



a shard of
SOUL

A Shade of Vampire, Book 85

BELLA FORREST

A SHADE OF VAMPIRE 85: A SHARD OF SOUL

BELLA FORREST

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TRISTAN

“*I* thought this day might never come.” The Unending’s voice echoed all around us. The world had vanished, mere wisps of color with no shape or substance dissipating into the great and vast nothingness that surrounded us.

We stood in front of each other, soft smiles on our faces. We were finally meeting, and in the strangest of places. We were in the depths of her subconscious, where millions of years of existence had been tucked away beneath layers of Aeternae lifetimes. I could see her for who she was. The Unending. The first Reaper ever made. The first among the First Ten.

Death had blessed her with the power of immortality, and the regret that had stemmed from this decision had also led to a string of misfortunes and misery. Yet the woman in front of me was all grace and forgiveness, her galaxy eyes shining with hope and... love. I could feel it in my own heart. The Unending loved me. I would’ve been a liar if I’d said I didn’t reciprocate the feeling. By the stars, my breath was short, my very soul swelling with pure joy at the sight of her. I’d not only fallen for Valaine—I’d fallen for the greater whole that was Unending.

“I’ve finally found you,” I said.

“Tristan, I have always been here.”

Wearing a long white dress, silk pouring down her body like milk, the Unending was a vision of absolute beauty. Her black hair cascaded down her back, her delicate hands wrapped in black leather. Blood-red lips stretched into a smile, and I was mesmerized, forever lost in the eternity of her gaze. Only now was I truly capable of observing the similarities between the Unending and all her reincarnations. While the black hair and dark eyes were never distinctive enough to separate a specific Aeternae from the others, they were features that she carried with her in each life.

I could see Valaine in her. I could see Sessilly and Eldfenn. Persia Bluewater and Eliana. I could see little Maira Razelyon and all the other Aeternae whose bodies she’d been born into. Each of them stared back at me, smiling with the same warmth and affection, sincerely happy to see me. I could see it all clearly now, and it made sense.

“How do we get you out of here?” I asked. She took my hands in hers. The feel of her leather gloves against my skin made me tremble, a faint shiver traveling down my back.

“We need to break through to my very first incarnation,” the Unending said. “And I’m

not sure how we're going to do that. It has become increasingly difficult for me to go deeper. Each golden thread is thinner, weaker, harder to follow. I suppose time is like snow in here. Every layer buries the truth deeper and deeper until there's frosted white as far as the eye can see, with not even a glimpse at the ground beneath."

"And we need to find the ground," I muttered, slowly moving away. I'd thought we'd already made it to the very first incarnation of the Unending. Clearly, Maira had not been it. We'd have to go further back, and I could feel the Unending's exhaustion, mirrored by my own aching bones. I wasn't sure how much longer we were going to last in here, but I sure as hell wasn't ready to wake up to reality without the Unending by my side.

I started pacing back and forth and around as she watched me and listened to my musings. I went over all the past lives we'd witnessed and everything we'd learned along the way about her allies and her enemies, about how the Aeternae, Darkling or otherwise, played key roles in keeping her a prisoner to this vicious and miserable cycle.

"So you remember all these lives, from beginning to end," I said.

Unending nodded slowly. "I remember what sort of blood I drank on the morning of the sixth day of my hundredth year of life as Draga Merensis. This is from five centuries ago. I remember every detail of each existence, down to Maira. Even things I wouldn't otherwise bother to register."

"Do you remember the seals Spirit put on you?"

She shook her head. "I haven't gotten to that part yet."

"But you remember that you're the Unending, Death's first Reaper."

"It's hard to explain this one. I know that I'm the Unending, Death's first Reaper. I've always known it. I just don't remember it, per se. I can't tell you how I got to Visio or what drove me to come here in the first place."

Heartbreak had brought her to Visio. "I could tell you."

"Tell me, then."

"Your lover was killed. You'd given him immortality, and the Spirit Bender killed him."

Moments passed in absolute silence. The Unending simply stared at me, her expression firm but blank. "I don't remember it. Even if you tell me. I'm afraid we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way."

"Keep digging." I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

"Yes. There's something else, Tristan. Something I've begun to consider lately, based on all the conversations I've witnessed across my past lives, including Valaine's." She paused, waiting for me to look at her. "I might have to shed my Aeternae form once we break the three seals, whatever they may be. This body... it's not who I am. It's alive. I am not."

Something gnawed at my stomach as I remembered all the times we'd assured Valaine that this wouldn't be the case. We'd spoken without full knowledge of what the seals entailed. Then again, the Unending was doing the same here, now, since she didn't remember details about the seals, either.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course not. It's just a feeling I have, but it's pretty persistent, so it might be anchored in some kind of reality. It might be stemming from something I know as the

Unending but can't remember. Soul, Morning, and the others might have it only partially right. I'm just trying to use logic here. Part of the seal involves locking me inside an Aeternae body. That body is still me, sure... but it wouldn't survive my liberation."

There was another thing I had to consider going forward. The more the Unending remembered, the faster the line between her and Valaine's consciousnesses would blur. Eventually there would be no difference left. Valaine was the Unending, but they were also separate minds—one alive and aware, the other dormant and struggling. I loved Valaine, and I loved the Unending. I wasn't really sure how I felt about this whole situation and all its harrowing possibilities.

I was excited to free Unending, but I would also grieve Valaine once she was gone—or maybe absorbed into the first Reaper, since she was a part of the greater whole. That was inevitable, I realized now. It had to be done. In order to succeed, sacrifices had to be made.

"I don't know how things will work out," the Unending said after a while, "but I know I'll be okay as long as I've got you by my side. You've been my beacon in the darkness, Tristan. I hope you'll forgive me for what must happen in order for my liberation to occur."

Exhaling deeply, I cupped her face and brought her closer to me. Her skin felt soft and warm to the touch, likely an interpretation of my mind here in the bowels of the Unending's subconscious. I could only imagine what she'd feel like out there in the real world. "Valaine doesn't deserve to suffer like this, and neither do you. None of your past lives deserved the hell they were put through, either. We have to stop the cycle, no matter what, and I know Valaine feels the same way. If she had a voice of her own, if she were a separate entity altogether, she'd agree. This has been going on for too long. It's time to set you free."

"I hope she will forgive me."

"You'll have to forgive yourself," I said.

She moved in closer, and our lips met. Warm light spread through me, filling my veins and making my soul glimmer from within. I could stay like this forever in the nothingness, in the Unending's delicate embrace. It was quiet here, and peaceful. The world outside was merely an idea, something we could comfortably kick aside and ignore for as long as we wished.

But being here also made me feel incomplete. It made us feel incomplete. I wanted to be with her, and she wanted to be with me. We couldn't really be together in here, not while this voided space served as an in-between place, a membrane to adhere to while we bounced from one set of memories to another. We had to keep going. We had to find the whole truth and return to the real world.

And once we got there, the Unending and I would do our damned best to make it better. To make the quiet of the nothingness feel as insufficient as it truly was. The universe needed the Unending, and she needed me.

"How do we dig deeper, my darling?" Unending asked, as if she'd just heard my thoughts. I offered a shrug in the absence of a coherent answer. "It's your voice I hear whenever I scratch at the glassy surface between my conscious and subconscious. It's

your voice I follow into the past. I trust you, Tristan. I trust you with my existence, with my soul... with everything."

Her words were meant as an encouragement, though I had to admit, they also made me feel a bit overwhelmed. Unending had placed a great responsibility in my hands, and I was terrified of the concept of failure. I couldn't accept a possible scenario in which I wouldn't be able to bring her back to the surface. Then again, we'd made it this far, and I was clearly the only one whose mental projection had survived. Morning and Phantom were nowhere to be seen. I had to keep going.

"Remember your very first day as Maira Razelyon?"

She thought about it for a few seconds. "I do, yes."

"Could you describe it to me?"

"I'm in my mother's arms. She's smiling even though she's tired. I can see it in her eyes... the exhaustion. It's been days since I was born, and my eyesight is getting better. I've been wandering in blurred colors and shapes until now, unable to make sense of everything. She holds me close. I'm swaddled in white linens with golden embroidery along the edges." The Unending closed her eyes as she relived the moment. "Yes, her face—it's beautiful. Even when she's tired from birthing a life, she's beautiful."

"Okay, now can you go farther back? Perhaps to those blurred colors and shapes you mentioned? What sounds do you hear?"

The Unending let out a deep breath. "I'm crying. I suppose I'm hungry... or maybe it's just the troublesome inconvenience of finding myself in this small body, sore from the laborious process of being born. I don't know, but my mother's voice soothes me. She makes promises I now know she won't be able to keep."

There was a tinge of bitterness in her voice. But I could hear her mother, too, like a faint whisper in the back of my head.

"You'll be an amazing Aeternae, my love. You will grow and live to be a billion years old."

A gold thread appeared by our side. It was barely visible, like a fisherman's line with amber reflections. I showed it to the Unending, and she smiled. "There it is," she whispered. I slipped an arm around her waist as she reached out and touched the thread.

"We'll do this together," I said, and we both held on to it and each other.

The nothingness dissolved again. A green pasture began to spread out in every direction, seemingly forever, beneath a bright blue sky with cotton-white clouds scattered across it. The sun was out, and I could almost feel its warmth seeping through my vampire skin. It was only an illusion, but a sweet idea, nonetheless.

In the middle of this greenery, a woman was running. Darkness poured from her like black ink spilling out of a bottle that tumbled on and on. She was crying, the tears mingling with the darkness in her wake, her bare feet sinking into the tall grass.

"Keryn," the Unending said. "My name is Keryn."

We both ran alongside the Aeternae woman, worried we might miss something important if we didn't keep up. Keryn stumbled and fell. Her knees were scraped through the pale pink dress, her long black hair spreading over her shoulders like a silky cloak. My heart broke for her because I recognized the symptoms. I'd seen them in Valaine before.

"There's no use in running, Keryn," the Spirit Bender said, and I knew it was the Spirit Bender because the Unending recognized him. He walked behind us, casual and relaxed, without a care in the world. "I'm going to get to you sooner rather than later."

"Leave me alone!" Keryn cried out. She got up and started running again. The Unending and I followed, though I had a hard time looking away from the Spirit Bender.

He wasn't alone. There were dozens of Aeternae walking behind him, each of them cloaked in black and wearing the Darkling mask. "Darklings," I murmured. "The first ones."

"Let me show you all how it's done, so you don't summon me whenever you trip on your own two feet," Spirit hissed, taking out his scythe. I'd only read descriptions of the double half-moon blade with a long handle, but the sight before me was truly frightening. I wondered if his soul had been copied along with its blade. Had both been compressed into those twelve shards, so that Spirit would never be without his weapon? Or would he have to use a loaner from one of his fallen colleagues? His original scythe could control spirits, bending them to the Reaper's will.

Losing one's autonomy and freedom like that seemed like the worst nightmare come true. And now, Spirit had set his sights on Keryn. Unending's first incarnation would soon die, as the Darklings learned how to contain and reset the third seal's cycle, setting the stage for approximately five million years of Aeternae growth and expansion.

TRISTAN

“I wish we could do something to help her,” the Unending whispered as she stood by my side.

“There’s nothing we can do. This has already happened,” I replied.

“I know...”

We stood in the middle of the plain, surrounded by endless greenery. The sun was out. I couldn’t feel its warmth on my face, but I might get to someday soon if I managed to survive the next few days. We had a cure, after all.

Keryn stopped running, her shoulders rising with each deep and ragged breath. Darkness rippled outward from the core of her being. The suffering of a tormented Reaper materializing into a toxic and deadly energy. Spirit motioned for the Darklings to keep their distance.

“If you get infected, you die,” he said to them. “Even once she’s dead.”

They stared at her as she turned around to face Spirit. He smiled, walking toward her. His scythe glimmered in the sunlight, its blade eager to slice through Keryn’s flesh. Seeing the Darklings so far away now, I couldn’t help but draw a parallel to Kalon’s situation.

“You couldn’t have done anything to prevent what happened to him,” the Unending said, her hand gently clasping mine. I looked at her, somewhat surprised.

“How do you know what I was thinking?”

“We’re in my head, Tristan. I can hear your every thought. You opened yourself up to me the moment you first came in here,” she replied. “It’s okay. If we liberate my true form, I’ll be able to help Kalon. I can feel it as an indisputable truth.”

“It’s sad, how all we can think about are ways in which we could’ve prevented one tragedy or another from happening,” I muttered. “Esme is struggling with guilt of her own. Had she not hesitated for those few minutes upon seeing me under your influence, she thinks Kalon would’ve made it safely out of your reach.”

Unending offered a sigh, her brows pulling closer. “I’m deeply sorry for what I’ve done. But Esme cannot possibly consider herself responsible for any of this. She was forced to choose between trying to save her own brother and her lover. I would’ve hesitated as well, had it been me in her shoes.”

“I’m done running away from you,” Keryn shouted, fists tight at her sides.

"I was going to catch you anyway," Spirit replied.

"Why are you doing this to me, brother?" she asked. The question seemed to trouble the Reaper. He frowned, measuring her from head to toe.

"Oh, it's not Keryn I'm talking to, huh?"

I froze, realizing why this first incarnation of Unending's was so important. "You remembered yourself," I mumbled. "It's you speaking through Keryn."

When she didn't answer, I turned my head to find tears streaming down her pale cheeks. She nodded slowly. "I was awake here, yes. I see it."

"My darling, this is the price you're paying for pushing me away," Spirit said. "I offered you a better existence, and you rebuffed me. I couldn't let you become a thorn in my side. Surely you understand. You, of all people."

"You killed Erethiel," Keryn said. "You swung the blade. You took his life."

"By Death's order!" Spirit growled. "I told you! I told you she asked me to do it!"

"You could've said no," she said. "If you truly cared about me like you often claimed, Spirit... you would've said no. You would've gone out of your way to see me happy. I was happy..."

The Darklings were silent, watching the conversation unfold. Some had their masks off, but I didn't spot anyone familiar. There were no Seniors among them—not that I could see, anyway, and none were among the surviving two hundred I'd personally met when Esme and Kalon had first brought them over to Orvis. They stood back and did nothing as Keryn crumbled under the pressure of her own power.

Her body was failing. Dark veins cut across her skin, splitting open and releasing black smoke. Her Aeternae form was too weak to hold a Reaper who remembered herself. I wondered for a moment if the same would happen to Valaine.

"Your happiness with this guy was always ephemeral," Spirit said, waving his scythe in the air. The movement generated the translucent image of a man. A hologram of sorts. Keryn gasped at the sight of him, tears spilling from her eyes.

"Erethiel..."

That was him! The one the Unending had fallen in love with over five million years ago. The one she'd blessed with immortality against Death's wishes. He was tall and slender, clad in flowing white silk. His hair was long and curly, golden swirls resting lazily on his broad shoulders. There was kindness in his green eyes, a kindness that spoke of an old soul who'd seen plenty and yet had chosen to see the good in people. As Erethiel stood next to Spirit, I could see the glaring differences.

Spirit's eyes carried the glow of galaxies within them, arresting in their appeal. And yet his own dark heart made him seem ugly in comparison. Erethiel was like an angel, while Spirit was the devil. Erethiel was light and love. Spirit was darkness and hatred.

"This is a cruel joke," Keryn said.

Spirit waved Erethiel away. "It's a reminder of what happens when you go against Death. She did tell you not to use your gift, my darling."

"Then why give it to me in the first place?"

"We both know she regretted it," Spirit replied. "A young creator. She made a mistake, and she couldn't exactly take it back. Not without destroying you."

"So she killed my soulmate instead," Keryn said, shaking.

"It had to be done."

"Therefore, you had no problem killing Erethiel. Stop telling me she made you do it when you gleefully whipped out your scythe and cut his head off!" Keryn shouted. Tears fell and landed on the blades of grass at her feet. The image, albeit brief, reminded me of the crystalline dew on a sunny spring morning. "I understand why she did it..." Keryn added, her voice fading. "Looking back now, I understand. She didn't want to destroy me, so she thought that by ordering me not to use my ability, I'd at least get to exist. Death was young, yes. She made a mistake. And I acted like a child, rebelling and throwing tantrums. I see it now. After ten thousand years of being locked in this body... I understand."

Spirit seemed worried. "I'm going to avenge you."

"I don't need you to avenge me! I need you to set me free!"

"See, there's the problem. I can't. Because you will run straight back to Death and tell her what I'm planning. I can't have that. Not while I'm still hashing out the details with Brendel and the other Hermessi," Spirit said, his tone clipped. "I gave you a chance to be my partner so that we could both teach Death a lesson. You chose this, my darling. You only have yourself to blame for being in this situation."

The darkness swelled around Keryn as she raised her hands in the air. A pulse burst from her chest. It spread all around her, and it intensified with its expansion. Spirit brought his scythe down and stopped it from doing any real damage. The grass in a fifty-yard radius around Keryn's bare feet was blackened and dried out, but Spirit had prevented it from stretching and killing everything in its path—the young Darklings included.

"Now you're just lashing out," he muttered.

"Immortality renders Death obsolete. It's something she could never accept, and I understand why. It's selfish, and she hurt me deeply. But I would never plot revenge against her. And you're foolish to even think you can get away with it," Keryn said, raising her chin in defiance.

I felt anger. It coursed through my veins like liquid fire. "She was selfish. Death, I mean. For putting you through the misery of losing Erethiel."

"I was angry with her for a long time. It's why I came to Visio. This place was supposed to be my refuge. My healing space. I gave a more conditioned form of immortality to the Trakkians as a means to get back at Death. She had Erethiel killed, but I had hope that she wouldn't wipe out an entire species just to prove her point, especially since I'd put limits on their eternal life."

"The decapitation and the removal of the heart," I whispered.

"Yes. I put those conditions into my gift to the Trakkians. I was trying to prove a point. Of course, I deeply regret it now. I guess I know how Death felt when she made me."

"But you never turned against her like the Aeternae turned against you," I said.

"No. I went ahead and kept using my ability, just to spite her. And my weakness gave Spirit an opening."

Shifting my focus back to Keryn, I could see the darkness swelling around her form. I could barely see her face at this point, her rage manifesting in a terrifying way. I wasn't sure how much longer her body would last. She didn't look good.

Spirit took a step forward, and Keryn screamed, releasing another pulse of toxic energy. He diffused it again, almost effortlessly, then smiled. "You're not capable of taking me on. Not while you're stuck in a physical body. Especially one that is obviously crumbling," he said.

"I won't let you hurt Death," Keryn hissed.

"Well... it's not like you have a choice. I own you, Unending. I have put three seals on you. My own recipe, from Death's hidden words. And I'm about to fortify that with a failsafe. You really need to stop digging through your head, going forward."

Keryn stilled, her black eyes glimmering with fear. I recognized that look. I'd worn it myself more than once, and especially since beginning my dealings with the Darklings. "Spirit, you reckless fool..."

"Brilliant, perhaps," he corrected her.

"Do we know what failsafe he's referring to?" I asked, and Valaine shook her head.

"I guess we'll find out later."

"You know what? I reject Death's premise that all things must come to an end," I said, giving the Unending a sideways glance. "This is what it was all about, really. So why? Why kill something if it's good? If it's doing good. If it helps this universe grow in so many ways... why end it?"

The Unending looked at Keryn. Her incarnation moved forward, furious and determined to take the Spirit Bender out. We both knew she would fail, but the Unending couldn't help but watch her own demise all over again. Then she moved her attention back to me, leaving Keryn and Spirit to their heated argument.

"All things must come to an end... it's part of a world order I was created into," she said. "It's not in my nature to question the basic tenets of life and death. I've always considered myself to be an anomaly. An exception to the rule. Your insight is appreciated, but in the end, you're merely a blip in the fabric of space and time. You all are."

"Maybe. But why not challenge the tenets if they don't feel right?" I insisted. "Death must've had that in mind when she created you, when she gave you such incredible power. Immortality. Eternity. Time loses its value altogether, but for those of us who love living so much, time doesn't matter, anyway. Imagine what this world would be like if we had the option to keep going. To never stop, unless we wanted to."

"And who gets to decide who deserves to live forever?" Unending replied. "Me? Tristan, you've seen my faulty judgment. It wouldn't work. Since before there was even a concept of time, this world has unfolded in three planes. The world of the living, the world of the afterlife, and the space between. It's in the latter that I truly belong, with my fellow Reapers, not in the world of the living. There is an order to this universe and the realms beyond it. I'm afraid it's something your mind cannot yet fully comprehend."

"Oh, I absolutely do," I said. "What I'm trying to say is, while I appreciate the idea of an afterlife even though I have no idea what that entails, I also appreciate the ability to extend one's existence for as long as possible. We all swoon over the concept of

immortality, but how long before we start to get bored with it? How many worlds will we witness as they're born and as they eventually die?"

The Unending chuckled softly, though her humor faded when Spirit finally bolted and aimed his scythe at Keryn's head. We were both silent for a little while, watching as her head rolled through the tall grass. Blood dripped from Spirit's scythe, the fallen droplets joining Keryn's tears along the bent green blades. The idea of morning dew faded, and my heart broke for Unending's first incarnation. This had been her end.

"So you accept that even if I gave you immortality, it might not last forever," the Unending murmured without taking her eyes off Keryn's collapsed body. Spirit stood over it, an arrogant grin slitting his face as he sheathed his scythe and turned around to face the Darklings.

"Maybe. But that doesn't mean we wouldn't make the most of it for as long as possible," I said, squeezing her hand. "I'm not advocating for you giving your immortality to everyone. I just don't think you should let Death dictate these terms."

"Maybe I should. This power has brought me nothing but trouble and misery. Almost five million years wasted in captivity because the people I turned immortal betrayed me. Never again," she replied, and I could feel the regret in her voice. If she could go back and do it all again, she would never have made the Aeternae—by giving immortality to the Trakkians she'd found living here. Consequentially, the vampires would never have existed. And I might have died of dengue fever somewhere in the Amazon jungle during one of my trips with Esme long ago.

"You're being too hard on yourself," I said. "Had it not been for you, I doubt I'd still be around. GASP wouldn't even exist, and many worlds would still suffer at the hands of evildoers. It has come full circle, Unending. You might have made a mistake, but better days will come."

She gasped, her eyes widening as she stared at Keryn's body and the Spirit Bender. "Tristan, you might actually be right," she whispered. "Look!"

Ahead, the world started coming apart at the seams. Colors and matter gradually faded away as the memory disintegrated. I recognized this moment, though I had yet to come up with a term for it. I had seen this before, and I understood what it meant.

"We need to dig deeper into Keryn's life," I said. "We need to go back to her very first day, or as close to it as possible."

The Darklings and the grass were disappearing. "My memory is fading."

"It's because this is such a distant moment," I said. "We need to find a way to stay anchored in it."

I pulled her closer to Keryn and the smirking Spirit. I cared very little for that bastard, and I could only focus on getting the Unending closer to herself. We'd come so far. It would be foolish not to fight our way back to the very beginning.

"How can we do that?" she asked, trembling in my grip.

"Do you see a gold thread anywhere?" I started looking around. "Think about your life before this moment. Go back further; go back as far as you can. We need a gold thread to hold on to."

"I don't... Tristan, I don't see one."

"Think!" I snapped, and she sucked in a breath. For a moment, I regretted my brusqueness, but it was necessary. For her sake and mine. She paused and looked down, her attention settling on Keryn's head. Her black eyes were wide open and devoid of life. The soul had already moved on to another vessel, soon to be born again. Among the strands of silky black hair, however, I could finally see it. A golden thread, waiting to be plucked.

A small doorway into an ancient memory.

The Unending knelt by Keryn's head, running a hand through the grass and the black locks. She picked out the gold thread and looked up at me. "You're a brilliant man, Tristan."

"Hold my hand," I said. As soon as we touched again, I felt her life force rushing through me like a tempest, rattling my senses as though I'd touched lightning itself. Glancing over her shoulder, I noticed the Spirit Bender looking in our general direction.

No, not just our general direction. He was looking right at the Unending, who was now standing beside me once more. "How is this possible?" she wondered, noticing the anomaly as well.

"I'm not sure," I muttered. I doubted he could actually see us. This had happened millions of years ago. This wasn't time traveling. We were simply in one of the Unending's memories. Spirit wasn't supposed to be aware of our presence. He wasn't supposed to be sentient beyond this moment. And yet I couldn't shake the unpleasant feeling that he was looking right at us—or right at the Unending.

"We should go," she said, and I couldn't agree more.

Gripping the gold thread tightly between her fingers, she closed her eyes. The rest of the world vanished in an instant, Spirit included. The nothingness replaced it all, and I welcomed the eerie and tranquil sound of silence. We'd finally managed to sink deeper into Unending's unconscious. We'd seen the first of her deaths, and now...

We'd made it. I could almost feel her freedom in the palm of my hand, like a delicate snowflake. I only had to be careful not to lose it, not to let it melt. We were so close.

Hours had passed since Petra had gotten hold of Kalon. I'd lost track of time, staring at her and my beloved, a gold thread connecting their hearts as the high priestess had begun the transfer. In a few more hours, Spirit's soul shard would be implanted inside Kalon's heart, which would make him a target for Danika, the one who'd been tasked with restoring the Spirit Bender.

My helplessness made me crumble on the inside. I was kneeling in front of the open doorway, unable to get past the protective membrane Petra had put in place. She kept looking my way, grinning with a disgusting degree of satisfaction, as if she were doing all this just to spite me. The worst part? It was her own son she was sentencing to death. It was her son's life she was destroying, and I still couldn't believe she was capable of such an atrocity.

I wasn't alone in my dismay. Dream, Nightmare, Soul, and Time had all stayed by my side. Lumi and the others had gone downstairs and outside, trying to figure out a way to take Petra down. Our options were limited. We couldn't demolish the tower without affecting Tristan and Valaine's interdimensional bubble. As Time had explained it, he'd anchored Soul's pocket into the physical matter of the tower room. Meddling with its integrity would put my brother and the others at risk.

We couldn't get past the membrane, either, because Petra had used obscure death magic to craft it—the kind of spell that not even Soul or Time or any of the First Tanners could untangle. She'd made it using words and sub-words that only Spirit had learned. We were pretty much screwed. Despite that, however, I hadn't given up just yet. There was a part of me that persisted, that held on to the faintest hope that maybe we could do something before it was too late.

My chest hurt as I looked at Kalon. He was asleep, but the Black Fever was returning. Black veins spidered up his neck and across his sharp cheeks. His temperature was high, too, judging by the red blush of his skin and the pearls of sweat dripping from his temples.

"You're not going to get away with this," Time said to Petra.

I wanted to believe him. I really did. But the truth was she'd played her cards well. Then again, who wouldn't? Petra had gone to great lengths to keep her family close.

She'd even turned her children to the Darkling side. Kalon had been the only one to resist. It was probably why she'd found the strength to denigrate him, to turn him into a target. She considered him a necessary sacrifice, but I had no intention of letting her walk out of here.

Petra raised the smoke bauble in her hand for us to see, a stark reminder of what she had yet to do. "I think I will, actually," she replied. Once she broke that object, Danika would be notified of our position. Yeah, we were definitely screwed, but I refused to give in.

Kalon was a fighter. He'd gone to great lengths to live as he wished. He'd taken risks to be with me, the one he loved. What kind of soulmate would I be if I didn't come through for him now?

"The living and death magic were not meant to be together," Time warned her. "This will all blow up in your face at some point, Petra."

"Maybe. But until that day comes, I plan to live life to the fullest. My actions here are undeniable proof of that," she shot back. Sitting next to Kalon, she took deep breaths as the shard began its slow descent from her heart into her son's. At least I assumed it did. I couldn't see it yet, though I didn't fully understand how the spell worked.

"Will we see the shard in that gold link?" I asked, my voice low.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen this kind of spell before," Time said, crossing his arms. I could tell he was still upset about how Petra had gotten into the room initially. She'd played us all, but Time had gotten it the worst—ejected from his own workspace by an Aeternae with a scythe and way too much death magic knowledge. That had to sting.

"Where are Derek and Sofia?" Soul asked, looking around. He'd been so absorbed with Petra and Kalon that he'd failed to notice we were the only ones left up here.

"There isn't anything they can do," Dream said. "So they're trying to cover all the other possible angles. Roano might be the target of an invasion if Petra has her way."

"Lumi's still working out a way to get to her," I muttered.

The high priestess giggled. "I wish her good luck, but the Word is no match for my words." This was certainly not the time for supernatural puns. I rolled my eyes at her and looked away, trying to focus on something else while I put my thoughts in order. Anxiety had me by the throat, its grip tightening and making it harder for me to breathe.

I shot to my feet and moved away from the open doorway, leaving Soul and Time there to continue their scowling contest with Petra. As I walked, I hooked my arms through Dream's and Nightmare's arms and pulled them back with me. Neither said a word as we descended the stairs, putting two levels between us and Kalon's room. I needed us out of Petra's earshot.

Downstairs, I could hear some of the Seniors growling and cursing. Ridan and Hunter held them back, insisting they had no place up here. An army of Aeternae couldn't get past that membrane, no matter how hard they tried. Arya mentioned something about ripping Petra's head off with her bare hands, followed by Ridan's dry chuckle. But our people were right. The Aeternae, even the Seniors, were useless against Petra. Hell, even the First Tanners were having trouble.

I wasn't sure how all this might end. I couldn't imagine a world without Kalon, but it

hurt me even more to think that his brothers would be left on their own without their older, wiser, and kinder sibling. Leaning back against a wall, I exhaled sharply as I stared at Dream and Nightmare for a long moment. I found myself hypnotized by their identical yet opposite features. Even the tailoring of their tunics was the same, though Dream's was mostly white, and Nightmare's was mostly black. They had the same cheekbones and thin lips, but Dream was tanned with long white hair, and Nightmare was pale with long black hair. There was one thing they had in common, one thing that remained dominant in their appearance—the galaxy eyes. The windows of the universe itself, nestled beneath their eyelashes, keepers of secrets and life and death.

"Are you going to kiss me or what?" Dream asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Huh?" I replied, my mind still jumbled as I tried to focus. I'd brought them down here for a reason, though I couldn't immediately remember it. I'd had an inkling of an idea. Something had crossed my mind so fast, so subtly, that I hadn't been able to grab hold of it.

"You keep staring at me," Dream said. "Perhaps my humor flew right past your head."

"A lot of things are flying right past my head," I said.

Nightmare smiled, his shoulder pressed into the wall next to me. "What's on your mind, Esme? Talk to us."

I sighed. "We're helpless up here, aren't we? Useless."

"Do you really believe that?" Dream narrowed her strange eyes at me. I ended up shaking my head. Good grief, it was hard to stay focused with Kalon in actual mortal peril. There was a reason why I'd avoided getting myself emotionally attached to any man all these years, and this was it. Everything had gotten worse, and I was struggling to stay afloat and pull through, even though that was all I wanted.

"No," I conceded. "Just wondering—Time can't do anything to that membrane thing. Neither can Soul. The rest of us are equally powerless. So whatever that spell is, it's affecting the physical realm, right?"

"That is correct," Nightmare replied.

"What about your realm?" I asked. "The realm between life and death."

"It has nothing to do with it. It's a physical spell, anchored to the living world. As in-betweeners, we cannot bypass it ourselves because of the elements of death magic that were used to make it," Dream said.

"And you two. Your ability. What is it you can do, exactly?"

Dream and Nightmare stared at each other for a second, and it appeared that lightbulbs had just been turned on inside their heads. I'd only asked in order to ascertain whether their abilities might do something against Petra—something that Time and Soul and all the other Reapers had failed to do. To be honest, I wasn't all that sure about where I was going with my line of questioning. It just felt better to talk and explore options instead of keeping quiet and watching the disaster unfold.

"Esme, we can reach into people's dreams," Nightmare said. "We can feed on the energy harness by simply being alive. You see, when people sleep, their minds and souls open up, like... I don't know, preserve jars. The lid gets popped off, and we gain access to their spiritual energy. Whether they experience good dreams or nightmares, it doesn't

really matter. They're producing soul energy, the kind my sister and I can feed on."

"But you're onto something here," Dream added, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Because the dreamworld is like another world, all on its own. Another realm that is only faintly tied to reality and the plane of the living. Petra's magic doesn't extend there."

"Wait... what are you telling me?" I asked, my heart skipping a beat.

Above, Time and Soul were hurling curses at Petra. I could hear her laughing. She was enjoying this moment, and I would've loved nothing more than to make her choke on it. Nothing I had in mind was enough to make her suffer the way she truly deserved, though. And revenge, though appealing, wouldn't do much to help Kalon right now. Therefore, if Dream and Nightmare had a better solution, I was all ears.

"One of us might be able to reach out to Kalon through his dreams," Nightmare said. "Normally, my sister and I do that to feed on the energy I mentioned. It's something only we're capable of doing—treading this line between reality and the subconscious. The latter is only slightly removed from the former, just enough to give us a way in, despite that doorway issue we're currently dealing with."

"But because of that doorway issue we're currently dealing with, neither of us is capable of planting dreams or nightmares in Kalon's head. We can only hitch a ride on what's already there. Well, one of us can."

Nightmare nodded enthusiastically. "If Kalon is having a good dream, my sister can get to him. If he's having a nightmare, I can get to him. It's as simple as that."

"It won't be easy, though," Dream reminded him. "Remember the last time we tried to get inside someone who was already dreaming?"

"Ah... right, yes," he mumbled, lowering his gaze.

"I'm missing something here," I said, though excitement was already flourishing inside me, making my blood pump.

"Thing is, we usually put people to sleep before we feed on their dreams," Nightmare replied. "It gives us control. It's how we're able to implant good dreams or nightmares."

It was how they'd divided the population of the last place they'd inhabited, from what I remembered. Kelara's account of how she'd met these two had reached me after we'd all come together in Orvis. Needless to say, things weren't looking all that grim anymore. Whatever chance we had against Petra, we had to take it, no matter what.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

Dream scoffed. "Of course not!" She took a moment to gather herself and closed her eyes. The air buzzed around her, and my skin tingled. Hers glowed ever so slightly, and I could almost feel her reaching out and above, through the stone that had been used to build this tower. I held my breath, waiting for her to smile, to tell me that she'd found Kalon and that everything would be okay. "Dammit!" she snapped, her eyes popping open. "He's having a bad dream."

"Ah. I guess it's my turn, then," Nightmare grumbled, visibly displeased.

"Dream made it look easy. Why are you so miffed?" I asked.

"Because reaching out isn't the tough part. It's getting through to the person that really sucks," Nightmare said. "Think about it. Kalon has no idea what's going on in

reality. He's under Time's sleep spell. I can't exactly walk in there and tell him to wake up. Man's subconscious is not that easy."

"But you can do it," I insisted. "Please, tell me you can." My voice broke. My eyes stung. I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't help it. The stress and worry were getting to me, and knowing that we were so close to saving Kalon was making me all kinds of emotional.

"Yes," Nightmare conceded. "I need to get closer to him, though, because Petra has a hold on his heart with death magic while doing the shard transfer. I need something of his. An object, a lock of his hair, anything he might have touched. It'll help me properly anchor myself in his bad dream by establishing a personal connection."

"You didn't need that with other people. Dream didn't need it now," I said.

"Dream has her methods, and I have mine. Like I said, that golden heart string has Kalon in a sensitive spot. I need to be able to get past it and right into his subconscious if we're to have any chance of success."

Without hesitation, I went back upstairs. Dream and Nightmare followed close behind. When we reached the open doorway, I stayed out of Petra's sight while Nightmare settled on the floor, crossing his legs and leaning his back against the wall. Time gave me a curious look, and I brought a finger up to my lips, silently telling him to be quiet about this.

That was all he needed to switch his focus back to Petra and continue berating her, while I fumbled through my pockets and fished out the Visentis pin. I'd held on to it ever since we'd put Kalon in his interdimensional bubble, looking forward to the day when I might give it back to him. Nightmare looked at the pin for a while, then reached out and wrapped his fingers around it.

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

"Where's Esme? I can smell her, but I can't see her," Petra said, ignoring Time's repeated demands to stop this madness.

"I'm here. I'm just in no mood to see your nasty face," I called out.

She laughed. "Watching yourself fail in real time is quite upsetting, isn't it?"

I moved closer to Time, leaving Nightmare to his devices. His whole being darkened, as if a light had gone out inside. That had to be the way into Kalon's mind. Nightmare was, in a sense, shutting himself down in order to get into my beloved's subconscious. I could see Petra now, but the sight of her made me queasy.

"No, watching you kill your own son in real time is what's upsetting me," I said bluntly. It triggered the response I'd hoped for.

"It's your fault." She pointed an angry finger at me.

"Keep telling yourself that," I retorted. "You had the option to do the right thing, but you're too selfish to care about your own children. You could at least admit it, but you continue to pretend you're a good mother. It makes me want to puke."

"It's too late to turn back now," Petra muttered, giving her son a brief and sullen sideways glance. "He made his choice. He'll have to live with it. I gave him a way out, and he refused. He preferred you. Now he'll suffer the consequences."

"You're delusional," I said.

And there was nothing I could do about it. But as Dream knelt before her brother and touched his shoulder, she gave me a faint nod, followed by a whisper. "He's in."

There was nothing I could do about Petra's shortcomings as a mother. But I could still do something to save Kalon. Thankfully, Nightmare had pulled through. Of course, the whole endeavor would likely traumatize Kalon in one way or another. I could only imagine what it would feel like to have my dreams invaded by a foreign force, regardless of its intentions.

In order to wake Kalon up from such a deep sleep, Nightmare would have to give him a serious jolt. I could only hope that it would lead to his salvation. That it wouldn't merely prolong the inevitable. I shuddered at the thought. As much as I wanted to remain hopeful and determined, I had to admit things were dire enough to make me doubt our capabilities.

The universe was pushing us to troubling new limits. How long before we finally gave out?

KALON

I was in a dark place.

An awful place—all black stone and dark skies and barren lands. It stretched on forever, gnawing at my very soul, because I knew there was nothing better waiting beyond the fractured horizon. I was alone here, alone with my thoughts and all the things I'd worked so hard to keep below the surface. My worst fears had come true. I was isolated and deserted and completely alone.

There was no one I could turn to. No direction to run for something brighter. This was a future I had often imagined, even as a child. This was Visio, millions of years after my own demise. The Aeternae had lost control. They'd consumed all the blood in the world, the supply no longer able to sustain the demand. The Unending had found a way to punish our species even more. Her Black Fever had spread. It had infected the Naloreans and the Rimians, too.

Looking up into the faded sky, I could see the two planets faintly glimmering—dots on a blank and gray canvas. The Black Fever had made it all the way there, mercilessly wiping out both worlds. For too long, we had tormented the Unending. For too long, we had taken our lives—our existence—for granted, assuming we were superior. Better than everybody else. Better even than the Reaper who'd made us.

This was our future, grim and empty and hungry. The Aeternae's food source was long gone. They'd drunk the animals dry, as well. Gradually, we could no longer survive the waves of Black Fever. Weakened by the lack of blood, we started drinking from one another. But even that didn't last long.

Here I was, walking across the hardened land, looking at the shell of what had once been a wonderful and vibrant and promising world. There was nothing left other than a handful of Aeternae. I was watching the end unfold, and I doubted I could do anything to stop it. The hopelessness had taken hold of my heart. I was merely a spectator, and I couldn't explain my presence here.

Maybe I had died. The faint memory of Esme drew a smile on my lips. Would I ever see her again? Had she also perished? Maybe I was a ghost, doomed to walk this world until there was nothing left. Until the sun died out and Visio was reduced to a crunchy marble fallen off its orbit.

Fear speared me as I looked ahead. A few figures emerged from the thick, oily mist.

My mother was one of them, but she was old and wrinkled, barely able to stand. The lack of blood had aged her beyond repair. Even now, she refused to give in. The Unending had been standing by my side, but I hadn't even noticed her until she spoke.

"They did this to themselves."

I glanced to my left and found Valaine eyeing my mother intently. She was the Unending. "I'm sorry, Val..."

"It's not your fault," she said.

"Maybe I could've done something. More... I don't know."

"You cannot blame yourself for your mother's faults," Valaine replied.

"Make it stop," Petra cried out. The other Aeternae looked worse. They were almost skeletal, their skin stretching over bones and atrophied muscles, their eyes sunken in their heads, their hair falling out. It broke me to see them like this, but it wasn't a surprise. I'd seen it coming. Even though I'd lived as an Aeternae, I'd seen this version of the future in my head more than once—especially after I'd learned about the Unending.

Knowing we'd built our glorious world on the back of a suffering Reaper made me feel ashamed to be an Aeternae.

"Make it stop, please!" Petra insisted, looking at Valaine. "You can stop this."

"No. Only you can stop this by setting me free," Valaine replied.

"You've won. Can't you see? Only a few of us remain," my mother wailed. "Only a few of us. You've won!"

"What have I won, if I am still in chains while you're still alive?" Valaine asked. I couldn't blame her for any of this. As a species, we deserved much worse for what we'd put her through.

My mother was crying, but it was a furious sob, not a defeated one. "You wiped us all out. Look! Look at what's left!" She motioned around her. I wanted to speak, but my mouth was gone. Quite literally gone. I couldn't even feel my lips anymore. Fear surged through me, yet I couldn't give in to it. Numbness seeped into my limbs, and I found myself watching without participating once again.

"Petra. You did this to yourselves. Esme and the others—they warned you, and you killed them. They tried to save you all, and you repaid them with blood and death," Valaine said. My heart shattered into a million pieces as the faded image of Esme lingered in the back of my mind. I was seeing her in a different light now. This little snippet of her radiant smile was all I had left.

My mother had destroyed everything. She'd killed Esme.

"All you had to do was set me free," Valaine continued.

The world morphed around us. The sky lost its last star as charcoal clouds covered it like a heavy blanket. I hadn't seen the sun through the reddish haze in a while now. I hadn't seen a tree grow or even a green leaf in eons. Whatever we'd done to ourselves, we'd done to our world, as well.

"Setting you free would've ended us. Do I look stupid?!" my mother snarled, baring her fangs as she took a few steps forward. I didn't know what she was trying to accomplish with this move, but she wasn't intimidating anyone. If anything, it only made her seem more pitiful.

"You look old and shriveled," Valaine said. "Your people are all gone. Your sons, too. Your youth and joy of living. Tell me, Petra. What is it that still keeps you standing? You destroyed everything. What reason do you have to take another breath?"

My mother thought about it for what seemed like forever. She didn't have a ready answer. All she had were more tears, streaking down her wrinkled, sunken cheeks as she dropped to her knees and surrendered to her own failure.

"You can kill me as many times as you wish," Valaine said. "I will always come back. That's the one thing none of you truly understood. There is only so much Spirit's seals can do to me."

Where was Spirit, I wondered. In this possible future, GASP had lost, which had to mean the Spirit Bender had come back. Where was he?

As if I'd summoned him, he snickered his way into the picture. I had never seen him before, but I recognized him immediately. Why did he look like Danika Nasani of all people? She wore a black leather tunic and carried a scythe in her hand, but I knew she was the Spirit Bender. How could this be?

"This doesn't make sense," I heard myself mumble, my voice returning.

Valaine shot me a cold grin. "You're not making sense."

"What's happening here?" I asked. My mother wasn't even aware of my presence. She just cried and cried, hiding her face in her hands. Black veins rose up her bony wrists, and I understood she would be gone soon, too.

"What's happening is that you're having a very crappy dream," Valaine said. She gave Danika a confused look. "Seriously? This is how you pictured the Spirit Bender?"

I was speechless, trying to wrap my head around this sudden change in her demeanor. Something was off, and I couldn't quite figure out what it was. My confused expression made Valaine throw her head back with laughter.

"Sheesh, Kalon. Your subconscious is a freakin' mess!" she howled before morphing into someone else. I'd seen him before. The long black hair. The troubled and moody frown. It was the Nightmare.

My heart stopped. "How... how is this happening? All the Reapers were turned to ghouls. Even the First Tenners," I managed.

"Let me guess, Death is still trapped under the many seals?" Nightmare asked, hands resting on his hips. I offered a meek nod in return. "Is this how you see the future? Really? Dude, it's insanely glum."

"What is happening?" I shouted the question, my patience withering away. My nerve endings crackled as I tried to keep my grip on reality. Was this even reality? Was this the inferno of a dead man? I'd seen my world crumble into this vapid abyss... or had I imagined it all? Had I lost my mind somehow? No, it didn't make sense. Not that long ago, I'd been in Esme's arms, sick with Black Fever and wanting to go down fighting, not nestled inside an interdimensional bubble.

Nightmare smiled, watching me intently. "Ah, I see life in those eyes. Are you figuring something out yet, boy?"

"Esme. I was with Esme just now."

Glancing around, I realized we were alone. The Spirit Bender was gone. My mother.

The handful of Aeternae left to suffer into oblivion. The land was empty and cold. The sky was dark. Even the air felt thin.

"Kalon, I'm going to need you to wake up," Nightmare said.

"Wake up?"

Why was I having such a hard time processing his words?

"Yes. Wake up, you oaf! Your mother is trying to get you killed, and you're letting her," Nightmare replied, increasingly aggravated. "You have to open your eyes."

"I'm not dreaming. This is real. This is what my people deserve. It's the future we've made for ourselves, and I was cursed to witness it all," I said. How sure was I of any of this? Everything up to this single most troubling moment had been a blur.

Nightmare groaned, clearly frustrated. "Okay, so we're doing this the hard way, then."

"What?"

"I guess Time's sleep spell is pretty heavy. I shouldn't have underestimated Curly Scythe," Nightmare muttered, turning around several times, as though looking for something. Moments later, he found it. A thick and gnarled stick, blackened by death and misery.

He held it up firmly, with both hands on the slimmer end, carefully analyzing its grip and weight. I grew restless, moving backward away from him. My instincts were telling me to run, but where to? There was nowhere to hide. The mountains were gone. The oceans, too. Only flatlands and barren skies remained, matching the emptiness in my soul. I'd been like this for a while, paralyzed by my own unhappiness.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

"I'm going to help you wake up," Nightmare said. "We don't have the time to do this following my preferred and more relaxed method. I mean, what's the point, if I can't even feed on this nightmare? Esme would hang me by my privates if I took so much as a whiff."

Esme's name lit up a flame in my mind. Her light persisted, flickering in the darkness. I would've liked to see her again someday. She'd told me about the afterlife, about the prospect of an existence beyond death, but I was a ghost. There were no Reapers around except for Nightmare. Maybe I could get him to reap me. Then maybe I'd see Esme in that afterlife she'd mentioned.

Maybe that was his intention to begin with, hence the stick.

"Shouldn't you use a scythe?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Yeah, you're not making much sense right now. Wakey wakey!"

The blow knocked the air out of my lungs. Whatever that stick was made of, it wasn't wood. I fell on my side, every bone in my body aching. I coughed, trying to catch my breath, but Nightmare kept coming. He swung the stick downward, and I rolled off to the left to avoid the second strike.

His boot rammed into my back, and I cried out from the pain. I could feel it. I could feel it all! Each hit. Every kick. My flesh hurt. My bones broke. I scrambled to get away from Nightmare, but he was relentless and kept beating the daylight out of me.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Stop it! Please!"

I sounded like my mother. Nightmare grabbed me by the throat and pulled me up into

a barely standing position. For a second, I thought he was finally done. But then he swung again and hit me on the side of the head.

Good grief, it hurt. I spat blood. He laughed again, like he was having a great time. What kind of cruelty was this? What had I done to him? Horror grew in my heart, clogging my arteries and tying knots in the pit of my stomach. I was terrified, and I couldn't get away.

"Wake up, Kalon!" Nightmare said, hitting me again. I brought my arms up to defend myself. The stick broke them both, and I sobbed in agony, the burning pain spreading through to my fingers and up to my shoulders.

I curled up in a fetal position, my cheeks wet with fresh tears. If I was dead, why I was feeling all this?

"It's a nightmare," he snapped. "All you have to do is acknowledge that, and you'll wake up. Come on, pansy! Wake. The hell. Up!"

The next blow felt final. I stilled, darkness hugging me tightly, and considered his words. Was this a dream? A really bad and truly ugly dream? Had I been wandering through my subconscious this whole time?

"A dream..." I whispered, my eyes slowly peeling open.

Light pierced through, blinding me. Nightmare's voice rang in my ear. "Yes. It's a dream, you fool. Now wake up and stop Petra! She's giving you her soul shard. She's going to get you killed!"

"A dream," I repeated, sounding more sure of myself.

The view before me was blurry—just golden glimmers and a still silhouette. Her laughter echoed all around me. "In a few hours, I'll be done. And you'll all be done too, just not in a positive sense." My mother.

"Whatever you do, don't let her break that bauble," Nightmare said. "Pay attention, Kalon. Pay attention!"

Like a stream rushing through crevices down a steep mountain, reality emerged in my consciousness. I was awake. My body was in a lot of pain, but not the kind provoked by Nightmare's stick attack. No, I was sore from the Black Fever. I'd contracted it during our tunnel escape. Time had put me in a pocket. I remembered.

Blinking slowly, I saw my mother. She sat next to me. The golden light became clear, as well—a thread connecting her heart to mine. I could feel it tugging slightly. It made me uncomfortable. Nightmare's words hammered my brain with exceptional ruthlessness. My mother was transferring her shard of Spirit's soul into me so that I'd be the one to die at Danika's hands, not her.

My mother was sacrificing me so she could live forever. I had no idea how she'd gotten here, but as I lay on the floor and listened to Esme calling out to me, begging me to wake up, I realized I was the only one who could still do something.

The bauble in her left hand was filled with dark smoke. Nightmare had said not to break it. Her scythe was inches from my right hand. If I wiggled my finger closer, I might even feel the cold metal on my skin. I had to stop her. Nightmare was right. I had to. This was the point of no return for me—leaving the dream and embracing the reality with all its sides, both good and nasty. This was where I'd have to make a choice. A very final

choice. This was where I would decide whether the nightmare I'd just come out of would become real someday or not. I had that power.

My life was about to change forever.

May my brothers forgive me.

To say I was on edge would've been an understatement. I had one foot in the sky while the other sank in hell. I could feel its flames licking at my skin, desperate to consume me, to reduce me to a pile of ashes. I stood by the open doorway, my gaze fixed on Kalon as I waited. Nightmare was inside his head, doing who knew what to get him to wake up. I imagined all sorts of scenarios, but they all ended with Kalon opening his eyes. That was all I could think about—seeing those beautiful, cold blue eyes open again.

Lumi had joined Time, Soul, and me. Dream and Nightmare were off to the side and out of Petra's sight for obvious reasons. Nightmare was deeply embedded in Kalon's bad dream; I could tell by the way his eyes moved beneath his eyelids. The Reaper was definitely hard at work, and the thought made my heart swell. It became hard to contain my own excitement, and Petra noticed.

"What are you so giddy about?" she asked, the gold thread glowing between her and Kalon.

"The thought of your upcoming failures. It's what puts me into a sweet sleep at night," I replied dryly, offering a snide grin.

"I've tried everything," Lumi muttered. "The damn room won't budge. This spell is not the Word's territory. I can feel it."

"Has the Word reached out to you in any way?" Time asked, genuinely curious.

Lumi shook her head. "It doesn't need to. It knows its own limits, much like death magic. I'm afraid this is one of those areas where the two can never meet."

"Don't worry, Lumi," I whispered. "We're on it."

Petra giggled. The more she enjoyed herself, the more I longed to see her face when she took her last breath. It was the least she deserved for everything she'd done. I'd thought the Exiled Maras had been the worst of the worst, but Petra took the cake. Well, she and Danika could split the prize for Worst Mother, since they were both okay with killing their children so they could continue to enjoy immortality.

"There is nothing you can do," Petra said. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? It's getting embarrassing. For you, Esme, that needs to be specified. I told you the moment you learned who I really was... I told you I'd prevail. You underestimated me."

Kalon stirred. His eyes were open. I held my breath. "No..." I whispered. "You underestimated your son."

Before Petra could follow my gaze and understand what was happening, Kalon's hand shot out and went right into her chest. His claws pierced through skin, tore through flesh, broke through bone. She froze, her eyes round and blue and empty when the realization finally dawned on her.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Kalon said, his voice trembling as he pulled his hand back along with her heart. Blood coated them both.

"Ka... Kah..." Petra croaked, having lost her final words.

"I'm sorry." The golden thread connecting his heart to hers withered and vanished. He caught the smoky bauble before it left her fingers and carefully placed it on the floor. Danika would not find us in Roano—not today, at least.

I released my held breath as Petra fell backward, finally defeated and lifeless. Kalon dropped the heart and stared at his bloodied hand for a moment. The air around the doorway shimmered. Lumi narrowed her eyes as she looked through.

"It's gone. The membrane. It's gone!" she exclaimed.

Nightmare wheezed and coughed as he woke up. "Holy crap!"

"That's the trouble with the living using death magic. Their life force feeds the spell," Dream said, gripping her twin's shoulder with one hand as he came to. "Once they're dead, the spell dies with them."

"Whoa, that was quite the ride," Nightmare said, gasping, then scowled at me. "Your boyfriend was clenched deep in there, honey. I had to beat him out of it!"

My synapses fired up as I made the connection. The spell was gone, and so was the membrane. I jumped to my feet and bolted into the room, sliding across the floor and taking Kalon in my arms in one motion. It was such a smooth and natural move. We just clicked together like matching pieces of a puzzle.

"Babe," I murmured, as he shuddered in my embrace. He tightened his hold on me, hiding his face between my neck and shoulder in a warm, secluded curve where he could cry in peace. I didn't let go, listening to his soft sobs as he released all the anger and pain he'd held on to for so long.

My gaze wandered to Petra, who lay on her back with a gaping hole in her chest. Lumi reached us quickly and took hold of the heart, slipping it into a leather pouch and handing it over to Amane for safekeeping. The Faulty had returned, and I'd barely registered her presence. Lumi must've used the comms system the moment Petra died. Soon this whole room would be flooded with people happy to see Kalon alive.

"We'll take care of this eventually," Amane said, stuffing the pouch into her satchel.

Time knelt next to us, carefully measuring Kalon from head to toe. "He doesn't look so good."

"I know. The Black Fever is regaining its hold on him," I said. "But give him a minute."

"I'm sorry." Kalon sighed, slowly raising his head. Seeing him like this was painful. I wiped his tears with my thumbs and pressed my lips against his.

"It's okay," I mumbled between short and fluttering kisses. "You're okay. That's all that matters, Kalon. You're okay, and we got her soul shard."

"I killed my own mother." He glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't bear to look at her, and I certainly couldn't blame him. He'd been through gut-wrenching torture just by making this decision. It hadn't been easy.

"No one takes pleasure in killing another being. No one sane, anyway," Time said. "And certainly not one's mother. But you had no choice, Kalon. It was the only way to stop her malicious ways."

"She was going to put the shard in your heart," I added, peering into his sad, glassy eyes. "She was going to hand you over to Danika and kill you. There was no other way."

Kalon took a deep breath, closing his eyes in the process. I felt his grief as though it were my own, strangling my heart and tearing me apart on the inside. I took his hands in mine, ignoring the blood, and squeezed tightly.

"You're not alone," I added. "You will never be alone."

"My brothers. Where are they?" he asked after a long pause.

"They're safe," Lumi said. "And now that Petra's gone, Moore is definitely going to be okay. The sleeper spell will have worn off."

Kalon's brow furrowed as he glanced up at her. "What sleeper spell?"

"It's how Petra got to you," I said. "She came to Roano, found us here. We took her prisoner. She claimed she wanted to see her sons in exchange for intel."

"Petra tried to send us to our deaths." Amane scrunched up her nose. "But thankfully we made it back okay."

"She hid a scythe and a sleeper spell on Moore when he was only a baby," Soul interjected as he leaned into the doorway. "Powerful death magic. Spirit's signature all over it. We thought we had her until she got a chance to be with the kids. She activated Moore, and well... here we are."

Kalon shook his head in dismay. "I can't believe she would do that."

"The only reason Petra came here was to put the soul shard into you," I said. "It was her plan all along. But she's gone now, and I am deeply sorry you have to live with this, Kalon."

"I'll have to live with it, yes," he mumbled, then looked at Time. "Do you see her?"

The Reaper exhaled sharply, glancing to his left. "Yeah, she's here."

"Who? Petra?" I blurted, my blood running cold until I realized what they were talking about. "Her spirit, you mean."

"Yes," Time replied.

Kalon straightened his back. Our hands were still linked, and he didn't seem to want to let go. But there was a longing in his eyes, and I knew what it meant. I couldn't blame him. Dream and Nightmare joined us in the room. Dream clearly seemed upset as she stared in a specific direction. Given that Time and Soul were looking at the same thing, which I couldn't see, it had to be Petra's spirit.

"I would like to see her, if that's possible," Kalon said, clearing his throat. "I believe last words are in order."

Dream was completely against it. "No!"

"What? Why not?" I asked.

"Trust me, you do not want to hear what she has to say right now," Dream insisted.

Behind her, in the small space at the top of the stairs, I could see Derek and Sofia. They'd both heard the news and come up. There was a mixture of relief and concern in their expressions. I could almost hear what they were thinking, because the same thing was going through my head: Poor Kalon, having to kill his own mother just so she wouldn't kill him and everybody else in the process.

Yes, he'd had a tough choice to make, but he'd made it. He'd chosen life and righteousness and freedom instead of death and darkness and deceit. His soul was pure, and he deserved better than this. Unfortunately, the universe was not known for gracing us with only the good stuff. All I could do was be there for him. In time, his wounds, his soul—they'd heal.

"I would like to speak to my mother," Kalon insisted. "I deserve that much."

"You do, sweetie, but she is not in the best of moods right now," Dream replied, looking genuinely upset at having to refuse him. The other Reapers appeared to agree with her, so I could only imagine what foul-mouthed garbage Petra was spewing, even beyond death.

"I don't understand." Kalon sighed.

"She's angry," Time cut in. "She lost everything, and she's blaming everyone except herself. I'm afraid she's not interested in hearing or offering any last words. Right now, she's trying to reach for my scythe." He paused and took out his weapon.

I almost envisioned Petra freezing. I wondered what she was thinking.

"She doesn't deserve a single shred of kindness," Dream said. "She is cruel. She is evil and unrepentant. Selfish beyond all reason. Kalon, you are better off never seeing her or hearing her ever again."

"If only she could understand the sort of punishment that awaits her in the afterlife," Time muttered, looking at Petra's spirit with contempt. "If only she could understand that there is justice beyond death. Her journey is only just beginning. She wanted eternity, and she's going to get it, just not in the way she'd hoped."

"Punishment?" I asked.

"That's all I can tell you," Time replied. "Order reigns in all three realms, Esme. You make yours, we make ours, and the others beyond make theirs."

I quivered at the thought of such cosmic balance. Until now, we'd only dared to wonder about the afterlife and what it might entail. The Reapers weren't going to share more information about it, but I had enough to go on. Enough to marvel at the way this world worked. There was an order in all this chaos. For every action, there was always a reaction. And Petra would soon get the reaction that comes from a lifetime spent killing and hurting innocent people, persecuting Reapers, and cheating Death herself. Yeah, it wasn't going to be pretty.

"Can she hear me?" Kalon asked.

Time nodded.

"You might as well say your piece," Dream said. "I'm just not going to give her the satisfaction of saying hers. She has nothing good to offer, anyway."

"I'm sorry. But I will sleep better knowing that my brothers and I are safe from her venom," Kalon replied. "I don't expect Ansel, Tudyk, or Moore to ever forgive me, but

everything I do, I do for them. They deserve better, and that's what my mother never truly understood. Maybe she will, wherever she's headed."

"I sure hope so," Time said and swung his scythe through the air. For the briefest of moments, I caught a faint glimmer as the blade moved. I could breathe again, and it had come at the expense of someone else's death.

She deserved everything that was coming her way, but I couldn't bring myself to bask in it. Petra could've chosen another avenue. She could've chosen a life with her children, if only she'd accepted that the past five million years had been spent in absolute cruelty and immorality.

Kalon's shoulders dropped as he realized what had just happened. I wrapped my arms around him, and he softened in my embrace. His tears seeped into my shirt, burning hot with heartbreak. Dream watched us for a while, but eventually she couldn't take it anymore and walked out, cursing under her breath.

I'd never seen her so emotional before. She had struck me as aloof, maybe a little psychotic, but definitely not sensitive in any way. There had to have been something in Petra's words to trigger such a reaction. Maybe Reapers could still be surprised by the depravity of some souls. Maybe Dream had yet to meet the absolute worst among us until she'd seen Petra in death.

Either way, the world was a better place without the high priestess. She had been a terrible mother and an even worse Aeternae. I would do everything in my power to make sure Kalon got over this. We'd made it this far. We would find our way forward together.

My faith had been renewed by Kalon's sacrifice. Unfortunately, he was also still sick with Black Fever, so he'd have to go back to sleep soon. Until then, I allowed myself a welcome reprieve, melting in his arms and thanking all the gods and stars that we'd survived this deluge of misfortune. We were stronger now. Stronger than ever. The kids would be okay, too. I knew it. They were fighters, and they had a better sense of right and wrong than their mother ever did.

We had two shards from Petra and Ramus, plus the one still lodged in Thayen's heart, but our work was nowhere near finished. Danger burned brightly ahead. But we'd make it. Together.

LUMI

I followed Dream out of the room because the look on her face was disconcerting. She wasn't telling us something. Instead, she was trying not to draw attention to herself, taking advantage of the overwhelming mixture of emotions that had overtaken everyone once Kalon was saved. But Dream was troubled, and I wanted to understand why. A Reaper on edge didn't bode well for any of us.

"What's wrong?" I asked, trailing her up the stairs.

We stopped outside Tristan and Valaine's room, since this part of the tower was clear. Most of the people were gathering below to check on Kalon and make sure the worst really had been averted. While their concern was endearing, I worried our troubles would only get worse, and Dream's expression confirmed it before she even answered my question.

"Nothing," Dream said, tucking a lock of white hair behind her ear. Her galaxy eyes seemed blurry. The stars in her irises had faded, as if darkness would soon swallow them whole.

"Your whole demeanor says otherwise."

She glanced to the side, perhaps gathering her runaway thoughts, before looking at me. "I'm glad none of you could hear what Petra had to say. I've never met such a vile creature before. And I've been around for a very long time, so that's saying something."

Murmurs emerged from below. The Visentis boys had made it into the room, and I could hear them sobbing as Kalon tried his best to comfort them. I hoped someone had covered Petra's body prior to their arrival. This whole situation made me feel uneasy, but the sooner we got it out of the way, the better for everyone involved. Especially Kalon, who needed to heal both physically and emotionally.

"What did Petra say? I can imagine she spewed plenty of angry garbage, considering how she got her ass handed to her by Kalon," I muttered, eyeing Dream intently.

"That Corbin is smarter than all of us put together, for starters." She sighed. "The moment he heard that we—Spirit's equals—were here, he started digging through the chronicles that our brother left for them. His sacred texts, in their minds at least. It's as if Spirit foresaw his own demise and used the Darklings as a backup option. Petra claimed he wrote about all of us in those pages. Therefore, Corbin knows as much about me and the other First Tennesers as Spirit did. Trust me when I say this... that's a lot of knowledge

for the Master of Darkness to have.”

“How does that impact us and what we’re doing?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. But arming Corbin with so much information will make it more difficult for us to fight him. He already has words and sub-words most of us never learned. If my suspicions are correct and Corbin is aware of our weak spots... well, let’s just say that could make it even harder for us to complete our mission.” Pausing for a moment, she allowed herself a deep breath, holding back tears. “I swear, what Petra was willing to do—killing her own son... I can hardly fathom it. And she was ready to kill all of them if it meant she’d live forever. Kalon wouldn’t have been the only one if Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore had turned against her.” She struggled for composure before continuing. “You see, Lumi, I have fed on the dreams of so many mothers since my inception that I... I can feel what some of them felt when they had to bury their children. Petra’s mindset, it’s... it’s incomprehensible to me.”

I felt my eyebrows arch in surprise. Truth be told, I was having a hard time imagining Dream as anything other than the mildly sociopathic Reaper who fed on people’s subconscious minds and influenced their dreams. Yet she bared her soul to me, and I couldn’t help but feel honored. Humbled, even, that she’d told me this much about her own emotions.

“You felt their grief? Their fear?” I asked.

“Yes. Like it was my own,” she murmured, clearly pained. “Like I lived through their lives and experiences myself—because that is what dreams are. Mixtures of memories and wishes, lost thoughts and persistent ideas. So, with the mothers whose dreams I fed on... I ended up understanding the struggle of creating a life and carrying it to term. In my heart, I felt the love, the pure and endless joy they experienced upon holding their child for the first time, which is why I cannot comprehend any mother being as cold and as ruthless as Petra. Or Danika, for that matter. I just can’t.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. She gave me a weak smile and exhaled as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “Does anyone else among your Reaper siblings know about this sensitive side of you?”

Dream shook her head. “Not really. Well, Nightmare has a clue, but that’s because of our twin-like bond. Among us First Tennesseans any kind of weakness isn’t advised. The Spirit Bender’s actions are clear proof as to why. So, I’ve kept these emotions mostly to myself, and seeing Petra just now... I couldn’t stop it from coming back to the surface. It’s been a while since I’ve fed on a mother’s dream, but the memory of those sensations persists. It intensifies if awakened.”

“What surprises me is that Death made you from scratch, and yet you’re capable of such feelings...”

“Oh, well technically speaking we weren’t made from scratch, per se. Before she thought of making Reapers from the existing souls of people who’d died, she experimented with other, less orthodox methods, let’s say,” Dream explained. “Death isn’t life. She can’t make Reapers out of nothing. She has to start from somewhere.”

“Life...” I mumbled.

“The Word. The force of the living.” Dream smiled broadly. “You are its servant, a

vessel for its power, but I doubt you know everything about it." She waited for me to reply, but I had no words. Just a faint shrug. "That's a conversation for another time. Thank you for taking a moment to check on me. It's much appreciated."

"No, wait. What unorthodox methods are you referring to?" I asked, having almost glossed past the single most intriguing part of her previous statement.

She let a heavy sigh out. "Spirit making a copy of his own soul wasn't the first time this was done. He, like the rest of us First Tenners, is a copy of an original soul. Our matrixes, let's call them, moved on into the afterlife. We were used as blank slates and given Reaper powers, hence why we're capable of understanding and feeling emotions like everybody else."

"Whoa. Do you remember your originals' lives?"

Dream shook her head. "Death made sure we were blank. But there are things she could never erase, such as the general direction in which our personalities would evolve. She used to say that we were apples befallen not far from their trees. Anyway, that's all I'm willing to share, if you don't mind."

"That's okay. I appreciate you opening up to me, nonetheless. All this aside, did Petra say anything else?" I asked, noticing how eager Dream was to get away from this personal side of our conversation.

"The truth," she said, nodding slowly. "The unpleasant truth that no one has been able to tell us until now. I suppose we've all guessed it, but Petra basically confirmed it. The only one who knows how to free Unending is Unending. With Spirit gone, she's our only hope. The irony doesn't escape me. Spirit didn't leave any information about it with the Darklings. Not a word in his so-called sacred chronicles. We thought the Master and the Whips knew. They gave that impression, as well. But they don't. Spirit must've figured one of us might get too close. He couldn't bring himself to trust the Darklings with the most precious of his knowledge—the actual seals used to bind Unending to Visio."

My heart sank like a chunk of lead. I almost heard it hitting the floor. Thump. Thump. Thump. "Why doesn't this surprise me?"

"Because Spirit spent too much time with hate in his heart. It consumed him. It transformed him. I swear, he wasn't like this in his earlier days. I could trust him with my entire existence back then. But he wanted to move on, and Death denied him the only thing he ever wanted. From that moment, his anger festered into something ugly and poisonous. Had he not been such a brilliant thinker, we would've seen most of this coming, I think. But Spirit was easily one of the brightest minds to ever bear the Reaper title. I guess that's why Death didn't want him to leave."

I needed a moment to wrap my head around all this. I pushed open the door to Tristan's room, listening to its creaky hinges. It seemed empty, but I knew there was an interdimensional pocket somewhere in here, where great and dangerous things were happening.

"Should we tell Valaine?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

"There's something else," she said. "Petra didn't mean to divulge it, but she was so furious, yammering on and on, that she let it slip. She mentioned a rumor passed down from the first Master of Darkness all the way to Corbin, which he shared with the Whips.

The seal that bound Unending to her Aeternae body has a trigger of sorts. If Tristan and Unending aren't careful, they'll unleash the purest death all over Visio. Petra stopped herself before she could say more."

"What, like some kind of internal trip wire?"

"Yes. Unending needs to be extremely cautious with how she navigates her liberation. The Black Fever is a symptom of her captivity, but it's also connected to the seal. So if we break that seal without a full understanding of how it works, we might trigger the kind of devastation that would wipe out all life on Visio."

My blood ran cold. "Why would Spirit do such a thing? It would kill his Darklings too, right?"

"I suppose he left it for Unending to learn once she awakens. A last 'screw you' to the Reaper who rejected him," Dream grumbled. "Sick bastard..."

A sense of urgency came over me, my heart beating faster as the potential repercussions took shape in my mind. "We definitely have to tell Valaine about this, so she's not taken by surprise when she does get to that stage."

Dream nodded her agreement and motioned for me to enter Tristan's room, while she summoned the Time Master. "How can I help?" he asked.

"You heard Petra mention the trigger," Dream said. "I told Lumi about it."

"We have to warn Valaine," I replied.

Time frowned. "I can take you inside the pocket, but if she's unconscious and digging through her memories, I would advise against waking her up. She's already fragile."

"Phantom or Morning can warn her," Dream said. "They're anchored in both reality and her subconscious, aren't they?"

"Worth a shot," Time conceded, presenting his scythe. He cut through the air with its glimmering blade, revealing a luminescent gash. Putting his weapon away, he used both hands to part the opening, making it tall and wide enough for us to simply walk through it.

I found myself standing in a dark room different from the tower. It was so quiet, I could hear myself breathing. But my attention was quickly drawn to the four people sitting in the middle with their legs crossed. Two of them—Valaine and Tristan—were glowing, their eyes closed. The other two—Phantom and Morning—were staring at them, equal parts astonished and concerned.

Time was just as surprised. "What's happening?"

"We're not sure," Phantom answered quietly. "This started only a few hours ago."

"Why are they... like this?" I asked, something clutching my throat. As eerie and as beautiful as Tristan and Valaine seemed with this light burning from within, it didn't feel... natural. Not to mention normal. This was anything but, and I'd already had enough crazy for one day.

"Again, we're not sure," Morning replied. "I've tried waking them up, but they're not responsive. Heck, they won't even budge. It's like they're paralyzed."

"Do you think maybe you should've come out to tell us?" Dream wondered aloud, and it earned her a scowl from Phantom.

"Do you think we haven't considered that?" the young-looking Reaper replied. "Time

flows much slower in here, so Morning and I figured we might try to do something more before reaching out for help. It's literally why Time put us in here in the first place."

"No need to get snappy," Dream shot back.

"Well, we have to talk to Valaine," I said. "Right now."

Morning chuckled bitterly. "Good luck with that."

"I'm serious."

"And I appreciate that, but we're both locked out," Morning replied. "We've already tried reaching into Valaine's mind. We hit nothing but tall and infinite black walls. It's like she doesn't want anyone disturbing her."

"What about Tristan?" I asked, fear gradually working its way through my system and warming my skin. My own clothes felt like molten lava, making me want to peel everything off just to escape this uncomfortable sensation.

"It's Valaine's mind that I can connect with, because of Unending. Reapers connect with Reapers on such a deep level. It doesn't work with the living the same way," Phantom said. "Besides, Tristan is inside Valaine's mind. I don't have access to him. They're both out of my reach."

I turned to Dream. "Would you be able to help? Like your brother did with Kalon?"

"I'm sorry." She sighed. "Tristan isn't dreaming. He's conscious but linked to Valaine's mind. Whatever is happening now, it's got something to do with Unending."

"I think she's getting closer to her full awakening," Phantom said.

"And that's a problem, because she doesn't understand what she's about to walk into." I rubbed my face with both hands in a bid to calm myself down.

I wasn't sure there was anything we could do at this point. Perhaps Valaine might figure out that there's something wrong with the seal. I could only hope she'd have the presence of spirit to catch the irregularity before she waded into her full consciousness. The more I thought of Petra, the more I hoped there would be some kind of punishment waiting for her on the other side. Had we known about this sooner, we could have warned Valaine of the potential disaster.

"Damn you, Petra," I mumbled, mostly to myself, unable to look away from Tristan and Valaine's glowing forms. Whatever was going on, it had to lead somewhere good. I was so tired of all these wretched twists and turns. Every moment we spent on territory that wasn't ours—namely the world of death magic and Reapers—was a moment we risked getting ourselves and our loved ones killed. I'd already lost Nethissis to this madness. I couldn't take much more.

In hindsight, I certainly agreed with why Death wanted our realms to stay separate from each other. Visio and its past five million years were obvious examples of why we were all better off not mingling. At all...

TRISTAN

Pure light surrounded us. All I could see was this endless sea and sky of white. It was peaceful and bright, like I imagined bliss would feel like if it were a real world. The Unending and I stood in front of each other. I had my GASP uniform on, and she wore her white dress with black gloves, hair cascading down her back.

Her red lips stretched into a warm smile, and I felt my whole being suffused with the sweet warmth of sunshine. It was as if a star were growing inside me, gathering its energy as it swelled and consumed every atom in my body. And I was okay with that because it felt amazing.

"Where are we?" I heard myself ask.

"I don't know," the Unending replied. "But I followed the gold thread here."

"It was supposed to take us to Keryn's earliest memory," I said. "This doesn't feel like a memory at all."

Unending shook her head. "No, it doesn't. Which is odd. It's rather frustrating to be so unaware of what's in my own mind."

"Hey, we made it this far," I said, touching her face. Buzzing energy flowed through me, and I needed a moment to adjust to this new, electrifying sensation. Would it be like this whenever my skin found hers? I hoped so because it was out of this world. "We'll find our way into the next stage, too."

"Your confidence is what gives me strength," she whispered. I could see the stars in her black eyes flickering whenever they found me. I felt her love blossoming inside me, and the closer we got, the more powerful this feeling between us became. We had no control over it. It had taken a life of its own, and we were just riding the wave.

Looking around, I wondered what all this meant. This blankness. It was the complete opposite of the nothingness in which we'd lingered before. "So you followed the gold thread into your earliest memory as Keryn," I said. "Is that what you had in mind when you touched it?"

"Not really. I mean, I did hold that intention, but I thought of something else too," the Unending replied. "I thought of myself. My true self. I thought of finding my way back and getting this over with, once and for all. Do you think maybe my subconscious listened, and we're in some sort of limbo preceding my true self?"

"It could be. I wouldn't put it past you, Unending. You're more capable than you

think.”

“Okay. Then what next?” she asked, her gaze wandering over the white emptiness. I spotted the faint draw of her brows as she fixated on something. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw what had captured her attention. It didn’t feel right.

It was a black tendril, moving upward like a thread of smoke, silent and discreet and dangerous. I couldn’t see where it was coming from, but I knew, deep down, that it stemmed from the Unending.

“That can’t be good,” I breathed.

“Tristan, I’m afraid...”

I gripped her arm and held her close as we moved away from the tendril, which had already split in two. Looking down, I couldn’t find its source. It seemed to go on and on forever, because the white space had no notion of up, down, left, or right. The laws of physics didn’t apply to this nook in Unending’s subconscious.

From two tendrils, we were suddenly faced with ten, each growing and engorging itself. Soon enough, they were lashing out, trying to get to us. “I think we need to run,” I whispered, then bolted as far away from the black arms as I could. The Unending was right beside me, but the faster we ran, the harder it became to move.

“Something’s wrong,” Unending said, her voice sharp with panic.

I couldn’t go on. Glancing down, I saw my boots sinking into the whiteness, like it was iridescent quicksand. The Unending was in a similar situation, writhing and squirming, desperate to get out before it consumed us both. The white space we’d stumbled into was now our greatest enemy, and the tendrils trembled as they shot toward us.

Using my claws, I slashed at them. They were made of pure black smoke, I realized. None of my hits did anything, and they continued to lash me like merciless whips. I felt each strike like a burning bite into my very flesh.

“Tristan, this... this isn’t supposed to be here!” Unending cried out.

“How do we stop it?” I asked, wrestling one particularly persistent tendril as it coiled itself around my torso and tightened its grip, making it hard for me to breathe. “We’re running... out of time here...”

Unending stilled, half-sunk into the whiteness. The tendrils were intensely focused on her, their tips wiggling as they traced the contours of her pale face. Her eyes widened as she looked at me. “Stop attacking it,” she said. “Don’t hit it anymore.”

“It’s kind of hard, since it’s hurting me,” I managed, gritting my teeth as another lash cut right through my side. Whatever this was, it had more of a problem with me than with her.

“Just let it,” she replied. “Trust me, Tristan. Surrender.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s part of the seal. It’s a trigger of sorts, meant to stop me from digging deeper.” Unending said. “This is it! The failsafe that Spirit mentioned when he killed Keryn. I can see it now. It’s restless and volatile... my own anger manifesting. The harder you hit it, the harder it hits back.”

Inhaling deeply, I allowed myself to be pummeled into oblivion. The few tendrils that had focused on me kept hitting—incessantly, mercilessly—until they... stopped. Finally, I

opened my eyes again. I hadn't even realized I'd shut them. The tendrils were all still, black smoke rippling as they aimed their tips at my head.

Fear bubbled up inside me like acid, drilling holes into my throat.

"What is this thing?" I murmured, crippled by my own helplessness.

"It's the Black Fever. The real Black Fever. Not the mild virus infecting the Aeternae or the darkness that oozes out of me when I lose control," the Unending said. "It's the force that feeds on my anger and misery. Spirit modified it with a trigger."

My head almost snapped as I turned to gawk at her. "What?"

"He modified it. The Black Fever is a curse, Tristan, remember? And with this trigger that Spirit added, it's extremely volatile. The more we fight it, the worse it gets. He wanted me to stop reaching beyond this point..."

"Do you know how to get past it, then?"

"Sort of. It's hard to explain, but I need you to believe in me," she replied, her voice trembling. "No matter what comes next, I need to know that you believe in me."

"I do believe in you." I wanted to, with all my heart. But I was half-eaten by the whiteness, with black tendrils of pure Black Fever pointing their unnervingly sharp tips at my face. I wanted to believe in her, I really did.

"If we're not careful, this thing will explode," Unending said. "I know it, deep down. It's like a nagging thought I can't shake. It's been in my head forever, but it's only surfacing now. I think my instincts are trying to get one step ahead of me with this."

The tendrils moved around as though they were analyzing us. Observing us. Perhaps looking for a better angle to strike. I felt vulnerable, which made Unending's plea for my belief increasingly difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, I held on. What other choice did I have, after everything we'd been through?

"What do you mean when you say it will explode?" I asked.

"It will leave us and release itself upon the world. I've been holding on to it for so long, I'd forgotten," the Unending replied. "Spirit wanted to make sure I couldn't break my own chains."

As I considered this new reality, I began to understand how far the Spirit Bender had really gone to keep the Unending buried and miserable, forever trapped. It made me sick to my stomach, but nowhere near as sick as the thought of watching this dark monstrosity escape the Unending's physical body and infect the entire planet.

"How do we stop it?" I asked, trying to focus on a solution.

"We can't. Not from in here," Unending replied. "If only I could peek behind this white curtain... If I remember, if I can figure out what the seals are, we can stop it from the outside."

I'd sunk up to my chest, and the light enveloped me in a most inviting manner. The contrast between this pleasant feeling and the threat of the black tendrils didn't escape my notice. Instead, it gave me the craziest of ideas—but then, who ever found escape in sanity? A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth as I glanced at the Unending. "I need you to believe in me this time."

It made her light up like the sun, and I found myself entranced by her presence, even in these dangerous circumstances. "I believe in you, Tristan."

"We need to sink."

She stared at me for a while, occasionally looking at the tendrils. They were calm now, but their aggression remained, quietly persistent and obvious whenever we made the slightest movement. They reacted to us, and they were insanely receptive. It was only a matter of time before we'd trigger their violence again. I was sure of it.

"Okay," she whispered, suddenly relaxing against the light's firm hold on her. Slowly but surely, she went down, sliding through until all I could see was her head. Following my own advice, I did the same.

Soon we were both engulfed in the white light, leaving the black tendrils behind. We sank for what felt like forever, the temperature rising, my senses unraveling as I surrendered myself to it all. This limbo had served a purpose, I realized. It had confronted the Unending with the greatest challenge that stood between her and her own release.

The Spirit Bender might have tied her down with three seals and left that darkness to fester inside her, but the Unending's mind had taken measures of its own, for her protection. The memories that had settled in layers, one on top of the other. The gold thread that invited her to discover and understand her past lives, one layer at a time. The white space where nothing had been allowed to flourish, except for the darkness that fed on her grief. Yes, the Unending had already done her part without even realizing it.

As the light swallowed us up, I smiled. Now we were getting somewhere, beyond the trigger that Spirit had placed as a barrier.

My eyes opened slowly, as if waking up too quickly would cause an unpleasant jolt. The Unending was with me. We sat on a flat cliff atop a stony mountain. The landscape didn't seem familiar, but it was breathtaking. This was a strange world, made of rocks and sparkling rivers. The obsidian sheen of the stone played with the illuminated waters as they tangled in streams across the world. Above, peculiar galaxies with green and blue stars swirled around. At the center of each, a tiny spot of white light glowed around a black circle. Stardust danced in shades of emerald and sapphire, dusting the heavens with its cosmic shimmer.

This was not a place I'd ever seen before. It was startlingly beautiful. It was something I'd imagined the gods might have called home, in any legend, in any culture. Everything was perfect despite its overall chaotic asymmetry. There were no straight lines. Only jagged edges and pearlescent surfaces accompanied by the sweet sound of rushing water. And in the midst of it all, overlooking the mind-boggling splendor, were the two of us.

Unending smiled as she brought a hand up to my face. The feel of black leather against my skin was nice, but I needed more, so I peeled the glove off and welcomed her naked touch. The energy flowed through me as if I'd been gently touched by lightning. I'd felt it before, not long ago.

She took off my shirt. The fabric slipped off me in the blink of an eye, and she took the other glove off, placing her palms on my chest. My heart grew as we gazed at each other, marveling at the love and the beauty we saw in each other's eyes. I wasn't myself. Not really.

I was somebody else, and I saw my hands come up to undress her. The white silk was

abandoned on the dark stone beneath us, her bare shoulders inviting my caress. I wrapped my arms around her. We were close. Closer than ever before. So close, in fact, that I even felt her heart beating against mine. The Unending no longer had one, and yet... it echoed inside me.

Our lips met in the most tender of kisses. I'd been in love with her for years, before she'd granted me the gift of immortality. We'd spent millennia together since, treading worlds and discovering new civilizations as they developed and expanded over virgin lands. We'd talked for millions of hours, never getting bored, never finding the silent moments awkward or heavy. No, we were the perfect couple—two souls who'd met in the world of the living.

I was Erethiel, the Unending's lover.

I had her pinned under my body, her physical form responding to my every touch. I kissed the side of her neck, following an invisible trail down to her navel, overwhelmed by the flurry of sensations she sent through me. My spirit sang with delight as we came together under a full and giant moon, the only witness to our eternal union.

This was a memory of the Unending's from before her binding to Visio. This was one of the single most precious moments of her existence. In it, I played the part of Erethiel. I followed his every gesture, each movement bringing us closer together. We made love, and she whispered in my ear, "I love you. I will love you forever."

"We have forever to love," I replied, gleeful at the thought of spending an eternity by her side. She stirred in my embrace as we discovered how high we could go with our physical union. I was her first since she'd become a Reaper. We had put this off for too long, though we'd both been eager to take our relationship to the next level. And now we were discovering exactly how strange and wonderful we were together.

The universe had thrown me into her path, and she'd held me up. She'd cared for me like no one else had before. To me, the Unending was the beginning and the end fading into forever. The same forever we had for ourselves. I looked forward to cherishing her for as long as time flowed. Running a hand through her hair, I rolled over. She was on top of me now, our souls dancing under the milky moonlight.

Suddenly, she vanished like a dream in the early morning—a wisp, a fugitive idea that was there and then wasn't anymore. I was alone on that flat cliff, my chest empty in her absence. I felt cold. Shivering, I tried to move. The world shifted around me, the same sky but from another angle, the sound of rushing water much closer than before. I looked to my right and realized I was no longer on the flat cliff.

No, I was on a pebbled riverbank. The Unending rushed to my side, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Erethiel... no..." Her sobs broke me. I wished I could do something to end her suffering, but I was paralyzed. Dead. With a trembling hand, she touched my face. "Oh, Erethiel, who did this to you?"

The grief in her eyes was evident. The stars inside were dying, and I could see my reflection in the darkness. My head... my head was no longer attached to my body. I'd been decapitated, and the mere idea made me feel nauseated. Now we were reliving one of the worst moments in the Unending's existence. How terrible, I thought, to jump from sheer happiness to this overwhelming agony.

"You left me no choice," Death spoke, startling her.

Unending whirled around to face her creator. Death hovered above the river, her bare feet not touching the water. In the pale moonlight, I saw the resemblance. I remembered Phantom telling us once that Death had chosen the Unending as her first Reaper because she looked a lot like her. The black hair. The shape of her lips. Yes, there were clear similarities.

"You killed him? You killed Erethiel?!" the Unending snarled, the air crackling around us from her rising fury. Death raised a hand to silence her.

"I didn't do it myself. But I gave the order, yes. I warned you against Erethiel. I told you not to give him your gift," Death said.

"And so you had him killed? You're a monster!" the Unending cried, shaken to the core. I wished I could say something, but I was only a spectator this time.

"My child, when will you learn that my will is absolute?" Death asked.

The Unending fell to her knees by my side again and gently caressed my face. Tears rolled down her cheeks. I didn't even know Reapers could cry. I'd seen Valaine cry, but not this true version of her. Not a Reaper. "You took the single most precious thing in my existence. The only thing that really mattered," she murmured, trying to retain whatever composure she had left. I figured loss was not something she'd often encountered as a Reaper, which would explain why the Unending was having such a hard time with this. I'd learned that Reapers became immune to certain emotions after a while, especially after millions of years.

But the Unending was different. She'd fallen in love for the first time since she'd been made, and she'd lost her partner to her creator. That had to hurt in so many ways. It was rare for Reapers to fall in love—let alone the First Tennessees. It wasn't impossible, but the emotional bonds they created had to be intense beyond our understanding. That was how Seeley had once put it, anyway.

"I begged you, Unending. I begged you not to give your immortality to anyone. I explained why I made a mistake with you. I made it clear that I do not wish to destroy you, which is the only way for me to take your power away," Death said. "You forced my hand. So here we are..."

The Unending scoffed. "You could've left us alone. We weren't troubling anyone. I'm free now. I deserved Erethiel."

"Letting you off the hook would set a poor example for the others, especially now that there are so many Reapers," Death replied. "I am sorry, Unending. For what it's worth."

"It's not worth anything!" she screamed, and the sky was cracked in half by the loudest thunderclap. Light flashed above as a violent storm gathered. I wasn't sure whether this was Unending's doing or just a really nasty day in this world, but the wind howled and I could hear the water swelling and rushing, the tap-tap-tap of rain falling from the dark clouds that hadn't been there moments ago. "You're sorry? You're sorry? Leave me alone! I never want to see you again!"

"Unending... you don't mean that."

"Oh, really?" The Unending shot up again. Electricity charged the air around us. I could sense it tickling my cold, dead skin. It was a bizarre thing to experience. "I don't mean it?"

You killed the man I love, and you think I don't mean it when I ask that you never show yourself in my presence ever again?"

"Time will pass," Death replied. "Your wounds will heal. And you will see the sense in my decision. I don't expect you to forgive me now, and I certainly don't expect you to forget what I had to do. But the day will come when you will understand why I did it, and why your gift should never have been given. Why you are simultaneously the one I love the most and my biggest mistake."

Seconds passed in utter silence. I could only imagine what had gone through the Unending's head in that moment. Erethiel was dead. There was no turning back from this. The dice had been thrown, and Death had made her permanent mark on Unending's soul.

"I want you to leave," the Unending said, her voice low and cold. "I want you both to leave, so that I may give Erethiel the burial he deserves."

Death lowered her head. No words were needed. She knew what she'd done, and she would have to deal with it forever. There was a hint of regret in her posture, but sadness was dominant. She'd been honest in saying she'd taken no pleasure in this. It had been the hardest thing she'd ever done.

In retrospect, the many times I'd bickered with my parents over things I could or couldn't do before I reached maturity seemed like jokes at a party compared to this. Death walked away and vanished into the night, leaving the Unending by my side, quiet and brokenhearted.

"She caused me a great deal of pain," Unending said. "It took me a long time after this moment, mostly while I was trapped here, in the prison of my subconscious, to realize that she was right all along. I should never have given Erethiel my gift. I made it worse with the Aeternae."

We were going back to a conversation we'd already had. She knew I'd disagree with her conclusion, but she also knew I couldn't speak. She gave me a weak smile, gazing at me as if we'd just met after many years apart.

"I'd almost forgotten what Erethiel looked like," Unending said.

I wondered whether she'd forgiven Death now that she remembered it all so vividly. Unending shook her head.

"I will never forgive her, Tristan," she replied, somehow reading my mind. "But I do understand why she did it. And I know that, deep down, she regrets her decision. We cannot turn the clock back, unfortunately."

All we could do was keep pressing forward. We'd gone beyond the seal that had put the Unending inside an Aeternae vessel. We'd reached the realm of her true subconscious, where all the truths were laid bare. Given the insane number of memories she must've collected over the millions of years since her creation, I had a feeling we had a lot more digging to do before we could find our way back to the surface.

She took my hand in hers. "We'll be okay, Tristan. I see it now. I see it all."

Hope was a dangerous thing. It was a fragile string that could snap under too much pressure. Even so, I reached out, desperate to stop myself from falling. We'd found the truth of the Unending, and we needed to bring it back into the world. She was the only one who could free Death and stop the Darklings once and for all.

Hope was a dangerous thing, yes. But it was also all I had left. It would have to do.

After the whole ordeal with Petra, we cleared out Kalon's room so we could have some privacy. Only his brothers stayed, along with Derek and Sofia, while the others took the high priestess's body away. The shards were safely stored in Amane's pouch, and we had a better idea of what we were dealing with.

Kalon was looking slightly better—not because of the Black Fever subsiding in any way, but because his mother was gone. He felt awful about it, but Petra had been one of the more considerable hurdles on our path to any semblance of a victory. With her out of the way, we had a better shot at securing the Unending's freedom and stopping the Darklings' reign of terror. Time had also managed to put together a protective spell of sorts that covered Kalon's skin, a death magic quarantine that made him no longer contagious. It was a temporary patch, but it was better than nothing, considering the risk he'd posed to his brothers and the other Aeternae currently in Roano.

"How are you feeling?" Moore asked Kalon as we all sat on the floor in a wide circle.

"I think this quarantine spell is making me a little stiff. Like, my skin feels tight. But anyway, you don't need to worry about me. Once we free Unending, I'll be okay," he said. "Tell me about you. I heard our mother... did something."

The boy sighed and nodded, trying to contain his sadness. "I couldn't control myself." He looked my way. "I'm so sorry, Esme."

"There's nothing to be sorry for, kiddo. We all know you're not to blame. It's over now. That's all that matters," I said.

"What do we do next?" Ansel asked. "Our mother may be gone, but she's not the only Darkling who can take us down."

"There's still Danika," Tudyk replied, his brow furrowed. "She wants Thayen."

"Listen, last time we saw Danika, Ridan had her all fried and crispy. It'll be a while before she can recover," Derek cut in. "As for what we're going to do next, I suppose we'll have to beat the Darklings to the punch. They're out to get the soul shards, so we'll need to stay one step ahead."

"We have to get the shards first," Tudyk concluded.

"Well, not you. You kids will stay up here in the tower, for your own safety," Derek said. "Kalon will be back in his interdimensional pocket, but I think you'll all feel better if you're together, given the circumstances."

"We'll send a team out to track down the remaining Whips," Sofia said. "Just one crew this time. The rest of us will stay back and protect Roano. Petra might've had the smoky bauble ready to break and notify Danika of our location, but there's no telling who else may have learned about where Petra was going. It's better if we prepare for the worst."

I leaned into Kalon, comforted by his steady frame. He'd yet to succumb to the Black Fever, his body still fighting the curse as best it could. The fever was running high, and the dark veins seemed more prominent, but in a few minutes, Time would come up to put him under again. He'd given us half an hour to discuss some things first. "Kailani should lead the crew," I suggested. "Amane can leave the shards with us, and she can take Ridan, as well. Plus a couple of Reapers."

"Trev's intel will be helpful," Kalon said. "He knows this world better. All the nooks and crannies, that sort of stuff. Kailani's crew can reach out to him through the comms system if they need guidance of any kind."

"Yeah, he's needed here for the time being, to help with the physical defenses of Roano, but I'm certain he'll be happy to help," I replied.

"I agree," Derek said. "It'll be a small team, anyway. The purpose is to hunt down the Whips, get past any death magic they might surround themselves with, and extract the shards before Danika's people get to them. Sounds easier than it actually is, and I am not comfortable with any of this, but it's our only option. Either we kill them, or Danika kills them and revives the Spirit Bender. No one wants that."

"Will you destroy the shards?" Moore asked.

"We've tried that already." Sofia sighed. "We'll try again. Lumi will work on something with Amane later today. Before the whole Petra incident, we'd discussed some options. I think Esme is right. Lumi can focus on the shards, and Amane and Ridan can join Kailani's mission."

Ansel crossed his arms. He seemed nervous. "What about Roano? Do you think our mother was followed here?"

That was a good question, but none of us had a good answer. There was the possibility that Petra might have been followed, but we should've seen signs by now. "When she arrived, the Seniors didn't sense any other foreign presence. Not around the city, anyway. If there were followers, they must've stayed far back. But the Darklings have surprised us before, so we'd rather be prepared for anything," I said.

"I've spoken to the Seniors, as well. Dream and Nightmare will help them plant false tracks around the city," Sofia said. "They'll cover a fifty-mile radius on dry land, and they'll make sure that if anyone gets close to Roano, they'll find traces that lead them away. Hopefully, that'll do the trick against Corbin's troops, at least."

Silence settled over the room. There wasn't much left to say, not after everything we'd endured. I was still reeling from the prospect of potentially losing Kalon to Danika, well aware that the Whip would've stopped at nothing to get her hands on his heart if the shard had been transferred. I felt bad for Sofia and Derek. They'd taken Thayen under their wing, and the boy needed all the protection he could get. It was one thing to try to kill an adult Aeternae for his heart. It was horrific, but nowhere near as dreadful as killing an Aeternae child for his heart. In that sense, Danika was infinitely worse than Petra.

"Esme, thank you," Kalon said after a minute or so.

I was confused. "What for?"

"You didn't give up on me," he replied. "You got Nightmare to get inside my head."

"It's true. If it weren't for you, I doubt any of us would've thought about it," Sofia said, giving me a warm smile. "Your relentlessness might save us all."

My cheeks were on fire. I thrived on positive feedback, but I didn't feel like I'd accomplished something extraordinary here. Not anything praiseworthy, anyway. After all, this whole thing had ended with Kalon ripping out his own mother's heart. That would stay with him forever.

"I did the best I could with what we had. Besides, Nightmare did all the work," I mumbled.

"I would be screwed if it weren't for you," Kalon insisted, slipping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me closer. The painful pang in my heart reminded me of the cruel reality we'd yet to escape.

"You're still screwed," I said, pointing at one of the dark veins.

"We'll get through this," Ansel replied, trying to encourage his older brother. The teenager was terrified, and he wasn't very good at hiding it, but he got bonus points in my book for trying. Tudyk and Moore looked to him for comfort and guidance, so Ansel had to be their rock. There was great potential in all the Visentis boys, especially in the absence of their mother's toxic influence. I'd promised myself I'd do whatever it took for them to have a better future.

Time came back, but the look on his face made me feel uneasy. "We have a situation," he said. I instantly shot to my feet.

"What's wrong?"

"Your brother," Time replied. "He's not waking up. Neither is Valaine."

My heart stopped. I clutched my chest as I stared at the Time Master. "What do you mean he's not waking up?"

"You'll need to see this for yourself to fully understand." He stepped aside so I could walk out the door first.

I took a moment to hold the others back, as the Visentis boys, Kalon included, were already preparing to get up and join me. "No, all of you stay here. Remember the Black Fever? Yeah, it's still up there, so maybe don't make things worse. Your older brother is temporarily contained. Valaine isn't."

Derek and Sofia sprang to their feet. I looked at them, blinking rapidly as I tried to formulate a response. These were our leaders. It wasn't like I could tell them what to do, even though I didn't want them anywhere near the Black Fever. Valaine's condition was critical, her darkness capable of infecting and even killing vampires. The curse had repeatedly stuck better to the Aeternae, but we were still susceptible to infection, and the last thing we needed was to find out that we, too, had become unable to shake it off once it affected us.

"Just keep some distance," I told Derek and Sofia. "He's my brother, so I have to go, but you... you don't. Okay?"

Kalon pulled himself up to a standing position. He wobbled for a moment, but Ansel

was quick to support him. "Esme, be careful," Kalon said, his brow furrowed.

I hugged him tight, putting all the love I had into this single gesture. It was all I could do to try to reassure him. I had every intention of coming back to him, so that we could try our luck at an eternity together someday, but until then there were still a few hurdles to jump over.

"And you be safe down here." I kissed him. It felt good to soften in his arms like this. I would've given anything to have this moment last forever. Alas, time was not on our side. The Reaper was, but his patron dimension wasn't. I looked at Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore. "You kids be good, okay? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"We'll both be back," Time reminded me. "I need to put Kalon under again."

Derek, Sofia, and I followed the Reaper upstairs. Every step I climbed brought me closer to the source of my anxiety. By the time I entered the interdimensional pocket, I was shaking like I'd walked into a Dhaxanian freezer. It got worse when I saw my brother.

"Oh, wow..." I heard myself mumble. "What the..."

"He's been like this for hours," Lumi said. She looked worried, and I couldn't blame her.

My brother sat with his legs crossed, unconscious and stiff as a board. Most importantly, he was glowing, as if pure light flowed through his veins. Valaine seemed to be suffering from a similar condition, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. Once Dream and Lumi filled me in on the trigger spell that Spirit had hidden inside Unending's subconscious, a whole new sense of terror came over me, and I found it harder to stand upright.

Sinking down, I settled on my knees next to Tristan, staring at him and wondering if there was anything I could do to help him. What could I do? This was Reaper territory. I had no knowledge or any understanding of how any of this worked.

"We've tried waking him up," Phantom said.

Morning gave us a faint nod. "We tried getting back inside Unending's head, as well. But she's not letting us through."

My pulse rushed, making my ears hum. I was freefalling, even though my knees were firmly planted on the hard floor. "She's not letting you through." I repeated her statement with a shaky voice. Whatever was happening, the Unending had to be behind it. "What if she triggers that spell thing?" I asked, gazing up at Lumi.

I'd hoped for a better answer than the one I got. "She'll wipe us all out. No discrimination whatsoever," the swamp witch said.

"Even from inside the interdimensional pocket?" I shifted my focus to Time. Soul wasn't here to answer, but all of the Reapers knew the extent of his powers.

"There's a chance it'll overpower the Soul Crusher," Time said. "It's worth considering the risk, though I can't say for sure. Something tells me Soul can't either. We've never dealt with anything like this before, and there are many unknowns."

"What do we do, then?" I croaked, the thought of losing my brother suddenly the most powerful force inside me. It felt like a hurricane trapped in a bottle, raging and roaring, desperate to get out. My bones hurt. My muscles twitched. My very soul bled, because I

couldn't even fathom an existence without Tristan in it.

I'd nearly lost him once, back in the tunnel. I wasn't ready to go through that, or worse, ever again. Time placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "We wait," he said. "I'll take care of Kalon, but you should try to talk to your brother. Maybe the sound of your voice will break through whatever wall Unending might have put up. It's worth a shot."

"Should we consider evacuating Roano?" Sofia asked.

"Not yet," Time replied. "I'm not getting a negative sense from Unending right now. Should that change, you'll be the first to know."

Derek frowned. "What about GASP? I mean, if the Unending is at this critical point, shouldn't we use all our forces to evacuate as many people as possible off the planet before the Black Fever is fully unleashed?"

"Perhaps a little more faith in our sister wouldn't hurt," Phantom cut in, sounding slightly offended. "She's trying hard to come back to us."

"I know she is. And as you can see, we're all here, ready to protect her," Derek replied. "But if she becomes a threat to all that is living on Visio, I have to consider a large-scale evacuation."

"Good luck with getting the Darklings on board with that," Lumi grumbled. "Listen. As much as I hate it, I actually kind of agree with Phantom on this. I think we should give Unending a little bit more credit here. If anything, Phantom can work with Soul to fortify this interdimensional pocket, just to be safe. Would that be an option, Time Master?"

The Reaper nodded once. "It's an acceptable, albeit temporary, solution."

"Okay. Let's see where this takes us," Derek said. "I'll keep GASP in the loop in the meantime. If push comes to shove, we'll have to notify the empire so that they can hold their airships back long enough for us to assist with an evacuation."

I doubted Corbin would allow such an operation to take place. His main objective was to kill Valaine, after all. What a cruel and ugly pattern this was—Darklings killing their own children in order to live forever. Looking at Tristan now, I realized how lucky the two of us had been growing up in The Shade, surrounded by love and kindness and tolerance.

Taking a deep breath, I took my brother's hand and held it tightly. The light shimmering within made my skin tingle, but I didn't let go. Something was definitely happening to him, and I needed to be here to remind him that we were stronger together.

"Tristan," I said. "I am waiting for you to wake up, brother."

I stole a glance at Time, who gave me a faint smile. I took it as a mute encouragement and moved my attention back to Tristan.

"I'm here, just so you know," I continued. "I'm here, and we'll cross this bridge together, Tristan. Okay? No matter how shoddy it is. We promised each other that, remember?"

He couldn't answer in his condition, but I hoped he might at least hear me. He'd suffered enough. We all needed a damn break. Glancing at Valaine for a second, I found myself praying to all the mysterious forces that powered the universe, asking them for one single break.

One single break so that we might all survive this. We'd earned that much.

TRISTAN

“I remember now.” Unending’s voice came through. “I remember it all.”

Colors danced around us, whirling senselessly for hours on end. I said nothing. Mesmerized by the millions of shades, I could only stand in silence and marvel at what was going through the Unending’s head. We’d made it past the darkness, and we’d found all her memories. I couldn’t see her anymore, but I knew she was in here with me.

“I can’t focus,” she said. “There is so much I have seen. So much I have experienced.”

The colors were starting to make more sense. I was standing in the middle of a tornado of memories, and Unending was having a hard time finding one to hold on to. As if the two of us had been eternally bound, I felt my hand reaching out. If she couldn’t find her focus, I would have to do it for her. We were nearing the end of our journey, and we had to return to the real world, preferably sooner rather than later.

I picked the brightest spot I could find. My fingers splayed and clutched the memory, bringing it to a sudden stop. The moment I let go of it, the brightness burst and expanded. Moments later, I was hurtling toward a planet at a terrifying speed. I was scared, my breath short, but I was also angry and in a lot of pain. Tears flew from my eyes. Flames surrounded me, furiously crackling as I breached the atmosphere.

Unending’s voice sounded in my head. “Tristan, this is the day I arrived on Visio.” It dawned on me that I was seeing it all through her eyes, like I had in the beginning. “I’m grieving and crying... I’ve been wandering through the universe for what feels like forever.”

The upper winds roared as we broke through. My bones ached, but I found relief in the wondrous blue sky that surrounded me as I began my slow descent.

“This place stood out for some reason. I think it was its beauty,” she continued. “Its unparalleled beauty.”

I saw it, too. The Visio of five million years ago was different from the one I knew now. More water, less landmass. Its oceans retained their dark blue hue. Its hills rolled on and on, covered in thick woods. Its plains rippled with tall grass and wildflowers. Its mountains rose proudly with snow-covered peaks and sharp, stony ridges. Yes, I saw its beauty through the Unending’s eyes, and I understood why she’d fallen in love with this place.

“The Trakkians were curious and wonderful creatures,” she said as we landed in the

middle of a sprawling city with marble towers that looked to the east, the west, the north, and the south. This was Roano, I realized, in its earliest days. It was much smaller than its present-day version. Smaller than what it was two million years ago, as well. Overlooking the ocean, it was home to thousands of pre-Aeternae known as Trakkians.

The day the Unending had come had been recorded in history, and I could certainly see why. The Trakkians gathered around slowly, warily, as if the wrong move might get them obliterated. Their reserve made sense. After all, this powerful creature had just come down from the heavens.

"They welcomed me," Unending said. "As soon as they looked into my eyes, they understood that there was no reason for them to be afraid. I'd come to say hello, to learn more about them, to see how they lived. I'd spent a long time wandering through space with no particular direction, so Visio felt like a good place to stop and get my bearings."

I watched the years go by as the Trakkians, led by Mira and Kemi, built their shrines in Roano and in every other major city. Altars for worshipping the Unending rose in small towns and villages, too. Wherever there was a Trakkian alive, there would be an effigy of the first Reaper they knew as Eternity.

"I never bothered to correct them. I didn't feel like they needed to know my real name. After a while, I started working my magic. A healing here. A river dam there. Every spell that affected the physical realm could be found in my arsenal. I couldn't bring the dead back to life. I couldn't do impossible things, of course, but I did what I could to make the Trakkians happy."

Now I sat on a throne in the imperial city, hundreds of miles south of Roano. The palace looked different, with lots of open-air spaces and wide terraces. Hanging gardens adorned the façade, and ivy-like splendors grew across the walls in shades of lime and spruce green.

"This was my first time sitting on this gilded throne," Unending said. Before us, the Trakkians gathered, bringing offerings of flowers and jewels, precious gemstones and fine silks—all the best that Visio's craftsmen had to offer. "They made me their Lady Supreme, and I accepted. They wanted me to lead them, and they listened to my advice. In return for their love and adoration, I gave them immortality. I admit, it felt really nice. So nice, in fact, that I became emotionally addicted to their attention. I thrived on it. I'm not proud of it now, but... you know."

I saw my hand reach out, my delicate fingers splayed once more. Tiny specks of light came out, like millions of wandering fireflies. They spread and dissolved into the Trakkians, melting into their pearlescent skin. With each deep breath, they became immortal. They became Aeternae. I was witnessing one of the Unending's greatest achievements—and the moment that would eventually lead to the creation of vampires, in another plane, in another world. How strange that it had all started here, with a Reaper's broken heart.

Mira was the first to bend her knee before the Lady Supreme Eternity. The first Aeternae, too. Kemi was next, followed by all the others. I saw Arya and others who'd survived all the way up to our mission in Roano. It was a chilling scene. More than half of these people would die, while the other half would live up to five million years, begging

to be allowed to surrender their lives.

As wondrous as it looked now, the light and grace of this moment withered when the Unending became a prisoner. All I could do was watch and learn from her experiences as she remembered it all, piece by piece. I was stuck inside her consciousness, seeing and feeling everything she'd been through while the world unfolded in a stunning time lapse from the earliest days of the empire down to the moment she was sealed inside the body of an Aeternae.

"This was my safe haven," Unending said, as the Spirit Bender brought down his blade and struck her. I felt myself coming apart into a cloud of restless, aimless atoms. She'd lost her form, and she was being absorbed into the very fabric of Visio. "This was my home. I'd come here to get away from Death and her betrayal. I'd come here to mend my soul. Truth be told, I wasn't sure I would ever be able to love again. I'd thought Erethiel had been my one and only."

I disappeared, and my singular point of view vanished. A second later, I could see everything. I'd become a part of Visio, and I was able to see, hear, and feel everything through it. It was an overwhelming sensation, and it would take a long time for me to get used to it all.

"But the Aeternae I'd created betrayed me. The one who killed my lover hurt me even more. I was rendered helpless, trapped in a purgatory of my own making. If only I'd steered clear of this place. If only I'd wandered some more, so that the Spirit Bender wouldn't find me."

It was too late for such regrets, and deep down, Unending knew it. Good things had come from what she thought was her greatest mistake. We, the vampires, had returned to our origins, and we were ready to let her go.

"I became a sliver inside my own artwork, cursed to experience everything without ever walking away from it," she said. "Yes, I see it now. The loneliness. The rage. The disappointment. It's how the onset of Black Fever began..."

Knowledge washed over me like ice water. The chills went deep, into my bones, making me tense. I felt everything she'd felt. I was trapped, like she was. But I knew everything now. I saw the moves the Spirit Bender had made. I heard the words and sub-words he used against her. I understood who the Unending was, and what could be done to set her free.

From every loss, gains had been made. From every death, life had been brought forth. From every failure, we had come one step closer to victory. As the memories kept playing out before me, I found comfort in the thought that soon the Unending would walk this world in her true form once again.

The First Reaper would return, and there was nothing the Darklings could do to stop it. We'd passed the final milestone, and we were rushing toward the finish line.

In here, hours passed as I sat by my brother's side.

The sight of him glowing like this was unsettling, but Phantom and Morning had assured me he was safer now inside Unending's mind than before. I'd yet to understand how that worked, and it was new territory for the First Tanners, as well, but they frequently checked Valaine's and Tristan's vitals. They were able to confirm that both were healthy, just weirdly illuminated from the inside.

"Do you think she'll actually trigger the ultimate Black Fever, like Lumi and Dream warned?" I asked. Only I'd remained in the interdimensional bubble. Lumi and Time had gone out to do their work. The swamp witch had to figure out a way to destroy the soul shards, and the Reaper had to put Kalon back under his sleep spell.

Derek and Sofia were coordinating with Kailani on the Whip hunt, and they were also making sure that Roano had all possible defenses in the event of another Darkling arrival. The Seniors were busy dumping false tracks all around the city, and the Orvisians were fortifying the surrounding wall with the help of ghouls and the rest of our crew.

I knew I'd have to go out there eventually, but I had plenty of time in here before I had to return to the normal flow of things. Looking at Tristan now, I felt a smile testing my lips as I remembered the two of us growing up. He'd always been the calm and responsible one. I'd gleefully taken on the role of the Vaughn family firecracker. Tristan's work here was truly extraordinary, and I wished for a way to tell him just how incredible he was.

"I don't think so," Morning finally replied. "Unending is not a bumbling fool. The closer she gets to her memories, the stronger her instincts will become. Phantom and I have said it before, and I will say it again: I have faith in our sister. If Spirit left some nasty parting gifts inside her mind, Unending will know how to work around them."

Phantom nodded her agreement. "Unending came before Spirit. She knows as much death magic as he does. Or almost as much, and it's still more than all the rest of us put together. I think she'll be able to spot trouble, especially if it's inside her. As much as Spirit wanted to keep her down, he knew it wouldn't truly be forever."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Look at all the effort he made to seal her. Three rare spells, plus that Black Fever trigger. The whole Darkling faction and the chronicles he left them with. These were the

actions of a scared Reaper, not a confident one," Phantom said.

I wanted to believe them. Every fiber in my body rooted for the Unending, because I knew her. Well, I knew Valaine, anyway, and I appreciated her strength and determination. She and Tristan were more alike than they probably realized, so with two warrior minds like theirs, the odds would surely be in their favor. But we'd already stumbled so many times that it was hard for me to put my faith in anything or anyone.

"Esme, you need some air," Morning said. "You've been in here for hours."

"Time thinks my voice might help," I murmured.

"And you can come back in a few minutes, but do yourself a favor and take a moment. Keep busy with something else for a little while," Morning insisted. "You've been through enough today. Should something happen, I'll come out and get you myself. For now, we've got it under control."

I nodded and got up, stretching my arms out. I'd barely moved since sitting down next to Tristan, and my joints were cracking. My muscles ached all over. Morning was right. I needed a break. A few minutes out in the real world might do me some good.

Placing a kiss on the top of Tristan's head, I left him with a message of hope. "I'll come back for you, big brother. You hang in there."

Outside, the world hadn't changed. Downstairs, Kalon was in his interdimensional pocket, sleeping as Time's death magic slowed the Black Fever down. Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore sat in his room, huddled together for a dose of comfort and brotherly affection. I felt sad for them. I'd thought our people had had it bad here on Visio, but the Visentis boys were definitely cursed. Their minds had been poisoned by their mother with nothing but vileness and hatred and death. Now, they were like lost little lambs. Kalon—their beacon of light, their shepherd—was down, and while we had high hopes for his recovery upon the Unending's release, the kids had to be wondering what would happen if we failed. And what would become of them if they lost their brother, too.

I'd promised myself that I would look after them, no matter what. Setting that thought aside, I took a deep breath and made my way down the spiraling stairs and outside. For the briefest of moments, my skin burned. I pulled the hood over my head, realizing I was standing in broad daylight. Sure, the sunrays were filtered through the reddish haze that surrounded Visio, but I had yet to take the day-walking cure.

"Speaking of," I muttered. It was time to take that step.

Leaving the north tower behind, I headed for the eastern one where Derek and Sofia were talking to Rose, Caleb, and Amal. Outside. With no cover whatsoever. My cheeks hurt from a sudden grin as I walked over to them, realizing that Rose and Caleb were both responding to the day-walking treatment—I'd been so worried and consumed with everything else that I'd not even paid attention to the fact that they'd begun the treatment for themselves. It had already worked on Sofia, and now it had given them the ability to walk in the daylight, too.

"I see we're making progress!" I exclaimed, hugging Rose, then Caleb. "Congratulations!"

"Right? I can't believe this!" Rose replied, laughing. "I mean, I can... but still, wow, huh?"

Amal smiled. "It has become a certainty now that the day-walking cure works seamlessly. It is likely permanent, as well. I've given Sofia her last shot just now, but Rose and Caleb have two more days' worth of treatments before we consider them cured."

"You've been amazing," I said. "In the face of this ever-changing, ever-growing adversity, you and your sister have managed to pull it off."

"It's what we came here for," Amal replied. "Everything else is just a nuisance."

"A big ugly nuisance," Caleb grumbled. "Personally, I'd like to enjoy this moment more, but I can't. Not with all the crap going on in this world."

Derek patted him on the back. "As of now, we have a functional day-walking cure. It'll give us an edge on the battlefield. No more hoods and masks. No more shielding our eyes from the sunlight. It's a much-needed enhancement, and we will certainly celebrate when we reach the end of this long and twisted tunnel."

"Until then, we focus on kicking more Darkling ass," I quipped, willing myself to smile more. I carried a lot of pain within me, and Phantom was right. I'd already had a nasty day. The Darklings didn't deserve another ounce of my suffering. I looked at Derek. "Kailani's crew?"

"Oh, they're out. They're tracking down the other Whips with the rest of Trev's intel. Unlike last time, however, the Reapers are helping to double-check all information before they act on it," he replied. "In the meantime, I've spoken to Phoenix and the rest of GASP. Arwen and Corrinne are helping with the telescope upgrades. They'll send over satellite-type images of Visio. Hopefully, those will assist in pinpointing the remaining Senior islands. We could use all the help we can get, and it's time to reach out to the other Senior Aeternae."

"Mira and the others don't know where the islands might be, otherwise we would've sorted this out, by now. Besides, we're not even sure the other Seniors will help. We only left with two hundred the first time we made contact." I said with a sigh.

"If Corrine and Arwen find the islands, we'll try, nonetheless. Even so, we're making progress of our own. Arya is out with our Seniors. They'll be going into the Nightmare Forest to drop false tracks there, as well, just in case," Sofia added. "Besides, Trev is using those flying wisps to communicate with a few Nalorean rebels he can still trust. Given what happened with his Rimian scouts, he figured the Naloreans might be more dependable. We've got a better hold of the situation now than before. I'm sure of it."

I crossed my arms, a particular concern still nagging me. "Is that enough? I mean, we've got hunters out there, and we're fortifying Roano's defenses, too. My brother and Valaine, well, they're doing their thing. I think we should try to figure out where Corbin is. If we have eyes on the Master of Darkness, we'll be able to stay ahead for real. No more surprise visits like with Orvis."

"I agree with Esme here," Rose said. "We need to figure out where Corbin is. And where Danika is. That bitch might be temporarily decommissioned, but she's not out of the picture yet. If we can keep an eye on them, we can see them coming."

Thayen's voice almost startled me as he exited the eastern tower. "You have to kill her," he said quietly. Sadness marred his beautiful features, and it was like seeing the

Visentis boys with their mother's corpse all over again.

"What?" I managed, my throat closing up.

"Sorry for hiding and eavesdropping like this. But I mean it. You have to kill my mother," Thayen lowered his gaze. "I understand who she is and what she's doing. She's worse than Petra, and you have to stop her."

"Thayen, we..." Sofia's voice trailed off. What could we possibly say to this boy that would make any of this better?

"It's okay. I forgive you for what you will inevitably have to do. I'm just pointing out the obvious because I'm tired of watching you all tiptoe around me. I know what's coming," Thayen said. "I don't care about being immortal. I just want this nightmare to end, and that won't happen unless you stop them all. My mother included."

I knelt in front of him, gripping his bony shoulders. "You're a good soul. A kind soul. I am so sorry you're having to suffer like this, but... thank you, Thayen. Thank you for being so smart and understanding. Nothing we do is easy, especially under these circumstances. Please, rest assured that we're not taking pleasure from any of this."

"I'm aware, Esme," Thayen replied. "You do what you have to do. She killed my father. She wants to kill me. I have no reason to ever want to see her again."

"Well, you can't exactly stop caring about Danika, either," Derek said gently. "I can only imagine how tough this must be for you. But Thayen, you're not alone, okay? You've got us."

"All of us," Rose added with a warm smile.

The boy looked up at me, the shadow of a smile fluttering across his face. "Thank you."

Looking at Thayen now, a thought crossed my mind. So subtle that I barely even registered it. Over the years, I'd learned a few important lessons from Tristan when I'd least expected it. One of them was to never be afraid to ask a question, no matter how crazy or silly it might sound. With my brother wedged in my heart combined with the fickle hope that we might get past all this and survive, I decided it was time to ask Thayen something.

At first, it had seemed far-fetched, but as the words left my lips, it actually made sense. "Thayen, do you have any idea where your mother might be hiding?"

He stared at me for a while before responding. "Our dynasty has many properties. And if my mother has kept her Darkling affiliation a secret for so long, there's no telling what else she's kept hidden."

"It would have to be somewhere remote. Where Danika might feel truly safe," Caleb suggested. "A place with a bird's-eye view, so she can see the enemy coming. She doesn't strike me as the type to hide somewhere deep in the woods or in a cave. She's a creature of comfort."

"That's true," Thayen said. "I can think of a couple of places. Properties I've only been to once or twice in the past few years. Built at a certain height, like you described. One of them, in particular—I remember it gave my mother great joy to be there. She seemed pleased with the fact that no one knew about it." He paused, the color draining from his cheeks. "I think I was four or five when she took me there. She said we'd come back to it

someday if she ever had to sacrifice me. I didn't understand what that meant... I can show you where they are on a map. She taught me to find it for myself, in case I ever needed to go there without her."

"We can start there, yes," I replied, marveling at his ability to remember such a detail. Then again, I'd almost forgotten that Aeternae children were infinitely more precocious than kids from other species.

The place sounded like Thayen's final destination. Danika had transferred the soul shard into his heart, and she'd clearly considered the possibility of having to actually kill him someday. No wonder Thayen had gone pale just now. He'd been too young to understand it at the time, but the truth was finally sinking in. The poor kid.

There wasn't much I could do for Kalon or Tristan. There wasn't much I could do for Roano, either. Our forces were still strong, and the tasks had been evenly divided among our crew members and allies. The one thing I could do to truly make a difference was take Danika out. She was our biggest problem, since she was the one tasked with collecting the soul shards. According to Petra, she was also the one who could bring Spirit back, as per the ritual. If I removed her from the equation, pressure would be relieved from our Whip hunt operation, and the Darklings would suffer an irreparable setback.

I had Thayen's blessing, and it meant more to me than he could possibly imagine. Yeah, I needed to focus on killing Danika. It gave me no joy whatsoever, but dammit, that woman had to go.

I could do more for my people and for Kalon and my brother. That had been the reasoning behind my decision to take another field mission. Granted, this one was fraught with unknowns and potentially fatal dangers, but I didn't let the fear get to me. I used it as a shield, pushing forward as I geared up for this trip.

On a more recent map of Visio, Thayen had shown me three possible locations where his mother might be hiding. I decided to start with the place he'd mentioned first—the property where Danika said she would've taken him for the shard sacrifice. I chose it primarily because the dull ache in the pit of my stomach had demanded it. Whether it was instinct or just an uncontrollable desire to kill her, it didn't really matter. I had a starting point.

I loaded my backpack with swamp witch smoke bombs and healing potions, along with a makeshift first-aid kit and plenty of pulverizer pellets—enough to kill a regiment. I had invisibility pellets and red garnet glasses in one back pocket of my suit, and a pair of short swords strapped to my thighs, gifted to me by Mira and Kemi. They were made of the finest Rimian steel and were capable of cutting through pretty much anything. Kemi had even gone on the record to say that I could actually scratch or even crack a diamond with this rare metal. My vampire claws couldn't do that, so I took the weapons as an added bonus.

Once I was geared up and ready to go, I picked up a new comms earpiece from Derek and Sofia. It had an SOS signal feature in case I needed it. The Darklings knew about our communication methods, so I didn't expect to retain my ability to reach out via Telluris if I came face-to-face with Danika. If I were to get in trouble, the SOS feature would come in handy by allowing me to inform Derek of my location.

"You be careful out there," he said, placing both hands on my padded shoulders. My combat suit had special inserts designed to absorb the shock of any blows, helping to prevent broken bones. They weren't infallible, but they were certainly helpful. "You're going against a very dangerous enemy. An unpredictable one."

"I'll be careful, Derek. Pinky promise."

"She's got tricks up her sleeve," Sofia warned me. "Whatever you think you know about her, be alert as to how much remains unknown. Danika is one of the few Darklings with more death magic knowledge than the First Tenners. Which is why I still think you

should ask one of our Reaper allies to come with you.”

I shook my head. “Danika will see a Reaper coming. She’ll have traps in place, and we can’t afford to lose any of our Reapers. I’m better off on my own. She’s more afraid of Reapers, Sofia. Danika won’t be expecting me, of all people. I plan to work that to my advantage.”

“Should you need assistance, use the SOS feature,” Derek reminded me, stepping back. “One of the Reapers will come for you then.”

“You need them here, now more than ever. But if I do find myself in need of assistance, I will reach out,” I replied. “You all need to be careful. I know the Seniors are planting false tracks around the city, but...”

“Corbin might still surprise us, I know.” He sighed. “We’re doing the best we can with what we’ve got.”

I tried to come up with other ways to defeat the Darklings, but nothing solid came to mind. They had a firm grip on Aeternae society. They’d all grown up expecting immortality. Despite their Blood Arena games, they wanted to live. The prospect of losing this particular aspect of their species could easily push them into the Darklings’ arms, which was why the faction had gained so much ground.

Trev’s last round of intel from the imperial city put the Darklings in a highly favorable light among the Aeternae citizens. They’d marketed themselves as saviors, hunting Valaine in order to stop the Black Fever from taking more lives. There were tens of thousands of Aeternae currently infected with the strain, according to more recent Nalorean intel, so the nation was uneasy and anxious. The curse was spreading much faster than the previous outbreaks, and it was likely connected to Valaine’s efforts to bring Unending back to the surface. Fear rippled across the continent, and the people trusted the only ones who’d taken any kind of action—the Darklings. Public opinion was shifting, after millions of years of anti-Darkling legislation. Now, with Danika as the Lady Supreme, they would surely win the empire.

With that in mind, we all agreed to consider the whole of Visio as potentially hostile. It was our turn to operate in the shadows while the Darklings were out in the open. The irony didn’t escape me, but it did make killing Danika all the more important.

“Be safe,” I said to Derek and Sofia, then left the eastern tower. Thayen was up there somewhere, keeping busy with Amal, Rose, and Caleb as they proceeded with the day-walking cure tests. Amal was in the process of speeding up the cure’s distribution and effectiveness, hoping to reduce the timeframe from several days to mere hours.

I had taken my own shot, as well, and I’d been given a couple more to carry with me and administer to myself in case I couldn’t get back to Amal in time—the same protocol had been established for Rose and Caleb, too. It was imperative that the treatment wasn’t interrupted once I’d begun. I looked forward to my life changing forever. It made me hate Danika and the Darklings even more—the day-walking cure was supposed to be our crowning achievement, yet we couldn’t even relish this moment.

Evening drew close, darkening the skies. There was rain coming from the north, and thick gray clouds rolled toward us. Hopefully, it would slow down anyone snooping around Roano. I stopped by my brother’s room in the north tower next. The interdimensional

pocket was closed, but I knew he was in there with Valaine, Phantom, and Morning. I wished I could hold him one last time, but that would've meant accepting that I was headed to certain death, and it wasn't the kind of mindset I wanted for myself.

Instead, I just spent a couple of minutes there in absolute silence, wishing Tristan would come back to us soon. My next stop was downstairs, in Kalon's room. I found Time talking to the Visentis boys. They were asking him all kinds of questions about Reapers and Death, and he was doing his best to answer as clearly and eloquently as possible. Kalon was back in his pocket, submerged in a state of deep sleep. I couldn't see him either, and that just reinforced my thought that it was better this way, because I was coming back from this alive and in one piece, dammit.

"So you've never been on the other side? Where you send the reaped souls, I mean?" Tudyk asked, wide-eyed as he stared at the Time Master, who shook his head in return.

"We're not allowed. It is not our realm, and it's not for us to know what exists beyond."

"How do you know there's an afterlife, then?" Ansel asked, his brow furrowed.

"I've had visits from the other side," Time replied.

"What?! From whom?" I blurted, suddenly drawn into the conversation. The boys' heads nearly snapped off as they turned to find me standing in the doorway.

The Reaper chuckled softly. "You see how in the world of the living, you and your GASP ilk have established yourselves as guardians and enforcers of sorts? Your Perfects and Arch-Perfects, your fae and your daemons, your witches and all those other creatures from across three whole dimensions?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"And in the realm between life and the afterlife, the realm of death, you see us Reapers doing more or less the same," Time continued.

"With added bureaucracy, yeah," I said, stifling a laugh.

Time shrugged, smiling vaguely. "We never said we were perfect. Anyway, to get back to my point, we now have identified two realms, the living and the dead, and agents who enforce their written and unwritten laws, with the sole purpose of maintaining balance and justice. Correct?"

I nodded, and so did the Visentis boys. I'd come to say goodbye, and I'd ended up in Reaper class. I allowed myself these few minutes, since Time was being remarkably generous by sharing all this information.

"What's in the afterlife?" Moore asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, knowing what's in these other two realms, wouldn't it be safe to assume that the afterlife may operate on similar principles?" Time replied. "I can't tell you what exists beyond death. However, my presence should tell you that death is merely one more stage, and that there is definitely something more. Right?"

We all nodded again.

"Ah. So the visits you mentioned you got from the afterlife. They were from its... enforcers, I guess?" I asked, my mind already blown.

Time smiled broadly. "That is correct."

"Whoa! What were they like? What are they? Why'd they come to you?" Ansel asked.

"Again, I'm afraid I can't answer that. But at some point, you will all find out for yourselves. I just wanted you to know there is something beyond death, and that Unending's liberation will not be the end of you all," Time said. "She deserves freedom. And you all deserve to live full lives in harmony with the universe's existing balance."

"You don't think Aeternae should exist," Moore muttered, suddenly sad.

"Not at the expense of my sister's suffering, no," Time replied. "I cannot promise she will allow you to remain immortal once she's free. To be honest, if I were in her shoes, I wouldn't. But the decision belongs to her. All you can do is be better versions of yourselves and give her good reason to reward you, or at least to spare you."

"Won't Death be miffed that you mentioned the afterlife and hinted at elements of it stepping into your realm?" I asked, trying to change the subject. The boys were clearly distraught, and I knew they had trouble accepting that they might not live as immortals once the Unending was free—they were kids, and certain concepts still took some extra time to sink in.

"I don't really care," Time said. "To be honest, I'm upset with her. She hid troubling truths from us while she expected blind obedience. In that sense, I can see why Spirit and Unending were so mad at her."

"Maybe you held her to a higher standard than you should have," I replied. "No one implied Death was perfect. I don't think anyone even considered she might be noble or righteous or whatever. For most of us among the living, Death wasn't even supposed to be sentient."

Time exhaled sharply, producing Petra's scythe from behind his back. "She held us to impossible standards, while she went ahead and did some remarkably stupid things. Had she not preached the justness of her ways and her systems, I would've left it at that. But her monumental pride got us into this mess. And since I cannot punish her in any way, the least I can do is delude myself with this fleeting moment of intellectual rebellion. You're right, Death is nowhere near perfect, nor should she be expected to even care about morality and righteousness. Death is Death, and she does not discriminate." He paused, walking over to me. "That being said, this is yours for now."

I stared at the scythe for a few moments, trying to understand where he was going with this. My befuddlement made him laugh.

"Esme, you're going against Danika without a Reaper by your side. You need a bit of an edge, and this will do the trick," he added.

"You're all needed here and out in the field with Kale's team and the Seniors," I said quietly. "I told Derek I'm better off on my own because Danika won't expect me coming after her."

"And I wholeheartedly agree with that premise. But you still need an advantage," Time said. "This scythe is it. She won't see this coming, either."

I hung the pulverizer weapon on my shoulder by its leather strap and took the scythe in my hand. Its silvery grip felt cold against my skin—an unusual chill that moved up my arms and nestled somewhere inside my soul. The curved blade captured specks of light along its sharp edge, and I could see my reflection in it.

"I don't know any death magic to go with it," I murmured, suddenly overwhelmed by

the scythe's presence. Despite its size, it seemed larger than life itself, like a weapon of the gods. Something that I, a mere living creature, didn't deserve.

Time leaned in and whispered a string of words in my ear. My skin pricked as I realized I was learning death magic spells. Though I'd never heard these utterances before in my life, the language made sense. I recognized the sub-words and the sounds being used. That had to be how death magic worked. Once I was given the knowledge, I understood it.

"I just taught you three minor defensive and three minor attack spells," Time said.

"How'd you do that? I mean, I don't get it. I know all six now, but how'd they stick so fast?" I asked.

He smiled again. "They call it death magic for a reason. I made it available to you, and therefore you internalized it. The process itself is simple. Perhaps don't overthink it. Remember to touch the blade with your index and middle finger as you chant the spell."

"Wow. I mean, thank you, but... wow..."

"Thank me after you remove Danika's head from her body. This is all the magic I'm comfortable with teaching a non-Reaper," Time said, his gaze wandering to the side for a moment. It settled on something, and I spotted a glimmer of humor in his galaxy eyes. I turned to see what he was looking at, but there was nothing there. "Now, bid your farewells and go. Trev is waiting for you downstairs."

"What? Why?"

"Because you need a wingman, and Trev knows the terrain better than anyone else," Time said. "Please, Esme. Consider it a condition to my teaching you the spells."

I shot him a grin. "Well, you've already taught me the spells. I can leave Trev behind. You should really learn to negotiate better."

"As easily as I've taught you, I can unteach you," Time replied. "Like I said, I used death magic to implant death magic in your mind. I can do the same to remove it, and you'll be none the wiser."

"Ah. Point taken. Okay," I mumbled, offering a meek half-smile.

He stepped aside, and I took a moment to hug each of the Visentis boys. Ansel was the most attached to me—he and Kalon and I had gone through a lot together long before we got Tudyk and Moore back. We had history. "Just be careful, please," he whispered. "I need you. We all need you."

It was hard not to cry in the face of such kindness and affection. How one kid could change with just the right company and influence... Ansel had come a long way since his early Darkling days. "You be good, too. Look after your brothers. And if push comes to shove, you three haul ass and get somewhere safe, no matter what happens to me or to Kalon, okay?"

"I'm not leaving Kalon," Ansel argued, shaking his head.

"You will if it means protecting Tudyk and Moore," I said firmly. "Their wellbeing—and yours, for that matter—comes first. There might be some tough decisions ahead, Ansel, and you might be forced to make them yourself. I trust your judgment, and I promise I will do everything I can to come back, okay?"

He sighed, removing himself from our hug. Tudyk was quick to replace him, throwing

his arms around my neck and holding on tight. "Come back," the kid said. "We can't do this without you."

I pulled him away and cupped his delicate face. "You might have to. But like I promised your brother, I will do what I can. Okay? Don't make me repeat myself. You're old enough to understand what's going on and what you might have to do to protect your brothers. Don't let Ansel do all the hard work."

"Nah, we're in this together. Ansel knows he can count on me." He looked at his older brother. The two exchanged brief smiles as I took Moore in my arms and held him close for the better part of a minute.

"You've had it the worst so far," I muttered. "Aside from Kalon, that is. I'm sorry you went through it."

"Have you forgiven me?" Moore asked, and I looked at him with genuine confusion. "The attack...?"

"Oh, come on. That wasn't you. How many times are you going to apologize? We survived, we're together, and that's what matters," I said. "Hold on to that."

"And you go kick Danika's skinny ass, okay?" Moore replied. "Take them all down."

"Listen to Time, kids," I said, chuckling softly as I stepped back, fitting the scythe on my belt at the back with a leather strap. I'd have no trouble taking it out fast if needed. "While you're in this room, he's the authority, got it?"

The boys all nodded—Time included, which made me want to laugh. Only a few minutes with this bunch, and the events from earlier in the day had already begun to fade. The Visentis boys would take a long time to heal after their mother's death, but they were handling it very well. It gave me hope for the future.

"I'll see you all soon," I added, then walked out the door, ignoring the lump in my throat. I didn't want it to be the last time I was in Kalon's presence, but I had to consider the possibility. With that in mind, I reverted to one of my dad's earliest teachings—negative thoughts invited negative outcomes.

With what loomed ahead, the last thing I needed was to invite the universe to screw me over. So I put on a faint smile, straightened my back, and descended the spiraling stairs until I reached the ground level where Trev was waiting for me. He had also geared up and was armed to the teeth with blades and a pulverizer weapon, plus whatever supplies he must've scrounged up from our repository in the south tower.

"Soul Crusher and Kelara have gone out to find Corbin. You ready for our side of the mission?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," I replied.

"Cool. Have you had any last rites or anything?"

I smacked him on the shoulder, and he laughed. "Don't be an ass. We're going to survive this, Trev."

"I know. I'm just messing with you," he said, and we started walking. "Esme?"

"Yeah?"

"I made Kalon a promise a while back. Before this whole Black Fever issue." He gently gripped my arm. I stopped and looked at him. "He asked me to make sure you were safe, in case the two of you were ever separated. Provided, of course, that I was around. I

think this qualifies, so I need you to know something.”

“Okay?”

“I trust you with my life. And I hope you will trust me the same way when we go out there,” Trev said. “We need absolute confidence in one another. If Danika gets so much as a whiff of wariness or doubt, she’ll use it against us.”

I gave him a warm smile. “Trev, I trust you. Kalon trusts you, so I’d be foolish not to. Now come on. We’ve got a Lady Supreme to assassinate.”

We started walking again.

“You make that sound like such a bad thing,” Trev muttered.

Ahead, the southern gates of Roano towered, rebuilt by Kailani, along with the rest of the surrounding wall. The city had been fortified in the event of an attack. Should the protective spell fail, we’d need some form of physical defense, as well. Two Orvisians stood guard, and they pulled the gates open for us. Outside, two Vision horses awaited. Trev had had them prepared for us, since we needed to move fast.

With a neatly folded map in my chest pocket, I looked ahead. The future was uncertain, but my desire to live was anything but. No matter what came at me, I had something wonderful to come back to, despite the difficult circumstances. That was something that Danika couldn’t say about herself. She had no one to love other than her own reflection.

KAILANI

While tracking Marios and Silla Levantes—two of the Whips we knew for sure had been on the run since shortly before Derek’s escape from the imperial palace—we ended up in a bluish, strange-looking desert. Trev’s wisp messages, which he’d relayed to us via Telluris, had brought us here on the basis of several sightings of the Levantes siblings by Rimians in the area. We knew we were on the right path, but we weren’t sure what waited for us at our destination.

Hunter, Ridan, Amane, Nightmare, Widow, and I proceeded carefully across the gradually rising dunes. The sand was streaked with shades of indigo and pale blue, and it created a truly stunning visual effect against the backdrop of reddish sky. The evening was fast approaching, and darkness rose along the horizon, casting its obscure blanket across the desert. I could see the moon in the east, a half-disc celestial presence that reflected its pale light against the trillions of microcrystals that made up the endless sea of sand at our feet.

It looked as though we were stepping on crushed sapphires and tourmaline gemstones. The winds whispered in the distance as we made our way deeper into this vast and barren land.

“The Rimians call this the Ghostly Land,” Hunter said. He’d spent some time with the Orvisian Rimians, questioning them about this place, shortly before our departure. Ever the careful one, Hunter had wanted us to know as much as possible about the region before we ventured into it. “They say that shadows dance across the dunes after dark, and the Rimians think they’re the ghosts of people who died before their time.”

“What are the odds that there would be any wandering spirits out here?” Widow asked as we climbed one of the dunes. The heat was finally dying down, soon to be replaced by the crippling nocturnal cold. This region was on the southeastern part of the continent, subject to dry spells and heatwaves during the day—but the nights were downright frosty. These sudden temperature changes had favored the creation of this landscape. “After all, it’s why the Darklings made their Knight Ghouls. To chomp on the spirits of the dead so that they wouldn’t be Reaped.”

“I agree with that line of reasoning, but who knows? I mean, look at Nethissis and how much she overcame as a spirit,” I said. “Maybe there are others like her. People who escaped the ghouls’ clutches and ended up here because, as you can all see, this place is

basically devoid of life.”

“It would also make a fine ghoulish hunting ground,” Nightmare chimed in. “Maybe those are the shadows that the Rimians think of as ghosts.”

“Ah, yes. That might be a possibility,” I admitted, in absolutely no mood to fight any more Knight Ghouls. I’d had enough of them, especially since I knew they weren’t in this of their own volition. They’d been forced into this existence, and that just broke my heart.

Ahead, I could see a faint light glimmering beyond a lower dune.

“Are we expecting to find more Rimian settlements here?” Ridan asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Remember what the other villagers said before we reached this desert. Fugitives from the empire have settled here. Rimians who take advantage of the harsh conditions and the freezing nights to hide from the guards.”

“Is it really enough to keep the Aeternae from hunting them down?” Hunter asked.

“If you pair that with the rumors of shadows and possible ghosts? Who knows?” Amane muttered, gazing out into the distance. “That is definitely a fire burning. If they’re trying to hide from the Aeternae, they’re not doing a very good job of it.”

“I don’t see the Aeternae shying away from chasing Rimians through here. Ghosts can’t do anything to them, and the ghouls are trained to stay out of the civilians’ sight. They only hunt runaway spirits,” I said. “They’ll eat flesh in the absence of souls, but without Reapers currently on duty here, the ghouls have plenty of ghosts to still feast on.”

Hunter smiled. “Okay. So if those are Rimians we’re about to encounter, how are they safe out here? I’m curious.”

“Let’s find out, shall we? Although I’m ready to go with Kailani’s angle. Too many wandering spirits for the ghouls to lessen their meals with ordinary meat,” Nightmare retorted, visibly bored with our debate. He reached out, and we all linked hands. He teleported us across the dune, and we found ourselves standing on the edge of a small camp. The Rimians nearly jumped out of their skins when they saw us.

A couple of the men brought out their spears, clearly fearful. I raised my hands in a placating gesture. “Please, don’t be afraid. We’re not here to hurt you,” I said. “We’re looking for someone.”

“You’re not Aeternae,” one of them said, his thick brows furrowed. His beard had a copper tint and a few streaks of white. He also seemed to be the eldest among his people, tall and strong and fit enough to fight back, if needed.

“We’re not Aeternae,” I said, smiling. “But we’re looking for some Aeternae. Marios and Silla Levantes. Have you heard of them?”

The Rimian man cursed under his breath. “Yeah, we know the siblings. Both of them monsters. What brings you all the way out here?”

“Have you seen them?” Ridan interjected.

“What’s it to you?” a second Rimian man asked. The first one, the elder, shushed him.

“Keep your mouth shut.”

“Sorry, Clay,” he mumbled.

“And put the weapons down,” Clay said. He seemed to be their leader. “They would’ve killed us by now if they wanted to.”

“Forgive me for asking, but how do you know that?” Ridan inquired. “I mean, we

aren't going to hurt you, but what makes you so sure we won't? You're hiding all the way out here... it would be easy enough to do."

Clay smirked, the light from the flickering flames dancing across his tanned face. "You're here, which means you're not afraid of the Howlers."

"The Howlers?" My blood ran cold. We'd clearly missed some important information prior to setting foot in this desert.

The Rimians exchanged amused glances before Clay looked at me. "You came all the way here without knowing about the Howlers?"

"How about you just tell us what they are, buddy?" Nightmare shot back, crossing his arms.

Clay's humor faded from his expression as he indulged the Reaper's request. "They're the souls of the forgotten. Spirits that have been wandering for too long, unable to move on. We don't know who they are or why they chose the desert of all places, but they're strong out here. Strong enough to scare the pants off the Aeternae, if that's what you're wondering."

"Howlers," I whispered, trying to dig through my knowledge of ghosts and Reapers. I couldn't find anything to go with this name, so I looked to Widow and Nightmare for answers. "What is he talking about?"

The Reapers seemed to know exactly what Clay was talking about. The Rimians too, and they were all on edge. They were a small group of ten men and five women, most of them young and skinny, dark-haired and with rough, sullen features. These were the faces of people who'd experienced true suffering. I could tell.

"Are they physically violent?" Nightmare asked. "Have you seen or heard them yourselves?"

Clay nodded. "Just last night. A great black shadow cut through that eastern dune there," he said, pointing at a tall mound of blue sand. Indeed, it looked as though it had been split in half with a giant knife, pale blue waves bursting over the dark blue, like the spilled filling of a cake. "It rattled our campsite, but it didn't stay long before moving farther east."

"We hear them all the time, especially at night when the winds die down," one of the women said. "Dozens of people have gone missing in these parts. Merchants, mostly, who sought to take a shortcut into the southeastern cities along the coast and paid dearly. Or so the rumors go, anyway."

"What the hell are Howlers?" I asked Nightmare. He gave me a sneer.

"Poltergeists, Word witch. So rare they weren't worth mentioning until now because most Reapers have never even come across one," he said. "And now I'm hearing there's a whole desert filled with them."

"I swear, the longer I stay on Visio, the more annoyed I become," Widow grumbled. "Howlers, as our friend here calls them, are not supposed to exist, much like the ghouls. They're abandoned spirits. They've spent thousands of years in solitude and isolation, unreaped and therefore increasingly miserable. Imagine existing in what feels like an eternal limbo. They can't see other ghosts. They can't talk to the living, either. It's a whole other kind of spiritual decay. While the ghouls are Reapers who basically do it to

themselves—with the exception of Visio—the Howlers have no say in it whatsoever. There are no Reapers to send them to the afterlife, so they're stuck here."

"And most of the rage they're exhibiting likely comes after all the running they do from the Knight Ghouls that exist in this world solely to eat them," Nightmare added. "If they're capable of cutting through a sand hill like that, I imagine they're capable of much more, too. They're strong, which means they're very old. Hundreds of thousands to millions of years old, and capable of manifesting physically."

"And the howls? How do you explain those?" I asked him.

Nightmare shrugged. "It's their suffering that these people are hearing. Cries for help. Think of it this way. After existing like this, without moving on and hunted by these horrid ghoulish creatures, the spirits begin to wear themselves down. They end up functioning on behavioral loops. I have only seen a few myself over the eons. One was reliving the moment of his death, like a specter, over and over again. He'd been abandoned inside an old house, unable to leave its premises for some reason—likely he'd been bound to that place in life, emotionally speaking. And anyone who set foot inside would eventually run into the guy falling from the third floor and breaking his neck. On repeat. Another screamed for hours on end, its howls echoing through an entire valley. It scared the villagers until they uprooted and left. I could go on, but I think you understand."

"Yeah. That's just... terrible," I said, my heart breaking for those poor spirits.

"What are ghouls?" Clay asked, clearly out of the loop regarding some of Visio's more crucial aspects. His question made Nightmare laugh.

"Trust me, you don't want to know. Just do yourselves a favor—if you die and no one comes to reap you, run until they do. If you see gnarly looking creatures with huge eyes and fangs and long limbs and translucent skin, again, run. Run as fast as you can. Seek refuge in this desert here, if you must."

His reply only confused Clay and the Rimians, but I understood why Nightmare didn't want to tell them more about what was happening beyond the veil of life. There was a reason for the secrecy of Reapers. Our intention was to resolve the Visio crisis. Hopefully, that meant Clay and his fellow Rimians would never have to deal with ghouls or Darklings in the hour of their passing.

"Hold on. If this is a potential ghoul hunting ground, wouldn't they have resolved the Howler issue by now?" Hunter chimed in, scratching the back of his head. "The Howlers are spirits, after all."

Widow shook his head. "Not necessarily. If a poltergeist is strong enough, it can fight a ghoul. I have never seen such a confrontation before, but I almost got my ass handed to me by a... Howler, before I was bound to Eirexis. They're mean and mindless bastards, I'll tell you that much. And if a ghoul isn't careful or he's too hungry to pay attention, the Howler might get the better of him."

"Therefore, if this desert is dominated by Howlers, there's a chance we won't find any ghouls here, after all, thus rendering the hunting ground theory incorrect," Nightmare said. "Personally, I don't mind. At least a Howler can be reaped."

"Oh. And if it's reaped, will it move on into the afterlife?" I asked.

"Theoretically, yes. We don't know what shape that soul is in upon its arrival there,

unfortunately." Nightmare sighed deeply. "We've only been able to theorize on the subject, hoping that whatever suffering the spirit has endured in death, it will be washed away when entering the afterlife. I'd hate to think we've sent psychotic poltergeists in there."

Widow chuckled bitterly. "The lasses there would have us flayed."

"Lasses?" I asked, and Widow abruptly tilted his head toward me. I didn't need to see his face beneath that gimp mask to know he was alarmed. He'd just let slip something I wasn't supposed to know about as a living creature, and his frame was suddenly so stiff and tense that I bet I could break a chair against his back and he wouldn't even budge.

"You said you know of Marios and Silla Levantes," Nightmare cut in, focusing his attention on Clay. I knew he was trying to deflect from Widow's slip of the tongue, and I didn't pursue it, since neither would tell us more about the afterlife. "Have you seen them around recently?"

Clay sat in front of the fire, the rest of his people already settled and eating fruits that looked like figs—likely collected from a nearby bush or from the edge of the desert, where I'd last seen fruit trees growing in rocky soil.

"If you go north for another hundred miles, you'll reach the heart of this desert. There's a large oasis there, but because of the sand and the Howlers, very few are able to reach it," Clay said. "It's where you'll find the Levantes brothers."

"How do you know?" Amane asked, taking out a map she'd gotten from Kalla to check our position on it. "I don't see it marked on the map."

"It's not recorded anywhere. Only those of us who've seen it know about it," Clay said, looking up at her.

"Okay, but how do you know the Levantes siblings are there?" I repeated Amane's question, and Clay let out a heavy sigh. His companions were all gloomy and avoiding eye contact.

"It was our safe haven until a couple of nights ago," he finally said. "The Levantes bastards drove us out. They tried to hold us down to drink our blood, but there were two of them and more of us. Plus, I think there were at least a couple of Howlers who really didn't like them."

"Explain," Nightmare said, obviously intrigued.

"Well, we couldn't kill Marios and Silla, but we were able to run from them. We were moving through the desert as fast as we could in the middle of a freezing night. I remember the icy sand crackling beneath my boots. The Levantes siblings came after us, their persistence genuinely frightening, if I'm honest."

"We weren't sure we'd make it all the way here," another Rimian woman added, shaking her head at the memory. I could only imagine the terror they must have felt during that run, the thoughts that must've gone through her head as she fled to save herself.

"Thing is, at one point the Levantes bastards were getting close. Until a few Howlers intervened. They knocked us over, and for a moment, I thought they would hurt us more, but they didn't. They were completely focused on Marios and Silla. The bloodsuckers had to run away because the Howlers kept ramming into them, tossing them around like rag

dolls.”

“And that’s why you’re out here, closer to the edge,” I concluded. “Doesn’t that put you at risk of being seen by any Aeternae patrolling around the desert?”

Clay smiled. “Lady, this place has been known to be cursed and haunted for a long time. No one dares to come in unless they’re fools or they’re out of other, saner options.”

Ridan sucked in a breath, his gaze wandering around. “Well, at least we know where to find those Whip suckers.”

The night had settled over the dunes, the moon rising and revealing flecks of stardust in the blue sand. It looked amazing, despite the persistently dropping temperatures. Chills ran down my spine, and I wasn’t sure they were all caused by the cold. The winds had become muted, barely raising a strand of sapphire dust here and there, but the darkness of the night echoed with distant wails—the Howlers, I assumed. They were definitely present but not too close.

We left Clay with his people by the small fire. I hoped it would be safe for them going forward, at least until we finished what we’d come to Visio for. If the Unending was freed, chances were good she’d take back the Aeternae’s immortality as punishment for what they had done—and that was literally their best-case scenario. It would render the Rimians’ and the Naloreans’ blood useless, too. And perhaps that, in turn, would lead to the people’s liberation.

This world had everything its inhabitants needed to live on their own, without the Aeternae feeding off the Rimian and the Nalorean resources.

“What should we expect from the Levantes siblings?” Hunter asked, looking my way. “If they’re running from Danika, do you think we’ll have an easier time taking them down?”

“Based on our previous experience with Ramus Malfas, I highly doubt it,” Amane said. “He, too, was thought to have fled the city to keep himself alive. Look at how that one turned out.”

Ridan grunted as we climbed the tallest sand dune. As I reached the top, my breath was taken away by the incomparable beauty surrounding us. The desert was a sea of pulverized gemstones, remnants of a massive crystal deposit. The hues of blue darkened beneath the night sky, but the moon’s delicate light still brought out dazzling shimmers everywhere I looked.

“I don’t know what the chances are of us running into Danika again,” the dragon muttered. “I fixed her up pretty good the last time we saw her.”

“Ugh, I think I can still smell her burning flesh,” I said, fighting a gag reflex.

“Personally, I reveled in it,” Hunter replied, still very much amused by that particular moment. It made Amane laugh.

“The fried chicken. Right...”

“Point is, Ridan might be onto something,” I said before we teleported again across several short distances. A few minutes later and about ten miles ahead, a massive oasis rose in the middle of the desert. It was shaped like a teardrop, lush greenery and

oversized flowers growing around the clear body of water. I could see remnants of tents and even an old hut by the shore. Someone had definitely lived here before. Judging by the size of the settlement, it wasn't just Clay's group, either. "Danika is currently healing from one hell of a burn. Soul and Kelara are tracking Corbin, and they're nowhere near this region. Which means that if we are to walk into another trap, it's not of their doing," I continued.

"Should we find some comfort in that?" Widow asked, his tone dripping with doubt.

"Not at all. But I admit, I'm slightly less scared because we're not going to deal with Danika or Corbin. Those two terrify me," I replied.

"There's no movement from what I can tell," Nightmare said, his starry eyes analyzing the encampment, along with the rest of the oasis.

Giant palm trees sprang from the blue sand. Their leaves were a strange mixture of azure and violet, most likely from feeding off the mineral soil. The rest of the underbrush was a crude green, littered with huge flowers that had wide, waxy petals ranging from yellow to orange and a frenzied pink. It was truly a sight to behold. Such a shame that it had become home to two of the Aeternae's most despicable characters.

I took out a handful of invisibility pellets and handed some over to Hunter, Ridan, and Amane. With our red garnet glasses on, we consumed the magic and disappeared from sight. The Reapers followed suit, returning to their subtle forms yet allowing us to still see them, as we carefully descended the dune and headed toward the oasis.

We approached with caution, keeping our conversation to a minimum and our voices down. Our collective experience demanded it. Even as we drew closer, however, I still couldn't see signs of movement—only the occasional breeze that made the waterside tents tremble.

"What are the odds that they're still there?" Hunter whispered.

Nightmare walked faster, getting ahead of us. "Let me find out. I might—" He froze, and we all heard the click under his bare feet. "Crap."

We stilled, eyeing him nervously. "Go on," I said, barely above a whisper.

"You might all want to step back a couple dozen yards," Nightmare replied dryly.

"I've got this." Widow grabbed my shoulder. Hunter, Amane, and Ridan were quick to touch him, and he teleported us farther back.

Nightmare gave us an okay sign before he disappeared. A split second later, an explosion tore through the blue sand, and we all ducked for cover. Nightmare appeared in front of us and produced a protective shield able to resist the ensuing ripples of death magic energy. The air shimmered black, and I held my breath as Nightmare's shield kept us alive.

The problem quickly became apparent, as another explosion rocked the sand, followed by another, then another. Blast after blast, death magic charges were detonated in a wide circle around the oasis, sending out waves of fatal energies designed to kill anyone who dared get close to this place.

Nightmare couldn't hold it all back on his own, so Widow joined him to double the defenses. I counted eight explosions, and they weren't stopping anytime soon. The night was illuminated by white flames and yellow sparks. I could barely see the oasis at this

point, but I knew I couldn't let the Levantes Whips win this one.

I sprang to my feet, the Word lighting me up from the inside, and gripped our Reapers by their shoulders, my lips moving as I allowed my magic to manifest. Electrifying glimmers moved from my hands into the Reapers, powering them up until their protection shield began to glow amber.

"What the..." Hunter was understandably astonished. This wasn't the first time that death and Word magic had intersected, but never before had we accomplished such a powerful synergy. I went with the flow, letting the Word guide me as I whispered the spell all over again, the light in our shield intensifying against the onslaught of death bomb shockwaves.

My muscles stiffened, but I had confidence in us. We were holding strong. The only problem was that this was probably just the beginning, and we needed to do something before the Levantes siblings launched other attacks. There was only so much that Nightmare, Widow, and I could resist together, even with our magic combined.

"Okay, screw this," Ridan snarled, getting up and giving his backpack and pulverizer weapon to Amane. "If the sand ain't friendly, maybe the skies will be." He stepped out of the protective shield and went full dragon, shredded pieces of his clothes fluttering away into the night sky.

Much to our enemy's misfortune, he remained invisible in his dragon form. The explosions stopped with one last ripple, too far away and too faint to hurt us. Nightmare and Widow glanced up at Ridan, who lowered his giant black head and bared his enormous fangs.

"Piggyback ride?" Nightmare giggled like a little boy in a candy shop.

We all climbed onto Ridan's back. Adrenaline coursed through me, but I took deep and measured breaths, knowing that our battle was only just beginning. The Levantes siblings weren't going down without a fight. Fortunately, a fight was exactly what we'd come to deliver.

Ridan flapped his wings, causing strings of sand to swirl up in the air from the powerful currents. He took off, and we held on tight to the hard black scales on his back. Within minutes, we were circling above the oasis, and only then did I spot them. The Levantes Whips, hidden atop one of the palm trees, were surveying the area with what looked like the Aeternae's version of binoculars. They had taken a particular interest in the area affected by the explosions, but they couldn't see us.

"Ridan, give them a little bit of fire before we land," I said.

One of the Levantes siblings must've heard my voice, because he looked up with an alarmed expression. It was too late, though. All he saw was a column of fire headed straight for him and his brother.

Nightmare and Widow teleported us to the ground—specifically, on the edge of the water—while Ridan circled the oasis one more time before landing. "Morfuris," I said, already running toward Silla and Marios. The two had been engulfed by flames and had fallen from the palm tree, desperately rolling through the sand in a bid to put out the fire.

Hunter and Amane revealed themselves, as did Nightmare and Widow. Within seconds, Marios and Silla had been destroyed by pulverizer weapons, leaving behind

nothing but silvery ashes and the Spirit Bender's soul shards. Clearly, Stravian technology couldn't destroy the damn things, either.

"Whew, that was effective," I said, watching as Amane collected the shards and hid them inside her satchel. She gave me a broad smile.

"Progress, I'd say."

Ridan landed with a heavy thud, showing himself but remaining in his dragon form, his claws digging into the blue sand. "Did you get them?" he hissed, and Amane nodded.

"Good, now give them back," a strange voice said as an Aeternae male emerged from behind the hut. I quickly measured him from head to toe, going over all Derek's detailed descriptions of the Darkling Whips. It didn't take long to put a name to his long and sharp face.

"Fennel Ferris," I said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Running errands for Danika, obviously," he replied dryly. Ridan growled, the scales on his thick neck dancing as he shuddered, his jaw dropping to release more of his dragon fire. It didn't seem to impress Fennel, who simply took out a smoke bauble.

By the time Nightmare got to him, it was too late. It had already broken, a black wisp dissolving into the air. The Reaper gripped Fennel by the throat, nearly crushing his larynx. "That was by far your biggest mistake!"

The Whip snickered, his gaze wandering back to Amane too often for my comfort. "On the contrary, it was the smartest move on the board," he said. "It's about to get really ugly for you."

Tension grew hard inside me, turning my blood and muscles to stone as I realized what was going to happen next. We only had seconds, at best, to get out of here with the shards we'd already collected. But then something that Fennel said triggered an alarm in the back of my head.

"Wait, you asked for the soul shards back. I thought Danika had to be the one to extract them in order for the resurrection of Spirit to work," I breathed, gawking at him.

"Don't you think we would've quit the moment you people killed Petra?" Fennel replied, annoyingly confident and downright defiant. The more he spoke, the more worried I became.

"How do you know about that?" I asked.

"That's for me to know and for you to find out," Fennel shot back. "Point is, you're better off surrendering those shards and running along if you wish to survive. No matter what you do, we are going to win."

Had Danika lied about having to be the one to complete the resurrection ritual, since she'd been the one to start it? Or was that more of a tradition than a requirement of the spell? She wasn't around to answer, and by the stars, I didn't want her to be. But that left me with another, equally horrifying question.

If Danika wasn't the one who was coming for us thanks to that smoke bauble, who was?

Vision horses weren't the only creatures waiting for us outside the city, but it took me a few minutes to notice the others as we rode along the ocean coast. Two ghouls had left Roano to guard us, and Trev welcomed their support. During our tunnel escape, he'd become attached to these damned creatures, and they seemed to have grown fond of him, too.

I named them Stan and Ollie, since they were no longer capable of communicating their names, and we didn't have any sentries on our crew to facilitate a dialogue. The ghouls kept to their subtle form for most of the journey, helping us steer clear of the more frequently traveled or populated areas.

As we reached the main road leading through the imperial city, Trev and I consumed invisibility pellets, feeding a couple to our horses, as well. The ghouls led us away from gold guards stationed along the coast, occasionally creating distractions to keep them from sniffing us out. I had to admit, Stan and Ollie were exquisitely dedicated to their mission, determined to get us to our destination safely.

Once we left the imperial city behind, I allowed myself a deep breath as I looked out to the ocean. Its dark blue waters rumbled, breaking into foaming waves against the rocky shore. A storm gathered in the distance, with black clouds and shocks of lightning, but I doubted it would reach the continent, as it seemed to be moving north rather than east.

"This feels nice," Trev said after a while. We'd made ourselves and the horses visible by uttering "Morfuris" while touching them. This had been done purely for the horses' comfort, since invisibility was not a state they were normally accustomed to, but we kept our gray hoods on and continued to follow the ghouls' guidance whenever they sensed other people.

The region we were crossing was mostly orchards and small villages, with rolling hills and tall grass pastures where various domesticated animals grazed. I'd learned most of them were cattle-like creatures raised exclusively by the Rimians and the Naloreans for their milk. They were huge compared to Earth's cows and bison, with massive swirling horns and pale-green-and-white coats.

"What feels nice, exactly?" I asked. Ahead, Stan and Ollie were sniffing the road in their subtle forms. I couldn't see them, but I spotted the air ripples here and there.

"Being on the road again," Trev replied. "I used to love road trips, especially as a teenager, when Petra took her sons out to their summer estates. Kalon always had me come along. Moore wasn't even born, back then."

To our right, the ocean swelled, each wave crashing and splashing onto jagged black-and-gray stones. To our left, a wide field stretched out where herds roamed freely. Farther beyond, I could see the copper leaves of an orchard preparing for the cold season, shedding its crowns in anticipation of the wintery days ahead. Life seemed to keep going on here as if nothing had happened. As if this whole world was exactly as it should be, and not built on the back of the Unending.

"Did you ever suspect that Petra might be a Darkling?" I asked, very aware of her contribution to the overall damage that had already been done—not only to the Unending, but also to the Rimians and the Naloreans, collateral damage of the Aeternae's war against death.

"Growing up, you mean? No. The Petra we've been dealing with since her discovery is not the Petra I knew. I suppose she really was an excellent actress if she could keep up false appearances for so long. Or maybe I was just blind and refused to see the truth even when it was right in front of me."

"Hey, I didn't see it coming either. Not until that night at the mansion," I said. "She played us all. Though she did the worst number on her sons."

Trev scoffed. "Kalon knew, but he never told me about it. I understand why. He was deeply conflicted at the time."

"You've forgiven him, then?"

"He was always innocent and trying to do the right thing. I had nothing to forgive."

"The Darklings killed Luna Visentis," I reminded him.

Trev gave me a sullen look. "And not a day goes by that I don't miss her." He was telling the truth. I could see his grief, alive and burning brightly in his eyes. "Looking back now, I can see why anyone might have suspected her of being the Unending. Luna had long black hair and almost black eyes. Her dark side, you know, the Aeternae feral side... it was quite the sight to behold. She could be scary and intense, though she rarely showed it."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because Luna and I were in love, remember? She told me everything," Trev said. "And I filled in some of the gaps during my attempts to infiltrate the Darklings shortly after Kalon turned me. At first, I'd been convinced that her death had something to do with the Black Fever. I quickly understood that it didn't make sense, since there wasn't even an outbreak at the time. Later, I learned that Luna had begun investigating some nobles from the imperial palace, suspected of affiliations with Darklings. In hindsight, I can see all the factors converging and ultimately leading to her last breath. She'd made certain people uncomfortable, so they had to kill her."

"Kalon suffered tremendously after she died, didn't he?"

Trev nodded slowly. The road split ahead. The main branch continued at a higher altitude, while a side path descended along a shell-covered beach. We followed the latter, since it kept us out of sight. The ghouls stayed close as we left the main road.

There were a few Rimian kids playing by the water, but they didn't mind us, and we had nothing to fear from them. It was the Aeternae we were steering clear of.

"Kalon was determined to take the Darklings down. Back in Orvis, he told me about the conversations he'd had with his mother regarding Luna's death. Apparently, Petra had been just as distraught at hearing the news of Luna's death. She hadn't sanctioned it. Now, knowing Danika had the imperial city under her control as Whip, I guess I can consider her responsible. She's almost certainly the one who gave the order. Luna was poking around. Her resemblance to the Unending might've played a part, but their motive was the cover-up."

I smiled. "That's why you agreed to come with me when Time asked."

"Yeah. If I get a chance to avenge Luna's death, I'll take it."

The beach spanned only a few miles before the road went back up and crossed the main one. After briefly checking the map, we decided to stick to it. The smaller path would eventually lead us closer to Danika's secret villa farther south.

"What was Luna like?" I asked. "As a person, I mean. As an Aeternae."

Trev couldn't help but smile as he remembered her. "I was a Rimian when we fell in love. Our relationship wasn't condoned in any way, yet she couldn't stay away. Neither could I. She wasn't a fan of drinking blood from others, though she did it to avoid the stigma that came with being an Aeternae who only consumed animal blood."

"Did she ever drink from you?"

"I offered once, but she said no. Her strength of character was truly out of this world. Luna was kind and noble. She didn't believe in this indentured service my people were forced into. Unfortunately, there were few among her peers who shared such beliefs, so she kept mostly to herself. She came across as shy, though she never lacked suitors. Luna was highly intelligent and beautiful."

"She hunted Darklings, right?"

He nodded. "Unlike other ladies of the high court, she never shied away from wearing armor or riding a Vision horse. Or going deep into the city's slums to track someone she suspected of associating with Darklings. I think that was her undoing. Her fearlessness."

"She underestimated the reach of the Darklings among the Aeternae elite. She certainly wasn't the only one," I said.

"No, but she paid the highest price."

"I'm sorry, Trev. I truly am."

He gave me a weak smile. "You know, at one point, I worried Kalon might've been one of them. Years before Luna died, that is. The secret he had to keep about his mother—it made him act suspiciously sometimes."

"What would you have done if he'd turned out to be one of them?" I asked.

Trev's gaze darkened. "It's something I don't even want to consider. Kalon has always been like a brother to me. One of the few Aeternae who never looked at me as a food source."

"He never fed on you, either?"

"Nope. The rest of the Visentis family had no qualms about drinking my blood, but Kalon did. And Luna. They saw me as more than that. I suppose it's why I'm so fond of

them.”

We nudged our horses and sped down the secondary road as it led us through a sprawling dark forest. The battered path was smooth enough to allow a brief race, and our Vision horses ran like the wind. Emerald green, golden brown and ruby red flashed past us, the wind brushing through my hair as we bolted through the woods. Sunlight couldn't breach through this part of the forest, so I'd allowed myself to ride with my hood and mask off.

Beyond the woods, a plain unfolded in shades of rich green and pale yellow. The last of the grains had been harvested across several swaths of land, and I could see ox-like animals pulling loaded carts away from the field and up the narrow village roads, where large circular granaries with red roofs rose above the houses.

“These are all Nalorean villages,” Trev said as we made our way across the green side of the field. “Silver guards come here every week to collect the blood of the people and to drop off their payment in precious coins. They're all used to it. They're all used to dying before their natural time because of the blood they give. It's not okay, and the Aeternae know it, but their comfort comes first.”

“If we're successful, the Aeternae empire will eventually fall,” I replied.

He offered a bitter half-smile. “And it'll take the Rimians and the Naloreans at least a few generations to forget that they ever had to live like this. You know, my people belong in the reddish sands of Rimia. The scorching sun and the caverns, the deserts and the coral valleys. And the Naloreans, they need their frost and snow, their white mountains and frozen lakes. None of this is natural for our kind. While I appreciate the more temperate climate of Visio, I miss the dry heat of Rimia.”

“How much do you remember about it? When were you brought to Visio?” I asked.

At the other end of the field, a new road awaited, snaking around a hill. Beyond it, we knew of a residential area owned mostly by Aeternae. That was how they kept their Rimian and Nalorean subjects under control and prevented any whisper of rebellion. Wherever there were blood sources living together, there would always be a village or town filled with Aeternae. That way, the subjects knew that the empire was always watching.

“I was six or seven, I think,” Trev said. “Old enough to never forget the blinding sun or the heat. The canyons and the volcanic lakes. Rimia is a beautiful place, you know. Where the rivers flow, it's green and bursting with flowers. There's an oasis in every desert, with hot springs and enormous palm trees. And I mean enormous. We carve our homes into the dead ones.”

“Whoa... That sounds amazing.”

I tried to imagine Rimia as Trev described it. I could see why his species had darker skin and coarse, curly hair. They'd adapted to a hostile climate with higher temperatures. In contrast, Visio was simply warm and perhaps a little too humid. “If we make it out of this alive, I'll gladly bring you and Kalon there and show you all the best parts.”

“He's never been to Rimia?”

Trev shook his head. He was about to say something else when the ghouls returned, tumbling down the road as they switched to their visible forms. I always felt shivers

running down my spine whenever I looked at them. It wasn't their fault—they simply couldn't reduce the creep factor that came with their appearance. Stan and Ollie hissed and whispered unintelligible words, but Trev and I didn't need to understand what they were saying. The meaning was clear enough.

We guided our horses off the road and settled in the shadow of a solitary patch of trees. They'd wait here for our return, since we couldn't risk taking them any farther without getting exposed.

"Beyond this hill, we'll find Pavia," Trev said, taking out his map and spreading it over a thick tree trunk. I followed his finger along the drawn roads until I recognized our location. "Here, see?"

"Yeah. And on the western edge, we'll find Danika's villa," I added, using my own finger to show him what Thayen had indicated back in Roano. "Right... here."

"The horses will be safe here. The trees' shade protects them," Trev said, leaving whatever he could behind, in satchels strapped to the Visions' saddles. He kept the weapons, the healing magic, and all the other swamp witch magic paraphernalia we'd brought along for this trip.

"Stan and Ollie should lead the way," I told him. The ghouls seemed restless, constantly glancing back at the hillside. "They can smell the Darklings before we can."

Armed and ready for the next stage of our mission, Trev and I followed the ghouls along the road, already invisible and wearing red lenses. From here on out, we had to stay out of sight. We were officially entering Aeternae territory.

My jaw muscles clenched once we reached the other side of the hill. The village was a splendid settlement, with elegant whitewashed villas and brick-red roofs, forged iron balustrades and wide terraces loaded with flowers and evergreens. The alleys were cobbled and lined with black streetlamps, and there were potted shrubs everywhere.

The people were nicely dressed, adhering to a more conservative but elegant sartorial code. The ladies wore dresses with ruffled sleeves and lace bonnets, while the men wore neatly tailored dark suits with pale ascots. There was a visual cohesion at play, and it spoke of an overall synergy among the Aeternae who lived here.

It worried me. If Danika was holed up in this place, she likely had the locals' support. Trev and I would have to be particularly discreet in how we proceeded. If we were to kill Danika, we had to move fast and with great care. An in-and-out operation. From where I stood, our invisibility surely helped, but it didn't render us invulnerable. And the Darklings had ways of anticipating our presence. We would just have to get around them.

According to Thayer's description, Danika's countryside villa didn't exactly stand out, since it had been made to resemble the others in the village. The worst part was that it was only accessible through one of the cobbled alleyways, and that meant we had to get close to the people who were out and about at this hour.

Nightfall was fast approaching, and the streetlights were coming on, lit by hand one by one, courtesy of the village's administrative personnel. Trev and I did our best to steer clear of the locals, using a variety of herbs in our pockets to mask our scent. The ghouls had no worries in their subtle forms, which made things easier for them.

We communicated through hand signs as we moved through the alleys, making our way toward the western edge. Stan and Ollie froze ahead, then bolted into a side street, nervously signaling us to follow them. Trev and I didn't hesitate, joining them around the corner. Moments later, I could see why the ghouls had grown anxious so suddenly.

A pair walked in the middle of the main alley, both dressed in black. There wasn't anything special about them at first glance—an Aeternae man and woman, holding hands and giving each other warm smiles as they engaged in their evening stroll—but the two Knight Ghouls who walked behind them were certainly cause for alarm. The only reason I could see them was because of the scythe I carried.

Trev had no idea, so I caught his hand, making it possible for him to observe them as well. "Oh," he whispered. We cautiously moved back to put as much distance between us and them as possible. The ghouls were right behind us, quietly trembling.

"It's a Darkling patrol," I murmured. "Probably pretending to be a couple. Or maybe they're for real. Together for evil and for worse..."

They passed our street without so much as a sniffle, and I allowed myself a sigh of relief. "That was close," Trev said, then gave Stan and Ollie an appreciative smile. "Thanks for that, fellas."

The creatures purred softly. They turned around and had us continue down the side street to another alley that would lead us closer to Danika's villa. We couldn't risk going back to the alley we'd just left, since we risked the Knight Ghouls catching our scent—they were better than the Darklings at differentiating between foreign and local smells.

Finally, we reached the row of westernmost villas, all fitted with lush front yards and elegant wrought-iron fences. The lights had come on inside most of them, but one in

particular stood out to me—not because of its appearance, but because of the Darklings stationed outside. They didn't need to have masks or black-and-white threads for me to recognize them. There was something in their eyes, a hardness specific to those who'd been indoctrinated into the Spirit Bender's organization.

Trev and I moved between houses until we reached the backyard of Danika's villa. Out here, four other Darklings had been assigned to guard duty, along with two Knight Ghouls. Whatever was inside certainly warranted protection, which made my suspicions about Danika being here all the more viable. We took a few minutes to observe movements around the premises, and I was able to tell that the locals did their best to steer clear of this area. They went on with their business and evening walks, but they actively avoided the property, turning away as soon as they saw the house coming up on their path.

"Oh, she's got to be inside," I muttered. We hid beneath a large oak-like tree with heavy branches still loaded with dying leaves and plenty of birds' nests. The underbrush made me feel a little safer, too—the swamp witch magic wasn't enough against the Darklings.

"We'll need to get in there," Trev said.

It was definitely Danika's place, not just because of the Darklings and ghouls guarding it. The backyard was just as Thayen had described it, with a stone pathway and a delicate black iron fence. There was a small fountain in the middle, featuring a decorative statuette of an Aeternae woman pouring water from her vessel, her hair seemingly flowing in the wind. There was a gazebo nearby, as well, made of wood and painted white, overflowing with decorative pillows and fur throws—Thayen had mentioned it was Danika's favorite spot, where she'd spend hours reading during the day.

Then again, I doubted there was much reading on the Lady Supreme's mind at this point, especially after the blistering number Ridan had done on her. The Knight Ghouls prowled around the gazebo, their beady eyes following the birds who'd made a home in this garden. One by one, the feathered singers chirped and vanished into the creatures' mouths while the four Darklings occasionally checked their pocket watches.

Nothing was happening. It was as if time itself stood still.

"If we get any closer, we run the risk of riling up the ghouls," I told Trev. "We need a diversion."

Trev and I both looked at Stan and Ollie, as if we were thinking the same thing. Our ghouls sighed simultaneously, their bony shoulders dropping with a mixture of dread and disappointment. Nevertheless, they knew what they had to do. Stan and Ollie left our side and rushed along the far side of the backyard fence, getting close enough to draw the Knight Ghouls' attention, even in their subtle form.

The Knight Ghouls growled, instantly spotting them. Stan and Ollie bolted toward the neighboring property, deliberately hesitating to further stir the others' interest. It worked, as the fiends jumped over the fence and started running after our guys.

It was enough to get the Darklings involved. Three of them crossed the garden in a matter of seconds, equally alarmed. "Where the hell are they going?!" one asked.

Another cursed under his breath. "They probably spotted a soul, which means

someone died around here recently.”

“What if it’s the outsiders?” the third asked.

“Well, that’s why Leann over there is going to stand guard while we go get our hounds back,” the first one shot back. They jumped the fence and went after their Knight Ghouls, whose growls and roars erupted across neighboring gardens—Stan and Ollie were definitely giving them a run for their money, even though we couldn’t see them anymore.

Trev and I only had one Darkling left to deal with. Leann was her name, and she looked worried. Their watch must’ve been quiet and uneventful prior to our arrival, and knowing we’d managed to disrupt them like this did give me a sliver of satisfaction. It felt like we were off to a good start.

I came out from under the tree first, closely followed by Trev. Both still invisible, we hopped the black iron fence, our boots muffled by the soft grass. Even so, it wasn’t enough to keep Leann’s attention off us. Her head turned as her ears caught something.

Remembering the spells that Time had taught me, I raised my scythe before she could reach for hers. “Steah rhys fellom-reyn,” I whispered, and a shimmering pulse burst from the tip of my illuminated Reaper blade. It shot Leann right in the chest, knocking her backward into the door.

Trev moved like a shadow and reached her. He brought his short sword down and cut her head off. Blood pooled at his feet as I caught up, practically flying up the steps. Breathing rapidly, we gave one another a faint nod, then proceeded to jimmy the lock on the back door.

I used the tip of the scythe, wiggling it into the lock at different angles until I heard the much-desired click. If only Time had taught me a couple more spells—wishful thinking, unfortunately. It was a miracle he’d taught me three attack and three defense spells, since the Reapers were notoriously guarded and secretive about their death magic knowledge.

Trev gave the door a gentle push, and we went in. After a brief search of the living room, the dining room, and the enormous kitchen, we determined there was no one on the ground floor. It was silent upstairs, as well, but I caught the scent of blood—a subtly different fragrance from what we’d just spilled outside.

There were four bedrooms on the floor above. Three were empty, but the fourth left me stunned. Trev and I froze in the open doorway. There were two bodies on the floor, their chests ripped wide open and their hearts missing. The blood had dried hours ago, seeping into the fine carpet and forever staining it dark brown. Cautiously, I stepped forward to get a better look at their faces.

Derek’s descriptions of the Whips came to mind. “That’s Jolie Jasperstone.” I pointed at the dead Aeternae woman, a black-and-white thread tangled in the fingers of her right hand. “And that’s Rennert Gauss.”

“Two dead Whips, and no sign of Danika,” Trev replied, a muscle ticking angrily in his jaw.

“They’ve been here for hours,” I said, crouching to analyze the Aeternae man’s body more closely. There were no signs of struggle on either of them. No scratches or bruises, no tears in their clothes, and their expressions were chillingly serene, despite the wide

and glassy eyes. They'd welcomed their deaths. They'd allowed themselves to be sacrificed so the shards could be extracted.

"Danika's doing this," Trev muttered. "How the hell is she even walking and talking? Earlier today, she was burned to a crisp."

"Maybe it's not her at all," I said, giving him an alarmed look. "Remember it could be any of the Whips or, even more likely, Corbin. The Master himself can take over and kill the Whips to complete the ritual."

"It's not his scent I'm catching, but Danika's," Trev surmised. "She was definitely here. If she didn't do the killing herself, it must've been one of her underlings. We're running out of living Whips to suspect."

That was the only other option available, considering the damage she'd incurred during her confrontation with Ridan. The dragon fire had burned her severely, and I doubted there was death magic that could reverse enough of the damage to make Danika able to walk and fight again so soon.

"They didn't put up a fight, though," I said, staring at the Whips' corpses. "If she's physically unable to do much... what if she took them out because they were willing, and therefore not that much of an effort?"

"Do you really think Danika can even walk or stand upright at this point?"

That was a question I had yet to formulate an answer for. It wasn't impossible, but it was still improbable, at least in my mind. There was only so much we knew about their abilities with death magic and the tricks they had up their sleeves. Noises outside distracted me. I shot to my feet and rushed to the window, the blood freezing in my veins as I saw the Knight Ghouls coming back, along with the three other Darklings. Seconds later, they spotted Leann's body. One of them looked up, visibly alarmed, and while he couldn't see me, I knew what he was thinking.

It didn't take a scientist to figure it out.

I looked at Trev, feeling my eyes widen as raw fear coursed through me. "We need to get out of here. Danika clearly isn't around anymore."

"I doubt we can go back down without them noticing," he replied.

The walls were closing in, and I had to figure a way out for us. I didn't know if Stan or Ollie were still nearby. I couldn't tell if they'd escaped the Knight Ghouls or if they'd been vanquished by the Darklings' scythes. The only thing I knew for a fact was that if we spent another minute in this room, we'd be discovered.

And I didn't have enough death magic in my portfolio to shield us from the collective wrath of all the Darklings present. As the number of voices in the rooms below increased, I knew we had to act quickly.

Danika had certainly been here, but where the hell had she gone next? How was she even able to move? Or was Trev's theory correct and she didn't really have to be the one to complete the ritual, after all? I had plenty of questions but zero time to figure out the right answers.

Boots thundered up the stairs. This was it.

TRISTAN

The Unending had regained control over her memories. It was getting easier for her to sift through her vast past and to identify the moments that truly mattered to our quest. Her voice persisted at my core as I found myself inhabiting her Reaper form again. This time, however, something felt different. There was a fragrance in the air... it made me feel wary. Concerned, even.

The palace gardens were massive. Air flowed through the enormous arches that framed it, making the greenery and the flowers tremble. Sunlight bathed the mirrored tiles that paved the narrow paths crisscrossing the entire space. Everything shone brilliantly, even the waxed leaves, and Unending found herself smiling as she marveled at the exquisite ensemble of reflections dancing across every surface—the gilded flowers that adorned the artesian fountain in the middle seemed to have come alive, as though the sun itself had kissed them.

But she was upset. She was alone. She hadn't seen her precious subjects in a while.

"This is sometime during my Lady Supreme days," Unending said. "But the Aeternae haven't brought me offerings in days. Weeks, even. It's not like them, and I don't understand why. I'm feeling lonely. Neglected. I suppose it doesn't mean much to you, but to me and given my emotional state at the time, it meant everything."

"How long since they were made?" I asked in my mind.

"I've lost track. Millennia, for sure."

She'd abandoned the comfort of her throne, guided here by distant, familiar voices and laughter.

"This is the Garden of Enkil, isn't it?" I asked, remembering something from Mira and Kemi's account of how Unending had fallen under the seals.

She followed the central mirror path which led to the far end of the garden and past the artesian fountain, catching glimpses of her reflection below. Her hair flowed long and black. Her white dress danced in the morning breeze. Her black gloves reminded her of who she truly was. But she had spent so much time here, looking after her faithful flock, that she'd lost track of her bonds to the realm that made her. To Death herself. She cared very little for her maker now, because she'd had her lover killed. Death had broken the Unending's heart, and her last words to Death still rang in her head, clear and sharp as a blade.

Following the increasingly louder murmurs and laughter, she kept walking, wondering why she had been forsaken like this.

"It had been days since I'd last set foot outside. The Aeternae were immortal, so they didn't need me to heal them or fix anything. I suppose I'd made myself redundant, in a way. Merely a figure for them to worship and thank for their eternity. But they weren't doing that anymore," Unending continued.

We found some of the Aeternae on the south side of the Garden of Enkil, feasting on platters of freshly baked pastries, which had been served atop an outdoor dining table made of elegant wrought iron and glass. This was a time before the curse of blood-drinking. They basked in the early sunshine. They laughed and clinked their glasses. They were having a great time, but the Unending wasn't included in any of this. For a moment, she felt like she'd been left behind. This kind of loneliness scared her more than anything, since she'd done her best to avoid it after Erethiel's passing. My emotions were mixed up with Unending's, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between my consciousness and hers as we watched the scene unfold.

Mira and Kemi were seated at the head of the table, lovingly gazing at one another. Arya sat beside them, joined by several other Seniors I recognized from Roano.

"And you know what Filibert said?" Arya asked, all eyes at the table fixed on her, smiles stretching from ear to ear, everyone waiting for the punchline. "He said that's fine, he'd been thinking of polygamy for years now!"

They all burst into uproarious laughter. The Unending stood at the edge of the elevated stone platform on which the exterior dining arrangement had been set, and no one noticed until Mira turned her head. "Your Grace!" she exclaimed, then shot up from her chair. She was having trouble standing upright from all the giggling. Unending felt as though she'd caught her children doing something naughty and fun, something she would've loved to participate in, if only they'd reached out to her.

"Pardon my interruption," the Unending said as all the Aeternae stiffened in their seats. They put on strained smiles as they got up and bowed before her, but the Unending wasn't at all impressed. In fact, the sudden change of demeanor was simply irritating. "Please, relax. You looked like you were having a good time."

"We were, Your Grace," Kemi replied. "Just passing the time."

"Who's Filibert?" Unending asked.

Arya stifled a chuckle, but Mira was quick to take over. "My youngest brother, Your Grace. He's quite the character. Has a hard time sticking to one woman these days."

"Ah, I see. Well, please, continue with your entertainment, I was just—" Unending tried to excuse herself, but stopped when she noticed their collective relief as she prepared to turn around and leave. "Actually, no. I've been meaning to ask... what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Mira replied, the crease between her eyebrows signaling a blend of disdain and amusement. I didn't like it, and I doubted the Unending appreciated it either.

"My throne room is empty. None of you have come to speak to me in quite a while. You made me your Lady Supreme, yet you have forsaken me," she said.

"Your Grace, we've been rather busy. The kingdom doesn't run itself," Kemi interjected, apparently offended by the implications. "It's not that we haven't wanted to come around, but our world is growing. It needs us."

The Unending let out a sigh, bitterly amused. "Yet here you are, sitting and eating and drinking, joking about your siblings, while I sit in my throne room alone."

"We're not your pets," Arya blurted. She seemed annoyed, but I couldn't understand what had caused the change in their behavior.

"Excuse me?" Unending asked, her voice breaking.

"We all know you came here to heal your broken heart. But we're not your pets. Not your companions, either. We're free people, and we can do whatever we please," Arya said, despite Mira's repeated attempts to silence her.

"Your Grace, I'm sorry. Arya doesn't know what—"

"No, no, she needs to hear this," Arya cut her off. "She can't rely on us to raise her spirits whenever she's down. We've got more important things to do. Our kingdom, as Kemi said, is growing. We have cities to build, stories to write, roads to pave."

"And how is that done from this table?" Unending replied dryly. "What is going on with you? Your traditions are failing. You used to bring me flowers and offerings every day. It's been days since I've last seen any of you. Weeks since you've even asked for my counsel. I'm supposed to be your Lady Supreme, yet you don't seem to need me anymore."

Arya shrugged. Mira cleared her throat, taking over the conversation. "Your Grace, we were just eating and drinking before the day's start."

"Oh, enough with the coddling," Arya retorted. "The truth is, Your Grace, we haven't had much need for you lately. That's all."

"You once worshipped my wisdom," Unending murmured, understandably taken aback.

"Well, they have mine, now." A voice rippled through the garden. It was a familiar voice, at least to the Unending, because I felt the sudden rush of heavy emotions as she whirled around and saw the Spirit Bender standing mere feet away.

"What... what are you doing here?" Unending asked, her voice breaking.

"Wait, you didn't know he was here?" Mira was clearly surprised by this unexpected turn of events. "He's your brother..."

"My brother in death," the Unending said, unable to take her eyes off the Spirit Bender. He smiled, bowing politely before her. "What are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I came to see you." Spirit sighed. "It's been a long time, my dear. I figured my carefully planted suggestion that your subjects enjoy their breakfast outside this morning might get you out of your throne room."

"You lured me to the garden, then... How long have you been here?"

"A couple of weeks," Spirit replied nonchalantly. "Pardon my secrecy, but I wanted to get a feel for your people first."

The more he spoke, the more alarmed Unending became. "What do you mean 'get a feel for my people'? What is this about, Spirit?"

He laughed, and the Aeternae watched in silence, still coming to terms with what had

happened. I understood the events that had led to this moment, but they seemed to be taking longer to reach the same conclusion. The Spirit Bender had found the Unending here on Visio, but instead of talking to her directly, he'd been cozying up to the Aeternae, likely pouring poison in their ears—it was the only plausible explanation for Arya's arrogance or their overall lack of respect for the Unending. He'd come between her and her people.

"I've come to talk to you, my dear," Spirit said. "A few things have come to pass since we last spoke."

Unending scoffed, shaking her head in dismay. "That's a bit of a lie, isn't it? Why come to talk to me if you've been talking to my subjects instead?"

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. I only wanted to understand what you were doing here," Spirit replied.

Mira gasped. "No, you didn't. You told us she wasn't fit to be our ruler, and that it would soon become apparent. It's why you urged us to steer clear of her throne room, because it would prove how needy and vain she really is."

"Ah. There it is," Unending muttered. "Tell me, Spirit. What's your endgame? We both know this isn't a courtesy visit. You're up to something. Did Death send you?"

He shook his head. "She did, but it's more complicated than that. Hence why I wanted to talk. She did an awful thing to you, my dear, and I am here to help you avenge Erethiel. I am here to help you make things right in the universe again. For too long, Death has held us prisoner to her whims. It needs to stop."

"Are you insane?" Unending asked, though it sounded like more of a rhetorical question. "Death sent you here so I could avenge Erethiel?"

"I'm the sanest of us all. And you're not following me. Death sent me for a different reason, but I'm the only one who can see right through her. Who understands that she must be put back in her place. The liberties she's taken with us—we can put an end to it all."

It only took the Unending a few seconds to refuse him. "I came here to seek comfort and solace away from her. I have no intention of dealing with Death ever again. What you seem to be wanting is the complete opposite. It is also treason. I suggest you abandon this foolishness before you get yourself hurt."

"Help me, Unending. Help me, and together we can put her away for good. Our society functions without her. She's no longer needed. Death is obsolete with so many Reapers in existence!" Spirit insisted. "I care about you. I've always cared about you. This is our chance to work together. To be partners and champions for ourselves!"

Unending exhaled sharply. "Is that why you killed Erethiel upon her order? Because you care about me? Ridiculous! You're insane. No. Go away, Spirit. Your vendetta is a fool's game. Death is death, and she is unquestionable and indestructible, whether we like it or not."

"Is she, though? Indestructible?"

Silence settled over the dining hall as Spirit took a couple of steps forward. Instinctively, Unending moved back. His presence made her uneasy, and she couldn't quite figure out why. It wasn't about what he'd just said. No. That wasn't enough to make

her feel wary of him, because they were on the same level in terms of power and abilities. There was something else, something in the way he spoke—it made her worry.

"You have a way to seal her away for good, remember? You told me about it, a long time ago. A thousand marks, a thousand runes to put her down and out of commission, forever. You can give it to me. But it'll be much harder to do it alone. I need my fellow First Tennesers with me on this," Spirit added.

"No. No!" Unending said. "No. I'm not giving you the Thousand Seals. I made that spell because I could, because I was curious if I could actually come up with something so powerful against Death, but I never intended to use it! That's not right or natural. Whatever my dealings with her, they concern me, not you. Whatever your problems with her, they're yours, not mine. Death is absolute. She is our master and our maker. What you're suggesting is worse than heresy. It's a crime against the universe itself."

"She had Erethiel killed!" Spirit snarled. "I'm offering you a chance to be with me, to rule beside me over this endless universe, to pay her back for what she did to you! Brother and sister. Partners!"

"And I will never forgive her for it. But that doesn't entitle me to take action against her. I see it now. My pride. My foolishness. They've led me here." The Unending sighed. "The people I've given eternal life to are now rising up against me, ignoring me, forgetting where they started. I see it now—she was right. The living can never truly appreciate what I have. And I cannot, in good conscience, follow your lead on this."

Spirit didn't wait to be told twice. He'd come here with a plan, and he was already springing for option B. He snapped his fingers, and the Aeternae vanished into thin air. "Let's get them out of the way first."

No one even saw it coming. A split-second later, he flashed past Unending, and I felt the burn in my side. He'd cut her. I turned around just in time to watch him raise his bloodied scythe.

"What did you do?" Unending asked, suddenly alarmed.

"Don't worry, your precious subjects are okay. I merely relocated them."

"No, what did you do to me?!"

"Oh, Death taught me some new words and sub-words over the years," Spirit said. "I've been experimenting with some new spells and seals. It turns out I'm really good at this death magic thing. So, if you won't give me the Thousand Seals, I'll get the spell out of you myself, one way or another..."

"Spirit, did you just put a seal on me?" Unending hissed, still unable to believe her own eyes.

"My dear, this is obviously not the first time I've betrayed you, since I killed your beloved. To be fair, you probably should've seen this coming," he replied dryly, giving her a cold smirk.

Something inside me snapped, and my heart broke all over again. "I... I don't understand," the Unending managed, though deep down she knew exactly what Spirit was trying to tell her. She could feel it in her soul. "I thought you cared about me."

"I do, darling. But I can't have you messing up my plans. I've worked too hard to get to this point."

A second later, Unending tried to hit him, but she was frozen to the spot as Spirit whispered a series of binding spells. I felt the chains come up all bright and golden as they latched around Unending's neck. This was it. The dreaded moment when Spirit had bound the Unending to Visio. The story of how this had come to pass had always been vague, barely described in Kalla's books. Nobody had actually witnessed it—or almost nobody, I realized, noticing a figure moving through the greenery. Arya had found her way back into the Garden of Enkil faster than everyone else, but she stayed quiet.

"Spirit, no..." Unending said, clutching the glowing chains.

"Oh, that ship has sailed, sister. I offered you a chance to be with me. To become a better, more powerful version of yourself. You're now an obstacle, and I'm afraid I have to treat you accordingly."

"You're making a mistake. This isn't the way. Whatever you have against Death, there must be another way to resolve it. This will only end in tragedy!"

"What's truly irritating is that I just asked you to join me, and you didn't even flinch. You didn't even bother to think it through. It's like I'm not worth your attention, if only for a minute, out of respect. That's how little you think of me, and I have to say, it's a bit funny... considering I've just bound you to this world," Spirit said. "And to think we could've had it all."

"You're irredeemable."

"Well, for what it's worth, at least I know what I'm after. You're languishing here, craving the love and affection of your people. You gave them immortality and look at them now. Not one of them is saying a word in your favor. Not a single Aeternae is standing up for you," Spirit declared. Arya finally came out with her claws out, though not that eager to strike him—she seemed hesitant, though clearly distraught, so he just waved her away with a disgusted sneer. "A little too late for retaliation, though I'll give you credit, young lady, you're more resourceful than your fellow Aeternae to have come back so quickly."

"You should stop," Arya said.

"Be thankful I'm doing this. Trust me, she was sure to get bored of you all sooner or later. That's the Unending. She briefly rebels against Death, toys with her own gift like a raucous teenager, but eventually she comes around and admits that Death was right. Had I not done this now, she would've stripped you of your immortality eventually. She wouldn't want Death getting involved again."

"What? No! That's a lie!" Unending screamed, and it echoed painfully beyond the manicured trees and sculpted columns. It tore me apart to feel her like this. The chains burned into her soul and vanished, but she knew. She knew she would never leave Visio again. She could feel the seal nestled inside, a part of her now.

"Oh, please!" Spirit mockingly laughed in her face. "You would've let the Aeternae fantasy go on for a little while longer, just until Death sent one of us to warn you that she would take action. I thought I'd give you a heads-up and the opportunity to fight back while you still had the chance."

Arya frowned. "What do you mean? I... I don't understand."

"Death has been telling me about Visio. About how you went ahead and gave an

entire planet immortality after Erethiel. She asked me to come and warn you," Spirit explained. "You see, I did come here in an official capacity, but I had no intention of going through with delivering this warning because I have plans of my own against Death. But it does prove something, doesn't it?"

"She sent you here to kill my people, too?" Unending mumbled, unable to cope with it all, and I couldn't blame her. Things were going from bad to worse in a matter of minutes.

"No. She sent me here to tell you that if you don't undo your magic and make them mortal again, she will come to Visio herself and kill them all," Spirit replied. "Seeing that you haven't learned your lesson kind of pissed her off. This is what I mean, my dear. We could've risen against her for this."

The Unending shook her head. "No. No. She's right. I shouldn't have done it in the first place." Her statement drew a gasp from Arya. "I'm sorry, but I see it now, clearer than ever. My ability has caused nothing but trouble. I made you all immortal in a bid to fill the hole that losing Erethiel left in my soul. I am the one who caused the imbalance in our universe. I am the one in the wrong. Everything I've done has led to... this."

Spirit cursed under his breath, clearly displeased with her conclusion. "You're going down the wrong path, my dear. You're giving Death too much credit, even now, after I've just told you she was going to kill everyone here."

"She's right! Immortality isn't natural. Eternity isn't natural. Not for the living, not when there is so much waiting for them beyond death!" she replied, increasingly angry and unable to act on it. The Spirit Bender's seal was burning right through her, tightening its grip.

"Well, that's out of your hands now," Spirit said dryly. "I'll let Death know you obliged and stripped your people of their immortality, but that you want nothing to do with her ever again. In fact, you were adamant that no more attempts to communicate be made from her part. It'll keep her nose out of this place, at least until I'm done with her."

He proceeded to whisper a series of chants, and I could feel Unending getting cut off from the rest of the world. Her telepathic connections had just been severed. She couldn't reach out to anyone for help.

"Oh, no," I murmured.

"You can't do this!" Unending insisted, but Spirit didn't give a damn.

"I'm obviously doing it."

Arya just stood there, watching with a deep frown etched between her eyebrows, as the Spirit Bender enforced his first seal on Unending.

I didn't even notice Valaine had appeared beside me. She was but a vision, unnoticed by the memory itself but clearly visible to me. There was a reason why she'd forced her way into this moment. Spirit and Unending continued their argument for a while. Arya no longer bothered to defend her maker, and I worried she'd turn out to be a horrible disappointment. It all faded into the background as Valaine took center stage in my mind.

"That look on Arya's face. I know it," she murmured. "Bitter acceptance."

The Unending dropped to her knees, defeated by the first seal. Arya's lips turned into a fascinated half-smile, finding Spirit's dominance intriguing. She could've tried to do

something, I thought. But what could she do against a being as powerful and devious as the Spirit Bender? Did she even want to stop him?

"Do you think she could've helped you in any way? Where are the others?" I asked Valaine.

"Spirit teleported them to different places. It'll be a while before they make it back here. Arya may have been the closest, but not by design. Either way, no... I don't think she could've helped even if she wanted to."

The revelation struck me like an icy wave. I froze, the implications rising before me, terrible and fraught with danger.

"That's not what matters, Tristan," Valaine added. "I remember the seals. I know what they are and how they must be broken."

Just then, as the Unending finally succumbed to the first seal's power and cried out in agonizing pain, I understood. We'd reached the end of the line here. We'd found what we'd been looking for, and the extent of the damage Spirit had done to Unending was clearer than ever. She glanced up at Arya. She'd been convinced by Spirit that Unending would take her immortality away. Unable to part with such a precious gift, she couldn't bring herself to rise against the Spirit Bender. She would convince the others that this had to be done, too.

Unending became a prisoner of the world she'd thought she'd honored and blessed with her presence. The people she'd graced with life eternal had stood by and done nothing, allowing the Spirit Bender to set the stage for this precise moment.

Our fight for the Unending's liberation had just begun. It would end in blood-drinking and Black Fever. This was the last I would see of the Aeternae's better and brighter days.

"You won't get away with this," Unending grunted, pushing herself back up. But she could barely stand, her being still struggling to adjust to its new, albeit unseen condition.

Spirit chuckled. "I already have. Your people know not to mess with me. I will forge ahead with my revenge against Death. I will get it. I will prevail. And then, my dear, I will come back to see you and rub it in your face."

"The others won't let you." Unending was breathing heavily under the seals' titanic pressure. But her words only brought more amusement for Spirit.

"My dear. I've already taken care of them. They, too, were foolish to say no, so they didn't leave me another choice. And I cannot rely on Widow, Soul, or Phantom, since they've signed themselves over to Thieron's protection. The fools."

"I'm sorry," Arya whispered, a single tear streaming down her cheek. She knew what she'd done by not doing anything, and she was already learning to live with it.

The Unending was conflicted. I could feel it. The rage inside her bubbled to the surface as she raised a hand and presented her scythe. I marveled at the beauty of its blade and the delicate handle. Despite its graceful design, however, the weapon passed a horrible sentence.

She may have been bound to Visio, but she had not been rendered powerless, and she intended to fight this with everything she had. But before she could attempt anything against Spirit, Unending had to punish the Aeternae.

"Don't be sorry, Arya," Unending said. "Everything that comes your way from now on

will be on you. It will be your doing. Not one of you sought me for days. You dared question my being. You allowed the Spirit Bender to screw with your minds," she continued, her voice rumbling like thunder. It made the Aeternae woman quiver as Unending's scythe shone brighter and brighter until it blinded her momentarily. "You stood by and watched as he hurt me. He bound me to you, and now you will all be bound to death and blood!"

Before she could utter the curse, however, Spirit threw a powerful blue pulse at her. It hit Unending in the solar plexus, and she fell on her back, unable to get back up. Arya breathed a sigh of relief, lowering her gaze.

This could've been the moment in which the Aeternae would've become blood drinkers, but Spirit stopped it. I wasn't sure how the rest of this encounter would go, but once the last seal was placed and three reincarnations later, Unending would eventually catch up and finish what she'd started here, dooming their entire species to life by blood and blood alone.

I quickly remembered the texts from Kalla's books—the so-called legends regarding Eternity and how she'd become bound to Visio. They'd been substantially embellished, though I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the tales had been transmitted orally at first, before they were put on paper. After all, in the legend, Spirit had offered to be Unending's Lord Supreme. In reality, he'd offered a partnership. He'd revealed to have been the one who killed Erethiel, too, but Unending was already aware of this by the time he got to Visio. There were several inconsistencies in the mythology, but one thing did become clear, as Unending whispered into her scythe, angrily eyeing Arya.

"My misery will haunt you all," Unending said, prompting the Aeternae to frown and quiver in her boots.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You'll see someday," she replied, before Spirit cast another shimmering pulse in her direction, enough to push her back down. It was too late, though. This was the moment where the Black Fever had been born, from her suffering. At some point in the future, it would take hold of the Aeternae, and they would experience their first outbreak of this terrible curse.

The Unending's own creation betrayed her, and that was why she would never be able to rise against Death. She couldn't do to Death what they had done to her because the feeling this entire affair had provoked inside Unending was so terrible, so unbearable, that she couldn't wish it upon her worst enemy.

In here, the dice had been thrown. Her fate had been decided a long time ago. Out there, we still had an inkling of hope. It wasn't much, but maybe it would be just enough to get us all through this fresh hell we found ourselves in.

The worst part also awaited us in the real world. I had a few things to clear with Arya over all of this.

KELARA

It felt like a long time since I'd last visited the Nightmare Forest. That wasn't the case, of course, but as I looked around I had the distinct impression that I was finally reunited with an old friend. The Nightmare Forest was a cold, dark and savage place, riddled with all kinds of dangers for the living. Wild animals big and fast enough to tear an Aeternae's head off. Creatures with poisonous venom that could cripple and kill every other species that lived in this world.

"Where's Taeral now?" I asked. "He's been staying out of sight from everyone, us Reapers included."

"Death has a gag order, so to speak. He's not to intervene unless she commands it," Soul said. "It was a recent communication. She can see through his eyes, now, as well as ours... she's holding him back until she considers it appropriate for him to intervene. Oh, there we go, more ghosts..." His gaze wandered somewhere to my right.

What our living friends didn't know, however, was that the Nightmare Forest was also home to a handful of wandering souls. Ghosts that had slipped through the cracks, having learned to hide themselves from everyone and everything. Seeley had done a planet-wide search for their kind upon his arrival, but they'd managed to escape his sight.

"Regarding Taeral, I have to admit, it's pissing me off. He might be useful," I muttered, watching the spirits walk between the trees.

"But Thieron is more important. Hence the hesitation. I say we don't rely on him, for now. I don't trust Death with the proper judgment on this," Spirit replied. "Notice how they're calm. Not running scared or anything," he added, nodding toward the ghosts.

It had become common knowledge to us that the Darklings' Knight Ghouls were often let loose to feed on these souls, since there were no Reapers left to take them into the afterlife—the purpose had never been to spare the dead their wandering misery, but rather to silence any witnesses.

I'd seen some of these ghosts moving through the woods before. They watched us with curious eyes, never daring to approach us. I would catch glimpses of them out of the corner of my eye. Faint, translucent figures that flickered and vanished from sight whenever I turned my head.

"We should reap them at some point," Soul said as we walked through the woods.

The night had settled over the realm, frost gathering at the base of gnarly old trees

and covering the dark green leaves in a thin layer of snowy white. This was the first sign of a colder season coming—sudden drops in temperature that we Reapers couldn't exactly feel but could still observe. We moved through the twilight, unheard and unseen by anything that breathed in the night.

"I wholeheartedly agree, but we should get them to open up a little bit first and tell us what they've seen," I replied. "If anyone knows about Darkling movements in the Nightmare Forest, it's the ghosts."

"And since their eventual cooperation might not give us anything useful, you didn't tell the GASP people about them, so as not to get their hopes up. Am I getting that right?" he asked, and I shook my head no in response. "Then why keep it from them? You asked all the Reapers, plus Nethissis, not to tell GASP or anyone else about the ghosts."

I offered him a dry smile. "We've been breaking so many of Death's rules lately, I figured we could at least stick to this one. The living don't need to know about the dead here. It's not their business. If we can get the spirits to talk, if we can gather any kind of useful intel from them, you and I are perfectly capable of relaying that knowledge back to GASP."

"Look at you, all stiff and rule-abiding," Soul muttered, not hiding his amusement.

"Like I said. We've been absolute rebels. I see this as one way to sort of... sweeten the pot when our bill is due. You know Death is going to flay us every which way, right?"

He chuckled. "Why? We're helping."

"Yeah, but we're also setting a bad example for other Reapers," I replied. "Think about it. How many death laws have we broken so far?"

He did think about it, and I could see the humor fading from his expression. "Quite a few."

"And yes, she will obviously commend us if we succeed. By the stars, she will kiss and hug each of us. She will weep tears of joy and gratitude. But then she'll take charge of the kingdom of the dead once more, and you know what will happen after that."

"She'll have to set an example." Soul sighed. "Yes. You're right."

We stayed away from any beaten paths, making our way through the underbrush and the most obscure parts of the woods—we'd already learned the hard way that the Darklings had ways of spotting us, so why risk it? Darkness was our friend in the Nightmare Forest, because darkness hid pretty much everything. Our enemies were alive, and they had their eyes to rely on. It was time to go back to the basics, which I didn't mind at all. It reminded me of my own living days. And the many mistakes I'd made prior to my last breath.

To our left, a spirit walked in silence, barely giving us a glance. He didn't seem to care much about us, unlike the others who dwelled here with him, and that made me curious. We'd been following ancient tracks, and we weren't making any progress in finding the Darklings—Corbin in particular—so a new approach was sorely needed.

"Look to my nine o'clock," I whispered.

Soul gave me a sideways glance, then saw past me, noticing the spirit. "New travel companion?"

"He's been walking in the same direction for the past twenty minutes," I told him.

"Maybe he's trying to tell us something."

"We could approach him, but remember, not all spirits are sane or coherent. Some wander for too long. They lose their minds eventually and end up functioning on loops," Soul said.

I shrugged. "It depends on how long he's been around, really. Centuries are not as bad as millennia. At least he's not running away from us, so that should tell us something." Pausing for a moment, I reflected on all the times I'd seen ghosts during my reaping missions. Most of them had been around for a few days, at least. Sometimes decades, at the very most. They had yet to lose their minds or function on loops, like Soul said. "Have you ever come across such poltergeists yourself? I mean, I've heard stories about them, and I've been instructed on the topic, but I haven't encountered ancient ghosts myself."

"Oh, yeah. Some were impossible to even reason with," Soul said. "Others were too angry, decayed by the feeling of abandonment. The existence of such entities used to be really rare, though. Maybe one lost soul for every thousand reaped. The ratio in these woods, where the ghosts seem to have found a scrap of safety away from the Knight Ghouls, is infinitely more troubling."

Soul and I stopped walking, just to see what the spirit would do next. He stilled before finally turning his head to look our way. He seemed faded, like a glitching hologram that could barely hold its own form. His hair was black, and his skin looked darker. "He's a Rimian," I whispered. "Well, at least he used to be a Rimian."

"Don't be afraid," Soul told him. "We have no intention of harming you."

"We just want to know what you might've seen in the forest lately," I added, taking my first step toward the spirit. He didn't budge, but he didn't give me a friendly vibe, either. Silence hung heavy between us, until he found the strength to answer.

"Will you end it?" he asked.

"End what?" I replied.

"My life like this. I cannot take it anymore..."

"We'll take you where you belong, I promise," Soul said. "Your world has been thrown off its natural balance, but we're here to make things right. Tell us what you've seen, and I'll make sure you get to move on."

The man sighed and walked toward us. "You're on the right path."

"How so? I haven't seen a single fresh trail," I said. "It's been days since someone's passed through here."

"Look for the eyes. The trees have eyes."

I frowned, glancing around and trying to make sense of what the Rimian ghost was talking about. All I could see was the hard, dark-brown-and-black bark, a thick crust enveloping each tree trunk. There was no... My own mind trailed off as I recognized the carving. It was so subtle that it was barely noticeable. "Soul, look here..." I murmured, reaching the nearest tree. I ran my fingers over the eye-shaped rune, which had been cut with a sharp knife. Beads of amber had formed, and they looked like tears.

"What is this?" Soul asked, visibly troubled. He hadn't seen this sign before.

"It's on all the trees," the ghost said. "Wherever the Darklings go in the Nightmare

Forest, they leave these marks. They know you're here."

A chill rushed through me. "What do you mean they know we're here? What do these runes do?"

"They know you're here."

"They know we're here," Soul repeated after him, his voice fading as he looked at me, fear glimmering in his galaxy eyes. "Kelara, they've been watching us through these runes. From the moment we left Orvis, they've gone to great lengths to make sure they could see us coming, knowing we'd be following their old tracks."

We should've anticipated something like this, but the runes were barely visible. There wasn't a single fresh trace to indicate that the Darklings had been through this area. Nothing throughout our journey so far had pointed to the enemy's presence in our vicinity. Soul revealed his scythe, giving the ghost a flat smile. "That's why you were following us, isn't it? You wanted to warn us."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you speak up sooner?" I asked, trying my best not to get angry.

"I couldn't find the strength until you approached me. It's hard to explain, but I've been like this for a very long time. I haven't spoken to anyone in years. Words don't come as easily as before," the spirit said. "I'm sorry."

"We're still in our subtle forms," I told Soul. "What are the odds that these eyes can see us?"

"I don't know. They're using Spirit's magic, so I wouldn't hold my breath on anything working exclusively in our favor," he replied, then shifted his focus to the ghost. "What else can you tell us? How do we find the Master of Darkness? He's their leader. They all obey and follow him."

The ghost nodded slowly. "Follow the eyes. Deep in the heart of this nightmare, you'll find the Master. He's waiting."

"How do you know he's waiting?" I asked, deeply troubled by his words.

"All the spirits are talking. Every lost soul in the forest has seen him. They've heard him, like I have..."

Somehow, this entire moment felt staged. As if we were supposed to be here. As if we were supposed to notice this ghost and the eye runes. As if we were being led in a certain direction, and not to our benefit. The thought of certain trouble made me quiver, but Soul gripped my upper arm and squeezed gently. "We've got this," he said. "We're well above their level."

I wanted to agree with him. I really did. But the Darklings had been one step ahead of us this whole time. Wherever we went, they found us. Whatever we did, they outplayed us. Our only advantage had been Valaine and our ability to keep her away from Corbin. I wasn't sure how that would turn out in the end, but at least we'd made it this far. Yes, the Darklings had a way of getting under our skin. But we were Reapers. We had our nature as an advantage. It didn't guarantee our victory, but it did help. We had to keep trying.

Death's release depended on it, along with the liberation of Visio. Soul exhaled sharply and cut the ghost with his scythe. The blade glimmered white as the spirit

disintegrated into a puff of silvery gold sparks. One by one, they vanished, and the Rimian man was gone. He'd moved on into the afterlife, where something else awaited. At least he was finally free, no longer hiding or running from Knight Ghouls and Darklings.

"We need to consider the possibility that they know we're coming," Soul said as we resumed our walk. Headed toward the center of the Nightmare Forest, we moved carefully, mindful of the other spirits that lingered and wandered aimlessly around us. I found comfort in their presence, since their sudden disappearance would've alerted us to Knight Ghouls approaching. As long as there were ghosts around, Soul and I were relatively safe.

"We must assume they can see us in our subtle forms, through these carved eyes." I nervously glanced around and spotted more runes along the way. The Rimian spirit had been right. They'd carved them on every tree. "They all look recent. The bark hasn't even healed yet."

"It must've been a collective effort after Orvis," Soul said. "It's a good thing they didn't do this earlier; otherwise, Orvis would've been discovered."

"I'm thinking this kind of surveillance magic must take its toll on the spellcaster's energy," I replied. "It can't be easy to monitor hundreds of miles' worth of dark woods all the time."

"The Rimian ghost said we'll find Corbin at the heart of the Nightmare Forest. It's likely he will be expecting us."

We stayed in our subtle forms and continued to move through the darker spots, doing our best to stay out of sight. Jumping across large swaths of space, we made sure that we would at least try to lose our watchers—if they really could see us. We stayed on the ground, coming across other spirits along the way, runaway souls that were keeping their distance from the center of the Nightmare Forest. They all confirmed what our Rimian friend had already said. Corbin was there, waiting. He knew we were coming, and I doubted we had any way left to surprise him. We weren't even sure our subtle forms were useful.

After reaping another witness, Soul gave me a worried look. "It feels like we're walking into trouble, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. But what choice do we have? Corbin must be taken out."

"I agree, Kelara. How are we going to do that if he's expecting us?"

I hadn't seen him like this in a while. Rarely had the Soul Crusher ever been so discerning, so concerned with our wellbeing. He'd made a name for himself as the slightly more psychotic among the First Tennes, and he wasn't the type to take crap from anyone. Oddly enough, I respected and admired that about him. Hell, it was actually part of his overall appeal, but it had taken me a while to figure that out.

Resting a hand on his shoulder, I gave him a half-smile. "We'll figure something out. You're a master of interdimensional pockets. One of the first Reapers ever created. That has got to count for something, right?"

"Are you complimenting me?"

I wasn't sure what to make of his expression. Humor persisted at the corner of his mouth, tugging ever so slightly, but darkness dwelled in his eyes, as if all the stars had

been shrouded in secrecy and hidden from my sight.

"I'm simply telling you the truth. I know the Spirit Bender's deeds on Visio have rattled you and your siblings. You're all shaken and I get it. We're all in the same boat here. But Spirit is dead, and we will keep the bastard dead, if we do our jobs right. Taking Corbin down is the task we've undertaken, and I just need you to know that I trust you to see this to the very end no matter what."

"One way or another, right?" he asked, and I nodded briefly, the tension between us rising. "Even if we don't know what one way or another might entail, huh?"

He made me chuckle. Unable to stop myself, I moved my hand from his shoulder and brought it up to cup his sharp cheek. His skin felt soft, like a layer of pure silk stretched across fine bone and muscle, tickling my fingertips in the sweetest way possible. He froze under my touch, and I took a moment to savor the sensation before reality came back to smack us both over the head.

"I'm trying to figure out whether you're incredibly bold or incredibly reckless with such statements," he muttered, his head lowering slightly. The air thickened as our lips moved closer. I hadn't felt like this in a long time, but the sensation was unforgettable. The Soul Crusher stirred me in ways I hadn't thought possible anymore. Our unexpected partnership had made it possible. My only question was, where would we go from here?

"I think we've both existed for long enough to accept that sometimes you mess up just for the sake of messing up. You take the wrong turn simply to see where the road leads you. You jump into the abyss to find out what's at the bottom. Here, in our intermediary plane, we face certain dangers, but us Reapers, unlike the First Tenners, have already seen the end of the road as living creatures. What guarantee do we have that failing in this stage of our existence will be the end?"

"Kelara, what are you trying to tell me?" Soul asked, his brows pulled into a delicate frown. I laughed again, because I relished seeing him like this—uncertain, maybe even a little lost. Vulnerable, and not at all the Soul Crusher I'd first met. I knew that part of this shift in his behavior had everything to do with our circumstances on Visio, but it didn't explain everything about him. There was more, and I could feel it in the faint golden thread that had formed between our souls. Maybe he couldn't see it yet, but I could, if only from the corner of my eye. Only when I wasn't really looking. Something was shifting between us, and I had to take it to the next level. We had no idea what we were walking into, so why stretch things out any longer?

"Will you take a leap of faith with me?" I ultimately replied, my hand still on his cheek. He brought his up to cover mine and closed his eyes for a second. "Yeah, we're staring trouble in the face. But when has that ever stopped us?"

"I don't want anything to happen to you," he said.

"And I don't want anything to happen to you. But we're here, Soul. We're doing this. No one else is going to do it for us."

He inched closer and brushed his lips over mine. It was such a fleeting gesture that I barely felt it, yet my soul expanded like a universe of its own. Holding my breath, I waited for something that never came, and I decided this wouldn't be everything there was between us. Pushing my heels up, I kissed him. He felt cold and warm at the same

time, but he didn't reject me. No, he deepened the kiss, our souls finally bonding. A golden light glowed between us, and we both looked down.

The thread had grown brighter, impossible to ignore. As we gradually relaxed and took it all in, the link shimmered away into its subtle form. "I've seen this before," he said, giving me an alarmed look. "It's... it's love. What the hell did you do to me, Kelara?"

Reapers weren't the type to fall in love. We'd always assumed that our bodies had been the main drivers of emotions. Hormones, chemical reactions, physical attachments—all parts of the living world and not our own. I'd heard stories of Reapers falling in love, and I'd seen it with Seeley and Nethissis, too.

We'd been through so much already, Soul and I. We'd prevailed in the face of grave dangers. Everything we'd experienced had served to bring us closer to one another. So, yeah, maybe love had found us, as well, despite the slim odds!

"Seriously? I'm the one at fault?" I replied dryly, though deep down I understood why he was inclined to panic. Someone who'd existed for as long as the Soul Crusher must've abandoned all hope of feeling like this ever again.

"What? You're blaming me?"

I stifled a chuckle and kissed him again, leaving him breathless. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close, reveling in our closeness. Despite his childish protests, Soul was enjoying this as much as I was. "Let's just agree to disagree on this one and take it like it is," I said and slowly pulled back in an effort to retain my senses.

Remembering where we were standing, I knew our bliss would be short-lived. The shadow of a smile flickered across Soul's face as he looked at me.

"I admit, I'm a lot braver when you're around," he replied. "Maybe that will prevent my ultimate downfall."

"Come on. Let's kill Corbin already. His mere existence feels like a stain in desperate need of cleaning," I said, taking his hand.

We drew closer to the center of the Nightmare Forest, and it became obvious that we were in Corbin's vicinity. There were no ghosts left around, only a few ghouls sniffing the ground and moving outward. They'd eventually catch a scent and go after one of the remaining wandering souls. If only we'd had the time to reap them all—they were skittish and scared, and we were better off removing the threat against them before trying to reason with them.

Out here, the forest seemed different. The trees were significantly taller and bigger, reminding me of The Shade's redwoods. The bark darkened close to black, and the branches bowed toward the moist ground, loaded with obsidian leaves that shimmered in whatever temporary ray of moonlight managed to cut through the canopy. Mist covered the forest floor, still and milky white. There wasn't a single animal around. No sabre tigers. No poisonous snakes. Not a deer or a bird. I couldn't even hear the chirps of insects anymore. It was as if life had left the core of the Nightmare Forest, perhaps because every breathing creature knew better than to cross paths with the Darklings and their Knight Ghouls.

In our subtle forms, we were able to move carefully between the trees, mindful of any enemies nearby. The ghouls were busy sniffing for ghost prints, while I cautiously avoided

the direct angle of carved eye runes around us. Finally, Soul and I managed to get close enough to the center to spot some kind of gathering. Tents had been put up, with furs covering both sides. It had to get cold out here during the night. A fire burned in the middle of the camp, but there was no one there. It looked abandoned.

"This doesn't feel right," I whispered.

"Nothing ever is when it comes to the Darklings." Soul clutched my hand tightly. I wanted this gesture to make me feel better, but it didn't. We knew we were walking into trouble, but it wasn't like we could run back without at least trying to accomplish our goal. No matter how we approached this, the Darklings were worthy adversaries. Our strength no longer depended on numbers, but rather on our ability to deal with situations like this.

It wasn't the unexpected peril that brought out the best in us. It was the certainty of danger that forged true character. This was the real challenge and walking away was not an option.

"Stay here," I murmured, moving away from Soul. He tried to pull me back, but I waved my hand for him to remain where he was by the gnarly tree.

The silence was unbearable, and I knew something was about to happen. Taking advantage of my subtle form and light feet, I carefully stepped closer to the center of the camp. Mist surrounded my calves, but it didn't react to my presence. The better I could see, the more I understood. Closing my eyes for a moment, I reached out to Soul through our telepathic connection.

"It's a trap," I told him.

"Then get back here!" he hissed, and I could feel his anger bubbling in my own throat.

"No. Someone needs to trigger it. We have to see what they've got planned for us. You're free. You can do something if the worst happens."

"Dammit, Kelara! Don't do this!"

"I have to. It's the only way to get to Corbin," I said. "He'll see me coming, but he won't see you."

A low rumble erupted ahead, and I froze. It was laughter. Coarse and heartless, aimed at me. Something moved between two of the tents. By the time I spotted Corbin, it was too late. A pulse burst from the tip of his scythe, and I was thrown backward. I heard Soul cussing in the back of my head, and I knew he'd be mad at me for going ahead without him.

"Light them up!" Corbin shouted.

In an instant, fires burst all around the campsite. They were strange, unnaturally bright with greenish flames. The moment they were all burning, I felt an energy field settle over me, and a heavy pressure kept me tethered to the cold, hard ground. I couldn't move. I was fully restrained, and Corbin walked toward me with a satisfied smirk. He could see me.

"Don't tell me this comes as a surprise," he said dryly. "Even the spirits warned you."

This was it. The confirmation I needed. The eye runes saw through our subtle forms. Corbin had definitely seen us coming. He'd been watching us the whole time. The pressure increased, pinning me with merciless strength, but I managed to at least tilt my

head and look back to where I'd come from. Soul was nowhere to be seen, and that meant he was safe. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he would do what was needed to take Corbin down.

One of us was bound to get trapped, and I wanted it to be me. Soul was the one with the real potential, while my newer powers were still developing after all the work I'd put into breaking some of Death's many seals. If anyone could take down the Master of Darkness, it was Soul. Not me. I was the bait, and Soul would never have let me do this. I'd have to ask for his forgiveness later. I'd pushed him into an uncomfortable situation, but I hoped it would be worth it.

Corbin reached me, scythe glinting in his hand. The blade looked... odd. Extremely old, but beautiful. Its handle was white, crafted with mother-of-pearl inlays and dark opals. It was truly a sight to behold. Corbin didn't deserve to even touch such a precious and stunning weapon.

"I've been looking forward to taming another ghoul," he added.

This wouldn't end well for me, unless Soul found a way to kill Corbin. I had faith in him. I had all the faith in the world. If anyone could rescue me and take out the Master of Darkness, it was Soul. In that instant, as my options looked incredibly bleak, I found myself wondering whether my intervention here would be regarded as a much-needed sacrifice.

SOUL

“Dammit!” I cursed under my breath, hidden inside an interdimensional pocket. As soon as the green fires had been lit, I’d slipped into my safe space and away from the realm of the living. In here, it was dark and quiet and protected.

But it was also lonely, because I’d left Kelara out there. No. No, she’d left herself out there. She’d stepped up despite my ardent request for her not to. “What the hell was she thinking?”

I knew exactly what she was thinking. There was no way I’d let her get trapped like that. I would’ve joined her under that blanket of pure energy and pressure. The spirits had all but guided us to this place. The eye runes had seen us even in our subtle forms. Corbin had been expecting us. We knew that. We’d known it before we’d even set foot in this place.

“She sacrificed herself so I wouldn’t have to,” I muttered, pacing through the dark space.

What good did that do? I couldn’t get the rest of my fellow Reapers involved because they all had important tasks of their own to deal with. Taeral was out of sight and off limits for now... The threat came on multiple fronts and from different angles and protecting Valaine superseded everything else. We were here on our own, and we’d accepted that going in.

I felt like a coward hiding in here while Kelara was out there with Corbin’s boot basically pressed against her throat. Finally, after some more pacing, I found my resolve. Kelara had snuck into my soul somehow. The bond between us was alive and strong, and I had never felt like this before—or maybe I had prior to my Reaper days, eons ago. Now that we’d grown so close, I couldn’t bring myself to imagine losing her. Kelara meant something to me, and I needed time to figure it all out. But what time did I have if Corbin had trapped her?

None whatsoever.

Kelara had pushed me into this corner because she knew I’d fight back. She knew I wouldn’t let this stand. Perhaps that was why she’d even kissed me earlier. To drive her point home. To further strengthen our bond. To make it impossible for me to stay away from her. “Dammit!”

I walked out of the interdimensional pocket. All it took was one step, and I was back

in the world of the living, standing on the edge of the green fire circle. It was a powerful locking spell. It pinned Kelara down. It stopped her from casting her death magic and prevented telepathic communications, as well. Corbin stood right beside her, smiling, his eerie scythe shining with what I imagined to be excitement.

Angry, I opened my mind to reach out to Taeral. I knew he'd hear me, whether he wanted to or not. "Get your scrawny ass out here, right now!" I hissed. As if summoned, he stepped out of the woods, invisible to the living. He was certainly getting the hang of Thieron's minor magic spells, so he had that going for him.

"I'm sorry this happened," he said, stopping right beside me as he looked at Corbin and Kelara with a dark frown. "It's a problem."

"You're in touch with Death. What does she think of all this?" I asked, my tone clipped. The longer she held Taeral back, the more annoyed I became. Our world was falling apart, and Death was still calling the shots in a way that seemed woefully counter-productive.

"She wants to see where Corbin is going with all of this," Taeral replied.

"Are you friggin' kidding me? Is she friggin' kidding me?"

He sighed. "I know. And let me tell you the worst part... she wants me to allow the Spirit Bender's return." The look in his eyes broke me. His spirit was devastated and conflicted, while I felt a whole new level of rage coming to the surface of my consciousness.

"Say what, now? I thought she wanted him down forever," I managed.

"Upon observing the Darklings and Corbin in particular, Death is convinced he will find a way to bring him back. So, I should stand back until he returns. I swear, Soul, I don't know what the hell she's thinking, but she is still holding key information from us," Taeral said, shaking his head. "And it's not like I can go against her. The last rune that Dream and Nightmare broke from the Thousand Seals has given Death a bit of extra reach. The kind of reach I wasn't even aware of until earlier."

That got me to turn so I could face him properly, chills coursing through my very soul. "I'm lost here."

"She's found a way to control my usage of Thieron, even from afar. She put limits on it, to make sure I do as she commands. I tried helping out earlier, but Death insisted that I hold back."

I cursed under my breath. "What kind of game is she playing?"

"I don't know, but her latest orders are at odds with most of what she's said and asked of me until now, including Kelara. Death used to say Kelara was different, special... but Corbin's current control over her doesn't seem to be a problem. She wants to see what will happen to Kelara."

"Oh, come on..."

Taeral exhaled sharply. "Yeah. My hands are tied. I'm truly sorry. Whatever her endgame, Death wants me to hold back for now."

"Is this some kind of fun activity for her?" I asked, though I knew Taeral didn't have an answer. "What the hell am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"First of all, tell no one about this conversation. Our people have enough on their

plates. You'll have to make do with what you've got until I figure out how to get Death to lift her restrictions on Thieron. I swear, she scares me sometimes."

Few creatures knew Death as well as me and the other First Tengers. There were times when I could see why Spirit had developed such a hatred of her. She had this way of doing things behind our backs, against our better advice—and her reasons were always a mystery. Until I got a chance to sit down with Death myself, I doubted I'd understand any more of this current decision.

Taeral gave me a friendly elbow nudge. "She's asking me to head back to Roano and stay close to Unending. She's all that matters, Death says."

"Screw what Death says, I'm staying here," I shot back, gritting my teeth. The Fire Star prince had good intentions, but he'd gotten himself tangled with Death directly, and that was a difficult trap to escape from. I still remembered the titanic relief I'd experienced upon my release from Zetos. It had meant the official end of my service to Death—I stuck around hoping she'd changed at least some of her ways. Clearly, she hadn't.

Once this whole affair with Visio was over, I planned on going away and never seeing her again. And if I'd needed any more proof that she wasn't all that good to be around, this was it. Even now, Death was pulling the strings and watching the story unravel on her own terms, without letting the rest of us know the whole truth of her intentions.

"You be careful," I added. "Maybe you can knock some sense into her ancient head."

"I'll try, I promise," Taeral replied.

I wasn't sure he could pull it off, but I believed him. Shortly after he disappeared, my attention was quickly redirected back to the Kelara.

"Have you ever seen a ghoul transform?" Corbin asked her.

Darklings stood outside the green fire circle that surrounded the camp. They were quiet, and there was only a handful of them. I knew Corbin would need a solid message in order for him to understand that he wouldn't be allowed to get away with this any longer.

I revealed myself first, fury burning through me and making my skin tingle as I produced my weapon and eyed the nearest Darkling. Corbin saw me first and tried to warn them.

"There's another one!" he shouted, but it was too late. I'd already vanished and reappeared beside my first target. My blade took on its physical form and cut the Darkling's head clean off. Blood gushed, and the body collapsed. I hated taking lives, despite the cruel image I'd crafted for myself. I enjoyed pissing people off and playing with their minds, sure... but death? Death was absolute and final. I hated it.

Nevertheless, it was my only option. I dodged an energy pulse blasted from a second Darkling's scythe. Within a split second, I stood in front of him. My fist rammed through his ribcage, and I tore his heart out. The life drained from his emerald eyes as he flopped on his side, resting forever in a puddle of his own blood.

One by one, as Corbin watched with clear displeasure, I killed the rest of his underlings. Some put up more of a fight than the others, but in the end they were no match for my rage or capabilities. The Knight Ghouls that lingered around this place were

smarter. They knew to keep their distance, despite their rune collars. This irked Corbin, whose lips moved as he uttered a spell. The runes lit up, making the ghouls suffer.

They bawled and whimpered. In the end, they caved to his demand and lunged at me. I cut the air with my scythe and tore open a hole through which the creatures slipped. I closed it back up, leaving the ghouls trapped in my interdimensional pocket. I would deal with them later. Kelara was my priority right now.

"If you so much as touch her, Corbin, I will hurt you in ways you've never imagined," I said firmly, positioning myself closer to one of the green fires so he could see me clearly. So he could understand that I wasn't playing.

The Master of Darkness laughed lightly, as if my mere presence amused him. He didn't seem at all intimidated, and that worried me. At least Petra had shown some fear, albeit slightly. Danika, too. The Whips seemed more concerned by what we could do, while Corbin didn't have a care in the world as his boot pressed down harder on Kelara's throat. She coughed and wheezed, but there wasn't much she could do against him. I was still her best chance to get out of here.

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" he asked. "Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to meet one of Spirit's equals?"

"You've never even met Spirit. What makes you think he's my equal in any sense?" I shot back, my hand gripping the scythe's handle tightly. Only the three of us remained now. Whatever these green fires were, I was certain I could get past them eventually. Knocking them over obviously wouldn't have worked, because Spirit would've never designed a spell so easy to break. For all his faults, a shoddy logic wasn't one of them. I couldn't even get too close without feeling my undead skin simmer and sizzle.

"I learned everything from him. His teachings. His chronicles. His words forever echo in my head," Corbin declared solemnly. "And I know about each of you in fine detail. You're the Soul Crusher. And you're just as he described you."

"Let Kelara go. She's of no value to you."

"On the contrary. She's clearly valuable, since she's the one keeping you here," he said. "Besides, no Reaper gets to walk through my land willy-nilly. Kelara will join the Knight Ghouls. That's where you all belong."

It was my turn to laugh. "Do you really think you have the power to destabilize the universe just so you can keep your Darklings in existence? How small-minded are you, Corbin, to think you can destroy hundreds of Reapers, if not thousands, to retain your immortality and superiority on Visio?"

"It's worked so far."

"Only because you were under the radar," Kelara grunted, trying to free herself from under his boot. But it wasn't Corbin who was keeping her down. It was the green fire magic. I kicked the clay receptacle in which one of the flames burned. Nothing happened. The fire persisted. I broke the vessel, and a strange liquid spilled over the ground—the fuel for the green flames. I stomped it. Still, nothing happened.

"Try all you want. It doesn't work like that," Corbin said flatly. As if I was behind on my death magic classes, and he was the one with all the answers. "Once cast, the spell remains until I undo it. The flames now serve no purpose, though I do admire their

persistence. They mirror my species' resilience, in a way."

"Resilience? You took Unending's gift and perverted it. You conspired to keep her locked away and tormented. You prevented millions of innocent souls from moving on beyond death. Corbin, the crimes you've committed will come back to bite you in the ass. My presence here is proof of that," I replied.

My gaze wandered across the camp as I tried to figure out a way to get through. I had the option of opening an interdimensional pocket, since it wasn't affected by the green fire spell. I could reach the camp, but Corbin would be waiting on the other side. I needed a good diversion, plus a couple of other backup plans, since he'd clearly done his homework on who I was and what I could do. Damn Spirit Bender.

"Resilience, yes. Because even with you and your ilk around, I am still the Master of Darkness, and I will get to Valaine, one way or another," Corbin said. "She won't last much longer, you know. She's been in so many reincarnations that her mind is an absolute mess. I've killed her before. More than once. I will do it again."

"She's remembering," I replied.

"Let her remember. There are still three seals holding her down. And while you all scramble to set her free, Danika and the others will do what they must to revive the Spirit Bender. Our maker will return, and you will all tremble before him."

I scoffed. "Good grief, it's obvious you've never met my brother. I have never trembled before the Spirit Bender, Corbin. Like you said, I'm the Soul Crusher. What part of that makes you think he can outfox me in any way? Remember, the only reason why he was able to get away with much of what he did was because I was on assignment, along with the Widow Maker and the Phantom. Spirit never would've gotten this far had we been around at the time. And look. I'm around now."

My words had the desired effect. A shadow of doubt lingered over his eyes, darkening his expression as he scowled at me. Deep down, Corbin knew and understood my point. The circumstances had changed. Yes, the Darklings had amassed plenty of power, and they had succeeded in shifting public opinion, as well—I'd read the messages that Trev had received from his scouts across the continent. The Aeternae were pretty much on board with the Darklings saving them from the developing outbreak of Black Fever. They were driven by their desire for survival. And yes, Danika and her fellow Whips were making progress in collecting Spirit's soul shards, too.

But Valaine wasn't alone. Unending was coming back to us. The agents of GASP weren't alone, either. They had the support of Senior Aeternae and the people of Orvis—not to mention Reapers and the ghouls they'd already set free. If Corbin thought he'd have a smooth ride going forward, well... he had another thing coming.

"I take it you like this one," Corbin ultimately said, glancing at Kelara. He reached down and grabbed her by her red tie, yanking her into an upright position. "I think I'll enjoy watching her turn."

I tried to get through, but the protective shield cast by the green fires around the campsite made it impossible. It pushed me back, like an invisible membrane, in a similar fashion to what Petra had put together in the north tower during her final standoff. As long as Corbin was alive, the spell resisted. I had a way of getting to him, but not enough

to guarantee success. If I were to save Kelara, I'd have to do this right.

"Damning a Reaper to ghoulishness is something truly awful, Corbin. How do you even sleep at night?" I asked, while mentally connecting to Widow and briefly updating him on the situation at hand. I hadn't felt heartache in ages but looking at Kelara now created a certain discomfort within me.

"Like a baby, knowing I've got an eternity ahead of me," Corbin replied. He revealed a rune collar between the folds of his cloak. He snapped it around Kelara's neck and dropped her like a sack of potatoes.

She landed with a thud, her arms and legs limp as she struggled to at least sit upright. I gave her a faint smile, wishing I could just snatch her out of there. She mirrored my expression and mouthed an "I'm sorry," making me sigh and slowly shake my head.

"It's okay," I told her. "You're going to be okay."

I wasn't sure my words would prove true, but I put all my hopes into that statement. I willed the universe into doing my bidding, though I doubted it would be easy. Moving my focus back to Corbin, I flashed him a cold grin.

"I'll get to you. I hope you realize that. I'll get to you, and I'll show you exactly why it's such a terrible idea to mess with Reapers and death magic," I said.

"By all means, you're welcome to join Kelara. I've never tamed one of Spirit's ancient kind, but I'm sure the resulting ghoul will be my pride and glory," he replied.

Widow came back to me with a simple message. "Let me figure something out." It was enough to give me a sense of confidence as I looked at Kelara once more. My odds weren't the greatest, but they weren't impossible. In my line of work, that was a regular occurrence. Walking smack into the line of fire. Challenging fate and laughing in its face. Doing the most predictable things in order to force the unpredictable to happen. That was what Kelara had endeavored to accomplish, and it was my job to finish what she'd started.

The taste of her lips still lingered on mine, and I swore I'd feel her again. Soon. I swore I wouldn't let her be turned or destroyed. Kelara was one hell of a fighter, and I planned to do her justice. She'd awakened something inside me, a fire so hot and devastating that only she could put it out.

For that, however, I needed her free. And Corbin dead.

KAILANI

The Word hummed inside me with something akin to anger as I stretched my arms out and released a flurry of fireballs at Fennel and his Darklings. The more energy I released, the more surged through me like an endless fountain of primordial power. Something had happened for the Word to react in such an intense fashion, but I welcomed it all, for it gave me a greater advantage in the field.

Hunter shifted into his white wolf form, dashing left and right and tearing Darklings' limbs off. Behind him, Widow bolted and swung his scythe, separating their heads from their bodies as they screamed in agony.

Fennel had weaseled his way out of Night's hold, somehow, but I'd been too busy fighting to see exactly how he'd done it. His underlings were vicious and relentless, and his Knight Ghouls were even worse. Ridan retained his dragon form and spat fire all over the oasis. The underbrush was alight, its waxy and colored leaves melting from the scorching temperatures. The water hole steamed, occasionally splattered with the blood of Aeternae Darklings.

Amane stayed close to me, using her twin blades to fight off attackers. The problem was that the ghouls had learned to shift into their subtle forms before pouncing, which made it infinitely harder for her to spot their movements before it was too late. More than once, she was knocked down and nearly killed, but the Night Bringer was there to help her.

The Darklings had also upped their game since our last encounter. They used their scythes and death magic to vanish and move like shadows, doing their best to steer clear of Ridan's devastating dragon fire. Of course, not all of them survived, but Fennel Ferris was a sly bastard, and he was getting dangerously close to Amane and me.

"We need to do something about that guy," I said, indicating Fennel. "He's coming for Marios and Silla's soul shards."

"I remember the Word being more powerful than this," Amane blurted, giving me an alarmed sideways glance. "You should be able to wipe these freaks off the face of this world, Kale!"

"Yeah, I know!" I retorted. "I don't understand it myself. It's weird. I can feel its anger, and the power is certainly surging through me, but there's something missing. I'm not sure what that is. I swear, I'm doing the best I can."

"The Word is a fickle thing," Night muttered as he made his way toward an incoming Fennel, whose scythe was out as he excitedly eyed Amane and her pouch. The Faulty pointed her pulverizer weapon at him, but he vanished as soon as she fired a series of pellets in his direction. They flew past Night and obliterated another Darkling and a couple of trees.

Ridan roared as he came down toward us, his amber eyes focused on Fennel, who'd reappeared to our right, but a swarm of Knight Ghouls pounced and climbed up his scaly back, scratching and biting. They were trying to get closer to his eyes—his weak spot—and I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them managed to inflict the right kind of damage. I kept unleashing my fire magic, combining it with energy pulses strong enough to break multiple bones with one blow.

Fennel dodged most of them. He was still coming for Amane, who fired a couple more shots his way. The Night Bringer raised his scythe, and darkness swallowed the sky. The moon and the stars disappeared in the blink of an eye. The winds howled and raged as a sandstorm gathered around the oasis. Something was coming. Something I hadn't summoned or asked for.

I gave Amane a brief glance. "Stay close," I shouted.

Everything blackened around us, and the temperature plummeted. I shivered but stayed focused on my mission. Hunter and Widow made a pretty good team, but there were too many Darklings, most of them too fast and cautious to fall for our formula once more. Even Ridan was having trouble with the Knight Ghouls.

"Duck! Get down!" I screamed. "Everybody, get down!"

I felt the dread take over my soul around the same time as the sand tide crashed into the oasis. With devastating force, it leveled most of the trees and covered the water hole. I lost my footing and my senses. I caught a glimpse of Amane getting dragged off to the side. She screamed and tried to hold on to something, but all she had was sand. Blue sand. I reached out to try and get her back, but something smacked into me with such strength that I rolled off with the rest of the oasis.

It had all fallen apart. Ridan was submerged in the sand, struggling to free himself. I couldn't see Hunter or Widow anywhere. Some of the Darklings passed through, drowning in the sudden deluge. The Night Bringer was thrown back by the same force that had disabled me.

"Hunter!" I shouted, my throat raspy as the sand scratched its way down. "Amane! Ridan!"

There were no answers, only the roaring of the sandstorm, the shrieks of fallen Darklings and startled ghouls, and the moans of palm trees breaking under the extraordinary pressure of whatever this was that had taken over the oasis. I heard a cackle, not too far to my right. Looking out, I managed to make out a figure. A cold grin with flashing white fangs. He reached down and grabbed something.

Amane's hand poked out from the blue sand. "No!" I gasped. "No, no, no!"

I forced myself back into an upright position, though the wind blew with powerful strength, enough to make me lean forward to move against it. I managed to run toward Amane, but Fennel was already gone. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I hadn't

even felt them coming.

"Hunter!" I screamed again, but the winds and the sandstorm intensified. Nothing could be seen or heard anymore, and the more I lingered in the heart of this disaster, the angrier and the more helpless I felt.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I reached deep down inside myself. The Word was there, waiting, pulsating like a distant star. Why wasn't it doing more? I'd given myself to it completely. I had surrendered my life and service to its power, so why had it abandoned me when I'd needed it most? All these thoughts darted through my head, and layer upon layer of anger built up within me.

Slowly but surely, it became so dense, so thick and large, that I could no longer contain it. The light inside me shone brighter, until I felt it seeping through my pores. I roared with this sudden burst of energy and opened my eyes, only to find my entire body shining as though my cells had been turned into pure light. This was it. Another threshold for me to pass. Another moment of absolute surrender in the face of adversity.

I understood then what the Word had expected of me. I'd had to tap into it, into myself, in order to release it all at once. How strange this craft was. How uneven and unpredictable. How volatile and downright infuriating. I let it all out. The light, the rage, the fury at all the injustices that had crippled Visio and taken Nethissis away from us.

I tilted my head back, and I heard my own scream. It tore through the night and the sandstorm. It broke the ravenous winds. It blew the sand dunes away like countless sticks of dynamite detonating at once. I released every bit of it, and the desert suffered under my wrath. The oasis was destroyed, vanishing under a layer of blue sand. The water hole was gone. Fennel Ferris was gone. Most of the Darklings were gone.

"Hunter!" I cried out, falling to my knees as the last sliver of energy left me. I still couldn't see him. Only Ridan's scaly back poked out from below. I'd ended up at the top of a newly formed dune. Next to me, Amane's hand still jerked as she tried to get back to the surface before suffocating.

My instincts kicked in, and I wrapped my hands around her wrist. Planting my feet as firmly as I could into the soft sand, I pulled her up, and she wheezed so loudly that I cried. I cried tears of joy to see her alive. We hugged tightly, comforting one another as we listened for any other sounds of life.

"He took them," Amane murmured. "The Levantes shards. Fennel took them both."

"I saw. I tried to get to you, but I don't know what happened. I don't understand," I said.

She moved back and wiped her own tears, streaking through the blue dust that had settled on her tanned face. "Something evil. Death magic, for sure."

"Hunter!" I screamed again, turning my head to look for him.

Finally, the white wolf emerged from the sand, blood clotting in his fur coat as he padded toward me. I cried out as he reached me, nuzzling my face with his nose. I hugged him, thankful that he'd come back to me in one piece. After a quick check, I confirmed that most of the blood wasn't his.

"You scared the crap out of me!" I snarled, and Hunter whimpered softly, licking my nose. He'd lost his clothes somewhere along the way, so I was quick to produce a pair of

pants I always kept in my backpack for him.

"What the hell happened?" he asked once he was back in his human form and wearing the pants. I shrugged, dusting some of the sand off my own clothes.

"I have no idea."

"Ridan!" Amane shouted, stumbling as she descended the dune and ran toward the dragon. He growled and moved slowly, sand coming off him with blue shimmers. I looked up and saw the sky had cleared. All around us, there was nothing left, only a broken palm tree poking out here and there.

Ridan shifted back, his shoulders and back covered in scratches, where his wings had been. Unlike regular foes, the ghouls had been able to cut through some of his dragon scales with their undead claws, and they'd managed to hurt his wings, which were slightly vulnerable by design. He'd heal quickly, but he was in a foul mood except for being happy that Amane was okay.

"Where's Widow?" I asked, scanning our surroundings again.

He appeared at the bottom of the dune, disheveled and confused. His mask had fallen off somehow, and his gorgeous face was marred with a deep frown. "I don't understand..." he muttered.

"The Night Bringer was trying to do something," Amane said, looking my way. "Could he have been the one to—"

"No," Night finally replied, appearing next to me. "Whatever this was, it wasn't my doing. Fennel Ferris is gone, though the same cannot be said for most of his associates," he added, looking around. "Their spirits are here."

Widow proceeded to capture one, revealing him to us. "Where did he go?" the Reaper demanded. "What did Fennel do?"

"Well, he took Marios and Silla's soul shards for starters," Amane grumbled, crossing her arms. Ridan helped himself to a pair of pants from her backpack—the burden of every shifter's girlfriend, apparently.

"Speak!" Widow snapped at the terrified ghost.

"I... I don't know!" the spirit replied, whimpering. "I... I just did what I was told. I don't know what that was..."

Widow cursed under his breath and reaped him with one swift move, his blade glimmering as the ghost was reduced to a wisp of silvery sparks before vanishing altogether. "It was death magic," the Reaper said. "No doubt about it."

Night nodded. "They had a contingency plan in place. They came for the Levantes brothers, and they had no intention of leaving here without their soul shards. They must've had another Whip or high-ranking Darkling nearby, waiting to do whatever that was."

"So the sandstorm wasn't a fluke, then, huh?" I said. "Fennel had that weapon locked and loaded, knowing full well that we'd have enough power to take him down. Am I getting that right?"

"Yes. I was about to obliterate him when the storm hit. It wasn't a regular storm, either, because even in my physical form, I'm not affected by weather. Not like this, anyway. It was death magic. The kind we all know the Darklings should never be allowed

to touch," the Night Bringer said. He exhaled sharply, lowering his gaze, while Widow put his gimp mask back on.

"We'll mark this down as a loss," he said. "Once again, they've bested us."

"Hey, we kicked their asses, too," Hunter shot back. "Fennel was the only one to walk out of here."

"And the ghouls," Ridan added, visibly displeased as he and Amane climbed back up the dune to join us. All around us, a deafening silence settled. The spirits were all gone. The night was clear and quiet. "They fled as soon as the wave hit."

"Better reflexes than their living and breathing overlords," Amane added.

"Either way, we're pretty much screwed," I said. "If I'm getting this right, Danika doesn't necessarily have to be the one to collect the soul shards in order to complete the ritual, like she initially implied. Any one of her cohorts can lay the groundwork, and all she has to do is put the pieces together. That makes our quest even more difficult."

"But not impossible," Night said.

"He's right," Widow interjected. "We still have some soul shards, and there are other Whips left out there. As long as Danika doesn't get them all, it's not over."

My whole body ached. My soul felt empty. Something had happened earlier, and I didn't like the Word's reaction to this situation. I saw the looks that Hunter gave me. He was probably thinking the same thing, but Night's words still bothered me—the Word was definitely a fickle thing. I just needed to figure out why it had been so glitchy.

Most importantly, we needed to figure out what had happened here. What type of death magic had been used to render us all so completely useless? Even Widow and Night had struggled. None of this was right, and it was simply one more reason to destroy the Darklings once and for all. They were cunning and deceitful fiends. They had tricks and spells up their sleeves. They had backup plans and a plethora of words and sub-words with which they'd put together new kinds of death magic.

They scared me. But they also made me even more determined to beat them at their own game. For now, however, we'd lost—and the taste was bitter, persisting on the tip of my tongue. I lingered in Hunter's arms for a few minutes, grateful that at least we'd all survived. Our faces spoke volumes, though.

We'd lost this battle, and the Darklings were one step closer to winning the war.

SOFIA

The news pouring in from Esme, Soul, and Kailani was discouraging, to say the least. Disturbing, even. Devastating. We'd all hoped there would be some victories coming our way, and we'd done our best to prevent any issues that might arise down the road. Unfortunately, the Darklings were somehow managing to retain their edge, constantly throwing us back.

Tristan was hard at work inside Soul's interdimensional pocket in the north tower, dealing with Unending's memories. According to the Time Master, we were close to breaking through on that front, but it wasn't anywhere near enough to soothe my anxieties. Derek and I sat on a stone ledge outside the tower, going over everything that had happened to our people in the field to see if we had any way of helping them push through.

Mira, Kemi, and Lumi were with us, while the rest of our enhanced crew was busy fortifying the city's defenses and planting more false tracks around Roano. I wasn't sure that would help in the long run. The bone implants had been removed from all the Seniors, so the Darklings couldn't track any of them back here, but still... I felt wary.

"Danika is nowhere to be found," Derek said. "Trev and Esme sent us a brief message saying they were surrounded by enemy forces, and I haven't heard from them since." He ran a hand through his thick black hair, a permanent frown on his face.

"And Kale lost the Levantes shards," I added. "Fennel Ferris played his cards right."

"At least they're okay," Lumi tried to reassure me. "We still have Ramus and Petra's shards, plus Thayen on our side. And even if Danika doesn't necessarily have to be the one to complete the ritual, the Darklings are still three pieces short. I imagine we would've gotten a visit from the Lady Supreme by now, if she knew where to find us."

"Soul lost Kelara," Derek replied. "She's Corbin's prisoner, and he plans to turn her into a ghoul. Forgive me, but I'm not feeling entirely optimistic right now."

"Neither am I. However, I refuse to concede," Lumi said, briefly gazing into the distance. The night covered everything in obscurity, while only a massive moon overlooked the land and cast its soft light over the Nightmare Forest. Somewhere in there, Kelara and Soul were struggling. I could almost see Corbin grinning, satisfied with his most recent accomplishment. "I doubt Soul will let anything happen to Kelara."

"He's on his own and up against the Master of Darkness. That's the guy with all of

Spirit's knowledge and tricks," I replied. "I doubt it'll be easy to pull one over on him."

"But not impossible," Mira interjected. "He's still a living creature. Even with Spirit's death magic, Corbin is at a slight disadvantage. Soul is still a Reaper, and one of the first ever made. There is power in him, power that someone like Corbin will never be able to summon."

"There's also determination," Seeley said, appearing out of thin air. Nethissis was by his side, looking miserable. I couldn't exactly fault her for it, since she and Kelara had grown close lately. All the Reapers were our friends and allies. Losing even one of them was a crippling and painful blow to us as a whole, not just as individuals. "Soul and Kelara have a... special rapport, let's say. It's not something I thought I'd ever see coming from an ancient entity like a First Tenner, but I have faith in him. He's driven to keep her safe."

"A special rapport?" I asked, feeling my eyebrows arching upward.

Nethissis smirked. "They've got a thing. Though neither of them is capable of admitting it."

"Oh, romantically speaking," I realized with a gasp.

"I'm not sure how much romance the Soul Crusher is truly capable of, but yeah, let's stick with that term." Seeley chuckled softly, then gave Nethissis a tender look. It warmed me up to see them like this, though it also confused me a little—what would become of the Lamia swamp witch once our adventure was finally over? If she and Seeley were also intertwined, emotionally speaking, what odds did they have as a couple?

Kemi cleared his throat, demanding our attention. "The Darklings have had between four and five million years, approximately, to prepare for this moment. They cannot be underestimated, especially when the blade is so close to the bone for them. Everything rides on their ability to resurrect the Spirit Bender, and the fact that we can't find Danika anywhere just proves that there is more going on. Just because we haven't seen her so far doesn't mean she's not coming for us."

"What are you trying to say, my love?" Mira asked, concern darkening her blue gaze.

"Arya and the others are out there trying to throw the Darklings off our scent," he said. "I'm hoping it'll be enough, but I doubt it. They've been able to catch up with us every time. Pardon my lack of optimism, but I feel the need to express my concerns. I'm not sure we all have what it takes to defeat them."

"Our hope lies with the Unending," I reminded him. "The only reason we're all here is to keep her safe while she works to remember the seals. Everything else is a distraction, side quests we have to complete in order to keep our focus on the grand prize. And that's breaking the seals. Once the Unending is free, her power will be enough to release Death. Then, and only then, will our victory be guaranteed. Even if Spirit is somehow brought back..." My voice broke. Spirit's return was dependent on Thayen's death—an outcome I didn't even want to consider. It made my heart heavy and caused an ache in my chest.

"We're in a hot mess here, that much is certain," Seeley grumbled. "I'd hoped our First Tenner friends would be enough to push us past the threshold, but I see now that it was all just wishful thinking. The chronicles of death magic that Spirit left the Darklings with

are proving to be quite the nuisance.”

“Even so, you know full well it’s not in our nature to give up,” Nethissis replied, gently squeezing his hand. “We’ve made it this far, haven’t we?”

Lumi gave her a warm and loving, though equally sad, smile. “Even in death, you glow with hope and pride like no one else.”

“I have faith in all of us. We’ve all brought something big to the table. Knowledge or skills or the determination to push through,” Nethissis said. “We’ve beaten the odds before. I’m certain we can do it again. The way Sofia put it, our situation is simple—even if it’s somewhat bleak right now. The sooner Tristan awakens the Unending to her full potential, the faster we’ll know what the three seals are and how to break them.”

“Let’s remember it was the Spirit Bender who made those seals.” Mira sighed. “They might be hard to break. Maybe even impossible.”

“Don’t be a downer,” Nethissis replied dryly, crossing her arms. “We thought defeating the elements was impossible, yet here we are, our worlds more or less intact and definitely not destroyed by nature itself.”

“Ah, the Hermessi, right,” Kemi mumbled, nodding slowly.

“All I’m trying to say is that it’s not over,” Nethissis reiterated. “Yes, we’ve hit some terrible bumps along the way, but as long as Tristan and Valaine are still working on their task, we still have hope.”

Derek slowly shook his head. “Should we send assistance to Esme and Trev?”

“I’ll go, if necessary,” Seeley said.

“You’ll be putting yourself at risk of capture,” Nethissis warned him. “You’re a valuable commodity to them. It’s why Esme and Trev went on their own to begin with, remember? Because the Darklings won’t be expecting living creatures to come after them. They’re expecting Reapers.”

“And you’d be ripe for the picking,” I added.

“Okay. Let’s wait for Esme or Trev to reach out. They have ghouls with them, at least,” Derek concluded. “I wish I could just bring the whole force of GASP down on these people.”

“It would be bloody and messy. Too many innocents would die, even if many of them are foolish enough to support the Darklings’ initiative,” I said. “A war still isn’t an option here. Besides, everything the Darklings have thrown at us in terms of death magic has been complex and potentially deadly. I’d hate to see what they would do in response to a GASP invasion.”

“What about armies of Reapers? Are they still off the table?” Nethissis asked Seeley.

He nodded once. “Death won’t send any more of our people here. They’re all at risk of seals and capture as soon as they set foot on Visio. We’ve evaded the Darklings until now, but the same cannot be guaranteed for the others.”

“What about enlisting the help of the Rimians and the Naloreans?” Lumi wondered aloud. “I mean, the promise of absolute freedom from the Aeternae’s dominion might entice them to cooperate. What do you think, Mira?”

The former Lady Supreme gave it a moment’s thought, but her response was not at all encouraging. “I’m not sure. They’re all used to being part of the empire. Certain perks

come with selling their blood to us, even if they don't have another choice. While there are rebel factions among them, I'm not sure they're well-coordinated enough to make a noticeable difference."

"Still, we shouldn't exclude the possibility. Whatever we can use against the Darklings and even the Aeternae as a whole, at least until Death is set free... it's worth it," I insisted.

Derek took my hand in his. "Let's see how Esme and Trev fare first. They've got pulverizer weapons and two ghouls by their side. Maybe they'll find a lead on Danika once they take down the Darklings at the villa."

I wanted to hope for the best. I wanted to gaze upon the twinkling horizon and look forward to what tomorrow might bring. The universe wasn't exactly our friend during these trying times, however, and I was running low on optimism. Even if we got all our people back somehow, Kelara included, I wasn't sure we had enough strength to keep the Darklings at bay for much longer.

No matter where we might run, they would still find us eventually. It was merely a question of whether they'd find us before or after we set the Unending free.

Emptied the pulverizer clips in mere seconds. Trev and I slaughtered the Darklings without a shred of mercy or compassion. There was no patience left to even try to empathize with these people. I'd forgiven Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore because they were children and didn't have a full understanding of what they'd gotten themselves into. These Darklings were a whole different breed.

They were vicious and evil, sneering as they tried to kill us. Fortunately, they didn't have much working knowledge about our weapons. The first Darkling had laughed at seeing mine pointed his way. The others stopped giggling once they saw him disappear in a puff of silvery ashes.

They didn't stand a chance.

By the time Trev and I were done, their scythes clanged on the floor and their ashes shimmered in the pale moonlight that poured through the bedroom windows. And to think I'd been worried about the outcome of this particular encounter when I'd first heard their boots thudding up the stairs.

"I swear, these pulverizer pellets are a gift from the gods," I muttered, hanging the weapon back on my shoulder. I took a moment to look around and analyze the room carefully.

"There aren't any Darklings left outside," Trev said, looking out the window. His eyes narrowed as he checked the backyard. "The Knight Ghouls are still there, but they seem lost. Aimless."

"Their masters are gone," I replied. "Maybe we can turn them to our side."

"Once we get the rune collars off, perhaps." He paused, then chuckled softly. "Well, Stan and Ollie are back, and they're taking care of the collars for us."

"What?" I croaked and dashed to his side to see for myself.

Indeed, Stan and Ollie had returned from their hiding spot, wherever that might've been, and were cautiously circling the four Knight Ghouls that had been guarding this property. They took a few minutes to hiss and sniff one another, but eventually all the ghouls appeared to land on the same page. Stan used his claw to try to remove one of the collars. It didn't do anything, and the Knight Ghouls looked disappointed, slouching on their hind legs and lowering their heads.

"They need a scythe's blade to crack open those collars," I breathed. "Let the others

know we're okay, Trev."

Picking up one of them off the floor, I hopped over Jolie Jasperstone and Rennert Gauss's bodies and practically flew down the stairs. I stopped on the back porch as the ghouls all stilled and gawked at me with wide, dark eyes. Ollie whispered something in their ghoulish language, and neither made a sound or a single movement as I carefully made my way toward them.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said, slowly raising the scythe so I could show it to the creatures. "You need this to crack open the collars."

The four Knight Ghouls didn't respond, but they didn't react negatively, either. I stopped mere inches from them. They eyed the curved blade, then one of them gave me a slight nod, allowing me to get closer.

"I've only heard how to use this on a rune collar, so you'll have to bear with me for a moment," I muttered, reaching the first Knight Ghoul. He tilted his head to the side, making it easier for me to access the collar's latch. A rune glowed red over it, engraved into the metal. Slowly biting the tip of my tongue, I used the point of the blade to scratch at it until sparks flew, and the red glow faded.

The ghoul let out a low growl, but he remained still. With trembling fingers, I managed to loosen the latch until the collar came off. He was finally free, giving me a long and curious look before he huffed with excitement and moved back. Stretching his long limbs, muscles taut beneath the translucent skin, the ghoul whispered to the others and shook his whole body, finally tasting freedom after who knew how long.

A second Knight Ghoul came closer, bowing before me. He stilled as I repeated the operation and released him, then his other two friends. The four of them gathered with Stan and Ollie, baring their fangs at me—it wasn't a threatening sneer, but rather an attempt to smile, to offer me their gratitude. Chills traveled down my spine as I realized how good it felt to have been able to give them this much.

"How long have you been in the Darklings' service? Do you remember?" I asked, occasionally looking around to make sure we hadn't overlooked any other Darkling guards around the house. The whole neighborhood was quiet, and only the songs of nocturnal birds nestled in the nearby trees could be heard. What I would've given for this brief tranquility to last forever.

The first freed Knight Ghoul raised his head for a second. He used a claw to scratch the dirt between us, drawing six short lines.

"Six years?" I replied, and he shook his head. "Decades?" Again, he indicated a no. "Centuries?" He nodded. "Okay. That's a long damn time to put up with these bastards. What about you three?" I asked the others.

Using the first Knight Ghoul's method and a few more questions, I was able to ascertain that they had spent a varied amount of time under the Darklings' rule. The second ghoul had been around for two million years, while the other two for five and six hundred thousand years, respectively. My heart broke for them, because I knew they hadn't chosen this path for themselves.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," I sighed, my shoulders dropping. "Truly sorry. No one deserves this kind of misery and subservience, especially not those of you who didn't

even ask for it.”

Stan and Ollie came closer, flanking me on both sides. They all looked up, as if waiting for me to give the next order. I couldn't help but smile, somewhat overwhelmed by their general softness. They were, by all intents and purposes, ruthless monsters and killing machines—and yet, they'd retained a sort of vulnerability.

“You're free now. I'm not sure how much good that does, considering what you were forced to become, but at least you're not the Darklings' slaves anymore. That's got to count for something, right?”

We'd lost two soul shards in this fight, long before we'd even set foot in the villa and despite Thayer's best intentions. But I couldn't count this as a complete loss. I'd released four tormented ghouls—former Reapers who'd come to Visio to do their jobs in maintaining the universal balance, which the Darklings had broken, hopefully not beyond repair.

I was angry, yes. But I was determined, too. Spirit's underlings hadn't heard the last of us.

“Esme!” Trev said as he ran outside and joined us in the garden. “I found this.”

Breathlessly, he handed me a small piece of yellowish paper. It had been folded and marked with a red wax seal. I recognized the sigil. It belonged to the Nasani dynasty, and my stomach churned a little. “Where was it?” I asked.

“Inside Rennert's coat pocket,” he replied. “We both know where it came from.”

We most certainly did. I exhaled sharply and tore off the wax seal, unfolding the paper to find a message scrawled in black ink. I'd seen the swirly handwriting before... on documents signed by Danika Nasani.

“It's for us,” I muttered, skimming through the lines before deciding to read it aloud. “Dear GASP worms, you might have noticed by now that neither steel nor fire nor death magic or Death's tools are enough to stop me. I've taken two more soul shards, and soon I'll have them all. You can keep fighting us if you want. Resist at your leisure. Be stubborn and foolish. Insist on your garbage, faux self-righteousness, if you must. But the outcome is and will always be the same. The Darklings will prevail. The Spirit Bender will rise again. And we shall retain our empire and glory, even if we have to crush your skulls and souls for it. I'll see you all back in Roano. Your Lady Supreme and Undeniable Victor, Danika Nasani.”

Trev remained silent. The ghouls didn't even blink, while I tried to take it all in. My blood ran cold, ice stiffening my joints and tightening its grip on my throat as each of Danika's words sank in.

“She's the ultimate bitch, even in writing,” I managed.

“I'll see you all back in Roano,” Trev repeated. Not only had we been too late to get the Whips away from her, she'd also made sure to rub it in properly by leaving this letter for us to find.

“Danika knows where our people are,” I said.

Tapping into the comms system, I immediately warned Derek and Sofia, though I had no more details to give other than a description of the events that had led up to this moment, contents of the found letter included.

We had nowhere else to go in terms of searching for Danika. We knew now that she was actually headed our way. I wasn't sure how she'd learned about Roano, but it didn't even matter at this point.

"We have to go back," I told Trev, my voice shaky. "If Danika breaches Roano's defenses, Thayen will be as good as dead."

"Tristan and Valaine, too," Trev replied, equally terrified by the implications of Danika's letter. "She'll find a way to get to them. If Petra was so dastardly resourceful, imagine what the Lady Supreme will do, if the dragon's fire wasn't enough to pin her down."

I didn't even want to imagine how Danika was faring. She'd been burnt to a crisp. It was a miracle she'd been able to write a damn letter, let alone make her way to Roano. Miracle aside, however, the facts were indisputable. She knew where to find us, and Trev and I couldn't get back there in time on our own.

"Stan, Ollie, we need your help," I told the ghouls, while Trev finished collecting all the Reaper scythes to bring back to Roano. "The horses aren't fast enough, but you two can travel across vast spaces because of your subtle nature. Can you help us?"

Stan and Ollie glanced at one another, then at the other four ghouls. They exchanged a series of chirps and whispers that I couldn't understand, but their collective nod made my heart swell a little. They had a solution for our urgent need of returning to Roano. They huddled together, and Stan extended a hand, his lanky fingers stretched out. I took it, feeling the coolness of his translucent skin against mine.

Ollie did the same with Trev. Once we were all connected, the first Knight Ghoul roared, throwing his head back as he lit up from the inside.

"Whoa. What... what's happening?" Trev asked, his eyes widening.

"I have no idea," I replied, unable to look away. It was clearly different from Harper's description of how she'd traveled with Herbert. This was something else entirely.

The other ghouls gripped the first one's bony shoulders. The unnatural shimmer didn't subside, but he started moving. We walked with them, our hands linked to their group.

Darkness surrounded us. The temperature dropped. A heavy weight settled in my stomach, while the ground vanished from under us. For a moment, I was tempted to flail and scream, until I realized I wasn't falling. I was still walking, but no longer like a living vampire—I was walking like a ghoul. The world shifted around us in a plethora of dim colors and blurred shapes.

Turning hundreds of miles into mere yards, the ghouls helped us make our way back to Roano much faster than on horseback. My chest tightened with anticipation. This was the worst-case scenario finally and unavoidably coming true. We'd all been fools to think it might end differently.

The Darklings had worked too hard for too long to let us defeat them.

But I wasn't done fighting, dammit. I had so much to lose if the Darklings had their way. I would be forced to say goodbye to Kalon if Danika managed to resurrect the Spirit Bender. The Unending would be killed again, and the cycle restarted.

"I'm not letting them win this," I heard myself whisper as matter shifted and brushed against my cheeks. It was an odd feeling, but nowhere near as odd as staring into the

abyss of a future where the Darklings prevailed.
They're not going to win this...

KELARA

Understanding how Rudolph must have felt during his captivity prior to turning was not something I'd ever planned for myself. In fact, I'd hoped I would only imagine it sometimes, when nothing else occupied my mind. But to find myself in his shoes filled me with the sort of dread I wouldn't wish upon the worst of my enemies. Yet here I was, with a rune collar tightened around my neck and my scythe secured on Corbin's belt.

He forced me to sit beside him on a large wooden chair in the middle of the camp. The green fires continued to burn slowly, their light dancing through the pitch-black night beneath the Nightmare Forest's foliage crown and between the thick, tall trees. Defeat left a bitter taste in my mouth that lingered on the tip of my tongue. The Master of Darkness had bested us, and I'd pretty much seen it coming.

I'd put myself in harm's way on purpose because I knew they would've gone for Soul first, and I could not, under any circumstances, let the Darklings get their claws on a First Tenner—especially not the guy I seemed to have fallen for. I cared about him, and I gave him better odds out there than in here with a rune collar. Anxiety persisted like a simmering ball in the pit of my stomach, but I did my best to ignore it.

The road had not come to an end just yet, and I planned to make the most of my stay here—regardless of how it would turn out. The collar stopped me from telepathically communicating with any of my colleagues, but I knew Soul was out there, trying to find a way to set me free. I just wasn't sure he'd get to me in time.

"What are we doing here?" I asked Corbin, who'd settled comfortably in his chair and was occasionally checking his pocket watch. "Waiting for someone?"

"I have friends coming, yes," he said, matter-of-factly.

Looking around, I didn't spot any movement outside the protected camp. But that didn't mean there weren't other Darklings out there and on their way to our location. The ones that Soul had killed were still around, their bodies stiff and partially covered with dried leaves. It was cold, judging by the steam rolling out of Corbin's mouth whenever he spoke.

A twig snapped somewhere nearby. I turned my head, hoping I'd spot the source of the brief but sharp crackle. It made Corbin smile. "Your friend won't save you. He can't get past the fires."

"You underestimate Death's agents," I replied, stiff as a board. Being in his proximity made me want to hurl. I'd never imagined a living creature to be as evil and as lacking in morals as Corbin Crimson—the same judgment applied to all the Darklings, actually. Choosing to disrupt the natural order between life and death solely to retain one's immortality... it was despicable. Unforgivable. "You're not going to win this, Corbin."

"It's Master, Kelara. That is how you address me."

I didn't respond. Instead, I chose to look away and hope I might see Soul somewhere around the camp. Even the slightest glimpse of him would take the edge off, because I was bordering on hopeless. I blamed my state of mind on the rune collar. It was doing something to me. It had to be the first stage of how Darklings turned Reapers into Knight Ghouls—stripping them of hope and strength, forcing them to succumb to the darkness that eventually pushed them to consume the souls of living creatures.

"It's only the polite thing to do. I am your Master, now," Corbin added.

I shot him a cold stare. "You will never be my Master. I only answer to Death."

"Death can't save you, sweetheart, but I must say... you've got fire inside you. I like you," he replied, smiling as if we'd only just met for coffee at the local café. There wasn't a single care on his mind. No shadows dancing across his face. Only the serenity of a man for whom everything was falling into place, one piece at a time.

"Can't say the same," I muttered. "Who's coming?"

"Oh, it's not your concern," he said. "It's out of your hands now, Kelara. You might as well start accepting your fate. It'll make the process easier when you turn, believe me. Less painful, too."

"You're not turning me into a ghoul."

"You're in my grasp, with a rune collar around your neck. Your friend can't reach us. What makes you think anyone will be able to save you, if Death herself cannot?" Corbin asked, still very much amused. "I'm not an underling like a scout or a silver guard. I'm not a Whip."

"You're not a Reaper, either. We still have that edge."

"I'm the Master of Darkness, Kelara. Your edge means nothing to me. I have the Spirit Bender's wisdom ingrained into my very soul. Every word and sub-word and sound he ever taught us is deeply embedded in my mind. You may have put up a half-decent fight, but my people are making progress. In the end, you will not stop us. We will have our way, and you will all perish for being bold and stupid enough to defy us. If only Derek and Sofia had stuck to their day-walking cure, it would've made everything so much easier."

It was my turn to laugh, and it seemed to irritate him. "You were the ones who asked us for help with a cure against the Black Fever."

"We knew you'd fail, obviously. We didn't expect you people to be so damn persistent! It was our assumption that once you realized that the Black Fever couldn't be cured and you had your day-walking cure, you would leave Visio and be none the wiser. In hindsight, I see that was a mistake on our part."

"Everything you've built here was never meant to last. Everything that the Spirit Bender did was ephemeral, and Death will come for you all, eventually. You've disrupted the natural order of things. You've deprived the afterlife of millions of precious souls."

You've destroyed the existence of hundreds of Reapers by turning them into ghouls—"

"Thousands, actually. Thousands of Reapers," he cut me off, his expression proud. "There are so many of you out there that your bosses can't seem to keep a straight record anymore. I'd have expected armies of your kind knocking on our doors by now, and yet... nothing. Just you. A handful brazen enough to think you can pull one over us. I don't know what Death has been doing lately, but I imagine her entrapment has rendered her useless."

I'd almost forgotten that Derek and Sofia had told the Aeternae leadership about Death and the Reapers a while back, long before we'd reached this suffocating boiling point. Long before Corbin, Petra, and Danika had been revealed as the upper echelon of our enemy. Our GASP friends had given these people too much intel, even though they'd had the best intentions at the time. I couldn't fault our allies for the error, but I did wish they'd kept some of this information to themselves.

"Either way, your empire is made of glass, Corbin. It'll break."

"Maybe, maybe not. We'll find out. In the meantime, I'm doing my part to preserve my world, my traditions, my immortality."

"By killing your own daughter," I scoffed, not hiding my disgust. "You must be so proud."

Corbin took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a long second. Upon reopening them, he stared somewhere in the distance, and his lips pressed into a hard line. His jaw was clenched, and I could see a muscle twitching. I'd definitely hit a sore spot, but I wasn't sure it was going to do any good, since Corbin still retained his calm attitude despite the brief shift.

"I'm not proud at all. It is a sacrifice, and it pains me," Corbin finally spoke. "But it must be done for the good of my people."

"Your daughter. Blood of your blood. The little baby you held in your arms and raised into a beautiful woman. You're going to kill her. Your legacy."

"I suppose the universe has a way of reminding me that nothing comes easy in this world."

I stifled a laugh. "You killed the Unending before. The universe is definitely telling you something, but you really suck at decrypting the message, Corbin. It's not telling you that things are hard, you fool. It's making you choose between your daughter and your ambitions, and you are making the wrong choice."

"The irony of having to kill my child does not escape me, Kelara, if that's what you're trying to get at," he said, his tone clipped. "But it's not my ambitions I'm fighting for. It's eternity itself. I will have another child someday. I will have a chance to atone for this sin. But if I lose my people's immortality, I will never get it back. And that, dear Reaper, is not an outcome I am willing to accept."

Shaking my head slowly, I stared at him, my lips twisted with disgust. "If you still can't see the error in your ways, Corbin, you're in for a rude awakening. Even if you bring the Spirit Bender back, Death will still become free someday. Maybe not now. Maybe not tomorrow or in a hundred years. But she will come for you. All of you. We're trying to give you a shot at survival, because if she comes to Visio, no one will be spared. Not you, not

the Darklings, not a single Aeternae. You are complicit in the imprisonment and torture of one of her most precious creations. She doesn't take this stuff lightly."

"Let her try. I trust our lord and creator."

"Good grief, you delusional imbecile," I muttered. "We have three of Spirit's soul shards already. You're not bringing him back."

I registered movement to my left. It was beyond the green fires, and Corbin didn't see it. He couldn't, because Soul, bless his heart, was keeping himself in a subtle form that only I could see. Corbin had a scythe or two on him, but a Reaper could still conceal his presence, and that was exactly what Soul was doing. He watched me in silence, the look of longing and concern persisting on his face.

I wanted to tell him I was sorry, but I wasn't. Not really. My choice, even if somewhat reckless, had been solely for the purpose of shielding him from a similar capture. As I sat beside Corbin in the middle of a camp littered with Darkling corpses, I found myself even more convinced that I'd made the right move.

Soul gave me a faint smile, and a glimmer persisted in his galaxy eyes. It was his way of telling me that things would turn out okay in the end. Of course, he couldn't really promise such a thing, but I knew he would do his best. It meant the world to me. Soul had good intentions.

"So what?" Corbin replied.

"Huh?" I mumbled, freshly torn from my thoughts.

"So what if you have three soul shards? Do you think you'll get to keep them forever?"

"You underestimate us," I said. "Petra's out of the equation. It's only a matter of time before Danika falls, too."

Corbin leaned forward, his dark eyes turned to slits as he held back a smile. "And you underestimate us, Kelara, if you think I don't know what you and your people are up to."

I took his response seriously. There's wasn't a shred of delusion in his statement, only immutable confidence. Those were the words of a man who knew more than I did, and I couldn't allow myself to be kept out of the loop here. I needed to find out more.

"How could you possibly know what my crew and I are working on?" I asked, hoping he'd tell me enough to shed light on how much the Darklings actually knew about our operations.

He got up, yanking the chain connected to my rune collar. I stumbled and landed on all fours, forced to scramble back to my feet as he briskly walked toward the eastern edge of the green fire ring where I'd seen Soul. He stopped beside one of the emerald flames, and I could see Soul standing only yards away, looking at Corbin with raw, festering hatred.

"Right now, two of your friends, specifically Esme Vaughn and Trev Blayne have just learned that Jolie Jasperstone and Rennert Gauss have already surrendered their soul shards for the return of the Spirit Bender. They've also just read a letter from Danika, and they know she's headed for Roano, where you're keeping everything and everyone—my daughter included," Corbin said. I froze beside him, unable to look away from his stone-cold face. "You see, I'm not in the habit of running around too much in an effort to make my daughter surrender. I'd rather focus on bringing our maker back, and he can take care

of Valaine for me. I would sincerely hate to cut her head off myself. In that sense, I suppose you're right. It's hard to live with something like this."

I needed a moment to pull myself together. "You know about Roano..." Glancing ahead, I could see that Soul was equally troubled.

"Of course. I knew you people would try to rope the Seniors into this from the moment you realized the true reach of the Darklings," Corbin declared. "I made sure I'd have eyes and ears among them once that came to pass."

"Hold on. You mean to tell me one of the Seniors is a Darkling?" I managed, barely able to string the words together as my whole world came crashing down, the very earth beneath my feet crumbling.

Corbin gave me a sideways smile. "Kelara. When I told you that you are seriously underestimating us, I meant it. Everything will come up in my favor eventually. Danika is on the move, we have most of the soul shards, and you're holed up in a ruined city with a patched-up spell work of Word and death magic. You're not equipped nor capable of handling the fire we're about to rain down on you."

Soul had already caught the warning. Maybe Corbin knew he was still around, but he didn't seem at all concerned. That shouldn't have come as a surprise anymore. Clearly, we'd been the ones left behind and in the dark, while the enemy knew more about us than we knew about them.

Corbin had an objective and a location already. Tristan, Valaine, Thayen—they were all in his crosshairs. And I was stuck here. Soul would surely warn them, but now his interdimensional pockets were in danger, too. If the Darklings got past the city defenses, if they reached the north tower... Soul couldn't stay here any longer, and I had no way of telling him that. Not without alerting Corbin, since my telepathy had been cut off.

Roano was on the Darklings' map.

TRISTAN

Unending wasn't ready to bring us back to the surface. She had been stripped of her freedom and betrayed by the Aeternae. I had watched it all happen as more memories unfolded around us. Slowly but surely, Unending was able to navigate them with greater ease despite the pain they brought to the surface.

I watched her fight the Spirit Bender, not long after their last encounter. Even under the first seal, she still had some fighting left in her. He cut her down, and her scythe hit the ground, instantly losing its shimmer. Before she could pull herself back up, he snagged a strand of her hair and placed it over the blade of his scythe.

Black clouds gathered overhead, storms brewing with elemental fury. I wondered if this was the local Hermessi's reaction to what the Spirit Bender was doing. I doubted I'd ever find out more about them, though. All I could do was interpret what I was seeing. Unending's hair melted into pure light as Spirit whispered a spell. Gradually, it changed its shape into a ring, taking on a silvery shimmer. The metal bound itself around an iridescent, tear-shaped stone. Spirit put it on his finger. "Once it's set, you're done for," he told Unending as she managed to recover her scythe.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's the second seal. I'm about to lose my physical form," Valaine explained.

"Forgive me, but it's confusing for me to talk to you, while also watching you relive the worst of your memories."

She turned her head and offered a delicate smile. "It's okay. It's still me, Tristan, regardless of the name I bear. The Unending, Valaine, Maira, Eliana... it's all the same. I am them, and they are me." Indeed, the only difference between Valaine and the Unending at this point was in their physical appearance. Despite the signature black hair and pale skin, there wasn't much else they shared. "I'm fighting Spirit for my freedom," she added. "I couldn't let him get away with this. The Aeternae were too scared to come back at the time, as I later learned, but I didn't mind. I needed a clear and open field to confront Spirit without distractions."

Not ready to give up yet, Unending vanished for a split-second, then reappeared behind Spirit. He ducked just in time to avoid the cut of her scythe, then bolted away from her. He was working different angles, trying to find a way to hit her before she could do real damage. I could tell he was worried. Something wasn't working out as he'd

expected. The ring wasn't ready.

"You see, as soon as I realized what had happened and shortly after Spirit hit me, I took advantage of his arrogance. He'd begun promising Arya power like she'd never seen before, and they were both so absorbed with his speech that they didn't see me moving. I snatched my scythe off the floor and left, knowing the Spirit Bender would come looking for me. I realized then that he didn't think everything through."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I still had my weapon. He'd bound me to Visio, but I could move. I could cast death magic. I could retaliate, hence why I planted the seeds of Black Fever on Visio, from my own misery. Here, he's trying to fix that."

I sighed deeply. "Unfortunately, he succeeds. Right?"

"Yes..."

The Unending went in for another attack, but Spirit was ready for her. He swerved around and cut her across the back with his scythe. She cried out in agonizing pain, a scream ripping from her throat as she fell to her knees. It coincided with lightning streaking across the black sky, quickly followed by deafening thunderclaps that made the ground tremble.

This was the defining moment, as Spirit hit her scythe hand with another blue pulse. Unending's weapon was thrown away, and he was quick to grab it off the ground. He used it to draw a circle around her, as the wound on her back burned bright red, glowing from the inside. He drew a second circle around it, followed by several scrawled symbols. The dirt crumbled under the sharp blade's tip. Each symbol became illuminated as soon as Spirit completed the entire scheme.

Unending looked at it, genuinely startled. The pain from her back subsided, quickly replaced by panic as she understood what Spirit was doing. "No, don't. Don't do this!" she shouted.

"You won't be needing this anymore, darling," he replied, gazing lovingly at her scythe. He raised his finger hand—the jewel was complete, the shimmer of its tear-shaped stone catching my eye. I'd seen it before. "This is your second seal now."

"That ring looks familiar," I told Valaine, and she nodded.

"It's my father's. He's worn it for as long as I can remember," she said. That meant Corbin had the second seal. We'd have to find a way to get to the very person who wanted to kill Valaine before Unending's liberation, and the thought alone horrified me.

"So, the first seal was the cut. The second is the ring. Right?"

"Yes. But the order and method with which I was sealed will not be the order and method with which I'll be unsealed. Remember that, Tristan, because it matters," Valaine replied. "Spirit might not have thought this all through, but he came prepared. He was a brilliant strategist, and few knew how to wield death magic like he did."

Spirit towered over the Unending, his back straight and his chin up, pride beaming from his galaxy eyes. "This should be enough to keep you under control, my darling. I can't have you throwing tantrums and looking for ways to reach out to mommy dearest."

Before she could reply, Unending screamed from the bottom of her lungs—so loud, so sharp, that I cringed and covered my ears. The sound was unbearable, rippling across

time and space as if the universe itself was suffering and mourning for this moment, this terrible loss.

Her physical form began to fade. Her eyes were round and filled with horror. She couldn't escape the circles, nor could she touch Spirit anymore, though she did reach out to try. Her hand went right through his. Spirit chuckled, unable to contain his childlike and psychotic giddiness. The circles he'd drawn around her lit up in a similar reddish hue as the stone on his seal ring. The magic was complete, and it broke my heart to watch it all in such troubling detail.

"We would've been great together, you know," he said.

The Unending had lost her voice. Her words were silent, faint movements of her lips as she shimmered away and vanished from sight. "Where did you go?" I asked.

"Everywhere and nowhere," Valaine replied. "I became one with Visio against my will. I'm in the air and in the dirt. In every drop of rain. Every blade of grass. Every spark that lights a fire in this world. I understand now. I see it all. I hear it all. I feel it all..."

"You lost yourself," I managed, my eyes stinging from unexpected tears. She took my hand in hers and squeezed gently. I could feel her in the midst of this memory. I could feel her in the center of my soul.

Footsteps caught our attention. Ragged breaths. Whimpers as the Aeternae finally caught up with Unending and Spirit. Mira and Kemi were here. Arya and a few others, too. They looked terrified and heartbroken, and I wondered if Arya had told them anything about what she'd witnessed. I doubted it. We would've learned about this upon meeting the Seniors, for sure, but we didn't.

"What... what did you do?" Mira asked, her eyes glassy as she struggled to keep herself together. She wasn't doing a good job of it. At least she was clearly remorseful of what she'd unwittingly helped with.

"I fixed a problem," Spirit replied, unsympathetic to her obvious plight. He turned to look at them, but he wasn't at all impressed. "It's the least you deserve for your betrayal."

"You're the one who trapped her!" Kemi replied, balking at his claims.

"You're the ones who stood by and did nothing for two weeks while I fed you my propaganda," Spirit shot back. "At least be honest with yourselves. Your gift of immortality required a sacrifice. This was it."

"Where is she?" Mira growled, fists balled tightly. Kemi held her back as she tried to move toward the Spirit Bender. It wouldn't have ended well for Mira had she been left to her own devices here.

"She's here. But you will never see her again," he said.

"Set her free!" Kemi shouted.

Spirit chuckled, hands casually resting on his hips, both scythes already gone. "I did you all a favor. The least you could do is say thanks. If I bring her back, she'll make you all mortal again. On top of that, she'll punish you, too. Chances are she'll mess with you even in her current state. I wouldn't put it past her. She let something slip before I put the second seal on her, anyway. My sister is remarkably resourceful when she's mad. You've never seen your maker angry, believe me. None of you would live to tell the tale."

The Aeternae stared at each other. They didn't have anything to say. Shame lit red fires in their cheeks. Sweat dripped down their faces as guilt ate away at them. They had a hard time adjusting to this uncomfortable truth, and as much as I wanted to feel sorry for them, I couldn't.

These people had believed Spirit, a complete stranger, without even telling Unending about his presence on Visio. They'd been too easy to manipulate. It made their entire species almost as dangerous as Spirit himself.

"And to think you were actually seeing all this... I can't imagine how it must have felt," I said to Valaine.

"It hurts... I can sense the fear in Mira's heart. I can tell she's worried about the repercussions, and she has every reason to feel this way. The Black Fever will emerge, sometime in the future. And at my third reincarnation, we all know what will happen," she said. "More suffering will come their way, and they don't fully realize it. Not yet, anyway."

"You'll curse them with blood drinking," I replied. For me, it didn't seem like the worst thing that could happen. I'd accepted that blood was a sacred part of being a vampire from the moment I'd been turned. I'd said goodbye to the sun, and I had embraced the sacrifices required to live an eternal life. The Aeternae would do the same, too.

"Yes."

"I regret that this happened to you," I told her. "This whole thing is the result of poor choices."

"I regret it, too."

Arya was silent. Mira broke down crying. Her knees sank into the dirt as she covered her face with both hands. Kemi stayed close, putting his arms around her shoulders. The other Aeternae were just as devastated, as the consequences of their actions had finally come to fruition. Their maker was, in a sense at least, gone. And the Spirit Bender had hijacked their entire existence, which they'd been taking for granted for a while. Clearly, the universe had a way of hitting back.

"They broke my heart," Valaine said.

"And they paid the price, don't you think?"

"But they've been suffering for almost five million years now. I think it's enough. We must break this circle, Tristan."

"Show me the third seal."

There had been a method to the Spirit Bender's madness and a madness to his method. He'd come to Visio with a plan and a backup scheme, but he hadn't expected the Unending to fight back so ferociously. He'd risen to the challenge, however, and he'd accomplished something truly frightening. Outside in the real world, we risked seeing him again.

I didn't want him to come back. His sole purpose had always been to hurt Death through Unending and through every other method at his disposal. The Darklings were playing with forces they didn't fully understand, and it was bound to blow up in their faces eventually. The innocents didn't deserve to become collateral damage, and Unending deserved her freedom.

The deeper we slipped into her subconscious, the more convinced I became that this was the only way. Her awakening, the breaking of her seals—the Unending was our only shot at restoring the balance and saving all the people we cared about. A universe in chaos was bound to create more conflict, more danger, more death. That was what the Darklings refused to understand.

The reactions to their actions would impact all of us.

TRISTAN

We reached a moment in time when the worst had already been done, and the Aeternae were learning to live with their new world order in the absence of their maker. The Unending was infused into Visio, and she could see and hear everything. It hurt my eyes to focus, as these memories were overwhelmingly complex. We could see millions of Aeternae at once, each of them doing something, saying something.

"It was hard for me to concentrate on a single person at first." Her voice echoed in my head. Around us, the imperial palace rose. The marble statues of the Unending were replaced with representations of Mira and Kemi as the Lord and Lady Supreme. Nubile women wearing flowing silks and carrying baskets of roses replaced the eternity motifs in every hall of the building. Noble warriors clad in sculptural armor raised their weapons toward the sunrise from the palace terraces. Brightly colored flowers blossomed in round white ceramic pots everywhere. It was beautiful, but it was also sad.

The Aeternae had been working hard to remove the Unending from their records, from their cultural existence. Their shame weighed heavily in the air, as they struggled to build a new identity for themselves—one that didn't reveal the horrible truth of what they'd allowed to happen in order to save their immortality.

"Is this why we've been having a hard time sifting through your memories?" I asked. The image shifted around us. We were transported from room to room, taking in all the details along the way—white silk curtains and stained glass windows, gilded details on the wooden furniture, richly colored tapestries, and elegant works of art. They filled every inch of their world with pretty things to compensate for the fact that they had allowed Unending to be trapped and tormented by Spirit. All they had was shame and an eternity to live with it all.

In retrospect, it was no wonder they'd chosen to erase as much of the Unending's memory as possible. Had I been in their shoes, having traded my maker for immortality, I would've looked for ways to forget everything, too. I would've taught future generations that the Aeternae had evolved into who they were.

"Yes, but now I'm learning," Valaine said as she took us into the throne room. There, we found Mira and Kemi sitting on their splendid and sparkling golden thrones. Precious stones had been sewn into their regal clothes, with mother-of-pearl buttons and platinum

inlays. They looked stunning with their bejeweled crowns and smooth skin. But the sadness in their eyes persisted, a grim reminder of what they'd allowed to happen.

"They are the first Aeternae rulers," I commented as we zoomed in on the Lord and Lady Supreme. A servant came in with a wheeled cart bearing various pitchers, along with crystal chalices and white cotton napkins. The Nasani sigil was embroidered on their corners with silver thread.

"Yes, they are."

"They look miserable."

I could almost feel the Unending smiling, despite the absence of a physical form. "They've made their bed, Tristan, and now they have to sleep in it. Unlike the Spirit Bender, Mira and Kemi—along with many others among their kind—had to face powerful consciences. They allowed this to happen, even though it didn't feel right. Naturally, the entire situation began to eat away at them," Valaine replied.

"What is this?" Kemi asked as the servant moved to leave the throne room. The man turned around, his hands behind his back and his voice uneven.

"Various assortments of drinks, Your Grace. You requested something special for the autumn banquet, and so the staff have scoured the land for these recipes."

"I don't really give a damn about that. I asked you to handle it, not organize a tasting." Mira scoffed, absently gazing off to the side and past the open window. We could see the ocean from here, a vast blue mass of rippling waters beneath a bright and sunny sky. "It doesn't matter where it comes from. As long as the people are entertained, we'll be—argh!" she cried out, suddenly covering her ears.

"My love, what's wrong?" Kemi gasped, instantly out of his throne and kneeling in front of her. "Are you hurt?"

Mira cried, tears rolling down her cheeks as she took a moment to adjust.

"I'm trying to reach out to her..." Valaine said.

"What is happening?" Mira sobbed, revealing the blood pouring from her ears. Kemi inched closer, frowning as he inspected the problem. Moments later, he cursed under his breath when his own ears started bleeding, as well.

"You tried to reach out to him, too, huh?" I asked. Watching all of this made me feel tiny and insignificant, somehow. A mere blip. The result of eons of struggles and misery and death magic that had eventually led to my birth and my making. I doubted my parents would've met, had it not been for The Shade and GASP. Vampires wouldn't have existed without the Aeternae—the very Aeternae I was looking at now, with a mixture of awe and... pity.

"I only wanted to reason with them, to make them understand that they still had a chance to do something, if only they would listen. But without my physical form, I was unable to control the intensity of my spiritual outreach..."

The pity I'd been feeling wasn't necessary, I realized. They were responsible for their own situation, and they had a very long time to live with the consequences of their poor decisions. "In about three million years, long after they're cursed with blood drinking, they will conquer Rimia, then Nalore, and establish their blood banks," I said. "Your efforts to reason with them not only failed, but they sank deeper into their misery."

"Yes. And I sincerely regret that the Rimians and the Naloreans got dragged into this. It wasn't fair," the Unending replied.

"Where are the others? Arya, all the Seniors who witnessed the first two seals... will we be seeing the third seal anytime soon?"

"Give it a moment, Tristan."

The large doors swung open. A mass of Aeternae walked in, led by Arya. Most were clad in fine and expensive-looking fabrics—likely nobles of the court. Others had settled for black leather tunics and capes. Gold masks hung from the latter's belts, and it took every ounce of strength I had left to push the nausea away as I recognized the early stages of Darklings. They'd not been founded yet as a faction, but I could certainly see the origin of their sartorial choices here among the Aeternae nobles.

"What were the gold masks for?" I asked.

"The ones carrying them were part of the security council. They commanded the armies," Valaine explained. "After the Darklings were founded, all those with masks joined the faction, leaving a leadership gap in the military until the first member of the Crimson dynasty stepped forth and took over."

"What is the meaning of this?" Mira asked, wiping blood from her ears with one of the cotton napkins.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed they were all exhibiting the same symptoms—perforated eardrums. Those beyond the palace walls must've been incredibly confused and startled at this point. "I tried to talk to all of them. I'd only managed to send a message or two in their dreams, but nothing ever stuck," Valaine said. "I'd sensed Spirit's presence again, and I wanted to... I don't know, to keep fighting, I guess..."

"He's here," Arya said, grimacing from the momentary discomfort. She used the back of her dress sleeve to clean herself up. "The Spirit Bender."

Both Mira and Kemi grew pale. Neither liked the news.

"No... what is he doing back?" Kemi murmured.

"I think someone called out to him," Arya replied. "You are aware of the fever outbreak that's been plaguing our people?"

"Ah, right." Valaine sighed. "I was bound to Visio and deprived of my physical form. I was angry beyond consolation, and the Black Fever curse had finally reached the surface. Meanwhile, I was lashing out, desperately wanting to start a conversation. As you can see, I made their ears bleed, yet I couldn't get a single word through. Fighting windmills, that's what this was..."

"The Black Fever," I said. "So, this was the beginning."

"Five hundred people are dead already," Arya added. "More are falling sick each day. The black veins, the high temperatures... the internal putrefaction. Our physicians have tried everything, but there is no cure."

"Yes, we're well aware." Mira shook her head slowly. "You do realize we've brought this on ourselves, right? This is no ordinary disease."

"It's punishment," Kemi said, his gaze darkening as he beheld the crowd gathered before him and his wife. "Eternity is still here, after all. No matter how hard we try to erase her from our existence. We can all feel her." He paused to wipe his ears, showing

them the bloodied napkin. "This is probably her doing."

Arya exhaled sharply and stepped forward, separating herself from the other nobles. "I know, Your Grace. But there must be something we can do. Maybe the Spirit Bender will help us again."

"Like he did the last time? Don't be foolish, Arya. He wasn't helping us. He was minding his own interests. They just happened to intersect with ours." Mira scoffed. "Nothing he gives us is good. Look at us now... We allowed him to bind her to Visio, and she gave us disease! The fever is taking hold of our brothers and sisters. We're being picked off one by one. What do you think will happen if we accept the Spirit Bender's help again?"

A familiar voice boomed through the throne room. "No need for such pessimism!" Spirit said, walking in. He hooked his thumbs through his leather belt, each step taken with a mixture of pride and caution as he moved past the nobles and Arya, reaching the Lord and Lady Supreme. I spotted the seal ring on his finger, assuming Unending's scythe was hidden beneath his coat, too. "I'm here to help."

"You're full of—" Mira snapped, but Arya cut her off.

"Hold on. Let's hear him out."

Oh, she'd definitely withheld what she'd witnessed during the creation of the first seal. Arya was clearly dangerous, and our people had to be warned as quickly as possible, but Unending wasn't done with this memory. Then again, time flowed differently in our interdimensional pocket.

"We did that once before. It didn't end well," Kemi replied, hands balling into fists as he sat back on his throne and lifted his chin in defiance. "You're not welcome here, Spirit. You've done nothing but endless harm."

"I made sure you retained your immortality. Thanks to me, you can live forever," the Reaper shot back. "A little gratitude wouldn't kill you. Besides, I hear there's trouble in your realm."

"Hundreds have died already," one of the nobles said.

"More like thousands," Spirit replied. "I suppose news doesn't travel that fast here. But your island populations are basically extinct. Within two weeks, you'll all be dead."

Mira and Kemi exchanged nervous glances. The Lady Supreme couldn't help herself, despite her obvious aversion to the Spirit Bender. "What do you know about the fever?"

"First of all, it's a curse," he said.

"It fed on my anger, my pain. It just grew beyond control. That's what this was always about. The first two seals were imperfect, proof that Spirit had no business crafting new death magic spells of his own. Unable to accept that, he came back... determined to keep me down and prove he was better," Valaine said.

As I flipped through the history pages of the Aeternae in my mind, it all came together. Unsurprised by the lies and half-truths that they had given us along the way, I could finally see the bigger picture of everything that had happened here, from the moment the Unending had come to Visio right up to her awakening in the north tower of Roano, almost five million years later.

"A curse?" Kemi asked, his brow furrowed.

"Your maker, Eternity, as you call her, is lashing out," Spirit said with a faint shrug. "It's not exactly a twist, to be honest. I saw this coming."

"No, he didn't," Unending whispered.

"And I have a solution!" the Reaper continued. "Clearly, Eternity will not stay down without a fight. It's not in her nature, and I may have slightly underestimated her. Nevertheless, I'm well prepared for whatever she might throw at us."

"Us?" Kemi spat. "You're doing this to help yourself!"

"And I'm helping you in the process. Everybody wins. Come, my friend. It's not genius-level science," Spirit retorted. "Anyway, it has become obvious that two seals are not enough, so a third is now a necessity."

The earth itself rumbled. The Unending had been listening, and she was reacting to his words and his presence. The Aeternae were startled, their eyes wide as they looked at each other, then at Mira and Kemi, waiting for their Lord and Lady Supreme's guidance.

"She knows you're here," Mira said, lowering her gaze.

"I couldn't care less," Spirit replied. "Do you want my help or not?"

"What if I tell you we don't need your help?" she asked, blinking rapidly, struggling to keep her composure as cracks cut up and across the throne room walls. Visio was literally quaking. Dust fell from the broken ceiling, and the nobles gradually moved back, fearful of what might come next as the Unending's rage manifested.

"Then you will all die of this... Black Fever, let's call it. The name's ominous enough, I reckon," Spirit said. "You will perish, and Eternity will still be here, alone and inconsolable, helpless and empty on the inside. This planet will keep hurtling through space and around the sun. The galaxies will continue their dance through this vast and endless universe. But you will be no more. What was the point of being accomplices in my crime if you cannot reap a minimal reward, which, in your case, is eternal life?"

As much as I hated to admit it, Spirit had just offered a compelling argument. I could certainly see why Mira and Kemi relented. Sure, later on they changed their minds and finally turned back to where they had originally stood. Millions of years from now, they would join us in our quest to free the Unending. But before that, they had a few more terrible decisions to make.

"What do you suggest?" Mira asked, exhaling sharply.

Spirit raised Unending's scythe, a grin slitting his face. "I've been thinking about a confluence of elements, actually. Not just a third seal."

"Explain," Kemi demanded.

Spirit's galaxy eyes narrowed as he shifted his focus to the Lord Supreme. "You've got quite the lip on you, my friend, and I don't like your tone. You're forgetting who I am and what I can do to you."

For a moment, I thought Kemi might concede, but the man was fearless even before a Reaper as evil and as dangerous as the Spirit Bender. "I'm not forgetting anything. In fact, you seem to be underestimating us. You think I don't know why you're in favor of our survival?"

"Enlighten me, please." Spirit laughed, though I sensed the wariness in his tone.

"You need us. You're not sure a third seal is enough to keep Unending down. In fact, I am willing to bet you're not as all-powerful as you claim to be. She spoke to me, you know," Kemi muttered, leaning back into his chair.

Mira was stunned. "What?"

"Eternity. She spoke to me in my dreams," Kemi said. "I've kept it to myself because I wanted to avoid this exact situation—someone calling out to the Spirit Bender, finding a way to bring him back."

So, Unending's efforts had not been completely in vain, though Kemi had not taken any action upon her words. What a waste of energy on her part.

"Has she talked to you about me?" Spirit asked, the humor gone from his expression.

"Your knowledge of death magic is equal to hers, but you lack her flair and patience," Kemi replied, the corner of his mouth twitching. "You say you know what you're doing, but you see... I'm not sure you really do. Which is why you need us alive, so we can make sure she stays put beneath the seals."

"Okay, so he definitely got some of your messages," I said to Valaine.

"It looks like it, yes," she replied. "I wasn't even sure he would remember my words."

The earthquake intensified, and one of the decorative columns came down, crashing into bits and pieces with a startling thud. The Unending's anger was bubbling just beneath the surface now. Some of the nobles present coughed, suddenly pale, as black veins swelled up their throats. They were pushed away by the remaining healthy ones.

"It's spreading faster!" Arya shouted, drawing a long knife from behind her back. "We can't let it take us all!"

"See, whatever conversations you had with Eternity... they don't matter now," Spirit said, keeping his cool with a strained smile. "You have a problem, and I have a solution. With or without your consent, I will do what I must. But in the long run, you'll find you catch more flies with honey. You want me by your side."

"I don't," Kemi replied.

"We're dying," Mira told her husband. "I hate that we have to do this, but..."

"I understand, my love. But making a deal with this monster will only make things worse in the long run," Kemi said. Mira wanted to agree with him. I could see the struggle in her blue eyes. But time was running out, and Spirit was the only one who could make things better for them.

"Here's where we stand right now," Spirit said. Behind him, the noblemen broke ranks. Those who'd fallen ill with Black Fever were dragged out by gold guards. The others murmured among themselves, trying to reach some kind of consensus while the palace trembled, pieces of the walls gradually coming off in uneven chunks. "I will apply a third seal, but it might not be enough to keep your people safe. Someone will have to swear fealty to me, to my cause. Someone will have to bend the knee for an eternity so that they can receive my wisdom and guidance on how to keep Eternity down and the Black Fever from killing too many people."

"You're forcing us into a partnership against our maker!" Kemi snarled.

Spirit waved him away. In an instant, Mira and Kemi vanished. I'd seen this before, but this time, he'd chosen to dispose only of the two most vocal opponents. Arya and the

other nobles were stunned and terrified. The Reaper, however, could breathe easily once more, as if he'd just gotten rid of a pest.

"Not again!" Arya blurted, her eyes big and round.

"They'll find their way back to the palace eventually. You've done this dance before, sweetie," Spirit replied. "I cannot rely on your Lord and Lady Supreme for this, but I will not topple your leadership. I leave the politics to you. What I'm interested in is knowing whether any of you are willing to do as I ask."

"So we bend the knee, and you teach us how to keep Eternity under control?" Arya asked. She gripped the long knife tightly, her knuckles turning white. She'd kept her mouth shut about the first seal and what she'd seen, but she wasn't fully on board with Spirit's plan—not yet, anyway. This had to be the tipping point for her. She'd gone with the flow until now, but Spirit was asking for her active participation going forward. It was different.

"Yes. Swear fealty. You'll be making a pact with a Reaper. You will never be able to break this bond, and you will always follow my will and instructions," he said. "I can teach you everything I know. I can make sure you all survive, and that Eternity never sees the light of day again. But before I do that, I obviously need to make sure you can be trusted."

Arya and the noblemen exchanged a few brief glances before she ultimately conceded and dropped to her knee.

"Ugh, I saw this one coming," I mumbled, finally accepting the terrible truth that had been hiding beneath Arya's pleasant smile and willingness to help GASP. Mira and Kemi had no idea, but she'd sold us all out long before we'd even landed on Visio.

"The very first Darkling," Valaine said, sadness dripping from her voice.

"My friends—they don't know!" I replied.

"I will serve you," Arya said. "Until my dying breath. Beyond eternity."

Spirit smiled as the remaining noblemen joined Arya on one knee, swearing their fealty to him. These were the first of their kind, the founders of the Darkling movement. The servants of the Spirit Bender and perpetrators of heinous death magic designed to keep Death and her agents at bay while he developed his plot with Brendel and the Hermessi.

"Good to see so many of you still have sense," he said, motioning for them to stand up. "There is a lot of work ahead. Many obstacles to overcome. The entity I serve must never know what happened here. The same goes for other Reapers who may soon come or are already here. I've gotten rid of some, but you'll have to pick up where I left off, and quickly."

"Other Reapers?" Arya asked, raising her eyebrows.

"You've lost thousands of Aeternae already. What do you think happens to their souls?" he asked, but his question was only met with silence. "Good grief, you people have a lot to learn. Anyway, first things first."

Spirit whispered into Unending's scythe. Its blade shone red as he gently pressed it against Arya's belly. Crimsonlight burst inside her, glowing through her flesh and dress. She gasped as she looked down, then gave the Reaper a confused look.

"You are with child, my dear," Spirit said, amused. "And your child will be the physical manifestation of Eternity."

"What?" she croaked, unable to follow. I wasn't surprised. We'd had a hard time understanding exactly how the three seals worked from the very beginning.

"To stop the Black Fever, albeit temporarily, I've bound Eternity to a physical body," Spirit explained. "She will be born. Her incarnation will have no knowledge of who she is. For as long as it's possible, she will live in sheer bliss."

"So she'll be one of us. My child," Arya murmured, deeply conflicted. I could tell that she was no longer sure about this.

"Yes. But Eternity is very powerful. This third seal might not be enough to keep the Black Fever at bay forever," Spirit said, running a hand through his hair.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means you might have to kill your child someday to restart the cycle. It's how I designed the seal. Every reincarnation holds the Eternity's power under control and in a dormant state. Should she struggle, should she awaken beneath it, you will see symptoms of her wrath and suffering. You will see a return of the Black Fever. You'll have to kill her, so she can be born again."

"Good grief..." Arya mumbled. She was horrified, and she had every reason to feel that way. First, she'd just learned that she was pregnant. Second, she'd just been told that she might have to kill her child someday.

"That may not happen for a few millennia, at least. We won't know for sure until... well, until it happens," Spirit replied.

"This is a sacrifice you're asking of me," Arya said. "To kill my own child so that my people can survive."

The irony of it didn't escape me. It was a recurring theme among the Darklings. Mothers committing the unimaginable evil for the survival of their species. Their child's life for the lives of their people. What an awful condition to abide...

Spirit offered an unsympathetic shrug. "And you're asking to live forever. Surely, you didn't think it would come with no strings attached. Besides, the chances of... oh..." His voice trailed off as he looked around at the other nobles. Several of the women present had a red glow coming from their bellies. Arya wasn't the only one, and Spirit seemed surprised, if not a little troubled. "This is odd..."

He looked at Unending's scythe, its blade still carrying a scarlet shimmer that gradually faded. Arya glanced back and noticed the other Aeternae women. "What's going on?" she asked.

"I may have used the wrong sub-word for this," Spirit grumbled.

"How so?"

"You're not the only one with child, first of all. And I think my seal used all your unborn children to stick," Spirit replied. "Basically, yours might not be the one to be born as Eternity. It could be one of theirs. We won't know for sure until much later."

An Aeternae noblewoman with long blonde hair and inquisitive green eyes stepped forward. "You mean to tell us you don't know which of us was chosen to carry Eternity's incarnation to term?"

"Yes. Sorry," Spirit said.

"Kemi was right. You've been winging it this whole time," one of the noblemen muttered. Arya reached him in a flash and cut off his head with her long knife. The others gasped, but no one jumped to his defense. He collapsed, his bloody head rolling on the mirrored floor.

"The Spirit Bender is our lord and master," Arya declared, wiping the knife on her dress. "We will do his bidding so that the Aeternae might live forever. Eternity gave us a precious gift, and we will forever be thankful, but she wanted to take it away. The Spirit Bender is helping us keep it. And we must do as he bids us in return."

"You killed him," the blonde Aeternae woman breathed, still wrapping her head around what had just happened.

"And I will do the same to anyone who disrespects or betrays our master," Arya replied bluntly. "I have forsaken many parts of myself to live forever, and many of you might feel the same way. We cannot let the bogus self-righteousness of a few spoil the future we've already sacrificed so much for. Are you with me?" she asked, but no one answered, so she raised her voice and asked again. "Are you with me?!"

Eventually, they all nodded their tacit agreement, while the Spirit Bender chuckled, clearly satisfied with the outcome. "Your Lord and Lady Supreme—I doubt they'll see things your way," he said.

"They will never know," Arya declared. "We'll keep it from them. For their own good."

"What of the others? What if there are more people on their side than on yours? The Aeternae seem rather conflicted at this point," Spirit replied.

"Then we'll figure out a way to push through," Arya insisted. "If you teach us everything we need to know, nothing will stand in our way. The others won't even need to know Eternity's role in the Black Fever. I'm confident that time will heal most wounds. It will cover the truth, and we shall build a new civilization. A better world. One that will last forever."

"I like you, Arya. You've got foresight. It's not often that I come across a visionary such as yourself," Spirit said, fumbling through his coat pocket. He took out the ring he'd made with Unending's second seal and put it on her finger. "You will be my Master of Darkness. My loyal servant. My friend. My disciple. Here..." He gave her the Unending's scythe, as well. "Let the ring be the mark of your leadership. Let Unending's scythe be a reminder to you and your colleagues of the sacrifices that must be made for your species' survival."

The shadow of a smile danced across Arya's face as she looked at the ring and the scythe. "This... this feels strange, milord."

"It's the power of death coursing through your veins," Spirit said. "The scythe of a Reaper is a powerful weapon in the hands of those who know how to wield it. I will teach you everything I know, Arya. I will give you all the tools you need to take your people to glory and beyond. Most importantly, I will help you make sure Eternity never regains her memories or freedom ever again."

The air thickened with a peculiar pressure as the earthquake died down. The third seal had fallen into place, and the Unending had been stripped of her consciousness.

She'd been bound to a body, soon to be born as Keryn, the first incarnation. There was nothing but pain and suffering ahead for her. Mira and Kemi would try to fight the Darklings off, but without knowing that Arya was their first and true leader, they would fail over and over.

There was nothing more dangerous than a foe disguised as a friend.

This was the pivotal moment in the history of the Aeternae, when a handful became Darklings and disciples of the Spirit Bender—dedicating their lives to learning the arts of death magic and making sure the Unending never regained her full consciousness. From this point on, every ten millennia or so, the Darklings would begin to spot the signs and rush to identify the Unending before the Black Fever would wipe them all out.

They would pay attention through their network of spies. They would keep their identities secret, working in the shadows. They'd try to advance into the public eye, as well, but Mira and Kemi wouldn't allow it. What a tormented world this was.

"How do we break the third seal?" I asked Valaine. "We've seen it now, but I don't know how to break it."

As if having considered my question, Spirit nodded at the scythe in Arya's hand. "There are three sigils in place, now, Master of Darkness. The order in which they were made is not the same as the order in which they can be broken. Your primary duty is to make sure they're never broken."

"None of us here would dare do such a thing," Arya replied.

"Do not underestimate those stubborn enough to bring about the end of their species in order to attain redemption. Mira and Kemi will take the opportunity if you give it to them," Spirit said.

One of the noblemen cursed under his breath. "Perhaps we should just kill them."

"Don't be an idiot!" Arya hissed. "We are better than that."

"He might beg to differ." Spirit chuckled, nodding at the dead nobleman's head.

"He is a statement to all those present," Arya replied. "Have faith in me, milord. I will lead us down the right path. Our Lord and Lady Supreme will never know of my involvement. They trust me, and that will come in handy later. Like I said, public opinion is frayed and fractured right now. If we're to do this, we must make sure history does not remember today or what came before." She paused, turning to face the Spirit Bender again. "How can one break the seals?"

The Reaper pointed at Unending's scythe. "That holds the key. First, ownership must be taken of the blade to destroy the ring. Consider it a double whammy, if you will. That will break the first and second seals."

"And the third?"

"The vessel must be killed after the ring is destroyed."

Silence settled over the room, as the devastating truth sank in. My heart broke. I could feel it coming apart, as if it had been made from porcelain. The one thing I'd hoped to avoid was our only way to release the Unending.

"Valaine must die," I said. The gravity of my words felt like a hammer to the chest.

"A sacrifice is necessary," Valaine replied, slowly shifting into the Unending again. "Valaine won't really die, Tristan. She is a part of me, and I am her. All that dies is the

body. Or as Spirit calls it, the vessel.”

“It doesn’t change the reality of what we’re facing.”

Corbin had the scythe and the ring as Master of Darkness. We had to get to those first before... killing Valaine. The pain was dull but persistent. My entire being ached, and I wondered if Valaine was listening. If she, too, had become aware of what needed to be done.

In here, Valaine and the Unending were the same. But out there, they were still worlds apart despite sharing the same body. The woman I’d fallen in love with, whose lips I’d felt on mine, whose heart I’d heard beating in sweet unison with my own—she was fated to die.

Of all the things the Spirit Bender had done in service of his own agenda, this was certainly the worst. For a moment, I wanted to turn back and leave. The temptation to drop everything and run away with Valaine was remarkably strong. But I could never bring myself to actually do it. Too many people had died because of this whole mess, and many more would soon perish, unless we freed the Unending, who I also loved with equal force.

We had to wake up now. Our people needed to know about Arya. She’d been pretending to be an ally for quite a while. Mira and Kemi were in the dark, and Arya had access to our secrets and most precious elements. Arya had access to Roano and Thayer.

This was strange and awful.

But it was also the only way forward.

SOFIA

Dread consumed me with the hunger of a devastating wildfire, only it burned cold. It sent shivers coursing through me, making my skin crawl as I understood the implications of Danika's message.

She knew about Roano. That meant she would figure out a way to get past the protections. She was coming for Thayen.

I bolted out of the north tower and ran to Thayen's shelter in the old city center, where I'd left him in Kalla's care. My heart thumped, sending shockwaves of pain through my ribcage. Cold sweat dripped down my face as my mind struggled to calculate all the possible scenarios. What if Danika knew exactly how to get to Thayen? What if she was already here, somehow hidden in plain sight?

The Darklings' knowledge of occult death magic—the kind that not even Death herself had come up with—made them incredibly dangerous. There wasn't enough in our arsenal of ideas and capabilities to help us withstand a full-on attack. Our only hope was with the Unending, and her awakening was obviously taking longer than I'd hoped, even inside the bubble that Soul and Time had put together.

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, darting like a shadow through the cobbled alleyways of Roano. Derek was with Amal, Rose, and Caleb, drawing up the final details of our defense plans in case Corbin found his way to us—but Corbin paled in comparison to what Danika could do. I'd never seen a creature as determined as she was. Even with the burns that Ridan had inflicted on her, she'd still found the strength to push through with her machinations. Thayen was her ultimate target, and we were the only ones who could protect the boy.

Horror stiffened my joints as I approached the shelter and didn't see Thayen or Kalla immediately. I burned hot and cold at the same time, and I called out to them.

"Thayen! Kalla! Where are you?!"

Our crews were mobilizing within the city. The Seniors were coming back from the surrounding areas and the Nightmare Forest. They'd all heard about Danika by now, and they were determined to make sure she didn't get anywhere near Thayen. While I appreciated their assistance, I feared they weren't enough to keep that maniac at bay. Dragon fire hadn't put her down, so what would?

"In here." Thayen's voice made me come to a sudden halt. He emerged from the

makeshift tent with a curious look on his face. Relief washed over me, and I nearly lost my footing. My knees were so weak I could barely stand.

"Thank the stars..." I mumbled.

"What's wrong?" Kalla asked, joining him outside.

"Danika," I said. "She knows where we are. She left a message for Esme in the village, along with two Whip bodies. She's collected more soul shards."

Thayen frowned, his breath accelerating as he processed the news. "She's coming for me."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," I told him, firmly gripping his shoulders as I knelt in front of him. "Do you hear me, Thayen? She won't lay a hand on you."

He gave me a weak smile. "I know you'll do everything in your power to stop her, Sofia."

"What can we do?" Kalla asked, hands resting on her hips. "I don't want to see that bitch anywhere near us."

"I'm not sure what else can be done," I said. "Time and the other Reapers fortified the city's defensive shield. Kailani and Lumi did their part, too. Word and death magic have been combined to protect Roano from the Darklings, but since we don't know how far they can push their occult knowledge, I'm not sure if what we've done will hold."

Kalla sighed deeply, taking a moment to glance at Thayen. "We need to put contingencies in place. An escape plan. Danika will be coming for all the shards we have, not just the boy's," she replied.

"I have Ramus's and Petra's," I said. "Amane left them in my care before she left. Unfortunately, it's all we were able to gather so far."

"Yeah, I heard about the failed desert mission," Kalla grumbled. "These bastards are still one step ahead of us, and I cannot for the life of me understand how."

"Maybe someone told them," Thayen suggested.

"Who? We're all allies here," I said. The prospect of a traitor among us terrified me so much that I couldn't even bring myself to accept it as a real possibility. "Derek is on his way here with Mira and Kemi. They might have some suggestions. I admit, my head's a mess right now."

"My mom has that effect on people," Thayen replied. "I'm sorry."

Another option was getting the boy out of here, along with the other shards. A small team of us, aided by a Reaper—we could bounce around indefinitely until our Unending problem found its solution inside Soul's interdimensional bubble. It was the only other avenue that made sense.

"I could take you away," I told Thayen. "We could ask Dream to come with us. The Reapers could spare her in their defense of Tristan and Valaine. It's not like we can move them just yet."

"Not until Valaine wakes up, right?" Kalla said, and I nodded slowly. "Weeks must've gone by in there. She's taking a while to get back to us this time."

"Spirit did quite the number on her," I said.

"We could definitely leave," Thayen interjected. "Before my mother finds us."

Kalla seemed to agree. "I can send one or two Orvisians with you for additional

protection, if necessary. A small group will move much faster and with greater ease across the land. We might even try multiple decoy groups at the same time."

"That's actually a really good idea," Arya interjected as she approached us.

"You're back!" I exclaimed, giving her a warm smile. "I take it you've heard the news?"

"Yeah, Danika's coming. I did a quick sweep around the city with a handful of Seniors, but there was no trace of her," Arya said, stopping a couple feet away from me. "How are you holding up?"

I was trembling, and my pulse was still racing. The mere idea of losing Thayen to Danika was throwing all my senses for a loop, but I wasn't ready to admit to my current state of mind. The kid needed my protection. "I'm okay."

"Where are the others?" Arya asked, looking around. "Mira, Kemi?"

"They should be on their way. We need to discuss options, but I think the multiple decoy groups is a good idea," I said, offering Kalla an appreciative nod. "I'll take Thayen with me, along with a few other people and a Reaper. Everyone else can help keep the Darklings busy running around. Settling in one place for too long clearly hasn't yielded much."

Arya thought about it for a moment. "You're right. We're running out of time. Danika will be here any second." She moved to take Thayen's hand, but the boy pulled back, giving me a confused look.

"Let's wait for Derek, Mira, and Kemi first," I said to Arya.

She glanced my way. During that second, I found myself increasingly more puzzled and agitated. Something was off, but I couldn't figure out where this additional uneasiness was coming from until I caught a glimpse of her long dark claws extending. She slashed open Kalla's throat, and I heard myself scream.

Thayen gasped.

I jumped at Arya, my fangs already out, but she raised a scythe in my direction. Her lips moved, and a rippling pulse hit me right in the throat. My breath was knocked out of me, as if a pair of hands had suddenly tightened, slowly crushing my windpipe. My body was numb. I fell backward, landing with a dull thud. I didn't feel anything, only the ache of helplessness as I began to quickly put two and two together.

Thayen tried to run away, but Arya smacked him with the back of her hand. The blow was strong enough to knock him unconscious. My eyes stung as I saw the life leaving Kalla's eyes, blood pooling beneath her in the dry dirt. It broke me to lose her. She didn't deserve this fate.

"Like I said, time is running out," Arya said, her tone flat.

"You... a scythe..." I managed, realizing that whatever stunning spell she'd put me under had a slowing effect on my speech. I could barely string a few words together. I couldn't move. All I could do was lie on the ground and watch the most abominable thing happen as Arya collected Thayen and threw him over her shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

"I'm the Master of Darkness. Well, the de facto Master of Darkness, anyway," Arya said. "The first one. I surrendered my role a long time ago, but I never truly abandoned my people or my beliefs. When the decision was made to round up the Seniors and

isolate them on islands, I chose to go with them. Not because I was a Senior myself, but because they needed someone to keep an eye on them. A true Darkling.”

“Oh, God...”

“Mm-hm. I know. It must be shocking. No hard feelings, Sofia. You couldn’t have seen this coming. I bided my time, played along, held on to my patience as events unfolded. I promised myself I wouldn’t intervene unless I absolutely had to. For what it’s worth, none of the surviving Seniors know my affiliation.”

“Mira... Kemi...”

I tried to move, but my muscles burned with each attempt. Every move, even the slightest, rivaled the agony of drowning in an active volcano. Whatever spell this was, it had been designed to cause great suffering, not just paralysis. What scared me the most wasn’t even the prospect of being stuck like this forever. No, it was the fact that I would never see Thayen again if Arya got away with this.

“They don’t have a clue,” Arya said. “I was the only Senior the Darklings could trust to infiltrate the island from the very beginning. Mira and Kemi weren’t present when the Spirit Bender and I made our deal on behalf of the Aeternae. I’m genuinely fond of them, but I could never trust them to understand our methods. Those were dire times, Sofia. The Black Fever was killing us in droves. Unending was going crazy beneath two seals. Something had to be done in order for our species to survive.”

“No... Thayen...” I hissed, almost feeling like I could reach out and touch him. Nothing happened. I was still stiff as a board, my body turned into my greatest enemy. My chest burned with fury. Fear ran cold in my veins. I loathed feeling this way. I hated myself and the entire universe for having allowed this to happen.

“He’s but one cog in the machine,” Arya said. “You know, at first the Spirit Bender wasn’t sure which of us would bear the incarnation of the Unending. He’d thought it would be me, but there was a minor glitch in the spell... anyway, for a long time after I had my first child, I worried she might be the Unending.”

Arya calmly knelt by my side, using her spare hand to check all my pockets. She was looking for the shards, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to stop her.

“I named her Keryn, after the northern star our sailors follow across the oceans,” she added. “When the first signs emerged, I was devastated. It turned out the Spirit Bender’s seal had worked as he’d intended after all. Much to my dismay, I might add. The Black Fever gradually returned, and I still didn’t have the courage to do what needed to be done. I’d sworn fealty to the Darklings and our cause, yet... I couldn’t.” She choked up, swallowing back tears. “My daughter, you know? I’d thought I could make that sacrifice.”

Finally, she found Petra’s and Ramus’s shards and slipped them into her coat pocket. I prayed to all the gods and the stars themselves to bring Derek and the others here sooner. There wasn’t anything I could do to stop her, but Mira and Kemi... they knew her best. Derek had enough fire in him to take her on, to avenge Kalla’s brutal and untimely death. But I couldn’t hear or see anyone coming. Arya had certainly picked the right timing.

“In the end, the Spirit Bender returned to give us one last lesson. He reminded me of my choice, of my devotion, and... I don’t know, seeing him back sort of made something

snap inside me. I can't quite explain it, but I found what I needed. I found the strength to make the ultimate sacrifice," Arya said. "I told the Spirit Bender that I suspected my own daughter, my beloved Keryn, of being the Unending. He turned that whole moment into a tutorial. I was shell-shocked. Frankly, even now I don't remember my reaction to watching my daughter's head fall. The Spirit Bender killed her, and I felt... nothing. Maybe a little sadness, but I was mostly relieved because the cycle had been restored, and my people would live to see another day."

She got up, narrowing her eyes at me.

"See, Sofia—that's the difference between your people and us Darklings. We recognize the value of surviving an eternity. Blood Arena games aside, we appreciate the gift of immortality, and we will stop at nothing to keep things as they are, as they should be. We've worked too hard to lose it all now, especially to a bunch of washed-up versions of Aeternae like you. Thayen will be sacrificed, and the Spirit Bender will be brought back. Your ilk have done plenty of damage already. It stops here."

I wanted to scream as I watched her walk away with Thayen on her shoulder. The boy's lights were out cold. She had the other soul shards, too. We'd lost everything. Arya was leading us down a dark path, and I was powerless to stop her. I knew she was taking him to Danika—after all, why would Danika struggle with Roano's defenses when she had Arya on the inside?

"No..." I heard myself whisper as Arya and Thayen vanished between the eastern ruins. Kalla's heart had stopped beating.

There was only silence. The mute emptiness of defeat. The tortuous sensation of having had the life of a sweet child slip through my fingers. Betrayal like this was rare, but when it struck, it struck hard and deep.

I'd thought Arya was one of us. Tired of the Darklings' reign of terror. Instead, she'd been at the helm since day one. Since before the empire... For two million years, she'd lived among the Seniors, isolated on an island, knowing the day might come when she'd have to rise again. That took a lot of dedication and patience. In a way, I admired her.

But I was also eager to rip her head off because she'd stolen Thayen. She was going to get him killed, and that... that simply couldn't happen. Crying on the inside, I braced myself for the worst, knowing it had yet to come.

SOFIA

Minutes later, Derek, Mira, and Kemi found me. I still couldn't move, but I'd had enough time trapped in my own body and with my thoughts to quickly get over the shock and dive straight into retaliatory rage.

Kalla's body was getting cold, and the silence of her heart tore me apart. Derek went pale when he saw me, sliding to his knees at my side. "Sofia! Are you okay? What happened? Why didn't you call out?"

I couldn't. Whatever stunning spell Arya had put on me, it had rendered me virtually useless, forced to observe and unable to interfere with the way the dice had fallen across the board. Derek took me in his arms, trying to hold me up in a sitting position, using his left forearm to stop my head from lolling back. I was limp, my eyes wide open as I looked at him, wishing I could say something.

Mira stopped by Kalla's still form, gasping as she realized we'd lost her. "Oh, no..."

"What is going on here?" Kemi asked, increasingly alarmed as his gaze darted all around us. "Where's Thayen?"

I managed to let out a low moan, but I couldn't move. My limbs were numb, and I had no ability to speak, but I noticed my eyelids were still closing and opening. Derek was dangerously close to falling apart as he tried to figure out what had happened to me. "Honey, are you conscious? Are you in there? Can you hear me?"

A yes would've been a godsend, but he quickly realized he wasn't going to get it out of me in the old-fashioned way. The clock was ticking, and every second we spent here in this infernally quiet limbo was one more second gifted to our enemies.

"Her throat was slit," Mira said, giving Kemi and Derek a nervous frown. "Clean wound. Much like what an Aeternae's claws might inflict."

"Danika, maybe?" Derek replied. "We know she's coming to Roano. What if she's already here?" He paused, then looked at me. "Honey, I need you to blink once for yes, twice for no. Do you understand?"

I blinked once, and he exhaled sharply, relief relaxing his frame.

"Did Danika do this?" he asked. That was a hard question to answer. Technically speaking, no. They needed to know about Arya, so I blinked twice. "Okay... was it a Darkling?" I blinked once. "Do you know who they were?" Again, once.

Mira sniffed the ground around Kalla's lifeless body. Her nostrils flared, and a glimmer

of recognition lit in her light blue eyes. "Arya was here. I can smell her."

"Did Arya do this?" Derek asked me.

"No way. She's been with us since day one," Kemi retorted, shaking his head. "No. She's not one of them. She's been stuck on that wretched island for two million years!"

"Sofia, did Arya do this?" Derek insisted, completely ignoring Kemi. I blinked once. Mira shuddered, grunting softly as she fell to her knees. This had to be devastating to both her and Kemi, and I knew it would be a difficult reality for them to accept.

"Kemi..." Mira murmured. "What... what do we do? How did this happen? Arya? Really?"

"Sofia, are you sure it was her?" Derek asked, his gaze piercing as his eyes searched my face for answers. I blinked once. "So she's a Darkling. She's newly turned to their side, perhaps?" I blinked twice.

"She was always a Darkling?!" Kemi croaked, and I blinked him a yes. He ran a hand through his hair, tension tightening his jaw.

"Did she take Thayen?" Derek asked. Yes, I blinked. My vision was blurry with tears. How would we get ourselves out of this mess? "And the other shards? You still have them, right?" As soon as he got my negative response, Derek sighed deeply, his shoulders dropping. He closed his eyes for a moment. Seconds passed, and I knew he was calling out to someone.

Lumi and Sidyan appeared out of thin air. "What's going on?" the Reaper asked. Last time I'd seen him, a few hours ago, he was adding a few more death spells to the protective shield around Roano to fortify Lumi's Word magic, just to be safe.

"Something happened," Mira said. "Arya—she betrayed us! I don't know how or why, but she's a Darkling."

"And Sofia?" Lumi replied, quickly checking my vitals. "Oh dear."

"Death magic?" Sidyan asked quietly, and she gave him a small nod.

"Can you help her?" Derek asked. "She can't move or speak, but she understands everything. She's able to respond by blinking. Arya took Thayen and the other two shards. She's been with the Darklings since day one—from my understanding of her answers, anyway."

Mira burst into tears. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Hold on," Sidyan said, getting closer to me. He ran his fingers through my hair, then traced the contour of my face while I lost myself in the galaxies of his eyes. I felt his energy simmering through me. Something was happening. "She's been stunned," he concluded, producing his scythe. He pressed the blade to my chest, his lips moving as he whispered a spell. A rush of cold air burst over me, swiftly followed by a burning sensation that shot through my entire body.

I sprang free and back to my feet, shaking. "Holy crap!"

"Sofia!" Derek pulled me into a hug. I wanted to revel in the safety of his embrace for as long as possible, but time wasn't on our side.

"You don't understand how bad this is," I said, then told them everything that had happened. I relayed Arya's every word, and they were left speechless and devastated, especially Mira and Kemi. Sidyan called out telepathically to the other Reapers while Lumi

covered Kalla's body with her velvet cloak. Sadness lingered in the air, making it harder for me to breathe. But the urgency of Thayen's abduction didn't allow me to indulge my misery, not even for a second. "Arya's got Thayen and two of Spirit's shards. She must be out of Roano by now. We have to stop her!"

"Kalla's spirit is here," Sidyan said, raising his scythe. "Given the urgency of the situation, I would like to reap her."

"Do it," I said, shaking. My heart was broken, and I couldn't even think straight with Thayen gone. "She deserves to move on."

"For what it's worth, she's at peace," the Reaper said, then paused to listen. Her spirit was probably telling him something, but we couldn't see or hear her. We didn't even have time to say goodbye. "She says to hurry and get the kid back. She's sorry she couldn't do more to protect him."

"It's not her fault," I replied, tears prickling my eyes. "None of us saw this coming..."

Sidyan moved his scythe, sending Kalla into the afterlife, then offered me a hand. "We need to go to the north tower. Now. There's something you all need to see."

I would've liked a proper moment with Kalla's soul, but time wasn't on our side. Without hesitation, I touched Sidyan. As soon as we were all physically linked to him, he zapped us to the very top of the northern tower. From there, we had a full view of the eastern lands and the Nightmare Forest. Rose and Caleb were already waiting, joined by Time and Dream. The others were still mobilizing.

"Mom, are you okay?" Rose asked, noticing the look on my face before she gave me a quick hug.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. Thayen... Kalla..." My voice broke, so Derek shared the horrifying news about Arya's crimes. No one had time to process the information, however, as Sidyan immediately pointed out the window. "Look there!"

We followed his gaze, and I heard myself curse, blood running cold through my veins. We could all see them. I took one of the long-distance lenses from Rose's bag and pointed it to the northeast. About a hundred yards from the Nightmare Forest, Arya had just finished crossing the tall grass field. Thayen was unconscious, still slung over her shoulder.

"That bitch," I mumbled.

"Kale's crew has just come back," Lumi said. "Nightmare, Dream, and the Night Bringer are converging on Arya right now."

We stood together in front of the window, tension rising as we watched the scene unfold. The Time Master rushed up to join us, equally alarmed. We saw Arya moving quickly, getting closer to the Nightmare Forest. The Reapers appeared around her. They tried to take her down, but Arya activated some kind of forcefield. It was a strange thing to witness.

"Why can't they get through to her?" I asked, my temperature rising.

"If what Arya told you is true, and she was the first Master of Darkness, that means she possesses knowledge that we don't," Time replied.

I could see what he meant. Three Reapers against Arya, all of them First Tennes, and they still failed to touch her. With a wave of her scythe, she launched a pulse that threw

them violently back. By the time they tried to approach Arya again, a familiar figure emerged from the Nightmare Forest. Despite the horrific burns, I recognized Danika immediately.

"Derek," I breathed, gripping his wrist. "She's here..."

Danika helped Arya into the Nightmare Forest, while our Reapers valiantly but ineffectively tried to stop them both. Thayen was gone, along with Petra's and Ramus's soul shards. Seconds passed in heavy silence as the truth settled over us like a layer of suffocating dust.

"We have to go after them," I said, determination flaring from the center of my heart. "Derek, I promised Thayen he'd be safe with us. I told him nothing bad would happen to him."

Mira gave me a faint smile. "You have us all by your side," she replied. "What Arya did—it's unconscionable. I'm ashamed to have ever trusted her. We didn't... we didn't know. Please believe me."

"I do believe you. I didn't expect Arya to betray us, either," I said. "It's nobody's fault but hers, in the end. She chose her allegiance a long time ago and spent millions of years pretending to be someone else. But we can't let Arya or the Darklings win this. If they bring the Spirit Bender back, we're all screwed. It would mean losing Thayen and maybe even Valaine."

Time cleared his throat. "We have to assemble a crew to go after them, but we must protect Roano, as well. Tristan is still in his interdimensional pocket with Valaine. We cannot leave them on their own."

"We'll lead the team," Derek said, raising his chin. "Thayen is our responsibility, and I will stop at nothing to get the boy back."

Esme and Trev reached the north tower as well, both looking like they'd seen a ghost. Kailani's gang didn't fare much better. The bitter taste of defeat lingered on our tongues as we tried to accept everything that had happened and make a new plan.

The Darklings had snatched all the soul shards we'd managed to gather. They'd been ahead of us once again. This time, however, the abominable had happened. They'd taken Thayen, too. Their final objective was within reach now, and we were still outnumbered and outgunned. Without a full understanding of their death magic knowledge, our enemy remained a great unknown, a constant risk and a fatal danger.

But even so, we couldn't give up. As long as the Unending was trying to make her way back to us, we still had a chance at success. Putting a crew together wasn't even the hard part, but finding Arya and Danika before they killed Thayen would be extremely difficult. The promise I'd made to Thayen persisted in the back of my head like a nagging migraine.

"Danika won't get away with this," I ultimately said.

It had become my mantra.

KELARA

The thought that Corbin knew about Roano made me sick to my stomach—a sensation I wasn't even supposed to feel anymore since I'd become a Reaper. But the more time I spent in the close company of this particular Darkling, the more nauseated I became.

I couldn't see Soul anymore, and I had a feeling it had something to do with what Corbin had just told me regarding Roano. He must've warned the others. They probably knew Danika was on the move, as well. All I had left was the hope that they'd beat her to the finish line. After all, our victory depended on the Unending and Tristan pulling through.

Corbin waited in silence, the green fires still burning brightly around the camp.

"I take it I've upset you," he said after a while.

"Your whole faction upsets me," I replied dryly.

"It won't matter after you're turned. I hope that brings you some comfort."

I scoffed. "I don't care what you do to me. Once Unending is free, you are all screwed. I'll consider my fall a sacrifice for a greater cause."

"It's the same way I view having to kill my own daughter. We may antagonize each other, Kelara, but in the end we're both working for something bigger and more important than ourselves."

Movement between the trees caught my eye. Several figures emerged from the distant darkness, making their way through the woods. Shadows and shade reigned supreme in this part of the Nightmare Forest. The overhead crowns were thick and loaded with leaves, keeping every beam of filtered daylight from breaking through. The smell of congealed blood persisted in the air, and I had a hard time looking away from all the dead Darklings. At least Soul had reaped their spirits, since I couldn't see them anymore—it was better than they deserved, considering the many innocents they'd deprived of a chance at an afterlife.

Arya led the group out of obscurity and closer to the campsite. Ice pricked through my undead veins, my stomach balled into a sudden cluster of oversensitive nerves as I understood the image before me. Arya... had betrayed us. Thayen was thrown over her shoulder, alive but unconscious. Danika walked beside her, gruesomely disfigured by Ridan's fire and still healing. She held a small pouch in her hands, gently cradling it to her

chest, but her crooked smile reeked of self-satisfaction. A dark blue velvet dress covered most of her body, but her skin remained a vivid mixture of pink and red. There was no hair in sight, but her eyes were bright blue and filled with hate.

Behind them, a couple dozen Darklings walked, smiling from beneath their leather cloaks, and I knew. Deep down, I knew what was coming. Danika had finally succeeded. She'd brought all the shards together, which meant that all the other Whips were dead now, and she'd stolen her son back from Roano for the last piece of the Spirit Bender's soul. Everything we'd fought so hard to prevent had come to pass, as if the universe was basically flipping us off.

"Danika. It took you a while," Corbin said as the Darklings reached the edge of the camp. I boiled with rage at his side.

"You're making a terrible mistake," I told him between clenched teeth.

"I'm doing what is best for my people," he replied in a hushed tone, then raised his voice as Danika, Arya, and the others walked past the green fires and crossed the camp. They stopped before him, bowing reverently. "Welcome back, Danika. You're looking a lot better."

"You're too kind," Danika muttered, her voice raspy and strained. Her vocal cords were still recovering. From up close, I could see the extent of the damage she'd suffered from Ridan's dragon fire. Her skin looked like a molten plastic glaze, still forming and struggling to stretch and cover the strips of muscle, tendons, and bones. Her hands were almost translucent, and I could literally see her cheekbones.

Arya dropped Thayen on the ground and gave Corbin a dry smirk. "We finally meet."

"Indeed, first Master. It is an honor to have you back among our ranks," Corbin replied. "I trust retrieving the boy and the remaining shards didn't require too much of an effort."

"Not at all," Arya said. "They didn't see me coming."

"And you killed everyone who stood in your way? We're aiming to send a firm message here," Corbin replied.

"I let Sofia Novak live."

Danika sneered at the Senior. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"She is of no importance to us, milord," Arya said, ignoring the Lady Supreme. "A vampire poses no threat, and we should not make a habit of killing our own simply because we can."

"Well, technically speaking, vampires are not our own. Also, you're late to the party here, Arya. We've spent the past two million years obliterating anyone who dared oppose us," Danika hissed.

"And where has that gotten you?" Arya snapped, giving the Lady Supreme a contemptuous sideways glance, much to Corbin's apparent amusement. "You're burnt to a crisp, your son is a victim, your husband is dead instead of supporting your endeavors, and the Unending is under the protection of foreigners. The only reason we're in this mess to begin with is because you couldn't keep your house clean."

Corbin chuckled. "Thankfully, you were able to leave the island and come to our assistance."

"Crispy over here wouldn't have been able to get past Roano's protective shield," Arya continued. "It takes a Master to break that magical combination."

"We are indeed fortunate to have you," Corbin said, cutting Danika off before she could respond. There was clear animosity between the Lady Supreme and Arya—something I might be able to manipulate in order to turn this situation to our advantage. "The rest of you should clean this mess up. The bodies will start smelling soon."

The Darklings proceeded to gather the bodies and severed heads, piling them up closer to one of the green fire pits. The plan was to burn them, along with what remained of the campsite. Corbin knew we couldn't stay here much longer.

"You're a traitor," I said to Arya. Her presence here wasn't even as shocking as I might have expected, yet I couldn't put my finger on why. Maybe there was something about her, something subtle and hiding just beneath the surface, something I hadn't consciously noticed before but still sensed somehow. She did strike me as cold and patient enough to live on an island for two million years with her enemies while in the service of the Darklings and the Spirit Bender.

"I didn't betray anyone," Arya replied. "I was always loyal to my Darklings."

"We trusted you."

"That was your mistake. Did you really think we'd let the Seniors live on those islands without some kind of inside man for additional supervision, especially considering how determined they were to bring the Darkling faction down?" Arya shot back. "Every time one of them came up with an idea to get off the island or to sabotage my colleagues, I had to work out an angle to dismantle their plans, to knock them down a few pegs. It hasn't been boring for the past two million years, I can tell you that."

"You should've killed Sofia," Danika reiterated, slowly shaking her head. I noticed she couldn't bring herself to look down at Thayer. "She's more dangerous than you might think. She's determined."

"So are we. Don't tell me you're afraid of an itty-bitty vampire." Arya giggled.

"I'm afraid of the Reapers in their alliance. The witches. And that blasted dragon is a problem!" she screeched. Corbin raised a hand to silence her.

"It doesn't matter anymore. We have everything we need now. All the pieces of the Spirit Bender's soul have been brought back together," he said. "Prepare for the ritual, Danika. I shall remove the shard from your heart and complete it."

I needed a few seconds to put two and two together, but when my synapses were finally in sync, I started laughing. Corbin stilled, giving me a confused and curious glance. Arya didn't say anything, but a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. She also realized what Danika hadn't done.

"You don't know..." I said to Corbin. "She didn't tell you!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, his gaze bouncing from Danika to me and back. It only made me laugh harder, despite the rune collar pressing against my throat and my otherwise grim predicament.

Danika tried to speak, probably to attempt some damage control. Judging by the look on her horrifically scarred face, she'd forgotten to cover this particular aspect of her personal plan regarding the Spirit Bender's return. But I quickly cut her off.

"Danika transferred her soul shard into Thayen's heart the moment he was born," I said. "And I guess she didn't tell you. Petra knew, and so do we. Why did you think she had Thayen taken from Roano? Did you think she was actually worried about him?"

Corbin glared at me as if I'd insulted him, yet I could hear the wheels slowly turning in his head as he shifted his focus to Danika. "Is this true?"

"The Spirit Bender gave us a treasure trove of knowledge. I was curious and resourceful and determined to live, in case the worst-case scenario ever occurred," she said. "How was I supposed to know these wretched foreigners would push us to these extremes?"

"I've been living in hell since discovering the Unending's identity," Corbin growled. He shot to his feet, fists clenched tight at his sides. "I'm forced to kill my own daughter while you willingly send your son to be slaughtered to spare yourself? Are you kidding me, Danika?!"

"I... I thought you'd understand. It's only so that we can be together," she replied, in a bid to save her hide. I refused to let her slither out of this mess.

"Hah. No, Danika. Be honest. If not with us, at least with yourself," I said. "The only reason you transferred the shard into Thayen's heart was because you're selfish and will stop at nothing to live forever. It's why you became a Darkling in the first place, isn't it? To preserve your eternal life?"

She pointed an angry metallic finger at me. "Keep your mouth shut, Reaper!"

"Why? Is the truth inconvenient? You can't even look at your own son, can you? Deep down, the shame is eating you alive," I replied, riding the wave all the way to the end. Danika was close to snapping. Anger rippled off her in heated waves. Her eyes twitched, unable to stay still for more than a second. Most importantly, fear glowed in them whenever she looked at Corbin.

"The Reaper is right, Danika. What you've done is horrific. What Petra tried to do is horrific, but at least she has met her just end. You, on the other hand—you disgust me," he said.

"Why, because I want to live?" Danika demanded.

"Because you want to live by killing your own son," Arya replied, her expression grim. "I had to watch my daughter die because she was the Unending's first incarnation. If anyone understands what Corbin is going through, it's me. For you to willingly put your son in harm's way, Danika... there's no worse crime."

"Well, screw you. It's done!" she spat. "I get to live and have other babies, and that's it."

"You don't deserve to be a mother," I interjected. "If you're so eager to keep your life at the expense of Thayen's, you don't deserve to be a mother, Danika."

Corbin sighed, visibly disgusted by the Lady Supreme. "I can't believe you'd do such an awful thing." He paused, taking a few deep breaths as he closed his eyes for a second or two. "The worst part is that you're willing to tear the boy's heart out—no, I cannot let that happen."

For a moment, I wondered what he meant. Hope was a dangerous feeling in times like this, but I couldn't help it. Was Corbin finally having second thoughts? Was killing

Thayen too much, even for him?

"I'll have to do it myself," he added, squashing whatever optimism I'd had left. "And you will have to stand here and watch. Maybe you don't think it's a big deal, but trust me, Danika. The image of your son dying for your selfishness will haunt you forever."

She didn't say a word, though I knew she was struggling on the inside. Sociopath or not, Danika had given birth to this boy. She'd raised him. Until she'd learned about the Spirit Bender's demise, she must've looked ahead at an eternity with Thayen by her side as future Lord Supreme and ruler of the Visio empire. All those dreams had vanished into a puff of ashes, and it couldn't have been easy to adjust, to cope. No matter how she tried to play it off, I knew Danika wasn't in the best frame of mind at this point—not after Corbin and Arya's harsh words.

"Don't do this," I said. "You'll be killing a child."

"Danika hasn't left me any other choice," Corbin replied, staring at Thayen. The kid was out cold, his eyes closed and his cheeks red from the cold. He looked so helpless and fragile. It broke my heart to see him like this, especially after all the trouble we'd all gone through to keep him safe. I could only imagine how Sofia was feeling right now.

Something whistled past me. It hit one of the trees behind us, turning it into a loose pile of silvery ashes. I followed the source and couldn't stop a cackle as I saw Sofia and Derek leading a group of fighters our way. Rose was with them, as well as Lumi and Sidyan. Esme and Trev. The Night Bringer, Dream... and Soul. He must've caught up with the crew. He must've brought them here!

"Let Thayen go!" Sofia shouted from the edge of the camp, pointing her pulverizer weapon at Corbin, who stood frozen on the spot. He hadn't expected this particular twist.

"How is this possible?" he mumbled, his eyes bulging in shock.

"You warded the camp against Reapers with your green fires, but you didn't take the pulverizer weapons into consideration," I said.

"Dammit, Corbin..." Arya sighed, drawing her scythe.

Within seconds, the Darklings dropped the bodies they'd been carrying back to the pile and took out their weapons, bombarding Sofia and Derek's crew with a flurry of death magic attacks. The night quickly came over us, courtesy of the Night Bringer. Everything turned pitch black, and all I could see were the glimmers of active scythes and the bluish flashes of pulverizer pellets flying past.

Someone screamed. One of the green fire pits was knocked over somehow. "What's happening?" I breathed, suddenly motionless as I tried to make sense of it all. The rune collar had reduced most of my abilities as a Reaper to zero, and I could barely protect myself. Everything was happening so fast, I could barely register most of the movements and words that flew back and forth through and around the camp.

A bright light flashed in the middle of the camp. It burned bright and pink as Lumi stepped forward, aiming her glowing white hands at Danika. I felt Corbin's hand on me, his fingers digging into my shoulder. He kicked Danika in the back. She cried out and fell forward. He snatched the satchel she'd been holding and shoved it under his belt, then grabbed Thayen's hand. For as long as the pink light burned above the camp, I could see. And Corbin had something planned.

The pulverizer weapons continued firing. The Darklings perished, one by one, while Danika struggled to get up. Arya and a few others moved away from Corbin and went on the offensive, using death magic to hold the pulverizer pellets at bay. Some shots were avoided while others took a few more Darklings down.

The green fire circle had been broken, and the Reapers were trying to make their way toward us, but as I looked up at Corbin and spotted the scythe between his fangs lighting up, I knew my troubles had yet to end.

"No," I murmured. "Corbin, don't."

Too late. We vanished, leaving the camp and the Nightmare Forest behind. I heard Soul shouting after me. "Kelara! No! Kelara!"

We were already gone. His voice echoed across the fabric of time and space, but he could no longer reach me. I lingered in an intense darkness, though I could still feel Corbin's touch. Thayen groaned softly. When the light returned, it came with a brutal cold. We were thrown in the middle of a snowy realm. A blizzard was raging, the winds howling above and around us.

"This is unpleasant, but at least we have some privacy," Corbin said, squinting as he tried to examine our surroundings through the curtain of piercing, icy snow.

He'd gotten away from GASP. He'd grabbed me and Thayen and the shards, and he'd brought us to a strange and cold land. This was a Master of Darkness with a mission. He intended to see it through to the end, no matter what. The dread that came with that thought made my throat tighten.

Things had just gone from bad to infinitely worse.

Just like every other time we'd dealt with the Darklings, they'd been well prepared for this encounter. Danika must've foreseen retaliation from our side from the moment Arya left Roano with Thayen and the shards. By the time we'd reached the campsite with Soul's help, however, it was too late.

The boy had been brought to Corbin, and the Master of Darkness had only needed a minute to wrap things up and disappear with Thayen and the shards—plus Kelara for some reason. We were left to deal with the remaining Darklings, Danika and Arya. Many had already fallen, pulverized by our weapons, but those who were still standing could upset the balance once more.

Soul vanished and reappeared around the campsite a couple of times, angrily cursing and looking to his left and right in a frenzy. Kelara had been taken, and he was losing his temper.

The rest of us fought hard, dodging death magic pulses from enemy scythes. The Night Bringer's darkness intensified, turning everything into a heavy blackness that swallowed us whole. Only the red light above remained, courtesy of Lumi's Word magic, looking like a sleepy star about to implode as it flickered overhead.

Sofia and Derek took on Danika together, and her appearance sent shivers down my back. She was no longer the gracious, beautiful, and elegant Lady Supreme, but a monster with healing burns and a bald, scarred head. Her prosthetic hands gripped the scythe, which glowed blue as she cast rippling pulses at us.

"You ruined everything!" she snarled.

Mira and Kemi dealt with Arya, while Trev and the rest of our crew handled the remaining Darklings. A stunning spell hit my shoulder and took out my arm. I couldn't feel it anymore. The fiend responsible ran toward me, eager to chop my head off, but Trev darted between us. With one swift swing of his short sword, the Darkling was decapitated, and I was still breathing.

All around the campsite, Knight Ghouls gathered. They were big, with muscular backs and translucent skin. I expected them to jump in and join the fight, but to my surprise, they held back, watching with silent interest. "Why aren't they joining their handlers?" I asked, almost breathless.

"I think they're conscious and hesitant, despite the rune collars," Trev said. "The

Darklings are outnumbered here and too busy to worry about them not interfering, I guess."

"You sent your child to his death!" Sofia said to Danika. She got dangerously close to the Lady Supreme, who hit them with a sprawling defensive forcefield that knocked Sofia and Derek back.

"The Spirit Bender will rise, and my son will have helped make that happen!" Danika replied, raising her scythe as she stalked toward them.

This woman wasn't delusional or simply fanatical. She was of the purest evil and not easy to defeat, but Sofia seemed fearless. Then again, she'd become emotionally attached to Thayen—I could only imagine the turmoil in her heart knowing what Corbin planned to do with him.

Lumi took down the last of the Darklings while the Reapers gathered around, intently eyeing the ghouls as they approached us. Mira and Kemi still had a bone to pick with Arya, and no one was even thinking of stepping between Sofia, Derek, and Danika. The Night Bringer approached the ghouls and took off their collars one by one, apologizing on behalf of Death and all the other Reapers for what had happened to them. In all fairness, the Reaper community didn't bear any responsibility for this planet—they were victims, too—but I could certainly see why the Night Bringer had chosen this approach. The ghouls needed at least a little comfort after what they'd been through.

My heart pumped angrily as I watched the remaining battles unfold. Mira was merciless against Arya, fighting with tears in her eyes. "You're the worst of the worst," the former Lady Supreme said in a momentary standoff. "For two million years, you lived with us on that island, isolated, all the while sabotaging our efforts to regain our freedom. Serving your Darklings even when you pretended to be our friend."

"What you did is beyond disgusting, Arya," Kemi added. "You could've at least been upfront and honest about it, but you weren't. You lied and pretended to be someone you're not. For five million years! Five million!" He roared as he bolted toward Arya, his claws and fangs out.

Arya smirked and dodged to the side, slapping him on the back with the blade of her scythe. "I did what I had to do for the people of Visio to survive."

"If what you were doing was right, you wouldn't have had to hide in the shadows." Kemi grunted, dropping to his knees. Arya had cast some kind of death magic spell on him, because he could no longer move. His arms and limbs were soft, and he fell on his side, groaning and grimacing in pain. His skin turned pale. He didn't look good.

"Your concept of right and wrong is ridiculous, even infantile," Arya muttered, shifting her attention back to Mira. The former Lady Supreme was quickly moving in, twice as angry over what had just happened to Kemi. But Arya had a plan for her, too.

Before Mira could reach her, the Darkling sneered and brought the scythe up, its blade glowing green. I'd yet to remember the color codes for the different types of death magic spells, but when someone like Arya wielded this kind of weapon, it could never lead to something good.

"We've built our world on the suffering of a Reaper," Mira said, stopping just feet in front of Arya. "And you've done everything in your power to perpetuate that misery."

Spare me the speech, Arya. We were there that day. We were all complicit then, and we've allowed it all to fester into what is happening today. At least have the courage to admit it."

Arya scoffed. "I will not apologize for fighting to keep my immortality."

"No one asked you to apologize," Kemi managed, barely able to push himself into a sitting position, his breathing heavy and ragged. "But you keep bringing it up because deep down you know you've done everything wrong from the moment you swore fealty to the Spirit Bender."

"It's too late now," Arya replied, though I could almost see her resolve weakening.

"It's not too late for you to put that scythe down and join us," Mira said. "You couldn't have faked everything over the course of five million years. I'm certain I know the real Arya well enough. You never liked the violence or causing other people harm for your own freedom. Please..."

The Soul Crusher reappeared close to Trev and me. The look on his face was grim. "I've lost track of them completely," he whispered. "I can't find any trace of Corbin or Kelara anywhere."

"Wherever they've gone, it's probably far from here," Trev replied, equally troubled.

"What do we do?" I asked, adjusting the hood on my head.

"There's not much we can do without a location," Dream said, joining our side of the campsite as the silvery ashes of perished Darklings began to settle. The Night Bringer pulled the darkness back, allowing the light of dusk to filter through the ruffled tree crowns once again. The red light from Lumi's magic had dimmed, and the aftermath of the fight could be seen with crystal clarity.

Danika could barely even stand, heaving and hunched over. Sofia had delivered quite the beating. At some point, Danika had lost her scythe. She had nothing else going for her, and Sofia could see it. Derek stood to the side, carefully watching like the rest of us. This had become personal. My heart was heavy, but this had to end now. The Darklings had hurt too many people. As much as we'd tried to stay out of Aeternae politics, they'd left us with no choice.

"It doesn't matter what happens to me," Danika said, her pink skin glistening with sweat. "My mission is complete. The Master has the shards, and he will bring the Spirit Bender back. Our nation will be saved."

"Are you sure it doesn't matter, Danika? After all the effort you've put into surviving. Even going so far as to hide the shard in your own son's heart," Sofia replied.

"I'm tired," she said, sighing. "My body is weak, and you're all vultures waiting to pick at me, to tear me apart. I can't help but anticipate my own undesired ending."

"At least do something useful with what little time you have left," Sofia urged her. "Make things right. Tell us where Corbin took Thayen. Your child doesn't deserve to die like this."

"If I tell you where Thayen is, then my death will have been in vain. It defeats the whole purpose of this moment, don't you see?" Danika chuckled bitterly.

Derek slowly shook his head. "We'll have to find him ourselves, Sofia. She won't tell us."

"Damn right I won't tell you!" Danika roared and lunged at Sofia. It was her final move. Her last stand. She'd gone from relentless monster to a mere wisp of an Aeternae in less than a day. It was a sad sight, but a necessary one, as Sofia caught Danika by the throat and rammed a hand through her chest, screaming with rage.

She pulled it back, ripping Danika's beating heart from her fractured ribcage. She tossed it away, tears streaming down her cheeks as Danika's eyes grew wide and glassy. This was the end for the Lady Supreme of Visio. As I watched the last twinkle of life leaving her blue gaze, I was reminded of the Aeternae woman we'd first met—poised and dignified, glorious in her gold-embroidered dresses, with the sun itself woven through her hair. She could've been a wonderful creature—she'd been resourceful and determined and remarkably calculated—but she'd chosen this path of evil and darkness instead.

She'd chosen to destroy her own blood to survive, and there was no worse crime in this vast universe. When Danika's body hit the ground, Sofia wailed as Derek took her in his arms. It was the one thing she'd dreaded the most, yet it was also something she'd known would come—killing Thayen's mother. It was easy for any of us to pass judgment on what kind of woman Danika had been, but in the end she was an important part of Thayen's life, no matter how wretched she'd turned out to be.

Danika could've led us to Corbin and her son, but she'd opted for death at the hands of the people she'd hated the most. This didn't feel like a victory at all. At best, it was one less obstacle in our way.

Arya screamed, forcing us all to turn our eyes to her. Mira hadn't moved from her spot, but the Soul Crusher had snuck up on her in his subtle form. He stood behind Arya, his scythe halfway out through her chest. Blood dripped onto the cold, hard ground as the Darkling tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Mira sobbed and covered her mouth with both hands, tears glistening in her sapphire eyes. A Reaper having to kill a living creature was truly a devastating moment in this world, and the weight of it weighed on all our shoulders. Soul exhaled sharply as he pulled his blade back, and Arya collapsed. His weapon was not bound by the mortal conventions of killing a vampire or an Aeternae in a certain fashion. The scythe did not discriminate, nor did it care. It sliced and obliterated all the same.

"It's over." Kemi gasped, regaining the sense in his limbs now that the spellcaster was dead. He sprang up and ran to his wife, taking her in his arms. They held each other tight, crying and thanking all the forces in the world for allowing them to survive this moment together.

"I had to," Soul said bluntly. "Arya wouldn't have told us anything about Corbin. I doubt she or Danika even knew where he's gone."

"Corbin wouldn't have told them," Derek agreed. "I'm sorry you had to do that."

"Me too. But I refused to let Arya take another life. I'd grown fond of Kalla," Soul replied. "She was a woman of great character."

"And one hell of a cook," Lumi added quietly, visibly saddened at the memory.

We were alive, but we'd lost everything we'd fought so hard to keep from the Darklings' hands—except for my brother and Valaine, of course, but even that was ephemeral, at best. Thayen was in the wind, and so was Kelara. The Darklings knew

about Roano, so it was only a matter of time before they'd come to the city gates and try to get past the protective shield.

"He's going to kill Thayen," Sofia managed, wiping her tears. Some of Danika's blood smeared her face, but she didn't seem to notice. "How do we find Corbin?"

"Kelara has a rune collar around her neck," Soul said. "It's blocking all telepathic communications."

"The common tracking spell wouldn't help, either," Lumi replied. "We don't know where it would take us, or if it could even take us anywhere. With Corbin's ability to teleport with a Reaper scythe, he could very well be halfway around the world by now. The tracking spell needs to run a physical course. It won't be able to follow a jump like that."

The Night Bringer cleared his throat as he glared at one of the green fire pits. "Corbin knew one or more of us might eventually come upon this place. The moment we left Orvis, he took control over the Nightmare Forest. He set up camp here, and he let his Knight Ghouls run loose to feast on the runaway souls in the area. He didn't know where we went, but he knew we'd eventually come looking for him. Otherwise he wouldn't have set this thing up."

"What is that, exactly?" I asked.

"The green fire ring? It's a perversion of a forcefield we use to contain poltergeists and angry spirits," Night said. "Most Reapers have never had to use one, so it's not something common to come across. But the green flames are specific to this spell, which is why I recognized it quickly."

"What are you trying to tell us?" Soul asked, still aggravated by Kelara's abduction. It was written all over his face that this was the last place he wanted to be right now. I could certainly sympathize. Kalon was stuck in one of his interdimensional pockets sleeping through a bout of deadly Black Fever, and my brother was meandering through the Unending's subconscious trying to save all our asses—and we hadn't even been able to save Thayen, let alone rescue Kelara or retrieve the other soul shards.

"Corbin foresaw plenty of our moves," Night said. "He's gone to perform the Spirit Bender's resurrection ritual now, but I doubt it'll be done quickly. That's some heavy-duty and insanely complex type of death magic. It will take some time to put it together, which means two things—one bad and one maybe not so bad."

"How about you get straight to the point, Debbie Downer?" I shot back, losing patience for the veiled metaphors and long-ass discussions. We were past the point of no return and more than pressed for time. We were close to getting crushed on multiple fronts here.

"Thayen might not die as quickly as you think," Night retorted, giving me a sullen look. "We may still have some time left to find him and save him."

Lumi sighed, rolling her white-blue eyes. "Was that the not-so-bad thing you mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Good grief. So what's the bad thing?" the swamp witch asked, hands resting on her hips. The Night Bringer turned to face her.

"The other Darklings and all their acolytes will likely set their sights on Roano next," he said. "Corbin is busy with the ritual, but I doubt he'd want the whole faction witnessing Spirit's resurrection while we're still out here, perfectly capable of foiling their plans. After all, someone needs to kill Valaine before Unending is fully awakened."

Dream gasped. "We need to get back to Roano and fortify its defenses."

"Exactly," Night said. "We can't move Valaine until she's conscious and back to her old self."

Our work was nowhere near done, and it was about to get infinitely harder. The Night Bringer was right in every detail. We couldn't do anything to help Thayen, but we had to get back to Roano and make sure the Unending was still safe. Once we got there, we'd sit down and figure out what else we could do to stop Corbin.

"I'm not letting Thayen die," Sofia murmured. Derek held her close.

"No one wants that to happen," Night said. "But we must also look after the most important weapon in our arsenal before we can find a solution for the boy's return."

The Unending. She was the most powerful entity on our side. She was also our only consistent victory, since we'd managed to keep her away from the Darklings from the beginning of this bloody and miserable saga. Maybe she was the one who could get to Thayen before it was too late.

What were the odds she'd awaken soon, though?

What were the odds she'd actually save us all, when danger and death loomed mercilessly all around us? The Darklings had made one more successful step toward their final objective, but they relied on the Spirit Bender to sort this mess out and kill Valaine to reset the ten-thousand-year cycle. We relied on Unending to remember herself and tell us how to break the seals that bound her.

Ironically enough, both sides of this war had put their hopes in entities that weren't at all easy to reach. One advocated freedom and fairness, while the other promoted murder and mayhem. Between us were millions of Aeternae, the innocent Rimians and Naloreans, and a world that had been built on a foundation of lies and grievous wrongs.

Whether light would grace Visio again remained to be seen. I knew we'd do everything in our power to make it happen. If only we had a way of getting to Thayen...

KELARA

I couldn't feel the cold myself, but I imagined what it had to feel like. Thayen's cheeks were as red as roses, his lips taking on a purplish hue as snow settled on his brows and eyelashes. It was freezing out here, and the blizzard was only getting worse.

"Corbin, you have to stop this!" I shouted, but the Master of Darkness ignored me as he prepared for the resurrection ritual. He cut his palm with the tip of the scythe's blade and squeezed his fist tightly, allowing the blood to pour down in a thin crimson stream. He moved around, using the blood to draw a strange symbol in the snow, a star with twelve points and a circle in the middle.

"I don't have to stop anything," he replied. "In fact, I'm just getting started."

"You're killing an innocent child!"

He paused for a moment to give me an angry look, as if I'd just reminded him of exactly how unpleasant this whole job was. "You know what, Kelara? I've enjoyed our brief time together, but it's time to help you cross over to the other side of this story."

"What do you mean?" I asked, barely hearing myself over the howling wind. It had taken me a while, but judging by the sky's aspect and the frosted terrain around us, I guessed we were at one of the poles—likely the north.

"You've been on the losing side as a Reaper," he said, stepping away from the bloody sigil. "Let us bring you to the side of the winners." His scythe glinted as he began whispering a string of words and sub-words I didn't recognize against its cold metal. My blood curdled as I understood what was happening.

This wasn't how I'd imagined learning about how the Darklings were literally making the ghouls. I hadn't planned on being on the receiving end of this mess, dammit, and yet here I was trapped. Corbin was determined to turn me into one of his slaves.

"No..." I managed, trying to get away from him. The collar burned my skin, forcing me to stay put. My muscles stiffened, and my joints tightened. My physical form was struggling to cope with what was about to happen. "You can't do this. It's... it's abominable!"

"What's abominable is Reapers getting to live forever while the rest of us languish," Corbin hissed, pressing the blade against my chest. An icy fire burned through me, and it took a titanic amount of effort to stop myself from screaming right away.

"You're immortal, Corbin. You don't need to punish me for it..." My voice trailed off as my temperature dropped, and my skin felt like it had been turned to ice. My teeth chattered. The spell worked on a pretty basic level. It was transferred to me through the blade, and it was wreaking havoc on the inside, stirring a most peculiar but disturbingly intense famine. "No... please..."

He smirked. "Too late. Feel the hunger, Kelara. It's the only thing you will ever know from now on, my dear."

Paralyzed by his words, I took a moment to process the situation. A battle raged inside me. A fight for control between the person I was and always had been, and the monster he'd created, a monster that only needed the power of one soul to make it to the surface and destroy me forever. I could feel it snapping its jaws, a void growing at the center of my being. An emptiness I couldn't define expanded rapidly until my mind caught fire and my stomach churned.

Yes, there it was... the hunger.

The hunger I'd often tried to understand. Reapers usually chose to eat a soul in order to become ghouls, to foolishly free themselves of Death's command, but at what cost? They lost themselves in the process. They became beasts without the ability to reason, driven only by the desire to consume another soul, and another... and another.

"It burns..." I cried out, my eyes stinging.

"And now for the final piece of the puzzle," Corbin muttered, getting up and moving away from me. He took the soul shards from the leather satchel and carefully placed them at the star points—one for each shard—while I struggled to resist the ravenous wave coming over me. Corbin had broken me. He'd stripped me to my most essential self. He'd won this fight, but I couldn't let him declare victory in the war, as well. I couldn't!

Unable to move much, I tried to focus on my breathing while the ghoulish fever spread and blistered through my chest and legs. It became increasingly difficult to focus, but when Thayen finally opened his eyes, I saw the light in them—the sparkle of a child with so much left to live for. The brightness of life beckoned me to do something. He didn't deserve to die this way.

Something toxic constricted my throat, and it felt like it was burning my vocal cords like acid. I couldn't even utter a word of warning to the boy as Corbin placed down the last of the extracted soul shards. Eleven people had died for this, and the twelfth was about to lose his life, too.

"Worry not, Kelara. The hunger won't last long," Corbin said, positioning several small black crystals along the circle line—pieces required for the ritual, most likely. "Once I kill Thayen, his soul will be yours to eat, and your transformation will be complete. Try not to fight the fever. I'm told it can be quite painful if you resist."

This was it. The trick in the spell. It triggered the hunger for the soul first, forcing the Reaper to do the unspeakable in order to control the troubling sensation. Eating Thayen's soul seemed like a no-brainer. Hell, my mouth was already watering as the boy looked at me, understandably terrified and confused.

"Thayen... run..." I whispered, my voice gone.

"Thayen, don't be an idiot. We're in the middle of the north pole. There's nowhere for you to run to," Corbin warned, patiently working on his heinous art. His every movement was calm and calculated as he meticulously arranged the pieces in a geometric pattern around the circle and along the star points.

Thayen was speechless, his gaze darting between me and Corbin. I had to look like a mess, because I saw the fear in his eyes whenever he glanced my way. I scared him, and that was the last thing I wanted Thayen to feel about me. With Corbin determined to kill him, I wanted to be the one to help, not the mindless beast that would consume his soul.

All it took was one moment of digging back into my memories, of remembering the son I'd once lost to my own vanity and ambitions. All it took was one glimpse of my boy, the image of him fading beneath a layer of frenzied hunger.

"No..." I murmured, my heart breaking for my own predicament. "No!" I screamed and gripped the collar around my neck. The metal and the runes burned my fingers. I heard the sound of searing skin and flesh, but I didn't stop. I pulled with all my might and howled until the collar broke.

The iron gave way, and I was suddenly free. Corbin didn't see me coming.

Snarling, I tackled him, and we fell into the thick snow. He tried to fight me off, but I was too angry, too determined to save Thayen. I needed my scythe. Corbin scratched at me with his claws, but I vanished into my subtle form for a split second, using up all the energy I had left, what little strength the ghoulish spell had yet to take from me. I fumbled through his cape until my fingers caught the tip of my blade.

I whispered one of my attack spells. The invisible pulse exploded between us, throwing me back. Corbin scrambled to get back up and catch me, but I was faster, even though I'd become visible again. "Don't you dare, you undead bitch!" he shouted.

"Thayen, hold on," I breathed and hooked my arm around the boy's waist, hoisting him from the snow. With my scythe back, I could take us away from here.

The fever burned and dismantled my synapses, the hunger beyond my control, but I could still do something. One last thing to make it count. I glanced back and saw Corbin practically flying at us. I wished for the fabric of space to open and swallow me whole.

We vanished, leaving Corbin behind. His snarl rippled across and into the darkness that enveloped Thayen and me, as I tried to envision Roano as my final destination. I'd taken the last piece of Spirit's soul from Corbin. I'd broken past the collar, somehow, and I'd saved Thayen.

My fall had not been for nothing, I thought, as I surrendered to the abyss.

*F*ury and desperation reigned supreme in our shelter in Roano. We'd returned with nothing but bad news and heartache. Sofia was inconsolable and barely keeping it together. Mira and Kemi were brokenhearted and quiet. The Seniors were stunned and disheartened, while the rest of our crew were basically fuming. Kalon's brothers hadn't stopped crying since news of Thayen's abduction had reached them.

The Orvisians were in mourning, and they had quickly mobilized to build a funeral pyre for Kalla. She lay on top of the wooden pile as though asleep, covered with a white linen cloth that concealed her slit throat. Pebbles had been placed on her eyes. We gathered around it for a moment, trying to get our thoughts and priorities in order. Rose, Caleb, and the others joined us as we shed tears for Kalla and her people. It was our duty to protect them now that she was gone.

The Seniors and the Orvisians made peace in a matter of seconds, as both sides understood that Arya was solely responsible for what had happened. Afternoon settled over the realm with shades of red and pink across the sky, but I felt as though the colors themselves were sad and nowhere near as intense as they used to be. It seemed like the heavens mourned, too. A life taken by a traitor was truly tragic, and we were all reeling from its impact.

"The Reapers and I have talked," Dream said, standing to my right. Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore were to my left, sniffing and wiping their tears. "We can't stay here much longer."

"But Tristan—"

"Time and Soul will help," she said, cutting me off. "They're both in the north tower right now, working on a solution to hopefully make the pockets mobile, so they can carry them to wherever we might go. It'll render them useless for any defense or offense maneuvers, but Nightmare, Phantom, Widow, Night Bringer, and I will cover for them as best as we can. Esme, this is too dangerous. The Darklings know we're here. There's bound to be a convoy showing up any time now."

Many of the Orvisians sobbed as Mira and Kemi walked slowly toward Kalla's pyre, each holding a burning torch. Derek watched the funeral proceedings with a heavy frown. I didn't even want to know what was going through his head, especially with Thayen in Corbin's hands.

"What about Thayen?" I asked Dream.

"The Night Bringer told you those things because he wanted you all out of there." She sighed, lowering her gaze. "Chances are the kid's already dead, but we couldn't let you all linger in the heart of danger. Not when Tristan and Valaine are here. They still need you."

Tears filled my eyes, and I couldn't stop them from pouring down my cheeks. "It's not fair," I whispered. "Thayen... he's just a kid..."

"And we did everything we could to keep him safe," Dream said. "It's not your fault he was lost. The Darklings had Arya. It takes some kind of character to stay dormant like that for two million years. Patience. Dedication. They were prepared for this. We weren't."

"Is there really no way to get to him in time?" Ansel asked, his eyes puffy and red.

"I'm sorry," Dream replied, shaking her head, then looked at me. "And I'm sorry Night had to, well, lie to get you all to move. His undead heart was in the right place. There simply wasn't anything we could do to retrieve Thayen. Corbin had his claws on the boy... and Kelara."

Kemi and Mira set the funeral pyre alight. The flames swelled and licked at the sky, the wood crackling and spewing sparks. Soon we could no longer see Kalla's body because of the giant orange flames, as plumes of black smoke rose toward the sky. Some of the Orvisians dropped to their knees, crying and wailing and breaking my heart all over again.

We'd lost an ally and a hero. Kalla had once been one of the few non-Aeternae Darklings, only to end up leading her people into the center of the Nightmare Forest, where a different and better society had emerged—one where the Aeternae didn't need to feed on their Rimian or Nalorean neighbors. She'd accomplished something that the empire had fought hard to eradicate ever since its conquest of Rimia and Nalore.

"Kalla made history by showing that it was possible to live without draining the life out of those around us," Lumi said. "She was a good and just Nalorean. A decent woman with clean morals and only the best wishes for her people, regardless of their species or social status."

"Everyone was welcome in Kalla's Orvis," Trev added, moving to stand next to the swamp witch. "All we had to do was respect the blood and life of others. And it worked. What she and her predecessors accomplished in Orvis... it worked."

Derek exhaled sharply. "The village itself may be gone, but its people and their culture survive. There is still hope for the future. Do not let Kalla's death be in vain. Do not despair. Do not surrender to the darkness that so eagerly wishes to consume us all. We've lost a battle today, but Kalla's life meant more than just this moment of loss."

"We're all together now," Mira continued, raising her gaze to the sky. "From all walks of life. From all corners of this vast universe. We're all together because we believe in justice and freedom for all. Because the life we, the Aeternae, have made for ourselves on Visio is not right or kind or innocent. We're willing to do better."

I couldn't get Thayen out of my head. I closed my eyes and almost saw him, lying unconscious at Corbin's feet. The look on Kelara's face when he grabbed her and the boy—when they vanished into the unknown, leaving us to deal with Danika and Arya's mess.

Good grief, what a colossal failure that had been.

"The only thing we can do is keep fighting and bring Unending back to the surface," Dream said, as if she'd somehow picked up on my train of thought. "We can fight to avenge Thayen. Remember, the Spirit Bender will be coming, and he'll be out for blood once he's told of his earlier demise, the Hermessi apocalypse debacle... ugh, I can only hope Unending frees Death first. It's our only chance."

And the thought of that was downright terrifying.

"Our fight isn't over," Lumi said, raising her voice so everyone could hear her. "We still have Unending—" She stopped abruptly, frowning as the air rippled just a few feet away from Kalla's burning pyre. Space itself split open, and a furious blizzard burst through, throwing snow in every direction.

Instinctively, we all took several steps back as the wind howled through the peculiar opening. My heart jumped when a familiar figure slipped through, and the blizzard was gone as suddenly as it had arrived. Kelara fell to the ground, cradling Thayen in her embrace.

"Kelara!" Soul rushed to her aid.

"Oh my God, Thayen!" Sofia cried out.

Within seconds, the circle of hundreds of Orvisians and Seniors and GASP crew members and Reapers tightened around Kelara and the boy. I cried tears of joy as I reached them, breathing a sigh of relief when Thayen opened his eyes and looked at us.

"Wait, something's wrong," Dream murmured, noticing Kelara's stiff movements. She grabbed Thayen and pulled him away from her, and Sofia was quick to take custody of the boy, while Soul knelt by Kelara's side.

"I can't believe you're alive," Sofia said, laughing and crying at the same time as she measured Thayen from head to toe, then showered him with loving hugs and kisses. Derek put his arms around them both and tightened the hug as Thayen smiled—he was weak and dazed, but he was definitely okay.

"Kelara... she saved me," he said, glancing at the fallen Reaper.

Only then did I see the devastated look on Soul's face. Kelara wasn't moving other than her quivering shoulders. "What's wrong with her?" I asked. Kalla's pyre was still burning, but life had already moved on, forcing us all to do the same whether we wanted to or not.

"Ghoul... he made... he made me..." Kelara croaked, her skin almost white and covered in sweat as she turned over.

The realization hit me like a punch in the gut. The ache intensified when Soul's eyes met mine, and I saw the devastation unraveling across his face.

"He put her under the ghoul spell," he mumbled. "Whatever death magic he uses to turn Reapers into ghouls... he did it to her."

"Don't... don't let me eat... soul..." Kelara managed.

Someone gasped. I was breathless, dread flowing through my veins and freezing everything in its path. Corbin had done the unthinkable. He'd destroyed Kelara, though she'd yet to show all the signs of a ghoul. He'd pushed her past the point of no return; he'd forced her into it, and still... she'd found the strength to free herself from his

dominance.

“It must be how the spell works. It plants the hunger, pushing the Reaper to do the unthinkable...” Soul looked at Kelara again.

She’d found the strength to bring Thayen back to us, knowing that no one else could have helped the kid under those circumstances. Kelara had been sacrificed in the Darklings’ game, and I had no idea how we could possibly help her.

So far, none of our victories had come at a small cost. Blood had been shed, and lives had been lost. Hearts had been broken. Family ties had been cut. People had been displaced and hunted. If what had happened so far was any indication of what the future had in store for us, well... we were in for the worst kind of trouble. But I was nowhere near ready to call it quits yet. No. I still had enough spunk left in me to fight tooth and nail, if needed. And despite the losses we’d incurred, the rest of our crew felt the same way.

The more the Darklings pushed us, the harder we fought back.

“What’s going on?” Kalon asked, still fuzzy from his sleeping spell.

The Time Master had taken him out of his interdimensional pocket to make transporting him easier. The more we’d discussed this issue, the clearer it became that moving our people was the only way forward. Corbin’s plan to resurrect the Spirit Bender had been foiled when Kelara managed to take Thayen away from him, but the Darklings still knew our location, and they were bound to come exact their revenge. I doubted Corbin would give up on the kid so easily.

“We’re going on another trip,” I told my beloved, gently caressing his face as he slowly blinked, trying to reacquaint himself with his surroundings. He looked good—Time’s spell had certainly helped keep the Black Fever under control. “We can’t stay in Roano any longer.”

“They found us?” he asked.

I gave him a soft smile. “Not yet. But they know where we are.”

“They’re ready to leave,” Time interjected, gazing out the window. “Soul, Phantom, and Morning are taking care of Tristan and Valaine, weird glow and all.”

“What’s going on? You took your brother out of the interdimensional pocket, as well?” Kalon asked while I helped him get up. He wobbled but managed to stand on his own, though I could see his knees were shaking. It broke me to see him like this, as opposed to the strong and relentless Aeternae who’d first stolen my heart. My love for Kalon had only grown more powerful, but without the Unending’s liberation, I was bound to lose him. The thought terrified me.

I took a minute to briefly talk him through everything that had happened since we’d last spoken. He was understandably upset and saddened by it all and expressed relief at Thayen’s return.

“What about Kelara?” he asked. “How is she faring?”

“Dream is handling that particular problem. They had to put another collar on her to keep the hunger under control,” I replied. “We’re hoping Death might have a solution, since she hasn’t eaten a soul yet. In a sense, I can sympathize with her. I remember my first few weeks after I was turned. The hole in my stomach, good grief... I imagine it’s the same, just maybe worse for Kelara.”

“Is she conscious?”

"Yes, and constantly apologetic whenever she finds the strength to speak," Time said. "As if she's somehow responsible for any of this."

"Come on, let's get you out of this tower," I told Kalon as he put an arm over my shoulders. "The faster we leave Roano, the better."

By the time we reached the ground level, our entire crew was ready and headed for the south tower, where we'd agreed to meet up. From there, the Reapers would teleport us all somewhere else, preferably as far away from the Nightmare Forest as possible. The desert had been mentioned a couple of times, considering how barren it was, home only to lost and wandering souls, for the most part.

Trev did a remarkable job of keeping all the ghouls in one place, including the few dozen we'd recruited from the campsite. We still had most of the Vision horses, as well, cared for by the Orvisians. The overall atmosphere was an odd mixture of sadness and hope. The former defined by mourning over Kalla's passing, and the latter amplified by Thayen's return. This didn't feel like a loss, though.

The Visentis boys shrieked and laughed as they rushed over, collectively hugging their brother. Kalon laughed lightly, struggling to keep himself upright as the boys smothered him with affection.

"Thank the stars for Time's quarantine tweak," I chuckled, ignoring the tears pricking my eyes. I had promised Ansel, Tudyk, and Moore that we would do everything in our power to save Kalon. I intended to keep my word, but with how things had been going lately, doubt was worming its way into my heart. It was becoming increasingly more difficult for me not to wonder what would happen if we failed.

"Kalon, you look okay," Ansel said, beaming at his older brother. "How are you feeling?"

"Not at the top of my game, I'm afraid," he replied, ruffling Tudyk's and Moore's hair at once. "I'm only out for a bit. Esmé tells me the Reapers have a... pod or something for me?"

Moore nodded and guided us to one of the carts, where a metallic pod had been installed with Lumi's and the Reapers' joint efforts. A similar contraption had been put in place for Tristan and Valaine. "This is it," the boy said. "They're going to put you in here. Soul came up with a way to make the interdimensional pocket mobile but still tethered to him. I didn't quite understand the details, but—"

"It's basically a hibernation chamber," Tudyk said, cutting him off. "You go in, we can't see or reach you, but you'll be safe."

"Look at Tristan and Valaine here," Ansel replied, nodding at the cart next to us. The pod was wide open as Caleb and Hunter gently placed Tristan, then Valaine, inside. They were both still glowing, but they looked like they were sound asleep before they disappeared into the interdimensional pocket, and Caleb shut the pod cover tight. Doubt poked me again, but I refused to give it any attention. I trusted my brother. I knew they'd eventually find their way back to us.

"They're going to be okay," Kalon said, giving me a sideways glance. Even now, he seemed to understand exactly what was going through my head. "Valaine is the fiercest creature I've ever known. Except you, of course."

"Yeah, she'll pull through," I replied. "I just want us to hear from Unending. We need to find out how to break those damned seals already. The clock is ticking—for you, too. I wonder how long until she wakes up."

He hugged me, pressing his lips against my forehead. I welcomed the warmth of his embrace and the sweet love in his kiss. I wanted this moment to last forever, but alas. Nothing really lasted forever. Softening in his arms for a second, I thought of a future where the two of us survived. Setting it as my objective seemed like the most natural thing to do. Our lives had become intertwined and impossible to separate. The best we could do going forward was to make sure we stayed together, no matter what. Despite the adversities, we'd given Corbin a run for his money. We'd turned the tables on the Darklings.

"Esme, we need to put Kalon back," Time said, giving me a tense smile. He hated having to break us up like this. "It'll be better for his condition."

"It's okay," Kalon replied, moving back as he tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, then whispered: "I love you." His fingers tickled my skin, and I shivered slightly with delight and longing. It would be a while before we'd be reunited again.

"I love you, Kalon," I replied, my heart throbbing.

"We'll all see each other again soon," he said, this time addressing the whole crew.

He gently moved away from me and hugged his brothers. He gave me one last smile before Time walked him to the pod and helped him get in. I watched Kalon disappear inside before the Reaper shut the cover, and I dug deep inside myself for that last sliver of hope I'd kept close to my heart. I needed it now more than ever.

"We've gathered all the supplies and weapons we have left," Sofia said. Thayen was by her side, hand in hers at all times. "We're not doing great in terms of pulverizer pellets, so we'll have to be careful with how we fire those."

"Let's hope we don't have to use them ever again," I replied.

A deep and heavy sigh left Derek's chest. "Everyone is ready to leave. Kelara has been secured, as well." He looked somewhere to his left, and I followed his gaze.

The affected Reaper stood next to Morning now, a thick iron collar fastened around her neck. Her eyes darted all over the place and sweat covered her face, but she was doing her best to keep it together. Soul stayed close to her most of the time, but because he was tasked with creating and maintaining the interdimensional pockets, we needed him to look after Tristan, Valaine, and Kalon. He was doing a stellar job despite the constant strain in his voice. I could tell Kelara's situation tormented him, but he refused to let it consume him altogether. I had a feeling something else had been bothering Soul—he wasn't the type to share, and I couldn't yank it out of him, either. Whatever was troubling him, he'd deal with it himself. He knew he could count on us for pretty much anything, if he needed help. The First Tanners weren't the type to reach out, though.

"Okay. I'm doing one last head count to make sure we've got everybody," Amane said, stepping away from Ridan and her sister. Murmurs erupted from the crowd around us—it didn't sound like the usual chitchat we'd grown accustomed to. There was a stench of fear swelling, engorged by gasps as we all turned to face the city's southern gates.

"What is... oh..." Amal's voice broke.

I froze once I realized what we were dealing with. Beyond the protective shield, people had gathered. Most of them were Darklings, and they'd appeared out of nowhere. No one had spotted them. None of the magical alarms we'd put in place around the city had gone off, either. They must have used death magic to conceal their presence. In hindsight, this moment seemed... inevitable.

"They moved quickly," Widow grumbled, crossing his arms.

"Wait, it's not just Darklings anymore," Trev said, his brow furrowed as he took the whole sight in. The southern gate was about a hundred yards from our position, and we could see everyone clearly. "They've got city guards with them, too."

"Not just city guards," Mira murmured, her eyes rounded and glistening with dread.

The front line consisted primarily of Darklings clad in their black leather cloaks, scythes shimmering and ostentatiously visible. Right behind them, the evening shadows danced across gold and silver armor. There were hundreds of guards present, and probably more were being stationed around the city. I saw Crimson soldiers, too, their red shoulder capes fluttering in the wind. Worst of all, however, were the throngs of civilians they'd brought along. Every Aeternae man and woman willing and able had joined the convoy, and they all looked like they would love nothing more than to break through.

"Oh, look at that. We're so screwed," I managed, barely able to feign sarcasm as I went over Petra and Danika's words regarding public opinion and how the Darklings had been working to influence it. Basically, the whole of Visio had gathered behind the Spirit Bender's faction. Thousands of civilians had left their homes and lives behind, and they'd all come to Roano in support of the Darklings. With the Black Fever claiming so many lives since we'd first arrived on Visio, desperation and the promise of salvation and continued immortality had turned the people to the dark side, quite literally.

Seeing them all like this made me queasy. And that wasn't even the worst part.

"I think the Darklings finally convinced everyone that their cause is just," Kemi said, giving Mira a nervous glance.

"Without us or GASP to oppose them, it seems like an expected outcome," she replied.

"We all saw this coming, though I suppose none of us wanted to admit it."

"We were all hoping the Unending might wake up before it went this far," one of the Seniors chimed in, shaking his head in disappointment. "The world itself has turned against us."

"And there's Corbin," I muttered, spotting Valaine's father as he made his way through the crowd, pushing various Aeternae aside. His gestures were sharp and brusque—the mannerisms of a man who'd lost his patience. He stopped right in front of the shield's edge. Even though he couldn't see past it, he knew we were here. After all, we'd tangoed before back in Orvis. "We're clearly locked in. They must've put death magic wards in place."

The Night Bringer grunted softly. "Yeah. We're stuck. Son of a—"

Without hesitation, I loaded my pulverizer weapon and stepped forward, aiming the muzzle directly at Corbin. "Time to end this, once and for all," I whispered, then pulled the trigger. The pellet shot past the protective shield but it never reached Corbin. It exploded

mid-air, and I was baffled.

Corbin smirked, briefly admiring the cloud of silvery dust. Had he seen this coming, perhaps? It just pissed me off, so I fired another shot. Again, it exploded before it could reach him.

"I'm confused," Sofia said.

"You and me both," I replied.

"Thayen! I know you're here, you little bastard!" the Master of Darkness shouted. "Come out! There's someone I want you to meet!"

All eyes in our camp were on Thayen. The boy looked understandably terrified, but there was something else wrong. He was clutching his chest, his nose crinkling in what seemed to be pain. Sofia noticed, too. "Thayen, what's wrong?"

"I... I don't know. The shard... I think... Ow... I think it's moving," Thayen replied, his voice breaking as he struggled to breathe properly.

A figure emerged from the enemy crowd. A tall man clad in black-and-white leather, a double-bladed scythe mounted on his back. Chills rushed through me as my mind collected the pieces of the puzzle and put them together into a greater, truly horrifying picture. Time's string of expletives pretty much confirmed what I was already suspecting.

"The Spirit Bender," Time said. "He's back."

"That's why the pulverizer pellets didn't work on Corbin. Spirit stopped them. Crap, crap, crap..." I cursed, gritting my teeth. This was utterly terrifying, and I had no idea how to cope with such a turn of events.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Soul snarled. "How the hell is that even possible? I thought taking Thayen away was the one thing that stopped Corbin from resurrecting that SOB."

"No..." Kelara croaked, her face suddenly white as she recognized the Spirit Bender. She'd met him before. He'd strung her along during the Hermessi revolt and made her think the Time Master had been behind that particular mess. "How can this be?" She looked at Soul. "Where the hell is he?!" I heard her whisper. Soul shook his head, motioning for her to keep quiet.

"Not now," he hissed. "Trust me."

Kelara seemed to accept his retort, but I couldn't quite understand what they were talking about, and given what we were witnessing, I felt the need to ask. "Soul, Kelara? Is there something we're missing?"

"You really don't want to know," Soul shot back. It didn't make me feel any better.

"Now is not the time to keep secrets," I said, but Time gripped my wrist for a second, giving me an intense look.

"Let it go, Esme. We'll talk when it's possible. We've got a bigger fish to fry here. A spirit-bending stinker, to be specific..."

I wanted to let it go, but something told me I was missing something important. Unfortunately, Time was right. The Spirit Bender had made his way back into this universe, despite the fact that we'd deprived him of Thayen. Morning and Dream were red-faced angry, lower lips quivering as they protectively huddled around Kelara. They'd spent enough time together on Aledras with her to feel a form of attachment. Widow

shook his head, and I could see his galaxy eyes darkening. This was their brother, one of the First Ten, and the worst of them all.

"Not the family reunion I was hoping for," the Night Bringer said, "but hey, maybe I'll get to whip his ass for what he did to me back on Cruor."

"I don't understand," Sofia mumbled. "How did Corbin bring him back?"

Thayen grunted from the pain. "I think he used eleven pieces. I think the Spirit Bender is incomplete, which is why this... this hurts so much."

"The shard is reacting to Spirit's proximity," Dream said.

Nightmare pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'd say this can't get any worse, but I don't want to tempt fate."

"Oh, don't worry. Fate's already been tempted," Soul said, crossing his arms. He looked downright pissed off—not worried or anything, but angry. Truly angry. Something had happened, something the rest of us knew nothing about, and there was no way I'd get him to tell us. Maybe later, like Time had suggested. All we had to do was make sure there was a later to get to.

The Spirit Bender moved closer, pressing his fingers against the invisible protective membrane of the dome spell. The fabric rippled under his touch, making him smile. "I can feel you in there, Thayen. We are irreversibly connected," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. The people in our crew were speechless and mortified, but none dared to even move. "We will always feel one another."

"What are the odds we can teleport out of here?" Trev asked Nightmare.

The Reaper scoffed. "Zero to none. We haven't been able to teleport since we spotted the Darklings at the gate, and that's Spirit knocking on our door. After Orvis, I doubt we'll be able to tunnel our way out of Roano either. They'll have put wards in place all around the city by now."

"Kelara! Punishment awaits you!" Corbin shouted. "You've been a bad, bad girl! But there's still time for you to atone, little ghou! Come out here! Surrender!"

"It's in everyone's best interest if you do as you're told," Spirit added. "Or I will level Roano and everyone in it. It's only a matter of time before I knock this protective magic down."

Seeley came closer to us, joined by a startled Nethissis. "How are we going to handle this?" he asked. Nethissis gave me a worried look.

"He's come for Unending, too, not just Thayen," she murmured.

"I know. We can't let him win," I replied, though I had no idea how we'd weasel our way out of this mess.

"In case anyone is wondering, because I can almost hear your brains exploding even though I can't see you yet," Spirit said, his lips stretching into a contemptuous smirk, "I blessed the Master of Darkness with a great deal of my knowledge, including instructions on what might happen if he doesn't have all the pieces of my soul. I spent years perfecting the recipe, and I took multiple variables into account."

"What an arrogant snake," Sofia hissed, baring her fangs.

"Point is, I'm me again, but I feel a little incomplete," Spirit continued. "There's a piece of me missing, and I sense it close by, lodged in the heart of a little boy who had

no business running away in the first place. So come out, Thayen. If I have to come in there and fetch you myself, there will be hell to pay for every single person who's currently shielding you."

I looked at my brother's pod, wishing there was something I could do to wake him up. Unfortunately, until the Unending came back to the surface, we were useless. All we had left was the protective spell around Roano—but that wouldn't last long, considering who our enemy was.

"Let the boy out so that his shard can be used to complete the Spirit Bender," Corbin shouted, "and I promise you all a quick and painless death. It's time to return Visio to normal. It's time to restore the empire and its immutable forces!"

"Oh, and while you're at it, bring Valaine out, as well," Spirit said. "Those of you who bring her out for me will get to live. I think that's a pretty generous offer, considering what I've learned about you all over this past hour. Frankly, I am disappointed to hear there are still Aeternae among you who are foolish enough to think they can override my seals or my rulings."

"He talks a lot, doesn't he?" Trev muttered.

"Spirit always loved the sound of his own voice," Time replied dryly.

"That aside, he's the supreme adversary. What the hell are we to do?" Hunter asked. "He's come back sooner than we anticipated. Dammit, he wasn't supposed to come back at all!"

Time exhaled sharply, closing his eyes for a moment. "This is what we know from Danika—specifically from what she told him during his captivity. This is a copy of the Spirit Bender. This means that the Reaper before us is not the Spirit Bender who almost succeeded with his Hermessi revolution. He almost certainly lacks the memories of the past four to five million years and doesn't have the experience of the Spirit Bender who managed to have Death's scythe stolen."

That meant that our enemy lacked some crucial knowledge—stuff we hadn't told Corbin about, or Danika, or any of the other upper-echelon Aeternae who'd turned out to be Darklings. I didn't want this to be the end of the road, though I had to admit that the Spirit Bender at our gates did not bode well for us.

But Time was right. We couldn't give up. Not yet. As long as Unending was with us, we still had a shot, no matter how slight and fragile.

Soul was the first to stand against the currents of adversity. "I'm not letting these scoundrels win. I will burn this whole planet down before I give Spirit the chance to wreak havoc again." He paused to glance at Kelara, who gave him a feeble but warm smile. "He's done enough damage, both directly and by proxy. This ends here."

"It's time," the Night Bringer said, giving Time a stern look. "We all know what Death said. This is it. This is his moment."

"Yeah, why don't you go ahead and ask Death about that, huh?" Soul replied, still miffed. It was confusing even for his fellow First Tanners.

I felt like I'd been left out of the loop here. "What are you talking about?"

"You're not going to like this," Seeley grumbled, hands sliding into his pants pockets as he pursed his lips and stared at his shoes.

"Death's permission. You're right," Time said, a devilish smile dancing across his lips. "You're absolutely right, dear brother. We still have one weapon we haven't tried yet."

"What is he talking about?" I asked Seeley, well aware of my repetition. I would ask a thousand times if that's what it took for someone to answer me.

"For what it's worth, we wanted to tell you," Sidyan interjected, giving Lumi an apologetic look. "We were under strict orders to keep quiet and not allow him to reveal himself unless we came face-to-face with the Spirit Bender himself."

"Right, now he gets to show his face," Soul muttered, and Widow gave him a nudge.

"Cut it out. What's wrong with you?" he asked, and Soul shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. Okay, so, do we have permission from Death or not?" he replied, looking at his brothers and sisters.

I groaned with frustration. "Come on, out with it already."

"They're talking about me." A familiar voice echoed around us. Seconds later, Taeral appeared in the middle of our group holding Death's scythe, Thieron, in his hand. My breath left me. My heart stopped.

What was going on?

SOUL

“*I*’m giving you fifteen minutes!” the Spirit Bender shrieked from the southern gates. “Fifteen minutes to come out with Thayen and Unending before I start tearing Roano down piece by piece, pebble by pebble, until there’s nothing left but blood and dirt!”

I hated him. I had never liked him much to begin with—his whining about having to be a Reaper and his inability to move on and accept his fate had made him downright unbearable as a colleague and as a companion. The Spirit Bender had never been easy to be around, but I’d never thought he’d stoop to such foolish levels. I doubted I would ever forgive Death for being so generous with him in terms of words and sub-words, but it was too late to change that now. The damage had been done. Besides, I was already mad at her for plenty of other reasons, but at least she’d finally allowed Taeral to reveal himself. I wasn’t sure what her angle was at this point, given Taeral’s earlier disclosures. All I could do was hope they’d work out in our favor. I couldn’t even tell the others about the previous conversation I’d had with the Fire Star prince, which made my anger about his revelation somewhat... misplaced. It didn’t matter. He was out. What came next was more important.

Kelara was battling ghoulishness, and I was wracked with guilt and helplessness. The Darklings had come to Roano, and they were expecting us to simply surrender. Hell no. I hadn’t spent millions of years locked away inside Zetos for the Spirit Bender to come along and ruin my newfound freedom. No. A thousand times no. And I’d be damned if the Darklings would get to lay a hand on any of these people. Not Thayen, not Unending, and certainly not Kelara.

“Taeral, what are you doing here?” Esme blurted, unable to believe her own eyes.

“I’m sorry,” the fae prince said with a sigh. “I had no choice. I was under strict orders not to interfere unless absolutely necessary. ‘Necessary’ meaning needing to deal with the Spirit Bender directly. Orders kept changing, but I guess an encounter with the Spirit Bender became the tight limit for my involvement. It’s complicated. Let’s just leave it at this, for now...”

Poor kid was conflicted and trying not to lie to his people. I felt sorry for him. Lumi shot forward and gave him a not-so-gentle shove. “You’ve been here this whole time?”

“It’s not his fault. We enforced the secrecy, as well,” Sidyan replied. It was all Lumi needed to turn around and slap him hard across the face. I liked the swamp witches.

They had spunk in them. And Sidyan had a thing for Lumi, though he'd worked hard not to show it. It was about time she put her boot down his throat. Someone had to wear the pants in that relationship.

Nethissis chuckled, but her humor faded quickly when Lumi shifted her focus to her. "Uh-oh," Nethissis murmured. "Lumi, I promise I would've said something. They swore me to—"

"Secrecy! Yes! All of you undead peeps were sworn to secrecy!" Lumi snapped. "Whoop-tee-friggin'-doo! What about the rest of us?" She looked at Taeral again. "We could've used you so many times before now! You could've helped Kelara, at least. Look at what Corbin did to her! She's one soul away from becoming a ghoul, for Pete's sake."

"Okay, for the record, ow!" Sidyan cut in, massaging his reddened cheek. I had a feeling his own emotions were creating this effect, like a sentimental illusion. Or maybe a Word servant simply had the ability to smack a Death servant into oblivion. I'd have to ask our maker later. "Second of all, Taeral couldn't exactly reveal himself to or get anywhere near the Master of Darkness. He's got Thieron, Death's scythe. Imagine if Corbin got the upper hand somehow and took Taeral down!"

"In all fairness, the Master of Darkness has made it difficult for us more experienced Reapers. Taeral is still new and armed with the most powerful weapon in existence, over which he has very little control," Time grumbled.

"Then why can't he just go over there and whack Spirit like he did the last time?" Ridan cut in, his brow stuck in furrowed mode.

"It's a little more complicated," Taeral replied. "I can explain... at some point."

"At some point," I said, trying hard not to lay it all out. Fortunately for Taeral—and myself, actually, I knew Death's wrath and what it entailed in case of civil disobedience. Her orders were sacred.

"Taeral, I can't believe this," Sofia said, gasping. "And you've been quiet this whole time..."

"We almost died more than once," Kailani said to him. "Where the hell were you?"

"Mostly around Roano," Taeral replied. "I'm sorry. I'll say it a thousand times if I have to, but Death ordered me to keep my distance. She trusted me with Thieron, the weapon you all know how hard we fought to retrieve for her, and she didn't want me falling in the Darklings' traps. Look at Kelara..." He paused and took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a second. "Besides, I've got some limits on Thieron, courtesy of Death. There are fewer seals keeping her down, and she's forcing me to do—or, better said, not to do—certain things. Like I said, it's complicated."

There it was. Either Death had given him the green light to tell the others about her more recent orders, or Taeral was trying to go around her directive, looking for a way to reveal his limitations. I wondered what Death was thinking about, now that Spirit was sort of back. I planned on taking Taeral and the other Reapers aside as soon as we caught a minute together—this needed further discussion and input from all the First Tennessees in Roano.

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you're here," Hunter said, giving Taeral a wide grin. Kailani scowled at him, but the white wolf offered a shrug in return. "Hey, better late

than never. If he's revealed himself now, it means he's going to help."

"Let's not dwell on what could've or should've been," Morning interjected. "The Reapers all agreed to keep this quiet for Taeral's safety. Well, and our own. Death's orders are not something you'd want to break, believe me."

"You and the Reapers kept this quiet," Lumi said to Nethissis.

The ghost smiled meekly. "They couldn't exactly hide him from me. I'm dead, remember? And I was there when he saved Tristan and Valaine in the tunnel. By the time Taeral tried to hide himself from me, too, I'd already spotted him. Seeley begged me to keep my mouth shut. Sorry!"

"In the tunnel?" Esme asked, her gaze darting around. "Oh... I thought I saw something back there. The bright light. Was that you, Tae?"

Taeral nodded. "It was one of my allowed interventions," he said. "Death dispatched me with Time, Dream, and Nightmare to join your team. Under no circumstances could I intervene or reveal myself, unless the situation absolutely demanded it. Sadly, those directives were recently... tweaked, and I have a hard time understanding why. But so far, you've all done a stellar job considering the circumstances and your limitations. To be honest, my knowledge of death magic is flimsy, at best. Death has been teaching me spells, but believe me, the only reason I got to tag along was basically to use Thieron against the Spirit Bender himself."

"Then why can't you use it against Spirit now?" Esme asked, still confused.

"The directive was tweaked," I muttered, repeating Taeral's previous statement.

"And he can't do squat?" Esme replied, her blood likely boiling.

"I'm not sure. Waiting for her to tell me. Telepathically," Taeral said.

Esme rolled her eyes. "Oh, for... gah! This doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, I feel you," I sighed.

"Let's take a few deep breaths," Derek advised. "I'm sure Tae would like to tell us everything he knows. Clearly, and judging by the constipated look on his face, he's still limited with his disclosure."

That didn't sit well with any of us, but considering Death's inability to tell us anything from the very beginning and her penchant for secrecy, this wasn't exactly the greatest shock of all. A few moments passed in awkward silence while Kailani discreetly explained a few things about Taeral to Mira, Kemi, and the other Seniors. Derek chuckled softly and gave Taeral a friendly pat on the back.

"At least you're here now. We'll take any help we can get."

"You're not forgiven, though," Lumi insisted, pointing an angry finger at the fae prince. "But worry not, Taeral. You'll make it up to us someday."

"Gladly, I promise," Taeral said. "And yes, I'm here now, and I will do my best to help with what Death allows. It sucks, I know, and I'm sure we'll all get the answers we deserve, but until then, this is all I've got. I couldn't assist Kelara because of Corbin, and I was nowhere near Kalla when Arya did what she did. I couldn't exactly follow each of you around, so I kept a relative distance, consulting with Death and learning some smaller attack and defense spells. Then something happened, and she told me to let this issue with Spirit follow its natural course..."

"Nothing natural about it, if you ask me, but okay," I replied.

"You stopped Unending's darkness in the tunnel," Ansel said to Taeral. "You saved us. Our brother, too... right?"

Taeral smiled. "I did my best. I regret I wasn't able to stop the progression of the Black Fever, too, but if we set Unending free, we'll have a shot at saving Kalon. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, enough with the berating and the apologizing," Sofia said, raising her voice. "The Spirit Bender and Corbin are out there, and they've given us a tight deadline. We all know what will happen if we don't meet it. But we can't surrender Thayer and Valaine. Tae, now that you're with us, maybe you have an idea?"

Despite my recent irritation, I did understand why Death had insisted on secrecy regarding Taeral. The living among GASP in particular would've looked at Thieron as the ultimate solution, without understanding the toll that wielding the damn thing took on Taeral. The more I thought about it, I had to begrudgingly admit that there was a method to my maker's seemingly insane decisions. I'd have to explain it to Taeral, as well, since she clearly hadn't fully brought him into the loop. She probably worried he might've chickened out or something—wholly underestimating the Fire Star prince, which was a whole new level of foolish since he'd brought Thieron back to her, in the first place. Good grief, she's exasperating!

Death's most powerful weapon belonged in Death's hands. Anyone else who used it got pieces of their soul drained, slowly but surely. The repercussions wouldn't be dire, but the effects would eventually make their presence known—exhaustion and weakness, in particular. It would take Taeral decades of prolonged rest to pull himself back together after surrendering Thieron. He just didn't know it yet.

As much as I'd wanted Kelara to be safe, I also understood some of Death's motives. It irked me that she wasn't upfront about it, but hey... Thieron could not fall into enemy hands—especially those of the Spirit Bender, who even in his copy version was still eager to make Death suffer. We all stood to lose in that scenario. I just needed to figure out, sooner rather than later, why she'd put limits on Thieron as of late. That still bothered me, and it was bound to bother the people of GASP, too.

"Death is well aware of what's been happening, including Spirit's unfortunate return," Taeral said. He turned and walked over to Tristan and Valaine's pod. "She says the only way to stop Spirit is to free Unending."

"Good grief, we already know that!" Amal replied. I'd never seen her so restless before, though her current state of mind made sense. She'd been quietly toiling away at her projects despite the fear of potential death at the hand of Darklings, developing the day-walking cure and assisting all of GASP with her knowledge. Even with everything that had been going on, she certainly wasn't going to let Spirit get her or anyone else killed. I liked that about Amal. She had spunk. "How do we do that if the Unending won't even wake up?"

"I described the glowing symptoms to Death earlier," Taeral said. "Apparently, Valaine and Tristan are stuck in a subconscious limbo. I have to wake them up."

"Won't that spoil the progress they might have made?" Derek asked. Taeral shook his

head.

"No. The glow means that Unending is already awake, but she's having trouble getting back to the surface," he said. "I need you to get Tristan and Valaine out of the pod."

Without hesitation, Time and I opened the pod and brought the star-crossed couple out of their slumbering abode. I hated the thought of all the suffering that Unending had been put through. I was a grade-A sociopath, but even I wouldn't have done this to her. She'd done no wrong in her existence. Her only fault had been that she'd fallen in love. For that, fate had cast all kinds of shade upon Unending.

Taeral knelt between them on the ground. Their skin glowed white, but they looked peaceful, deeply submerged in a magical sleep. He whispered a spell into Thieron's blade, and shivers ran down my spine. Even though I'd been separated from Zetos, I could still sense its tingling whenever a spell activated it. He pressed it against Tristan, then Valaine's forehead, and the glow began to subside.

"Hopefully, once they're awake, we'll be able to confirm Death's theory that Unending is already conscious," Taeral said.

Behind us, the Darkling and Aeternae crowd roared, the soldiers thudding their armored boots onto the hard ground. It was a battle cry, and it had a chilling effect on the rest of us. They were itching for a fight, while we were struggling to get one step ahead of them. For once. With Death still poking us in all the wrong places, even though we were doing all of this for her, too. The war had only just begun, and the Spirit Bender smiled, as if knowing the odds would be in his favor.

But was the universe really so screwed up? I doubted it.

TRISTAN

Somehow, I'd ended up in a strange place.

It was dark and filled with Aeternae women. They were all at different stages of pregnancy, their baby bumps glowing red, like stars in the night sky. I must've walked for hours, making my way in no specific direction.

I called out for Unending, but she never answered.

The women all stood around me, silent and smiling, hands resting on their rounded bellies. Expectant mothers who had no idea who or where they were. It felt odd, like a collage of people—carriers of the Unending over the span of almost five million years. Every Aeternae woman that had given birth to one of her reincarnations. Eventually, I came across a familiar face. Arya.

She stood in the middle, still as a statue, doubt etching a fine line into her forehead. I couldn't help but frown as I looked at her, leather cape hanging loosely from her shoulders. "You did a horrible thing," I said, doubting she could hear me. "You had a choice between right and wrong, and you chose awful. You betrayed your people, your friends—just to watch your only daughter get murdered by the very entity you swore to serve."

Arya sighed deeply, glancing down at her belly. Wherever we were, it was a part of the Unending's subconscious. There was some kind of sense to it. I just needed to figure it out. I just needed to find her, so we could swim back to the surface together. Weeks had passed since we'd delved into this obscure part of her mind. The world needed us. It needed the Unending most of all.

"You were perfectly fine with your daughter dying so you and your people might live forever," I continued, allowing my contempt for Arya to flow freely. It wasn't like she could really hear or see me. She was only a memory lost in the underbelly of Unending's tortured mind. "And to think there were others like you. Danika, the Lady Supreme. You know she planted Spirit's soul shard into her son's heart. What is it with Aeternae women and killing their own children? You make me sick."

She didn't react. Instead, she just lovingly smiled at her belly.

"How could you be so calm and serene, knowing you might be the one to give birth to the Unending, huh? How could you even live with yourself, knowing you'd sold your soul, your salvation, to the Spirit Bender? I'm honestly baffled."

Arya looked at me, and I froze. The red light in her belly intensified, glowing brighter than the other women around her. She took my hand and placed it just above her navel. I could feel the baby kicking gently. My heart skipped a beat, and I couldn't understand my participation in this peculiar moment. Was this a dream? Had I fallen out of Unending's subconscious already?

"I know she's going to be the Unending. But for whatever time we have left together, I will love her with all my heart," Arya said.

"You've signed her death warrant," I replied.

"We all make sacrifices for immortality. That is the whole point of it. How far are you willing to go in order to live forever?" she asked.

I didn't have an answer. For me, vampirism hadn't been the easiest of choices, but it hadn't come at the steepest price, either. And now that we were developing the day-walking cure, I'd be able to walk in the sun again. I'd given up food, too—blood was my only sustenance. I'd sacrificed some important things, but in the earliest days of vampirism, deep at its origin, immortality had come at a much higher cost.

I'd had to surrender the sun and my favorite foods. Arya had asked a good question of me, I realized. What else or what more was I willing to sacrifice in order to keep my immortality? The answer, however, came easily to mind.

"Our children are the future. They're better versions of ourselves. They're more than we'll ever be, and if we kill them in order to lift ourselves up, then we don't deserve immortality at all," I said. "I would never allow the death of my child in exchange for eternity. You should've said no, Arya. You should've told the Spirit Bender no."

She chuckled softly. "I didn't know any better. I was selfish. Foolish. Hungry for life."

"Arya thought she was doing the right thing." Unending's voice rippled through the darkness above. "They all thought they were on the correct side of history. That endless sacrifices had to be made because my gift to them was simply too precious, too beautiful and wonderful to ever forsake. I know it's a difficult concept for you, Tristan, but I honestly do understand their choice..." The more she spoke, the clearer and more concentrated her voice became. It was coming from somewhere specific.

I looked around several times, but I couldn't see her immediately. She was getting closer, though. "So you agree with what they did to you?" I asked.

"Not at all. I understand, but I don't condone their actions. The Aeternae had Spirit's help, and they took it. They used every drop of it. The bottom line is, I never should've made them immortal. I'm afraid we've reached the same conclusion as before."

Finally, I turned around and found her standing mere inches from me. With a delicate smile on her face, she looked into my eyes, and our souls met. As our souls touched, the entire universe vibrated from the encounter.

"It's too late now. Everything has already happened," I said.

Unending wrapped her arms around my waist, and we held each other close, our hearts singing in a strange but settling unison. "I know. What will come to pass matters more than anything," she whispered. "My journey back won't be easy, Tristan."

"Yeah, but I'm here, aren't I? You'll never walk alone again."

I meant every word. I felt like I'd found my path, and Unending was it. She was my

beginning and my end, my forever and always. I would never leave her side, and I knew she would never leave mine. Our threads had crossed, forever intertwined.

"I never thought I would say this ever again, but Tristan... I love you," Unending said, melting in my embrace. "I love you for who you are, for the person you will become. I love you more than anything. You are my light in the darkest storm."

"I love you. Every version of you," I replied, lowering my head.

We kissed, and as soon as our lips met, everything disappeared. The Aeternae women with glowing red bellies. Arya and her treachery. Mira and her grief. All those who'd contributed to the Unending's suffering were gone like snowflakes left in the sun. Everything melted. The memories, the unspoken words, every sensation that Unending had ever experienced. Gone with the darkness.

All that remained was the two of us against all odds, falling in love over and over until the end of time. We'd reached the end of the line. The world awaited beyond. Our world. Our life together.

For a while, I wasn't sure Taeral's spell had worked. The glow had vanished, but neither Tristan nor Valaine was showing any signs of consciousness. Considering our enemy was literally at the gates, the urgency of the situation stretched my nerves beyond their limits, and I found myself restless and anxious, especially given this unexplained issue with Death's directives. Kalon's salvation depended on the Unending's freedom. But what good was she to us, to anyone—even to herself—if she couldn't even wake up?

"Are you sure you did it right?" Time asked after an agonizingly long silence.

"I followed Death's instructions, word for word, sub-word for sub-word," Taeral replied dryly. "I'm sure it must have worked."

"So, what, they're just taking a nap?" Nightmare retorted.

"I don't know! Give it a moment!" Taeral said.

"Maybe you didn't do it right," Time insisted.

Taeral scoffed. "Why don't you try it, then?"

"I don't know the spell," Time muttered, looking away awkwardly. "It's Death's proprietary magic, not something she'd ever teach us."

Sofia took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Let's gather whatever is left of our patience here," she advised. "We're treading into unknown territory."

"I'm thankful you're here, Tae," Kailani said. "We need whatever sort of help you can give us. Even if you do muck up the spells."

"I didn't muck up the spell, dammit! I did it right—" He froze before finishing his sentence, as Tristan and Valaine both flinched awake, wheezing and breathing erratically.

"Holy mother of..." Lumi's voice trailed off, her eyebrows arched with pure shock.

"I'm okay," Tristan managed, holding Valaine's hand. "We're okay..."

"Welcome back, you bozo," I blurted, tearing up as I dropped to my knees and hugged my brother with all the strength I could muster. "Man, I've missed you!"

"I've missed you too, sis," he replied, chuckling softly and dropping a kiss on my cheek.

"And you... you scared the crap out of us," I said to Valaine, then proceeded to trap her in a bear hug, as well. But she felt different. My skin tingled at the contact, as if I'd just embraced an iceberg. She stilled, and I cautiously moved back, frowning. "It's you..."

Silence settled over us until Spirit's sharp voice cut through from the southern gate. "Your time is running out, people! I want Thayen and Valaine now, before I rip you all to shreds, ever so slowly!"

Valaine's gaze darkened, and only then did I spot the stars glimmering in her irises. They weren't as intense as a Reaper's eyes, but I could certainly see the common elements. Tristan gave her a warm smile and helped her up. "It's going to be okay," he said. "We've made it this far, right?"

"Easy to say, considering what comes next. I take it my brother has made his way back into this world?" Valaine replied, looking at Spirit and the many others who'd joined him outside Roano. Only, she wasn't just Valaine anymore.

"Your brother... oh..." Lumi gasped. "Unending."

"Welcome back, sister!" Morning cried out. Within seconds, all the Reapers had surrounded Unending, holding her tight and covering her face with warm and loving kisses—even Seeley and Sidyan, who'd never met her personally. Her return was such a joyous moment, such a wonderful occasion, that all etiquette between their kinds had been forsaken. Hell, I felt like kissing the light out of her, because we'd been waiting to see her, the Unending, for so damn long.

"Finally, the stars have aligned themselves in your favor," the Night Bringer said as the Reapers moved back, giving Unending some room to breathe. She was smiling, flustered but happy to see them all. Even so, there was sadness persisting in her gaze.

"I'm not sure that's the case yet," she replied. Tristan stayed close to her.

"You're awake. That's what matters," Sofia said. "You have no idea how badly you're needed right now."

"Oh, I'm aware. The problem is I'm still trapped under three seals," Unending said. It felt odd to see and hear her like this, considering she was inhabiting Valaine's body. Then again, Valaine was basically one side of her. I'd get used to it eventually—at least until we freed her.

"And the Spirit Bender is sort of alive again," Soul muttered. "He's incomplete, though. He never got the shard from Thayen's heart."

Unending shook her head. "I'm not sure that matters much. He's obviously driven and fully supported by the people. All Aeternae seem to be behind him. And like I said, the seals... I'm helpless under them."

"Okay, how do we break them?" I asked, almost instantly regretting the question. Judging by the look on her face, I realized I wouldn't like the answer. My stomach tightened with strained anticipation as the Unending gathered her thoughts.

We were all watching her in silence, utterly ignorant of Spirit and Corbin's barrage of threats and insults. Minutes flowed as the Aeternae beyond the shield prepared for an attack. I wasn't sure how long the protections would last, but the sliver of hope in my heart had grown. All was not lost. Not yet.

"I need to explain something before I tell you how to break the seals," Unending said, and Tristan nodded in agreement. "The first seal was created when Spirit cut me with his scythe, using a superior word-only spell, binding me to Visio. The second seal was fashioned from a strand of my hair and with the help of my scythe, destroying my

physical Reaper form. The third seal was created with my scythe, as well, locking me into the Aeternae rebirth cycle. Now, the order in which the seals were made is not how we'll break them," she added, glancing in Corbin's direction. "First, one of you must take possession of my scythe. Corbin has it. Second, you must destroy the ring on his finger. Then, with the same weapon, you must kill me."

I needed a moment to let that sink in.

"What?" Sofia breathed, her enthusiasm fizzling away.

"My vessel. My flesh. It must be destroyed with my own weapon." The Unending sighed. "I don't like it any more than you, but it must be done. Spirit used my scythe to fashion the third seal, which ultimately had me reborn as Valaine, and it is my scythe that we must use to destroy it. As for the first two seals, well... let's just say Spirit wanted to make sure freeing me wouldn't come easy, hence the different method of breaking them as opposed to the method of making them."

"It clearly won't come easy. Tristan, that means Valaine will die," I said, giving my brother a worried look.

"I know. She knows. We know," he replied, sadness lowering his voice. "But Valaine won't really die, if that makes sense. She's Unending, and Unending is Valaine."

"There is a physical distinction, though," I replied.

"It no longer matters," Unending cut in. "We have to do it. Only once I'm free can I go back to Aledras and free Death."

The Darklings and the Aeternae were shouting and howling now, amped up by the battle spirits among them. They were itching for war and bloodshed, revealing their sharp fangs and long claws. Spirit grinned, but Corbin's eyes turned to slits as they approached the protective shield. Spirit's scythe was out, shining brightly as he raised it in the air. The crowd roared. Our people murmured in fear, instinctively taking a few steps back. Even the Seniors seemed overwhelmed.

This was it. The final battle was upon us, and the Unending had delivered quite the blow. We needed Corbin to release her, but holy hell, I had no idea how we were going to manage it.

"To destroy our enemy, we must approach our enemy," Derek concluded, staring angrily at the Master of Darkness. "To get rid of Corbin, we have to get close to him. This won't end well."

"It's our only option," Unending said. "I'm the only one who can break the rest of the seals that Spirit put on Death."

"I knew Death relied on you for this, but why?" Taeral asked. "Why are you the only Reaper capable of accomplishing this feat?"

Unending shot him a cold glare. "Because I'm the one who designed the Thousand Seals. Almost half of the magic Spirit learned, he didn't make using his own formulas. He stole it from me. Yes, he's had some ideas of his own, including my imprisonment, but everything else? He plucked it from the energy fields of Visio, where my consciousness dwells."

It made sense now. This whole saga of spiteful Reapers had come full circle. Death had wronged her children, and some had fought back in their own way. It had led to a

millennia-long disaster, and it was time for its conclusion.

No matter what followed after this, I knew we would stop at nothing to set the Unending free. We'd come farther than anyone else. We'd brought her back, even though she was still bound to her body. Securing her freedom would be an insanely dangerous task, but none of us would quit until it was done.

"Free me, and it'll all be over in seconds," Unending said.

Yes, we were scared. I was downright terrified. My heart was aching. Blood was rushing to my head. I was staring my own demise in the face, yet I couldn't walk away. We were in this together and terrified of the prospect of failure. The Spirit Bender was confidently sneering. Corbin was goading his people into a violent frenzy. The protective shield wouldn't last, and Kalon was still under the Black Fever's influence.

But we had innocent children with us. Good men and women. Kind souls that deserved a better life. My brother had fallen in love with the Unending. Kelara was in pain. We'd lost so much. Everything had happened fast and from different, confusing angles—but this was our threshold.

This was our time to fight back. The Darklings had been poking and prodding us for too long. Retaliation was long overdue, and if I had to go over there myself to get the Unending's scythe and bring it back from her Aeternae father before chopping his head off, then so be it.

I was ready. We were all ready.

ASOV 86: A BREAK OF SEALS

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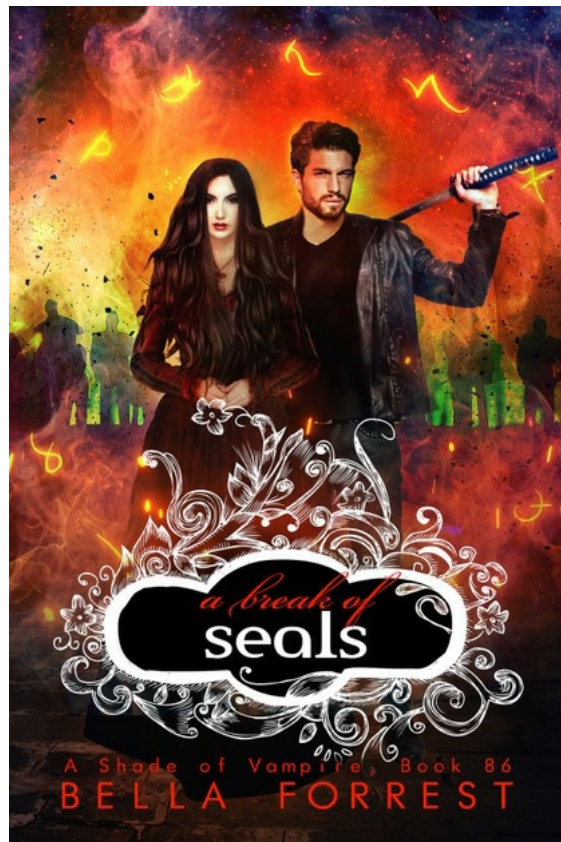
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