

THE
CURSE
OF THE
ANCIENTS

—♦——♦—

QUINTARRA

THE GODS ARE THE ONES
THROWING THE DICE NOW

A.A. KRUTOGOLÓVA

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

18+

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The Curse of The Ancients. Quintarra

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Tired of the mundane life, twenty-seven-year-old Alora breaks out of her cramped Brooklyn cage straight into the astral plane. A Grimoire given by a mysterious guru whisks her away to Argos, where she learns a brutal truth: her arrival was no accident. Her own alter ego has betrayed existence, selling her soul to Goro — an ancient spirit hungry to unravel reality and weave it anew. The price of that new creation? Every single one of Alora's incarnations. Under the protection of warriors and mages guarding the fragile balance of Quintarra, Alora trains in combat and forbidden magic, growing stronger by day. But within the flames of her awakened power also hides a spark of Goro himself. Now she faces an impossible choice: follow her new allies into battle against herself, or heed the ancient voice that promises to fix the universe's eternal injustice. Alora's choice will decide the fate of every existing world...

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The Curse of The Ancients. Quintarra

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THE
CURSE
OF THE
ANCIENTS

QUINTARRA

A.A. KRUTOGOLÓVA

Prolepsis

Death for the sake of innocent lives sounds heroic — people will sing legends about you; generations will remember your name...

But what if you were destined to die by your own hand?

What then?

I guess I'll be the one to learn it the hard way...

Animal terror buckled my exhausted legs.

That's good. Means I'm still alive...

Whatever was in front of me, it smelled no better than the stinky breath of a dead Xurus, blowing mucous bubbles that popped right on the surface — a surface that reflected absolutely nothing.

"Forget everything you are in your own world. Let the shadows take over you..." Riker leaned toward me, so close I could feel his agitated heart beating.

"I... I can't..." I whispered with the last of my strength, sitting on the cold stone floor of the cave.

As if sensing the truth of my words, the murky surface responded with an echo, sending ripples across the viscous lake that so longed to swallow us whole.

"You have to. You *need* to do this! Before you kill yourself..." The dark mage carefully tried to push me toward the inevitable.

Is that a tremor I heard in his voice?

Empathy... The last time I'd encountered it was when I got hit by a car many years ago, not to mention that the Loreons were generally strangers to such things.

Or was it his own *special* trait?

The human world... I had my own issues with it, but right now I would've gladly brewed myself a cup of aromatic berry tea, wrapped myself in my favorite blanket, and greedily continued watching that stupid series Orin had recommended to me, while stroking Silas with my other hand.

I wonder if he still remembered me?

They say cats remember those they love...

A sudden sharp pain pierced beneath my ribs, shooting straight into my rotting knee, as if a part of me was agonizingly and slowly dying, crying out for help. Though, that's exactly what it was...

I didn't know which one or where, or under what circumstances, but soon there would be one Alora less in the universe. And I was the only one to blame.

I needed to hurry...

Chapter 1

"Deep breath in... And exhale... Ahhh..." a young woman in a pink tank top and purple leggings said in an instructing voice, smoothly flowing from pose to pose to a melodic mantra. The chaotically gathered chocolate bun on top of her head trembled slightly in tune with her words. "And again!"

A loud sound echoed through the studio, spreading across the room like a stinking, tear-inducing time bomb.

"Oh god..." I muttered, wrinkling my nose at the smell of rotten eggs.

I cracked my right eye open and looked around. It seemed that out of everyone here, I was the only one embarrassed by this incident.

Probably that's exactly how it was.

"It's only natural!" Orin's words bubbled somewhere at the back of my head. Which would have been fine, except my dear friend forgot to mention that we'd have to sit in this studio for nearly two hours, listening to and bathing in the aroma of complete strangers I hoped to see once and never again.

Why did I even let her drag me here?! Me and yoga.

Yeah, right...

"And now let's return to the starting position. Bring your hands to your chest and thank yourselves for the work you've done!" Our instructor twisted nimbly, flowing from downward-facing dog into a blooming lotus position. She smiled broadly and surveyed her students.

Inga, if I remembered her name correctly, was... *peculiar*. More than peculiar. Having traveled through half of Asia, she knew from experience how to reach the rainbow, which herbs to mix to heal yourself without paying an arm and a leg for medicine, and what it truly meant to be *spaced out*.

Though, looking at it from another angle, sitting here among all the colorful outfits and mats with mandala patterns, it was me who looked like a black sheep. Literally.

Total black had always been my motto when it came to clothes — except for that transitional period around thirteen, when I got struck by a sudden obsession with that piggy color, and everything around me absolutely had to be that shade.

Not just soft or girly — *pink*.

And so, after choking down that neon, unicorn jelly, I entered my teenage years the way any self-respecting teenager should — in total black. I liked it so much that a good chunk of my wardrobe stayed loyal to it all the way up to my twenty-seven.

Quite a number, that's for sure... But even worse are the phrases thrown at me constantly, ever since my age rolled past the second decade. I mostly hear them from my relatives. It's always the same: husband, kids, stable job, mortgage... The only things that change are their expressions and the tone, which gets more and more condescending toward my misery with every passing year no matter my hard attempts to explain the complexities of the modern world, that it's often better to be alone than with just anyone, and that inheritance and legacy are two very different things.

And still, every dog has its day. Theirs came when, by some lucky coincidence, I met a cute guy at a café, which later became my other problem, because now, almost a year and a half into this relationship, I still couldn't get my act together and break up with him.

How do you even start conversations like that? What do I say?

"*THE END!*" someone's cheerful voice snapped me out of my spiral of thoughts.

Better that way. Sometimes I really need that...

I turned around and saw Orin's flushed face. Her gray-blue eyes looked at me with a spark of anticipation.

"Weeell?" she drew out.

I hesitated for a moment, scratching the back of my head.

"Could've been worse?"

"I'll take that!" My friend accepted my blunt feedback on the class. Unlike me, she'd clearly enjoyed it to the fullest. "Let's go. I need to rinse it all off and get some fresh air!"

I couldn't help but smile.

Orin was a regular at events like this: working with chakras, seeing with all three eyes, and breathing through every possible — and impossible — place to unlock the flows of material and spiritual wealth.

Has she become immensely rich and successful like she'd wanted? Unfortunately, no. But her flexibility was to die for! Not to mention all the stories she got herself into while meeting with her little hobby clubs. One of such forced me to bail her out of a holding cell way past midnight, where she'd ended up after finding herself in the same company as a zonked weed dealer. *A lucky coincidence.*

But that's a story for another time.

Right now, all I cared about was that overwhelming urge to take a warm shower, change into something baggier, and get home as fast as possible, where I'd be met by our spoiled, ginger cat Silas and the leftovers of a luxurious New York cheesecake, which I'd grabbed from the café after my shift.

As for Owen... I didn't really want to think about him.

"What are you going to tell him?" Orin asked, as if reading my thoughts, holding the door wide open for me.

Lost in my worries, I hadn't even noticed how we'd left the mirrored studio, rushed through the showers, changed into our everyday clothes, and were now shuffling down the chilly streets of Brooklyn.

Without asking anyone's permission, autumn was slowly creeping up to every doorstep.

"Almost two years of complete confusion, constant moving, tears and fights... I don't even know what there is to say..." I shrugged. "I guess... that I've had enough."

My friend nodded quietly and firmly. She knew my situation better than anyone else. Even my parents were aware only of a small part of what was going on inside me.

Though, given how long we'd been together, they were probably already milking thoughts of a soon-to-be wedding and grandchildren.

Meanwhile, I was eagerly waiting for my moment of freedom...

"It's about time!" Orin's reddish-blond curls bounced along with her. "I told you those kinds of relationships never lead anywhere good! But I guess you had to figure it out yourself. And thank heavens you did, because otherwise I would've had to step in. And if I was the one handling it — I'd definitely be in jail! Again..."

Chattering away, she stepped right into a shallow puddle in pure frustration.

"These damn men... Such a waste of time!" my friend kept grumbling, shaking her wet shoe. "Where are all those fictional hero-lovers ready to lay the whole world at your feet?!"

"You read too many romance novels before bed!" I laughed at her dreaminess.

Orin waved me off.

I wouldn't call my friend naive — not at all. But Orin was clearly the one-man type, waiting for her own happily-ever-after, which, as it turned out, takes a very, *very* long time to arrive... Still, it happens differently for everyone. As for now, we were the brightest example of old maids and the secret nightmare of our parents, who were eagerly waiting for us to join the ranks of happy mommies.

I've got nothing against kids and family. But when you have a clear understanding of what a huge responsibility it is, arguments like "*But who's gonna take care of you when you're old?*" or "*Just give it a try, maybe you'll like it?*" sound at best stupid. And selfish.

"At least they add some color to my life!" Orin replied with sarcasm. If I were too suspicious, I'd think that jab was aimed at me. "And also, meditations. Astral flights — *whoosh!* Now that's an adventure!"

"How zoned out do you have to be to lose it?" I joked, squinting at the sun that had briefly broken through the sky. "From what I've seen, that kind of thing only happens on pills or weed."

I'd never tried either, and clearly wasn't planning to — I always kept the consequences of using psychotropics in mind, having seen them up close with some of my classmates. Still, the thought of taking a break from this hectic world, even if just for a little while, definitely warmed my soul.

"You just haven't learned how yet!"

Orin winked at me slyly, took my arm, and walked me through the front door of a high-rise building.

Our apartment resided in one of those rundown Brooklyn buildings and looked no better inside than it did outside. Though we'd done everything we could to give this two-bedroom unit, roughed up by the previous tenants, at least some feeling of coziness.

When we got to the elevator, we realized that it was under repair yet again, which meant that we'd have to drag ourselves to the sixth floor up the grimy, spit-stained stairwell — a little cardio that was absolutely not a part of our plan...

Frustrated, I punched the closed metal doors.

"I'd really like to get out of this shithole someday..." I muttered, already panting like a chain smoker by the fourth flight of stairs.

"We need to think positive!" Orin tried to cheer me up, though her face, pale from anemia, was telling a completely different story. "Everyone starts somewhere, right?"

"And we chose this dump as our starting point? Pfft!" I snorted.

To be fair, our apartment was far from the worst. Before this, we'd lived in an old grandma's unit with three other people — a young couple and some guy who was just as lost in life as we were. And that place still gives us shivers to this day: cigarette butts on the windowsills, a constant line to the bathroom, bedbugs that eventually drove my friend to sleep on the kitchen table... Hell, we even got robbed there!

Noticing my grimace of disgust, Orin probably remembered the same thing.

"At least now we know whose hair, or furball, is floating in the soup, and who snarfed down *my last* chocolate bar!" She emphasized that part with a lecturing tone.

I rolled my eyes in response.

"You know perfectly well I try to avoid store-bought stuff! Have you ever read the ingredients?! It's a nightmare!" My friend kept gaining steam, battling both hunger-induced aggression and exhaustion at the same time.

"I'll buy you one, chill!" I reminded her of my promise. "At least let me get home first."

Leaving Orin to chatter somewhere in the background, I started looking for the apartment keys. A pitiful meow came from behind the swamp-green door. We were clearly expected.

"Who's a good boy?" Orin cooed in a childish voice, squatting down in front of Silas, who was already puffing up with joy the moment we stepped over the threshold. "I need to take off my shoes, wash my hands, and then I'll pet you, alright? Just wait a little..."

She quickly kicked off her dirty boots, which were immediately sniffed from all sides, and ran to the bathroom.

Like a loyal dog, Silas followed his mama.

"OH NO! WHY NOW?!" Orin exclaimed, waving a wet waffle towel around. The sound of claws in the litter box cut through her outrage. *"WHAT WERE YOU DOING ALL DAY?!"*

"He's a neat-freak, remember? And the human slaves will clean it all up right away!" I joked, wrinkling my nose at the smell of feces that had spread through the apartment faster than the aroma of a freshly baked bread.

As if confirming my words, Silas darted out of the bathroom, tracking soggy litter down the hallway, and raced into the kitchen with loud demands, waiting for his dinner.

"Your turn!" Orin nodded toward the litter box, shaking the last drops of water from her hands straight onto the floor.

We spent most of the evening in silence — either from exhaustion, or because for the first time in our lives we'd actually managed to discuss everything that was on our minds that day. Though personally, I'm leaning toward the first option.

"So, what exactly do you have to do?" I asked, sitting cross-legged on our shabby leather couch. Orin seemed confused. "I mean meditation. The astral plane and all that stuff..."

"Ahhh!" she drew out.

Suddenly, Orin's face lit up with superiority. She pressed her already thin lips together and squinted at me slyly.

"But you don't believe in any of this?!" My friend threw my own words back at me.

I shrugged thoughtfully, a little embarrassed.

"Why not give it a try? Since you somehow managed to drag me to yoga! I mean... I can't say I was thrilled... But! It was interesting."

Orin's almond-shaped eyes grew even narrower.

"I knew you'd come around!" She beamed.

Jumping up from the floor, my friend rushed to her room, reappearing a second later with a yoga mat in her hands and a large metal bowl tucked under her arm. My eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"I just wanted to..." I started, but Orin quickly cut me off, covering my mouth with her palm.

"Shh-h-h! Lie down. We'll start with breathing exercises..."

I don't know what came over her, but it seemed that my crazily-enlightened friend had been preparing for this moment her entire life! After showing me a few breathing exercises, she hovered over me with those bowls like some kind of shaman, trying to lull me into a trance. In the end, she even sent me a couple of pretty useful meditation files.

"Listen to them before bed to relax. And you can also do the exercises we did before the regression. They'll help you open up to your emotions and feel your body better," Orin instructed me.

I nodded politely.

Regression therapy was probably one of the most far-out things we'd ever done! I still remember lying on the couch with my eyes closed, trying to visualize an apple, sense its taste and color... How they made me sink into the happiest and the heaviest memories from my childhood just to answer one single question — *why am I here?* And how desperately Silas yowled, running in circles, which, as the therapist explained, was normal because animals see and feel more than humans do.

But what puzzled me the most were the sensations that accompanied me the whole way, the images that surfaced before my eyes like snippets from a past life, and the incredibly pleasant weightlessness after the session. Whether it was real or just a fabrication of my brain — I still can't figure it out. But those beautiful, fluffy clouds and that atmosphere of complete serenity haunted me like ghosts of missed opportunities that I just couldn't seem to reach again...

And even following Orin's advice, that evening was no exception.

Chapter 2

The next day, I felt like an absolute trainwreck.

"Rough night, huh?" Orin asked, noticing me leaning on the soiled cash register.

I took a deep breath in response.

We didn't see each other in the morning — her shift had started before dawn, and by five o'clock she was already flitting between tables, serving coffee to all the hardworking early birds of the city.

Or to those who, just like me, were suffering from insomnia.

"I had *the craziest* dream..." I mumbled, trying to recall the whole mess my brain had cooked up. "I was chasing people and killing them. And then it turned out some of them were *me*... I kept teleporting through space. It was so strange... I feel like I'd been hit by a truck."

Orin listened carefully to my incoherent rambling, unintentionally ignoring a customer who had his hand raised, waiting for his check.

I shot him a tired glance.

Working at the café drained every bit of energy out of me — mostly because the duties didn't match the paycheck at all, not to mention the stupid 60's uniforms we all had to wear to keep the "authentic" vibe. A short red dress with a white apron and bright lipstick made me look vulgar and at least ten years older, and attracted way too much unwanted attention to my already skittish persona.

I gave a barely noticeable nod toward the old man.

"He's waiting for you..."

Orin studied my haggard face — a mirror of her own — took a deep breath, carefully smoothed her uniform, plastered on an obliging service smile, and headed over to him. Mr. Jones was one of our regulars, so I figured he wouldn't take it personally.

I snorted under my breath.

Our café was pretty cozy but felt completely stuck in time. Maybe that's why so many old folks came here — to reminisce about the good-old days of their long-gone youth. Our manager, Amanda, always made sure the tables were spotless and that every customer was greeted with a wide smile, which often left our cheeks aching after a long shift.

But still, it gave us enough money to stay afloat, covering rent, food, and little trinkets for Silas, who couldn't care less about any of it. And every workday started with us convincing ourselves to hold on just a little longer, suppressing the nagging urge to let it all go to hell and start selling feet pics if not for the nagging disgust from the very first message in the "*hey baby*" style — the nauseatingly sweet tone coming right through the screen, punctuation optional — that made us want to throw our phones off the nearest rooftop and jump right after it.

And that's exactly how Owen decided to start our conversation today.

"*I'm at work*" I texted back, having absolutely zero desire to deal with his tantrums and accusations.

"*You never have time for me!*" Flashed on the locked screen. A few seconds later, the message disappeared.

I rolled my eyes and tucked my phone deeper into my pocket.

"What does he want?" Orin asked, setting her bag down next to me. Her shift had just ended, and without wasting a single precious second, she'd hastily changed clothes and already had one foot out the door, having handed her tables off to another girl.

"If it's not another meltdown, then he's probably feeling lonely, and will either ask me to come over for the night, or he'll want to come to ours," I guessed.

Orin made a face of disgust.

"I hope you're not—"

"*OF COURSE NOT!*" I cut her off aggressively. "I told you, I'm done with this nonsense. It's time to put an end to it."

My friend pressed her lips together.

"Keep that in mind when you see him..." Orin added quietly, remembering all my previous failed attempts to break up with Owen, every single one of which had ended up in bed. "Have a good shift!"

She gave me a playful wink, grabbed her knitted hippie bag off the table, and walked out the front door, saying goodbye to the other waitresses who'd spent two or even three times less time in this godforsaken place than we had. In a moment, our eyes met through the grimy panoramic window. Orin made a funny gesture with her hands, showing that she was watching me closely.

I smirked back at her.

The moment my friend disappeared from the view, it felt as though all the hell broke loose. Problems came crashing down on my head all at once, and by the end of my shift, I was completely drained.

The cherry on top of that shitberg was Owen's unexpected and utterly ill-timed appearance.

"*Heyyy*," he drawled like a sheep, appearing behind me a looming shadow. I jumped in fright, nearly dropping my apartment keys.

"What are you doing here?!" I asked, looking him up and down.

Owen usually preferred to wear sportswear, and an ironed shirt with pants were such a rare sight that just seeing them on him told me he had big plans for the evening. The sultry scent of his cologne hit my nose. Leather and tobacco — his signature.

Yeah, he was definitely up to something...

"Waiting for you," Owen replied in a low voice, looking at me with his deep, brown eyes. That was the very same forbidden move that had made me fall for him in the first place.

I knew exactly what he wanted...

Trying not to give in to his masculine charm, and suppressing the sudden surge of raw, animal desire, I pressed on.

"Why?"

"Didn't you miss me?" he asked, surprised.

My heart clenched in my chest.

Part of me truly wanted his company and warmth, cherishing those memories from the first few months when we'd just met. The other part was guided by common sense and the pain of humiliation — the kind I'd felt whenever I needed his support and help, only to get indifference and cutting remarks like "*you brought this on yourself*" in return. And that second part was a cold, sobering slap in the face.

"Was I supposed to?" I snapped, tugging at the stuck zipper of my bag.

I slung the leather strap over my shoulder and headed toward the intersection to the right. Owen hurried after me.

"You vanished for a week, if not longer! I don't even understand what's going on?! Does this look like a healthy relationship to you?! Or any kind of relationship at all?!"

I stopped at the traffic light, nervously tapping my foot as I waited for the green. Surprisingly, the usually crowded street near our café was completely empty. We stood alone at the crossing.

"Sorry, I've been busy..." he began with his usual excuse. "Work, you know..."

A sarcastic sigh escaped my chest.

How many times had I heard that line already? And I'm the one being accused of not giving him enough attention?! I should've spat in his face long ago instead of trying to find a compromise...

"How was your day?" The unexpected question of concern nearly stopped me in the middle of the crosswalk.

I threw him a side eye and crossed the street.

Our apartment was right next block, which was actually the reason I'd chosen that workplace. Waitressing at a café sounds degrading at best, and not exactly a dream job — not that I saw myself working for anyone at all. But having to commute for hours on top of that? That would've been too much.

"Rough. Stressful. Dirty," I snapped, earning raised eyebrows and a furrowed forehead in reply. "It's Friday, so there were tons of people, huge lines, and hordes of kids running around like crazy. Two of them threw mashed potatoes at me with a spoon, and one even got me in the eye!"

I turned toward him and pointed a trembling finger at the reddened corner. Owen forced a smirk.

"I told you to get out of there ages ago. It's a waste of time."

"And do what?" His words made me stop. "Find another café? Go mop floors? Or sell myself on the street?"

"I don't know. Take some courses, learn something new..." He shrugged. "Get a job at a company, for fuck's sake."

"As a secretary for pennies?!" I flared up. "Serve coffee to rich old men and let them grab my ass?!"

"Isn't that what you're already doing?" Owen's sarcasm nearly made me lunge for his wavy, dark-blond hair.

Getting a hold of myself, I took two short breaths and one deep exhale — just as Orin had taught me. Spinning like a carousel before my tired eyes, the rotten world finally settled back into place.

A wave of disappointment washed over me. The corner of my mouth twitched in a fleeting moment of realization. It was time.

"Why did you come?" I repeated my initial question.

"To talk. Calmly," Owen answered, closing the distance between us.

My breathing grew erratic again.

"You know that—" I started, but then Owen's warm lips pressed against mine. His right hand slid through my stress-tangled hair, while his left gently rested on my waist, pulling me slightly toward him.

A spark of wild desire shot straight through me.

No matter how immature he could be, our sex had always been flawless. And my body remembered it perfectly, greedily begging me if not to take him back, then at least to let myself have this one more time.

My knees buckled involuntarily, and the smirk on Owen's lips told me he'd noticed.

God, if Orin was home — she'd kill me... But I'd deal with that later. For now... I'd had a very long, very stressful day, and I wanted to leave it behind as soon as possible.

Fumbling, I opened the front door, and we headed for the elevator.

This time, it was working properly and arrived surprisingly fast, so within a minute, our street kiss had turned more passionate and almost scandalously arousing.

"*Alora...*" he whispered my name, trailing kisses down my neck.

"*Not now...*" I replied, having absolutely no desire to hear whatever stupid thing he might say.

No. Right now, I didn't want to think about anything...

Just one night... One last farewell sex... And then we'd break up...

Another fake promise I made to myself.

By the time we reached the sixth floor, the elevator cabin was already hot enough to warm half our drafty building. Owen's lips kept sliding down my body, lower and lower, as if nailing me to the dusty, graffiti-covered wall. The bulge in his mustard-colored pants was so hard that I nearly ripped my own clothes off right there.

I'd almost forgotten how big he was...

A loud ding announced our arrival. Taking each other's hands, we headed toward the far door.

By some lucky coincidence, Orin wasn't home, so we dumped all our stuff on the floor and locked ourselves in my room.

It was exactly as I remembered it every lonely evening when the heat between my thighs reached its peak, and my hand inevitably wandered down, playing with fingers one by one, and sometimes with things a little more intricate... And yet, despite all my skill, nothing could replace the warmth of a burning male body, and that firmness that slid in and out of me, making me beg for more and more until the ringing in my ears faded and the cheap bed nearly cracked in half.

Relief washed through my body, making every inch of it tremble, when Owen laid me on my back, spread my legs wide, and got to work with that tongue of his — the same tongue that loved to babble about all kinds of nonsense, driving me up the wall.

But this time, he brought me somewhere far more interesting...

After tumbling around in bed for about two hours, we finally calmed down. Physically, at least. Mentally, the anxiety from the conversation I'd failed to have was pressing down on my neck like a giant boulder — one I couldn't bring myself to swallow, but also couldn't quite spit out.

To my surprise, Owen was the one who nudged me toward it.

"So, you really moved in here, huh?" he said, thoughtfully scanning my room.

There weren't many things in it as I don't like useless clutter. But it wasn't exactly tidy either... A dusty closet, only half full, a desk buried under notebooks and stationery, a couple of tops randomly tossed into corners — everything had its place. And it was truly mine.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go," I answered, putting on one of my clean black t-shirts with a neon geometric print — I had very few of those left, and they were worth their weight in gold.

This insane work schedule wouldn't even let me go down to the damn laundry room! In that respect, Owen was absolutely right. I desperately needed to change something...

He smirked, giving me an appraising look.

"What?" I asked, narrowing my eyes slightly.

"You know, if I hadn't seen you in bed, I'd think you and her were... you know..." He made the stupidest face I'd ever seen. "You get it."

"No, I don't get it?" I played dumb, nudging him toward the edge of the cliff.

If there had been even a drop of compassion or doubt left in me, it dried up irreversibly after his next words.

"Well, you've just been friends for so long and you're always together... If anything happens, you run straight to each other, like you're... a couple? I can't even imagine how you live! She's... You know..." Owen started spewing complete nonsense. He twirled his finger by his temple, smirking at his own observations. "You even dragged that shabby thing of a cat off the street!"

My face twisted with rage.

"Get out..." I muttered, barely holding back my fury.

"What?" he asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

I grabbed his things and started hurling them at him.

"GET OUT OF HERE AND NEVER DARE COME BACK! YOU HEAR ME?! NEVER!"

"WHAT DID I EVEN SAY?!" Owen protested, trying to dodge his shirt and underwear.

"YOU'RE A PIECE OF SHIT! HOW THE HELL DID I EVER GET INVOLVED WITH YOU?!" YOU... YOU..." I was out of breath.

I pushed through it and finally let him have it... It was a long, fiery speech, full of cutting insults and throwing anything I could get my hands on at him. In the end, Owen ended up in the hallway in just his boxers.

"MY SHOES!" he yelled after me.

Without a second thought, I launched them at his head and slammed the door.

"YOU CRAZY HYSTERICAL BITCH!"

I had never felt so light, so hurt, and so amused all at once. I'd replayed this moment in my head so many times, expecting to break down sobbing. But the tears stubbornly refused to come. Instead, a hoarse laugh burst out of me, as if a mountain had fallen off my shoulders and taken my sanity with it.

I slid down the rough wooden door and plopped onto the floor.

Purring loudly, Silas nudged his way under my arm.

"Well, there you have it..." I mumbled, listening to Owen's furious shouts from somewhere behind the wall.

As it turned out, my cat had also decided to leave his mark on this situationship — just a bit more literally.

"FUCK'S SAKE! THESE ARE BRAND NEW!" echoed through the hallway as Owen shoved his feet into his pee-soaked shoes.

Chapter 3

The breakup went easier than I'd expected, but the aftertaste of last night still lingered. So, taking advantage of our shared day off, Orin and I went to a meditation session at a wellness center not far from Midwood Park.

"I don't think I can do this," I shared my doubts, remembering all my failed attempts before. "I'll probably just sit there with my eyes closed and die of boredom in a couple of minutes."

"Oh, come on!" Orin nudged me with her elbow, glancing at the neighboring brownstone houses. Say what you will, but Brooklyn's noble architecture never failed to please the eye with its aristocratic refinement.

That day, my friend was dressed more than hipster-ish: burgundy leather pants, an olive cotton long sleeve, and a colorful beret paired with her angular, nineties-style sunglasses. I didn't tell her all the details of our breakup — just the gist. But for Orin, that was more than enough.

Maybe she really was out of this world, but that's exactly what I liked about her. Because I myself, year after year, kept wondering more and more if I'd even ended up in the right place. If such a choice even existed at all...

"This way!" Orin's voice snapped me out of my sublime thoughts.

Following her finger, I spotted the studio sign.

"*Laba-Daba?*" I read the name with irony. "Are we sure this is the place?"

My friend uttered an affirmative "*um-hum.*"

Grudgingly, I followed her.

Orin pulled the frozen rectangular metal handle of the glass door and confidently walked up to the registration desk, giving our names for the list. Where she'd dug up this place — I had absolutely no idea.

Waiting for her to come back, I looked around.

The new studio seemed brighter and more spacious than our previous one, with panoramic windows, angular mirrors that created a kaleidoscope effect, and lots of green plants in light-colored pots. They even had their own little coffee shop to the right of the reception desk, selling various goodies and Ayurvedic things, the smell of which had nearly knocked us off our feet as soon as we walked in. A bit heavy, but more than pleasant.

Patchouli stood out to me the most.

"Ready?" Orin bounced back over to me and nodded toward the studio hall.

This time, the session was led by a man older than middle-age, originally from India. Because of his hard-to-pronounce name, he asked us to call him Bobby.

As soon as the room filled up, the practice began.

There were about twenty of us, and everyone obediently followed the instructor's directions, whether it was slow neck rolls or long inhales and exhales using the square breathing technique that nearly made me pass out. I made a mental note that I really needed to get out into the open much more often.

But the most interesting part started when we lay down on the floor.

"*Imagine your consciousness as an empty vessel. Banish all unnecessary thoughts...*" The calm voice with a slight accent floated somewhere among us. "*Silence and peace... Complete serenity...*"

"Alright..." I said to myself, trying to fight off the skepticism. After all, the session cost us twenty dollars, and I was not about to let that money go to waste!

"*Inner peace...*" I repeated the cliché mantra in my head, fidgeting on the squeaky mat. "*Did we turn off the stove? And we should have probably left some food for the cat... Good boy, stood up*"

for all of us! Damn, what if the stove is still on and we burn the apartment down?!... What if we burn down the whole building?!... We'd never be able to pay for that! OKAY! Shh... Inner peace..."

I took a deep breath, scratched every itchy spot, and finally allowed myself to relax.

Truth be told, I didn't catch any Zen. Neither during the session, nor after my fight with Owen. That night, I had the same nightmare as always. Only this time it felt even more real...

I was standing in the middle of a dark desert surrounded by pointy hills. Smoky clouds gathered under a cosmic-purple sky, lightning flashing here and there as the cold wind kept whipping the frayed hem of my dark cloak... Looking down, I saw that my legs were covered in scars, and in my left hand I held a black dagger of a bizarre, sharp shape, stained with dried blood. Its appearance both frightened and fascinated me in the most inexplicable way... Behind me were endless dunes, and ahead... pure horror! Mountains of corpses lay before me — humans and creatures I had never seen before. All of them were dead.

I had killed them...

A loud sob escaped my throat. I gasped as if choking, then bolted upright on my mat. The people sitting near me flinched. A wave of whispering spread across the room.

"*ARE YOU OKAY?!*" Orin rushed to my side, feeling my arms. My blurred vision briefly registered her blueberry-green workout set as a dress. I'd never thought about it before, but she looked just like Merida.¹

"What... What happened..." I mumbled, trying to snap back to reality.

"You were screaming so loud, it was horrible!" Genuine worry was written all over my friend's face.

"I must have fallen asleep..." I guessed, wiping my red, puffy cheeks with my dusty hands.

Things like this had happened to me before. But... when had I drifted off? I'd only closed my eyes for a second...

"Return to your starting positions. Deep breath in... And out..." Bobby redirected the audience's attention back to himself. Once he was sure the alarmed stares were busy again, he leveled with me and gave my shoulder a light pat. *"Come..."*

I couldn't help but raise my left eyebrow, then frowned. My head was pounding like after a hangover, and my legs were humming no worse than an old TV that had lost its signal.

Easy for him to say...

Leaving the studio in complete silence and bewilderment, the unshakable guru escorted me to his office. An unremarkable light-colored door hidden in the far corner of the hall closed behind us.

"Tell me," he said, sitting down at a desk nearby. "Was it your first time going astral?"

My eyes nearly popped out of my head.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'GOING ASTRAL'?! I JUST FELL ASLEEP!" I laughed at his words, forcing out a sarcastic tone.

But the man's dark-skinned face was dead serious. He pointed to a soft armchair across from him and sat me down like an experienced psychologist.

Driven by curiosity, I obeyed.

Bobby's office was rather modest, as if he'd just moved in yesterday: bare walls, an empty desk with an old computer, and only a couple of seats, which struck me as odd — considering the cost of his sessions, he could have afforded something much nicer.

I sniffed.

"What practices do you do?" the guru asked, still insisting on his standpoint.

"None." I shrugged. "I breathe. *Through my nose*. Sometimes I try to meditate. But it's no use. I still can't get it right..."

¹ Princess Merida, the fierce, red-headed protagonist of Disney/Pixar's 2012 animated film *Brave*.

Bobby listened carefully, narrowing his eyes now and then. After rummaging through his drawers, he pulled out a rather old and strange book of practices and handed it to me.

"Try this," he added, tapping the worn binding respectfully.

I raised my eyebrows skeptically, yet accepted the peculiar gift.

In my hands lay a small book with a dark, woven cover marked with purple hieroglyphs. Its pages, faded by time to a nearly orange hue, made me realize it could be five times older than me.

"What is this?" I asked, having no idea what I was supposed to do with it.

"Open it and you'll find out," the man replied, then quickly added. "Only at home! *It's not for prying eyes...*"

He waited for some kind of reaction from me, but got nothing in return. So, Bobby stood up from his chair and headed for the exit, only adding as he went. "If you have any questions — come find me."

I gave a polite nod.

The narrow door closed behind him.

Left alone with myself, it finally dawned on me: this was just an ordinary yet genius marketing move — pretend to be Yoda of a sort, make me feel special, give me some mysterious instruction in a language I clearly can't read, and then sit back and wait for me to come back to his studio for yet another practice. Judging by the number of pages in this manuscript, I'd just signed up for a year-long yoga subscription.

"Sly bastard!" I muttered under my breath, feeling used.

Sure, I could have not taken the book. I could have set it on the table, quietly left the office, and never returned to that money-hungry place. But something was pulling me toward it like a magnet. Wounded pride, or simply the basic desire to escape my boring routine for a while — even in a not-so-logical way. Whatever was on those tattered pages, it already promised a more interesting pastime than my usual evenings of binge-watching shows and staring at the ceiling, stuck in the bleak realization that my life was being wasted on nothing.

"Fine! Let's see what's in there..." I accepted the challenge.

Already changed, Orin found me after the session, and we decided to walk through the park, grabbing a couple of fruity popsicles to boost our mood. The day was surprisingly sunny for an autumn in the city, so we picked what looked like the cleanest bench and sat down to soak up the rare warming rays, surrounded by slowly balding trees.

"What did he give you?" my friend asked, peeking into my bag.

"Some book." I shrugged, biting into the creamy filling.

Noticing the corner of the cover, Orin's face changed. I smacked my lips loudly.

"What?" I felt uneasy, seeing her scared expression.

"*Hide it and don't EVER show it to anyone!*" she practically hissed in a commanding tone, covering the book with my knitted scarf.

"What's wrong with it?!" I protested, hearing that phrase for the second time in the last hour.

Looking around, Orin started whispering.

"*That book is forbidden in esoteric circles. It's considered a grimoire of dark magic! Rumor has it, it was stolen from a monastery in Tibet and cursed by the very monks who wrote it in a possessed state. The cover is made of embalmed human skin as a reminder of the infinitely high price for the sacred knowledge and our insignificance compared to the vastness of eternal existence...*"

I swallowed nervously, missing the melted drops of ice cream I'd meant to lick off — rolling down the waffle cone, they splatted near my leather ankle boots, staining my new jeans.

Not that I'd ever been superstitious, but I still tried to steer clear of folk signs and legends. Just in case. Especially when it came to artifacts.

"AND WHY THE HELL WOULD I NEED THAT?!" I stared at my friend. "DO I LOOK LIKE A FREAKING WITCH OR SOMETHING?!"

Orin rushed to calm me down.

"It's just rumors," she added, glancing around. "But sometimes there's a grain of truth in them..."

I shook my head, denying everything I'd just heard.

"It's just a book with hieroglyphs, nothing more!" I zipped my open bag shut. "Let's finish up and go back. He can have it and dance around it with a tambourine for all I care!"

My friend gave a conceding shrug. As much as she loved adventures, whatever might fall on us if the rumors turned out to be true didn't appeal even to her adventurous spirit — and I couldn't help but go with her gut on that.

I exhaled loudly and shifted my gaze to the people around us.

Dozens of strangers wandered slowly through the autumn park — some with their families, but most alone, or with a cuddly dog to keep them company. The loneliest ones were walking as many as five. Others preferred soulless gadgets as their companions, diving into the bottomless pit of "overwhelming success" and the latest trends pushed by perpetually and groundlessly happy influencers hiding their true faces and feelings behind masks.

"A sad sight..." I muttered, thinking about the weight of the modern world.

Orin seemed to be pondering over the same thing.

Unlike me, she cherished the idea of a husband and children, a little house in the countryside, a big garden with a flower patch, several dogs and cats, and maybe a flock of feathered chickens laying fresh eggs for breakfast. Yet, even being ready for it, family happiness stubbornly passed my friend by, making way for the years flying past her eyes.

Next spring, Orin would turn thirty. And I knew she dreaded that day with a shudder...

"Alright, let's go. We need to get there before they close." I interrupted the thoughts that could potentially send my friend into an early seasonal depression. And honestly, I wasn't far from another tearful episode myself.

Orin forced an awkward but grateful smile.

Crossing the street clogged with cars, we found ourselves on a busy sidewalk filled with ever-rushing people.

Capitalism and consumerism rule the world, that's for sure...

Scaring off a flock of pigeons, we hurried to the studio.

"Damn it!" I grunted, tugging at the locked doors.

"Weird..." Orin agreed, studying the sign. "They're supposed to be open until at least seven."

"What time is it now?" I turned up the sleeve of my dark cotton turtleneck.

"It's not even five yet," my friend answered, pressing her face to the glass. "It's empty. Completely..."

"Screw it. We'll come back another day." I waved my hand, not paying much attention to her words.

To our surprise, the studio wasn't open the following weekend, nor the week after. It had simply vanished into thin air, leaving behind nothing but lingering questions and taking with it everyone who could answer them.

Well, *one* person, to be precise.

I scoured the Internet but couldn't find a single mention of Bobby — who he was, what he'd done before. No address, no phone number, not even his real name. All we had left from that visit were memories and a mysterious book gathering dust on my nightstand.

"You still haven't looked inside?" Orin asked over dinner, cutting into a grilled piece of tofu smothered in barbecue sauce.

I shook my head.

"What's the point? I wouldn't understand anything anyway," I said matter-of-factly, finishing the last of my berry tea.

My friend fell into deep thought. As potentially dangerous as it might be, the book was nagging at her as much as it was at me. And naturally, in her scholarly manner, Orin found a way around the obstacle standing in our path.

"So... I dug around online and found this interesting article buried on the 'dark side' of some esoteric forum..." she began circuitously, carefully watching my reaction.

"Aaand?" I hummed, waiting for more.

"These hieroglyphs aren't exactly Tibetan. More like a combination of several languages at once," my Sherlock in stretched-out leggings shared. "Here, I'll show you!"

Jumping up from her seat in excitement, my friend headed toward the laptop lying on the table in her bedroom, grabbing a bunch of chaotic notes and scribbles in her notebook along the way. When she returned, Orin tied her curls into a bun and put on her square black-rimmed glasses for an extra dose of scientific credibility.

Judging by all this, the conversation was going to be serious.

"It's Elamo-Dravidian language group — which technically isn't even fully recognized as a real thing, but still..." My friend placed her palms on the table, reminding me of a vice-principal from one of my childhood schools. "Don't ask how I got there, it's a long story. Let's just say I had to pull a few strings and dig up some dusty skeletons from closets. But! We have a rough dictionary!"

"So, I guess I need to go grab the book?" I voiced the obvious.

Orin pressed her lips together and gave an affirmative nod.

"Time to open this can of worms!"

A few minutes later, the manuscript lay on our round kitchen table.

After drumming her fingers in impatient anticipation, my friend began matching symbols to their meanings from a long list on her laptop, occasionally cross-referencing her guesses with comments from those forums.

"A-HA!" she suddenly exclaimed, shifting her gaze to the dark cover. More specifically, to the purple hieroglyphs that shimmered oddly in the dim evening light. Pointing at each, Orin gave them a possible translation, running through the first four. *"Soul... Journey... Uncharted... Infinity..."*

"That tells us absolutely nothing?" I propped my face up with my hand and gave her a skeptical look. "Even an idiot can tell that this isn't a cookbook."

Sharing my opinion, Silas let out a pitiful meow sitting in my lap, cautiously sniffing the history-soaked paper corners, which seemed to frighten even our fluffy, indiscriminating bookworm.

"Wait! We've only just started!" my friend assured me.

Muttering something under her breath like a protective spell in case the curse was real, Orin opened the ancient manuscript. The untouched aged binding crackled. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"What is it?!" I got genuinely scared, leaning in closer.

"It's empty..." muttered my enthusiastic translator, examining the yellowed pages.

"It can't be?" I said, turning the book toward myself.

The first quarter of the pages were indeed blank, as were the second, and the ones after that. The only catch was the very middle, which felt much rougher to the touch than the rest.

Lost in thought, we sat in silence for over half an hour.

Had Bobby really fooled us, literally palming off empty air? But if the book was a dud, Orin wouldn't have been so wary of it. Then again, maybe it was just a fake?

"Wait a second..." An idea suddenly struck me.

I jumped up and grabbed the orange lighter sitting on the beige kitchen counter about three feet away. We often used it for cooking since our old gas stove was far from ideal, or to light incense,

mostly in Orin's room. She liked pretty weird, heavy scents that reminded me of sweaty old lady fried in onions and gave me pounding headaches.

"What are you doing?" my friend asked, watching me wave a small flame in front of the manuscript.

"I saw this in a movie. Some of the pages are too rough, like something's embedded in them, and I thought maybe..." I started explaining, when suddenly my hand trembled.

As if by magic, the previously blank parchment began to turn black, reveling runic drawings and hieroglyphs lengthwise and crosswise, forming lines, columns, and even intricate square labyrinths.

Orin gasped in delight.

"Milk?" she took a wild guess, only to be met with my stunned face. "So that's it! Things are about to get *really* interesting..."

Chapter 4

The book turned out to be completely useless! Not only was there only about twenty pages of actual information in it — and those were right in the middle — but the translations Orin and I came up with were so clunky that our whole idea just felt plain stupid.

But honestly, at least we had something to do in our free time.

"I'm leaving till morning. Try not to kill each other, okay?" my friend said to me and Silas, throwing on a dark teal raincoat.

A couple of months had passed since we got the Grimoire, and even longer since the last time I'd had sex. And I absolutely couldn't wait to be alone.

"You too!" I joked in return, handing Orin her leather backpack.

Well, it was eco-leather. My friend cared about animals, and everything she owned was made with that in mind — though you could barely tell it from the real thing.

"Ha-ha! I'll do my best!" Orin grinned.

She gave Silas a kiss on his dirty nose, turned the old round doorknob, and left the apartment. A couple minutes later, my friend was out of the building.

I watched her through the window, then lowered the blinds and shut the frame tight.

"You've got food. Mommy needs some alone time!" I announced to the cat.

Silas meowed back at me and headed toward Orin's room. Meanwhile, I just wanted to take a bath in complete peace.

After that night, every time I lay in my bed, waves of loneliness and lust would wash over me, giving me goosebumps of disgust at a single thought about everything Owen and I had done.

"*Damn it...*" I muttered, feeling that familiar tingle of arousal in my fingertips.

For a typical Brooklyn apartment, we were super lucky to even have a tub — most people are thankful for a whacky shower. Even if it was in crappy condition, with peeling pale-yellow paint and the dim light from one lamp hanging by a cord somewhere near the ceiling.

This dump costs us way too much...

Pushing negative thoughts away, I filled the tub halfway with warm water and lay down on the barely cool bottom, which warmed up pretty fast from my own heated body, reaching for the vibrator I'd made sure to charge fully. Naturally, even with all its functions, that buzzing little machine couldn't replace what I'd had with Owen, which kind of pissed me off. But at least I could get a quick release.

I teased myself between my legs, then slid the tip inside...

It took me just a couple minutes to climax, and just as long to realize I wanted more. Again, and again...

After soaking in the bubbles for about an hour, I'd completely drained the vibrator.

"I need to do something about this..." I muttered, knowing that in around twenty minutes I'd probably be holding it again.

My crazy libido just wouldn't leave me alone, but I wasn't about to throw myself at the first random guy either — keeping a whole pig for just one sausage wasn't part of my plan anymore. Especially since most guys don't even know how to handle it.

Don't even get me started on the clitoris — those jokes have been around long before I was born, and clearly not for nothing.

I sighed and put my saving toy on the square stool next to my phone and a scented candle that I'd lit up to set the mood. After scrubbing with a loofah and washing my hair, I rinsed off, brushed my teeth, and got out of the bathroom, wrapped in my warm beige bathrobe.

Silas was asleep on Orin's bed, spreading his fluffy fur all over the t-shirt she'd left behind. I forced a little smile.

At least some of us are happy with their life!

After checking all the locks ten times before bed, I went into my bedroom.

I'd been dealing with insomnia for many days now and tried pretty much everything: exhausting workouts, breathing exercises, meditating before bed, even mixing sedatives with sleeping pills — you name it. Nothing could block out the constant noise from the highway outside or my insane upstairs neighbor who kept drilling a hole in the same spot 24/7. If it weren't for magnesium, I would've shoved that damn power drill right up his ass!

Out of desperation, my eyes landed on the Grimoire.

Like I said, we hadn't really gotten anything useful out of that super weird book. Orin had managed to figure out that the pages were organized in a logical way and divided into blocks. One of them covered the "astral projection technique," which we'd tried both together and separately.

Do I even need to say that we were still in our crappy Brooklyn apartment?

Maybe, I thought, we hadn't followed one of the main rules for that kind of travel. Because, to my surprise, the book didn't require complete and total relaxation, but rather a balance between letting go and staying in control.

"Alright, fine. Have it your way," I said to the manuscript, spreading it on the floor. The rough pages and old binding crackled a little under my impatient fingertips.

"...Find a comfortable position..."

I reworked that practice every which way, carefully following every word and note, but those magical worlds still wouldn't open up to my tired eyes. Putting the Grimoire aside, I climbed back into my messy bed and fell into a deep sleep within seconds.

Complete silence and darkness... Absolute nothingness...

Except for one glowing dot in the distance, moving toward me at an incredibly slow speed.

No, not a dot...

It's... *a tunnel?*

Changing colors from white to pinkish-purple, the unknown something suddenly sucked me into a whirlpool and dragged me down like a hungry Kraken. I kept flying and flying through this neon current as if it was a water park, until a bright light blinded me.

I opened my eyes and realized that I was lying on soft, grassy ground.

"So realistic..." I mumbled to myself, pulling my nails out of the rich soil, dark chocolate mud packed underneath them.

Usually, my dreams were pretty average — I'd either see everything that had happen to me that day, or have some crazy embarrassing nightmare about running naked through a crowd of people I know, or just floated in total darkness.

But this time, everything felt different.

I shaded my face with my hand and looked around.

"Holy shit!" I muttered in complete shock.

This was probably one of the most vivid dreams I'd ever had, as though I'd stepped right into a fantasy movie...

Stretching out into endless plains, the fertile land covered with emerald forests here and there smoothly transitioned into tall mountains that stood as harsh marble giants, blocking the blazing sun. The blue sky beamed with clusters of thick clouds that let warm rays slip through, gently falling onto the surface of a small lake not far from me, bouncing off it in rainbow sparkles. Wild vines lazily wrapped from one treetop to another, surrounding centuries-old trees that seemed to have a hundred little branches each — chaotically scattered up top, they all connected into a single massive trunk that twisted downward like a spiral into roots deep underground. Noticing one of them glowing with an azure shimmer, as if enchanted, my jaw hit the dusty floor.

I was standing at the edge of a sandy path leading far off toward jagged rocky cliffs.

Curiosity got the better of me. I got up on my feet.

There wasn't a single soul around — just me and untouched, virgin nature. The breathtaking view almost made me cry. But I didn't get to see more of this mysterious place, because as soon as I took my first step, something unknown violently shoved me into a completely different space.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, then opened them again.

This time I was inside a room. But it sure as hell wasn't Brooklyn...

Like a ghost, I was floating above the marble floor of a bathroom done in elegant sea-foam green, lit by bright daylight from a panoramic window somewhere to my right. I couldn't make out what was on the other side, no matter how hard I tried. All I could see was a huge mirror above a long, floating vanity made of white quartz.

A moment later, a stranger's figure appeared in front of it.

It was a man, tall and pretty athletic. I couldn't see his face, just his short, pitch-black hair and his bare torso, which, even in my unconscious state, sent a pulse through my body. He didn't look like those bodybuilder types I'd often see at the gym. His silhouette was muscular and sharply defined, as if the world's best sculptors had worked on every inch of those broad shoulders. On his right upper arm there was a dark scar of some weird shape, that seemed like a deep subcutaneous tattoo. I'd never seen anything like it.

Glancing lower I realized he was only wearing a towel...

A deep, completely confusing sigh escaped my chest. I quickly covered my mouth with my hand.

Being somewhere behind some kind of a veil, there was no way he could hear or see me. But somehow, as if guided by instinct, the stranger's head suddenly turned my direction.

Maybe it was the rush of adrenaline, but I got sucked back into the unknown again, and so hard that when I opened my eyes for the third time, I realized I was in my own bed, with the blanket clamped tight between my legs from all the pent-up tension.

I propped myself up on my elbows.

The room was pitch black, except for the occasional flash of lightning outside my window. While I'd been flying around in my sleep, a heavy rain had started outside. And it was freezing cold.

Hearing me gasp, Silas came running over to check on me.

"What a night..." I looked into his green eyes and scratched him behind the ears.

I only had a few hours left before my shift, and replaying everything I'd just seen in my head, I knew there was no point hoping for more sleep — no matter how much I wanted it. I tossed and turned for a bit, then got up, made myself some coffee, fed the poor cat that'd been scared by my reactions, and started getting ready for work.

I didn't tell Orin about my dream. Especially not when I saw how exhausted and drained she looked when she got home. I didn't ask how her shift had gone either — I knew better. Despite how sunny and nice the café looked on the inside, the staff was far from feeling that vibe.

Giving her a clumsy smile of solidarity, I grabbed my backpack with my freshly washed uniform and walked out the door toward the first chilly rays of an autumn morning.

The day dragged on forever...

Not only was it Tuesday, but my little nocturnal adventure kept nagging at me nonstop with how real it felt, leaving this intriguing aftertaste. I'd never had such vivid dreams in my life. And the stranger... That dominant silhouette was imprinted into my memory like he was right in front of me.

By the end of my shift, I felt that I'd lost whatever will to live I had left in this miserable world. After counting out the register — which, as usual, was short a couple bucks, so we all had to chip in to cover the difference — I gathered my stuff, looked around the empty dining room, and made a firm decision to never come back. What I planned to do next? God only knew. But walking out into the street with that clear realization, I felt like I was seeing everything from a completely new perspective.

"Whoever said that the best thing about a job is quitting was absolutely right!" I cheered myself up.

I slung my empty backpack over my shoulder and headed toward the nearest park, accompanied by envious and miserable stares from the other waitresses — the ones we'd never managed to become friends with.

But that was all in the past.

I had zero desire to go home, at least not right now when I had so many questions floating around in my head. So, I walked through a few crowded alleys and made it to the studio — still empty, just as before.

The whole situation was beyond strange.

"I think I'm starting to lose my mind..." I glanced at my tired reflection in the dusty glass doors, when out of the corner of my eye, I caught a guy walking past.

My jaw dropped, and my mouth went dry — the silhouette was a dead resemblance to the one I'd seen in my dream. Only this time, he was dressed for the weather, strolling through the evening streets of Brooklyn in a dark blue coat and straight-leg jeans.

I pulled back from the locked door and hurried after him.

I had no idea what I was hoping for or what I was even going to say to him if I ever caught up, but my exhausted legs were carrying me after the stranger like my life depended on it. And the sooner I catch him, the better, because autumn darkness was slowly but surely settling over the city.

I didn't know how long I trailed him for, but my fast walk turned into a run as I tried to keep up with his tall figure. Eventually, our paths split at an intersection.

Blending into the crowd, the stranger disappeared as though he'd never been there.

Feeling like a complete idiot, I threw my head back. My phone map showed I was God knows where, and I should probably get home as soon as possible — at least before this suburban neighborhood turned into a jungle where people breathe exhaust fumes and cocaine instead of air, and polite conversations are replaced by gunshots.

I looked around and swallowed hard.

"Rough day?" Orin asked the moment I stepped through the apartment door.

The smell of freshly made pancakes came from the kitchen, while I reeked of dog shit which I'd stepped in while running back and only noticed once I was already home.

I made a face.

"Where the hell have you been?" my friend wondered, looking me up and down. Sniffing my shoes, Silas threw up some chewed grass right on the doormat.

"Trust me, you don't want to know..." I waved it off, not wanting to get into details. Mostly because everything from the past day was connected, and I really didn't feel like untangling that whole mess.

"THERE'S NO HOT WATER, BY THE WAY!" Orin yelled when she heard me going into the bathroom.

"AAARGH!" I finally lost it.

This untimely injustice was the last straw.

The upside of living with someone is that whenever you come home, you can at least count on some decent company. And living with your best friend? You also get good food and a shoulder to cry on.

After dinner, Orin and I talked about recent events and our plans for the future. We decided that if we were going to start a new life, we'd do it together. Working as a waitress pissed her off just as much as it did me — except she'd found a way out much earlier. Orin had answered an ad for a receptionist position at some yoga studio she'd been meaning to check out. Not that the pay was that

much better than the café, but it was enough to cover our basic needs for the next few months, for both of us. And my friend was nice enough to give me time to figure myself out.

And so, my unemployed life began.

I thanked her for being so understanding, cleared the table, and did all the dishes so that Orin could relax. Later, we gathered in my room to watch some movie about strippers.

Man, they let anything play in theaters these days!

Occasionally glancing over at the Grimoire, I couldn't wait to go back to sleep...

Chapter 5

Somehow, sitting at home, time both dragged and flew by at an insane speed.

Every morning felt the same: I'd wake up, make breakfast for two, feed the cat and clean up after him, then wash up and sit down at my laptop, scouring the Internet for a decent job offer. But everything I came across was either sketchy as hell or came with a mile-long list of requirements for pocket change.

Naturally, neither option worked for me.

So, after spending a few weeks sitting on my ass, I'd made exactly zero. If you don't count my worsening eyesight — there I was solidly in the minus. And about as far on the climb towards the top of my career ladder.

The only escape I had was the Grimoire, which, surprisingly, I barely put down. As soon as the streetlights came on, the book would magically end up in my hands. It was my silver lining. I only had a couple more pages left to translate, and I'd also learned to control my dreams — according to the ancient manuscript, they were called *lucid*.

As for that mysterious place, I'd gone back there more than once as it became my go-to destination — a quiet corner I'd visit when I really wanted to escape reality. How I managed to do it, I couldn't even explain to myself. All I knew was that in that place, I felt safe.

There was just one catch... I was still floating above the ground like a ghost.

Skimming through the manuscript yet again, I stumbled onto something that had been bugging me for days.

"Grounding practice?" I read the translation of another pair of hieroglyphs.

I raised an eyebrow and kept digging.

My brainstorming session ended the same way as all the previous ones — with my tired face smacking flat into the book. Sinking deep into sleep, I flew through that familiar tunnel again and found myself in my favorite spot.

"Okay. I need to focus..." I looked at my hands, trying to give them at least some kind of a form.

They weren't see-through or faded, no. But they had no life in them. No strength.

I just *was*.

I took a few deep breaths in and out, then commanded my mind to be here and now — over and over until my head started spinning from the strain.

Suddenly, a light breeze touched my skin. Goosebumps ran down my arms.

I opened my eyes and saw that my feet were actually standing on the ground — solid, yet still soft and welcoming. A wide smile stretched across my dry lips.

This feels kind of weird...

Oh well. At least I'm standing!

I spun around and noticed a dry stick lying on the rustling grass nearby. I tried to pick it up. At first, it wouldn't budge, but soon, after really focusing on it, I felt the rough bark against my skin.

Then, I reached out and touched the damp grass.

Whatever this book was, it had truly opened up a new side of dreaming for me. Now I could not only control and choose the events, but literally *live* inside my dreams.

Realizing the potential, I happily flopped down onto the ground, staring up at the blue sky and the stars twinkling far beyond the fluffy clouds, as if bright day and deep night were one and the same. How that was possible, I didn't care. I just lay there in silence, watching the cosmos, gathering strength to go back to my own world — the one wrapped in grayness and total indifference.

Little did I know where those careless flights would lead me...

After yet another Groundhog Day in reality, I was cherishing the moment when I could finally lounge on my favorite meadow. I happily flopped onto my bed, arms and legs spread wide, eager to get back to those fragrant flowers. But as soon as I flew out of the tunnel, my nose slammed into something hard, nearly folding like an accordion, as I found myself in one of my worst nightmares.

I crashed to the ground and started groaning in genuine pain, as if I'd been hit by a van at full speed.

"THAT'S HER! SEIZE HER!" I heard unfamiliar voices.

Squinting against the sun and writhing from the metallic taste of blood on my lips, I tried to open my eyes. Suddenly, someone's hands grabbed me by the wrists and yanked me up like a sack of potatoes.

"What's going on..." I mumbled, only then realizing that I was surrounded by strange people.

Men.

Dressed in smooth leather outfits that only covered the lower half of their buff bodies with tight pants, while the top half was hidden under something like belt-corsets, emphasizing their firm pecs, they looked as tribal Spartan warriors lying in ambush for their prey. Brutal and tanned, it felt as if the picture of the world in my head had merged with some medieval movie I'd watched before bed.

One of the strangers grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back.

"This would almost be hot if it didn't hurt so much!" I protested, only to get a loud slap across the face that nearly knocked me out cold. My eyes went wide with rage. *"WHAT THE FUCK?!"*

"TIE HER UP!" a commanding voice ordered from behind.

A wave of adrenaline rushed through me, activating every instinct I had.

Dream or not, I wasn't going to let anyone treat me like this! And if they were more muscular and stronger, then I'd have to be wigglier and faster.

I don't know where all that courage came from but, using a split second of surprise, I broke free from one soldier's grip, dodging another one coming from the left, and slipped into the nearby bushes. I barely had time to catch my breath when a whole rain of arrows came pouring down on me.

"ARE YOU SHITTING ME?!" I cursed again, hating my dream with every fiber of my being for how real it felt.

A second later, my anger turned into revoltingly explicit swearing when an arrow flew right past my ear, barely missing my eye and leaving a deep gash on my right temple. My reflexes kicked in perfectly.

Burning pain shot through me.

Cursing everything and everyone, I exploded like a bomb.

Time itself seemed to stop...

I looked around in what felt like slow motion, just barely noticing three warriors advancing on me — and a thick, black smog...

Wrapping around their muscular necks as a deadly lasso, that dark void started choking the soldiers. Lifting them several feet off the ground, the smoky Kraken toyed with those men — who could have snapped me like a twig with their strong fingers — as if they were toys, twisting their limbs into the most unnatural positions.

And their eyes...

Peeking out from my hiding spot, I accidentally caught one of the warriors' gazes. Swollen with blood from the pressure, his pulsing eyeballs burst with a distinct pop, spilling out of their sockets like melted butter...

I nearly threw up.

The sight was beyond horrifying. Brutes or not, I couldn't just watch the product of my imagination tear people apart like rags — even if it was just a dream.

"*ENOUGH! STOP IT!*" I yelled in a commanding tone, trying to push through the smoky haze that separated me from the bloody massacre.

Hearing my anger, the thing finally paused.

"*LET THEM GO!*" I ordered again, trying not to let my voice crack, fully aware that I could easily end up in their place.

To my surprise, the black mist hovered in the air as a grim question. Dropping the lifeless piles of muscle to the ground it moved toward me.

Animal fear paralyzed my body — the body I had only recently learned to make solid. And that dark thing clearly had no intention of letting me use it to run away.

Grabbing me by the waist with a free tentacle, it carried me off into nowhere, leaving the nauseating traces of our unwanted presence behind...

I woke up in a cold sweat. To say I was more than happy to see my room — which had gotten pretty cluttered in just a couple of weeks — would be an understatement.

I pulled my knees up to my chest and hid under the blanket.

"*OH MY GOD! WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?!*" Orin's caring-shocked voice echoed through my head.

It took me a second to realize what she meant. Noticing the blood stains on my sheets, I quickly grabbed the little folding mirror from my nightstand — a cute vintage thing my grandma had given me once, that now served as my only reminder of her.

"How did you manage to do this?!" Orin started grilling me, showing up in my room at just the right time. Judging by the pile of clothes in her shaking hands, she'd been trying to sneak back some stuff she'd borrowed from me — including the new pair of jeans I hadn't been able to find for days.

But I wasn't in the mood for that. I simply stared at my messed-up reflection in silence.

The sight was far from pretty: a bruise was blooming on my left cheek, and my right temple was bleeding from a scratch that had come out of nowhere. Or at least its origin was a mystery to my friend.

Me, on the other hand...

I nervously looked down at my wrist. Noticing the finger-shaped marks on it, I accidentally dropped the mirror. It would've shattered if not for the soft carpet.

"*How is it possible...*" I mumbled under my breath, not believing my own eyes.

"What happened?! Spill it. Everything!" Orin demanded, sitting on the edge of my bed.

Despite how openminded my friend was, I seriously doubted she'd take my story as the truth. However, having listened carefully, her face got seriously pissed. Honestly, if I'd blamed it on an accident — or even Owen — she probably would've been less angry.

"*WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING?!*" Orin suddenly went off on me.

"What's the big deal?!" I asked.

My friend just stared at me as if I had two heads.

"*DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW DANGEROUS ASTRAL TRAVEL CAN BE?!*" Orin tried to shame me like a schoolkid after a failed parent-teacher conference.

And somehow, it kind of worked.

"Well, I..."

"*I-I...*" She mocked me. I had nothing to say to that.

I looked at her again, pressed my lips together, and tucked my cold feet under the fuzzy blanket.

Did I feel guilty for hiding all this from my best friend? Maybe. Was I sure that I'd actually been in the astral plane? That thought just wouldn't settle in my head...

Part of me wanted to argue with Orin, to calm her down, to make excuses for myself and throw facts at her about how impossible it was to do stuff like this — if not for the fresh bruises and that stinging cut that were making me panic way more than my friend.

Orin took a deep breath and rubbed her temples, which were practically throbbing with stress.
"One more time. From *the very* beginning."

Chapter 6

After that hell of an adventure, I swore off touching the Grimoire altogether. I was even afraid to fall asleep thinking about that mysterious place, terrified of ending up between life and death again — if it weren't for that alluring sensation that shot right through my body every time I remembered that intangible thing. That chilling, deadly presence, capable of killing with a single touch...

And it obeyed *me*.

Orin strictly forbade me from doing any more astral travel without her careful guidance. Keeping everything I'd seen in mind, I agreed without much of a fight.

But then, one rainy night, it found me on its own.

"No, no, no!.." I muttered under my breath, finding myself in that all-too-familiar place again.

After all my visits, I never would've thought my little paradise could turn into such a traumatic spot for me. In every sense of the word.

Luckily, when I looked around, my fears slowly faded. I was all alone on a wasteland I already knew.

"Get me out of here!" I commanded the creepy whatever, standing guard in nothing but a raggedy old t-shirt and cream-colored granny panties, which was my second unpleasant surprise. Looking down at my bare legs, I gritted my teeth in frustration. "NOW!"

A mocking breeze blew at my back, tousling my already messy hair. I stomped my foot in annoyance, almost stepping on the sharp edge of a small rock.

This time, my stay promised to be a long one...

Unable to believe my luck, I rubbed my sleepy face with my hands.

"Okay, fine. Alone, and thank God for that." I calmed myself down, sighing in relief at the realization that I wouldn't have to fight for my honor and dignity.

Why were my most vivid dreams always so horrible?! And what if Orin was right, and I really was in the astral plane?

That would mean...

I quickly shook my head, trying to chase away all the dark thoughts. My skepticism stubbornly refused to let me admit that this could possibly be so — no matter how convincing the evidence to the contrary.

Remembering that day, I unconsciously touched my cheek. The faint traces of a purple bruise were still visible. The horrifying realization crept over me in the form of goosebumps.

"If that's really true..." I started connecting the dots, against all logic. "I need to get out of here — now!"

I spun around frantically, trying to find the nearest shelter, which turned out to be easier said than done. All that surrounded me was wind-swaying grass and tall trees, which I'd have to reach by walking down a dusty path.

I pursed my lips, sizing up my chances.

If my judgment wasn't failing me, from the looks of it, running into people for help wasn't in the cards for me for at least five miles — that's how far I'd have to trek to get to those towering mountains, where there might be at least one tiny settlement. Luckily, a shimmering lake also spread between us, which meant I had a shot at finding fresh water and maybe even food. All I had to do was get there in a raggedy t-shirt, barefoot, and remember how to fish.

Well, here goes nothing...

I stepped onto the sun-warmed path and almost melted with pleasure.

In my own way, I lived in a jungle too — a concrete one with a bunch of skyscrapers — and I almost never got to enjoy warm sand, except for the occasional trip out of town where the main attraction was a half-dried pond full of toads. Though, to be honest, I'd always loved nature, and peaceful days away from the noisy city circus felt as a reward for all my hard work.

Of course, on the other hand, I'd much rather prefer an actual one — like money, for instance... But that goddamn café!

"Okay, pull yourself together!" I grumbled, losing focus with my wandering thoughts.

Standing on my tiptoes for some reason — probably to make less noise — I ran the first few feet, silently praying I wouldn't trip over my own clumsy legs or step into something slippery and gross. A couple more sprints like that, and I made it to those twisted trees, getting up close to one of them.

Somehow, the massive trunk, which spread into a dense, dome-shaped canopy, was glowing with an azure light as if absorbing it.

"No! It's... giving it off?" I corrected myself, watching a tiny shimmering speck slide confidently under the bark.

It traveled down the twisted trunk like a waterslide, slipped into one of the roots, and vanished underground.

My jaw dropped when I realized this wasn't just a tree — it was the heart of this valley. And it wasn't alone. Similar giants stood a fair distance apart, but close enough to keep every inch of the blooming forest nourished, feeding it with stored-up energy like solar batteries. I counted at least five of them on my way to the lake.

Grabbing a random stick I found, I turned it into a walking cane and kept going.

The lonely path led me steadily toward the mountains, splitting off only once, forcing me to choose between continuing on or stopping by the water.

Obviously, I went with the second option.

Tropical savanna — that's how I'd describe my surroundings — turned out to be pretty welcoming. During my hours of wandering, I spotted a few birds I recognized from pictures of Africa, and only ran across a couple of green snakes peacefully sunbathing. Hearing my cane rustling, they made a wise decision to hide in the grass.

The day slowly slipped into the afternoon, but the mountains still seemed out of reach... Luckily, I at least made it to my first destination.

Spotting the inviting glimmer between the trees, I sprinted toward the lake, scratching my feet on prickly thorns and sweating even more. But I didn't care.

Once I reached the water, I dove right in.

Warm on the surface and cooler below my waist, the lake was deeper than I expected. The crystal-clear water that cooled me down in seconds told me it originated high up in the rocky peaks. How long it had taken to make its way out here, I had no idea, but the size of the lake clearly showed it had been at least a few decades.

Washing my dusty face, I felt the life-giving drops on my cracked, dehydrated lips. An overwhelming thirst hit me.

I scooped up handfuls of water and gulped it down greedily.

"Oh god..." A deep sigh of relief escaped my chest.

I spread my arms and legs, leaned back, and let the shimmering water carry me. Perhaps a reckless decision, but I closed my eyes, allowing myself to relax — just for a moment.

But my little nature retreat didn't last long.

The water I'd swallowed hit my empty stomach like a rock, waking it up and reminding it that it was all alone in there — and me that every move I made had consequences.

Giving in to my hunger, I climbed back to shore and went looking for food, drying off as I walked.

My brilliant plan was to find two things: local edible plants that wouldn't kill me, and supplies to make a fishing rod and start a fire so I wouldn't freeze at night. And while the first part worked out — some cute meerkats led me to low bushes with wild berries that looked like red currants — the fishing gear I had to literally scrape together from sticks and whatever shit I could find.

"Seems edible," I said to myself, tasting a handful of the juicy, slightly tart little berries. Of course, I only ate them after making sure all the rodents were still alive and well after their meal.

Swallowing the chewed berries, I picked up the fishing rod.

"Papou² would've loved to see this..." I muttered, trying to impale the worm I'd dug up.

To sum it up, my fishing gear consisted of a pretty sturdy stick, a thin vine wrapped around it, and a hedgehog-shaped thorn — after stepping on a few of them with my bare feet, I could confirm they were sharp enough to hold a worm. I apologized to the little guy a few times, then hooked the slimy bait, wrapped it around, and cast my makeshift fishing rod as far out into the lake as I could, wading in it up to my knees, just in case.

About twenty minutes later, I was freezing.

"Okay, let's try something else..."

I got back to shore, tied on a longer vine, hooked another worm, and cast again. This time, I sat down on the sand to warm up.

Needless to say, attempt number two was a complete failure as well...

On the bright side, I had plenty of time to examine my scratched-up legs and get laughed at by a passing pelican. Spotting something in the water, it shot down toward the lake like an arrow, and expertly snatched a flopping fish in its huge beak, showing me exactly what a loser I was. The seasoned hunter landed triumphantly on a rock nearby and started swiveling its head, judging me from every angle.

"I'm no ornithologist, but you're what they call a jerk chicken!" I grumbled at it.

The arrogant bird gulped down its catch, quacked mockingly at me, and flew off. I smirked back.

But a second later, my gut told me that it might've been more of a warning...

Animals, especially birds, are pretty sensitive to predators. And knowing my luck, I figured my proud solitude wasn't going to last long.

A loud crack of a broken branch came from behind me.

I gripped my fishing rod tighter, ready to fight off those warriors from before, quickly trying to remember all the anti-muscular-guy moves I'd Googled back in my own dimension. Except I didn't need any of them, because when I turned around, I saw something fangy watching me from the bushes.

A lump of fear stuck in my throat.

Judging by its narrowed, hungry eyes, the creature figured out I was about to bolt. Our staring contest quickly turned into a race for survival.

Gathering every ounce of courage I had, I sprinted toward the forest path on my right.

"DON'T LOOK BACK! DON'T LOOK BACK! DO NOT LOOK BACK!" I begged my curious brain, which was screaming at me to turn around.

Hearing a furious roar behind me, my cracked heels moved even faster.

For some reason, at that moment, I thought my salvation lay deep in the woods. I could hide between the trees, climb up high, or run out onto the main road in some blind hope of finding help. Except to get there, I'd have to cross the sand that conveniently surrounded the lake for about fifteen feet in every direction, turning my run into a pathetic shuffle.

This place was checking off *EVERY SINGLE ONE* of my nightmares!

Somehow, I made it to the nearest trees. Then I made the mistake of looking back.

² Grandfather (Greek)

The thing chasing me was completely unfamiliar. Charging on all four massive, clawed paws, it bared its fangs — set deep in its skull — and drilled me with two pairs of blood-red, hungry eyes. Spikes as long as horns stuck out from its head, short fur covered its chest and striped back, and its tail was bare and quick as a whip. The upper part of its body was covered in a thin shell, like it was some failed experiment in crossbreeding an armadillo, a lion, and some crazy Cretaceous-period reptile.

"HOLY SHIT!" I squeaked like a pig.

Hearing my pitch, the creature snorted steam from its wide nostrils. After a sight like that, it took everything I had left not to collapse on my shaky legs.

A killer machine the size of a refrigerator was chasing me... Through unfamiliar jungle...

Slowly but surely, panic started to creep up on me.

For a second, I lost control and slapped myself across the face, turning the other side of my cheek crimson.

"PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!" I held onto my shit-stained panties. "I need to figure out what it can do... Climb trees? Spit poison? Fly?! Nah, probably not. That thing's way too bulky..."

Running through different options in my head, I decided to outsmart the creature using its own lack of agility. But just as I reached the deeper part of the grove, another unexpected twist threw a wrench in my plans.

Losing sight of my pursuer, I glanced back for a second, and missed a twisted root right in front of my feet. I tripped and went flying face-first.

Everything would've been fine, except my adventure wasn't over.

A second later, I was hanging a few feet off the ground, having conveniently landed in some kind of net trap. Shooting upward, it snapped shut around me. I smacked my head on a thick branch.

An enraged roar from the hungry beast sounded below me.

Turns out, I was right — the thing couldn't climb trees. Taking that as a small victory, I threw my head back and sprawled out in the net as much as the space allowed.

"WELL, WELL, WELL..." a loud all-too-familiar male voice drawled from below.

I made a bitter face at the problems about to land on me, noticing that the wild beast had suddenly disappeared — probably scared off by these brutes.

Honestly, understandable.

"LOWER IT!" a commanding order echoed in my half-asleep brain.

A whipping sound arose as the cut rope dropped me to the ground.

I grunted from the impact.

"SEIZE HER!" I heard once again, just before my consciousness faded into darkness from sheer exhaustion.

Chapter 7

When I finally opened my eyes, everything was hazy. I felt the surface beneath me — I was lying on the floor.

"God, did I fall out of bed so hard that I dreamed up all that nonsense?" I thought for a second. But no such luck.

Expecting to see my painfully familiar bedroom clutter, I tried to push myself up on my hands and flopped right back down, only then realizing they were tied.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" I protested loudly, spitting out some thatch.

"YOU'RE AWAKE?" that now-familiar voice boomed right above my ear, ringing like a monastery bell in a rusty bucket.

I shot an angry glare from under my brows and saw a man in front of me.

As it turned out, my situation was pretty damn grim. I somehow got my pathetic body upright and stared at the stranger through the rusty bars.

"A CAGE?!" I snarled at him, getting a perfectly smug smirk of incredibly straight, almond-shaped teeth in return.

"Just the way you like it!" the warrior sassed me. He raised his thick chestnut eyebrows slightly and nodded at the thin silver chain around my wrists. "Don't even try to teleport. Not a single chance."

I involuntarily mimicked his lecture with a scornful face.

He didn't look like those soldiers who'd beaten me up on the road, but at the same time, he wasn't that different from them either.

Squatting in front of me, the stranger studied me with contempt in his hazel eyes, as if we were old enemies. His thick, chocolate-colored hair — that matched an equally impressive beard — was pulled back into a massive bun, about the size of his pumped-up chest muscles covered in dark fabric and metal guards on his shoulders — probably his most vulnerable spot.

I made a note of that, in case I had to fight him.

Judging by his looks, he wasn't much older than me, and his attitude reminded me of a little boy who'd just gotten a new torture toy. A pretty ancient one, though... I still couldn't tell how far I'd been thrown in time and space.

"General!" a soldier called him from behind. Judging by his rather dull uniform, I figured he was just a regular guard.

The stranger gave an acknowledging nod, then turned back to me.

"Have a nice time!"

I smirked back at him.

The twitch at the corner of his chiseled lips hinted that if he'd had a muzzle on hands, I'd already be wearing it.

My overseer left. But not too far though.

My prison looked more like a medieval pirate dungeon than a modern cell. On either side of me were two more cages, connected by thick bars. And judging from the stone wall the buff jerk had disappeared behind, I was a little past the entrance to this hole stinking of piss and alcohol.

Whoever had been here before me, I didn't want to know...

For entertainment, I had a modest window — also barred, of course — and a stupid chain on my wrists that, despite how thin it was, wouldn't break no matter how hard I tried.

"What are you even made of?!" I muttered under my breath, trying not to draw any attention.

My little jail accessory just glittered mockingly back at me.

After stressing myself out, I shifted my focus to the general. Or more precisely, to his most outstanding feature — his firm ass, brazenly peeking out from behind the right corner of the ceiling alcove like a chocolate candy in latex wrapping.

Judging by the voices, he wasn't alone.

I pricked up my ears, trying to make out what they were saying.

"*What are you doing here?*" my overseer asked. His tone told me he wasn't exactly thrilled about the unexpected visit.

"*What do you think?*" countered another voice, much colder.

If I had to describe their dynamic, I'd say it felt like a dance of ice and fire.

"*I'll handle it myself! Stay out of this!*" the general ordered.

A suppressed growl echoed through the empty stone chamber. My body responded with goosebumps. A very strange feeling...

"*I need to see her...*" the stranger replied. "*Let me through!*"

"*Haven't you had enough?!*" the general shot back with mocking sarcasm. Though, I could have sworn there was a hint of genuine concern in his voice — as though they might have been old friends.

An awkward silence hung in the air.

Then, without getting the desired permission, the unexpected visitor took matters into his own hands. He smoothly ducked under the general's muscular arm, slipped past him toward the spiral staircase, and quickly headed down to the cells.

"*RIKER! DAMN IT...*"

Hearing confident, impatient footsteps on the stone floor, I flinched and turned away, perfectly pretending I hadn't been eavesdropping and didn't care about their conversation whatsoever.

A demanding chill washed over my back, announcing the arrival of some questionable company. The stranger crouched down by the bars, bringing himself to the same level as me.

Sitting sideways, I glanced at the uninvited guest from the corner of my eye.

His gaze was... I completely lost all words to explain that feeling, even to myself.

Cold...

Piercing...

Predatory...

I'd never seen eyes so icy — and I'm not even talking about the color. He stared at me as if not seeing me at all... at least not my physical body. That intensity made me turn fully towards him.

A reverent fear took my breath away. I froze.

Some kind of magic, or worse — but I noticed nothing except those electric-azure eyes in front of me, and the dark mist slowly wrapping around me from behind.

That deadly fog... Was he the one controlling it?

But no... This was something else... Some kind of haze of memories... Like he was trying to read my thoughts... *And failing?*

"What do you want?" I finally found the strength to ask him through the barrier. My voice sounded muffled, as if I was inside a bubble.

Startled, the mist began to slowly dissipate, revealing a cat-like, satisfied smirk.

"*Interesting...*" a spark of genuine curiosity lit up those once-cold eyes.

The stomping of heavy footsteps pulled my attention from the stranger to the general, who had finally arrived beside us. Somewhere deep down, I was almost glad to see him.

How much time had passed? If I remembered correctly, he'd run after him immediately, and from my cage to the entrance there were maybe only fifteen feet...

"It's not her." A velvety but stern voice interrupted my calculations.

I looked at the stranger again.

Now he was sitting in front of me — a young guy, a bit older than me. His icy eyes were deep blue and searching, as if I was some puzzle to him, and his short, jet-black hair matched the color of his leather cloak with its high, angular collar — the cloak he'd arrived in.

"Interesting..." he muttered, thoughtfully furrowing his dark brows so deeply that a vertical line formed between them. "We need to take her to the Headquarters."

With that, the stranger confidently rose to his feet, drawing level with the general. He was quite tall — somewhere around 6'2 by eye — athletically build, but noticeably thinner than my overseer, whose face showed complete bewilderment.

"What are you planning?!" he asked, throwing a confused look at me, then at his friend.

Whatever it was, the general clearly didn't like it.

"She'll be useful..." the stranger replied.

Adjusting the collar of his turtleneck to match his cloak, he clapped his friend on the shoulder and headed for the exit. "*GUARDS!*"

They dragged me out of the cage in the most barbaric way possible!

Grabbing me by the arms, they twisted them behind my back, roughly yanked me to my feet, and hauled me out through the open gate.

"Let me guess, this is a men's world?" I snarked as I walked past the general. Skeptically raising one eyebrow, he slammed the cage door behind me.

Why the hell they wanted me, nobody knew — including the muscular brute himself. But on his friend's orders — the one who apparently terrified every lower-ranked grunt — I was led up the spiral staircase, through a long gray stone hallway with a bunch of oak doors — each one earning me either a whistle or some curse — and finally outside to a wooden fortress wall. All of this while I was in nothing but a torn t-shirt. *Barefoot.*

Once outside, I immediately squinted against the sun.

Judging by the blazing heat, I'd been locked up for at least one night — if my timeline from running away from that hungry armadillo-chupacabra thing was right. And now the day was just approaching noon.

They led me to a wagon parked nearby, lowered the wooden tailgate so I could climb in, and sat me down across from the guy my overseer had called Riker. Whether that was a first name, last name, or call sign, I had no idea. The general himself sat to his right.

Sliding the barrier shut, he let out a loud whistle, ordering the driver to move out.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, staring at him.

"You'll see," the general cut me off, smirking as though the whole idea of this trip seemed stupid even to him.

I gave them both a hard glare from under my brows, then shut up and watched the changing scenery behind their backs.

The prison where they'd kept me — not for long, thankfully — was located in a wide sandy quarry straight out of the Nevada desert. I'd been there only once — to a casino where Orin and I had blown a good chunk of our savings on a stupid drunken whim, testing our luck — but I'd seen plenty of pretty pictures that looked just like what was now drifting past my eyes, that were desperately trying to adjust to the bright light. To give this place credit, despite how harsh the climate was, nature was thriving in every way: from small shrubs to massive trees just like the ones that had blown me away when I first got here. Looking around, I officially decided to name this oasis *tropical savanna*.

"There are plenty of those around here," the general said, noticing my eyes go wide at a horned lizard covered in spikes from nose to the tip of its tail. "They're called 'sand devils'. Won't kill you, but they'll pierce right through you. So, I wouldn't recommend running around barefoot."

I shot a pointed look at my bound hands, reminding the not-so-bright brute how I'd ended up here in the first place. Judging by the thoughtful scowl, for once he agreed with me.

After a moment, the general turned to his friend.

"What are you so dressed up for?" he asked, looking at Riker, bundled up as a spoiled cabbage. From their conversation, I learned my overseer's name was Zayd.

"This is my best interrogation outfit," Riker said, clearly offended. He sat up straight, proudly lifted his chin, and gestured to his stately appearance. "Inspires fear, doesn't it?"

Zayd smirked. I snorted in the background.

"The only thing inspiring fear right now is that green crap staining your teeth. What did you eat?!" he joked, squinting at his friend's swamp-colored incisors.

Riker looked visibly embarrassed.

"Xira..." he muttered under his breath.

Staring at the wagon floor, the gloomy stranger unsuccessfully — and not so subtly — started scrubbing his teeth with his tongue, occasionally glancing at Zayd, who was making an equally stupid face, demonstrating exactly where he needed to rub.

I took a deep breath and rolled my eyes.

Fear? Give me fucking a break!

"You two gonna kiss or what?" I snapped, fed up with their childishness.

"Dream on!" the general shot back, winking at me.

I frowned at him in disapproval.

After rummaging in his pockets, Zayd pulled out a dark cloth, and covered my mouth before I could say anything else. The nasty taste of the rag hit my tongue. I almost threw up.

"Just to be sure!" he added, tying another one around my eyes. "Some things need to stay secret."

Deprived of half of my senses, I stomped my foot in rebellion.

"We're approaching," Zayd announced.

I'm not great with directions or navigation, but judging by the tilt of my body, we turned left, then right, rode a few more yards, and stopped short.

Losing my balance, I flopped onto my side like a Weeble.

Zayd snorted.

"Do we *really* need her?!" he faced Riker.

Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he smiled in response.

Zayd hauled me off the wagon like a sack of potatoes and led me to a set of wide steps. There were — to put it mildly — a crap-ton of them for my completely un-athletic body. Riker, for his part, hadn't touched me once since we'd met, keeping his distance as though I was contagious.

With great difficulty, groaning and grunting, I was delivered to the main entrance. The sound of a massive door reached my ears — judging by the fact that neither of my companions moved, it was guarded.

Without wasting a moment, we went inside.

Within a few steps, another staircase awaited us — this time going down. We descended it in seconds and reached a flat surface, where I managed to trip over a wide stone and let out a loud snort, cursing out whoever designed such stupid floors. At that moment, I think Zayd regretted taking the gag off.

After waiting for me to finish venting, our group moved on.

The echo of my stomp was pretty strong, so I figured we were walking through a grand hall with high ceilings — maybe even columns, if my imagination was painting the right picture.

After a while, Zayd lifted me by the arms. I realized another staircase was ahead.

"No wonder y'all have such tight asses!" I muttered, already exhausted just from the first climb.

My sarcastic compliment obviously stroked the general's ego.

We made it up that obstacle too, not without sweat on my eyebrows and under my arms. I mentally labeled these climbs as "*Okay*", "*Could Be Worse*", and "*A TOTAL FUCKING NIGHTMARE*" according to how much effort they took.

At the end of the last one, I finally got a reward worth the trouble.

"I don't think we need this anymore..." Zayd said, leading me to a tall oak door. "You can stay here. Temporarily. Second room on the left."

He took off the blindfold and the chain from my wrists, opened the door, and ushered me inside with uncharacteristic gentleness.

"Couldn't you have done this earlier?" I added, trying to look around like a cat exploring a new apartment.

"Could have," the general agreed with a smirk. "But that's no fun!"

I barely stopped myself from punching him in his muscular chest — partly because I didn't know what would happen after, and partly because my hand would probably shatter on impact with that wall of steel. Imagining the sad consequences of my temper, I settled for a disapproving glare.

"You can relax. For now," he said, closing the door behind him.

I stood there frozen in confusion for a couple of minutes, staring at the chaotic grain patterns in the massive oak carving, until a knock from the other side snapped me out of it.

"Yeah?" I answered awkwardly, not sure how to react.

Suddenly, the door opened again as three young women rushed into the room. Servants, I figured.

Cliché...

Though they were dressed pretty nicely: light cobalt blouses with puffy, elegant sleeves tucked into long dark-mustard skirts that went down to the floor, cinched with leather belts with carved buckles. Their long wavy hair was adorned with thin gold headbands featuring carved triangles on the sides. They were quite young and very meticulous.

Noticing my interest, one of the girls gave me a polite smile.

"A welcome gift," Zayd explained from the other side of the door. Maybe he'd never left at all — just stood there silently, looming over my confused soul.

I barely had time to turn around before a folding screen was set up against the wall to the right, just past the entrance, hiding a pinewood bathtub made of wide planks. Meanwhile, on a small table to my left, the smell of something like herbal tea and warm omelet began to drift through the air. The scent immediately made my head spin, reminding me that I hadn't eaten in almost two days.

"Thank you," I said with a grateful nod, watching the servants scurry away.

A slight smirk curled the general's lips. He closed the door again — this time for good — leaving me alone with my unmet needs.

Chapter 8

That warm bath came at the perfect time. After everything I'd been through, I gladly dunked my head under, trying to wash off all the physical and mental grime. Over the past day, I'd already had enough adventures for my scratched-up ass — rising from rags to riches, literally speaking, and all thanks to Riker's insistence, whatever he saw in me...

I dove under again and lay at the very bottom.

Like a horror movie flashback, Riker's blue eyes appeared in my mind, then shifted to black smoke as a sudden cut in a film. Then, I saw him on his knees. That all-too-familiar tentacle was holding him by the throat, just like those soldiers by the forest, tightening its deadly grip as a snake coiling around its prey.

A crack of bones echoed in my ears...

I shot back up in pure terror, gasping for air as if my own neck had just snapped. Maybe it was just my nerves, but out of the corner of my eye — for a split second — I could've sworn I saw something dark slip through the crack in the doorway.

I scrambled out of the tub in a hurry, splashing water everywhere.

My late breakfast was already half-cold by the time I finally got to it, but I couldn't have cared less. I tore off a piece of soft, fluffy sourdough bread with my hands shaking from hunger and tasted what was arguably the best omelet of my life, washing it down with a soothing, spiced-sweet tea.

I devoured everything in seconds like a seagull. My face spread into a satisfied smile. I leaned back into the soft, low armchair and finally paid attention to the room I'd been given.

Some might say that there was nothing really extraordinary about it. Just a narrow bathtub tucked humbly behind a carved folding screen, a low square table for meals with two matching chairs and a thin rug in the doorway to the right, a double bed with white pillows on a red blanket, and a tall window looking out at mountain ranges partially hidden by thick curtains. Not a five-star hotel, but definitely not our Brooklyn dump, which could've easily fit into this space — maybe even twice.

Thoughts of Orin flooded my mind. I swallowed the last bit of toasted bread crust that had gotten stuck in my throat and glanced at the thin lines on my wrists.

Technically, nothing was stopping me from at least trying to wake up — if this was *still* just a dream. But Zayd's smirk when he'd taken off that damn chain had been way too casual, which made me doubt whether I could escape from this place at all, tied up or not. No way he'd suddenly started trusting me for no reason.

Lost in thoughts, I rested my head on my fist.

A faint chill ran over my bare legs, reminding me that I was sitting naked on a wet towel. I glanced at the neatly made bed and noticed clothes laid out on it.

I was overjoyed when I realized they hadn't given me some frilly dress or a peasant skirt, but a genuinely comfortable everyday outfit. Though it did have its own medieval flair.

"That's nice." I assessed, checking myself out from bottom to top. For all the comfort of my room, it seriously lacked a mirror.

To complete my look, I tied my hair into a low bun using the plain beige hair ties one of the girls had thoughtfully left next to the clean clothes. Small gesture of good will.

Suddenly, a haunting singing reached my ears — then faded a moment later. I looked around.

"Must be the servants." I shrugged, turning toward the window.

The massive chocolate-cherry curtains covered the sides of the oak frame, leaving me only two-thirds of the view on the other side of the glass. I stepped closer and saw nothing but mighty mountains, peak after peak, stretching into the unknown. I pressed against the window, trying to see

the grounds of what I assumed was a castle, to the left and right, but the same landscape surrounded me from every side, slowly fading behind the mist. I pulled back and realized that I'd fogged up a good foot-and-a-half of the glass, turning the squeaky surface opaque.

The mysterious singing came again. Only this time, it was painfully familiar.

"Is this some kind of a joke..." I muttered, listening to the lullaby melody my mom used to hum to me before bed when I was little.

My memory might be far from perfect, but I remember the moments that truly matter.

I took my knee off the low, narrow windowsill and followed the sound coming from right behind my wall. I walked through the arched alcove in the middle of the room — which flowed into a semi-oval ceiling — and pressed my ear to the wooden panel.

As if sensing my undivided attention, the voice quieted down slightly, as if luring me to come straight through the stone barrier.

It was beyond strange. Familiar, yet so foreign. Soft, yet at the same time scratchy, like an old record someone kept scraping with their fingernails, interrupting the beautiful melody with guttural undertones.

I pulled back from the wall and shuddered, horrified by the overwhelming urge to get in there... Giving in to the provocation, I ran to the door, hesitating for a second.

Was I allowed to leave my quarters? Zayd hadn't said anything about that.

I grabbed the carved handle and yanked the door open, coming face to face with Riker, who had his hand raised. Judging by the fist hovering over me, he'd been working up the nerve to knock.

"Ugh..." I drew out, pursing my lips like a kid caught stealing cookies. Riker's face showed he felt pretty much the same.

Copying my dumb expression, he lowered his arm.

"We have a meeting soon," the uninvited guest announced, briefly looking me up and down.

"I thought I wasn't allowed to leave the room?" I replied, immediately making things awkward. Isn't that *exactly* what I was about to do?

Riker's eyebrow twitched subtly.

"You're not a prisoner," he said, scanning my face for any sign of disagreement.

I thought about it for a second and couldn't come up with anything better than a nod. An awkward silence hung between us.

Whether that was the real reason for his visit or not, Riker was dressed to impress — his seemingly everyday outfit topped off with a pleasant scent of spring freshness. Perfume or his natural smell, I couldn't tell.

He was probably the only person after me whose wardrobe had this much black! And he was definitely taller than I'd imagined — at least a head, even with my leather boots giving me a little heel.

This time, Riker had gone with dark pants — not dress pants, but not skinny jeans either, thank God — and an ink-black shirt, leaving the top couple buttons undone. Not that they would've hidden his chest muscles anyway.

My eyes got stuck in that trap for a second. I swallowed hard.

He also had a couple of silver bracelets on, which I didn't think much of. At least not until I noticed that everyone in the Headquarters wore them. But right now... I had more down-to-earth things on my mind.

For example, the fact that while I was checking him out, Riker's azure eyes weren't wasting any time either.

Separated by the doorway, we stared at each other like two complete opposites — as absurd as that might sound.

Unlike him, I was wearing a cream-colored blouse with no buttons and a high collar, trimmed with golden pattern inserts along the line above my chest and down to my shoulders on both sides,

and brown leather pants with a matching belt. How much I cursed trying to get my head through that hole and my bony ass into that squeaky latex — better be left behind the scenes.

Still, my outfit made just as much of an impression on Riker as his did on me.

His eyes quickly slid over me, lingering on the shallow neckline and my bare collarbones for a beat longer than he probably meant to.

My outfit also came with a short, two-layer cloak that fell just below my shoulders, which I was holding in my hands because it made me look like a retired girl scout. Either way, I decided to bring it along. Evenings in rocky halls promised to be chilly, and that mysterious voice sounded a fascinating mystery that probably wasn't ready to give up all its secrets just yet.

As the tension peaked, that haunting song reached my ears again. I jerked toward the room on the right.

"Are you okay?" Riker asked, tilting his head slightly. His gaze shifted from studying to concerned.

"Uh... Yeah..." I answered, not wanting to seem crazy. I figured if he'd heard it too, I'd see some kind of reaction.

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, then nodded for me to follow along. I obediently stepped out of the room.

The hallway to the right of my quarters was completely empty, not a trace of anyone — not even servants. Just a tall, slightly dusty window and a firmly closed door.

Catching myself slowly losing my mind, I hurried after my guide.

Riker led us past two rooms — a storage closet and a bedroom that belonged to another member of their group, whom I'd yet to meet. We went up a short flight of four steps ending up in another hallway and turned right toward a tall archway.

The Meeting Hall looked exactly like what it was called. Even though I'd never been to a gathering such as this before, as I stepped into the spacious, bright room, I could feel that this was where the fates of not just individuals but entire kingdoms had probably been decided — if they had them, that is.

Honestly, I had no idea what scale to measure this place by.

"What's your house?" Riker suddenly asked as we turned a corner.

"Sixth. Why do you need to know?" I wondered, then stopped short, almost running into his outstretched arm.

"Zayd, Xira — Alora of House Sixth, our guest," he announced unexpectedly, gallantly gesturing for me to go ahead.

The room went silent.

I stared at him, then grabbed his sleeve and yanked it.

"*Why 'Sixth'?*" I whispered at the fool. "*And how do you know my name?!*"

"*You just said it,*" Riker muttered back, looking confused.

"*You asked about my apartment!*" I hissed at him. "*I live in Brooklyn, in building number six. If you wanted my last name, it's Samars!*"

Riker's face changed. Zayd raised his eyebrows slightly, watching our exchange with amused curiosity.

"You don't have family houses?" Riker asked, switching to a normal tone. Judging by his confusion, he didn't know that much about my world.

"Well... maybe the rich do." I gave it a thought. "But my family's far from that."

"Shall we drop the formalities?" Zayd suggested, redirecting our attention to himself. "We'll call you stooge."

I shot Riker a hard look.

"Back in Brooklyn, you could get in big troubles for that!"

"Then you're *incredibly lucky* you're not there!" he shot back, possibly testing how far my sharp tongue could go.

A playful spark lit up his eyes. For a second, I felt a strange sensation that we'd known each other before. Not just Riker or Zayd — the place itself felt familiar...

Following his gesture, I went down a small set of steps and ended up in the middle of the room, leaving Riker by the arched entrance.

Despite its purpose, the Meeting Hall was completely open to anyone. At least that's how it seemed at first. Tall, Gothic-angled windows that offered a clear view both outside and in, and the lack of any actual door made this presumably sacred space feel incredibly vulnerable until Riker raised his right hand. As if by magic, massive shutters closed from the inside, and a cloudy haze fell over the windows like blinds.

He let me go ahead, then took his seat at the oval table. I, on the other hand, hesitated.

The room was incredibly elegant, but without any unnecessary frills, so that all the attention went to the main focal point — the people. In the very center of the hall stood a table, with three chairs on each of the long sides and none at the head, which threw me off, because in every political broadcast I'd ever seen, someone always acted like they were above everyone else. On the highly polished wooden surface sat a set of figurines on a shiny copper tray, and on the wall directly in front of me hung a square oil painting — judging by the landscape peeking out of tall, pointed-arched windows, it depicted nothing other than the very place we were in. My new acquaintances called it Argos.

"Do sit down!" Zayd's deep voice snapped me out of my daze. I turned towards him.

Sprawled in the middle chair on the left, the general was inviting me to take one of the side seats — perhaps to keep me under control, just in case. He was still wearing the same outfit as in the prison: completely bare chest and brown leather pants, as if disregarding any sense of etiquette.

But what caught my attention the most was the woman standing at the far end. Staring intently at me, she hadn't said a word, remaining a silent statue. My imagination couldn't have described her as anything other than Xena from that infamous show.

Combining the harshness of a soldier with the softness of a young woman, the stranger kept her large green eyes with long lashes fixed on me — those eyes being the main highlight of her perfectly chiseled face. Her long, wavy chestnut hair was held back by a gold ornament that shimmered in the sunlight, matching a necklace with a blue stone that looked like aquamarine — the same stone that crowned her forehead. Carved, copper-gilded bracelets randomly crisscrossed her bronze arms and forearms, complementing similar accents on her brown leather dress with a plunging neckline.

Involuntarily, the stranger's indescribable beauty made me question my preferences for a moment.

"Xira, this is Alora," Riker said to her. But the woman just kept staring at me as if I was a ghost.

"Relax. Everything's under control," Zayd jumped in.

She shot him a doubtful look, then turned to Riker.

"Where is she from?..." Her voice carried a note of concern.

"Well... That's exactly what we're about to find out!" the general grunted.

He threw his muscular arm over the back of his chair and invited me to the table again, this time gesturing toward the empty seat across from him. For some reason, I looked back at Riker.

He just nodded.

"This whole situation is as weird for me as it is for you," I finally found the courage to speak. I accepted the invitation and sat down in a soft chair with an angular back, nearly hitting my elbow on it from the force of Xira's harsh stare. "My name really is Alora. I was born in Patras, Greece — if that means anything to you... When I was about three, my parents moved to the States thanks to my dad's citizenship. I won't bore you with the bureaucracy details... We traveled through a bunch of cities and finally settled in Boston. I finished school, then college, and got a job at a café. I have a

friend, Orin — we share an apartment in Brooklyn. Don't ask how that happened, it's a long story... She's a bit... unique, let's say. She's into esotericism, chakras, and all that stuff. But, if necessary, she can throw hands like it's nobody's business, ha-h! Anyway, she convinced me to go to yoga. There we met some old guy who gave me this ancient book with hieroglyphs. Orin said that it might be cursed, but we still dug into it anyway... And well, here I am."

I finished my rambling and finally lifted my eyes from the edge of the table. For the lack of a better word, the expressions on my companions' faces clearly showed confusion.

"*YOU'RE EVEN DUMBER THAN I THOUGHT!*" Zayd suddenly burst out laughing. I raised my left eyebrow at him.

"Is this some kind of a joke?!" Xira flared, staring at Riker. "*YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?!*"

Noticing her hand reaching for her dagger, Riker quickly stepped between us. I froze, waiting to see what would happen.

Sure, I'd never been a great storyteller, but this was the first time I was about to lose my head over it.

"*IT'S NOT HER!*" he shot Xira a harsh look, as if trying to hypnotize her. "I checked..."

"But she reeks of that... *magic!*" the warrior wrinkled her nose in disgust, literally sniffing in my direction.

"I know. I feel it too. But it's not her..." Riker agreed, glancing at me briefly.

Still not trusting his words, Xira turned to Zayd. According to his stories, I'd managed to take out three of his best soldiers. Actually, *it* had... the thing that was protecting me. I flinched nervously, trying to erase their purple, suffocated faces from my mind.

Zayd just shrugged at her silent question.

The woman's face twitched slightly. She grunted distrustfully and slid the blade back into its sheath.

"What does all of this mean?!" the warrior demanded an explanation.

But none of us could really answer.

Xira pursed her full, defined lips in disapproval and finally sat down. Silence fell over the table — and judging by their grim faces, it wasn't the first time.

Completely in over my head, I broke it.

"Who are you people constantly talking about?" I looked at each of them. "Who is *she*?!"

Riker sighed heavily, as if this question was his personal burden. And just as he was mustering the strength to explain, a fierce pain shot through my head like a billion tiny needles.

Grabbing my temples, I collapsed onto the stone floor, screaming.

I don't know what the members of the Headquarters saw, but a whirlwind of faces, places, and hundreds of voices rushed in front of my eyes. Young and old, loud and rough... They all begged for one thing — *mercy*.

Riker muttered my name and ran up to me. The moment his hand touched my back — for the first and only time — a savage pain cut through my skin like the claws of a hungry beast tearing into its freshly caught prey. My eyes rolled back into my head, covering in a dark haze. I went into a state of shock.

And then *she* came...

Or rather, *I*...

It was like a horror movie, if I were watching it through a mirror with myself in the lead role. It felt as though some otherworldly thing had boldly stolen my face and stretched it over its dark being as a mask. And it was clearly hanging on by a thread...

Black lines cut across my hollowed cheeks and forehead like scars, and instead of eyes, two glowing blue-white lanterns stared out from my sockets. A beige cloak covered my head — every last hair gone — and my hands... dozens of the thinnest fingers on both sides twisted and writhed like grotesque threads, trying to hold onto a shimmering sphere.

I didn't know why, but I figured it might've been someone's soul...

Suddenly, the image in my head shifted to another. A little girl appeared before my eyes — or so I thought at first. Standing somewhere in a dark forest, the helpless creature called to me with a trembling, barely audible voice.

"SAVE US!..."

A choked gasp of terror seized my throat. I flew out of that carousel of events and plunged into complete darkness...

Chapter 9

A ringing clap of thunder shook the walls of my room. I jolted upright and realized I was lying in my own bed. Everything around me was exactly as I'd left it — as if not several days had passed, but only a couple of hours. Time is a funny thing...

I jumped to my feet and sprinted into the living room, looking for Orin.

"YOU ARE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS!" I exclaimed when I saw her sitting at the kitchen table.

Looking me up and down, Orin dropped the little spoon she'd been using to eat her favorite chocolate flavored oats.

"OH MY GOD, THAT'S SO COOL!" my friend squealed after I told her everything I'd seen during the night. *"YOU NEED TO GO BACK THERE RIGHT NOW!"*

"WHAT?! NO! FORGET IT!" I waved off her stupid idea.

"AREN'T YOU EVEN CURIOUS?!" Orin was surprised by my stubbornness. I furrowed my brows at her.

On that point, she hit the nail right on the head... With every visit, Argos revealed itself to me in a new way — not to mention I was dying to learn more about that secret group of three rebels hiding behind the mountain walls. What did they do? Who were they? And how did fate even bring them together? Because if my instincts were correct, their trio had been pieced together from completely different corners of their mysterious dimension.

But there was another side to the coin. One that made my survival instinct sound the alarm at the mere thought of going back to those dangerous lands.

I got up from my chair, bared my back, and turned to Orin. An awkward silence hung between us.

"Ugh... What am I supposed to see?" my friend drew out.

"There's nothing there?!" I didn't believe my ears, reaching my right arm over my shoulder as far as my flexibility allowed.

"Just your bony spine," Orin joked. Noticing my confusion, she asked. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know... It's just... really weird..."

Not feeling anything at all, I headed to the bathroom mirror. My eyes adjusted to the yellow, dim light and scanned my pale skin, which looked as if the sun had never touched it once in my entire life.

"I don't understand..." I muttered, expecting to see a shredder of flesh and tissue.

But everything was exactly as my friend had described — through the oval, slightly cracked reflection, all I saw was my bony back.

"Not everything that happens to us leaves a physical mark," Orin noted, answering my unspoken question.

"But it felt so real..." I shuddered, remembering the claws that had dug into me like blades.

My friend only shrugged, not fully grasping how vivid my dreams were. Then again, if she were in my shoes, I probably wouldn't have believed this ridiculous story either...

"It suits you!" Orin added with a smirk, checking out my new outfit. That was probably the only physical proof of my story — the reason she hadn't committed me to a loony bin yet.

Orin grunted thoughtfully under her freckled nose and went back to the living room. Like a little tail, Silas ran after her, pretending he wasn't the one who'd already gobbled down a third of the Choco balls right from her bowl.

Despite all her tricks, Orin couldn't convince me to go back to Argos. After a few days of failed attempts, my friend finally gave up, accepting that maybe I really was better off staying away from that place. For my part, I decided to focus on real-life problems and finding a decent job. We were still living off Orin, and her back was too fragile to carry all three of us, so I switched gears. Funny enough, my brain didn't give me even a hint of another adventure — just tortured me with familiar nightmares about job interviews I had to pass in nothing but my underwear, or showed me a blank screen.

Either way, it did let me rest.

I passed out at my computer after yet another failed day of calls: some rejected me due to my age — because apparently, I might get married and go on maternity leave — while the others flipped it the other way around, directly linking my life choices to a lack of work motivation. And as if that wasn't enough, I then had to relive that humiliation again in my dream, where I happily told them all to go to hell and kicked the door off its hinges on my way out.

But instead of waking up, I got sucked into a bright void right from the doorstep. When I opened my eyes, I was staring at Zayd's annoying face.

"*PRAISED BE VELGORN!*" the general boomed, as if he'd been waiting for me for a long time.

"*DAMN IT!*" I grumbled back loudly.

I rolled onto my back and sprawled out on the stone floor.

This time, I hadn't landed in the wilds of Argos, but in the Headquarters — right under my overseer's nose. Though, it turned out, that wasn't an accident.

"You're pretty hard to catch, I'll admit. We took turns guarding the trap for almost seven dyadics," he shared, leaving me confused.

"Catch?" I repeated. My face twisted at his carelessly thrown words, which made me feel like a rabbit or a dog that had slipped its leash.

And what the hell is a *dyadic*?!

Zayd raised his thick eyebrows mockingly and glanced at the runic circle under my ass.

"You left a few things here. They came in handy. Thanks!" he had a dig at me, reminding me of my torn t-shirt and dirty underwear.

"Pervert..." I hissed, not wanting to know what they'd done with my rags.

"Don't flatter yourself. We just burned them to make some paint for the ritual," Zayd explained. "A few quick moves and — bam — you're back."

"But why?" my curiosity got the better of my attitude.

The general's face turned serious. His next words came with visible difficulty.

"We need your help..."

I propped myself up on my elbows in surprise. This was a first for me. Usually, it was the other way around...

"Not here," Zayd added, noticing my intrigued look. "The sanctuary isn't the place to ponder over worldly problems — even universal ones."

A spark of fear flashed in my eyes, and judging by the general's knowing face, it wasn't for nothing. I swallowed the lump of mounting anticipation and took his outstretched hand.

Apparently, I hadn't landed in the main Meeting Hall, but somewhere more secret. *Mesa-etn* — or "The Forgotten Altar", as Zayd later translated — had gotten its name from a half-destroyed mountain temple on which ruins the Emissaries' Headquarters now stood. That's what their trio called themselves. It hadn't been demolished completely — rather, restored with good intentions and by the members' own hands, with help from Admiral Condo, whom the brave warriors of Argos revered as a distant ancestor of the respected commander and leader, Garak the Fierce. Zayd promised to take me to his temple later. For now, the general was eager to notify his friends of my arrival — as if their time was measured in minutes.

"Let's go." He nodded toward the staircase behind us.

Sizing up the climb, I realized this was only the first half of the same middle staircase that led to the members' quarters. We, apparently, were somewhere on the lowest level.

A dark stone elevation — a smaller copy of which was hidden right behind the altar, which looked more like a clay fireplace — led out of the gloomy chambers, thick with incense and the occasional shuffle of tired caretakers' feet, straight toward a bright opening. It mockingly challenged me, as though we were about to climb from Hell to Heaven.

A doomed sigh escaped my chest.

"Get used to it. It'll do you good," Zayd said ironically, eyeing me up and down. I gave him that familiar sarcastic smile.

Leaving the partially empty sanctuary with its lonely altar surrounded by flickering cream and red candles, we started our ascent.

"You could've set up your little camp somewhere on a nice green meadow, next to a cool lake, under a warm sun, you know?!" I grumbled, barely able to breathe.

Judging by his silence, Zayd didn't appreciate any of my suggestions.

By the time we reached the first landing, I was bent over like a boiled shrimp, leaning my tired, shaking hands on my creaking knees. For such a dubious dream, this felt way too real!

A shadow of condescending disgust flickered in the general's deep eyes. My physical state clearly made him pity me.

Anima Sana In Corpore Sano³ — or whatever the fuck...

"I'm coming!" an irritated growl escaped my chest. "I just need to catch my breath... *Whew!*"

Taking advantage of the moment, I looked around, studying the details of the main hall we'd passed through earlier.

Turned out, I was pretty close in my guesses.

³ Sound mind, sound body (Latin)

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