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## Cursed Connections

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CURSED CONNECTIONS

ASIA WYLEY

Bachelor of Science in Education

Ohio University

August 2017

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

at the

NORTHEAST OHIO MFA

and

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

MAY 2019

We hereby approve this thesis

For

ASIA WYLEY

Candidate for the MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING degree

For the department of

English, the Northeast Ohio MFA Program

and

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

College of Graduate Studies by

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# CURSED CONNECTIONS

ASIA WYLEY

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a work of fiction. It contains the first fifteen chapters of a novel in-progress. The novel will use five different perspectives to tell the origin story of problematic issues that led to the creation of magical divide between the magical and nonmagical beings. *Cursed Connections* explores the circumstances that divide families, lovers, and friends while examining the consequences of one putting one's duty over their loved ones. By using the perceptions of a mother and her three daughters along with an unknown fifth perspective, this novel will tell the story of what happens when each character contributes to saving humanity by making the ultimate sacrifice.

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## The Prophecy

The town and surrounding fields were engulfed in flames. The war was no longer on the other side of the world. It had crept its way through life-filled lands to position itself here. They were its next target. The brink of war had lurked in the shadows, watching and waiting for his prize. He didn't attack. He wanted them to think they were safe, that the rumors were just rumors. But he knew different. He knew what he wanted. He wanted her. He needed her because, without her, there was no chance. No chance at all for humanity. No chance there would ever be anything for anyone to look forward to. He knew something they hadn't: 23 years ago, a warrior was born, but this warrior wasn't supposed to exist. It was just lore. Just something families told their children as bedtime stories to provide them encouragement to be strong against the "creatures". The warrior would be one that gave birth to a nation and through this nation, one child would be born and forced to bear the burden of breathing life into the nation's future savior. No one knew which Charaz received the vision. We just all knew that the warrior would be broken and with the help of others she would become whole again, but before she could become whole again, she had to lose everyone she loved.

## The Discovery

“Good morning Ingrid, Charlie, and Joseph.” I spoke softly, trying to prevent the growing buds from being startled by my voice. It was my week to care for the plants and I wanted to make sure that each lily grew strong. Mother loved her lilies. She would be angry if they weren’t grown right.

As the water fell from the spout, it slowed down and then stopped moving in mid-air. Gasping, I quickly let go of the watering can and studied the scene. The watering can, and the water, stalled in time. I had finally mastered it. When I first noticed what I could do, I was playing near the charbarkys trees. Mother had just finished watering them and I decided to climb to the top. When I placed my hand on the tree’s trunk, beads of water formed at the bottom. I waved my hands over the beads and they moved up the trunk. I was fascinated. I was the reason they moved.

I didn’t tell anyone. It was my secret. My dad told me that I was special. I never believed it. Or, at least I didn’t feel like I was. I spent the next week mastering my newfound skills, soon realizing that I could freeze things in real time. I knew I had to show Izelle. I decided to bring her proof. She would never follow me outside, which meant I needed to bring the show to her. I

grabbed a droplet of water in my hands, gently holding the precious bead. The water rolled around in the palm of my hands. I steadied my pace as I walked.

The cream, wooden glass paneled doors swung open as I pushed them with my foot, exposing the foyer. Walking past the golden arches of the kitchen into the main hallway, I looked down to make sure that my water bead had stayed in my hands. As I reached the corridor, my heart fluttered. Everything was glowing around me. I stared at the various pictures on the wall. We were never really great at taking family photos. All the smiles seemed forced. Mother always made sure the pictures were color-coded. We had fourteen photos in total. Each photo contained the five us: my mother, my father, Gizelle, Izelle, and me. In each photo, my smile was less convincing than the one that came before.

I hid my sorrow well. But the familiar loneliness, I usually felt when I walked down this hallway, was no longer present. With these powers, my family had to accept me. They could no longer push me to the side. They would have to listen to me, now, because I am special, too. Maybe even more special than them since none of them had ever mentioned possessing magic.

The thought of acceptance caused my mind to recall a happy tune. I hummed along as I closed my eyes. I let the tune carry me down the hall. The music guided my feet through the warm darkness. I needed to calm myself from the excitement I felt. Once I was sure I was more settled, I opened my eyes. I sighed at the entrance of Izelle's room, but she didn't seem to notice my presence. I walked through Izelle's open door. She was on her bed with her head near the end.



“Izzy, look,” I yelled with excitement. Holding out my hands towards her face. She looked at my hand for a few moments, and then continued reading. “It’s a freaking bead of real water. How is this not interesting?”

“It’s not.” She didn’t look up from the book. My anger and resentment returned. I never knew why she hated me so much. I never understood what I did to her to make her feel this way towards me.

“Why are you so mean?” I growled.

She looked up from her book and stared at me. Her gray eyes scared me. They were dark and still. She swallowed hard, which made me swallow harder. “Fine, show me. Show me what you did in the garden.”

I studied her to make sure she was genuine. Once I was sure, I grabbed her glass of lemonade, pouring it towards the ground. I froze the glass and lemonade in mid-air. With one hand, I kept the liquid in place while setting the glass back on the table. Using both of my hands, I brought the lemonade up to Izelle’s eye level, separating the liquid into small beads. I swirled my hands around and the beads started to dance before our eyes. After a few moments, I stood still, concentrating hard. I didn’t want to mess this up. I guided the liquid back to the glass and filled it back up, making sure not to spill a drop.

Once I was done, Izelle began clapping, sarcastically. “It’s about time you learned how to activate your power.” She snickered. “We’ve been waiting on you to learn about it for years. Mom told me I couldn’t tell you, she feared you would do something reckless.”

The way she said reckless made me lunge forward. I stopped myself, realizing I could get more answers if I played nice. For now. “You’ve been waiting? How long have you known?” I inquired, trying to hold back my frustration.

“Nycromina, did you really think you were the only one with powers?” She looked at me with fake pity, and then her voice hardened. “You’re no one special. I’ve been practicing for ten years now. Mom showed me my powers when I was five.”

“Ten years?” I exclaimed. “Unbelievable. The things I could have accomplished. You’ve known we had magic for ten years and you didn’t think to mention it? Do you know how many chores I could have done with the wave of my hands? Come on, Elle.”

“See this is why you didn’t know.” She huffed. “You would have abused your powers and lost them.”

“Yes, Elle, washing dishes would have contributed to the end of all my powers. I’m not stupid. I don’t think the Charazes define doing household chores as one of the six unbreakable rules.”

Izelle got up from her seat and walked up to me. “How do you know about that?” She gripped my collar, tightly. I wanted to punch her, but that would wake our parents. Izelle screamed when she didn’t get her way. She was a blugger, too. Always running to our parents when I hit her, even when she knew she deserved it.

“Because I have friends that have powers. Now get off me. Just because you’re fifteen and you’ve been practicing longer than me, doesn’t mean that you can boss me around. I’m still a year older.” I grabbed her wrist. “Unhand me or I will break it.”

“You’re not stronger than me. We’re just humans with powers until we’re 25 and then,” Izelle gloated before grinning from ear to ear. “we’ll be immortal.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Immortality wasn’t something I wanted. To live here for the rest of my life was not something I longed for. She had to be joking, but as I read her face, I knew she was serious. I decided to act unphased and tightened my grip on her wrist. Her arrogance annoyed me, causing me to pull her wrist back and twist it without thinking.

Izelle’s wails filled the room. I could hear rapid footsteps coming down the hallway. The sound of the footsteps caused me to grip Izelle’s wrist tighter. She yelped in pain. Tears were now filling her gray eyes, bringing genuine emotion to them. The look in her eyes caused me to feel a tinge of remorse.

“What the hell is going on in here?” My dad’s voice boomed as he demanded an answer. My mother stepped in front of him to see why Izelle was still breathing sharply.

“Let her hand go, Nycromina.” My mother’s face was quick and sharp. I didn’t budge. The anger returned. Izelle needed to learn her lesson. I was tired of her treating me this way, and my mother acting like it was fine. “I said let go.” My mother’s tone let me know that she wouldn’t ask again. I let it go and my mother rushed to Izelle’s side.

“Cro, come here.” My dad reached for me, but my mother gave him a chilling look.

She turned her gaze towards me. Her gray eyes stared at me, causing my spine to firm. “Don’t you think you should tend to the daughter that’s injured right now?” My mother spat, not taking her eyes off me.

“I am.” He responded taking me into his arms and holding me. My frustration began to dwindle as I melted in his embrace. I buried my face in the fabric of his pajamas. The silk fabric soothed me as I began to silently cry. He patted the back of my head as the scent of vanilla filled my lungs through my hushed sobs. I heard my mother’s enraged sighs as my sister yelped in pain.

“It’s broken. Can you go get Gizelle?” My mother demanded.

My dad let me go and walked out of the room. I faced the wall, afraid to look back in my mother’s direction. I wiped my eyes as Gizelle entered the room, running to my sister’s aide.

“What happened?” Gizelle gasped, causing me to turn and stare at her.

“It’s broken, I need you to mend it. We’ll have to put it in a cast afterwards, did you learn how to craft those yet?” My mother ignored Gizelle’s question.

“Yes, mom.” Gizelle smiled as she had our mother hold Izelle’s wrist. It was swollen and there was a little bit of bone bulging under the skin. She waved her hand over the broken wrist and within seconds the bulging bone snapped back into place. The skin surrounding Izelle’s wrist was still swollen. With another wave of her hand, a green bandage appeared, and it began wrapping around Izelle’s wrist. Once it was secure, it began to harden. Gizelle tapped on it to make sure it was solid before looking at my mother for approval. My mother kissed her on the forehead, causing Gizelle’s lips to curve into a smile. They disgusted me.

Gizelle stood up and brushed off her pants. She started walking towards the door. When Gizelle reached the door frame, she glared back at me. A familiar warmth pulsed against my chest as an uncontrollable surge of contempt tickled the back of my throat. I let out an irrepressible scream, attempting to release my aggravation.

The room rumbled as I focused my gaze on Gizelle. Waving as an invisible force threw her body into the wall. Her body smacked against the wall before slithering down the wall. I stared at my hands in confusion as my vision started to blur. The sound of rapid footsteps caused me to raise my head. Izelle was rushing over to me and I put my hands up in defense. I crossed them in front of me and Izelle froze in mid-run.

I looked around and everyone was frozen. My heart forcefully pounded against my chest. I was trying to comprehend what I had done. Unsure of how to explain what was happening, I slowly lowered my hands and sprinted out of the room. As I ran, it felt like my destination was so far away. I ran harder down the long hallway of photos, past our mother's study, past the kitchen, trying to get to my sanctuary. My lungs burned, but I had to keep going. If I didn't they would catch me and Carmalena Cygna's wrath was not something one wanted to deal with, especially for an accident. I didn't mean to hurt them. At least, that's what I would keep telling myself until I knew for sure.

I didn't stop running until I reached my room on the other side of the house. It was the one safe spot I had from everyone. Closing the doors behind me, I frantically gasped for air as the atmosphere cleared my lungs. The air slowed down my pants as I pressed my back firmly against the door. I took a deep breath. There was a crisp freshness in my room. The aroma was a mixture of grapefruit and lemongrass. As it twirled around my nostrils, I felt a calmness rush over my body. Once my heart stopped racing, I opened my eyes. A sharp groaned escaped my lips.

My room was covered in bright fluorescent colors. Bright green walls with random knick-knacks of neon colors along my desk. I didn't like it anymore. It had to go. I waved my hands and all the walls became a dark gray. I took down the pictures of my sisters that hung on

the wall and stacked them in the corner. My mother could have them and they could have her. I felt for the switch on the far-left wall and let my fingers flick it. The wall slowly came down, revealing a king size bed. I changed the comforter from orange to black before climbing into bed.

I turned on my left side and stared at the picture of my dad on my nightstand. I was seven in the picture. He was holding me in the air as my face lit up with joy. I still remembered the laughter. That day, we laughed so much my stomach hurt. I would never forget the smell of vanilla. My father always smelled like vanilla, and it eventually became my favorite scent. I heard a knock on my bedroom door that startled me.

“Go away.” I shouted towards it. I heard the door knob turn and watched my dad enter anyway.

He closed the door behind him before looking around the room. “This is new. I see someone is using their powers for redecoration.” His voice had a sarcastic, airy inflection. I tried not to laugh, but his happiness made me happy. He could tell I was trying to hide it as he walked over towards me. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at me. Raising an eyebrow, he chuckled before speaking, “Is this how you feel on the inside, Cro?”

“Maybe.”

“And why is that?” He pulled his feet on the bed and sat up with his leg crossed. Seeing him like that felt weird. He was tall man that was a bit scrawny for his age. We often joked about his lack of brawn. He always told me he had muscles in the right places. I told him that he couldn’t have both and his body chose height.

He was still in last night's black, silk pajamas. The color contrasted nicely against his rich, toffee skin. Having my thirty-nine-year-old dad sitting at the foot of my bed like a teenager was strange but comforting. I could tell he cared, which made me more open to talking.

"Mother hates me. Gizelle and Izelle are always excluding me. And you," I paused and took a deep breath. "You never want to choose sides. I know, you're not supposed to, but I don't have anyone sticking up for me here."

My dad paused as he pondered my reasonings. He looked at me and gently patted my ankle. "Cro, you don't need anyone sticking up for you because not everyone in this house thinks you're always wrong." That was not the answer I wanted, and he could tell by the frown on my face. "What I mean is that I stick up for you behind closed doors. If you wouldn't have track starred out of Izelle's room, you would have seen me reprimand all three off them."

"All three of them?" I gasped before quieting my excitement.

"Your mother isn't exempt from being chastised." He laughed. His laugh made me feel better. "Each one of you is special and I need for you all to remember that."

"What makes me special, huh?" I could feel the anger returning to my throat. Within seconds, he started tickling me. My body flailed around as I tried hard to control my laughter. "You're going to make me pee. Please stop." I felt his hands fall away and I sat up, trying to fix my composure.

"You're what makes you special. You can't let people bring you down, even if they're family. People say hurtful things, but that doesn't mean you change your perception to fit theirs, do you understand?" He looked me in my eyes. I nodded as I reached in and hugged him.

“Thank you, Daddy.” I held him tightly as tears of joy fell from my eyes.

“No problem, Cro.” He pulled me away, gently, and raised his hand to my chin.

“Damaged souls are just people trying to find their way in this world, the feeling of being hurt is the only thing they know how to reciprocate. Sometimes, you’ll have to show them your light without such an aggressive fight.”

I laughed at the last bit as he kissed me on my forehead. I pondered on his advice before giving him another hug. “I’ll try not to let my emotions get the best of me.”

“In time you will learn. Just from now on, no more magic on family members.” He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s your mother’s orders.” He walked towards the door and opened it. Turning back around, he flashed a smile. “Stay in here until I come back with breakfast. By that time, all of this will hopefully blow over.”

I hope so, I thought flashing a reassuring smile as he walked out the door.



## ONE

(Gizelle)

“Please, state your name.” The old woman declared. Her voice was raspy and carried a harsh tone. Her eyes were covered by cobalt framed glasses that never turned away from the computer screen. Her fingers resting on the pad at the bottom of the black keyboard, waiting for a command to type. She looked like she was having a rough day, or maybe this was just her demeanor. “Hello, is anyone there?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Got lost in thought.” I smiled from ear to ear before letting out an awkward chuckle. She offered a small smile that lacked sincerity.

“Okay, now that you’re with us,” She huffed before rolling her green eyes at me. “Can you please state your name for the record? There are other people in line, and we don’t have all day.”

I glanced behind me and there was no one in our line. I looked back at her, but her eyes were fixated on the screen again. “Gizelle Cygna.” I croaked, fearing her reaction. Her eyes widened as she looked me up and down.

“Sorry ma’am, I hadn’t realiz---

“It’s fine,” I stopped her before she could try to give me some horrid apology. I scanned her blouse for a nametag. The blouse was covered in tiny men on surfboards and was a combination of yellow-orange hues. Someone really needed to give her an attitude and wardrobe tune-up. I squinted my eyes at the gold square attached to the right breast pocket of the blouse. It had some letters poorly etched into it. I finally made out the name. “Susan. Susan, we all make mistakes. Let’s not make this more than it needs to be. Can you please just sign me in before others notice?”

“Yes, yes I can.” Her demeanor had definitely changed as she spoke quickly. She furiously stroked the keyboard keys and within seconds, a slip of paper printed from the top of the computer screen. She pulled it from the screen and placed it down on the counter. “Just scan this before you enter the elevator.”

“Thank you.” I grabbed the slip of paper and began examining it. It was just a small piece of paper with a barcode on it. I was beginning to become quite confused. The Charazes that trained us didn’t divulge much during our training except that if we failed our final missions, we couldn’t be inducted as Charazes anymore. Failure of the mission made us weak. Mother told me my life’s purpose was to be a Charaz, and I couldn’t let her down.

Walking to the elevator felt like a plank walk. This was the moment I either survived or I didn’t. The thought made me nervous. Reaching the elevator, I looked down at my hand. The piece of paper was crinkled in my hand. I tried to smooth out the wrinkles before anyone could notice. The hallways were clear, but it didn’t mean they weren’t watching. The Charazes were always watching. I walked to the first elevator on the left. There were two elevators on each side of the corridor. I held up the barcode to it and a red beam scanned the still crumpled paper.

**“BARCODE INVALID”** scrolled across a screen positioned above the elevator in big letters. I sighed with frustration as I rubbed the paper against the corner of the elevator panel. Once I was positive it was straight enough, I held it up to be scanned. The red beam scanned the barcode and the same message appeared on the screen. After the message scrolled away, the screen blinked quickly before displaying another message: **YOUR BARCODE IS NO LONGER VALID. PLEASE SELECT THE “UP” BUTTON TO CONTINUE OR RETRIEVE ANOTHER BARCODE. YOU HAVE FIVE SECONDS.**

There was a countdown from five. By four, I had already pressed the button. There was no way I was showing anyone my nervous mistake. I watched the doors open and I stepped in. The doors closed behind me. I turned and faced the closed doors. There weren't any buttons to press, just a scanner in the shape of a hand.

“Welcome.” A voice echoed through the elevator. I searched the walls and the ceiling for the place the voice was coming from before realizing that the hand scanner was emitting the voice. “Please, place your hand on the scanner.” I placed my right palm firmly on the scanner. I felt a tingling vibration that made my heart beat faster. I kept it there until the voice told me to remove my hand. “Hello Gizelle Cygna. Before we can continue, you must answer security questions. Please speak clearly or your answers won't be heard. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Each answer of the question will get you to the floor of your final training mission. If you fail, you will not be able to retake this exam. Do you understand?” the voice explained.

“Yes.” I chuckled nervously before wiping the sweat from my brows.

“Name the six magical rules imposed by the Charazes.” The voice asked. This was easy. I remembered the sign that rested on my wall across from my bed. I had memorized every rule on that sign. It was black and had shiny silver letters:

1. Malicious Use of Magic Prohibited
2. Performing Magical Acts on Non-magical Beings Prohibited
3. All spells above an eight level are tracked for safety
4. Every magical being is subjected to one evaluation each year.
5. The first child in a magical family must become a Charaz on their 27<sup>th</sup> Birthday.
6. Failure to comply will result in magic being extracted, without the opportunity for an appeal.

As I read each rule in my head, I spoke them slowly enough for the elevator to hear me. After finishing the sixth rule, there was a beeping that lasted for three seconds. Then, silence. I bit my lip. I was sure I got them all right. A piercing screeching sound filled the elevator causing me to hold my ears until it stopped.

“Correct.” The robotic voice came back except this time it was lower in pitch and sounded almost cheery. The elevator made a whirling sound before moving upward rapidly, causing me to lose my balance for a second. I steady myself against the wall as the elevator came to an abrupt halt. Before the doors opened, the voice came back on.

“Gizelle Cygna, your mission is to get Lycan to reveal Alphogee’s location. You fail, you fail as a trainee. You pass, you will be given the chance to make your choice.” The robotic voice sounded displeased with the information it just provided. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I gulped hard. This mission would be impossible. Lycan had been locked up for years. We were never allowed to see his face or learn about him. We all just know that he was connected to Alphogee and anyone connected to Alphogee was considered a threat.

As the doors opened, I felt a tingling sensation in my knee. I didn't know what was worse: failing the mission or voluntarily quitting before induction. I had always questioned whether I truly wanted to be a Charaz. The path wasn't something I chose, but my mother forced its importance upon me. I had always listened to her without question, but now there was a choice and I wasn't sure which to make.

As I stepped into the hallway, a section of darkness was filled by bright, white light. I watched as the hallway's light came on. Every other section of the hallway had a square light at the top. The square light took up the large ceiling panel, rotating between a panel with light and a panel without. It made me anxious the way the lights came on. One by one. Slowly until the plain walled hallway was illuminated in a bright, white light. There was nothing in the hallway except one large double door. There weren't any handles. The double doors stood across from the elevator. It seemed like whoever built this hallway wanted one way in and one way out.

Stepping towards the double doors, a loud screeching similar to the one in the elevator echoed through the hallway before another robotic voice spoke. This time the voice was a man. "State your name?" His voice spoke in an annoyed matter like the older woman in the lobby.

"Gizelle Cygna." I replied as the loud screeching returned, and the doors slid open.

"Step in." The voice directed. I quickly obliged as the doors shut rapidly behind me. There was a hard click and the sound of a lock turning.

"Fresh meat." An eerie male voice pierced through the darkness in a sing-songy tone. I wanted to move forward, but my body wouldn't let me. I wasn't sure what to expect. They said Lycan was stripped of his powers, but the sound of his voice was still frightening. Taking away someone's magical abilities didn't make them powerless. "It's okay. You can step forward.

That's the only way the lights will turn on. From your scent, I can tell you're the Charazes' new recruit. And from the fear I smell, this must be your final mission. How delightful. Come on, let's play. Complying now is your best chance. Five...four...three...two..."

Before he could reach one, I stepped forward. The lights flickered on and stung my eyes, causing my vision to blur. Once my vision cleared, I could see that there was a window that showed a clear view of Lycan and his cell. His cell was unusual. There was a toilet, a bed, a desk, a chair, and a shelf full of books. It made me think of all those photos Malina's family showed us of college dorms. It was small space, but Lycan seemed content.

Lycan looked different than I imagined. I imagined a rugged, old man suffering from the agony of being alone. We all assumed that since his powers were stripped that would mean his immortality was gone, which would make him turn old and fragile. Instead he looked maybe a year or two older than me, making him anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-years-old.

The Charazes never told us they had captured someone so young. Lycan had a scruffy, dark brown beard that hung about four inches off his chin and his eyes twinkled a golden color under the light. His body adorned a gray jumpsuit while his hair was braided to the back in medium-sized braids. His dark hair contrasted nicely against his peanut butter skin.

"You are beautiful." He spoke slowly, walking to the glass between us. I felt a warmth in my spine. "Please come in. You are allowed to. I can't hurt you. No powers, remember? It's been a long time since I have had anyone to talk to."

"Okay." I blurted. The word came out in a nervous haste. Maybe too eager, but I had an advantage here. He didn't have powers, but I did. He couldn't attack me if he wanted to. Plus, he showed his weakness. Lycan thinks I'm attractive, and I could definitely use that to help me get

the location. I walked towards the door and slowly turned the knob. The door clicked and opened by itself. As I walked in, a familiar smell filled my nostrils. I couldn't quite remember what the distinct smell reminded me of.

"Please sit." He motioned to the desk and its chair. I complied without thinking. There was something about the chair that drew me to it. When I sat down, I could see him clearer. He was more attractive up-close. My cheeks began to warm a little as I twirled my hands in my lap. He looked at me with his eyes. They were actually milk chocolate and more alluring without the light. "Relax, I can't hurt you in here. If I could, I would be handcuffed."

"Mhmm." I hummed, swallowing the lump in my throat. The fact that he was attractive was making me uncomfortable. Each word he uttered warmed my stomach but made me feel uneasy. Trying to calm myself, I rubbed my arm as I watched him reach under the bed for something.

Lycan pulled out a tattered, brown box with white spots. "You must want to know what's in here. I can see it in your eyes." He spoke softly before smirking. His smirk made the back of my neck tingle. Knowing what was in the box was definitely not what was on my mind. His smirk turned into a smile and he winked at me. He was toying with me. I wondered if he knew what I was thinking. He had to know why I was here and the more he talked, the more my chances of failing this mission increased.

"No." I spoke out loud. I repeated the word again, this time directing it at Lycan. From the way his eyebrows rose, I could tell I caught his interest. I decided to use this moment to take control of the conversation. "I have business to tend to and I want to get out of here. So, please, just give me what I want."

“Interesting.” He sat down in the seat across from me with the box in his hand. I began to sense something familiar about him. He squinted at me before placing the box down and getting up. As he paced the room, he started speaking again. “What exactly is it that you want, beautiful?”

The way he said “beautiful” made me want to smile. I wasn’t sure if he was genuine or if this was his game. I decided that either way I needed to play along versus letting my fear control me. “It’s Gizelle, and you know what I want. Alphogee’s location.”

“Doesn’t everybody?” He exclaimed sarcastically as he dramatically flopped in his chair. He propped his chin in his hands. “Please tell me they did not send you here for that.”

“Well, they did.” I spoke firmly staring in his eyes. “And you’re going to give it to me.”

“I don’t think that’s what you want.” He chuckled, blowing me a kiss, before rising to his feet again. My cheeks started to burn again. I wasn’t sure what type of tactic this was, but I wasn’t liking it. He made me even more nervous because he wouldn’t just sit still. “I think you want me. There was a sparkle in your eyes when you looked at me through the glass. Your body tensed which means frustration. Since I don’t know you personally, and you don’t know me. It must be of the coitus nature.”

“Stop playing with me, Lycan. Just give me Alphogee’s location and we’ll let you out of here. You’ll be free.” I tried to reason with him.

He looked at me and then at the ceiling before rubbing his chin. “That sounds like a tempting offer...” He paused dramatically, “but no. You and I both know that I’ll never be free. But, if I were to ever become free, I would love to take you on a date. You look like the type of girl that likes simple dates. There’s this great spot on Earth that serves the most delicious ice



cream. We could grab two cones and walk to this bench. It has the most beautiful view of the lake. Tell each other our histories, have a good laugh. I think you would like that, wouldn't you?"

"You're deflecting." I sucked my teeth, annoyed by the fact that he thought I wouldn't notice. "Please don't insult my intelligence. You're handsome, not dumb."

"You think I'm handsome, hmm?" Lycan stopped pacing and stared at me.

"Y..No." I spoke firmly.

"A false start." He chuckled before letting out a whistle. "You lie to me, I'll know."

"Fine. You're attractive. What does that have to do with you giving me the location?" I snarled. He was making this harder than I would have liked.

"It doesn't have anything to do with it. It just helps me understand your ulterior motives." He smirked as he laid his back against the wall. "Can you explain to me why the Charazes believe I would betray Alphogee for them?"

"Betrayal? You're worried about protecting a man that murdered both magical and nonmagical blood." I let out a growl that I didn't know I had. I wasn't sure what was happening.

"Murder? Is that what they've been telling you guys. Wow, they have reached new depths." Lycan sighed, crossing his arms across his chest. He wasn't even phased by my growl.

"Why are you so angry?"

"What?"

"Why are you so angry?" He paused in between in word.

“I’m not. I just want to leave.” I lied. He was wasting my time, but if I told him that he would just probably waste more of my time.

“You’re lying.” He clicked his teeth, walking over and sitting down across from me. “I don’t like liars.”

“I am not lying.” I grunted. I couldn’t control any of my responses, it felt like someone was controlling them.

“You are and until you tell me the truth, you won’t get what you want.” He began drawing circles in the desk. “I’m waiting.”

I took a deep breath. This was getting me nowhere. Maybe honesty would work in this situation. “You’re wasting my time. You know what I’m here for and how desperately I need it, but you’re playing this childish game.” I responded. Lycan looked at me for a few seconds, rubbing his chin.

“When I was younger my father once taught me that sour words cause people’s mouths to pucker while sweet words cause them to open.” He chuckled as he rubbed his chin, again. “You’re making me realize exactly what he meant.”

“I don’t care.” I groaned loudly before covering my mouth. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

“It came from inside. Keep going. If you’re honest with me, I’ll be honest with you.” Lycan pulled his chair closer to the table and placed his hands on the table. “If you want my secret, I want one of yours. Think of it as a prize for a prize.”

He was insane if he thought I would tell him anything personally about me. I groaned with frustration as I tried to figure out a way to get what I needed. The lights flickered the more anxious I got. Lycan was staring at me with anticipation as he waited for an answer. I wasn't doing this. He couldn't make me do anything. His eyes narrowed as he looked at me. The look made me nervous. Lycan pointed to his wrist signaling that he still wanted an answer, but there was only one to give.

"No way." I protested, trying to get up. I couldn't move from my seat. "What in the—"

"You're not leaving until I say you can." His voice was calm as he smirked again. I searched around the room. "There's no cameras. They're not watching. It's the perks of them thinking I'm harmless."

"Thinking you're harmless? They stripped your powers." I replied without hiding my confusion.

"The Charazes are incompetent. Always have been since Alphogee's parents died." He snickered before gripping the edge of the desk.

"If you have powers, then why didn't you just escape?" I inquired, trying to occupy him while brainstorming a solution to escaping.

"Look whose curiosity is peaked." He raised an eyebrow. "That's a story for a different time. Right now, you have a mission you need to succeed in. Let me show you something." He placed his hands upward on the desk. "I'm not going to force you. This has to be your choice."

I looked down at his hands. If he wanted to play this game, then it was time for me to stop playing nice. I placed my hands on his. A surge of energy flowed through me. I closed my

eyes until the feeling passed. When I opened them, there was a folded piece of paper underneath my hands. I looked up at Lycan. He nudged his head towards the paper without saying a word. I opened it slowly and began reading:

My Dearest Alphy,

I wish that I could be with you to give you this final goodbye.

Unfortunately, I must leave you to protect you. There are people who wish ill on people like us. I know this won't make sense, but in time it will. For now, I just need you to hide. There's an apartment in a town called Wallingford Hills. It's protected, and they will not be able to locate it. You must go there and wait. Never let anyone know your true mission. My son, I never thought that I would have to say this but, I must make sure you know the truth. Today, your father and I will die. We have found out that 6,648 people have been killed for malicious reasons. We must avenge those deaths to keep you and others like us safe. The typuits do not know of this. They will be blindsided at our inauguration. The next 6,648 years will be hard for you to manage, and I hate that you must do it alone. Maybe one day, you'll have our grandchild. He or she will remind you of why this had to be. Oh, Alphy, my boy. I hate that I must say goodbye and that I can't reveal too much. I am sorry for any tear smudges.

Remember this, don't trust anyone and follow this list. Only these six family names must live: Cygna, Brooks, Cruze, Bandsen, Meneap, and Vox. They will turn them against you, but anyone in these family lineages will eventually come to your aid. Now comes for the hardest part of this letter. The curse will only erase the knowledge of our magic from

the typuits' memory. They won't progress. Most have been studying our kind's gifts for years. Without us, they no longer have the formulas to advance the worlds they hold so dear. For the next 6,648 years, they will be cursed and oblivious to who we really are. You must find a young woman named Carmalena. She will be the start to your downfall. If you follow the plan exactly, you will not die. You cannot die. If you die, your father and I will have perished in vain.

We have seen the future and you are the reason for it. Make us proud. I love you, Alphogee. I love you more than you will ever know. We don't wish for you to be at the inauguration. You don't need to see us like that. I want the last memory of me to be something good. I want you to know that I love you. Your father loves you. But most importantly, we need you. Let the book guide you. It will have everything you need and more.

I'll love you always,

Mom

I ran my fingers over the letters as I read again. "Who wrote this?"

He didn't answer me.

"When was this written?" I smashed the letter on the desk.

"Twenty-nine years ago."

"This is why Alphogee started the war. A letter from his mother. He killed people fo—"

“Respect her, recruit.” Lycan hissed as he gripped both ends of the table. There was anger in his eyes. His lip curled to show his contempt.

“These are lies.” I spat, crumpling the letter.

“They’re not and you know they’re not. You’re not mad at me.” Lycan smirked before releasing the table. He had a satisfied smug look on his face like I had given him the reaction he wanted. “You’re mad because your instincts are telling you it’s true.”

“I’m not doing this. I won’t do this.” I growled, rising from my seat. I was shocked that it worked this time. I glanced across the table.

“I don’t need to force you to stay anymore. You’ll be back. You know the truth, but sometimes it takes a while for the brain to process it. I’ll be waiting for your return, Gizelle.” He spoke softly before saluting me. His hand moved from his forehead to the brown box that still sat on the table. He let his hands dance on the top. He was happy I was leaving. I noticed it in his face.

He wasn’t getting rid of me. Not this easily. There was no way that I was failing this mission. He was going to give me that location even if I had to use my powers on him. He was going to tell me why my mother and father were mentioned in that letter. He was going to tell me everything he knows.

“Actually, I think I will stay.” I turned on my heel and made my way back to the chair.

“Smart choice.” Lycan smirked as he tapped his finger on the table. “Why are you so loyal to them?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Lycan looked me in the eyes. “I believe in what he’s trying to do. He wants to protect us. Lift the curse, but he wants the corruption to vanish. They did a good job of isolating you all, but isolation only works for so long.”

I chuckled at the words he spewed. Lycan believed Alphogee. His eyes glistened when he talked about him. If he was right, then everything the Charazes taught me was a lie. The thought sickened me. My contemplation made it worse. A part of me believed he was telling the truth.

They had omitted Lycan’s age. They had omitted that Alphogee’s parents were Charazes. Some of us knew that things didn’t make sense, but we didn’t question it. Maybe it was fear. Or, willful ignorance. But, mostly, it was our way of not angering our trainers. We were afraid to lose our family’s honor.

“Why haven’t you escaped?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. He wasn’t powerless. Lycan could escape at any moment if he chose, but he stayed here for ten years. Letting everyone believe that the Charazes were as omnipotent as they said they were.

“Do you like puzzles, Gizelle?” Lycan asked as he opened the lid to the box. “Your mother did.”

## TWO

(Izelle)

I decided to go practice my shielding. Usually, Nycromina and I would practice, but she had snuck off to be with Damere late last night. I watched her shadow sprint across the courtyard. If I hadn't remembered her familiar silhouette, then I would have blown her cover like I had the first time.

She was creeping across the courtyard, waiting beneath the beanzel bushes. I shimmied to her spot and caught her by surprise. It wasn't until I was on top of her that I realized who she was. By that time, Nycromina had smashed me in the head with a turquoise stone. She turned me over and began choking me. I reached for her face, but everything went black.

When I woke up, I was in the bedroom with a bandage on my head. Nycromina was by my bed. She told me that she was sorry and walked out. It wasn't until a few weeks later that I found out that Nycromina was sent to special practices. She was angrier than before. More closed off. More reserved. I admit that I was never nice to her. I envied her, which made it hard to empathize with her. Yet, her transformation bothered me. She had lost some of her exuberance, and I couldn't help but feel it was my fault.



Walking past the beanzel bush, the memory faded. Each place in Cygna held a memory. That was my misfortune. I had to relive them. I sensed things that others didn't and sometimes it got hard to block out the different memories. Being an emptent was hard, especially when interacting with the public.

As I walked down the long golden path, I wondered what life would be like after Gizelle was inducted. Right now, she was away. But, she still had the opportunity to reject the Charazes' advances. If she rejected the opportunity to join the Charazes, then she would still be able to keep her powers. The only punishment she would receive was the one from our mother. That was something Gizelle never wanted to face. She had been groomed, like me. We had roles we needed to fulfill and even if we didn't quite understand those roles, any deviation would ignite our mother's wrath.

As I walked, the breeze brushed against my nose. The quiet streets in the crisp, morning air held sleeping generations of refugees from the war. Cygna was a gift to my mom from the Charazes. They were grateful that she would be able to defeat Alphogee. Her reward: immortality and this land, but she refused to leave the refugees behind and together they were transported here. They built it from the ground up. One house for each family. Each of the families owned their home and their land. Never in debt to anyone, assuring no one could ever take anything from them, again. Now, that could change.

Walking down Clariton, I stared at Mond Hill. It was the runner's cove. Different people ran there every day, different memories clouded the air. Learning how to block and read specific memories would help me gauge my power. If I could use it at will, then maybe I could manipulate my opponents' memories. I could show my mom I could still protect my home. As I

walked past Grindel Square, cheery patrons walked up and down the streets. Some late for work, some enjoying walks, a few on dates. Every person told a story.

The girl in the coral cardigan and matching plaid skirt radiated with sorrow as she finished her latte on the bench. Her mother had died recently, and she was forced to deal with the consequences. Images of her crying on her sofa with mangled, blonde hair and puffy eyes flashed through my mind. I tried to blink the images out. The worst part of being an emment was feeling what they felt. I could feel the sorrow deep down inside or the anger from people fed up with their lives.

Sometimes, it doesn't make sense to me. Even in a world without hunger, poverty, or corrupt governing entities, people still found a way to create misery in their lives. I've learned that love is usually at the root of it. The lack of love, too much love, unrequited love, and the list goes on. Humans are just greedy. Some of us have magic and some of us don't. Those who have magic pay dearly for using it against the rules.

I made sure to still use my human qualities. Even though I was born with magic, I try to do as much as I can without it. Gizelle taught me that. She was training to be a Charaz and learned about how the Charazes are allowed to take away powers. She wanted to make sure that if anything happened to me that I knew how to survive without my powers. Nycromina didn't listen. She used her powers for everything. Since everyone knows about the magic, she feels she shouldn't hide it. I feel she shouldn't flaunt it.

Still, walking the four miles to Mond helped me clear my head. The stronger I get, the easier I can defend Cygna: my one and only goal. I refuse to let my mom's hard work vanish. Once I reached the top of the hill, I sat in a shaded spot, next to the water spouts. As the runners

filled up their water, I would practice. I set a goal for myself: recall four, block five. I would always start with the blocking first because it was harder than recalling.

Closing my eyes, I relaxed my body. I made sure to let the energy in the environment fill me. Once I cleared my mind, I let my guard down. A mixture of emotions began to rush through me, there was jealousy, angst, jubilation, guilt, distress, and many other emotions flowing through my body. Each memory was a stream of colored auras that transferred through the air. I concentrated hard as I blocked memories. As the emotions came, I let them go. I accepted them for what they were and pushed them out. I wanted quiet in my space. I demanded it. One by one the emotions faded, and I smiled at my accomplishment.

Now was the hard part. I would have to wait until two people came to the spouts. I would choose one's memories to read while blocking out the other one's memories. Controlling the environment help me maintain confidence. If I could learn how to master this, I would definitely beat Nycromina this year.

First up, Mr. and Mrs. Bandsen. It was our duty to know everyone that lived in Cygna and everyone made sure to make it a priority to be remembered. The Bandsens lived in West Cygna. They had the largest house on that side of the town. They liked to throw lavish parties, and we were always invited. Mom only came to the first party. After that, it was up to Nycromina or me to make the appearances. With Nycromina always occupied with Damere, I had taken on her duties. I felt sorry for her, I guess, or maybe I just liked being the center of attention for once.

“Let’s start with you Mr. Bandsen.” I whispered, allowing both of their memories to come to me. I quickly shielded away the aura that flowed to me from Mrs. Bandsen and let Mr. Bandsen’s flow to me. His was violet while Mrs. Bandsen’s glowed a fluorescent orange.

When I let his memory hit me, I was transported back to a strange garden. It was filled with violets and lilies. There was a stone path and I chose to explore it for a while. There was a warm breeze and the air filled with a spicy and sweet aroma, I couldn’t identify. As I walked down the stones, whisperings and children laughter brushed past my ears with the breeze. I followed the voices, stumbling upon two young girls, who were playing jacks.

One of the girls looked familiar. I couldn’t clearly make out who she was. Just that she had mid-back, auburn hair that fell in loose curls against the back of her peach dress. Her laughter reminded me of someone I had met before, but because she wasn’t clearly pictured in this memory, I knew she wasn’t important.

I followed the path until I reached a field of short green grass, the aroma filled my nose as I walked towards the boy sitting down underneath a cherry blossom tree. He was writing in a journal and eating a peach. His smile was wide, and his energy radiated like the sun. This was one of his true desires. I couldn’t believe he would think of something like this after running.

I let go of the memory and I was transported back to the bench. I released Mr. Bandsen’s aura and let Mrs. Bandsen’s come to me. As it filled me, I smelled different aromas of fresh garlic, basil, and warm bread. When I opened my eyes, I was sitting at a table in the corner of a restaurant. Mrs. Bandsen was sitting at a table by herself. Her face lit up as a plate was lowered to the table in front of her. When the waitress placed it on the table, Mrs. Bandsen thanked her before salting her fries. She took one fry in her hand and looked around the room. Once she was

sure no one was looking, she took a bite. As she chewed the crispy potato exterior, the soft interior melted against her tongue. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. I felt the same emotion of satisfaction that she felt, and it made me crave more.

After the fry, she held the burger in her hand. As she took a bite, I was overwhelmed by the taste. The soft, buttered bun blended well with the crunchy, peppered bacon. The tomato slice was fresh and juicy, the burger was filled with different spices. I could taste the fresh garlic mixed with the seasoning salt and pepper. No wonder she wanted this. Each bite provided me with an overwhelming sense of euphoria.

As I wiped my mouth, the room transformed. I was on a boat staring at a familiar face. Her long, chestnut hair blew in the wind. Her dimples glistened under the sparkling sun. Her smile made my stomach flutter as I stared into her eyes. I could see my reflection in her almond eyes. My lips curved into a smile. The excitement in my body rushed from my stomach to my chest, causing it to feel heavy from fear. This was it. This was the moment. I tried to figure out why I felt this moment.

“Izzy?” The familiar voice chimed. The memory faded, and I looked up at the same smiling face. The butterflies rushed forward.

“Malina, what are you doing?” I tried to mask my excitement. “Did Nycromina see you?”

“No, you told me that you were up here. I was hoping to get your help with studying.” Malina sat next to me and placed a gentle hand on my knee.

I looked around and watched as the Bandsens ran back down the hill. Once I was sure no one was watching, I placed my hand on top of hers and squeezed tightly. “Is she still home?”

“No, she was going somewhere with Damere.” She squeezed my hand back.

“Good, then we still have time.” I smiled before getting up and walking with her down the hill.

~

As the sun peered through the slits in the sheer curtains, I tossed slightly until I felt the heat from another body next to me. I quickly opened my eyes to soft, tousled hair against my bed sheets. Her stature was mesmerizing, even while she slept. She was delicate and needed to be handled with care. I had neglected her. It wasn't until this moment that I realized the damage I had done.

I needed to make it right. Maybe if I finished what I started, things could go back to normal. I just needed it for a little bit. I could feel things changing around me. I slowly got up from my side of the bed and tiptoed across the room. I needed her like this. Waking her would ruin the moment. I opened the curtains just enough to let some light shine through.

The easel sat in the far corner of my room, directly diagonal from the bed. I place the blank canvas on it and waved my hand over it. A half-finished portrait with brush strokes of blues, whites, and browns appeared. I had learned a concealing charm that would hide the work until I was ready to show it. Every painting I painted was precious, but this painting, it meant more to me.

As I painted, I kept glancing up at Malina's sleeping body. No one ever cared as much as she did. After my practices, we would focus on her studying. We didn't get much studying done, though. Each day, we would go over a new charm or hone a skill and somehow, Malina always found an excuse me to kiss me.

From there, we would end up here. Waking up a few hours later, sometimes mid-afternoon or by moonlight. She wanted more. She made me crave more. When I was with her, I felt complete. But I never could fully commit myself to her. There was too much at stake.

It wasn't until a year ago that I found out Malina had powers, too. She intentionally kept it from me. Her excuse: she wanted me to get to know the real her. It was a ludicrous omission, since the real her: was her and her magic. She hated that about me. I always had to make an unnecessary comment and overtime, she softened me.

I looked down at the painting and smiled. It was finished. Malina's body was floating through the sky. She had clouds covering her body like she was wrapped in a silk blanket. Only her midriff, arms, and legs were exposed. Her eyes were shut, and she floated peacefully. I was proud of myself for finally finishing it. I hesitated on finishing this portrait because I didn't know how she would feel.

I feared that it would be too much, but sometimes I question whether it would be enough. I loved her. I knew it when I saw her on the boat. She saw the woman hiding beneath my façade. With her, I was better. With her, I had a purpose. But unfortunately, with her, I was in distress. When Gizelle left us six months ago, I rushed to her side. I needed relief, solace, and a break from reality.

Only Malina seemed to care. My mother was pushing me harder than ever, and Gizelle was the only person I really talked to. Malina recognized my distress and came over whenever I called. After the third week of constant visits, she kissed me. I wasn't surprised, but this kiss was different. In the past two years, she had never kissed me as passionately as she did that night. I

remember how my lips tingled after she pulled away. I looked into her eyes and I knew something had changed.

That night, she became my first. I never told anyone, but Nycromina suspected it. I denied it. I wasn't ashamed. I just didn't want her to think that I was distracted. Unlike Nycromina, I wasn't good at juggling multiple things. There was only enough room for practice. Malina changed that. She squeezed herself in my schedule, and it wasn't until last week that I realized that I was better with her help.

Sometimes, I felt bad because I knew I was using her. When she helped me recall, I was at my best. She didn't make me feel pressured or make me question my abilities. She encouraged me and that helped more than I thought it would. In return, I spent more time with her, but this was not what I wanted. I looked down at the painting and back at her sleeping body.

I questioned what I was doing. I wondered if love existed. Nycromina was so sure about what she had with Damere while I pushed Malina away, the closer we got. I wanted to protect both of us. There was something coming and if I lost her, I wouldn't know how to keep living. I distanced myself from her, but she kept coming back. When she came back, I let her. Her spirit made me a better person. I knew that what Nycromina had with Damere wouldn't last. Mother said so many times before. If Nycromina couldn't, then how would I be any different?

I tiptoed to the bathroom, quickly washing the dried paint from my hands before rushing back into the room. As quietly as I could, I set the easel up next to the bed. The sunlight caused the painting to glisten. I decided to slide back in bed. I curled my arms around her body and Malina tossed slightly. She had snuggled her back against my chest and I planted soft kisses on the crook of her neck. Each kiss made her flinch a little before she slightly opened her eyes.



“Izelle,” She spoke my name with a gentle, airy tone before clearing her throat. “It’s beautiful.” I felt wetness on my arm. I carefully turned her body towards me as she wiped her face. Her eyes twinkled with watery tears.

“Don’t cry, Mal.” I planted a soft kiss on her lips. She pulled herself on top of me and planted a harder, more passionate kiss. Her skin was warm against my fingertips.

“What does this mean?” She looked at me and then back at the painting.

“What do you mean?” I raised an eyebrow, unsure of where this conversation was headed.

“For us, Izzy?” She sat up and covered her body with the sheets. “Is this finally the symbol that you’ll be my girlfriend?” I fell silent for a few moments before she spoke again. “I should have known.”

I needed to say something. I could feel the awkwardness increasing in the room, yet I remained silent. Malina grabbed her clothes from the floor and walked towards the bathroom. As she closed the periwinkle door, I followed the patterns carved in the wood. They were simple swirls, but they calmed me. After counting all twenty-two swirls, the door swung wide open and Malina walked out.

Her frame slouched a bit as she moved slowly through the room. Her tawny skin still glowed beneath the rays of sun that hit her skin through the half-open curtains. Her small, beige lips hid their tinge of pink beneath her frown as her brows furrowed. She was staring at me, waiting for an answer. Her frustration filled her face and I closed my eyes to block the image out.

When I opened my eyes, I was back in my room. This time I had moved from the bed to the chair in the left corner. I watched as my twenty-year-old self held hands with Malina. I smiled at the memory. We were two people just trying to find our way in this world and we had ended up falling in love. I remembered the tingling sensation that ran up my spine every time, she came near. She was everything I wanted but just couldn't have.

"Do you love me?" She asked softly. I watched her read my silence. I wanted to yell at my younger self. I remembered what I wanted to say. I wanted to let her know how I truly felt, but I was weak then. I let fear take over. I was a coward and too stubborn to admit how much I cared.

"Why do we have to ruin what we have with that phrase?" I kissed her forehead gently. "Love ruins a lot of things."

She looked at me with disgust but didn't express it. "It, also, brings out the best in people, Izelle. One day I am going to walk out that door and not come back, you hear me. You can't just go around showing love and not admitting you feel it." Her voice cracked. She tried to prevent the pain that she was feeling.

"Look around us, Mal. No one knows what love is. We're all searching for someone to make us whole and somehow, we think when we find it all the world's hardships will make sense, but love is just a word. It's not really an emotion. I should know." I grabbed her hand and held it tightly. "When I'm with you, there's no place I'd rather be. You're the only person I would drop everything for. I care about you, Malina. Don't go messing this up by throwing around the love word." Malina flashed a fake smile before getting up and leaving the room.

I blinked, and I was back in my room with the present Malina. She was staring at me waiting for an answer still. I finally decided to ask what she had asked. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. Can you repeat that?”

“Typical. Just typical Izelle.” She growled. “I don’t know why I came back. I should have just stayed up North. You didn’t care to visit me then and I damn sure didn’t have this unnecessary stress.”

The words stung as I remembered her leaving. It was the next day after she walked out on me. She left for a whole year. I had been trying to reach her for weeks when I received a postcard in the mail:

*Izzy,*

*I am safe. I just decided to move away for a while. My parents have phoned me to let me know that you have been trying to reach me. Please stop. I need to be alone. Maybe you were right about love. It probably doesn’t exist, but right now to me, it does. I need to stop loving you and then, I’ll be back around. Until then, I wish you the best.*

*Love,*

*Malina Cruxe*

I could still feel the weight of the postcard in my hand. It became heavier with each word. I wanted her to know I was wrong, but she sent back all my letters and still ignored any type of communication offered. It wasn’t until she heard about my incident with Nycromina that she came back. When I woke up, she was by my bedside holding my hand.

She told me that she had finally cleared her head. At first, I was cold towards her. I felt rejected that she didn't want to talk to me anymore. She asked if any of my attempts were to confess my love. When I told her they weren't, she rubbed my hand gently before letting me know that's why she didn't take them. It hurt me that I had hurt her so much that she felt not talking to me was the only solution. I promised to make it up to her.

Malina started coming around more and I started to show her more affection, but I guess that still wasn't enough. She wanted to become an item, but I wasn't ready for that just yet. I wasn't afraid of anyone, but myself. I didn't want to let my competition with Nycromina or my ego get in the way. I wanted to be the best version of myself for her and at twenty-three, that was simply something I wasn't ready to do.

"Why do I even try?" Her voiced pierced my thoughts as she began gathering the rest of her things.

"Wait," I pleaded. Malina paused and stared at me. "Please just repeat what you said earlier. You had a memory that was too strong to block out. I wasn't ignoring you on purpose." I could see some of the tension releasing in her body.

"I said why are we doing this? You don't love me, and I keep running back to you hoping that something will change, but it never does." Malina sighed before sitting on the bed. "It's been two years and you still won't admit you love me. Am I really that bad?"

I felt sorry for her. I never wanted to cause Malina this much stress. I tried to find a different way to answer the question, but I thought maybe after two years, she deserved to know the truth. I cleared my throat. "You are one of the most brilliant minds I have ever encountered.

You love without questioning it, and I admire you. When you left me, I never desired anything as much as I desired you. I just didn't know how to process what I was feeling back then."

"So, what do you feel now?" She asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"That it would be a shame to lose you, again." I reached for hand, but she pulled it away.

"You have to be shitting me." She rolled her eyes and stormed across the room, putting her shoes on. Malina sniffled before grabbing her painting. She walked towards the bedroom door and glanced back at me, sorrow in her eyes. "I hope you remember your part in this."

I watched her turn on her heel and walk out the bedroom door. I plopped my head back on my pillow and let out a defeated sigh. I heard footsteps nearing the door again, which made me perk up again. I glanced towards the doorway and Nycromina stood there smiling. She was eating a piece of nagret while she smirked.

"What do you want?" I grunted. She had to know I wanted to be left alone. I was more than sure that she knew that her presence was bothering me, but from the look on her face, she was enjoying every moment of it.

"Hey Grumple, Malina was looking pretty pissed walking out the front door." She made sure emphasize the double consonants in each word. I rolled my eyes in frustration. I really wanted to wipe her amusement off her face by slamming her into the wall.

"No, shit. Anything else you want to point out?" I huffed hard as a warning.

"That's not the reason I came here if you're asking. I just was surprised to see Malina here this early. I thought you were training this morning?" Nycromina paused before squealing

with acknowledgement. She held the piece of nagret between her teeth before taking another bite

“Did she spend the night? Or did she come over this morning?”

“Nycromina, what do you want?” I screamed. I had enough of her taunts. She was aggravating me, and I couldn’t take it anymore. She let out a hearty laugh.

“Geez, who pooped in your mygentos, this morning.” I didn’t laugh, and she just rolled her eyes before continuing. “Your mother says we need to be in the city centre within the next hour. I advise you to shower and get your attitude right. She said to meet her by the fountain. We’re dealing with important manners.”

“You could have started off with that.” I glanced at the clock, it was 10:35. I waved my hand and slammed the door in her face.

“It would have been more powerful if you would have slammed it in my face.”

Nycromina laughed. I could hear her laughter echo as the sound of her footsteps soften as she walked further down the hallway. I got up and walked towards the bathroom. I turned on the shower and let it run for a bit before getting in. As the water sprinkled on my face, I just wished that I had told Malina that I do love her.

### THREE

(Carmalena)

Luther's brows furrowed as he rubbed his forehead. "You're not listening to me."

"I am listening to you. I just don't care to talk about this subject, again." I growled as I put the puzzle piece in its place I didn't want to fight about this. There was no point to having this conversation again.

"If that's how it's going to be, then fine. Let's talk about what's really bothering me." Luther pushed back in his chair.

"Which is?" I didn't look up from the puzzle. Luther let the trivial things bother him, which made it really hard to care about what he wanted to talk about.

"You're being extremely hard on the girls. It's not necessary to keep pushing them this hard. Having them duel against each other. What you're doing to them is not healthy."

"What I do with my daughters to prepare them for their parts is between me and them, Luther. We've discussed this. Don't meddle in my affairs, and I won't meddle in yours." There was a sharp edge to my voice that made me almost apologize for my tone. But he knew better.

Luther pushed back his chair and slammed down his hands, shaking a few of the puzzle pieces. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I asked, coyly. Luther would never hurt me. He promised me, but I could see that I sparked something in him.

“Don’t do that, Car. They are my daughters, too. For twenty-seven years, I have watched you distort these girls’ realities, and I am the one who has picked up the pieces of their crushed egos. I know you don’t have much tact, but don’t discredit my contribution. To try to prove your false righteousness to the very people destroying our family.” His voice lowered, daring me to disagree. He knew that I would accept the challenge, which was a stupid choice to make.

“You care about one daughter. One daughter. The other two listen to me. They obey me. While you and your replica defy me. But, remember this Luther. When you defy me, you are defying the natural order of magical law.”

“Pffft...says who. The Charazes. Think for yourself woman. That’s what they do.”

“I will not listen to this nonsense. I am going into town. Don’t follow me. Don’t call for me unless there is an emergency. I will prepare for Givandi without you. We don’t need your terrible energy dampening on celebration.” I growled, rising from my seat and walking out the door. I shimmied to the driveway. I wanted to get as far away from him as possible. I decided to walk to the park that sat next door.

The smell of the flowers filled my nose. The quiet lull filled my mind with thoughts. I knew why I had to get away. Not because Luther made me angry. I never stayed angry for too long. But Luther was right. It was my fault that Nycromina and Izelle were the way they were. If the Charazes would have just told me who played what role in the prophecy, I wouldn’t have



made the terrible choices I had already made. They were so cryptic. The Charazes. They convinced me if they revealed too much about the future, it could change. One of your daughters is destined to carry the savior, the other would rule the land, the words echoed in my head. I just wanted clarity.

I smiled at the families playing in front of me. The park was my favorite place in the city centre. I came here when I needed to think. Being around the other people in Cygna made me realize how lucky I was to have created something so beautiful.

There was a little girl swinging. She looked so peaceful. Another girl walked up behind her and pushed her off the swing. I winced in pain for her as I watched her cry. Her mother rushed over and picked the crying girl up, carrying her to a bench where she tended to her crushed ego. The mother whispered things to her daughter to make her laugh. Soon, the little girl's tears were gone, and she made her way to the sandbox to play with other children. She reminded me of myself.

When I built Cygna twenty-seven years ago, I envisioned a place that would be welcoming to all and protect everyone from the dangers we faced on Earth. Cygna would be a free land where free meant free and no one owed anything to anyone. With a few like-minded individuals, we created a place that became a sanctuary for all. It definitely wasn't a utopia. We weren't perfect. After all, we were still humans. But we found better ways to solve our problems. Cygna was a place where anyone could prosper. We encourage people to fulfill their lives however they pleased as long as it wouldn't cause harm to others.

Cygna was a place that held different types of people much like a playground. Some decided to become the richest citizens, like the Bandsens. Some decided to become the most

successful ones, like the Laves, they owned every shop in the city centre. The Cruxes decided to tower in academia and build an educational gateway for those who wanted to return to Earth for college. And then there were people, like Mrs. Meneap, who had seen the horrors and beauty of the world. All she wanted was peace, quiet, and for no one to mess with her lawn.

These were just some of the people that made Cygna a joy. When I first created Cygna, I had the idea of a toybox. A place where everything had a home. Everyone had their own house and their own land that no one could take from them. If they wanted more space, they could purchase more space. During the first five years, we learned instead of restricting people from what they wanted, we should just let them prosper how they wanted as long as it didn't infringe on another person's prosperity. No one was bothered by this either. They knew what they had was solid therefore they worried about themselves.

I watched as a pregnant mother sat on a bench rubbing her belly. Her son ran over to her with a skinned knee. As she picked him up and put him on the park bench, her face scrunched in disgust. Her movements were slow and disconnected as she tended to the wound. The father came over with an ice cream cone. The mother quickly took the ice cream cone while giving the father the antiseptic and cloth she was dabbing the blood with. The father continued to clean the wound as the mother enjoyed her ice cream as she continued rubbing her belly.

I remembered finding out that I was pregnant. I was excited to finally have a family. During the war, I was alone, and I had lost nearly everyone. My parents had moved us to a small town far enough from the central city that no one thought the war would come our way. We lived there for two months before my parents died and I was forced to go to a home. I desperately longed for a family during those lonely nights. The reality of becoming a parent made me excited and I planned to treat each pregnancy with care.

When I gave birth to Gizelle, I knew that I would have a limited amount of time with her. All first-born children became Charazes. They were used to balance out the shift the war caused. She was off getting her final certification. My twenty-seven years with her were about to be up, but I tried my hardest to give her all of me while I could.

Nycromina came two years after and I handled her with care. I felt more confident with her because I knew that I wouldn't lose her. My immortality extended to all my children, which made it easier because I was more worried about prepping them for the world versus them dying over mundane things. I knew that no matter how bad the injuries were that the girls wouldn't die, but that didn't mean that they didn't suffer the pain. Nycromina was rough and she had the scars to prove it. She had to learn the hard way. Sometimes, I believed it was for attention.

I got pregnant with Izelle when Nycromina was three months. I spent most of my time making sure my pregnancy wasn't stressed by our newborn. Luther cared for Nycromina more while I spent as much time as I could with my pregnant belly. I just knew this pregnancy held the one that would create the savior and I couldn't risk anything happening to her. When I gave birth to Izelle, it was calm. Nycromina's birth was painful and long while Izelle came out after a few pushes. Everything operated smoothly, which I thought was a sign since letting Izelle go would be the hardest thing.

As they grew, I made sure to spend as much time with Izelle as possible. She would be leaving me soon and I wanted her to be prepared. There was only one rule: keep her identity a secret. I spent years feeding her with information while trying not to tell her what she was destined for. I told her about her immortality and powers. We trained her earlier than when I started with Nycromina. She needed it more than her sister and I felt that I could always make up

for lost time when Izelle left us. Luther had constantly told me that I needed to treat the girls fair, but I couldn't.

"I know what I know, Luther." I protested.

"But, what if you're wrong?" His words chilled my spine.

"I'm not. I felt it when she was in my belly." I pleaded for him to listen. A mother knows, she knows.

"All I am saying is that you need to treat each daughter equally. You're pitting them against each other, Carmalena." He rubbed his forehead before staring at me. I didn't respond. I didn't know what to say, causing him to walk away. I didn't follow him. I know I should have, but I didn't. I just sat there thinking of ways to justify my actions until Luther's anger wore off.

It wasn't until now that I started realizing the damage I had inflicted. I had spent years arguing with Luther about how I was right. Nycromina and Izelle fought all the time. In the past, Nycromina didn't have an accurate hold on her powers. She let her emotions control them versus using the emotions as fuel. When she got angry, things exploded, or people got hurt. When she was happy, there could either be random acts of kindness or bubbles trailing behind her. When she was sad, thunderstorms poured down or she made it snow. Her emotions made her out of control, but now things were worse.

Luther trained her on top of her daily lessons after an incident with Izelle. He was teaching her control and she was improving. She started to hang around the Montag's boy more and distanced herself from me. At first, I was happy. I was able to spend more time with Izelle without feeling guilty. I was going to miss Izelle. She was the daughter I wanted to take the throne, not Nycromina.

She listened to me, she had more self-control, and she cared about what I cared about. She understood the importance of defending Cygna from danger and wanted to spare me from any pain. Izelle was protective of me and with her, I felt love. We were so alike, yet so different. As I spent more time with Izelle, I realized the truth.

Luther was right. I had pitted them against each other. I told Izelle all the family secrets and kept them from Nycromina. I had her believing that she wasn't yet immortal. She was a showoff and I needed to protect her. My fear was that she would go out and create destruction. She would return home with different body parts broken, wasting precious time healing for weeks at a time. I couldn't let people know how immature their future leader would be. I needed for them to respect her, especially with war looming in the atmosphere.

The obvious remained. Izelle wasn't as good as her sisters. Nycromina was the best. She was only beat by Gizelle because Gizelle constantly cheated. She would read her sister's moves to win. Izelle practiced hard, but it wasn't good enough. Nycromina had a natural talent that got better with practice while Izelle's was mediocre and she let her envy control her. She was the hardest working person I had ever seen and was constantly finishing in last place. Even with her starting early, she still couldn't master her main power. Izelle had just turned twenty-three and Nycromina would be twenty-five in a few months. We didn't have much time left.

Izelle constantly reminded me why I built Cygna. The tall buildings that mimicked skyscrapers in the city centre meant nothing without the businesses that resided in their walls. The parks were lifeless without the children and their families creating memories. The houses that lined the streets didn't become homes until the citizens occupied them.

When we first arrived in Cygna, it was empty land. We weren't allowed to know where we were, but the Charazes told us that we were hidden away from Earth for our own protection. I was fine with not knowing as long as we were all safe. I designed Cygna after our old town. City centre served as our downtown. The chrome-colored buildings were around three-hundred feet tall. Most of the buildings contained the businesses people worked for, like the insurance companies or the city clerks.

There was one building that was different than the rest. It was the tallest building and contained a hundred floors. Each floor contained magical intel and only the individuals with the highest clearance could get in. Luther and I were the only two that had clearance, other than the Charazes.

I chose to stay away from that building. I hated what it stood for. It was the only building that held the enchanted prison, Poyan, and the interrogation rooms. Each year the Charazes demanded that we interview every magical being to ensure no one was plotting against them. After what happened with Alphogee's betrayal, they didn't want to take any chances. Their paranoia was justified. Alphogee was the reason for the war back on Earth that exposed the magical beings again. Exposure caused fear. That fear caused the Charazes to move us here.

I didn't approve of the rules though. It was something about them that didn't make sense. There were only six, but those six rules were crucial to follow if one wanted to keep their powers. The Charazes made it known what they give, they would take away and there was only one person who met that fate: Lycan Mybel.

Lycan Mybel refused to give up Alphogee's location and was punished for his lack of cooperation. He was sentenced to Poyan and stripped of his powers. His released was postponed

until he revealed Alphogee's location. For the last ten years, Lycan was constantly interrogated, but no amount of interrogation broke him. I don't believe he knows Alphogee's location, but the Charazes still believe he does. We usually spent hours interrogating Lycan when the Charazes visited.

But this year would be different. When the Charazes arrived, there wouldn't be any interrogation tactics I would have to participate in. The induction and our Givandi festival would take precedence. During the last three days of December, many of the citizens would participate in the days of giving. On the third day, December 31, we would gather in the city centre to feast and share our appreciation for those around us. This year's festival was extremely important. At the end of the festival, Cygna would have its first Charaz induction ceremony. The first-born child in each magical family would pledge his or her commitment to the Charazes.

The city was preparing for the event. All the citizens being inducted were currently away for their training. I couldn't wait to see my Gizelle. She left six months ago, and I hadn't seen her since. I wanted to make sure this year's Givandi festival was extravagant. I wanted to honor the sacrifice our children were making.

As I watched the children in front of me play, I couldn't help wondering how many of them were first-borns. By their twenty-seven birthdays, they would be serving a higher purpose by protecting the magical world as a Charaz. But for now, they didn't have a care in the world. Just teetering on the seesaw or swinging mindlessly on the swing sets.

Maybe if I would have let my daughters play like these children, they wouldn't be so angry with each other. It bothers me, knowing that I had created a place where my citizens felt protected, but my daughters felt neglected. I tried to be the best mother I could be, but the

Charazes told me that duty comes first. Regretfully, I trusted them when I should have listened to Luther.

As I walked from the park to the city centre, I smiled at the children playing on their front lawns. Their laughter filling the air like a sweet symphony as the wind blew past my ears. No two lawns the same. The streets crowded with people as I reached the city centre. The way they gathered in a huddle around the fountain told me that the fountain had changed. As I made my way through, citizens that noticed my presence moved out of the way and pulled their friends with them.

I wasn't one for the theatrics. The way people stood in awe as I walked the streets made my stomach churn. I missed the days when I went unnoticed on Earth. Those days I didn't feel like I was under such scrutiny. The Charazes told me I should have a firmer ruling over my citizens, but I didn't think it was necessary. I enjoyed my six-bedroom home. It was enough for my family and it allowed me to be within close distance of everyone else. I gave the large castle to the Bandsens. They deserved it more than I did.

As I made my way to the fountain, my eyes widened. In the middle of the city centre was a fountain that stood eight feet tall. It was made from a morphing clay called lodalite. Every time an important event happened in Cygna, the fountain would morph into a statue to reflect Cygna's current celebration. The fountain was shaped as a Charaz to reflect the coming events. As I stared at the statue, it began to morph again.

An alarming sense of terror crept up my spine, resting in the back of my throat. I swallowed hard to erase the feeling. The shape of the Charaz was more apparent. Each Charaz looked the same in its cloaked form. Each Charaz was a hooded figure that wore a black cloak.



The hood covered their heads to make them look faceless. The ordinary darkness allowed them to creep through the shadows, undetected. The fountain's statue was startling. The water was pouring for the Charaz's hooded face as if it was crying. The rest of the audience gasped with confusion.

I knew what this meant. I knew who did this. The outcome made my heart heavy with sorrow. Gizelle was gone, and who knew how long it would be before I lost my Izelle. I would be lonely. Left to rule a nation with the aid of my distance daughter versus the one I cherished. Luther hadn't suggested this outcome. He never told me that there was a possibility that I would lose both daughters at the same time.

## FOUR

(Nycromina)

“I’m leaving. I ju--”

“Leaving where?” Damere cut me off with a confused look on his face. The sound of footsteps caused me to turn my head, but before I could see I felt Damere’s hand on my shoulder. As we shimmied, the euphoric sensation was overwhelming. My head felt like it was being pulled in five directions, my body felt like it was being twisted. I landed on the floor with a light thud. I rubbed my head as the black spots in my vision swirled around. I held my head as my stomach started to feel queasy.

“Are you okay?” A distorted voice spoke as I felt something touch me. I rolled over and threw up. I felt hands on my arms pulling me up and carrying me somewhere. I could feel the softness of bed and a glass to my lips. “Drink this.”

I didn’t protest, I just gulped the liquid down. The cold liquid tasted like oranges and grapefruits mixed together. It coated my throat as I swallowed it down. I laid my head back and kept my eyes closed for a few minutes. I opened my eyes slowly and my vision was clear. Damere was staring back at me.

“Hey.” I said dryly before closing my eyes again. I didn’t want him to think that something was wrong. I swiftly placed my hands on my stomach and felt around. I closed my eyes and tried to sense if anything was wrong. There were no issues that I could feel, and I always felt when something was going wrong.

“Are you okay?” Damere asked softly rubbing the back of his hand against my cheek.

I opened my eyes and grabbed his hand. Intertwining my fingers with his, I smiled softly. “I’m fine. Shimmying just made me a little nauseous.”

“A little?” Damere stared at the floor. I glanced over at the puddle of vomit as embarrassment filled my face. “I’ll make a batch of Korta for you to take home. It’s a natural remedy for nausea. My mom has started me on healing teas in our lessons now.”

“Okay. More than a little, but we both know no one knows how a person will react to shimmying. Healing teas? What does a sentient need to know healing teas for?” I tried to change the subject, but he looked at me with a curious look.

“What’s going on?” He looked into my eyes with deep concern. This was not how I wanted to tell him, and this is not how I would tell him.

“I’ve just been feeling down lately. There’s a lot going on at home.” I whispered, shrugging my shoulders.

“Like?” He sighed with frustration. Damere wasn’t going to let this go and I needed to give him something. I waved my hand in the air and the cloudy memory replayed today’s earlier events.

“Givandi is cancelled this year. T—”

“What?” Izelle exclaimed. “No, no, no. You can’t do that it’s Gizelle’s last one before she becomes a Charaz. Plus it starts tomorrow. Too late to make changes”

“Izelle, she’s not coming home before the induction. The next time you see her, she will be a Charaz.” Our mother spoke softly as she rubbed Izelle’s shoulder. “Plus, Givandi needs to be cancelled because I feel there’s danger lurking.” Her voice was almost a silent whisper. The word “danger” caused Izelle’s eyes to broaden as she looked at our mother. My mother just gave her a gentle nod and pulled Izelle into her arms. My stomach churned and I could feel anger seeping through my veins.

“Alright, break it up. I don’t have all day. What are we doing here?” I interrupted the touching moment. I didn’t know what it was about, and I didn’t care what it was about. I just wanted to get away from them.

“Well, Nycromina it seems you haven’t lost your charm.” My mother snarled before giving me a half smile of scorn as she let Izelle go. She started walking towards the fountain and we followed. When we reached the fountain, my mother turned around and looked at us. “Do you know why this fountain is made of lodalite?”

“Because lodalite is the only morphing clay that can be enchanted to foretell the future.” Izelle answered quickly and with pride. I could taste the vomit at the back of my throat.

“Exactly.” My mother responded cheerfully. “So, any guesses as to what this could mean?” She pointed to the fountain. It looked like a Charaz was crying.

“That something is going to make the Charaz’s cry. I’m not understanding what’s going—”

“Nycromina, I am not talking to you. I am talking to your sister.” My mother sneered, without looking my way.

“So, then, what the hell am I here for?” I growled.

“I actually don’t know. I told you to tell Izelle there was a meeting by the fountain.” My mother turned to me, crossing her arms against her chest. “Your sister and I have important matters to tend to. I’m pretty sure you’ll find something or someone to occupy your time.”

“You are such a –” Before I could finish my mother and sister shimmied away.

“I mean you weren’t exactly nice to them. Like I could sense the attitude all in your voice.” Damere rubbed his chin as the memory began to fade. He tended to do that when he wasn’t sure how I was going to react. I wanted to scream at him and tell him he was wrong. That they deserved it. They did, but I was tired of harboring old feelings. That’s why I needed to move away. Start fresh. Become someone different.

“I know I’m sorry. I just hate this time of the year.” I groaned. “You know it’s worse now. Gizelle’s gone and it’s been a parkle of tension.”

“It’ll be alright.” He pulled me into his arms and rubbed my shoulder as I buried my head into his chest. He smelled like a forest after a night rain. I sniffed harder and felt a tickle in my stomach. I guess I wasn’t the only one who liked the smell. As I rested my head on his chest, he began talking again. “My father once told me sour words cause a mouth to pucker while sweet words cause it to open. This is just a thought and don’t kill me, but maybe try letting your family back in.”

“I’ll think about it.” I hummed as I danced my fingers across his white t-shirt. I definitely wasn’t letting them back it. I had tried that before, and it was a failure. I had a few days to figure out where I was going and how I was getting there. My decision to leave was final. I just needed my escape to go undetected.

“Wait, has your mother told everyone that Givandi is cancelled?” Damere asked like I knew the answer.

“Why don’t you go ask her sidekick?” I sighed, rolling my eyes. I moved back over and propped my head up with the pillow. “They don’t clue me in on their secret plots. I can ask my dad during training later, but other than that I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“I’ve touched a nerve. Well, since you’re already bothered might as well get it out the way. What do you mean by leaving?” His eyes showed fear as his voice trembled as he sat on the edge of the bed. That was definitely the worse transition. I don’t know if it was the hormones or the fact that Gizelle had rubbed off on me, but I was becoming more observant of the mundane.

“Exactly what I said. I’m leaving. Probably go to Earth or somewhere.” I tried to sit up, but I became dizzy. “Can I have more Korta?”

Damere nodded before walking away. I felt bad about lying about what was truly going on. I had been hiding it for three months now. Right after I found out, I panicked and thought it was best to keep it a secret from everyone. Now, I had no clue of what to do. I was hiding it from my boyfriend and my family. Leaving now was my best option.

I looked around Damere’s room and smiled. There were pictures of us everywhere. Our first date at Laymen’s. Our first picnic. Our first beach trip. He kept all of them. I wasn’t that much of a picture person, but I took a few over the last three years. I looked over towards his

desk and saw a picture hanging above the desk. It was a small baby and a man I had never seen before. I assumed the baby was Damere and that the man must be his father.

We didn't talk about his father much. Honestly, I've only ever heard him say two things about his father in the three years we had been together. The first: His mother's husband wasn't his father and that he doesn't like talking about his father. The second: The aphorism he provided earlier about sour words. I've always wondered what happened to his father, but Damere never told me. I knew he had brothers, but I had never met them. I wondered if they stayed with his father while he had to live with his mother.

If I had to live with my mother that would be horrible. It was bad enough to have to deal with her and my sisters, but to do it without my father would be impossible. But, Damere's mother didn't seem that bad. She was always hospitable, offering cookies and food. I've even had dinner with them a couple of times. Her cooking wasn't the best, but they had what I wanted and that was a family.

My eyes wandered around the desk for any other mementos. He had an open book on his desk. I waved it towards me. As it floated across the room, I stared at the doorway. Once it was in my hands, I place my finger on the open page and I skimmed through the other pages. It was journal full of drawings and writings. I didn't know he journaled. We were more alike than I thought. There was an inkling in the back of my mind to just to put it back. I agreed that I would after I read just one page.

I went back to the open page and read the first few lines. I clutched the binding as I reread the words again:

**Nycromina has been acting strange again. I'm not sure what the secret is, but I have a feeling she's going to be leaving me soon.**

I heard footsteps coming down the hall and I quickly waved the journal back to its spot on the desk. Damere entered the room. He stood tall with a medium build. His broad shoulders swayed as he took long strides. There were dimples in his dark chocolate covered cheeks, which caused a crinkle under each chestnut colored eye. His hair was in a curly afro that framed his face. Underneath the hair, he had a block head that I occasionally laughed at. He would laugh with me. That's was one of the many reasons why I fell in love with him.

Damere cared about me. He always wanted to make me feel good. He taught me how to love myself when I couldn't anymore. Through that process, I learned to love him. No one has ever taken care of me like him. He knew how to handle me with care because of the emotional turmoil I had experienced with my family. Now, I was lying to him about two things. He doesn't deserve this.

But I love what I have with him and I don't want to ruin it. I enjoy that I'm able to be myself. He's not put off by my tough exterior, he challenges me back, and treats me like a person versus some fragile little girl. He's always honest, which made it so hard to keep secrets from him.

"So, what are you going to do?" Damere's voice was so timid, it startled me.

"What do you mean?" I gulped, unsure of what he meant. I wondered if he had noticed the symptoms, and while getting my drink, he had figured out the secret.



“About this leaving thing?” His voice lowered even more. I sighed with relief when I realized that he hadn’t figure it out yet. I looked up at him smiling, but he was still frowning. I recalled his previous words from the journal.

“What do you think?” I raised an eyebrow. I tried to imagine why he even felt he needed to ask that question.

“I’m asking you.”

“Who’s that man?” I said, pointing to the picture of the man and the baby. Damere followed my finger and then turned back to me.

“Nobody important. Now back to—”

“So, you want to give me you your answers, but you can’t give me any? Okay, I see how we’re playing it.” I growled. Starting an argument was the only way to prevent anymore lying. I rolled my eyes and stared at him. “Can I please just have my drink?”

Damere looked at me flabbergasted as he gave me the glass. He looked like he wasn’t sure what to say as I grabbed the glass from his hand. I put it to my lips. I felt bad, but he was asking too many questions and I needed to distract him.

“No, you’re not doing this.” His voice raised a little. I raised an eyebrow in anticipation. Damere only raised his voice when he was upset, and with me, he wasn’t upset often.

“Doing what, Damere?” I asked before finishing my drink and setting the glass on the side table. The way he looked at me firmed my spine. He looked so heartbroken and frustrated at the same time. There were a few moments of silence. The buzzing of the lights filled the room as we stared at each other.

“Just say you don’t want me anymore, Ny. Just say it. I’ve been feeling it for a while now.” His voice lowered and his gaze went to the floor. “Is it someone else?”

“Seriously,” I pulled the cover back and tried to get out of bed. The dizziness came back, and I decided to just sit up. “this is ridiculous. I know you think I’m leaving you, but I’m not. I wouldn’t have told you I was leaving, if I wanted to leave you.”

Damere looked at me and then at his journal on his desk. I covered my mouth, cursing myself for the slip up. “You didn’t.” There was a tinge of disbelief in his voice as he walked over to the notebook and lifted it to his nose. “You did.” He looked at me. “That was private.”

“How do you even know I looked at that? Maybe, I sensed your uncertainty and came up to that logical conclusion.” I responded confidently, trying to assert some innocence.

“Nycromina,” There was a low growl in his throat. “stop lying to me. You freeze time. You don’t sense things. I do. That’s my power. Not yours. I’m losing my patience with all these lies.”

I swallowed hard, “Geez, relax, it wasn’t like that. I just wanted to see what you were reading.”

“And when you realized it wasn’t a book.” He stared at me, coldly.

“I kept reading it.” I whispered, finally deciding to put an end to it.

“And you wonder why I think you’re about to leave me. You’re changing, Ny, and I don’t even think you notice it.” He sat in his desk chair and put his head in his hands. “What is going on? There’s more than this family mess. Why do you want to leave? You’ve been dealing with them all your life, could have left at any time. Why now?”

“What do you want from me?” I screamed. The pressure was too much. I couldn’t tell him the truth, but I couldn’t fool him either. He knew more than he was letting on.

“The truth.” He made a point to distinctly pronounce each syllable.

I didn’t answer him. I just watched him. After a few moments, he raised his head and stared at me. He was waiting for an answer. An answer I wasn’t ready to give. An answer that wouldn’t make this situation any better. I was terrified of his reaction. I wanted to wait to tell him because there was more than just the secret. Along with the secret came more.

I had to tell him about my immortality that I would get in June. I was afraid to tell him. I know how much my dad struggled with my mother’s and I was definitely scared that Damere might leave me. He knew that I possessed powers. He did, too, but immortality was something different. I didn’t know when the Charazes would give him everlasting life. Izelle said ours didn’t activate until we were twenty-five. I needed to prepare both of us for this.

I spent the past three months lying to everyone until I was sure what I was going to do. I had told Izelle that I was hanging out with Damere more while I told Damere I was with my dad practicing. I was training, but majority of time I slept. I could hear his deep breaths as he waited. I just looked at him.

“Stop trying to think of another story to tell. Just please stop lying to me.” He pleaded. “You’re so-called practicing more, you constantly ask me if you look fat before leaving, you’ve been more secretive, and you wouldn’t tell me this big secret unless you told your dad, too. Just tell me.”

This was killing me inside. Each partial truth gave me more courage. “On my twenty-fifth birthday, I will become immortal.” The words came out of my mouth as I interlaced my fingers. I looked up and Damere was rubbing his head.

“You’re really going to cover up your secret with another lie.” This time he answered in a partial growl. He caught the growl in his voice and straighten his posture.

“I’m not lying.” I protested. I was finally telling some truth.

“Everyone knows your mom is the warrior. Everyone knows that she was granted immortality.” He said grabbing an old tattered cover book off his bookshelf. He tossed it on the bed next to me. “We thought that the warrior begged for her family’s immortality, but I guess it’s only those that are her heirs to the throne.”

“True loves, actually.” I grabbed the book and rubbed my fingers over the burnt orange cover with gold trim. I flipped open through the pages until I got to the warrior section. My eyes widened as my leg shook with annoyance. My mother had lied. Izelle had lied to me. We were immortal from the start, and she kept it from me. “Those averches.”

“True loves?” Damere asked as he walked over towards me. He sat down on the bed and put my feet in his lap. I knew why he was being nice to me. He thought I would open up, but now I was furious.

“My true love will be granted immortality. Gizelle told me that after the war, our mother begged the Charazes to help her not lose anyone else she loved. They sent her to a forest and that’s where she gained immortality, but obviously that was a lie.” I sighed as I read more. “My mom’s true love is....”

“It won’t be in there.” He took the book out of my hand and placed it on the floor next to the bed. I studied his face. I wondered how he knew, then I realized that he must know a Charaz. “Immortality isn’t an issue anymore. I don’t care if you’re immortal. I’ll love you until I die. I’ve always known about your immortality. Now tell me what’s really going on.”

“I already told you.” I grunted. I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. I wanted to just get home and talk to someone about what I read. “Can I see that again please? How did you get that book?”

“All the magical families have them. They’re an accurate record, and the Charazes don’t want us to forget the past.” He held the book up in the air, holding it out. I reached for it and he pulled it back. “Tell me what’s really going on and I’ll give you the book.”

I hung my head low. I nervously pinched the blanket several times, but I could feel his eyes on me. I glanced at him and he was staring at me. This was not how I wanted to tell him, and this wasn’t how I was going to tell him. He was going to be upset, but that’s just a risk I was willing to take. “I want you to leave with me.”

“You know I can’t do that.” He groaned rubbing his forehead. “I have to take care of my mother and make sure things are great around here.”

“You have a stepfather. Why can’t he take care of his wife?” My voice didn’t hide its disappointment.

“Because I don’t trust him. I just can’t leave, Ny. I have to think about my family.” He replied. He had to think about his family. That was his excuse. He needed to realize he had other people outside his family to think about.

“I have to go. I’m leaving in few days whether you’re coming or not.” I spoke quickly as I rose from the bed. The dizziness had settled. Thank you, Korta. I walked past him and out the door. Damere was shouting behind me, but I refused to hear him. There was only one thing on my mind.

## FIVE

Anton walked towards his father's den. He had been forced to come back from his vacation, where he spent his time exploring Neturieye. Neturieye was home to the Syphenes. The Syphenes were peculiar winged creatures that guarded the Domolation Caves. He almost gained access to the caves when his father called, forcing him to come back home with the snap of a finger. Literally.

Within seconds of his father's call, Anton was back at the Brooks Estate in Pikea. The lush trees that surrounded the twenty-bedroom mansion were wilting away. They had developed a lackluster hue of raven black. The town was dying, like every other place his father owned. This would be just another place added to the broken toy box, causing Anton to realize why he was summoned.

Every time one of his father's lands started dying, he expected Anton to magically bring it back to life. And every time, Anton was unable to complete the revival. Maybe he really could, but just didn't try hard enough. Or maybe, he was too incompetent like his father suggested. But what he did know for sure was that his father didn't understand Anton. No, actually, Anton's father didn't try. He was a man capable of comprehension, just not when it came to Anton.

Anton's frustration grew over the years. Not because his father never listened. Of course, that aggravated him. But his malignant exasperation was caused by the fact that each of his father's failures always ended the same. With Anton standing in front of this mahogany door, agonizing what place his father wanted to take over next. When the next place failed, it would be Anton's fault.

His father never took fault for his actions. He thought it was Anton's job to keep his places alive, but Anton didn't want that. Anton didn't understand why his father needed open land to fool around on. Literally, all his father did was build mansions that housed himself. Anton wondered how many mansions his father needed. He was more curious as to why his father couldn't keep any of his places alive.

Anton stared at the door. The gold letters etched in the door, displaying the name Darrin Brooks, caused bile to pool in the bottom of his throat. Anton swallowed it down before turning the knob. His father was on the intercom talking to someone. Darrin placed his hand in the air, signaling that he would be only a moment longer.

"My boy is here. Let me contact you later." Darrin's low voice spoke quickly before he clicked the button on the intercom, ending the call before the other person responded. His father sat back in his chair and threw up his hands. "Anton, look at you. How was your trip?" There was a melodic tone to his voice.

"It was riveting, Darrin." Sarcasm filled Anton's voice. "I always love being transported to decaying wastelands." Darrin's face twisted like he had eaten something sour. The condescension in his actions didn't go unnoticed.



“Next time, you’ll come home when told.” Darrin snarled as he pointed to the empty seat in front of him at the round table. Anton followed his directive and sat down in the chair, taking in the room.

Nothing had changed. His father was the same. His office was covered in mementos that displayed his awards and achievements. Darrin made sure he’d taken pictures with each prize and compulsively placed each prize next to its matching picture. Most of his prizes were trophies from helping other places on Earth in peril. He did it for the credit. Darrin Brooks didn’t have a milligram of compassion in his body.

His desk was placed in the corner of the room. Away from the windows and any entrances. The desk was adorned with a notebook and a container that held a pair of scissors and a couple of pens. There was nothing in the office that showed any side of Darrin’s home life, but he didn’t really have a home life. Anton was twenty-three and had abandoned any intentions of having a family with his father at the age of seven.

“Please just tell me what was so important?” Anton sighed, flexing his knuckles.

“We need to move. The only place to move is Cygna. It’s the only area in this realm with enough vegetation left to feed off of.” Darrin crossed his fingers in front of him, placing them on the table.

“There are people on Cygna.” Anton’s face was fixed with a horrified gaze. “You can’t even keep land alive when it’s just you. How are you going to keep Cygna viable enough to sustain its citizens?”

“Not me. You.” Darrin let out a small cackle as he rose from his seat. He began pacing the room as he talked, which was a typical indication that he had devised a plan. “You care about

people. I might be a conquer, but you're a breeder. You keep things alive. I don't care if things die."

Except his pride. Almost everything Darrin encountered dwindled away except his ego and pride. He was unbelievable. The audacity of his embellished ego to think this plan would work. Anton rubbed his eyes, trying to see if this was really happening. He wondered how his father thought this was a good idea.

"Father, seriously. How—"

"You know how I feel about that word, Anton." Darrin's voice inflated as he winced like he was in pain.

"I'm sorry, Darrin." Anton spoke through clenched teeth. "There are other places, other realms. You don't have to take over the last few left here. Can't you go back to Earth?"

"You know as well as I do that as long as Earth is cursed, we can't go back. I use my magic to keep my businesses afloat. On Earth, the nosey rem's will ask too many questions and end up dead." Darrin looked at Anton. "Would you like that blood to be on your hands?"

He was asking an impossible question. Darrin was playing a game that he played too well. He had spent years never taking blame for his actions. Always blaming those that didn't agree with him. If someone didn't agree with him, then it was their fault. Darrin had the delusion that if the person would have followed his commands, then anything that went wrong wouldn't have gone wrong.

"How do you expect to get control of Cygna from Carmalena and Luther? They aren't just going to sign over their land." Anton inquired, providing logical reasoning.

“After we’re done with them, they won’t have a choice.” Darrin let out a devilish laugh as he grabbed a glass canister that held a clear, silver liquid. Anton frowned as his father poured two glasses of nelkin. Nelkin was Darrin’s normal celebratory drink, but Anton knew his father just wanted control.

“I don’t want to do this.” Anton voice was shaking.

“You’re going to do this. We have a partner backing us.” Darrin smirked. “You’re doing this for your mother.”

“Don’t you dare slander her like this.” Anton slammed his hands on the table. “This is for you. It has nothing to do with her.”

“It has everything to do with her, and you know it.” Darrin’s voice was unphased by Anton’s anger. He placed the glass down in front of Anton. “Drink up. Our guest should be here soon.”

Anton reluctantly raised the glass to his lips. He gagged as the liquid slithered down his throat. As it traveled through his body, he felt like liquid cement had been injected into his veins. He could feel his body stiffing as the liquid settled in his stomach. He hated the feeling. The paralysis set in almost immediately. Once he was completely paralyzed from the Nelkin’s properties, he watched as Darrin poured his glass’ contents back into the nelkin container.

Anton couldn’t move his body physically, but he could still observe things with his eyes. This was Darrin’s way of conducting official business in the presence of his son. Anton was too opinionated in Darrin’s mind, which made it hard to having Anton present in his meetings. The elixir forced Anton’s undivided attention while providing Darrin the peace of not being blindsided by his son’s integrity.

I can't lie. I asked Darrin to bring Anton here. I wanted them both in the room. They both played a part in the plan, even if I didn't understand it myself. I felt a tremendous amount of guilt, knowing that in this moment I was the cause of Anton's suffering. I hoped that this moment would eventually become a distant memory. I had plans for Anton. I wanted him to have a better future, but I just needed to get his father to believe that this conquest of Cygna was his idea.

Darrin's ego made it easier to accomplish this. As I knocked on the door, I could see the fear in Anton's eyes. He was unsure of who was behind the door, and I wasn't sure if my presence would put him at ease. Darrin quickly opened the door and I made my way to the table. I sat in the third seat Darrin had just pulled up.

"Gentlemen." I smiled, cheerfully.

## SIX

(Gizelle)

Wallingford Hills. 2546 Kanede Street. That was the address Lycan gave me. He told me I should visit the place before the Charazes did. He wanted me to see the truth. By law, I was required to report it immediately, but there was a sense of curiosity that caused me to go on my own. Maybe it was Lycan's charismatic personality or the fact that within four hours of talking, he had caused me to doubt everything I had been taught about the magical world.

Even though I knew it was wrong, I had to see why he wanted me to go there so desperately. I had only been to Earth a few times before this. Only the inside of buildings, never actually outside. Cygna mimicked a picture-perfect Earth that one could find in a textbook, but it wasn't like the real thing. A few of the recruits lived on Earth, they were lucky they got to experience the weather changes and the human interaction. For twenty-seven years, I had seen the same land and the same sights. I was ready for a change. Ready to live out of confinement.

Shimming was the fastest and stealthiest way to transport ourselves to Earth. I decided that a quick shimmy in and out of the location would be my best option. Right after, I would definitely tell the Charazes. Maybe.

The living room was covered in cobwebs like it hadn't been cleaned in a couple of years. There was an old couch with a hideous floral print. The flowers looked like they were a mixture of tulips, lilies, and paint globs. The fabric of the couch was covered with at least two inches of dust. The dust-gray color filled the surface of the couch and everything surrounding it.

Examining the room didn't give me much. There was the couch and a coffee table that held a small black remote. The television was a small, nineteen-inch bulky box topped with an antenna. There was a mantle that held picture frames, but there weren't any visible pictures. Each frame held a blank photo, which was quite peculiar. As I moved closer to the picture frames, the room became occupied with the shadow of another person. I could feel it. When I turned around, there was nothing there, but the dusty objects and the walkway to the kitchen. I scratched my head in confusion. I was sure that someone else was there with me.

Something was telling me to move further through the house and I complied. Walking through the halls, I could feel a presence with me. The kitchen was empty, holding nothing but old appliances and dishes with fighting dusty bunnies. Frustration settled on my face because it seemed that Lycan had sent me to this address to toy with me. There were no signs of life. It looked like it hadn't been touched for years.

As the thought left my mind, a sensation rushed over me, requesting to be chased. The feeling danced with my spine as it called me to a far corner of the house. I followed the energy past three closed doors. Each one had a different color. Purple, orange, and then red. The colors were odd because most of the house was filled with muted colors. These doors showcased vibrant color. I wanted to explore the rooms, but the energy was pulling my body until I couldn't walk any further. A pink-painted door stood before me.

The surface of the door was covered with faded stickers. Tracing the stickers caused static to tickle my fingertips. Feeling the door could possibly help me trigger whatever presence was inside. As my palm touched the wood, a shock went through my body forcing me to pull my hand away. A voice began echoing through the halls.

“Charazes aren’t welcome here.” The voice hissed, causing my body to tense up. There was a frosty air on the nape of my neck. “Show yourself.”

Turning around slowly, I lowered my hood and gasped at the person in front of me. He looked much younger than I expected. He was one of the only two Earth bounded people in the lore. Never able to leave his house. I knew his name. Maybe that would provide me leverage. “How are you here, Amerlis?” I inquired. My mind tried to find an explanation, but it just didn’t make sense. The figure belonging to the voice circled me. He was taller and definitely younger. This was not how I thought I would meet him.

“Who are you?” The voice hissed. I wasn’t sure if he could understand me. I wondered if he was just a phantom energy source. Here to scare, but he couldn’t actually touch. Amerlis Pynia was a myth. He was someone who had been missing for decades, presumed dead. His wife, Piyata, was said to have went missing with him. No one ever heard from them again, but now he was here. “How do you know my name?” He gripped my arm tightly.

“Th- the Cha-- Charazes.” I stuttered as I felt him grip my arm tighter. He was real, or at least his touch was.

“Why did they send you? I have nothing left.” He growled, his eyes glowed like fire as his hot breath sprayed moist spit on my cheek. I feared wiping it, unsure if it would anger him

more. He held my gaze, the fire burning in his eyes somewhat dimming as another presence filled the hallway.

“Amerlis, let the girl go.” A softer voice came from behind him. I looked over his shoulder and smiled at the woman standing in the shadows. Her silhouette still showing her undeniable beauty in the dim sunlit hallway. I felt the pressure of his hold release and quickly rubbed the spot to soothe the pain.

“Piypy, she’s a Charaz. Her mission is to cause trouble.” Amerlis sneered as he walked towards the woman. The way he walked made me smile. He walked like I dreamed he would, but to see it here. In person. Was better than any dream, I could imagine. His strides were calculated, yet erratic. During training, we made bets on what it was like to be him. Amerlis was the first of many myjems to advocate for the preservation of magic. His campaigns were establishing forces within the Charaz community. He was one of the reasons the Charazes existed.

“If she wanted to cause us harm, then she would have done it, Mer. When she shimmied in here, she was looking for something and that something is not us. Let’s let the girl find what she’s looking for.” She spoke gently, cupping his cheeks. Her words had a tone that calmed my fear. I wasn’t scared anymore. Relieved, possibly. She obviously recognized me and that was enough for me not to announce my identity. Eventually, she would explain it to him. When I looked at her, I could see that she was giving me a smile and a nod.

With her approval, I turned back around and gripped the doorknob of the pink door. The initial shock filled my body. It felt like static electricity passing through my blood stream, causing my body hair to rise. I wondered if I should go in. Usually, excessive energy means stay



away in the magical world. Maybe Pytia had an answer. I looked over my shoulder to received confirmation, but the hallway was empty again. They wouldn't be able to help me.

Turning back around, I twisted the knob until I heard a click and pushed the door open. There was a slow creak as the door opened to reveal a dusty room filled with old books on a bookshelf, a bed, a desk, and toys on the walls. The room couldn't have belonged to someone older than thirteen. Minimalistic at best. Lycan wanted me to see this for some reason, but I couldn't understand why. Deciding that maybe using my power was best, I walked towards the bed.

Waving my hand, I cleared off the debris and laid on top of the covers. Rolling to my side, I tried to find a place that a young girl would hide her valuables. It had to be somewhere that was in plain view, but a spot that would remain oblivious to visitors. There were boxes underneath the desk, but that was too obvious. The bookshelf was at an apparent angle, as well. I search the walls. There were two posters on the walls. One contained a sunset over the ocean, and the other contained the solar system.

Something about this place was off. We didn't know that Pytia and Amerlis had a child. I wondered if the Charazes had known. It would be odd if they didn't since they were responsible for why Pytia and Amerlis couldn't leave. I kept skimming the room until I reached the toys on the shelf.

There was a yellow stuffed rabbit with green button eyes that was displaced about three centimeters. Rising from the bed, I crept to the shelf before pulling down the stuff animal. It was heavier and harder than I expected. The weight was probably what made it tilt down to the side. I noticed that threads were torn, and stuffing was coming out the backside. Turning it over, I

pulled out a small handheld journal. I rubbed the broken, glittery lettering, which I assumed once spelled a name.

Opening the journal caused a mist to seep onto the ground. The mist moved upward, filling the air before forming into an apparition of the stuffed rabbit. It circled me, looking me up and down before speaking. "I need the password to let you read. You get three attempts. If you fail, you'll be my next feast." The rabbit grinned after saying the last word as it rubbed its belly. I had no clue what the password was. I was still trying to figure out whose room this was or why I needed to be here. Lycan didn't tell me he was sending me into a possible death trap. Maybe he wanted me dead. Gave me this false location to make me believe I would meet Alphogee, but actually sent me to the home of the magical realms' most notorious convicts to die.

I tried to think what the password could be. The Charazes didn't tell us that the Pynias had been captured. They didn't tell us they were alive. The Pynias were considered criminals because they fled after Alphogee's parents cursed the realms. They were considered accomplices by association. There were rumors that a secret organization had been created before the war and this organization was what truly caused the events of the war. The Charazes repeatedly dismissed the rumor. They blamed Alphogee and as their recruits, we were ordered to believe them.

I'm starting to think that those demands were meant to keep us from asking questions or searching for the truth. It seemed like all the information the Charazes provided were half-truths. I wanted to know the impartial truth. Lycan was cryptic, which didn't help. My mother was loyal without question. Maybe, Pytia could help. I closed the journal and watched the phantom image disappear. After placing the journal in my inside cloak pocket, I put the stuffed rabbit back in its place.

I walked out of the room and closed the door behind me. Walking down the hall, I could hear chatter in the distance. The smell of bacon frying filled the air, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. I waited in the hall to hear the rest of their conversation.

“She’s not supposed to be here, Piypy. You know what happened the last time they were here.” Amerlis voice was low and firm.

“She’s not even a full Charaz. She’s a recruit. Don’t you see what this means?” Pytia’s voice was almost cheery.

“No, I—” There was silence. A few footsteps moved closer to me, causing me to back up in the hallway. “Come recruit. You’ve done enough eavesdropping.”

My chest felt like it was going to explode. I paced myself as I walked into the kitchen. Pytia was standing by the stove. I was able to get a good look at her now that the sun was lighting the whole room. She was of medium build with long auburn hair that hung in loose ringlets. She hummed a tune as she plated the bacon and eggs. “Would you like something to eat?” Her voice was cheery and Amerlis grunted as he sat at the kitchen’s isle.

“No, thank you. I’m just really trying to figure out why I was sent here.” I didn’t hide the confusion in my voice.

“I told you them damn Charazes were up to it agai—”

“Amerlis, please, she may be our only hope.” Piyata’s sighed. She was trying to hold in her frustration, but it clearly wasn’t working. Her statement made me remember what Lycan told me. He told me if I met someone to give them a coin. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a silver coin. It was about two inches wide.

“I was told to give you this.” I twirled the coin, reading the letters “s”, “c”, “o”, “r” etched into it. As I placed it her hand, Pytia gripped it tightly.

“Lycan.” She hummed. “See I told you, he sent her, not the Charazes.”

“It could be a trap. They could have broken him. I don’t care. They know where my Lena Bena is, and they won’t tell me.” Amerlis yelled as he slammed his fist down on the table. His eyebrows relaxed as Pytia glared at him. Within seconds, Amerlis grabbed his plate and made his way to the orange door. He opened and close it so quickly that I failed to get a good glance at what it contained.

“I am sorry about Amerlis behavior. This sentence has been hard on him.” Pytia sat down next to me, gently holding my hand. She was so pleasant that it made me wonder how she got herself in this predicament.

“What did you guys do? What happened to your child?” The questions fell from my lips. Realizing what I had done, I tried to be more assertive. I didn’t want her to think I was weak. “They don’t tell us how people get their punishments, just who has punishments, but they never told us that you both were alive.”

“The Chazies are something else.” Pytia scoffed as she pulled out a knife and a cutting board. “Do you have any siblings, recruit?” I watched her grab lemons from the refrigerator as I tried to figure out how to respond. Even though she was more welcoming than Amerlis, I needed to be wary of the information I provided. Maybe the Charazes were testing my loyalty and knew Lycan would give me the location.

“My name is—”

“We don’t care.” Amerlis voice returned to the room as he walked in. His stride was heavy as his bald head shined in the sunlight. He was a tall man with a muscular build and under the sun his figure was less intimidating. Before he had a gray tone to his walnut skin. Now, it was bright and vibrant. It was clear that these two weren’t dead. Setting his plate down, he stared at both of us. “I’m done with this beating around the bush, polite talk. Yo—”

“No, you are rude. I don’t know what made you so darn angry, but you can’t keep blaming the world for your problems.” The words slipped out of my mouth. He was causing an annoyance to erupt within me that controlled my words. “You’re the criminal, not me.” I made sure to clearly articulate each word as I glowered at him.

“Criminal. Criminal.” His breaths were short as his chest heaved up and down. “My daughter was taken from me. All because the Charazes were too greedy, and they label me as a criminal.”

“Honey—”

“No, Pytia, No. Listen here, girl.” His voice echoed through the room in a loud, deep bass. “They cared about money and power. 6,648 people slaughtered by their hands. Not ours. Yet, they lie and place the blame on those of us who have done nothing. Nothing, but uphold the true core values of our gifts.”

“What, my husband is trying to say is—”

“I don’t need you speaking for me, woman.” He huffed. “The girl can hear perfectly fine, and she clearly not dense in the head. Before you start believing these truths that those manipulators give, figure out the truth for yourself. If you’re not careful, you’ll be the next.”

I looked over at Pytia before speaking. She didn't say a word, just began humming. This time the humming asserted rage. The fury was the undertone of each hum as she rolled the lemon with her palm before slicing it. After slicing one lemon, she raised the knife pointing it at her husband. "Amerlis Kygen Pynia, if you ever address me that way again. Your testicles will become my personal stress balls. I don't give a damn what we've lost. You didn't lose your mind, so stop talking to me and this young lady like you have."

Her voice lacked any tremble, showing how serious she was. Beads of sweat began forming on the surface of Amerlis' head. He was swallowing hard continuously. In this moment, he looked vulnerable. He was no longer the tough guy he had portrayed in the beginning to frighten me. His eyes trailed to the ground before looking at Pytia and then me.

"I'm sorry." His voice was low and filled with disappointment. Pytia didn't say a word just began slicing the next lemon. Silence filled the room as the atmosphere became thicker. Amerlis' voice broke the silence. "Can I show you something?" He was staring directly at me.

I wasn't sure how to respond. He was like a broken thermometer I wasn't sure how to read. The way he stared at me, relaxed me more. His eyes were now a light gray versus the glaring red-orange they were earlier. I had a feeling I was going to regret this, but I was sent here for a reason. "Sure."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and then my vision was filled with the scenery of a dim-lit cave. The sound of fire rustling through the air filled the hollow passages. I followed the sound. The smell of sweat and mud filled my lungs as I crept further into the cave. The heat of the fire increased the further I walked down the rocky pathway until I could feel and see its warmth.

A ring of fire was surround by martzey crystals. Martzey crystals were only used in summoning rituals. Yet no one had been summoned.

“That’s right.” A sweet voice spoke from the shadows. I turned around immediately to see who it was. There was no one. Just the cave walls. “I’m not here to harm you. You can put your fists away.”

I looked down at my balled fists, not realizing that I had already gone into defense mode. “I’m sorry it’s just in—”

“Instinct.” The voice finished my sentence. I felt a pinch at the side of my temple. Wincing from the pain, I tried to massage it, but the pressure intensified. My vision blurred as nausea filled my lungs making it hard to breathe. I gasp for air as my throat tightened. The pressure in my head made it feel like it was being pounded repeatedly by a meat tenderizer. I held both sides of my head, silently screaming as a burning sensation filled my veins. My skin felt like it was being seared off. The heat of my skin caused my tears to dry, instantly. I could hear the voice’s muffled laugh before it spoke again. “Welcome to Scor.”

I closed my eyes and the searing pain stopped. When I opened my eyes again, I took multiple breaths, breathing in the fresh air of the Pynias’ house. I was staring back at Pytia and Amerlis as I stroked my throat while Pytia slid a glass of water towards me. Within seconds, the luxurious liquid coated my throat, soothing its irritation. After three more glasses, I was finally able to speak.

“What the hell did you do to me?” My voice was raspy as I checked the rest of my body for damage.

“Look at me. We have just given you what you need.” Pytia grabbed my hand hard. Her green eyes looked like emeralds in wet sand against her skin. “You find my daughter. You bring her home; do you understand me?”

“How am I supposed to find your daughter? Where do I even start?” I yanked my arm away. A bruise was already forming. Great. I needed to figure out how to explain this to the Charazes now. I’m not even supposed to be here. I should have never listened to Lycan.

“Butter Pecan.” Amerlis’ voice pierced through my thoughts.

“What in th—”

“You start with Butter Pecan.” He repeated. They both waved their hands and I felt my body being raised in the air. I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I was sitting across from Lycan.

“What the—” I tried to jump out of my seat but couldn’t move. I was still stuck to the chair like Lycan wanted. “Was any of that real?”

“What do you see?” He asked looking at me strangely.

“What do you mean? This is out of h—”

“Gizelle, calm yourself.” His eyes intensified as his voice demanded silence. “What do you see?”

I looked up at him and I could see his body glowing in a violet aura. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was seeing it right. “You’re violet. Not your skin, but around your body.”

“Good, it worked.” He let out a sigh of relief. Lycan put the top back on the tattered brown box. He pushed three items toward me. “These are yours. You’ll need them.”



I stared at the items. One was a small bean, the second was the coin with the engraved letters, and the third was the journal I found back at the house. When I looked up at Lycan, his face beamed with delight as he let out a devilish smirk.

## SEVEN

(Izelle)

I watched the clock as I sat in the training room. I had been waiting for thirty minutes. She had five more minutes to get here or I was going back out there for her. I looked around the room, trying to occupy my mind. There wasn't much in the room, but padded walls and a few stick dummies we practiced on. The room had change over the years, but none of the memories faded.

"You can't let her get to you." Gizelle's voice was calm and reassuring as she looked me in my eyes. "Our mother has a way about her. We have roles and we must follow them. I don't know why, but we do. She's only hard on you because you probably have the most important role."

"You think?" The idea of being something greater than what I was now gave me hope that I could eventually please her. "What about Nycromina?"

"Why must you always compare yourself to her?" Gizelle groaned as she rubbed her head. The frustration on her face was alarming.

"You do it to," I stammered, rising to my feet.

“No, I don’t. I’m not in a constant war with her.” Gizelle growled. “This is what I’m talking about. This whole destiny crap is driving a wedge between us. We need to stick together.”

“We can’t force Nyc--”

“But we can try. We can try to get her to work with us, not against us. Our mother is not always right. Sometimes you need to say the word ‘no’.” Gizelle scoffed.

“Izelle, are you ready?” The voice broke through the memory. I looked up and it was my mother. Her hair was in a braided bun. She was dressed in an all-black jumpsuit with black tennis shoes. She appeared to be fine, but I could sense something was off. I tried to see if I could recall a memory, but there was nothing. She must have been blocking me out. “Honey, are you okay?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I looked at the hand she was reaching out to me with. It had a bandage on the index finger. “How did that happen?” I asked, reaching out for her finger. My mother pulled her hand away.

“This was from the fall when we teleported.” She chuckled. She was lying. There weren’t any cuts on her hand. I examined her whole body when she was incapacitated. I knew she was lying. She knew she was lying, but I couldn’t understand why.

“Who were you talking to in the bathroom?” I asked, raising a brow. I watched her body tense up as she stared at me.

“Look, Izelle, there are more pressing matters at hand.” My mother’s voice was slightly annoyed, as she moved towards the middle of the room. “Where did you and Gizelle leave off?”

“You can’t just change the subject. First, you fall during shimmying and hit your head. Then, you’re talking to someone in the bathroom. Now, you have a cut on your hand. You can’t just keep omitting things from us.” My voice was high as I felt heat rush towards my ears. My mother’s stare was frightening, causing me to gulp hard.

“Listen here, young lady, when I don’t respond to something, that is not an open invitation for you to keep fishing for information. I s--”

“But, I’m j--”

“Am I not talking?” Her voice was hard and dared me to answer her rhetorical question. My eyes went to the floor as I twisted my fingers around each other. “Look at me.” I quickly answered her demand. “We are all in danger. You have a role to fulfill and you will do it. You are the only hope that we have left. Now, answer me, where did you and Gizelle leave off?”

“W-w-we were still trying to control my recalling. W-”

“Izelle,” There was a low grumble as I watched her fists clench. “you and Gizelle have been lying to me. You’re not progressing. Eighteen years. Eighteen years and this is all you’ve got. We can’t keep dealing with this mediocrity.”

“Me-Mediocrity.” I whispered. Her words stung my eyes as I rose to my feet. “I’ve been trying. I’ve been trying here. Your yelling doesn’t make anything better. How about we talk about what’s really bothering you versus you yelling at me?”

My mother face was tense. She was breathing heavy, which caused me to sit back down. “Your father is in danger. War is coming.” Her voice cracked.

“War? What are you talking about?” I couldn’t hide the disbelief in my voice. She was losing it. Creating scenarios that didn’t exist. “What do you mean about my father being in danger? What kind?”

“There isn’t enough time to explain. We could have months, weeks, or days until we are attacked. If the time comes, I need you to help me convince Nycromina to perform her role. Without her, we will all perish.” Her voice was serious. I could tell she believed whatever delusion she was having.

“Which means she’s the important one, not me. You just want me to convince her because you know you can’t.” I huffed, looking at the training dummy. At this moment, I felt the same. I was just here to help others while staying stagnant. “Can we please just train to improve my mediocrity?”

My mother didn’t say anything. She looked relieved to not be talking about the subject anymore. “What do you believe is your weakest focal point?” She questioned as she sat down next to me. Her immediate emotional transition was peculiar causing me to realize there were things she wasn’t forthcoming with.

“Recalling and combat.” I cowered at the admission, but I needed help.

“Let’s see,” My mother rubbed her chin before waving her hand. She transformed the room into an all-white room. There was nothing, but four walls, the floor, the ceiling, and us. My mother chuckled a little, probably from my facial expression. I quickly closed my jaw, trying to hide my astonishment. “Come over here.” My mother sat down with her legs crossed in front of her. She held out both of her palms, closing her eyes.

I stared at her. My mind was swarming as I just watched her sit on the floor like I wasn't angry. Like my world wasn't falling apart. It was always her way. You either listened or got forced to listen. Not anymore. I was going to take what was mine. Walking towards her, I could feel the fire in my veins. Sitting down in front of her, I placed my hands on her palms.

"Close your eyes and relax your mind. When I say go, use your power to tap into a memory of mine. Doesn't matter which one, but don't let any other memory distract you." Her voice was calming, almost alluring. The sound almost made me resent my anger. Almost.

I closed my eyes and relaxed. Through the darkness, I could see an array of memories like a movie selection screen. I scrolled through them with my hand. They felt so real. I scrolled until I seen a still image of Alphogee and my mother. I had no clue she even knew him. I wanted to open the image, but I decided to open another one instead. It was her with a middle-aged man and woman. I selected the image and felt my body being transported to another place.

It was a small shop filled with random trinkets on the walls. There were small children running around trying to be controlled by their parents to no avail. I could see a younger version of my mother. She couldn't be more than eleven. Her hands were gripping at the older man's shirt as she whined. "Daddy, I want two scoops of ice cream. I got straight A's this semester."

"Lena, too much sugar will keep you up all night." The older man looked down at his daughter. Carmalena made a pouting face until her father gave in. "Alright, alright, poke your lip back in."

"Yes" Carmalena threw her hands up in the air before letting out a boisterous laugh. I had never seen her like this, and it was satisfying to see my mother outside of her normal tough demeanor.

“You two are strange.” The older woman chuckled. She looked a lot like my mother. She was where we must have gotten our looks from. Her auburn hair was in loose curls around her face and her plump lips showcased a beautiful smile as she tried to hide her amusement at her husband and daughter’s exchange. My mother didn’t talk about her parents that much, but it was nice to know she still had memories.

“What can I get for the pretty young lady?” The waitress asked.

“Three Butter Pecans please, and I will have two scoops this time. No kiddie cup.”

Carmalena beamed as the waitress smiled.

“You got it.” The waitress winked before turning and making the scoops of ice cream. Her father grabbed the tray of ice cream cups and Carmalena raced to a table in the corner. I sat down and watched them. They joked about things, shared laughs, and played with each other’s spoons. Just watching them made me appreciate what they had. I didn’t have many moments like that with my family. I wondered why my mother was the way she was if she grew up like this.

Nycromina thought things with us were perfect. It wasn’t. We weren’t a family who carried sweet memories. Mother worked us hard without praise. I resented my mother’s devotion at times and Gizelle did, too. Nycromina had the easy part. She defied all of our mother’s wishes. All she had to say was no. While Gizelle and I attempted to follow my mother’s unreasonable demands.

The memory faded on them laughing. I opened my eyes and we were back in the training room. The walls were still white. I watched my mother, whose eyes were still closed. She was no longer the little girl I saw a few seconds earlier.

“You know about Alphogee, don’t you?” My mother’s voice was low, but she didn’t open her eyes or move her body at all.

“I know that you know him, but I don’t care about that. It’s not like you would share anyway.” I refused to hide the agitation in my voice. “I was watching you and my grandparents at an ice cream shop.”

“Excuse me?” Her eyes opened and she glared at me.

“My grandparents. That was the memory I chose.” I gulped hard, unsure of why she was so angry.

“Izelle that was private. I only let you have access to answer your questions from earlier. No one told you to go to my past memories.” She spat. Her reaction was not what I expected.

“You didn’t say any of them were off limits. You said choose whichever memory I wanted.” I scoffed. “Why does it matter anyways?”

“We are not talking about this.” My mother got up.

“Are you serious? They’re my grandparents, too, you know. I deserve to know them.” I cried.

“That is final.” My mother changed the room to an Olympic size pool. “Thirty laps for your disobedience. I’m enchanting the door until you finish.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I groaned as she walked out the door.



## EIGHT

(Carmalena)

Carmalena stirred slightly as she rubbed her head. It throbbed as she touched it. She felt wetness as she pulled her fingers away. Looking forward, she couldn't really see where she was. Footsteps could be heard coming closer. Her vision began to clear as she blinked her eyes multiple times. "Hello?" She called as she started to see the trees and dirt beneath her body.

"Good, you're up." A voice spoke with relief. Carmalena looked up and saw a tall shadow figure. It was wearing a black, hooded robe and its face was hidden by the large hood. The hooded figure raised a black gloved hand to her, causing Carmalena to move backwards. "Don't be afraid. I just want to heal that nasty cut on your head."

"Wh..What are you?" Carmalena stammered as she continued to move back until she felt her back against a tree. Feeling the wood against her skin caused her to remember Natal. "Where is she?"

"Let me heal you first." The figure tried to reach out to touch Carmalena, but she smacked the gloved hand away.

“Where is Natal?” She spoke sternly as she stared at the hooded figure, coldly.

Carmalena watched the hooded figure lower its head before looking to the right. She looked to the right of her and noticed the body laying limp in the distance. Crawling over to the body, her heart pounded hoping for the best, but knowing that it was the worst. “No.”

Carmalena could feel an intense pressure in her head. She needed to get Natal to breathe again. She tried to get Natal to breathe again by breathing into her mouth before performing chest compressions. She checked for her pulse there was nothing. Carmalena kept trying, frantically breathing. After a few minutes, she realized that there was no use. Pulling her hands up to her face, she began to sob hard.

“I’m sorry. Natal didn’t make it.” The figure’s voice was filled with sorrow.

“No.” Carmalena crawled back over to her, picking Natal’s head up and placing it into her lap. Natal was rigid and so cold. Still she was beautiful. Her cinnamon colored skin was now pale and lack any signs of life. Her lips were graying around the edges and Carmalena just wished she had kissed them one last time. She knew her next request was hopeless, but she felt compelled to say it. “Help her. Please, help her. She can’t die. She’s all I have left.”

“She’s already dead. I can’t help her. When you teleported her, her body was too weak, and she arrived dead while you passed out.” The figure spoke placing a hand on Carmalena’s shoulder. Carmalena felt a surge of energy go through her body. She raised her hand to her forehead. The gash was no longer there.

“How did you do that?” Carmalena asked, looking up from Natal’s body while still running her fingers through her lifeless coils.

“I’m a Charaz, dear.” The figure spoke softly.

“A what?” Her confusion set in again.

“Oh, dear.” The Charaz’s voice displayed fear. “Do you know this man?” The Charaz waived its hand and an image of man’s head floated in the air. His curly hair was perfectly angle around his oval face. His green eyes seemed to stare directly at her through the floating image. His coffee colored skin was smooth against his cheekbones. There was no doubt that the image was Alphogee.

“Yes, that’s Alphogee.”

“And what do you know about him?” The Charaz spoke softly. “Please, don’t lie to me.”

“That he’s an orphan like me. He’s twenty-five and he’s been living in Wallingford Hills for six months.” The last sentence echoed in Carmalena’s mind as she realized that there was probably no town to go back to. “My home.”

“Did he tell you anything? Say anything about us?” The Charaz voice was calm, but Carmalena could tell there was an undertone of annoyance.

“No.” Carmalena responded quickly, but then remembered the notecard. “Actually, he said something about me being the start to his downfall.”

“It’s safe everyone.” The Charaz called out to the trees. Within in seconds, the Charaz was joined by others like it. “This is Carmalena, she’s the destined grandmother of our savior.” The other Charazes stared at her beneath their hoods.

“I’m nobody’s anything.” Carmalena growled. She was grieving, and they wanted to talk about a savior. Natal didn’t have a savior. They didn’t save her. She just wanted to go back to what was left of her house, if there was anything left at all.

“Don’t worry, Carmalena. Natal will receive the proper Charaz burial.” A man’s voice spoke as one of the hooded figures stepped forward, hovering over Natal’s feet. He touched her ankle and she disappeared.

Frantically, Carmalena felt her lap. “Hey, you can’t do that. Bring her back.” She jumped to her feet, tears now streaming down her face again.

“As a Charaz, she has to be buried in our sacred tombs.” The man stepped back into the circle surrounding her. They all stared at her, which made her feel more hopeless. “We want to offer you your own land. It’ll be in another realm than the one that exists here on Earth. You are free to visit Earth at any time.”

“You expect me to go to a realm and you couldn’t even protect one of your own.” Carmalena stomped her feet. She felt a tightness on her throat, making it hard for her to breathe.

“You should be grateful that we are giving you anything. Your fraternization with Alphogee is what got Natal killed. Don’t blame us for your indiscretions.” One of the Charazes’ voice was cold as it tightened its fist. Carmalena couldn’t see who it was because her eyes began to water. She felt the grip around her throat tighten. “Be glad we’re giving you a chance to come back to Earth. It could be a one way ticket to magical prison.”

“Let her go.” Another voice boomed. Carmalena felt the pressure on her throat loosen. She gasped for air, trying to gain back the air she lost.

“I don’t have magic, and I don’t have anyone to visit. Everyone I love is gone. So sorry I don’t see this as an act of gratitude.” Carmalena croaked, rubbing her throat. She felt her stomach sink low. Carmalena couldn’t believe that she was alone again.

At least at the orphanage, she had Natal and the Bandsens. She remembered meeting them when she was twelve. Her parents had gone on a vacation and left her with her babysitter. They never came back and were reported missing. She didn't have any other relatives and was sent to the town's orphanage owned by the Bandsens. There she met Natal. Over the years, they had planned their whole lives together. Even bought a place near Carmalena's childhood home, but now what she thought of as home was where she lost all four of the people, she considered her family.

"This new land you can make yours. Govern it anyway you choose, as long as you register the magical families with us. There are three types of people in this world: remes, typuits, and myjems. Remes are humans without powers or knowledge of magic, typuits are humans that know that magic exists, and myjems are the humans that possess magical abilities. Your town was only full of remes and myjems until today. We must now move the new typuits and the rest of myjems with you to this new land." The male Charaz spoke as the others nodded.

"And what if I don't want this new land?" Carmalena inquired.

"The planet has been cursed for the next 6,646 years. Alphogee's parents killed themselves and 6,648 others to curse our lands, and we fear that he is following in his parents' footsteps. He's the reason for this war and all its casualties. But, now that we have found you, we can be free again. He may have spent the last six months convincing you that you're his ally, but you're the enemy." Another Charaz spoke. The third Charaz voice was monotone and filled with arrogance. "If you choose to spend life here on Earth, you and everyone else who knows that magic exists will be tortured. The remes have a way of annihilating things they don't understand."

“I don’t possess magic. How do you expect me to govern a place where some contain magic and some don’t?” Carmalena responded. She was beginning to question whether they were actually giving her a choice.

“My darling, you are not only a myjem, but you are one the most important one.” A male Charaz with a raspy, deep voice explained.

“You will give birth to children in the future. Your first-born will become a Charaz like us. One of your other two children will give birth to a child that will save us from this curse.” An uproar of cheers followed another woman’s words. Once the cheering stopped, she continued speaking. “Now, go back and gather what’s left of your things. We will meet you at dusk.”

Carmalena opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get her words out. She was back in her backyard, staring at a half-charred house. Reality was settling in as she walked towards the back door, reluctantly reaching for the door knob. This time it was cool to the touch. She turned it slowly and watched it swing open. Most of the room was charred. The kitchen was obliterated to mere pieces and all the furniture was burnt. She looked where she sat across from Alphogee and could see something sticking out of the rubble. Walking over to it, she gasped realizing it was the journal Alphogee left. She grabbed the pen attached to the side and opened it to the first page. Her heart pounded against her chest as she scribbled furiously.

~

“Mom? Mom?” A voice yelled. Looking up, Izelle face began to fill my view. “Are you okay?”

“I believe so. Why wouldn’t I be?” I croaked. My throat was dry, and my head hurt.

“You passed out and you’ve been out for a few minutes.” Izelle’s voice was filled with concern.

“I’m fine. I don’t know what happened, but I can see you and only my head hurts.” I shrugged, trying to convince her that I was okay. I needed to get to the bathroom and see what was happening. I rose to my feet, stumbling for the first few steps. “I’m okay. Just need to get to the bathroom.”

I walked out the room and into the hallway. The house felt empty. As I walked down the hallway, I felt sick. The Charazes had sent a message. The prophecy was starting. That could be the only reason that memory occurred. This was their way of telling me they were sending someone to break the news to us. I wanted to try to get the girls to understand what was happening first. The fountain was the first message. I should have known.

Staring at the walls, I smiled. There were different family portraits that stood as snapshots of our lives. The fourteenth portrait was the most recent one. We took it seven months ago. No one knew the trouble that would follow. We were all covered in snow laughing when the photographer snapped the picture. I don’t think, I’ve seen us that happy in years. It finally started to feel like a family until the next week, Gizelle had to report for training.

Her reporting for training created a whirlwind. I needed to make sure everyone else was prepared. I knew that it was only a matter of time before the true danger came. I was preoccupied with preparing for my fate that I forgot about keeping those I loved most close. As I walked into the bathroom, I felt lonelier than before. I couldn’t help but think that this was my fault and now I had to tell my girls the truth. I had to let them know what was really going on.

Closing the door, I let out a sigh of relief. I walked over to the sink and turned on the cold water. I rinsed my face with the water. My skin felt refreshed by the feeling. I raised my head and looked into the mirror. There was an aching pain in my forehead, but there weren't any scars or bruising. As I examined the rest of my face in the mirror, a high pitch beeping filled the room.

"Mena." A distorted high-pitched voice called. "Mena, can you see me?" I looked around the room, trying to find out where the voice was coming from. I looked back at the mirror and let out a yelp.

"How...how..." I couldn't find the words. This was impossible. She was dead. "Natal?"

"I don't have long. Listen, something is coming. It's not good. People are in danger. Everything is not what you think." Natal's voice was airy and distant. "You have to help him. The jour—"

"You're breaking up, Natal." I held the sides of the mirror. She was as beautiful as I remembered, but this time she was breathing.

"Mena, the journal." Natal screamed as her image slowly faded from the mirror.

"Come back." I yelled as I touched the mirror. She couldn't do this to me. Not again. She couldn't leave me again.

"Mom, are you okay?" Izelle's voice called from the other side of the door. I could hear her tapping on the door. I quickly wiped my tears away.

"I'm okay, Izelle. Don't come in. I'll be out in a second." I responded, as I wiped my tears. I checked the mirror to make sure there were no visible signs of my tears before walking to the door and opening it. Izelle was standing there with worry in her eyes.



“I heard you screaming.” Izelle voice was low. “Are you sure everything is alright?”

“I’ll explain everything to you later. Go get ready for training. I’ll meet you in a few.” I commanded as I walked towards my library. I wasn’t sure what Natal’s message meant. I still wasn’t sure if that was really her, but she knew about the journal. She wasn’t there when it was given to me. There was no way she could have known. The journal was the only thing other than her ribbon that I kept from our old house. I hadn’t used it in years.

As I reached the library, I tapped on the door four times. “Ovelius.” The door glowed blue before turning back its normal mahogany color. I turned the knob and walked in. The room was filled to the ceiling with books. There were over eight hundred books. Most of them were my favorite books I used to read when I was younger. There were different collections from fiction to poetry. My parents used books to teach me knowledge and it was something I just couldn’t leave behind when they died. Most of the books were from their collections while the others were the ones I collected when I visited Earth.

I walked over to the fireplace and opened the ash shoot. There was a silver box with a few engravings on it. I grabbed the box and took it over to my desk that sat in the middle of the room. Setting the box down, I took a deep breath as I grabbed the letter opener. I slid the sharp blade against the skin of my index finger. I watched the cerise nectar pool on my skin. Once I was sure I had enough blood, I traced the engravings on the box. The engravings illuminated in a golden hue as my blood sunk into each of the symbols. There was a hissing sound and then a click of a lock.

“Still got it.” I chuckled as I opened the box. It contained an amulet with six symbols. The circular, brass shape had lines carved into it that displayed six equal sections. Each section

was accompanied by a spike on its circumference. Each spike aligned with one of the six symbols. I never found out what the symbols meant, but my mother gave it to me. She told me to hold on to it. I wasn't sure why, but the fear in her eyes told me it was a directive that I shouldn't question.

My mother never told me that I was myjem. She never told me I possessed magic, but I was starting to believe this amulet, and all of this was for my own protection. I just wish I knew what I needed to be protected from. It was starting to become clear that Natal was apart of that protection and it made me questioned whether what we had was real. She had known of my powers, but never said anything. I had spent eleven years of my life befriending her and believing in her while she was using me. I just couldn't understand why she came back now. The journal had nothing to do with her.

As I set the amulet back in the box, I pulled out a folded piece of paper. I unfolded the paper smiling at its written words:

Luther Cygna: Kyeer

Carmalena Cygna: Fyete

Izelle Cygna: Emptent

Gizelle Cygna: Obsofuit

Nycromina Cygna: Isulia

I couldn't help but smile at the writing. When I discovered each person's power, I recorded it outside of the record book I used for the Charazes. Luther told me he didn't really trust the generosity of the Charazes and this piece of paper was our compromise. I touched each of the

names on the list. I never wrote our roles because I never wanted anyone to know what I was told other than Luther until the time was right.

I set the piece of paper to the side and I grabbed the cobalt journal with gold trim around the edges. It still smelled like him. He smelled like warm apple cider and ginger. I hadn't held this journal in years. The last time I had it out the box was when I was training Gizelle on how to identify familial scents. As an obsofuit, she was able to sense and smell ancestral connections between individuals. Most obsofuits could only observe things about people and places. I made it a goal of mine to teach her how to smell familial connections. It was one attribute that would set her apart from all the other Charazes and the recruits if she could learn to ignore her mundane observations.

I let the weight of the journal sit in my hand before closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. The memory of Alphogee came back:

He took a deep breath and reached into his bag, pulling out a journal with a cobalt colored bind with a solid gold line down the middle. "I need for you to have this. Don't ever let them know you have it, okay?"

"What are you talking about?" Carmalena stared at the journal in front of her. She held it in her hand. "What is this supposed to be?"

"Our communication. You write in it and I'll know all your words. I'll even write back. Only you and I will be able to see it." Alphogee smiled at her, gently rubbing her arm. "I've got to go away for a while. Things are starting to get a little rearranged in my life. I'll be back for you, I promise." His heart skipped a few beats when she felt her arm yank away. He could see her glowing personality starting to dim.

“You can’t leave me. You’re the closest thing I’ve ever had to family other than Natal.” Carmalena tried to cover the breaks in her voice. Alphogee reached for her hand again, this time patting it gently. He didn’t know how to respond. It was true that he had grown close to her over the last sixth months, but he couldn’t just forget the mission he had. His parents had died to protect him. He needed to make sure that he fulfilled their dying wish.

“It’s not like that, Mena. I don’t want to leave, but sometimes people have to. Doesn’t mean they won’t be back. Let me show you something.” Alphogee laid his hands in front of him palm up. “Hold my hands and close your eyes.” Carmalena reluctantly placed her palms against his before closing her eyes.

She felt a tingling sensation travel from her hands to her head. The darkness that she saw once she closed her eyes was now filled with a gray mist and she could hear a voice that was clearly not Alphogee’s. The voice was a woman she had never heard before and it seemed to be chanting her name. Once Carmalena acknowledged the voice, it began speaking to her.

“You will give birth to a nation and through this nation, one child will be born and forced to bear the burden of breathing life into the nation’s future savior. This savior will save humanity.” The voice was crisp and clear. Carmalena had questions. Before she could ask them, the gray mist disappeared, and she was looking at the inside of her closed eyelids. She opened her eyes slowly, expecting Alphogee to still be there. He was gone. All he left was the journal and a small, blank notecard. She felt tears well in her eyes. She had been abandoned again. He could have at least said goodbye.

As the memory faded from my mind, I opened my eyes and turned to the first page of the journal. I rubbed my fingers over the letters: *I will find you and I will kill you. You have killed*

*innocent people and Natal. You will pay, Alphogee, with your life.* I remember how furious I was when I wrote those words. The Charazes just told me that Alphogee was the reason why Natal was dead, and I ended up grieving three times that night. Once for Natal. Once for my home. And once for Alphogee. He was like a brother to me. Protected me, looked out for me, and then he turned his back on me. Killed my true love and caused a war that threatened to expose all magical beings. I couldn't understand it. I didn't understand it, and I don't think I ever will.

I picked up my pen and I began to write in the notebook as Alphogee's words repeated constantly in my head.

*Did you ask Natal to contact me? Is someone in danger?*

I felt childish writing this. I hadn't talked to him in years and the last time I talked to him, I threatened him. I started to close the journal until I saw words start to appear on the page.

*Natal? No. Danger, yes.*

I wondered if this was a trick. There was no way that Natal was a hallucination. She came to me. Someone sent her.

*Are you in danger? Who is in danger?*

My heart was pounding as the letters came across the page.

***Luther***

I closed the journal quickly. I wasn't sure how he knew about Luther or what type of twisted joke this was, but I wasn't going to entertain it anymore. As I put the journal back into the box, I noticed a small notecard. It was blank and crinkled. I picked it up and the words began to appear on the surface. It was Alphogee's handwriting:

*Mena,*

*This is not how I wanted to say goodbye, but I could sense that you were going to have questions and those questions I'm not allowed to answer. This is already hard for me, and I can't let you make it harder. I am sorry I had to leave you this way, but please understand that it is for your own good. They are coming and when they come for you, you must tell them that you are the warrior. They will know what that means. Trust me, eventually things will become clear. Tell them you are the start to Alphogee's downfall, but don't believe everything they say. I don't know how, but they will turn you against me. Just please don't try to come after me or you will die. I don't want you to die, but I have a mission that can't be interrupted. We will meet again when the time is right. Please use the journal, if you need me. It will always find you when you need it or when it needs you. Whether you use it is another choice you will have to make. The words on this notecard will vanish once you place it down. Just like the journal, only your blood can activate the words. I will miss you.*

*-Alph*

## NINE

(Nycromina)

It had been three days since my argument with Damere. I wanted to talk to him, but I was still angry. He was so inconsiderate. Acting like he was the only person he had to think about. I thought about him before just up and leaving, only to get hesitation from him.

As the thoughts swarmed through my mind, I punched and kicked the combat dummy in front of me. Every time Damere crossed my mind, I hit harder. The harder I hit, the easier it was to hold back the tears. With each combo, tension released from my body.

“Training doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes. You’re going to tire yourself out before we even get started.” My father chuckled as I heard footsteps behind me. I acted like I was wiping sweat off my face, to disguise the fact that I was crying, before turning around.

“Sorry, just needed to get a little steam off. All of the tension in this house has been driving me crazy.” I shrugged as I sat down on the floor next to the padded wall.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Izelle and your mother are just going through Gizelle withdrawal. They’ll be back to normal after today’s Charaz induction.” He sat down next to me with two lidded cups in his hands.

“Are lessons cut short today to allow you to attend?” I raised an eyebrow. If he left, I could finish packing. I planned to leave in two days. After everything with Damere, I just wanted to leave. I just needed to figure out where to go.

“Nope, I’m going to skip the induction. The Charazes and I have this thing. I stay away from their functions.” My father gave me a slight smile before handing me one of the cups. “Yorel tea for you. It’s good for mental clarity and nausea. Cata Myte for me.”

“To heal your wounds after I beat you down.” I snickered.

“You win because I let you.” My father took a sip of his tea. “You don’t let me do anything.” I grabbed the cup, shaking it gently in the air. “By the way I asked for Piyente.”

“I heard you this morning. It sounded like you drank a little too much last night.” He replied. My cheeks felt hot. I didn’t expect anyone to be up that early, but a sense of relief filled me. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep this a secret. “And Piyente is just for extra energy. You obviously have too much of that.”

“But why?”

“Because you have to practice and too much energy burns you out fast.”

“I’m not talking about the tea. I’m talking about you and the Charazes.” I took another sip of my tea. It tasted kind of strange. “Did you put something in this?”

“The Charazes are a story that would take weeks to tell and we only have a few minutes before practice starts.” He laughed as he raised his eyebrows at the question. “No ratago syrup.”

“But that’s the best part.” I faked whined, causing him to shake his head as he finished his drink.



“Drink up. We don’t need sugar slowing us down.” He sprung to his feet and began stretching. “I’m assuming you’re already stretched and ready to go.”

I finished my tea before setting the empty cup down. I rose to my feet and put myself in my fighting stance. My father knocked me off balance with one swift kick. I hit the ground, the cushioned floor protecting my fall. “No fair. I wasn’t even ready.”

“The enemy doesn’t care, Cro. They strike when you least expect it. You have to be vigilant.” My father reached to help me up. I grabbed his hand and flipped him over onto his back. He let out a winded laugh. “Good one.”

I snickered before getting up and standing back in my stance. This time we dueled. We kept tallies as we knocked each other over and pinned them to the ground. I was currently up by two. One more and my father would lose this round. He threw a punch, most likely aiming for my right jaw. I ducked and punched him in the stomach. He stumbled back a bit. I kicked him across the face and his face cocked to the right. Once my foot hit the ground, I pulled the other one in the air to kick him again, but his hand caught my foot and he flipped me to the ground.

I winced in pain. Rising to my feet slowly, I limped back into my fighting stance. My father was kneeling on the ground, holding his chest. This was one of his tricks. He had done it before. Pretending to be hurt to get me closer to him. I watched him, but he was still clutching his chest.

“Daddy?” I couldn’t control the concern in my tone. I started walking over to him as his arm started to tremble. Within seconds, his whole body started to shake. Panic filled my brain as I ran over to him, trying to lay him on his back.

“Mom. Izelle. Help.” I screamed repeatedly, but there was no answer. He was still shaking beneath me. “Hold on, Daddy. I got this.” I quickly froze the room. Without thinking, I rubbed the heart necklace around my neck. Damere appeared in his boxers with a tooth brush in his mouth.

“The fu—”

“No time. He’s seizing. No one’s answering me. They must be at the stupid induction setting up,” I growled. “Please help me.”

“Keep him frozen. My mother is better at these things than me. I’ll be right back.” Damere shimmied away. It felt like he was gone for an eternity. I didn’t know how much longer I could keep him frozen. I reached for him, but Damere appeared back in the room with his mother by his side.

“Nyhino. We need to get him to a bed now. Go back to the house and get the Yethis bag.” His mother voice was sharp. She turned to me as Damere shimmied away. “Help me get him to the bedroom.”

I hurried to my feet and helped her carry him to the bedroom.

~

The clock on Damere’s watch kept ticking. His mother had kicked us out of the room, but I refused to go far. I sat on the floor in the hallway with my hands over my ears. Applying pressure to the side of my head seemed to make the images stop. It was easier to not concentrate when black spots filled my vision. I felt my stomach rumble, and quickly darted to the bathroom. I hurled until I couldn’t anymore.

Once I was sure there wasn't anymore coming, I flushed the toilet and washed my hands. The water swirled down the drain. Plugging the stopper, I let the faucet fill up the sink. The water felt like silk on my hands and cooled my face as it splashed against it. He would be okay. Damere's mother would fix everything. He had to be okay.

The water looked like the eye of a tornado as it torpedoed down the drain. The mirror showed my dripping face. I patted it dry, pushing away the thoughts that contained the worst. I looked back in the mirror, and the reflection of Damere was in the corner. He paced towards me wrapping his arms around me while resting his chin on my shoulder. He stared at our reflections in the mirror. His hands held my waist and I watched his eyes glaze over.

Within a few seconds, his eyes had life again. "You're—"

"Your father is stable now." His mother's voice called from the hallway. I pulled away and followed the voice without acknowledging Damere.

The walk from the bathroom to my parents' room, frightened me. Damere knew. I could see it in the way he looked at me. I needed to see my father. Once I was sure he would be alright, I would deal with Damere. As I entered the room, exasperated gasps escaped my mouth. My father looked so weak. The great Luther Cygna looked so feeble. The skin around his eyes had developed a gray hue while his lips were swollen and bright red.

"What happened to you?" I rushed towards him, taking his hand in my own.

My father smiled at me unconvincingly. "I'm fine, Cro." He coughed. "Really."

I didn't believe him. I squeezed his hand firmly, but gently. "You're not okay. What happened?" I asked. "One minute we're fighting, and then the next minute you're seizing."

“I’m not sure, Cro. I am fine though.” My father grimaced as he tried to sit up to prove that he was fine. I pushed his body back down.

“Please don’t lie to me.” I lowered my head. Damere’s mother hadn’t told us what was wrong. She didn’t confirm that he was going to live either. I needed to tell him now before it was too late. “I need to tell you something.” My father looked at me, his eyes showing panic. I took a few breaths before speaking. “I’m pregnant.”

“I knew it.” Damere’s voice filled the room before I could get a reaction from my father. I turned around and stared at him. I didn’t know what to say. There was no way to rationalize it. I knew I needed to say something, but no words came out. I just sprinted past him. Damere didn’t let the subject go easily, he followed behind me calling my name. I ran faster, but it didn’t work. I felt his strong arms wrap around me, forcing me to ease in his embrace. “I need you to stop running.”

I turned around and faced him, cupping his face with my hand. “I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

“It makes sense.” He pulled my hands away before gently kissing my forehead. “Now I know why you were so mad. I’ve been spending the past three days agonizing over the disconnect.” His breath had a warm cinnamon smell to it. I didn’t respond. I just stared in his eyes, searching for the truth. He must have noticed because he opened his mouth to speak. “I’ll go with you or we can stay here. Whatever you want to do. Just promise me. Promise me. No more secrets.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a promise I could keep. Telling Damere everything wouldn’t be a simple task. My family had secrets. Secrets that I inherited. The worry in his eyes alarmed me,

though. I could tell he needed those words to hold on. “I promise.” The lie poured from my lips like thick smoke. My heart immediately fell to my feet as his face glowed with satisfaction.

“My father. We need to get back to him.” There was a strong feeling in my chest that something might be wrong. Trying not to seem too alarmed, I walked just a little faster than normal until I reached my parents’ bedroom.

When I reached the bedroom, Damere’s mother was standing over my father. “He’s alright, Nycromina. This tea should get the swelling to go down.” Her voice lulled as she put the tea up to my father’s lips.

“Do we know what caused this?” Damere asked his mother as she placed the cup on the table.

“No, it’s unlike anything I’ve seen. I’m going to go home and do a little research, I need you to watch over Luther. If anything changes, summon me immediately.” His mother gathered all her things before shimming away.

“Is this the young man?” My father’s voice muttered through the silence.

I nudged Damere, encouraging him to speak first.

He hesitated for a few moments before speaking. “Hello, Mr. Cygna.” Damere’s voice was shaking as he stepped forward. I had never seen him this nervous. It was quite adorable. My father caused fear in him. It amused me but pained me that they were meeting under these circumstances. I had waited three years to introduce them because I wanted it to be the right moment, but now it was clear there would never be one.

“Call me Luther. We can skip the formalities. Seeing as I might be dying and all.” My father cackled, almost breathlessly.

“Don’t joke like that. You’re not dying.” I grunted as I stomped my feet. I wanted to break down and cry, but I didn’t want my father to see me be vulnerable. He needed my strength.

“I’m sorry, Cro. I didn’t mean it. It was a joke.” He offered a smile, but I could tell he knew something that I didn’t.

“Are you dying?” The words caused him to stare off into the distance. There was silence. I repeated the words again. This time more slowly with more emphasis. “Are you dying?”

“Nycromina, listen to me.” He pulled his body up slowly. “You need to leave.”

## TEN

Two tall figures walked in to the poorly lit room. Two briefcases sat on a table as they surveillance the room. The table was the only thing that was lit in the dark room as a speaker on the table began emitting sound.

“Is it done?” A voice from the speaker spoke.

“Yes.” The taller man said approaching the speaker. He had a mask on and was dressed in all black.

“About how long will it take?” The voice responded.

“It’ll take about thirty minutes for the poison to seep through his bloodstream, and then within a few days he’ll be completely bed ridden. Give or take a few more days, he will die.”

The other taller man spoke before letting a maniacal laugh.

“Great. Luther Cygna will not prevent this plan.” The voice spoke quickly. “Take your briefcases and never come back to this location.”

The two men each grabbed a suitcase and walked out the door. When the door closed behind them, they shimmied away.

## ELEVEN

(Carmalena)

The round arena held about two hundred people. The seats in the arena held all the magical beings on Cygna that wanted to attend. There were Myjems, of course. But some of the Golphirs and Byjuns decided to join. Some of the Golphirs were given the day off from guiding Poyan. Golphirs were dwarf-like creatures that guarded the prison. They were able to camouflage without restriction, which allowed them to sneak up on the enemy. The Byjuns were the forest protectors. They followed the Charazes wherever they went to ensure their safety. The Charazes sat in the middle of the arena directly across from the stage. The stage hosted a platform with a podium and a large screen behind it. As everyone took their seats, the screen started to buzz.

“We are here to provide order and protection for all magical beings” the message scrolled across the screen before the sound of Yundel birds singing filled the space. I always found the sound soothing. It reminded me of harps and violins streaming in harmony. Izelle squeezed my hand with excitement. She was happy I chose her as my companion, but little did she know her father refused to attend. I hope that Nycromina showed up. Gizelle could use the support.



“There goes Gizelle.” Izelle screeched as the Charaz recruits entered. I had known each of them. Some of their families had moved back to Earth once they believed it was safe to return. Out of this group, Gizelle was the only one who was a true Cygnan. I smiled as I saw her warm face, but I could see its perplexing gaze from here.

“Is it me or does your sister look confused?” I whispered to Izelle, who squinted her eyes before nodding.

“She’s probably nervous. Who wouldn’t be?” Izelle looked at me like I had the answer. Maybe she was right, but the look still raised concerns. Gizelle still had the chance to say no. I just hoped that face wasn’t an indication that she was turning down being a Charaz.

The music stopped as all five of the Charaz recruits stood there as everyone looked at them in silence. There were supposed to be six recruits, but Lycan Mybel was banned from becoming a recruit after the discovery that he was aiding Alphogee. One of the Charazes approached the podium. When he began speaking, my body tensed. He was the one that took Natal away.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here today to induct our newest recruits. It has been twenty-seven long years since we have accepted a new recruit and I am proud to host this ceremony.” His voice was cheerful and was met by a round of applause. He stopped the round of applause and continued. “Out of the five recruits, only two will be inducted tonight. For those who aren’t inducted, we have a spot for you in the Poyan building if you would like.”

The faces of the recruits looked shocked. This was my first time attending a Charaz induction and it was extremely weird that three would be eliminated in front of everyone. It was starting to make sense why Gizelle was so nervous. Maybe she was one of the three getting eliminated.

“Ryori Bandsen, please step to the left.” The Charaz instructed. A woman with dark chocolate skin and honey brown hair beamed with delights as walked forward. “Gizelle Cygna, please step to the left.” Gizelle looked up at the audience before taking her place near Ryori. “Ladies and gentlemen, your new Charazes.”

Screams and applause of joy filled the stadium. The three other recruits left with their heads low as they were escorted off stage. Gizelle didn’t look very happy. She was embarrassing our name. There was a static sound coming from the screen, which caused the Charaz to turn around. A few seconds passed and Darrin Brooks was pictured on the screen.

“Hello, Charazes, I’m sorry to interrupt. But this announcement can’t really wait.” Darrin’s sarcasm caused a sea of angry faces. “Carmalena Cygna, are you there?”

Everyone turned to look at me. My body began tingling. I looked up at the man on the screen. I hadn’t seen Darrin in twenty-seven years. Turning him down was the best decision I ever made. He was a selfish, unskilled, avaricious, and deceitful individual. Silence filled the room as Darrin stared back at me. His grey eyes made me feel like he was there with me. His face formed into a nefarious smirk.

“Lena, I see you.” Darrin teased. “I have a proposition for you.” I didn’t respond. “I get it. You’re still mad at me. You’re not the only one harboring old emotions, but that’s not why I’m here.” He clicked his teeth, before smiling hard. “I’m declaring war on Cygna unless you want to sign it over to me, willingly.” He kept a peaceful and nonchalant tone.

Everyone was still looking at me. Waiting for my answer. I couldn’t sign over Cygna willingly, but I couldn’t provoke a war with Darrin either. I promised that no one would ever fear for their safety again. I promised that war would never happen on Cygnan land, and Darrin knew

that. He knew that I wouldn't sign over Cygna to him, either. He couldn't even keep a garden alive and turning them over to him would mean my people will die anyway.

"My daughter." I paused for a second. "You can marry my daughter." I blurted and heard Izelle gasp in response. Darrin's eyes widened.

"That sounds like a tantalizing offer, but I prefer women my age." Darrin sighed. The crowd filled with sighs of sorrow. "But, if marriage is still on the table, then I don't see why she can't marry my Anton."

Darrin didn't care about his son. He had made that clear when he wrote me a letter about how unhappy he was with his wife. He wished that I bore his children instead of her. I cringed at the thought of having his children before looking back up at the screen. "Fine." I responded, trying to hide the defeat in my voice.

"You have two days to produce the daughter or by dawn of the third day, we will take Cygna by force. Good day." Darrin disappeared without another word. As the screen turned off, the audience began whispering to each other while side eyeing me. I quickly grabbed Izelle's hand and shimmied us to my library.

I began hyperventilating as I checked the hallway before closing the door. My head throbbed as I realized what I did. I just offered my daughter. I was still trying to comprehend how I would explain this to Luther. The Charazes didn't say I would have to deal with Darrin. They were supposed to warn us about threats. Yet, here I was again. So close. Another home on the cusp of vanishing.

"Mom, I need you to calm down." Izelle's voice was muffled.

“I just need a few minutes.” I sat down and took a few deep breaths. The air filled my lungs and released as the tension in my body began to release. Izelle placed a glass of water in my hand. I gulped it down letting it cool the burning sensation in my throat. As I waited for the pressure in my chest to cease, my mind swarmed. I was losing everything. I had two days to protect as much of Cygna as I could, and I didn’t know how.

“Why did you tell Darrin that?” Izelle asked, noticing that I was feeling better.

“Not now.”

“Mother please. Who is going to marry Anton? Is this what you’ve been saving me for?” Izelle snapped.

“Lower your voice when you’re talking to me.” I demanded. “Your sister will. Nycromina just has to be convince.”

Izelle was silent for a moment. She was look at me with intense eyes. “How is she going to be convinced? You think she’s going to give up Damere and just marry a stranger.”

“It won’t be willingly, Izelle. We both know that. We have no other choice. I have to prepare for you to go into hiding. You have to be the one to save us from all this.” I stood up and held both of her shoulders. “I need you to convince Nycromina to marry Anton, and you cannot fail.”

“Hiding? Where am I supposed to go? I’m just supposed to leave it all behind?” Izelle frustration was clear and caused her volume to raise. “And me? How the hell am I supposed to convince on the of the most stubborn individuals on Cygna to give up everything and marry a man

she barely even knows.” There was a knocking on the door. I put my hands up to my lips and walked towards the door. When I opened it, Nycromina stood there with a panic look on her face.

“It’s Daddy, come quickly.” She turned and rushed back towards my bedroom. I followed her, unsure of what she meant. The memory of the journal flashed in my mind. This must have been the danger Alphogee was referring to. When I reached the threshold of my bedroom door, I inhaled sharply.

“Luther.” I walked over to the bed. He looked so pale. I held his hand. “What happened?”

“We were practicing combat, and then he collapsed. H—”

“You’re the reason he collapsed? It’s that temper of yours, girl.” I snarled as I approached Nycromina. She didn’t back away. “You think you’re tough? You purposely hurt your father for what? To prove to me that I should just let you be with that boy.”

“That boy has a name.” Nycromina sucked her teeth and licked the inside of her jaw. “And I didn’t do anything. Why would I hurt the only person who cared about me? Why did I summon Damere and his mother, if I wanted him dead? You’ve lost your mind.”

“Carmalena, I mean this in the most respectful way, but you’re jumping to conclusions here.” Lynia step forward. “Izelle, can you take your sister to another room, I need to talk to your mother.” Izelle took Nycromina with her, who was more than happy to comply. Lynia looked back at me with her hands on her hips.

“Don’t look at me like that, Lyn.” I tried to prevent my voice from cracking.

“Carmalena, you are my oldest friend, but you know your daughter did not do this to Luther. He’s reacting to some type of toxin in his blood. Damere is out picking up the ingredients

for some teas.” Lynia’s voice was calm, which was strange for her. “And please, don’t talk about my son like that ever again. He is good to your daughter. We all are affected by Alphogee and his decisions, but my son is not your scapegoat.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” I replied, regretfully. “There’s just a lot going on. Darrin has declared war on Cygna, and I need Nycromina to get on board with marrying his son.”

“You can’t do that, Lena. You can’t force her to marry Brook’s son.” Lynia voice was alarming. She was pacing the room. She knew something that I didn’t.

“Why not? Do you want war again? Do you remember what it was like to see our town burning?” I questioned. She was acting like this wasn’t the right thing to do.

“Yes, and it was horrible, but you cannot sacrifice your daughter for this place. She will never forgive you.” She pleaded as she grabbed my hands.

I pulled away. “We all have to make sacrifices, Lynia. You did. I did. It’s their turn. We have a duty to protect our people. W—”

“No, we have a duty to protect our children from the struggles we faced. You may have created this place, but you don’t get to decide what someone sacrifices. You’re being a tyrant. Be a mother.” Lynia scoffed.

I could feel the hatred in my hands. “You get out of my damn house. You’re one to talk when your damn son is in Poyan. You can’t tell me anything about sacrifice when Lycan sacrificed his life to save you.” I stomped my foot. She was a hypocrite. “Leave.”

“You’re under stress and that’s the only reason I’m going to let this slide, but tread lightly Carmalena. Tread lightly.” She grunted as she walked towards the door. Lynia looked back at me.

“I’ll bring back his teas when they’re ready. Hopefully, you won’t do anything foolish while I’m gone.”

I rolled my eyes before sitting on the bed next to Luther. “Luther, what am I going to do?” Tears began falling from my eyes. “Luther, I need you more than anything right now.”

He didn’t respond. The way he breathed, the way Lynia reacted, and Alphogee’s message let me know one thing. Luther wouldn’t be okay. He was probably dying.

## TWELVE

(Izelle)

“Get off of me.” Nycromina screamed as she tried to wiggle free from the magical bindings. “I will call for mother if you don’t stop. You know her rules about the use of magic on family.”

After studying her face about how serious she was with her threat, the magical binds loosened and then disappeared. Nycromina rubbed her arms and stood tall. I could feel her anger. I could read it. As she inched closer, I could see what she wanted to do to me. She wanted to grip me by the throat and throw me into the dresser. She wanted to pounce on me and stab her elbow in my throat, pressing hard enough to make me think she would crack it before she spoke the words: Don’t do it again.

“Stop that.” She growled. She knew. She knew that I was reading her mind. It’s fascinating to think about it. One of us could beat the other in combat if we decided to read the other’s moves. We always played fair though. When we practiced combat, we fought fair. I never read Nycromina’s mind and she never read mine, but she always beat me. She always won. No matter how hard I trained, Nycromina beat me. I thought about cheating, sometimes. Just one glimpse into her mind and I would know her next move. I would be able to be one step ahead of



her and finally knock her to the ground. She would respect me, then. She would know my true worth and understand I'm not just her little sister anymore.

"You should have practiced your blocking lessons more. You can block me out. All you have to do is plant the false memory, but you're too weak." I growled. I was right. She didn't practice as hard as me, yet she was able to beat my scores every year. "If you weren't always up under Damere, then you wouldn't have lost to Gizelle last year."

"We are not going there." Her words were sharp and cold. The way she spoke was her warning. I decided to address the subject lightly. Provoking her was a stupid decision. Without magic, Nycromina was fierce, but when angered she couldn't control it. It had been eight years of dueling since Nycromina discovered her powers and several memories to remind me of each time I lost to her. I had been the victim of many unintentional accidents. The scar above my right eye stood as the most recent reminder of how permanent the actions of her anger would last.

"Fine." I sided with her. There were more pressing issues. Thinking about them caused more frustration because, somehow, I already knew the answer to the question I was about to ask. I felt compelled to ask it. "What are we going to do about Anton?"

"What about him?"

"Are you going to go through with it?" I asked. Her previous answer was different this time, which gave me some relief. I had asked her this question during the walk here, but she kept replying with a firm 'no'. What happened at the induction didn't deter her, the fact my mother offered Nycromina to the Brooks without consulting her increased her defiance. Maybe this time the response would be just what I wanted. Maybe she decided to not be selfish and decided to put us first.

“The answer is the same as before. I will not give up Damere to marry a man I barely know. I don’t care what the consequences are.” Nycromina rolled her eyes as she sat on the edge of my bed. The purple comforter began to crease down the middle as she propped her feet on the foot of the bed and pushed herself back. She laid down and placed her hands behind her head. She was getting comfortable, but not with the type of comfort I preferred. I wanted her to get cozy with the idea of marrying Anton. Not get herself comfortable enough to ignore me. The marriage had to be completed. To save Cygna, she had to marry him.

“What about Cygna?”

“Let’s see. City hall is doing fine. Crime rate is still at zero percent. There hasn’t been a war in twenty-seven years and all our citizens are happy. So, what about it, Zel? Seriously, what about it?” Her words echoed through the room. She hadn’t even flinched. She didn’t move a muscle. She didn’t care.

“There will be a war, if we don’t stop him. Marrying him is the only way to stop him. He wants Cygna.” I took a long paused trying to read her. She was blocking me out this time. “If you marry him Anton gets Cygna, peacefully. Our people don’t want war. You remember Mom’s stories of the last one. The elders wouldn’t be able to handle it. Twenty-seven years of peace, gone.” I pleaded. I needed her to do this. Cygna needed her to do this.

“And what about my peace? What about what I need? You want me to marry a man. A man I don’t know, so this nation can have peace? I will not give up my love for Cygna. I will not become like you or mother.” This time she rose and walked over to me. “The people with magic can keep him out. Once he crosses the terrain his weapons will power down and they will be useless. By that time all those with powers will dismantle his men and destroy his whole army.”

“He will come after us and many of us will die. Think about all those people who don’t have magic. Only five percent of the families here possess magic, what about the other beings?” I looked into her eyes as tears welled in mine.

“Our magic will protect them. Father will protect them. I will not sacrifice like mother did.” She stood close to my face. I could feel the tip of her nose. Her breath was hot and made me uncomfortable. “Don’t ask me about this again. The answer is no. I don’t care if Cygna burns to the ground. I will not sacrifice my future for this place. I’ll be immortal in five months, which means I can kill Anton myself.”

“But mother—”

“Who cares what our mother wants. You’re twenty-three and I’m twenty-four, it’s time for us both to start acting our age and taking responsibility for ourselves. Carmalena will no longer dictate me or my decisions. What you do is your choice.”

I gasped as she walked out the door. She was adamant about her stance. Necromina was willing to sacrifice everything our parents worked for over a boy. Over someone she thought was her true love. True loves don’t exist. If that was true, then father wouldn’t have fallen ill. Our parents were so in love, yet our father was dying. I could tell from the way our mother reacted. She knew that he was in danger three days ago and now it was starting to make sense.

After finishing my mother’s punishment, I went searching for answers. I was told the Charazes only granted immortality to those who were the true loves of the Cygna bloodline. I mourned when I found about my father’s rapid decline, and now I was going to have to mourn the loss of my home.

I walked towards the living room. My mother was staring out the window. She had been waiting for hours for Damere's mother to return and my father still didn't wake up yet. I had never really seen my mother worried until now. It scared me, but what frightened me more was the fact that convincing Nycromina to marry Anton was impossible and her reaction to that realization would cause more emotional eruption.

"Mother, are we still having our meeting?" I squeaked from behind her. She quickly turned around. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying.

"I'm sorry. Yes, honey. My mind has been elsewhere lately." My mother closed the curtains to the living room's window and turned on her heels. She sniffled as she walked passed the gray sectional to the table that sat across from the closed curtains. The living room was minimalistic. Just a sectional that could fit eight, a coffee table to host guests' drinks, and a black carpeted floor. She used to tell me the living room was similar to the one she grew up in.

There was a new addition to the room. There was a large table that sat eight people in the corner. There was a puzzle on it that my mother gravitated towards. She still loved puzzles, and no one would take that away from her. Sitting down at the table, she looked at her watch.

"Where is your sister?"

"Late as usual." I mocked with annoyance knowing that Nycromina probably wasn't going to come. Not after our conversation. "Can we just start without her?"

"Very well, then." My mother spoke softly taking a seat. "When the Charazes gave me this land, they said that it would be like before. I decided to use that as an opportunity to create a better land than the one we had on Earth. Little did I know that there were other humans out there, who still held their greedy values. It has co--"

“I’m sorry, Mother.” Nycromina came rushing in, stopping to catch her breath. I glanced at her not understanding why she was here. She just protested marrying Anton, but here she was at this meeting about her marrying Anton. It didn’t make sense. She was up to something and I would find out what it was.

“I’m home.” A familiar voice sang as she sashayed into the room.

“What are you doing here, Gizelle?” I squealed as I rushed to hug her. We didn’t get to see her after the induction ceremony this morning. She must have sensed there was something wrong because we didn’t properly congratulate her. I didn’t care why she was here as long as she was here. It had been six long months without her.

“I was sent to deliver a message.” She hugged me and our mother tightly before pulling away. “The Brooks are coming. We need to figure out what to do.”

“They said two days.” My mother stared at Gizelle in disbelief.

“Correct, but” She looked at me. “they’re still preparing to come in forcefully until they get word of the marriage.”

My mother gawked at me, and then Nycromina. We both looked in another direction. I was disappointed that my persuasion techniques hadn’t worked and Nycromina was just trying to avoid the conversation in general.

“Well, this is where I take my exit. I’m not for this nonsense. I thought this meeting was for something important. Like figuring out what’s wrong with our father. You know the one that is currently in a coma. If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my room.” Nycromina turned and walked towards the door she ran in. Before she walked through the arch, she looked back at us “I’m not marrying anybody except for Damere.”

“The Brooks want to wage a war to expand their society. Darrin Brooks is still vengeful.” Gizelle spoke, ignoring Nycromina’s outburst as she watched our sister leave. “He wanted Mom’s hand in marriage, but she chose father. S—”

“Luther loved me while Darrin just wanted the power I had. I must figure out a way to end this. We can’t go to war.” My mother sat back down, rubbing her forehead. Nycromina was the only option. “I’ll go speak with her.”

“She won’t do it. We’ve discussed this since I found out about our father and his sickness. She’s too stubborn.” I spoke softly.

“She hasn’t spoken with me.” My mother tried to provide reassurance and rose to her feet. She walked out of the room towards Nycromina’s bedroom. I followed her. When we got into Nycromina’s room, my mother let out a sigh of exhaustion before opening the door.

“I’m not doing it. Please don’t ask me.” Nycromina looked up at her mother and then back down at her journal. She was reading our mother’s mind and my mother needed to block her out before Nycromina discovered my mother’s true intentions. They both stared at each other. “Blocking me out won’t help, I still won’t do it.”

“Who else is going to do it, then?” Our mother questioned. This time her frustration was apparent. We didn’t have time for this.

“Why do I have to sacrifice my love for Cygna? Why don’t you marry Anton’s dad since you’re used to marrying men you don’t truly love?”

“Excuse me, young lady,” Our mother spoke sternly as her face scrunched. “I love your father very much.”

“But not enough.” Nycromina voice carried a cruel tone as she stared at our mother before going back to journaling. Our mother waved her hand and the journal hit the wall.

Nycromina looked up at her. “Dad isn’t your true love. If he was, then you wouldn’t think he was dying.”

“You don’t know what I have sacr---”

“Actually, I do. You gave up your true love during the war. I won’t be like you. I won’t be miserable. Damere loves me and I love him.” Nycromina’s words caused a reaction in my mother. I began reading her emotions. Nycromina’s voice reminded our mother of a younger version of herself. Filled with love. Optimism. Unaware of the true evils that lurked in the dark. Our mother was protecting her. Nycromina was destined to rule Cygna. If she was destined to rule, I needed to know why I had to go into hiding.

“You will marry Anton and that’s that.” She turned around and walked out the room.

“No.” Nycromina’s response was strong.

“This is not up for discussion.” My mother spoke through clenched teeth. Our mother didn’t want to hear anymore protest. There were more pressing matters at hand. She walked out the room and closed the door.

Making our way back to the living room, we could hear Nycromina’s screams from the hallway. I kept reading my mother’s mind as we walked. She didn’t care. Not everyone could get what they wanted, and Nycromina was no different. As we walked into the living room, Gizelle looked at us with sorrow in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s dying.” Her tears began to fall rapidly. “The Charazes say he’s been poisoned. They think that this has something to do with Alphogee.” The name caused our mother to swallow hard. We all knew the name, but the way she reacted showed she had a deeper connection with Alphogee. A personal connection. I thought back to the memory of her and Alphogee I didn’t open.

“How can they be sure?” I responded with outrage. “They haven’t even seen him, yet.”

“Because they know things, Izelle. If he dies, the Brooks family will easily take over. Mom, you have to convince Nycromina to marry Anton.” Gizelle demanded. Her voice was full of dread.

“I’ve said what I can, but we cannot tell her that your father is dying. If we do, we will most likely lose her.” Our mother sighed. Her fears were coming true. Had she wished this into existence. With her guard down, she made it easy to read her. She wondered if her recent fantasies of Natal were the cause of Luther dying. She knew it wasn’t logical, but still she had wished Natal had been here instead of Luther. She feared that her wishful thinking had caused her to lose both of her lovers because she had been too selfish. Her thoughts began to anger me as I read them. “Izelle, you need to help me persuade your sister. Talk to Malina or Damere. We need her to marry Anton.”

“I’ve already spoken with her. It’s not good enough. She won’t change her mind.” I retorted. It wasn’t like she cared. She was thinking about some woman named Natal. I decided to keep quiet. I didn’t want to activate any other rage.

“You make her change her mind. You’re developing too slowly. I need you ready, if this war comes. Every morning, I want you to practice at a local place with multiple people. At night, we will work on your combat skills and go over your progress. Now go find someone to help get through to your sister.” She dismissed me as she sat down at the table.

I refused to keep letting her do this to me. Today, she was going to tell me what was going on. I needed to know what everything meant. These secrets weren’t helping us anymore, and I’m not sure they ever were. “Why is it Nycromina’s destiny to rule the throne?”

“Excuse me?”



“You heard me, Mother. I want answers and I want them now. What am I some type of sacrifice?”

“Izelle, we are not having this conversation. I don’t have time for this. I’m not able to give you the answers you seek.” My mother’s tone was firm.

Gizelle hugged our mother, and then came towards me. “Not here.” She whispered as she escorted me out the living room and down the hall.

“What is going on.” I tried to stop, but she kept pushing me down the hall.

Once we were far enough away from my mother, she cupped my face. “Malina. You need to go talk to her. She can get through to Nycromina. She understands the importance of what’s going on.” Gizelle began to chuckle a little. She must have noticed the confusion and worry on my face. “Everything will be alright.” She whispered as she pulled me into a tight hug before letting me go. “You have a mission, now go.”

## THIRTEEN

(Gizelle)

I watched Izelle walk down the hallway. The way she walked showed me how tough this was for her. All of this would be over soon. At least, that's what I hoped. Still there were more immediate issues to handle. Once Izelle was out the door, I went back into the living room and sat at the table with my mother. She was putting together a puzzle. It was partially done. There was a beautiful nighttime sky missing a few pieces.

"We need to talk." I grumbled, disguising the anger in my voice.

"I'm sorry, for not staying. After the whole Darrin thing, I just needed to leave. Everyone was staring at me." My mother spoke but didn't even look at me. She put the puzzle piece in her hand in its place. Her eyes traveled up towards mine. "I really am sorry."

"I don't care about that. I never wanted to be a Charaz in the first place. What I do care about is that you've been lying to me." I replied through clenched teeth. I pulled out the journal that Lycan can gave me and placed it next to her puzzle. My mother reached for it with trembling hands. When she touched the journal, it glowed in a golden orange color. My mother's body was radiating in the same color. She was a fyet. A fire breather.

“Where did you get this?” The curiosity in her voice caused a tinge of irritation in the back of my mind. “I haven’t seen this since I was twelve.”

“They’re really your parents.” The disbelief in my voice was apparent. “You told us your parents died.”

“They did die. What the hell are you talking about? I was orphaned at twelve. Forced to live at the Bandsens’ orphanage until Na—” My mother paused. “I don’t have to explain this to you again. That was one of the most tragic moments in my life. How dare you question it?”

“They’re still alive. Looking for you. You’ve been lying to me.” I screamed. “The Charazes have hurt people and you’ve done nothing but support them.”

“Alive?” Her face looked genuinely shocked, but I wasn’t buying it.

“Trapped on Earth. Did you know that Amerlis and Pytia are considered the most dangerous threat towards the Charazes?” I asked, raising a brow. Her support for the Charazes was the only thing that kept me from following my true instincts. I didn’t want to join the Charazes, but Lycan explained that I would get access to very valuable information and he was right. As a fully admitted Charaz, I received entry to the Vinel. The Vinel held all of the Charazes’ history. After meeting Amerlis and Pytia, I began realizing that something wasn’t making sense. I thought coming to my mother would help me put together the pieces, but she was acting like she didn’t know all of this occurred.

“Gizelle, there is enough going on with your father. I do not need to deal with this nonsense, too. Why would my parents be considered a threat? I never knew anything about magic until the war started.” Truth rang from her voice. I could see that she was confused.

“Everything is crashing and burning. I believe the Charazes because Natal was one. She didn’t betray me, and neither would any of the others.”

Her naivety was charming. I started to understand why they had chosen her as their target. She was gullible. They took everything from her to rebuild her. She had believed them, causing her to become devoted. Her devotion caused me to make a terrible mistake. My mother was just staring at the journal like a little girl lost in thought. I was too afraid to read the journal. Once I found out it was hers, I wanted her to tell me about it.

“Now that you’re done testing me about my loyalty, could you please tell me where you found this journal?” She inquired. My mother hadn’t believed a word that came out of my mouth. She was pathetic. I couldn’t understand how she was able to devote herself to the Charazes, but not understand they were responsible for her own family’s demise.

“In a box of rubble.” I lied. I needed to figure why she was so loyal to the Charazes before releasing any more information.

“That doesn’t make sense. This journal couldn’t have been with us or the Charazes. I haven’t seen it since I was twelve.” She placed the journal on the table placing her hand on top. “Gizelle, don’t lie to me. Where did you get this?”

My heart began thrashing against my chest. I could feel the sweat on my brow. If I told her the truth, I was afraid she would report me to the Charazes or at least, confront them. If she told them anything, then they would know that Lycan gave me more than what they requested.

“The Charazes had it. Look, I’ve said too much. I have to go. Let me know when Dad comes out of his coma.” I replied quickly before giving her a brief hug. I needed to get back to Earth and talk to the Pynias. They would be able to tell me why the Charazes lied.

~

I was in the living room of the Pynias’ house again. This time it wasn’t dusty like the vision Lycan gave me. Everything was cleaned and in a pristine condition.

“Amerlis. Pytia. It’s me, Gizelle. I need to talk to you.” I called out. There was no answer. I started casually searching around the room for any clues. In the living room, the same floral couches were surrounded around the small coffee table. There was nothing on the coffee table except for a remote. There were two bookshelves in each corner past the couches. I looked at them closely. One of them had nothing, but pictures. The other one had a few titles of books. Each one had a title except a burnt orange book with gold trim. I pulled it from the shelf and opened it. I had seen this before. From where I couldn’t remember. There were too many thoughts zooming through my mind to recall where this book came from. I sat down on the couch thinking that it could jog my memory.

For people who were captured, they sure were good at hiding. I opened the book and began flipping through the pages. It was a book that contained history of the magical world, but nothing like the ones the Charazes had given us. I stopped at a page that had a picture tucked in the page. I pulled the picture out and examined it. Pytia and Amerlis were obvious, but there were ten other people in the photo. They were in some type of building and there was a clock in the background. The clock had strange symbols on it. The three was mixed with an “s”, the six had a curve around it that looked like a “c”, the nine was circled, and the twelve had the letter “r” underneath it.

My mind recalled the memory of being in the cave and after the burning sensation, the voice said, “Welcome to SCOR.” Nobody told me what SCOR meant, but obviously these people knew. I heard the creak of the front door and pulled up my cloak’s hood on. I put the picture in my breast pocket and stepped into the corner to blend in with the shadows. The door opened slowly, and I held my breath as I watched my mother come in. She was vigilant as she walked around the room. Maybe she could help me put the pieces together.

I watched her examine the living room before following her down the hallway with the colored doors. The first door she went in was the purple one. It was just a regular bathroom filled various shades of blue. She reached behind the toilet and grabbed something before quickly putting it in a small pouch decorated with embroidered lines. I stepped out of the way, hiding myself in the shadows. I followed her as she walked into the room with the orange door. It was another bedroom.

This bedroom belonged to someone that was extremely neat. It looked just as pristine as the rest of the house. There was a nightstand on each side of the bed. Each nightstand contained a framed photo. On the right was Pytia in a pair of blue jean shorts and a black tank top underneath the sun in the meadows. She was looking up at the sky laughing. On the left was Amerlis in front of a record player. He was looking dead at the camera with a breath-taking smile. My mother was on the floor under the bed reaching for something. She pulled it out and quickly placed it into the pouch.

I stepped back into the shadows and I watched her check the hallway before closing the door. She walked into the room with the red door. This room had black walls and nothing else. My mother walked up to one of the walls and pushed on a portion of it. A small square in the wall popped open. She reached in and grabbed something. My mother placed it into the bag and walked out.

I still couldn't see anything that she was placing in the bag, but one thing I was certain of was the Pytia and Amerlis were not here. I didn't understand how. They were bonded to the house. It was their punishment. Something wasn't making sense. I watched my mother hesitate in front of her bedroom door. It was strange to think that she had spent all her life not knowing the truth about herself.

She opened the door and walked over to the shelf of toys. She grabbed the rabbit and untwisted its eyes. After shaking contents from the eye sockets into the pouch, she closed the pouch. She spun around and waved her hand. I hit the wall hard with a grunt.

“Why are you watching me? What have you done to my parents?” She grabbed me by my cloak. Her breath smelled of plione. My mother’s eyes were glazed over and dark.

“It’s me. It’s me.” I pulled back my hood and she let me go.

“What the hell are you doing here? You following me now? What’s this a Charaz order?” She rambled as she paced the room. Her behavior was erratic, and I needed to calm her down.

“No, I was here. Trying to put the pieces together.” I replied, standing up and fixing my cloak. “How about you tell me about what you’re doing here?”

“Not here.” She whispered as her head turned towards the hallway. My mother grabbed my shoulder and we shimmied to the inside of some cave. I looked around noticing that it was the same cave from the vision Lycan gave me in his cell. The feeling of my body burning consumed my mind.

“What are we doing here?” I felt the walls of the cave. Snippets of the sweet voice played in my ear.

“This is one of the only places we can have this ritual without anyone knowing. These caves were purposely created to keep anyone, who wasn’t part of the group my parents were in, out. We’re good, it’s in our blood.” My mother was opening the pouch and took out four identical crystals. They were a canary yellow and cloudy. They were thin and the length of a middle finger.

“What are you doing?” I watched her closely as she spread out the pouch. It became a square with embroidered lines from each corner. The lines met in the middle at the same point. Each line was a different color. One red, one purple, one orange, and one pink. My mother started spiking the ends down with the crystals. Making sure that the piece of cloth was smooth against the dirt.

“A summoning spell. These are Martzey crystals. My mother took me to these caves once. She told me when things don’t start making sense to come here. The spirit that resides here can show me the truth.” My mother didn’t look up. She pulled out her journal and opened to a blank page. I wondered if she knew what the voice would do to her. It had almost burnt my flesh. I wondered if it would do the same to her. I couldn’t risk it.

“I thought you didn’t know of magic while growing up.” I inquired, trying to distract her.

“I didn’t.” She pointed to the journal. “But the version of me before my parents’ death did. The Charazes must have done something to my memory, but this journal brought some of it back. It’s in snippets. Not really sure what they mean yet.”

“We can put them together.” I offered.

“First I have to summon the spirit here. Once its here, we’ll have a little more context.” My mother waved her hand over the crystals, creating a small fire. The fire made my breathing shallow.

“Don’t do that. You don’t understand the power this spirit has.” I cried. I wanted to protect her.



“It has the power to help me, Gizelle. I hope the Charazes didn’t turn you against me this fast. I know they’re behind what’s happening on Cygna.” My mother’s voice was a deep and dark rumble.

“What do you mean? They gave you Cygna. Why would they destroy it?” I inquired. The fact that she thought the Charazes were behind my father’s poisoning was absurd. They may have lied about Lycan, Pytia, and Amerlis, but they wouldn’t have told us about the poisoning if they were behind it.

“Why did they lead me to believe that my parents died? They even had Natal get in an emotional relationship with me to distract me. She’s probably not even dead.” My mother slammed the journal down. It had been a long time since I’ve seen her this upset. “She came to me in a mirror and I’m going to summon her to figure out what is going on.”

“Do you think she would tell you? If you think she’s been working with them since before I was born, why would she help you now?” I knelt down and grabbed her hands. “Listen summoning people that you believe are connected to the Charazes won’t help you. If you believe that they have something to do with this, then we have to complete this another way. They’ll just run back to the Charazes.”

“Another way? I need the fastest way.” She pulled her hands away and stood up. My mother began pacing the cave with her hands on her hips. The cave started to feel warmer. I watched her and let her pace until she calmed down. If I waited, then maybe she would let us go back to Cygna.

“We can go back to Cygna and figure it out there. I don’t think summoning anyone here will help you.” I pleaded. I didn’t want her to accidentally bring the voice back. The voice from Lycan’s vision still haunted my dreams.

“What will help me, Gizelle?” My mother stopped. I thought about the picture I took earlier. Maybe it could help her figure out who her parents were dealing with. I grabbed it from my breast pocket and held it out. She snatched it from me, and her mouth hung open from recognition.

## FOURTEEN

(Nycromina)

After my mother left my room, I grabbed my packed bag. We needed to leave now.. Before my father went into his coma, he told me that I needed to leave. He didn't say why, just that I needed to leave and not tell my mother. Now, I knew why. My father must have had a vision of the events. As a kyeer, my father could see the future. The only issue was that he never knew when exactly it was going to happen. It seemed each of our gifts had limitations.

If my father truly believed I needed to leave, then that's what I would do. I crept through the house to Izelle's room, noticing her keys on the table. The keys would help me access one of our safe houses. No one would expect me to go there. They would expect me to be at Damere's house like usual. By the time they discovered I wasn't there, Damere and I would be in another realm. I grabbed the keys and made my way to my parents' room. The only person there was my father. I walked over to him and kissed him on his forehead.

"Get well, Daddy." I hugged his limp body before remembering her father mentioning a book.

~

She made her way down the driveway to the marble sidewalk. Taking a sharp right, Mrs. Meneap's house stood tall. It had two sides, the right side was short while the left side hovered over its partner. The strangest thing about that house was that it was painted in a deep black with dark green windows and doors. Nycromina never understood what caused Mrs. Meneap to make the daring choice.

As she walked down the street, she waved to a few neighbors watering their grasses or tending to their garden. Mother had insisted that they live among the citizens, even if their family was royalty. She said these were her people and she saved them during the war. Each of them helped build this city on this land, which meant that they deserved the same amount of respect.

Nycromina quickened her pace past the houses of different shapes and various colors. She needed to make it to Malina by seven or she might miss her chance. Malina's demand for punctuality was one of the standards Nycromina failed to meet. Today, would be different. Making a sharp right on to Magnus, Nycromina came to an alley that held the trash of the houses lined against it. She walked to the sixth house and went to a part of the backyard that held a pull up door hidden in the grass area.

Nycromina and Malina used the underground storage as their personal hangout space and for secret sleepovers. The door was a thin sheet of metal protected by magical charms that made it impenetrable. Nycromina knocked five times rapidly to signal Malina to open the door. Within seconds the door was open and Nycromina braced herself for the downhill slide.

Reaching the end, she stood up in a small room with a door. Walking over to the door, she turned the latch and revealed a complete lounge area customized by their dreams. The room was spacious enough to fit two desks for studying, a couch, a projector, a film screen, two

bookshelves filled with various books and trinkets like Nycromina's old stuff bear, Bubskins. The walls were adorned with various pictures of the two and random doodles or writings they felt were noteworthy enough to be hung. Nycromina walked towards the middle of the room where Malina had stacked at least fifteen books.

"This is all I could find from my beginner's collection. There's some in there that are intermediate and advanced, but that's just to show you what we're aiming for." Malina beamed. She was excited to teach someone something she knew, and her best friend was the perfect apprentice.

Nycromina eyed the stack of books before grabbing one and sitting on the couch with it. She flicked to a random page and read the chant. "Invecadus. Invecadus. Invecadus." She whispered repeatedly as she focused all her energy into the words. Her body started to tingle as it disappeared slowly.

Malina caught a glimpse of Nycromina's head before it disappeared. "Seriously, do you have to be such a show-off? I knew you were lying about not knowing you had powers. Of course, the heirs to the current rulers would have powers." Malina's jealousy grew as she ranted. "The Charazes granted your mom this whole land to start over after the war, did you really think I would believe that the Charazes would make the royal family one of the few families that don't have magical abilities?" Malina's confession filled the air and the relief on her face was comforting. Nycromina stood there silent, unsure of how to respond, which caused Malina to roll her eyes before speaking again. "Why don't you just give it up, Ny?"

"I didn't know." Nycromina spat starkly. "My family doesn't talk about magic. We know that some in town have it and some don't. That thing with Henry, I didn't know how to do that.

I've never stopped time and I'm still trying to process it. Plus, somehow, I froze Izelle and when she came to, she knew I had the keys. I can't control it. Either help me or you don't."

Malina huffed and turned on her heels. She walked out of the door and Nycromina listened as she heard ascending footsteps, the door creak open, and then the door slam shut. Shrugging it off, Nycromina picked up the book and reread the skill description. Soon, she realized the root of Malina's frustration. The charm was one of the highest, a level twenty. Nycromina felt angry with herself for not realizing that. She just wanted to learn magic, have some fun, and belong. But now, she realized it meant more to those who were aware of its power.

Placing the book to the side, she picked up one of beginner books and began reading it. She practiced charms as she read them. Hours turned into days as a week went by. Nycromina had spent every moment of her free time practicing. She had to keep the books at the underground haven until she was sure she had the powers mastered. Malina had joined her a few times, finally warming up to the idea that Nycromina was telling the truth all along. She had started giving her lessons, which helped Nycromina tremendously.

"Alright, name the six rules." Malina quizzed Nycromina.

"I don't remember." Nycromina responded quickly.

"You need to know." Malina smacked her lips. "When the council evaluates all magical citizens, they need to be reassured that everyone is using their magic for pure intentions."

"Mal, you worry too much. You're forgetting something." She paused for dramatic effect. "I am the council. Or at least part of it. I think my 'good magic' meter is ay-okay."

Malina rolled her eyes at the statement. “That is not the point.” She grunted pulling her scroll out and pinning it to the wall. The six rules were written in a vibrant rose-gold color:

Malicious Use of Magic Prohibited

Performing Magical Acts on Non-magical Beings Prohibited

All spells above an eight level are tracked for safety

Every magical being is subjected to one evaluation each year.

The first child in a magical family must become a Charaz on their 27<sup>th</sup> Birthday.

Failure to comply will result in magic being extracted, without the opportunity for an appeal.

“I got it.” Nycromina yawned as she went back to practice the trick she had been trying before Malina arrived. “I think I finally have them under control. Watch this.” She grabbed a stack of papers and threw them in the air. She concentrated hard as time around them slowed and then came to a full stop. This time Malina was not frozen and Nycromina walked towards her

. A flabbergasted Malina gawked in amazement at the scene. She ran throughout the haven with joy. “This is awesome. What else can you do?” She squealed with joy.

Nycromina laughed as she snapped her fingers and the room went into motion again with the papers falling to the ground. Deciding to have a little fun, Nycromina motioned her finger in a counter-clockwise circle. The room rewound the previous event of Malina’s running in a blurry vision. Malina started moving in reverse. When Nycromina rested her hand, Malina was back where she started before, she started running through the room.

“What the heck? How did you do that? I was just over there.”

“I can rewind time, too. Of course, you can still remember what happened, but I can use it to my advantage eventually.” Nycromina boasted. “I can’t wait to show my family.”

“You know what you are, don’t you?” Malina’s voice inflated. “You’re an Isulia. There’s not many like you anymore. Never met someone who can meddle with time. My mother used to read me stories about people like you. Your kind was an imperative support in the winning of the war.”

“A what?” Nycromina was puzzled. She didn’t know what she had already had a name.

“An isulia is a manipulator of time. Did you not read the category index?” Malina groaned as she gave her face a long rub. Instead of waiting on an answer, Malina grabbed the book and place it between Nycromina’s hands. Nycromina felt the tattered cover in her hand. This was an old text, which is why she ignored it. “It has a charm on it, and it can only be detected by you and me.”

Nycromina looked at the binding of the book, finding it hard to swallow. The binding matched the gold lines on the books back at the log cabin. She wanted to ask Malina how she got one of these books. Nycromina assumed that somehow Malina’s parents acquire the artifact during whatever fire caused the cabin to burn. She felt the book calling to her, but she knew she needed to be alone with it.

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I frowned at the emptiness of the bunker. I hoped that Malina got my message I sent, but she wasn’t here which made it obvious that she didn’t. There was no use in wasting time. I grabbed the book and placed it in my bag. I would need this if I wanted to protect us from whoever we were running from. Once I reached the surface again, I closed the bunker’s doors



and shimmied to Damere's. Once I arrived, I saw that Damere was sleeping. He looked so peaceful.

As I walked over to him, he inhaled sharply before opening his eyes in surprise. "Nycromina, do not do that. I could have hurt you." He steadied his breathing.

"Thought you were sleeping." I chuckled, realizing he was practicing projection.

"Very funny." He sat up. "What are you doing here? We're not leaving for another day."

"Change of plans. We're leaving now. My mother came into my room demanding that I marry Anton. That's not happening, and we need to go before anyone else sees us." I began packing him a bag.

"Hey, hey, relax." He walked over to me and grabbed my hands. "I already have a bag packed. I'm carrying light. We don't know where we're even going yet."

"I do." The certainty in my voice made me proud. "Grab your stuff and say good-bye to your mother."

"We should say good-bye to my mother." Damere kissed my lips before grabbing his bag. He grabbed the journal, the photo of the baby and the man, and a coin. He placed all the items in his bag. "I'm ready."

"Good." I smiled. My smile quickly turned into a frown as I heard footsteps running down the stairs. I stood in my fighting stance.

"Nyhino, your brother." Damere's mother was hysterical.

"What are you talking about, Ma?" Damere's face and voice became consumed with worry.

“You need to go. You need to get out of here. If they find out who she is, who you are. We won’t defeat them. Go.” His mother shouted. She kissed both his cheeks and forehead. She pulled him into a tight embrace and placed her chin on his shoulder, closing her eyes tightly. Before she let him go, she opened her eyes and started at me. “Take care of my boy, Nycromina. Take care of my grandchild. There are secrets. Secrets I haven’t told him and secrets that you’ll have to find together.”

Damere pulled his mother away. “What are you talking about, Ma? What secrets?”

“There isn’t much time.” She cupped his face and then directed her attention back at me. “The house in the forest that holds Henry. Go there. Use Henry to get to Earth. They won’t expect you to go there. Henry will transport you to a town, this town has an apartment. 6558 Sawyer Street. It is protected from the Charazes or any magical tracking spell.”

“But—”

“No more questions, Nyhino. Go.” She waved her hand and both of them were transported to a forest.

“Where are we?” Damere asked, clutching his bag tighter. I looked around, realizing where we were.

“It’s a forest behind my house. It contains a safe house a little further down. How exactly does your mother know about this?” I questioned moving through the forest, signaling Damere to follow.

“Your mother and my mother grew up at the same orphanage. How do you not know this?” Damere’s dismay was apparent.

“Let’s just say my mother and I don’t talk very much. How do you know all of this?” I looked back at him with a smug expression.

“My mother makes it a point to educate me. Luther, my mother, your mother, and Malina’s mother built Cygna together. It was your mother’s idea, but without them all of what we had wouldn’t have existed.” He followed behind me, making sure to make as little noise as possible.

“What about your brother?”

“What about him?” Damere gave an annoyed response.

“Your mother was nervous, almost scared, when she mentioned him. What’s that all about?” I asked quietly, sensing the tension between us.

“Is that where we need to go?” Damere dodged the question as he pointed to the half-charred house.

“Yes.” I replied. This was not over. I wanted answers and I would get them. Tracing the crimson triangle in the tree trunk in front of us reassured me that it wasn’t a trap. My excitement increases as I started sprinting towards a ragged rusted fence surrounding a crumbling building. The building had fallen rubble of burnt wood and rotted logs surrounding its outer perimeter. The inside of the building, which was visible from a gaping hole in the side of the wall, was hollow and scorched.

“My mother sent us to a burning building?” Damere voice raised. I ignored his question and focused on my mission. Opening the small gate attached to the tattered fence, I beamed with

joy. Walking down a path filled with various brown stones, I carefully watched where I stepped before reaching forward and grabbing hold of an invisible handle.

“Alveen.” I whispered, stepping back and watching the rubble find its rightful place on the scorched building. Damere gasped in admiration. A log cabin had appeared, in excellent condition, where the torched building once stood. The small log cabin was adorned with various windchimes and casting nets. Grabbing the handle of the orange wooden door, I slid Izelle’s key in the lock and turned it. A series of random clicks filled the air as the door unlocked its charms. Once the clicking was over, I turned the knob gently and pushed the door open half way before walking through.

We were greeted by a homely atmosphere. There was a fire place crackling in the left corner of the room and a small kitchen that stood in the right. A small couch sat in front of the fireplace, glowing a bright orange. The walls were adorned with many framed pictures. I held my breath to prevent any squealing. I did it. I entered the place that my family had kept hidden for so long. It had been ten years since I visited here.

My eyes darted through the room taking up as much as I could before focusing on something else. There were pictures of my mother and another woman scattered in random places throughout the room. It was a one-story cabin that seemed so spacious, but intimate at the same time. I touched a few artifacts that I assume must have been from my mother’s birthplace. The objects possessed a certain energy that drew me near and caused a tingle in my spine as I grazed them with my fingertips.

As I walked through the room, I felt a strong energy coming from a room to the right of the kitchen. Walking towards the room, I slowly opened the door. The energy wasn’t threatening,

but welcoming. My guard was up, just in case this was a charm to single out intruders. Creeping in the room, I flicked the light switch and the room filled itself with a warm, golden light. There were six walls in the room. One wall was home to a fireplace while the others stood as support for the five bookcases that stood at least eight feet tall. Each of the book cases were filled with various books. I scanned the bindings.

Most of the books were for pleasure reading, my curiosity peaked when I noticed some of the books had peculiar, gold bindings. There was no lettering on the binding, just two golden lines that paralleled each other at the top and the bottom of the book's bind. As I moved closer, I felt a rush of energy come over me that caused me to turn towards the fireplace. I was greeted by a piece of ribbon incased in a golden frame that adorned that same lines as the bindings on some of the books.

The ribbon was mainly lilac in color except for the abnormal, tattered mint green ends. I deduced that the ribbon must have been found among the remaining ash after the fire occurred here. As I pondered the meaning of the ribbon, my eyes glanced towards a round clock sitting on top of the fireplace's mantle. We needed to get to Earth. I turned on my heels and walked towards the door. I would be back, and I would uncover the mysteries that were waiting. Switching off the light, I closed the door firmly and walked back into the common space.

I heard something rustling at the front door. I signaled for Damere to tiptoe with me to the backyard. Once we were outside, I sprinted to the tree. "Do you know how to use this?"

"Partially. You just touch it and say Vitayo, but you must think of where you want to go. We both must think the same or we might end up somewhere else." Damere spoke quickly as we both heard rattling against the back door.

“Oh, no. They followed us. Okay calm down, Ny. Calm down.” I relaxed my breathing. I reached out for Damere’s hand and we both spoke in unison.

“Vitayo. Vitayo.”

## FIFTEEN

“They’re gone.” The man growled as he entered the backyard. “We almost had them.”

“Maybe we weren’t meant to see them yet.” Another man spoke.

“It’s been too long. I need to see my brother. Tell him things to help keep him from danger.” The man held his hand to the tree trying to read where they went. “There’s no use. They both didn’t think in unison.”

“What does that mean?” The other man spoke his face filled with angst.

“It means that tracking them is impossible. I have no clue where they are, and we need to find them to warn them.” The first man growled.

“We need to lay low for a while. Stay here until they discover you’re missing. Then we can use the hysteria as a diversion.” The man rubbed the young man’s shoulder.

“No, I need to find him now. What if they get to him first?” The man pulled his shoulders away.

“They won’t Lycan. They’re too incompetent and your father has provided the best protections one can give.” A relaxing voice spoke.

“How do you know Pytia?” The young man asked, looking up as he bit his lip.

“You have to trust me and Amerlis.”

“You should listen to her.” Amerlis cosigned. “She’s the reason we got you out. If it wasn’t for her learning how to break the house bound and then learning how to reverse Poyan’s bindings, you’d still be stuck in that prison.”

“I know, and I am thankful. I don’t want you guys to think I am ungrateful, but it has been so long since I’ve seen my family. I miss them dearly.”

“Lycan, it’s okay. We miss our daughter too. As much as we want to go and torture the Charazes until we get the truth, we can’t. It wouldn’t do anything anyways.” Pytia pulled Lycan into a hug and rubbed his back. “We will be reunited with our families soon enough. I promise. Now let’s go back inside. We need to strategize a new plan.”

Pytia walked inside and the two men followed. She placed down a map that allowed her to see the Charazes home. Lycan sat next to her pulling a book out of his bag. This book contained letters from his father and clues to helping overthrow the Charazes. “Do you know of anyone other than Gizelle that can be turned?”

“Who were the new recruits?” Lycan asked trying to get a name to come to mind.

“There were only two. Ryori Bandsen and Gizelle.” Amerlis answered, removing his hand from his temple.

“Bandsen? Are you sure?” Lycan asked, looking through the books. “It says here that only one family member of each family is given the choice to join the Charazes. Why do the Charazes need two of the Bandsen children?”



Amerlis and Pytia looked up at Lycan. “What do you mean?” Amerlis asked walking over to him and sitting next to him.

“Right here, it says that Natal Bandsen is already a Charaz Why would her sister become one too? That doesn’t make sense, right?” Lycan asked, looking at the two. Amerlis began to look through his book. His text consisted of the Charazes’ knowledge of recruits and locations of magical people.

“I think your copy is incomplete.” Amerlis responded. “My copy says Natal died during the war.”

“No, that can’t be right. It says here that she was accounted for after the war.” Lycan showed the page to them. As Amerlis read, he started to show signs of realization.

“This book is filled with omissions.” He spoke as Lycan’s face frowned. “Not yours, but mine. Carmalena hasn’t been giving the Charazes all of the information.”

“There’s an easy way to solve this, boys.” Pytia chuckled. She sprinkled a black powder over the map. “Ahgenta Natal. Ahgenta Natal.”

The map glowed as the black powder swirled on the surface until it formed a crystal. Pytia picked up the crystal and handed it to Lycan.

“Good work, my love.” Amerlis smiled. “When that crystal glows yellow, it means that Natal is close. We’ll have to go search for her and really figure out what is going on. The fact the crystal formed means that she is alive.”

“Glow yellow like this?” Lycan raised the glowing crystal.

“That can’t be possible.” Pytia frowned. “I must have complete the spell wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“For the crystal to be glowing it means that the person is here with us.” Pytia grabbed the crystal and studied it. “It’s definitely glowing, but there is no body here other than us.”

“Are you sure?” Amerlis whispered pointing to the closed bedroom door. “Did you check every room in the house?”

“Yes,” Pytia scoffed walking towards the closed bedroom door. “There’s nothing in here, but a room full of books.”

Amerlis opened the door and the room full of books appeared. He stepped in taking in the room, he heard a creaking in the corner. When he looked over, he noticed that there was a shadow near the chair. “It’s okay, you can come out. My name is Amerlis and this is Pytia, my wife. We’re looking for a friend.”

“Your friend is not here. It is just me and I am friends with no one.” The voice spoke from the shadows.

“Maybe you can help us.” Lycan stepped forward. “I’m looking for my dad, but in order to find him. I need to find a woman named Natal. Natal Bandsen. Do you know that name?”

“You do not speak that name. That person no longer exists.” The voice boomed shaking the room, causing all three of them to lose balance.

“I think it’s a Unrete charm. They’re used to cause harm to those seeking things they shouldn’t. In order for us to figure out what the charm is hiding, we have to provide it with the proper information. We only have three tries. If we fail, let’s just say we all broke out of our prisons for nothing.” Pytia gulped hard. “What do we know about Natal?”

“Her parents were the Bandsens, her sister is Ryori, and she helped run the orphanage.” Amerlis spoke loudly as he read from the book he had. “Can any of those help us?”

“I don’t think so. Unrete charms can only be created when someone has been wronged. They create impossible answers that only people who really knew them know.” Pytia looked at both of them. “How did Natal die?”

“She’s not dead.”

“Lycan, listen to me. She is dead, but the charm is making us think she is alive. One of the wrongs is murder. Who would have murdered her?” Pytia groaned as the room began to rumble gain. The three of them were silent trying to contemplate who it could have been.

“Betrayal, right?” Lycan broke the silence. “What if it was her family?”

“No, I know the Bandsens, they wouldn’t betray their children.” Pytia asserted.

“The Charazes.” Amerlis closed the book tightly. “They’ve been betraying everyone since before Alphogee’s parents died.” He turned and looked at the shadow figure. “The Charazes murdered you, didn’t they?”

A flash of light flickered in the room. When the light disappeared, the cloaked bottom of the shadow figure appeared.

“It’s working.” Amerlis cheered. “What other forms of betrayal are there?”

Lycan looked at the clock. He pointed to Pytia, and then to the clock. “Doesn’t that look familiar?” He nudged her. Pytia realized what it meant.

“The cooperative didn’t protect you.” She spoke closing her eyes just in case she was wrong. There was a flash of light and the shadow figure had showed another apart of its body in cloaked form. “Yes.”

“Alright one more. This is obvious.” Lycan boasted. “The Charazes tricked your sister into joining after your death.” There was a loud screeching noise and the room rumbled.

“Lycan, that was incorrect.” Pytia growled. “We need to take our time. Figure out who Natal knew.”

“I got this.” Lycan reassured them, stepping forward. “Your parents didn’t protect you from the Charazes.” The screeching noise returned. The rumbling caused some of the books to fall off the shelves.

“Lycan, stop talking.” Amerlis covered his mouth. “We only have one chance left. If we blow this, we die. Stop saying anything. We need to make more educated guesses.” He let Lycan go.

Lycan read the book in front of him while Amerlis read his. Pytia looked around the room for any clues. The trio was so preoccupied that they didn’t hear the footsteps coming through the front door. As they researched the footsteps crept towards the room, they were in. The figure that belonged to the steps, positioned itself in front of the room’s threshold.

“We’re never going to figure out the answer. At this rate.” Pytia groaned. She realized that her hopes of getting her daughter back were gone. That Lycan wouldn’t be reunited with his family. They had been given a puzzle they couldn’t solve.

“Alphogee didn’t protect Carmalena.” A voice called from behind them. A beam of bright light filled the room and when the light disappeared, there was a Charaz standing there. Each of the three paused as they watched the Charaz come closer. Once it was close to them, it lowered its hood.

“I’m not here to harm you.” It reached out its hand revealing that it was Natal. Her cinnamon skin brought ore light into the room and her curls fell to her shoulders. “We must protect Carmalena.”

“What do you mean?” Amerlis stepped forward. “Where is my daughter?”

“I’m not sure.” Natal spoke circling the room. She was looking for something. Pytia followed her trying to see if she could pick up a read on Natal’s memories. When she reached out to touch her shoulder, her hand went right through her.

“She’s just an apparition.” Pytia called back as she looked behind her. Her mouth dropped open as she seen the man stand behind the two. His curly hair hung wild around his oval face. His hair stopped just below his chest. His green eyes seemed to stare directly through her and at the floating spirit. His coffee colored skin was smooth against his cheekbones as he stood there unbothered by her reaction.

“What’s wrong?” Amerlis asked, but all Pytia did in response was point behind them. Lycan and Amerlis turned around, their mouths opening wide. The man started moving towards them. Amerlis looked at Lycan as he backed away, but instead Lycan kept moving forward. At first slowly and then faster until he had his arms around the man like a small child embracing someone they loved.

“Daddy, where have you been?” Lycan voice was muffled with sniffles. The man hugged his son back. It was very touching to see two men hugging that way. It seemed like they never wanted to let each other go. Amerlis made his way over to Pytia.

They both looked at each other before speaking in unison, “Daddy?”.