didn't allow us to move on and join the dead beyond. She might need us later."

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was fine. I chose to stay on and reap people, without answering to anyone. I made sure I always had souls to look after, and I kept a low profile. What can I say? I'm a creature of habit. I like it."

"What of the others, then?" I was hoping he had a potential culprit in mind. Fearing there wasn't enough to find the other nine before time was up for the fae, I figured the Spirit Bender might be able to help me skip a few names.

"Well, Widow, Soul, and Phantom were quickly summoned afterward to be bound to Thieron. They had the option to refuse her, of course, but they said yes. The rest is history. Forgotten history. The others, however... they went out and never came back. Disappeared into the ether. Unseen and unheard of. I wouldn't be able to tell you how any of them feel about their condition now, but I do remember that some of them never wanted to be Reapers in the first place. They didn't voice their discontent, but they didn't hide it, either, especially when Death told us we couldn't move on."

"I'm guessing you're about to give me a name or two?"

He shot me a cold glare before shifting his focus back to the end of the tunnel, now just fifty feet ahead. "The Time Master was particularly upset about this. He lashed out, and, when Death demanded an explanation, he just vanished for millennia on end. Tantrums, I suppose. He hated being unable to move on."

"Would you say he'd help Brendel just to get back at Death?"

He laughed. It wasn't the kind of laugh that was meant to signal humor, but emotional strain. "You need to understand something about us, the First Ten, Kelara. We're extremely powerful and capable entities. Our influence on the world of the living, the world of the dead, and the thin fabric between them where Reapers exist, is much greater, much more potent than other Reapers'. On top of that, we have very little regard for rules, especially Reaper rules—which, by the way, we made. I want you to have this piece of knowledge embedded in your brain, if possible, before you go off chasing one of us."

I was scared out of my mind, but I couldn't back away. Someone needed to stop this traitor, whoever he was, before greater damage was done to Taeral's campaign. I was in no way looking forward to reaping billions of people because of the Hermessi.

"I understand, but I still need to know," I replied. "It gives me no pleasure having to do this. But I've taken it as my responsibility."

A few seconds passed before he spoke again. "If there is anyone who harbors enough rage to turn against Death and help Brendel, it would be the Time Master. But if you're crazy enough to want to find him, you'd have to talk to Nightmare and Dream first."

"The twins, right?"

"Yes. Time was closest to them. But you cannot disclose why you're looking for him. Not to those two, and not to any other Tenner. The last thing you want is Time getting a heads up. You'd lose him forever," he warned me.

Halfway through the tunnel, I spotted the true source of the stream. It came from the crystal wall to our left, splitting in two threads—one which we'd followed up here, and the one which we were currently following to the other side.

"Okay, got it. Thanks. Where will I find Nightmare and Dream?"

"Here, on Desplan. But you must proceed with caution, Kelara," he said. We stopped in the tunnel opening, beyond which a wholly different world unraveled. While the ridge we'd come from was dry and crystal only, this side was lush and green and bursting with pink and yellow blossoms in every tree and shrub. The haven stretched from the end of the tunnel, where we stood, all the way down to the mountain base. I couldn't see any people, but the canopy was thick and tall, so there were bound to be some beneath. "They've occupied two different camps down there, on both sides of this river."

"Camps? Did they take over the locals or something? Is that even allowed?" I managed, feeling the creep factor jump to new heights. My instincts were practically screaming at me to turn back.

"They influence the locals with dreams and nightmares. They love playing with people's minds, though I suppose they also feed on their energies in the process. I used to call them emotional vampires. They can be pretty intense. As for what is allowed for a First Tenner and what isn't... I'm afraid that means nothing out here, especially since Death lost Thieron and the ability to find and punish us."

"Ah, so they've been living it up here, huh? For the past four or five million years, at least, since Brendel stole Thieron," I said, feeling a red-hot string of anger stretching through me and burning my chest.

"You know... Now that you mention it, have you ever considered the possibility that whoever helped Brendel against Taeral might've also helped Brendel with stealing Thieron in the first place?" the Spirit Bender asked, and I froze on the spot, paralyzed by the dread that the simple thought of that possibility had caused. "I was surprised when I heard about Thieron's disappearance, but, in retrospect, with what we know now, it makes sense."

"What are you trying to say? That the Time Master assisted Brendel with stealing Thieron four or five million years ago?" I croaked. It sounded awful but terrifyingly possible.

The Spirit Bender shrugged. "Well, someone must've told Brendel about Thieron's importance in the order of things. After all, Thieron has the power to stop the ritual. Brendel couldn't have learned it all by herself. Death was never close enough to the Hermessi for them to know that she'd transferred a significant part of her power into that scythe. Someone must've pointed her in the right direction."

The more he spoke about it, the more I considered it, and the more afraid I was of what came next in my own quest for truth and justice. The Spirit Bender exhaled sharply, giving me a sympathetic smile—the most emotion I'd seen from him, thus far.

"I must leave you now. No one can know I brought you here, Kelara. My siblings can't see me," he said. "I have no interest in seeing them again, myself. They've gotten a tad too scary for my taste, over the years."

"Scary? To you? Imagine how they'll be to me," I blurted.

"You're already here. It would be a shame not to try and finish what you started. Just be careful. The First Ten have powers that can affect other Reapers. We cannot kill each other among the First Ten, but we can definitely destroy other Reapers. You know what Dream and Nightmare can do. I just told you. So stay safe. Be smart. I wish you the best of luck."

I wanted to ask more questions, but he pulled a Reaper disappearing act and vanished into thin air, leaving me at the tunnel opening, the water rushing down the mountain. Cursing under my breath, I tried to find the strength to keep going.

I was left on my own here, about to look for Dream and Nightmare, two powerful First Tenners who'd been left unsupervised for far too long. With retreat as my only other option, I proceeded to mentally prepare myself for what would probably be an extremely dangerous encounter.

Making my way down the green side of the mountain, beyond which a pink desert expanded, I decided to face the danger and get the truth before it was too late.

KELARA

I moved slowly, taking my time as I explored the lush mountain base. The stream vanished to my left, beyond some purple bushes, but I could hear it flowing somewhere farther ahead, as well. I figured it made a loop somewhere in the bush lands and came back toward the pink desert.

The jungle grew in soft layers of pale green, delicate pink, and crystalline purples and blues, offering the beholder a variety of ruffled blossoms to admire. The trees were palm-like, with thick, rounded trunks and massive leaves coming down like waxed feathers. The ground was covered in a layer of yellowish green moss with patches of blue, from which more flowers grew.

I heard small birds chirping above, but I could never see them. There were creatures living here, but most of them were small and hidden from sight. It didn't matter, though. The general vibe of this place was otherworldly and calm, the complete opposite of the Hermessi chaos I'd left behind. I could stay here for a while...

Going back over what the Spirit Bender had told me, I realized that my nerves were tightly wound in anticipation of crossing paths with Dream and Nightmare. The scary part was knowing that the First Ten were able to influence Reapers as much as the spirits they interacted with. It put me in danger, as well. For a moment, I was tempted to just turn around and get out of here, but the reality was that I couldn't. Not really. I needed the truth more than anything, and I had to make sure our side wasn't helping the Hermessi—if they were, I'd have to do everything in my power to stop them.

Ahead, the jungle scattered, revealing a beach-like strip that lined the returning stream. The sand was soft and rosy pink, and dozens of humanoid creatures slept on the edge of the water. They all wore similar garb, made from ferns and palm leaves and tied up with twine. They had shells and raw gemstones tied up around their necks and wrists. They wore the same colors, and their faces were painted with pinkish mud. "A tribe of sorts," I murmured.

I took a few moments to check them out. They were deeply sunken in a most peaceful sleep, smiling and humming once in a while, holding one another in almost-fetal positions. Tiny flakes of light left their bodies like luminescent ashes traveling on the wind. They floated gently toward a small, narrow bridge made from purple crystals that crossed the stream.

Beyond, another group of tribespeople slept, though their garments and face-paint differed. They were of a more bluish variety. Opponents or neighbors, I presumed. They, too, slept, but their slumber seemed ugly and restless. They moaned and winced and sometimes even screamed, their minds likely plagued by terrible nightmares. Some held others, clinging desperately to a form of physical comfort, while a few were splayed across the sand, writhing, kicking, and punching, fighting off all kinds of disturbing nightmare beasts.

Light flakes were drawn from their nimble bodies as well, floating toward the bridge. I stilled, noticing that both light flake streams converged in the middle of the crystal overpass, where two figures lounged on soft white pods akin to oversized beanbags. I approached them with the greatest care, fear gnawing at my stomach as I began to make out their more detailed features.

First, my gaze was drawn to the light flake streams, which were pulled into crystal bottles with ancient runes carved onto their necks. They appeared to be half-full with liquid light, from which the figures took the occasional sip.

They were Dream and Nightmare, I understood, exercising their influence on the locals. On one side of the river, Dream fed on the pleasant things harbored by a peaceful, sleeping mind, while her brother drew from the nightmares he inflicted on the tribespeople resting on the other side of the river. I had a feeling that, either way, these creatures were screwed, victims of the whims of First Tenners.

I kept myself hidden from both the living and the two Reapers as I made my way up the bridge, looking to get close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation. The better I knew who I was dealing with, the higher my chances of surviving this encounter.

"You know what my favorite part about the bad dreams is?" Nightmare asked Dream. It wasn't difficult to differentiate between the two. They both resembled humans, but Nightmare was pale and dark-haired, his Reaper tunic mostly black with accents of white leather, while Dream was tanned and white-haired, her tunic mostly white with accents of black leather—a rather interesting contrast of clothes on Reapers with similar facial features. I could tell they were the twisted mirror image of one another, and that just creeped me out more. "The rush, dear sister. The rush of adrenaline as they struggle to escape the abominations that form in the depths of their minds."

"Hm... I've tasted your nightmares. A little too rough and smoky for me. Good dreams, my darling brother, they're elixirs of happiness. For one moment in their otherwise drab and miserable lives, creatures who dream of their most ardent wishes coming true are loaded with serotonin. You know, the substance of love and joy," Dream replied and took another sip from the dream energies she'd been collecting. The happy dreamers stirred in their sleep whenever she drank, as if reacting to bits and pieces of them forever lost, which fed the white-haired Reaper.

"I don't know. There's no fun in true happiness. I mean, the high is great for about five minutes," Nightmare said. "Fear, however, fuels the dream for longer, because the people try to fight their worst fears or try to run from them. The harder they oppose what I inject into their minds, the more agitated they get and the longer the nasty dream. My bottle will last longer than yours, because fear, my beloved Dream... fear is true power."

"Gah, you sound like a maniac."

I tended to agree, but Nightmare chuckled with delight. "Hm, I'm getting a whiff of tears," he muttered and raised his head to take a look at his nightmare-infested tribespeople. I followed his gaze and nearly got my heart broken. Indeed, one of them was sobbing, stuck in a dream he couldn't escape, likely about to surrender to his despair. "Ah, there he is. Good. The bitterness of tears gives my recipe a bit of an edge."

I shuddered as the full picture sank in. That's how they'd set up shop here on Desplan. They'd enslaved two small tribes, keeping them in permanent sleep states and feeding off their dreams. Upon a second look, I was able to tell that these people hadn't woken up in a long time. Their clothes were dirty and partially decayed. Their muscles had atrophied, and there were patches of yellowish moss growing up their limbs. My stomach turned itself inside out.

"I think yours die faster than mine, though," Dream replied. "Remember, we timed the last batch. Mine lived longer by at least a day. Happiness keeps the food alive for longer," she added, and turned her head to glance in my direction. "And you need to stop hiding, honey. I can smell you from a mile away."

I froze on the spot. They knew I was here—of course, I should've seen this coming. These were ancient Reapers, made eons before me. Their senses and abilities surpassed mine. It shouldn't have come as such a shock.

Exhaling deeply, I revealed myself, one hand resting on my right hip, where I kept my scythe. My suit felt tight and uncomfortable, and it had nothing to do with the planetary temperature—yet everything to do with being in the presence of Dream and Nightmare.

"I should apologize," I said. "I wasn't sure whether you'd accept my presence."

Nightmare raised an eyebrow at me. "Well, you're still standing. That should tell you that we've tolerated you until now, despite your cowardice."

My blood boiled. His words were harsh on purpose. He was trying to elicit a reaction, but I kept a straight face. "I'm Kelara. It is an honor to meet you both. I've heard wonderful things about you."

Dream cackled as if I'd told her the greatest joke ever. "She said, watching us feed on people's dreams and nightmares. Goodness, do they teach you nothing about flattery at Reaper school these days?"

I smirked. "I take it you're aware that what you're doing is horribly wrong, then?"

"Absolutely. Don't tell me you're going to do something about it, because I am going to laugh," Nightmare retorted, without even looking at me. He took another sip from his bottle, instead. A light drop slipped from the corner of his mouth and rolled down his prominent jaw. It fell on his black leather tunic and got lost somewhere beneath the creases.

"I wouldn't dare," I replied. "But it's still not okay."

Dream shrugged, measuring me from head to toe. "Mother Death hasn't been around to punish us. We're not working as Reapers anymore. So who cares what we do when no one is looking?"

"Fair enough," I said. "I'm not here to judge or hold you accountable, anyway."

Nightmare shot up in a sitting position, narrowing his eyes at me. "Then why are you

here, Miss Prissy and Morally Superior?"

He was going to give me a hard time. I knew it.

"Haven't you wondered why Death hasn't come out to punish you over these... endeavors of yours?" I asked, nodding at the sleeping, soon-to-be-rotting tribespeople. When they didn't reply, I knew I had their full attention. "Are you familiar with Brendel? You must be." They were, nodding in response. "About five million years ago, during the last Hermessi ritual attempt, Brendel caught Death in a moment of weakness and stole Thieron from her. Unable to use it herself, she dismantled it into three pieces, which she hurled across the In-Between in three very different directions."

Dream blinked rapidly, a smile stretching across her face. "Oh, that makes so much sense. A lot of her power is in that thing."

"I told her not to infuse Thieron with her power," Nightmare replied, shaking his head. "I did warn her. Remember, Dream?"

"You most certainly did. And she practically laughed in your face."

"Well, who's laughing now?" he chuckled.

"Clearly, you are," I shot back. "Anyway, there's a crew designated by Death to retrieve Thieron. They've got two pieces already, and they're about to get a third—"

"Which means Soul and Widow are already loose, right?" Nightmare replied, and I nodded briefly. He gave his sister a sideways glance. "Oh, good, the psycho and the goon are back."

"Thing is, I need to get hold of the Time Master," I said, lying through my teeth and hoping I'd get away with it. "Brendel is too close to this crew, and they need an edge against her."

Dream got up, stretching her arms and yawning before she placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. "What are you doing here, missy? Interfering in the affairs of the living is strictly prohibited."

Assuming they didn't know the details of this most recent ritual attempt, since they'd been lounging in this remote part of the universe, I decided to make things up in order to get what I wanted from them.

"Death has waived some of the restrictions, which is why I'm here," I said.

"Which brings me to my next question. How'd you know about us, and how'd you find us here?"

"That's two questions," Nightmare muttered, and Dream shushed him.

"I asked around a lot. It turns out I asked the right people," I replied dryly. "It really doesn't matter. The point I'm trying to make here is that I need your help. Death needs your help. Will you not rise to assist your maker?"

Nightmare got up as well. They were both taller than I'd initially thought, towering over me. My skin crawled, mainly because I didn't like the looks on their faces. The way they stared at me spelled nothing but trouble.

"I need to find the Time Master, and I was told you might know something about him or about where he might be holed up these days," I insisted.

They seemed to think about it for a moment. "Dream, when's the last time we fed on a Reaper's dreams?" Nightmare asked, eyeing me intently.

Fear crept up my spine, my hand instinctively clutching the scythe's handle. If push came to shove, I'd have to fight my way out of here. I just needed to be fast enough to get away from them before they trapped me under whatever spell they were using to keep the tribespeople asleep.

"I think ten years. When one of your dreamers died," Dream said.

"Do you remember what his nightmares tasted like?" he replied, and she gave me a devious smile.

"I must say, it was one of the very few times when I actually enjoyed drinking a nightmare."

"What happened to that Reaper?" I asked, my jaw clenched.

Nightmare sighed. "He went on his merry way. Ah, sorry. On his not-so-merry-anymore way." He giggled. "We don't kill our own, if that's what you were thinking."

"But you screw with their heads, don't you?" I retorted.

Dream grinned at Nightmare. "Maybe that's why the other Reapers on Desplan are afraid to come out. Makes sense... We scared them."

"You definitely scare me," I mumbled.

"Aw, that's a fine compliment. Well done!" Dream cheered me on, and I felt trapped in a most absurd Dali-type delusion with these two, wondering if I'd actually make it out of here alive. I needed to find the Time Master, though. My fear didn't matter.

"Where's the Time Master?" I repeated my question, prompting Dream and Nightmare to frown with what looked like disappointment.

"Why would you waste your time looking for that grouch, when you could hang out with us?" Dream asked, smiling gently. "I could give you the sweetest dreams, and I can make sure you don't remember any of the nightmares my brother will put in your head. It's been a while since we've tasted Reaper dreams, and you look like you pack quite the punch."

"It'll be fun, we promise," Nightmare added. "Then, you can go on your way. You can look for the Time Master later."

I was beginning to think that maybe I'd made the wrong choice here. If I let them take me, they would fill my head with dreams and nightmares, then feed off my energy for maybe years on end. If I let them take me, I'd miss out on my opportunity to help Death.

These two didn't care about the war raging beyond Desplan. They didn't care about the people whose lives were at risk. I had to find a way to get myself out of this impending trouble, since I had no intention of going to sleep now and waking up in a decade or so, with my brain all wired back wrong and no people left to save.

Dream and Nightmare took their first steps toward me down the purple crystal bridge, and I braced myself for what might come next. It couldn't be anything good, that much I knew.

TAERAL

My first instinct had been to use my powers. Faced with Queen Brendel and her royal guards, I didn't feel like we had other, better options. I'd thought we might get more information about this dream and what purpose it served if we allowed ourselves to be taken to prison, but, as the guards moved in on us, my defenses sprang up.

"Don't even think about using your powers," my mother warned me. "I've put blockers outside the room. You won't get away with it. Please, son, just comply with the queen's orders."

"I didn't remember you being so spineless and ready to turn on your own son," I replied, my hands balled into fists.

"Tae, let's be compliant," Lumi said, giving me a sideways glance. "Let's see where all of this leads. If it's scripted in any way, it might help us figure out who or what is behind it."

Without remembering our entire common not-dream, I feared that Lumi was right. We might have to roll with the punches in order to get to the solution. The queen's guards quickly surrounded us, slapping charmed crystal cuffs on our wrists.

Looking at my mother as the guards escorted us out of the room, I felt the taste of bile in my throat. She couldn't be the real Nuriya. My mother never would've let me get into this kind of situation. She would've fought entire empires to keep her son safe—that much I knew without a sliver of doubt.

We were led down the stairs and out of the house, where a carriage big enough to fit us all had been pulled up. One of the soldiers handling it got off and opened the latched side door, and we climbed in, one at a time. I watched Riza and Herakles go in first, followed by Amelia and Raphael, Lumi, Nethissis, Eva and Varga, then Eira. I stopped for a moment to glance back. Queen Brendel stood at the gate, watching us with great, irksome satisfaction. My mother was by her side, arms crossed and frowning. I still couldn't believe she'd do this to me.

"She's not real," Eira whispered from inside the carriage, reminding me that I was taking this too personally. My mother might not have been real here, but she was remarkably accurate in design and behavior. Enough to make me doubt my own sanity for a split second, until I remembered that I wasn't the only one dissociating around here.

I got into the carriage, and the door was slammed shut and locked behind me. The trip to the prison wasn't long, but it wasn't comfortable, either. The soldiers made sure to guide the horses over all the potholes along the way, as if to make us feel as miserable as possible before they dragged us out and threw us into one of the larger cells in the prison.

"This feels so many kinds of wrong," Raphael grumbled as the guard locked the cell and pocketed the large, black metal key.

I'd been in this place before, though on the other side of the bars. I'd brought prisoners here—most of them criminals who deserved to spend their entire lives in a cell. Raphael was right, this was wrong. It also felt off. The other cells were empty, which never really happened. There was always a thief or a scammer or a murderer here—sometimes many more, especially when rebel camps were raided. For the prison to be empty felt like a deliberate scene setting, rather than a coincidence.

"It's too empty. Why's the prison empty?" Amelia asked, giving voice to my thoughts.

"You will all stay here until you tell me where Phyla is," Queen Brendel declared as she came down into the narrow corridor. Her eyes glowed orange, and it struck me as odd. I'd never seen a fae's eyes manifest like this before. Yet another thread of weird to add to the festering pile.

"I told you, we don't know where your stupid shiny stone went!" Eva snapped. "You gave it to us, and it vanished from the gifts table. This is beyond ridiculous!"

"It's a shame. I suppose you'll have to stay down here for a while, at least until you understand that you cannot lie to your queen and get away with it," Queen Brendel replied, trying hard not to smile, this time, as if she didn't want to come across as gloating. That's a little too late, I thought.

"You're not my queen," Eva shot back.

"Nor mine," Varga added.

"Or mine," said Lumi, joined by Nethissis.

"Nope."

"I don't answer to you," Amelia said.

"I don't have a queen," Raphael chimed in with a smirk.

Riza chuckled. "Don't even get me started, girl."

"I'm more of a rogue myself, and not of the Fire Star, so you might as well take a flying leap," Herakles declared, crossing his arms.

Queen Brendel didn't like the reactions, even though they all spoke the truth. She wasn't their queen. "You're not even Eira's queen," I said.

"But I am yours," she shot back, her glowing orange eyes drilling into my very soul. "That's enough for me. We'll talk again when you're ready to confess."

She didn't wait for a reply, gliding back up the black stone stairs and vanishing from sight. All of a sudden, we were on our own down here, in cold and humid semi-darkness, likely wondering how we'd gotten ourselves into this mess and if we'd manage to get ourselves out, as well.

Minutes passed in heavy silence, until Amelia spoke up again. "I'm telling you. This is the dream. This can't be reality."

"Let's go over the dream again, but by looking at this world here," Lumi suggested. "What feels wrong? What do we, deep down, feel isn't what it should be? If this is the dream, indeed, it must be based on some kind of reality, right?"

I nodded. "First of all, Brendel as queen of the Fire Star feels wrong. In the not-dream, or the reality we seem to have trouble remembering in full detail, my father was king. He was under the Hermessi's influence, but still the king."

"Phyla is wrong, too," Eva gasped, her eyes wide as something came back to her. "It's in the... not-dream, as well, but it's not a gemstone. I mean, it is a gemstone, but it's the third piece of Thieron."

"That's why we went to Aledras, isn't it?" Eira asked. "Oh... Speaking of what feels wrong here... I feel wrong."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly overwhelmed by concern for her wellbeing. I moved closer to her, trying to analyze her expression carefully, as her blue gaze wandered across the cell.

"In the dream, I'm from Cerix. I'm a Cerixian. Where you first went to investigate the whole Hermessi business," she said. There were things we were remembering, some more than once, as if our minds were fractured. Memories came and went, and most of them didn't make much sense on their own, until we put them all on the same canvas. I knew I'd heard some of these things before—or maybe I'd experienced them, and that was why they'd seemed so familiar. "But I do have my water abilities. I can manipulate water, much like a fae, but I'm not a fae, I'm a—"

"Hermessi child," Riza replied. "Your father was Acquis, the Water Hermessi of Cerix."

"No wonder you feel wrong," Lumi muttered. "You were assigned a species you don't belong to."

"Okay, let's try something else," Amelia said. "Let's go back to when we landed on Aledras. We were making progress there."

"Right," Eva agreed. "We landed on Aledras. We escaped the Hermessi. We had help from elemental rebels. They kept the enemy busy. We reached the capital city..."

Herakles frowned. "There was a structure in the middle. It descended into the woods below."

"Yes. We made our way up the streets. We heard some of the locals talking," Amelia added. "I think we were intrigued by how they'd built their entire world around Phyla, which they worshipped as something else. They had no idea where it came from or what it really was. They weren't aware of the Hermessi, either."

"True," I said. "And I had Eirexis and Zetos put together from before. I'd used it to hurt..." My voice trailed off as the memory of our incursion on the Fire Star came back with a colorful bang. I remembered the bottom of the ocean. The leader of the Hermessi. Her name was... "Brendel. I hurt Brendel with it."

They all stared at me, and I couldn't blame them. This was the first time Brendel fit into the context of our not-dream. Amelia gasped. "Holy crap, you're right. Brendel leads them. She's one of the oldest Hermessi in existence. It's Brendel and... Kabbah."

"The Earth Hermessi of Nevertide," Varga exclaimed, his eyes glistening with excitement. The deeper we dug into our shared experience, the more details were

coming back in high-definition. "He's with Fallon, now. He took over Fallon. It gave him more power against Brendel. There was something about fae hybrids that favored Hermessi possession, I think."

"He was with us," Nethissis continued. "Along with... three Reapers. That Seeley guy, who helped us before, if I'm not mistaken—"

"Yes! On Persea's moon!" Amelia replied, beaming with what I could only describe as sheer enthusiasm. "Against that Yamani fella'. We got his scythe."

"Yes. So, Seeley, and the old ones. The Widow something..." Nethissis said, scrunching her nose as she tried to remember. "The Widow Maker."

"And the Soul Crusher," I chimed in. "Seeley, Widow, and Soul. Widow was bound to Eirexis, but we set him free. Soul was bound to Zetos, and we let him loose, as well. We had Phyla, in which Phantom resides. We know nothing about Phantom..."

"Tae... We got close to that structure," Raphael reminded me, downright transfixed. "We reached it; we went down the many steps. Phyla was at the bottom. The Hermessi were coming after us."

I held my breath for a little over a minute, without even realizing it, as I followed Raphael's thread. I felt watched, all eyes set on me as I went back in my mind and found myself running down the white stone steps. I remembered seeing the greenery between the discs... and Phyla beneath a glass bell at the very bottom, just like Raphael had described it.

We'd run toward it. Explosions had torn through the city above. We'd heard the screams. The Hermessi had come down afterward, trying to stop us, and we'd all been wondering why Brendel wasn't around like before. I'd found it strange.

"If the not-dream is the real thing, then we need to find the very last thing we truly remember," Lumi said, gripping my shoulder. "Taeral, I think you might have the answer. I have faith in you."

"We all do," Varga added, giving me an encouraging smile.

Yes, we'd reached the glass bell. Phyla was just as I'd seen it here. Perfectly round and black, with streaks of color reflections whenever the light hit it from different angles. It hovered a few inches above the ground.

Upon realizing that this was it, our final piece of the puzzle to complete Thieron and get it back for Death to use against the Hermessi, we'd teleported inside the glass bell. Brendel had joined us at the very last moment. There were a lot of questions around her speedy recovery from the Fire Star incident, among other things.

"I reached out to get Phyla, and Brendel jumped in, too. Then, everything went white," I finally said. "That's the very last thing I remember. I was scared when I woke up... I was scared because I thought she'd gotten Phyla."

"It had to be the Phantom," Eira replied. "She must've put us in this dream."

Amelia nodded slowly. "Soul could create these blips between dimensions where he threw his targets. Like his puzzle rooms. Maybe the Phantom is one level above and she can create these... alternate realities for us."

"Funny how Phyla is nowhere to be found in this dream, then. And how Brendel is our unwanted antagonist. Say what you will about the Phantom, but I'll give credit where it's

due. She sure knows how to mess with people's minds. Better than Soul, I'd say," Lumi replied.

Suddenly, the entire picture came into focus. My mind was clearer than ever. It all made sense again. "This is the challenge," I breathed. "And, for some reason, Brendel got dragged into it as well."

"The Phantom's challenge, you mean," Eira murmured, curiously watching me as I started pacing the cell. The others got out of my way, leaving me room to move and patiently waiting for the conclusion.

I stopped in the middle. I'd gotten my answer from deep within my subconscious. "We need to find Phyla in this dream world, then get out of here before Brendel realizes what's happening."

This had to be it. The final stage of the quest. Lumi had been fair in her assessment—the Phantom had done quite a number on us, but we'd caught on. We'd finally caught on. It was time to do something about it.

AMELIA

"Easier said than done." I sighed, glancing down at my charmed crystal cuffs. "These are the same material used to subdue the influenced fae. We can't use our powers."

Raphael gave me a long stare. There was a tinge of sadness in his eyes. I wondered why, until it came to me—everything we'd thought to be a part of our lives, a part of us... was invented. Our relationship, living together in The Shade. It wasn't real. We'd barely kissed a couple of times out there. We hadn't developed our bond to this exquisite level. I wondered if we'd remember all this upon waking up. Given the look on his face, I realized he was wondering the same thing.

He took a deep breath and gave me a soft nod, his eyes smiling. I took it as an encouragement of sorts. As if he was telling me that we'd be okay, one way or another. The dream world might fade away, but what we had between us was stronger. It would live on.

"Lumi, you told me not to worry about the cuffs," Taeral said. "Think you can help us out, then?"

The swamp witch shrugged. "How? I'm blocked as well."

Taeral's face went pale. "What? I... I thought you... I thought you told me not to worry because you had a way of getting out of them!"

"Nope. It was just my instinct, and I still stand by it. We'll get out of these cuffs, just not with my magic," Lumi replied with a dry smirk.

None of us spoke for the better part of a minute, as we tried to figure something out.

"We can still pick a lock," Raphael said, pulling out two slim, metallic tools from an inner pocket of his suit. I couldn't help but chuckle, and he shrugged innocently in return. "What? I like to be prepared, at all times."

"I know, that's why I love you," I replied, and we both stilled for a brief moment. Suddenly, these words had even more meaning for us. Maybe their impact would follow us into the real world.

Herakles groaned, rolling his eyes. "Enough with the mush already. Let's get the hell out of here and find that stupid stone. Brendel is also after it, remember?!"

He did have a point there, and Raphael didn't engage him further. Instead, he used his tools to pick the lock on the cell door. He fiddled with those things for minutes on end, trying to find the right angles and the right internal mechanisms to nudge. Nothing

seemed to work. We all heard the metallic clinks inside the large square lock, but it wouldn't open. Raphael cursed under his breath. "This isn't good," he muttered.

"Hold on. Let me try," Varga replied, taking over. "I've picked a few locks myself. I think these prison ones are different. There's a..." His voice faded as he heard a familiar clang, but the door still wouldn't slide open. "Dammit!"

It still wasn't working. Herakles, Taeral, and Raphael took a few more turns, but nothing got the lock to open. The tools were useless. We had no magic, no abilities. We were stuck in this cell, eager to get back to reality before Brendel beat us to Phyla. Despair threatened to clutch me by the throat and strangle me, but a fleeting thought cut through and left me wondering.

"Hold on," I said after a while. "If this is an invented dream world, then technically speaking, we're not real. It's not real. What if we can take over? We're participants in a dream, so why not turn it into a lucid one, where we control the outcome?"

The idea was well received by the group, but the next question was how we'd pull off such a stunt. How would we take over a dream, especially one woven by such a powerful Reaper as the Phantom?

Our first challenge was to check and see if we could change anything in the dream's design. I stood in front of the lock, staring at it and channeling every ounce of energy at it. I wanted to will it into opening. If I managed that, it meant that my theory was correct, and that we had a decent shot at winning this challenge.

I didn't even realize I was scowling until Herakles brought it up. "You look like you're about to slap that lock into nonexistence."

It got him some giggles from the group, but I didn't care. "Shut up. Let me concentrate. I think I'm on to something..."

"Okay. Just don't pop a vein or something. Aneurysms can be a bitch," Raphael shot back. I gave him a cold stare, which prompted him to respond with an innocent half-smile and a wink. I knew he was kidding.

It didn't make my plight any easier. Resuming my focus, I set my gaze on the lock once more. I thought of everything I wanted in this world—surviving the Hermessi chaos, living a long and fruitful life, building my relationship with Raphael, exploring true happiness... opening this goddamn lock.

It clicked. I held my breath. It clanged. A second later, I reached out and tried to slide the cell door open. It moved, and I couldn't stop my excited yelp from coming out.

"Holy crap. Holy crap. Holy crap!" Varga hissed, his eyes bulging in shock.

"It worked," I whispered, grinning ear to ear. "Jeez... It friggin' worked."

Lumi smiled. "Manipulating an invented reality cannot be easy. Well done, Amelia. You just proved it can be done."

Taeral narrowed his eyes at the swamp witch. "Was this what you meant when you said you trusted your instinct?"

Lumi nodded, prompting him to let a short and frustrated breath out.

"Okay. So the door's open," I said, nearly hyperventilating. "We need to find Phyla next, right? How do we do that?"

"I might have an idea," Nethissis replied, her expression sad and pained. "I think it

has something to do with Acantha. Remember how out of it she seemed at the engagement party before she died?"

"She was by the gift table, too," Lumi said. "We still don't know why she died in this dream world. Out there, she... she sacrificed herself to Eirexis." Her voice quivered, the memory of her death hitting hard from both the real world and the Phantom's illusion. It hurt to think about Acantha, but I could only imagine how it felt for Lumi, who'd trained and loved her like a daughter.

"You were right the first time," Taeral replied. "Or at least, I think you were, in saying that Acantha's death and Phyla's disappearance were connected."

"Then we should head to the mortuary," Eira suggested. "I bet that's where her body is kept."

I was already focusing on my crystal cuffs next. I'd opened the locked cell, and it was time to take the invented-reality-manipulation game to a superior level. Channeling all my will to live and make a positive difference in this world, I glared at the cuffs until, seconds later, they popped open and fell off.

"Look at you, all powerful," Raphael quipped, glowing with pride as he put his cuffed hands out for me to take care of. I managed to take his off next, while Riza chose to try and open hers without my assistance. Unsurprisingly, she caught up, freeing herself and Herakles next.

Soon enough, we were all one step ahead of the dream, aware of our existence and the illusion that had been spoon-fed to us as a reality. Riza gave me a confident nod: "How about we head down to that mortuary and figure this mess out already?"

"I think real life sounds more appealing than this place." Herakles chuckled. Indeed, in the real world, these two had already paired up. In here, however, they'd yet to even talk about their feelings for each other. How bittersweet, I thought. Riza and Herakles were looking forward to getting back into the real world, while Raphael and I seemed happier in here.

We linked hands, and Riza closed her eyes for a moment. In a single blink, darkness enveloped us, and we found ourselves standing across the street from the mortuary, beneath the heavy shadow of a roadside tree. There were guards outside, perhaps too many for the purpose of this building. The dead didn't fight back in this reality, did they?

Even so, I wasn't about to let a handful of soldiers spoil our mission. We hadn't allowed an army of blazing Hermessi to take us down, let alone these uniformed pipsqueaks. We had an apocalypse to stop.

VARGA

We hid behind the corner of the building behind us to establish a plan of action. Using my True Sight, I scanned the mortuary from top to bottom, quite intrigued by the number of fae guards stationed in and around it. At the same time, I soon came to realize that my relationship with Eva wasn't real, either—at least not at this level. We weren't completely bound to one another yet. We'd never made love, and she hadn't acquired my sentry abilities.

Glancing back at her, I felt my breath slip away as her aura vanished, and I was no longer able to admire that golden glow of her love toward me. Interestingly enough, acknowledging that this was an invented reality had a clear effect on it and on the illusions it had tried to feed us. I couldn't see her emotions anymore because, in reality, we'd barely kissed and gotten together. On one hand, it left me with a sense of hollowness within, mourning the many wonderful memories that the Phantom had given us. On the other hand, I was eager to get back into the real world and defeat the Hermessi, so Eva and I could catch up with our dream versions.

"There are ten guards inside, patrolling all three levels," I whispered.

"Do you see Acantha's body?" Taeral asked.

I checked every room until I found her, on the top floor, resting in a cold chamber on a stone table. A white sheet covered her up to her neck, her reddish mane rich and loose. "Yeah," I replied. "Third floor, fourth window from the left."

Come to think of it, we were all going to have it awkward upon our awakening. Our relationships had been thrown upside down and spun around. I set these thoughts aside for later, internally amused by Riza and Herakles, in particular. We'd all have to address this back in the real world—in the meantime, we had an invented reality to escape from.

Taeral linked hands with us and teleported us inside Acantha's mortuary room. It was chilly and quiet up here, with barely a stream of moonlight pouring through the single, wide window.

Lumi sniffed, wiping a rogue tear as she stared down at Acantha. "She looks so peaceful."

"It's not her," Taeral murmured. "Not really."

"I know, I know. It's still painful, Tae. You understand, right?"

He did. The look on his face said he most certainly did.

"What now?" Herakles asked, hands in his pockets.

Eva and I positioned ourselves by the door, in case any of the guards tried to enter. I needed to be able to listen for footsteps and warn everyone if people were coming. I couldn't take my eyes off Eva, and she didn't let me out of her sight, either. Even without reading her emotions, I knew how she felt. The sadness was almost palpable.

"At least we get to start over in the real world," I said to her. "It's not that bad."

She chuckled softly. "Just remember not to go crazy on the proposal, okay?"

It was weird for us to talk about ourselves like this. The Phantom had built an exquisite illusion here. At times, even after I'd acknowledged that this wasn't real, I still had trouble imagining myself outside and back in the real world, barely getting close to Eva. In here, we knew each other so well. I remembered every inch of her skin, the sound of her heart beating whenever I held her.. It was strange to let it all go because it had all been a dream.

"Do you see anything weird about her?" Taeral asked as Lumi and Nethissis checked Acantha from head to toe. They took a few minutes to check her hands and feet, especially, looking for signs of poison or any kind of hidden foul play. Nothing came to light, until Amelia noticed something.

She pointed at Acantha's throat. "What's that?"

Lumi followed her gaze and stilled at the sight. From her angle—and mine, for that matter—the lump was clearly visible. Something round protruded from Acantha's throat, the skin stretching white above it. Lumi pressed a trembling finger on it.

"It's quite hard," she said, and looked at me. I knew what she needed me to do, so I used my True Sight and peered into Acantha's throat. My stomach churned as I recognized the black, perfectly polished sphere.

"Ah, crud..." I managed.

In an instant, all eyes were bouncing between me and Acantha's throat.

"Please, don't tell me it's in her—" Riza said, but I finished her sentence for her.

"It's in her throat. Phyla is in Acantha's throat."

"What the hell?" Raphael mumbled, getting closer to the body and staring at the lump with pure disbelief. "What in the ever-living hell?"

"The Phantom is one friggin' psychopath," Amelia said, shaking her head with disgust. "It's like she's competing with the Soul Crusher for the Hannibal Lecter Award, I swear."

It was probably why this invented version of Acantha had died. The Phantom had dangled Phyla in front of our noses first, knowing we wouldn't immediately realize how important it truly was, and then she'd had Acantha swallow it or something.

"Hold on, I thought they couldn't determine a cause of death," Taeral said. "That bulge in her neck is pretty obvious."

"Maybe the Phantom's script made us all blind to it," Lumi suggested. "It's her playground. She makes the rules, right? We can see it now because we're much more aware of the farce."

"Which explains why I don't have sentry powers anymore," Eva replied, giving me a sad look. I responded with a warm half-smile, as if promising her that one day soon, we'd bond for real and we'd be able to sense one another again. "It was never real."

"Ugh. So, what, the Phantom made the poor girl swallow it, and she died choking on it, in this dream world version? That's just so many shades of gross," Amelia said.

"We need to get it out of her," Taeral added.

The door between Eva and me vanished into a puff of smoke. Startled, we both jumped back as fae guards came in, all geared up and eager to take us on, their hands flaming orange. A familiar sight was Brendel in the doorway, dressed in her queen-like garb and smirking as she looked at Taeral. "I believe we'll take it from here," she said.

"Is this the Phantom's doing?" Riza wondered aloud.

Brendel frowned, genuinely confused. "Who is the Phantom?" When no one answered, she resumed her role in this charade. "I knew you'd eventually find your way out of that prison and come to the mortuary. I figured a clue to Phyla's location might be on your dead friend here, but I'd never see it without your help. It turns out I was right, but it wasn't a clue you found. It was Phyla itself. Now you can all go back to prison for conspiring against the queen, and I can take my prized jewel home."

Taeral and I exchanged conflicted glances. How was Brendel so faithful to what was clearly a script? She was pleased and perfectly comfortable with being our enemy—that much was obvious—but I would've expected her to hulk out into a full Hermessi by now.

"Unless..." I mumbled, then whispered to Taeral. "She doesn't remember."

Taeral scowled at Brendel, his eyes glimmering as the realization dawned on him. "You're right," he said. "Whatever happens, don't let her touch Phyla."

Brendel nodded at her guards. "I think it's out of your hands at this point."

My muscles flared, my instincts alight as I mentally prepared myself for what was bound to be a difficult battle. So far, without the charmed cuffs, we all had the abilities that we'd been born with. I tried not to worry about the Phantom tweaking any of it just to spice up the challenge, but I couldn't help it, since it was a possibility.

We had ten furious-looking fae ready to take us on, along with a Hermessi who'd forgotten who she was. Phyla was within our reach—the only way to end this nightmare... What were the odds we'd get to it before Brendel?

TAERAL

As the queen of this fantasy, Brendel stayed back, letting the guards handle us first. For a moment, I wondered if this had been the Phantom's helping hand, but I didn't have time to even expand on the theory with the others—the guards' hands were blazing, fireballs forming between their fingers, and Brendel's current ignorance was the one thing we had to our advantage in this scenario.

Raphael took on two guards at once, using his flash technique to dart between them and drive his claws into their backs. I heard the bones crunching as the fae gurgled blood and eventually collapsed, dead on the floor.

I dodged a fire attack from a third guard and paid him back in kind. Only, unlike me, he wasn't fast enough. The fireball hit him in the chest and swallowed him whole. He screamed and flailed desperately, trying to put it out, but I drew my short sword and slashed his throat to put him out of his misery.

Lumi and Nethissis moved to get closer to Acantha's body, but two more guards came at them. Varga and Eva intercepted them, using their sharp reflexes and vampire claws to hit them in the soft spots of their armor.

I caught a glimpse of Varga catching his opponent by the throat and crushing his windpipe, while Eva drew a long knife and drove it through the other fae's ribcage, right beneath his armpit. Five down, five more to go.

Amelia handled one, and Riza took on another, while Raphael and Herakles faced off with the other two. There didn't seem to be any limitations on our powers in this invented reality, but the fae that Brendel had chosen as her guards were impressive in terms of speed, agility, and firepower. A tenth guard came at me, thinning himself to slip between the melees that had unraveled in this cold chamber.

I teleported myself right behind him. He stopped, confusedly looking left and right. I pierced the back of his neck with my sword and quickly withdrew it. He collapsed, blood puddling beneath him on the stone floor.

The other guards were losing their battles as well, and Lumi and Nethissis had already begun the extraction process for Phyla, squirming as they made an incision into Acantha's throat. I wanted to help them, but Brendel intercepted me. She put a glowing orange hand on my chest, and I felt the burn so deep, it nearly fried my heart.

I jumped back, gasping for air, and Brendel came after me. If I were her, I would've

gone for Phyla directly, but her animosity toward me was driving her. On top of that, I was once again reminded that she didn't remember who she really was, so I decided to face her, to fight until we got Phyla out of Acantha.

Brendel came at me, fire shooting from her hands. I ducked as fast as I could, but I let my defenses down in the process. Despite her queen-like dress, Brendel was remarkably fast. She kicked me in the chest. The blow was so hard, it threw me backward against the wall.

She cast a massive fireball at Lumi and Nethissis. It happened so fast that they didn't have time to produce a shield spell, so they just dropped to the floor. As the rest of the team converged on Acantha's body to retrieve Phyla, a dozen more fae guards poured into the room.

Suddenly, we were all back to zero, while Brendel sneered at me. "I never liked you, Tae. I don't remember the day you were born, but I do know I was incredibly happy when you and your mother stepped away from the throne. You did the kingdom a favor, you witless half-breed."

Normally, I would've found her words to be offensive. But, in this case, I was actually amused. She had no idea who she was or what she could do. She launched a flurry of fireballs at me, but I zapped myself across the room, forcing her to come after me.

Everyone was fighting. Fae throats were slashed. Blood smeared the floor. Weapons were dropped. Yet more guards were still coming in. Soon, the bodies would pile up and there would be no more room to fight.

"Amelia! Get Phyla!" I shouted, noticing that she was the closest.

The gemstone was within her reach. All she had to do was extract it from Acantha's throat. The cut had already been made, and I could see the black surface with its iridescent reflections.

Brendel glowered at Amelia and snapped her fingers. In an instant, flames swallowed Amelia whole. Raphael jumped in to help her as she screamed in horror and pain.

"Amelia!" Eva cried out, but got herself punched and stabbed by one of the guards. I lost count of our enemies at this point.

Eira drew water from the sink in the corner of the room and channeled it at Amelia, hitting her with violent but effective pressure. Raphael held her. It tore me apart to see her like this. She'd been burned beyond recognition, her skin and flesh charred, her limbs twitching.

"It's not real!" Lumi shouted at me.

I must've frozen. Brendel was ten feet away and coming at me fast. It's not real. No, it's not real. What's happening to Amelia isn't real. This was a dream. I could take control of it. I could manipulate it. I knew something that Brendel didn't. I had the damn power, and I needed to use it.

For a second, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "It's not real," I whispered. When I looked around, Brendel was still coming at me, but Amelia was fine, as if the fire had never touched her. Even she was surprised—not to mention Raphael, who was crying tears of joy after the nightmare he'd just endured.

Brendel threw fire at me, but I waved it away, and it dissipated into the cold air.

Something had clicked inside me. A shift had taken place. I'd taken control of my dream, and I needed something I knew I'd used against Brendel before. I thought of Thieron and our meeting on the bottom of the Fire Star's ocean.

My fingers twitched, and I felt the sculpted bone in my hand. Glancing down, incomplete-Thieron glowed white, back in my possession. Brendel was befuddled but determined to kill me. In her mind, I was still the obnoxious nephew who'd once threatened to occupy a throne she'd wanted so badly.

"What is happening?" she asked, her brows furrowed.

"What's happening is that you are about to go away," I shot back and brought Thieron down on her.

She jumped back, but I still managed to nick her with the large Zetos blade. I drew her blood—a thin, glowing amber line on her shoulder. She froze, her eyes wide. This was my moment. Brendel raised her hand, pointing a glowing finger at me. "This isn't right," she said. "This is a dream..."

"Uh-oh," I managed, dread forcing me to stand still. I desperately wanted to move and hit her again with Thieron, but she was remembering who she was now—it must've been the previous hit that had triggered the memory. With all my heart, I wanted to cut her down, but... I couldn't move.

The orange glow spread from her hands and up her arms. Slowly but surely, Brendel was regaining her Hermessi form. Fire licked at the air around her. Something weighed me down, an incredible pressure that threatened to crush every single bone in my body.

I'd thought that this was it, but it wasn't. Brendel was coming out. The true Brendel. We were screwed six ways from Sunday, and with Phyla within our reach. This can't be. Dammit, it can't end this way...

"Taeral! Catch!" Eira's voice shot through the bloody fighting. Between the bumping bodies and the rampant fireballs, I saw Eira next to Acantha's body. She held something in her hand. Something we'd been fighting for this whole time.

Brendel looked back and recognized Phyla. "No!"

Eira didn't think twice about it. She tossed it across the room. Brendel tried to reach it, her full fire figure menacingly expanding and threatening to swallow the entire room.

"One shot. One last shot," I whispered.

I teleported myself into midair and put my hand out. I was falling, and Brendel's fire was coming at me. But I caught it. I caught Phyla, and the moment I touched it, an icy whiteness burst through me.

I caught it.

I win.

Phyla was safe. I'd beat Brendel to it. I had no idea what would come next. I slipped out of consciousness, eagerly anticipating my real awakening. An entire world was waiting for us. Salvation was within our reach.

TAERAL

I woke up with a start, but this wasn't the real world. There was nothing but white as far as my eyes could see. I was suspended in it, trying to figure out what to do next.

"Hello? Can anybody hear me?" I called out.

My voice echoed across the nothingness, but no one answered. Time seemed to slow down, or maybe it was just my impression. Perhaps everything was warped here, including my consciousness.

After a while—which, to me, seemed like forever—a figure formed in front of me. She was petite, with pale skin and long black hair. There were galaxies in her eyes, and she wore a long white nightgown with ruffled lace sleeves and a black satin bow on her chest. She smiled softly, but it did nothing to soothe my anxiety.

We were running out of time, and I was... I had no idea where I was.

"It took you a while, but congratulations," she said, though her lips didn't move. I heard her in the back of my head. "You completed the challenge."

"Phantom? You're the Phantom?" I croaked.

"Underwhelmed? Also, just Phantom is fine."

I shook my head. "More like creeped out. You've got a terrifying imagination."

The memory of everything that had happened, including who I thought I'd been in her dream world, came back at furious velocity. I was bombarded by thoughts I'd had, and thoughts I'd dreamed I'd had. It was an abstract notion, but I was baffled by how my mind had functioned under Phantom's challenge.

She'd played us all like fiddles, including Brendel, and we'd nearly lost this entire war. Part of me wanted to grab Phantom by the throat and choke her to death, but my realistic side reminded me that she was one of the First Ten, and definitely not someone I'd want to piss off.

"I did my part, and you did yours," Phantom said. "How that happened doesn't matter. What does matter is that you followed your instincts. You found Phyla, you remembered, and you stopped at nothing to get it. For that, you have my eternal admiration."

I nodded slowly, trying to accept an ancient Reaper's compliment. It was a hard thing to do, after everything she'd put us through. I'd watched Amelia get burned alive, for Pete's sake.

Phantom smiled. "You have a lot you'd like to say to me, I presume. Just don't hold on to that grudge for too long. It's unhealthy."

She was right. I did have a question, one that burned hotter in my mind than anything else.

"How'd you get Brendel into the challenge? She had no idea who she was, right until the very last moment," I said.

"I am very powerful inside Phyla. Brendel never would've been able to take Phyla away, but she could've ended the challenge. She could've defeated you. She could've done many nasty things, so I decided to even the playing field a little bit. I was also curious as to how she'd fare. I'm a little disappointed. Her instincts are garbage. All she has is power and an obsession for that stupid ritual."

"So it's over?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Maybe. You have Phyla. You can complete Thieron. But it must be delivered straight to Death's door, wherever you left her. No artifices. No Reaper help on this one. Nothing. You must travel to—"

"Mortis. She's on Mortis."

"Mortis. Makes sense." She giggled. "You must go there yourself and give it to her. That is how the challenge was made, and that is how it must be completed."

My heart swelled from the anticipation, until I remembered something I deemed to be equally important to me in this wretched quest. "What about my father? The Soul Crusher said I could resurrect him with Phyla. Brendel killed him. It's unfair. It's unnatural. I have to save him..."

"Soul didn't lie. You can do that. You can resurrect your father with Phyla, but... be honest with yourself, Taeral. Do you have time for that?"

Knots twisted and tightened in the pit of my stomach. A voice in my head whispered, telling me that maybe I should start considering the prospect of a life without my father in it, but I couldn't bring myself to give it any credence or consideration. The idea was simply too awful.

"Brendel is in a momentary limbo because she got sucked into my game," Phantom added. "As soon as you are out, as soon as you come to, you will be open and vulnerable to her. Do you think she'll let you go anywhere with Phyla?"

"Then what was the point of all this?" I blurted, my voice shaking, my eyes stinging. "I lost my father. I'm about to lose my planet, my friends... my everything. What was the point?!"

Phantom hovered closer to me, peering deep into my soul. "Normally, I'd have let you struggle, but, I admit, I have my weaknesses. You've impressed me, Taeral. Tell you what, I can't let you become Brendel chow. You're right. There's no sense in that. But there isn't much Phyla mojo left in me, just enough to do one thing, and that's all," she said, waiting for me to say something. I could barely think in that moment, so she did me a favor and finished her proposition, instead. "I can take you and your friends through Phyla to one place, and one place only."

"What... What are you saying?"

I felt tears rolling down my cheeks, but my whole body was soft, like butter. There

wasn't much I could do, other than listen to what Phantom had to say. I was tired. Exhausted. Drained.

"I can take you to The Shade, where you can resurrect your father, but, five minutes later, Brendel will be all over you. I've been in your minds, Taeral. I've seen what you've seen, and, unlike you, I'm able to ascertain that an ancient Reaper like me is helping Brendel go after you. Chances are that Reaper will support her again, and your quest to save your father will only end in more tears."

Her statement floored me. However, upon thinking it over, I realized that she was right. There had to be some Reaper knowledge involved for Brendel to heal so quickly after I'd first struck her with Thieron. "I hit her with Thieron in your dream world, as well. All it did was trigger her memory," I said.

"That wasn't the real Thieron," Phantom replied. "None of it was real, except Phyla."

"So, if I go to The Shade now and save my father, Brendel will catch up with us," I said.

She nodded. "You've come so far. It scares her. She is relentless, and she will stop at nothing to stop you or to throw you off your game. She's got Reaper help too, which, to be honest, kind of worries me. Your entire quest might end in failure if you choose to go to The Shade."

It hurt me, deeply. I couldn't bring myself to turn my back on my father at this junction, but I had to ask her. "What's the second option?"

"I use the same amount of leftover mojo to take you to Mortis, instead. Straight to Mama's door. Reapers can't normally zap mortals around like this, but with Phyla I can. You complete Thieron and hand it over to Death, and perhaps she will rescue your father, once she's done flambéing the Hermessi's asses. Sherus's death is unnatural. We're both in agreement here."

These were my choices. Save my father and risk blowing this entire mission because of Brendel. Or complete the mission and rely on Death to save my father. I'd listened to my instinct until now, and it had gotten me through Phantom's challenge. My heart cried out for my father, but my instinct was pulling me in the opposite direction.

"You don't have time to think about it too much," Phantom said.

My heart broke into millions of little pieces. What were the odds that any of these options would truly end well, based on everything we'd gone through so far? I wanted to save my father. I needed him back. But Death needed Thieron, and we needed Death to come through for us. The choice sounded rather easy, but the ache in my chest told me it would be anything but.

KELARA

Fear was not something I'd experienced much of since I'd become a Reaper. Dying had sort of washed most of the emotions away. For a while, I'd struggled with the longing, with missing the taste of food and drink. But I'd taken comfort in still being able to listen to music wherever I went, to watch conversations and relationships unfold over time. There were silver linings to my existence between life and death. Emotions had felt like extra baggage after a while, and I'd eventually learned not to miss them.

Out of all of them, fear was the one I didn't want to welcome back, and yet it was precisely what I was experiencing in this moment as I stood before Nightmare and Dream. They were infinitely more powerful than I ever would be, and, if I wasn't sharp and careful enough, I'd end up feeding them like the sleeping tribespeople on the riverbanks. They didn't care about what I had to do, about what needed to be done to help Death and the living against the Hermessi.

"It's not our fight anymore," Nightmare said, taking another step toward me. They were definitely planning to knock me out and munch on my dreams. "It hasn't been for a very long, long time, Kelara."

"You're honestly better off staying here with us for a while. I'll make sure your sleep is sweet and sound. I promise," Dream added. Oh, she could easily seduce anyone's mind. What an enchantress she could be, if she set her sights on a person. But I had to resist. I had to find a way to get them to help me.

If there was a treacherous First Tenner out there, like the Time Master, for example, he needed to be revealed and neutralized before he could do any more harm. The universal balance had been damaged, and it had to be restored.

"I must find the Time Master," I said, determined not to go down easy. Pulling my scythe out, I hoped it would remind them that I wasn't one of the local creatures for them to play with as they wished. "You're either going to help me, or you'll direct me to someone who can. I have no interest in staying here and fueling your addiction."

"What part of 'we don't care' did you not understand?" Dream shot back, narrowing her galaxy eyes at me. If she wanted to come across as menacing, she didn't have to go to great lengths. One scowl from her was enough.

"Taeral is about to get Thieron back to Death," I said. "One way or another, he will

succeed. He's gotten past the Widow Maker and the Soul Crusher already."

Nightmare laughed. "Oh, honey. But the Phantom is a wholly different ballgame. She's too powerful, too complicated in her craft to be defeated by anyone. I've known her since the dawn of time. I'm well aware of what she can do, especially if she's powered up by the likes of Phyla."

They inched closer to me, and I moved back. I had to reason with them somehow. They were too strong for me to resist in any way, and chances were I wouldn't be able to shake them. Perhaps the truth might set me free, regardless of what the Spirit Bender had said.

"Can I be honest with you?" I asked, stalling for time.

Dream nodded slowly, eating me up with her gaze. "Of course, darling. Honesty is tastier than deceit."

The way they talked about abstract concepts as if they were delicious morsels on a food platter was certainly chilling, but not nearly as bad as the prospect of ending up as their dinner, so to speak. They fed on people's energies. They put them to sleep and they infused their heads with dreams, from which they then drank, insatiable and unwilling to stop until they had the very last drop, leaving behind a pile of desiccated husks.

"I'm not looking for the Time Master because I need his help. I'm looking for the Time Master because I think he's the one who helped Brendel steal Thieron in the first place. He's the one who's been helping her against Death and against the living," I said. Their expressions changed from delightful anticipation to deep, darkened frowns. "One way or another, Death will get Thieron back. The challenger is too far down the road to stop now, and it's my understanding that he can't even die until he completes this. So, when the curtain falls and Death has her full powers back, whose side do you want to be on? The traitors'? Or your maker's?"

They were speechless, but they weren't moving. I felt I was moments away from driving the point home. So I kept going.

"When she's back to her grand, whole self, do you want to be on her naughty list, or do you want to be known as the Reapers who helped?" I continued.

Dream scoffed. "Are you serious?"

"Do you see me smiling?" I shot back.

"Where'd you get your information regarding the Time Master? How do you know he's your culprit?" Nightmare asked, crossing his arms.

Relief washed over me, as their stances relaxed. They weren't coming at me anymore, and I could breathe again. Slowly, I slipped my scythe back in its leather holster, steady on my hip.

"Something didn't make sense when I first heard about Brendel swiftly recovering from a Thieron hit, even though the scythe was incomplete at the time. I began suspecting Reaper involvement, especially when Brendel was given a location no one among the living would've given her, and certainly no one among the rebel Hermessi."

"How do you know that for sure?" Dream asked.

"Because both the living and the rebel Hermessi were trying to hide and protect the Hermessi children from Brendel," I said. "The only one who would've revealed their

location had to be someone who knew but wasn't among them. A Reaper. Combined with the extensive knowledge it would take to heal an elemental or any other entity from Thieron's blow, it just made sense that we'd be talking about one of the First Ten."

"And how'd you reach the brilliant conclusion that it was the Time Master?" Dream chuckled. She didn't believe me.

"The Spirit Bender told me. Out of all the First Tennes, the Time Master was the most disgruntled regarding his immortality and inability to move on into the world of the dead. The only one who longed to find his final rest."

Dream and Nightmare burst into laughter. I'd told them one hell of a joke, apparently. For a moment, I felt rather silly. Had I been misled, somehow? Had I trusted the wrong guy? The thought alone was enough to make me shudder.

"Well, that makes sense," Dream said, still giggling. "Spirit played you so well, you didn't even see it coming."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Out of the First Ten, the only one, the only one who ever bitched about being stuck as a Reaper was the Spirit Bender. Nobody else," Nightmare replied, a muscle twitching angrily in his jaw. I had a feeling he didn't like Spirit much. "He stuck around after his release from duty because he didn't know what else to do. At least, as a Reaper, he had some kind of routine. We always pitied him for being so linear, so boring. We'd often joked that Death had made a mistake by creating him."

"And contrary to what that lying, whining sack of regrets told you, the Time Master, while very much a loner type, would never, absolutely never betray our maker like this," Dream added. "We may be awful by your standards. Selfish and whatever. Crazy and so on... but we are still loyal to Death. She was never the best mother, but we would never take up arms against her. Except, maybe, the Spirit Bender. He was always spiteful and vindictive."

"Skeevy, deceitful bastard," Nightmare muttered. "I can't tell you how many times he sowed discord among us before we all told him to bugger off. It's why he wound up back on duty in Reaper-Town. None of us First Tennes wanted him around."

I could barely breathe at this point, horrified by how easily Spirit had manipulated me. "And since none of you were around these past millions of years, he could lie to me or anyone else who asked, because we couldn't verify any of his claims..."

Dream smiled and picked up her liquid light bottle, taking a long sip. "It's your lucky day, Kelara. We're not touching you with a ten-foot pole, but not because we don't crave the taste of your dreams... trust me, we do... but because we don't want to play that jerk's game."

"He sent you down here to divert suspicion from himself and so we would keep you busy while he goes around doing whatever the hell he's doing," Nightmare explained, slightly insulted. "He figured we'd knock you out, nibble on your dreams, while he continues with his web of treachery and deceit. Personally, I find that unacceptable."

Suddenly, these two had a moral compass. It was fascinating to watch, but it also revealed my biggest underlying problem. I had let Spirit go without telling anyone about him—more than an hour had passed since I'd last seen him, which was enough time for

him to pursue his agenda against Death. By the time I reached out to Seeley or anyone else, Spirit would be long gone.

In the wind, impossible to track. Looking at Dream and Nightmare, I understood what needed to be done. Spirit had to be stopped, no matter what. And I needed powerful Reapers by my side, because I, on my own, didn't stand a chance.

But would Dream and Nightmare be willing to help? Or would they just scoff and send me on my way, claiming that they'd already helped? Was this the most I'd get out of them?

AMELIA

I was suddenly awakened from what had felt like a distant but extraordinarily vivid dream. We were all inside the glass bell, groaning and gradually coming to. My first instinct was to look for Raphael. I found him next to me, equally confused as he looked around. His jaw dropped, and I followed his gaze to find Taeral sitting up, holding Phyla in one hand and the rest of Thieron in the other. He was crying.

"Tae," I managed. "What... What happened?"

"Oh, crap, she's still here!" Herakles gasped.

A bumbling ball of fire was inside the glass bell with us. Brendel. She was smaller than usual, and she didn't strike me as being conscious. "She was in the dream with us," I whispered, the memories coming back with frightening speed.

Raphael and I exchanged glances, my face burning as I remembered our dream relationship, the love-making, the disillusionment of learning that none of it had been real. But those thoughts faded quickly as the immediate threat came into focus.

"She's going to wake up soon," Taeral said, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" Eira asked him.

Looking behind me and beyond the glass, I saw Seeley, Widow, Soul, and Kabbah staring at us in disbelief. They couldn't believe we'd made it, I figured. Farther up the white step structure, dozens of Hermessi flashed in vivid color, threateningly swelling as they began their descent. What had they been doing until now?

"There's no time!" Taeral shouted, and put his arm out, clutching Phyla tightly in his hand. "Link to me. We have to go!"

"What the hell is happening?" I heard Kabbah shout. His astonishment was equal to mine, because I couldn't understand much of this, either. My head was an absolute mess, blending dreams with reality in a familiarly irritating manner.

"Just touch me!" Taeral snapped.

We linked hands as Brendel's fire form glowed brighter, the flames threatening to fill the entire glass bell. Eira caught Taeral's Phyla arm, keeping the physical connection. Seconds later, we disintegrated and vanished from sight.

Only a few seconds passed before a new world reappeared before us. Only, it wasn't new

at all. It seemed familiar. We'd been here before. Atop a massive cliff, surrounded by a thick, crystalline stream that poured down into a curtain of waterfalls. Beyond, bamboo forests stretched out for what seemed like forever, with rivers and lit-up pathways snaking toward the horizon.

I recognized the quiet greenery, the dark blue and starry sky... the palace behind us.

"This is Mortis," I said. "We're on Mortis."

"How did we make it here so fast?" Lumi asked, equally befuddled.

We were all okay. I had a faint recollection of being burned alive, but, by the looks of me, that had only been a terrible piece of Phantom's dream world. It dawned on me then. "Phantom... Phantom's challenge!"

Taeral didn't say anything to us. His eyes were red and overflowing with tears. With Phyla still in one hand, and Zetos and Eirexis in the other, he rushed up the stairs and stopped in front of the palace doors.

"I'm here! I brought you Thieron! Come out! Help us!" he shouted.

Eira was understandably worried about him. "What happened to Tae?" she asked, her voice low, uneven.

"I'm not sure. What do you guys remember?" Varga asked.

"Phantom's dream world," I replied. "We were all..."

"Together," Raphael said. "Inside invented realities. We were... couples. Real couples. There was no Hermessi threat, nothing to fear until—"

"Until Acantha died and Brendel took on her villainous role," Eva replied, her cheeks still red from the memory of her engagement to Varga. Our dream relationships had been incredible, to say the least. Perhaps the most honest parts of that illusion. We'd been given something we truly, wholeheartedly desired, and had been made to believe that it was real.

"Come out, dammit!" Taeral barked, furiously kicking at the palace doors. But no one came. Nothing happened. "I've got your stupid weapon! Come out, do your thing, stop the ritual and save my father! It all needs to stop now!"

"Oh, God," I breathed, understanding what had happened to him, more or less. Phantom had done this. She'd brought us here. No other Reaper had such power, unless aided by Phyla. Much like Soul and Widow had helped us with what mojo they'd had left upon their release, Phantom had zapped us across the galaxies and straight to Death's door.

Her voice startled us. "I gave him a choice."

We turned around. She stood behind us, clad in a white nightgown with a black bow, her long hair flowing straight down her back. Her lips were flushed. Her skin was pale. Oh, she certainly looked like a ghost.

"You must be Phantom," Lumi said.

The Reaper nodded. "And you're a brilliant creature. Quite unique, if I'm not mistaken. The very last of the pixies."

"What is going on?" Herakles asked, his brow furrowed and his gaze darting between Taeral's persistence against the palace doors and Phantom's calm demeanor. "What did you do?"

"I had to get you out of there before Brendel woke up. Like I said, I gave Taeral a choice," Phantom said. "Normally, I wouldn't have interfered with the completion of the challenge. You'd have had to deliver Thieron by yourselves, with no Reaper involvement. But I decided to bend the rules a little because I felt sorry for your friend there," she added, nodding at Taeral. "But I could only move you across space like this once. Either to The Shade, to save his father, or here... to complete the challenge and end it all."

She paused for a moment, frowning as she looked at the palace.

"And he chose to come here," Eira replied, unable to take her eyes off Taeral.

"If we'd gone back to The Shade, Brendel would've come after us," I said. "He sacrificed his father to get here first and to get Death to stop the ritual..."

"Brendel has a Reaper helping her," Phantom replied. I felt like I'd just been punched in the gut. "It took digging into your heads to figure that one out."

"Where the hell are you?!" Taeral shouted, still kicking the doors.

"She'd have caught up with you in The Shade," Phantom continued. "So, yes. Taeral decided that coming here was the better of two options. He followed his instincts against his heart."

"Whoa. Hold on. Rewind back to the Reaper-helping-Brendel part!" Raphael replied. "Where'd you get that from, specifically?"

"I told you. From your heads."

I rolled my eyes. "Our memories, you mean? How'd you reach that conclusion before us?"

"I recognized the signs," Phantom said. "Brendel's quick recovery, her knowledge of the Hermessi children in The Shade... plus a few other bits and pieces along the way, like her ability to stop you from teleporting. Did you really think that was Hermessi magic?"

I froze, my breath stuck in my throat as missing pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. "You mean to say a Reaper has been helping Brendel screw us over this whole time?"

Phantom nodded. "The Hermessi have maybe five or six rituals of their own, including this end-of-days nonsense and that thing you called a Blackout. They're quite limited. Reapers, on the other hand, have a whole arsenal of magic. Bigger than yours," she added, looking at Lumi and Nethissis, then at Riza, "and yours, and all the witches in the Sanctuary, for that matter. Its use is highly regulated, of course, but for a rule-breaker like the one helping Brendel, sanctions clearly mean nothing."

Taeral turned around, all cried out and utterly confused. "What is happening? Where is she?!"

"It was a split-second decision to bring you all here," Phantom said. "I doubt he even realizes he did it, in a way. I think he's functioning on pure reflexes at this point."

"What's going on?" I asked, staring at Taeral. "There's something wrong here."

He'd been banging on that door for minutes, while we'd been recovering from a most awkward dream, while also being pummeled with new information regarding a traitor among the Reaper ranks.

All this was too much even for my brain to process. My heart broke a thousand times for Taeral. He'd chosen to come here, to leave his father's spirit in The Shade, and to

finish the challenge.

But where was Death?

TAERAL

I prayed to all the stars and all the gods out there for Death to save my father. I'd completed the challenge. I'd recovered Eirexis, Zetos, and Phyla; I'd brought back Thieron right here, to her doorstep. So why wasn't she answering?

Had I taken the express route to The Shade first, I would've resurrected my father, but Phantom would've been unable to help us again. We would've had difficult travel from Earth to Mortis, especially since Brendel was clearly ready to unleash all kinds of hell in order to stop us.

Phantom's artifice had been our shortest way here. Perhaps a loophole in the rules of the cosmos, even. I'd done my bit. We'd all done our parts... Where was Death?

Desperation fueled me, clouding my judgment, pushing me to pray and shout and kick and scream some more at the double doors of Death's palace. The dread of losing my father was too much to bear. The horror of failing this close to the end made me break into a cold sweat. My heart was twisted in unnatural and painful ways, and all I could think of was that Death needed to answer the damn door.

"What's going on?!" I asked again, looking at Phantom.

She didn't have an answer, but her expression worried me. There was something she was holding back. My friends were just as confused as I was. We'd gone through all the hoops. We'd broken limbs, we'd been hit and burned and crushed by everything that the Reapers had hurled at us... yet here we stood, alive and ready to finish this.

"It took us a while to figure out where you'd gone," Soul said, appearing next to Phantom. Widow and Seeley joined them.

"Where's Kabbah?" Amelia asked, looking around.

"Oh, he's on his way," Widow replied. "He's rallying the rebel forces."

"Why the hell did you skip out like that?" Soul snapped, scowling at me.

Widow whacked him over the head. "Duh! Brendel, you idiot!"

"But I thought the next stop was The Shade!" Soul insisted.

Phantom briefly explained what we'd done and why I'd chosen to do things this way, and he immediately softened—to my surprise. He even gave me a sympathetic smile, which I'd never seen before.

"I'm sorry, man," Soul said. "You did good. It was the right choice."

"You, on the other hand... You colored outside the lines, missy," Widow said to Phantom, who shrugged in return.

"Lightning didn't strike me, so I guess it's cool," she replied. "Merely a tiny transgression, which I'm sure Death will forgive. Speaking of which, she's not answering." She pointed at me and the double doors.

"He's been calling out to her for a while now," Lumi added. "Something isn't right."

Seeley frowned, setting his sights on me. "Look at Thieron."

"What of it?" I asked, then glanced down. My blood ran cold, as I realized a most startling truth. "It's not glowing at all..."

"What does that..." Eva's voice trailed off, her eyes widening as she, too, understood what was going on.

Seeley took a deep breath, glancing around with a deeply concerned expression. "Death isn't here anymore. I can't feel her. None of us Reapers can..."

"You're right," Soul said. "I would've experienced at least a little tingle in my heart."

Death wasn't here. After all that we'd been through. After all the infernos that we'd managed to survive. After all the lives that had been lost along the way and the irreparable damage done to countless worlds up to this moment... Death was gone. I couldn't understand what was happening. I couldn't wrap my head around it.

All I could do was feel every muscle in my body clench as horror began to set in, to take control of my senses and drop me into an endless, dark tunnel, made up of all my worst dreams, each vying for its own spot in the real world. The nightmare was coming true.

"I cannot reach her, either," Seeley added. "I can't sense her in any way."

"Me neither," Phantom said. "It's most unusual. I admit, I didn't know we'd come to this."

Amelia reached out to Sofia via the comms system to update them on our position and progress. About five minutes later, she looked at me, white as a sheet of paper.

"Tae... the sanctuaries... The Hermessi took them over. Ripped them from the ground. They're keeping the non-fae at bay. They're saying it's in preparation for when they hit five million. They're going to use the sanctuary fae as concentrated beams of—"

"Pure annihilation." Phantom cut her off. "They're getting ready to destroy it all."

My knees felt weak. "What about my father?" I murmured, leaning back against the doors, barely able to stand.

Eira walked up the stairs and came to my side, not knowing what to do to help me. I pulled her into my arms and held her tight. It was the only thing I could do. The only way to temper myself. She didn't budge, letting me keep her close as I stared at Amelia, waiting for a reply.

"He's okay, Tae. But it's not looking good for any of us. We don't know where Death is," Amelia said. "What do we do now?"

The air thickened. The hairs on the back of my neck twitched.

"Something is coming," Widow declared, looking up at the night sky. "Something is coming, and it's headed straight for Taeral's head."

Lights sparkled up there. Glinting in flashes of orange, white, blue, and green. Dozens

of them, sprinkled between the stars. I knew what they were. I knew who was leading them. I even knew what was coming next.

Affixing Phyla into Thieron's blade, I felt a cold rush burst through me, every atom in my body zinging with delight. Eira didn't let go of me, her arms wrapped tight around my torso.

"Brendel is coming," she mumbled.

Without taking my eyes off Thieron, a complete Thieron this time, I found my resolve. "Let her come," I said. "We need to find Death and get this over with."

So little time left, so much to do. It didn't matter. I'd sworn I'd fight to the very end. I'd thought this was it, but, clearly, I'd been wrong. We had another mile or so to go. We'd made it this far. We could go a little while longer.

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