Prologue

“Don't touch it!”

William Campbell, who was standing on a ladder, froze for a moment. Both of his hands were ready to move a portrait which had been hanging on the wall of his mother's house for decades.

He turned to look at his mother who was staring at him with an unhappy face. “But why, mother? She's just...” he paused.

He looked back at the portrait - a portrait of a very beautiful young woman. From her look, it could be said that she was from a far away land. Thick full lips, big round eyes, dark hair and brownish skin. But it wasn't her face that caught his attention. It was more like an unsettling feeling, as if she was staring at him and smiling. That really creeped him out sometimes.

He stared at her for a moment. *Who was she? Why would Mother keep her portrait for decades?*

“Can you please at least tell me why?” asked William.

He had lost count of the number of times he'd asked that question. And just like all the times before, he got no answer, except for his mother's stern look.

“Never mind,” he sighed.

No matter what he did, he could never move the portrait away or even touch it without getting shouted at. Because he was the only child, the house had been handed down to him by his mother. He had the right to do anything he pleased with the house, except for removing the portrait. Feeling hopeless, he stepped down from the ladder.

He looked at the portrait once again. *You are very lucky, you know that? My mother loves you whole heartedly. I wish I could understand why.*

He smiled faintly at his mother, folded up the ladder and left.

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Giselle Campbell had two things she wanted the most - wealth and power. She was well-known throughout the country for stopping an outbreak of a mysterious disease that killed many people 56 years ago. Ever since then, she had continued to surprise people with her miraculous medicine. She was even nicknamed 'Goddess Giselle', and worshipped by thousands of people.

Now at the age of 77, she started to feel weak. Her son, who had just turned 43 last week, thought she was dying and that was the reason she handed down the house to him. But the real reason was that she needed something which only her son could provide. Deep down she knew she would never die. That was the promise made to her, and she had to keep her part of the promise to stay alive, forever.

She looked at the portrait hanging on the wall. “Arini,” she whispered.

As long as she lived, no one would ever be allowed to touch it. Not even her son. Not even her daughter-in-law. Not even she herself.

She knew they weren't happy having the portrait in the house. She often heard Olivia, William's wife, complaining about it.

“What's so important about that old portrait?”

“I think your mother is crazy to keep that unknown portrait around.”

“Darling, this is your house now. Do something. Get rid of it. It gives me goosebumps.”

Giselle closed her eyes. *If only they know how important the portrait of Arini is to me.* But she couldn't tell them. It was her secret that could not be revealed to anybody.

Slowly, she pushed her wheelchair - which had accompanied her for almost two years now - towards her bedroom. Her head was aching. She just needed a rest.

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In the silence of the empty hallway, the portrait of Arini started to vibrate. The vibration continued for a few minutes and then settled down. Inside the portrait, a spirit was lingering and trembling with excitement. Soon, it will all be over.

PART I - THE PROPHECY

1

**Dulmer - 56 years ago**

Giselle stared out her bedroom window. Today was her 21st birthday. It was no different from her previous birthdays. There would be no celebration. She would just be having dinner with her family the same as any other night.

But what did make today a bit different was the fact that Dulmer was covered with snow. Dulmer was a small town populated by only 400 people. Its weather was always cold but it rarely snowed, even though it was located well south of the equator. The last time the town was hit by snow was almost two decades ago. She was too little to remember.

She kept on staring at the falling snow. To her, it felt like magic. She had dreamt about this moment, where she could bathe herself in the snow and build a snowman like the one she drew in her sketchbook.

*What am I waiting for? I should feel its magic while it's still falling.* But she couldn't bring herself to move from the window. She was too mesmerized to do anything.

“Meow.”

Fleur, her Burmese cat, was rubbing her face along Giselle's ankle. She smiled and lifted her up, and hugged her affectionately. “You love snow too, don't you Fleur?”

“Meow.”

Giselle smiled. She remembered the day she found Fluer. It was exactly three years ago, on the night of her 18th birthday. She was having dinner with her Ma and Pa and her little sister, Elizabeth.

“I turned 18 today,” she had braved herself to speak. It was a rule in her family not to discuss anything over dinner, unless they had something important to convey.

Silence.

“I've been thinking. Maybe we should all...”

“Finish your meal, and help your Ma clean up after that,” Pa interrupted.

“But...”

“Just finished your meal.”

Giselle bit her lip. Angry. She turned to look at Ma. She was acting as if nothing had happened and continued eating. Giselle turned to look at Elizabeth. Her sister was staring fixedly down at her lap and didn’t lift her head.

What was wrong with her family? Why couldn't they be like the Jones, or the Archibalds, or the Hansons? Most of her friends shared stories about how wonderful their families were. How they spent time together. But her? She couldn't find a single pleasant word to describe her family. She even doubted if she could ever consider them as a family.

“Why can't we be like a normal family?” she gathered her courage to ask.

“Giselle, how many times do I have to tell you not to speak during your meal?”

“But what's wrong with it? You're never home during the day, and Ma is busy with baking and knitting. This is the only time where we can get together. Why can't we talk? Why can't we share what we were doing all day?”

“That's enough young lady!”

“No! We are family. Why can't we act like one?” Giselle protested.

“This is my house, my rule. If you don't like it, you can get yourself out of here!”

*So, there's really no hope for this family, huh?* Feeling hopeless, Giselle pushed her chair back from the dining table and ran from the room. She couldn't stand being there any more. She didn't want to be part of something where she didn't belong.

“Giselle!” Elizabeth stood and tried to chase after her sister.

“Elizabeth, sit!”

An order from Pa stopped Elizabeth in her tracks. She wanted to go after Giselle but she was scared of her father too. Slowly she sat down and looked at her disfunctional family. Pa and Ma were not worried at all that Giselle might run away forever from home. They kept on eating. She understood her sister's pain because she felt it too. Her tears started to fall.

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Giselle sat in the middle of Pa's apple orchard, thinking how foolish she was. When she ran out of her house, she hadn't realized it had started raining outside. To make matters worse, it was winter. She wasn't just wet, but cold and shivering.

She had acted according to her emotion. She knew her parents wouldn't change, and she should just bear with them. But yet, she had snapped. She was just hurting herself.

She stood up. There was no point in running away. It would not make any difference to Ma and Pa. They would still be the way they were. But she could do something for herself, and Elizabeth. She could still change both of their futures.

Slowly she walked back home, passing through the rows of apple trees. The orchard was large - about two acres - and was the main source of income for her family during the season.

Pa planted Winesap, an older variety of apple. The apple shape was small and rounded. The skin was rough and deep red in color. It could be eaten raw but Pa did not plant the apples to be sold like that. Once the apples were picked, Ma would turn the apples into cider. Ma was good at baking too so sometimes she would make many kinds of apple cakes and sell them to bakeries.

When Ma was busy helping Pa, Giselle was responsible for preparing dinner. Lately, it had become her routine almost every day. Ma had found a new interest - knitting. If Ma wasn't helping Pa, she would spend hours knitting.

Giselle had no choice but to take over these responsibilities. Elizabeth’s health was poor and without proper care she would easily become ill. Ma and Pa never seemed to care about this but Giselle loved her little sister dearly and couldn't bear to let anything happen to her.

She reached the edge of the orchard. Up ahead she could see a light coming from her house. She sighed. Like it or not, she had to go back. Right now, that was where she belonged.

She was still about 100m from the house when she spotted the grey Burmese kitten lying in the middle of the road. At first she thought the kitten was dead. But as she came close to it, she realized that it was still alive, barely. With a sudden rush of sympathy, she brought the kitten home.

2

Inside their cold bedroom, Elizabeth was crying underneath her blanket. She kept on thinking of Giselle. *What if she really ran away and doesn't come back?*

The sound of someone tapping on the bedroom window turned her sadness into a moment of panic. Afraid to do anything, she froze herself underneath the blanket, hoping who ever tried to break in would go away.

“Elizabeth.”

Someone was whispering her name.

“Elizabeth.”

It took her awhile to realize it was Giselle calling out her name. She threw back the blanket and ran to let her in through the window. Her eyes sparkled when she saw Giselle standing right in front of her. *She had not run away!*

“Get me a towel,” Giselle instructed her.

Elizabeth nodded, and hurriedly went to get the towel. She was really happy Giselle was back. She handed over the towel and was surprised to see it was actually used to wrap up a dying kitten.

“Is there any left over milk in the kitchen?”

“I think so.”

“Elizabeth, I want you to take this kitten, put it on my bed, then quietly go to the kitchen and bring back a bowl of milk. Can you do that for me?”

Elizabeth nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“I need to get out of these wet clothes.”

Without another word, Elizabeth gently took the kitten, put it on Giselle's bed which was just beside hers, and went to the kitchen. When she returned, Giselle was already dressed in her sleeping robe. She passed her the bowl of milk.

Giselle dipped her little finger into the milk and brought it close to the kitten's mouth. At first, the helpless kitten refused to lick it. But when she carefully pushed her finger into its mouth, it slowly licked off the milk, and they continued this process until it had enough.

Giselle smiled, content. She might have a rough day, but in the end, she had saved the life of a stray kitten.

“Giselle?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Happy birthday,” said Elizabeth. She extended her right hand which held an old silver necklace with a diamond-shaped crystal pendant.

“What is it for?” asked Giselle, confused.

“It’s a gift for you. I know you love this necklace.”

Giselle looked at the necklace. It was Grams, passed down to Elizabeth when she was three. Elizabeth, at that time, cried all the time. No one knew why. The only thing that could stop her from crying was Grams’ necklace. Holding the necklace somehow gave peace to her.

It was true that Giselle loved the necklace. She had taken it once without telling anybody, to wear to her school dance. When she came home, she found that Elizabeth went hysterical for hours. Since then, she understood the importance of the necklace to Elizabeth and swore not to ever touch it again.

“I shouldn't have it. It's yours.”

“I don't mind giving this to you if it can make you happy. I don't want you to run away anymore.”

Giselle was speechless. She didn't expect those words from her 11 year old sister. Elizabeth might still be a kid, but she did indeed have a big heart. She cared, unlike their parents who didn't even try to understand their daughters' feelings.

She held Elizabeth's right hand. “You keep it. I won't be going anywhere, at least not without you.”

Elizabeth's eyes widened. “Promise?”

“Promise,” Giselle answered, with a smile. And she meant it.

Elizabeth looked over her sister's shoulder where she could see the kitten was sound asleep. “Is it going to be alright?”

Giselle turned to look at the kitten. “I hope so.”

“Are you going to keep it?”

“Uh-huh,” Giselle nodded.

“Does it have a name yet?”

“I haven't thought about that. Would you like to give it a name?”

“I can?” There was a note of excitement in Elizabeth's voice.

“Of course you can. What should we call her?”

“How about 'Fleur'?”

Giselle smiled. “Fleur it is.”

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It was already midnight but Giselle still couldn’t sleep. She couldn't stop thinking about her future. *What can I do to change it?*

She got up out of her bed and sat down at the chair in front of her dressing table. From the dimmed light of her bed lamp, she looked into the mirror. What she saw was a beautiful young brunette. Her oval-shaped face in a tanned skin was perfected by downturned, dark blue eyes. Her look was quite distinct from Elizabeth's. Although they shared the same hair color and face shape, her sister's skin was pale, almost white. She had hooded, true gray eyes. Her straight-cut fringe combined with a long straight hair that was always let loose made her look really cute, suitable with her age.

Giselle studied her face for a few more seconds. She was already 18 and supposed to be married. But yet, she was still single. All of her girlfriends had already started their own families. It wasn't that she had no suitors. With her pretty face, young men were queuing to propose her. The only problem was Pa. He refused them all.

The first was Charlie Bakersville. He was in the same class with her at high school. Short and fat, he had since taken over his father's job at their sheep farm. He was shy and they had hardly spoken, but Giselle was aware that Charlie had always showed his interest towards her.

Then there was Peter Watson. He was a mature man, seven years older than her. He had come to Dulmer two years ago, opening a bakery which Ma sometimes sent her apple cakes to. Giselle did not know much about him, except that he was a widower.

Next was Morgan Russo, a farmer. He had a well built athletic body but his attitude was annoying. He clearly had a high opinion of himself. For once Giselle was actually happy when Pa rejected his proposal.

Bobby Stone had the same fate. He had been teaching at Giselle's old school for about a year now. He had a sweet and charming personality as a teacher. He was good at making jokes too. Everyone in the school loved him.

Greg Harrison's fate was no different from the others. He was an officer in the army which was considered to be a sacred position in Dulmer. The armies were the protecters of the city, treated with a great deal of respect. Still, that couldn't penetrate Pa's invincible wall.

The last one was Connor Macbill. He was an educated, handsome young man. He was the son of Jack Macbill, the CEO of a chocolate factory in Dulmer and a millionaire. Connor was sent to study business in Anders, a place where the best of the best gathered and learned.

Giselle first met him at the chocolate factory when she went to buy a wedding gift for Maria Jones, her best friend. Connor had just arrived for a long break at Dulmer. She mistook him as one of the workers, and innocently asked for him to wrap the gift.

Since then they had been meeting secretly. After two months of the relationship, Connor decided to make Giselle his wife. She told him about the previous proposals and he confidently said 'No one refuses the Macbills.' But he was wrong.

Pa was not impressed a bit by the Macbills' wealth. Like the other men before him, Connor's proposal was solidly refused without any reason. Giselle was bitterly disappointed. She tried to reason with Pa but her arguments weren't heard. Feeling insulted, Connor went back to Anders, and later on she found out he had married his father's best friend's daughter. That was the end of Giselle's dream.

The story of Pa rejecting every single suitor became well known, and made Giselle the most popular topic in town.

“Poor Giselle. She'll end up an old maid.”

“Patrick Campbell might be waiting for an angel to fall from the sky to marry his daughter.”

“I'd rather marry someone who is ugly than the beautiful Giselle who is just for display.”

“I think Giselle might just have a terrible disease.”

No man wanted to propose to her anymore. Giselle felt so helpless. Her miserable life had been sealed. She would grow up being a single, old, and lonely woman. *Thanks Pa for ruining your daughter's life.*

There were times when she wondered what was wrong with Pa. What made him so heartless? What he had planned for her? She couldn't figure out Pa's past. He wasn't originally from Dulmer, and neither he nor Ma would ever talk about his past. But she had heard that Ma had found Pa badly injured at the outskirt of Dulmer, tended to his wound and later maried him. No one actually knew where he came from. Not even Ma.

She sighed. It might be too late for her to change her destiny, but she could still prevent the same ting from happening to Elizabeth. She vowed to find a way. She definitely would.

3

“Meow.”

Fleur interrupted Giselle's thoughts. Those were her memories from three years ago. She looked at Fleur, who was once a dying kitten, with loving eyes. *You survived the night. Thank you for still being here for me.*

She turned her look towards the dressing desk. It was still the same Giselle reflected in the mirror. She had once made a promise in front of the mirror to change her future. And Elizabeth's.

Her sister had grown up to be a beautiful teenage girl and she received a lot of attention wherever she was. But that was as far as she could get. The people in the town remembered how cold Pa was when dealing with suitors. Elizabeth would bear the same fate, unless she changed it. *Will I be able to keep my promise? It has been three years now but nothing has really changed. I was just all talk.*

Giselle took a deep breath. She gave Fleur a kiss and put the cat down. She was going to change things from this moment. And she would start by going out in the snow.

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Giselle threw a snowball towards her half made snowman, with an upper torso and a head. “Arghhh!” she screamed. This wasn't what she had had in mind. She had imagined of making a gigantic snowman with a bunch of friends and then they would have a snow fight. But this? This was so boring and lonely.

She had not asked Elizabeth to come along because she was afraid her body might be too weak to cope with the cold. She had thought of Maria, but her best friend was expecting. Her other friends, Tessa Archibald, Annabel Pringle, Hannah Willowski and Gina Hanson were all married. They didn't spend much time going out together anymore. Everybody was so pre-occupied with their new families.

Giselle looked at her former school building which was about 50 metres in front of her. She had chosen her former school field as a spot to play with the snow because she hoped to bump into some kids playing around where she could join the fun. But when she had got there, she could see nobody. She waited and waited, but still, no one came. *They really don't know how to have fun. What's wrong with the people in this town? No, what's wrong with their families?*

She felt like a fool. It was she who decided to go out in the heavy snow. Normal people would be staying at home, keeping away from trouble. She threw another snowball, this time harder, because she was angry at herself.

Her fingers were becoming numb with cold. It was getting colder, and her woollen gloves and jacket could not keep her warm anymore. Her teeth were chattering. She had to get away from there. She started walking, but found for some reason her legs refused to walk back home. Instead she found herself walking on across town, further and further from home. And somehow in this freezing weather, she started to feel the freedom that she longed for.

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Giselle stared at what was in front of her, with great disbelief. She was surprised when she eventually found she had reached the botanical gardens, at the northern edge of Dulmer. The gardens made a spectacular scene. The lancet arch entrance was decorated with snowflakes. The leafless trees were all frosty. But what made everything stranger was the deep snow that covered the garden.

The moment she stepped into the entrance, her legs sank in the powdery snow. Confused, she turned her head over her shoulder, to confirm the sudden change. Before the arch was crud, and right after the arch was powder. It seemed like the arch was the separation line between the crud and the powder.

And what was this feeling she had? It felt like she had just entered another realm. It was really hard to describe. She had been to the garden so many times in the past. Apart from the snow, there was nothing different physically about this place. But it felt different this time, like it was calling for her, urging her to go deeper and deeper.

Giselle tried to move but found herself stuck in the thick, soft snow. *Brilliant, Giselle!* Carefully, she dug herself out and moved a step forward. Each time she moved, the same thing happened. She was quickly tiring from digging herself out, and she decided not to try and go any further into the garden. She had already wasted a lot of time there. Soon, she had to prepare for dinner and she needed to find a way to get back to the arch without sinking.

*If only I could find something to ride on, like a sled.*

“Are there any reindeer in here? Santa? Anything?” she shouted out loud.

There was no response. She had to do this herself. It was when she was about to turn back that she spotted something glowing from beneath the snow just right ahead.

Curious, she pushed herself to walk towards the glow. When she reached the spot, she could see the glow more clearly. Brighter. Forgetting about her tiredness, she started digging. She had to find out what it was underneath the snow.

*It could be tons of gold.* Or it could be other valuable stuff. Whatever it was, it might be the answer she was looking for, her escape to freedom. She kept on digging until the snow she was sitting on suddenly became shaky. By the time she realized what was happening, it was already too late.

4

Giselle opened her eyes. She was lying on soft, green grass. Her vision was a bit blurry but she could tell she was in a completely different place. She rubbed her eyes to clear her vision.

Staring up, she saw a bright sky covered with thin mist. And there was a little girl about 11 years old, with long red hair and smooth, porcelain skin sitting beside her right shoulder, looking down at her. She looked like a little angel, except without wings.

*Wait! If she's an angel, does that mean I'm...*

“You're awake,” said the little girl.

“Am I dead?” asked Giselle.

“No.”

“Then where am I?”

“In *our* place.”

“How did I get here?”

“You tell me.”

Giselle closed her eyes, trying to remember. She remembered being in the garden, digging in the thick snow, losing her balance and falling.

*The glow! That's right. I was digging to reach that glow. Could it be this place is 'the glow'?*

She sat up. Her eyes wildly scanned the surroundings. She was in a beautiful garden. There were different kinds of flowers - species she had never seen before. Trees were strong and big. There were also some small tress which bore delicious looking fruits. To her left, she could see a small stream that sounded pleasant as it flowed past her. Everything was strange to her. If this was not heaven, then what was this place?

Giselle turned to look at the little girl. “Who are you?”

“Ava.”

“Okay Ava. Can you tell me exactly where this place is compared to my... umm...”

“Compared to your world?”

Giselle bit her lip. “Right. Compared to my world.”

Ava smiled. “We are just underneath your world.”

*This is getting crazier.* “Why did you bring me here?”

“I didn't. You came by yourself.”

*Of course. I was the one who went nuts chasing the glow.* She took a deep breath. “Do you know how could I go back to my world?”

“Through the same way you came.”

Giselle studied Ava for a moment. She needed her to explain in detail. “Ava, I'm going to need you to tell me exactly how.”

Once again, Ava smiled. “Would you like to have a look around?”

“No Ava. I just want to...”

“Come. I'll show you.” Without waiting any longer, Ava pulled Giselle's hand and ran.

“Ava, wait!” Giselle tried to stop her but it was useless. Ava held her hand firmly and pulled her through the trees and flowers until they reached a a flat area at the edge of a cliff. Her heart pounded rapidly from too much running.

“Look!” Ava pointed down the cliff.

Below them was a large village, situated in a valley surrounded on three sides by the rocky cliff. What made the village look unusual was that it was full of tall and huge trees, and the people down there lived in tree houses.

The tree houses were all different shapes and sizes. There were single-storey tree houses, and there were also double-storey houses built on different branch layers with stairways. Rope bridges connected the trees together and from above, the village looked like an intricate spider web.

Growing perpendicularly from the sides of the cliff were massive bushy-topped trees. Above the trees was a beautiful spring that trickled down onto the trees, creating tiny waterfall showers that streamed down the cliff. She really couldn't believe what she was seeing.

“Now I'll show you your way home,” said Ava.

5

They had reached the portal to go back to her world. It was just a small cave entrance that linked to the other side. Giselle was on the verge of stepping in, but realized she was not ready - her inquiring mind needed to know the answer to this bedazzling world. She turned to Ava.

“Ava, do you mind if I ask, who are you exactly?”

As before, the little girl smiled. “I'll tell if you decide to come back.”

“Can I?”

“It depends on you.”

“But how? The snow might not last long, and I may not be able to find the glow from your world to tell me where the portal is.”

Ava held her hands. “The portal is always there. The snow just helped you to see it clearer. You just need to know where to look.”

Giselle nodded.

“The next time you come, tell me your name,” said Ava.

“I can tell you now.”

“What good does it do to know someone's name just to forget it?” With that, Ava turned, and left.

Giselle was puzzled. She did not expect that kind of answer to come out from a little girl. “Wait, Ava! How do I know where to find you if I decide to come back?”

“I'll know once you've crossed the portal.” She gave Giselle a final wave, and disappeared in the mist.

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That night, Giselle had trouble sleeping. Her mind kept wandering off, thinking about her unexpected adventure during the day. A lot of things did not make any sense.

The time in her world seemed to have stopped the moment she entered the portal. She was unconscious right after that for only God knew how long. She was sure she was in the other world for at least an hour, but when she stepped back into her own world, no time had passed. Had she really gone to the other world or had she been just hallucinating because of the coldness?

How could there be a portal in the gardens? She had been there so many times. So had other people. Wasn't it weird that no one had ever found the portal before? Dulmer was such a small town. Everybody knew pretty much about everything. If someone had found the portal before, the whole town would have talked about it, unless that someone was really good at keeping it a secret.

And an unknown world underneath her world? She must have gone really nuts. Rationally, she knew it could not be possible, but she knew what she had experienced felt real. There was only one way to find out the answers to this mystery - she had to go there again.

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In the other world, Ava was studying a large painting in her house. She tried to recall every single detail that was told to her about the painting, not wanting to miss anything important. Her study was interrupted by the arrival of her father.

“Evening, Ava,” her father greeted.

She curtsied to show her respect.

“I heard you made a new friend today.”

“I did, Papa.”

“Is she the one?”

Ava looked at the painting, thinking deeply. “I don't know.”

“Be careful, darling.”

“I will, Papa.”

Her father smiled, gave her a kiss on the forehead and left.

waited until her father left the room, then she closed her eyes and thought of the prophecy that had been passed down through generations to her.

6

A week had passed since Giselle's little adventure to the other world. As days passed by, her curiosity towards the unknown world faded, and she hardly gave it a thought. She had enough problems already, and a new adventure in her life wouldn't fix what was wrong now.

Today was not going to be a good day for her either. It was Greta Jones' big day, and as best friend of Greta's sister Maria, Giselle had to attend the wedding, even though she didn’t really want to go. It was not that she had anything against the wedding, but the fact that she was still unmarried made her felt uncomfortable. In Dulmer culture, women who were still single after the age of 20 were treated with prejudice. They were considered as an “embarrassment to the society” for not being able to find a husband.

Every person in Dulmer knew it wasn't her fault that she was still unmarried. Even so, there were a lot of unpleasant stories spread about her. To make matters worse, most of the stories had become twisted - that she was too demanding and the suitor were not up to her standard. This had turned her from a victim to a villain.

She had another good reason not to attend the wedding. Greta was marrying Peter Watson, the widower whose proposal Pa once refused to accept. She looked deep into the mirror, picturing herself in a white, puff sleeved gown. This could have been her wedding. And she would have been a happy wife and a mother. Instead, now she was just an aging woman in a red top, a white coat and a sheath skirt. A loser with no future.

While she was still thinking about her gloomy life, Elizabeth entered the room, stomping her feet. Her action puzzled Giselle.

“What's wrong honey?” she asked.

“I don't want to go to the wedding!”

*Me too. Let's just go away from here.* “Is something bothering you?”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. Her face was red with anger. “Guess who I saw at Dido Grocery? Beth and Jen Hope! They said I shouldn't be bothered going to the wedding because I'm not going to have one of my own. They said I'm going to grow up an old maid like you.” She burst out in tears.

Giselle looked at her little sister sympathetically. *Unfortunately what they said was true. You are going to end up just like me.* “Hey honey, look at me. Nobody knows what the future is for us. Until it happens, don't ever believe what other people say, especially those two. They love upsetting other people.”

She sounded far more convincing than she felt, but she knew she was absolutely right about Beth and Jen Hope. They were known as the 'Gossip Sisters'. Spreading tales and making fun of other people's misery were what they did best. Beth was two years younger than Giselle. Married to Sam Butler, her next door neighbor, Beth's tongue was sharper than a knife. She would say anything that would hurt people's feelings and brag about it afterward. Jen had been in the same class as Elizabeth and her attitude was a complete clone of her sister's.

Elizabeth wiped away her tears. “I hope you'll get married soon so all of these people will stop saying bad things about you.”

“I hope so too. But right now, we are going to forget about this hurtful thing and just enjoy ourselves at the wedding, okay?”

*As if I could.* But she had to be strong, at least for Elizabeth's sake.

7

The wedding was huge. The ceremony was held in a wedding chapel in the middle of the gardens. Because it was winter, everything was done indoors but it did not stop the event from being a wedding to remember. The interior was decorated with a garden theme. Fresh red roses were found on every bench and lose petals were scattered along the aisle where the bride and groom would walk.

Again, the same thought hit Giselle. This could have been her wedding. It was exactly how she had pictured her wedding would be when she was young. She had dreamt of this moment.

The start of the wedding song played by Maria interrupted her thoughts. She turned her head towards the entrance of the chapel. Peter and Greta walked in slowly, arm in arm. They were smiling joyfully, ready to live happily ever after. At the altar, the minister waited as they approached.

After they had been pronounced husband and wife, the guests rose and clapped. Everybody was happy for the newlyweds, except Giselle. She was happy for them, but she also felt acutely miserable - as though her heart was constantly being stabbed. She wanted to leave before it became more painful but when she glanced at Elizabeth's hopeful face, standing beside her, she put the thought away. *For Elizabeth.* She kept on repeating the phrase to herself.

The guests were invited to a buffet at the chapel's hall next door. The food was served on a long table covered in white tablecloths on the right side of the hall. At the top center of the hall, stood a five-layer wedding cake on a small round desk.

Everybody was enjoying themselves, eating and talking. The newlywed-couple were busy cutting cakes and posing for photos with family and friends.

Giselle couldn't bring herself to be part of the joyous moment. She constantly looked at her watch, counting every minute for the festivities to be over. Maria approached her several times for a chat, but each time before their conversation got anywhere, she had to leave to entertain other guests.

It was one of the longest days in Giselle's life. She decided to preoccupy herself with more food and cocktail. She left her diner table, walked towards the buffet and unexpectedly stumbled into Beth and Jen.

“My, my,” said Beth. “Look who we've got here. Gis-olda-maid Campbell! You actually have guts to show your lonely face among these happily married people.” Jen giggled unpleasantly.

“What do you want Beth?” asked Giselle, annoyed with the sisters.

“Cheering up my day,” she replied. Jen continued to giggle.

*Whatever. I'm not going to fall for her stupidity*. Giselle walked away from the buffet table, ignoring Beth and Jen. Other people nearby were starting to show interest.

“What's the matter old maid? Too shamed to be with us, the happily married people?” Beth was no longer warming up with her words. She had gone into attacking now.

“I felt sorry for you Giselle. You must be dying to know how it feels to be caressed by a man, don't you? The sensuous feelings between a man and a woman. Oh, I know! I can show it to you, the excitement that you are missing. Consider that as a pity gift from me to you.”

*Just walk away, Giselle. Don't succumb to her words.*

She knew Beth's words were intentionally cruel and Beth was that kind of person but still, she was hurt. And the other people nearby found it to be funny. They laughed along with Beth and Jen. It was an unbearable feeling for Giselle.

As she moved to get away, she saw Elizabeth's standing among the crowd, frantically looking at her. Giselle shook her head. *Get away from there quickly, Elizabeth. You don't want to be trapped in this mess.* But it was too late. Beth had already spotted Elizabeth's presence.

“Well, there's another one. Another soon to be unmarried girl. What a one big happy old maid family. If I were them, I would have hid myself in a far away cave, and made friends with wild animals. Actually I wouldn't have minded even being eaten by them, it would be better than living such a pitiful existence.”

The laughing grew louder. Giselle could see her sister's eyes started to fill with tears. *This was way too much.* She stopped, turned slowly and walked back towards Beth. This bullying had to end now.

“Did you want take on my offer? I can...”

Beth speech stopped abruptly when a powerful swing slapped her left cheek. She fell to the floor, with a look of disbelief. What she saw in front of her was no longer the quiet and usually timid Giselle, but someone who held a lot of hatred in her. Someone who could resort to violence at any time.

“You were saying?” asked Giselle. Her tone changed. Rougher this time.

Beth's eyes widened. “You are a loony. Is this what an unmarried single life had done to you? You and your sister...” Before she could even finish her sentence, Giselle slapped her again. She screamed painfully.

“You can say anything you want about me. But if I ever hear you bad-mouthing my sister again, I'll make sure that mouth of yours will never say another word. Understood?”

Slowly, Beth nodded. Her left palm was covering her mouth. She could feel blood around the edge of her mouth. She was too afraid to do anything. Behind her back, Jen was screaming hysterically.

“See? That wasn't too hard,” said Giselle. She stood up, straightened her dress and fixed her hair. She turned to Elizabeth. “Let's go home.”

Giselle walked out of the hall, with a huge smile on her face. It felt like she had won a war. This feeling was so great. She never knew she had it in her. After this incident, she would undoubtedly become a hot topic in town but she wasn't bothered. No one would dare messing around with her anymore. She was sure of it.

8

As expected, Pa was very angry with the incident at Greta’s wedding. Giselle was called to meet him later that night. She walked into the lounge where Pa and Ma were waiting. Usually she would be terrified whenever Pa was angry about something but this time she felt different. She had more confidence, and was ready to face what was to come.

Pa was sitting in his wooden rocking chair. Both of his arms were resting on the arms. With a thick mustache that covered his upper lip on a square dark face, he always looked very stern. She wondered why on earth Ma agreed to marry Pa. *Ma must have been out of her mind to accept such a hot-tempered, ugly looking and good for nothing guy like Pa as a husband. Thank God Elizabeth and I did not inherit Pa’s features. Or else…*

Giselle walked towards Pa, and waited for her punishment. Without saying anything, he stood and slapped her hard across her face. Giselle stayed still, as if she had already expected that kind of reaction from him.

“Was that the best you could do? You are such a disgrace to me.”

Giselle smiled slightly. “I am as much of a disgrace to you as you are to me.”

“You demon child! Know your place!” shouted Pa, angrily and he slapped her again. As before, she didn't move but a small smile crept up her face. Pa continued with the beating, but Giselle didn't respond, and the beating went on until she had no more strength left to stand still.

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Ma sat in the corner, watching in fear. She had not expected that kind of reaction from Giselle. No one dared to take on her husband's wrath and yet Giselle had talked back to him in such a rude manner and was now smiling despite his anger. What had she turned into? She took a deep breath. She knew this was what her husband had always wanted.

The memories from the time when she met her husband flashed into her mind. She shook her head hard to push those memories away. How she wished she had never met him.

9

Elizabeth sat quietly in the bedroom, holding Fleur tightly in her arms. Tears started flowing slowly from her eyes. She could hear Pa's shouting angrily. She knew what Giselle must be going through at that moment and she couldn't do anything about it but to cry.

Half an hour went by. Elizabeth was still sitting on her bed, waiting for Giselle to walk in. All she wanted to do right now was to ease her sister's pain. She felt it was her fault anyway that caused Giselle this trouble. She knew Giselle was trying to protect her. She would have done the same for her, if she could.

The sound of footsteps walking towards her bedroom made Elizabeth jump off the bed. She put Fleur down and ran to open the door. Giselle stood in front of her, her face covered in bruises and starting to swell. Her hair was messy and her dress a little bit torn. She was beaten up pretty badly.

Elizabeth was petrified, too shocked to say anything. Her sister's beautiful face was gone. She knew Pa could be very brutal, but what he did to her was just too cruel.

Giselle forced herself to put a smile on her face. It really hurt to move her face muscles but she didn't want Elizabeth to share her misery so she endured the pain. *For Elizabeth*. Slowly she patted her little sister's head and limped pass her.

“Giselle...” said Elizabeth, softly. Tears were running down her cheeks.

From across the room, Giselle stared at the mirror where she could not even recognize her own face anymore. This was the price she had to pay for defying Pa. Once again, she forced herself to smile.

“Now now Elizabeth, big girls shouldn't cry,” said Giselle, enduring her pain.

“But Giselle, your face!”

“It is only bruised and a bit swollen. It will get better in no time, so stop crying, okay?”

Elizabeth nodded, still sobbing a little bit. She was surprised to see Giselle grabbed her winter coat and started limping towards the door. “Where... where are you going to?”

Giselle stopped and turned towards her. “I'm going to head out for a little while, but I'll be back before you know it. Don't wait up and get a good sleep.” She then left.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Giselle stood at the entrance of the botanical gardens, thinking. What brought her there? She had no answer to that herself. All she knew was, she had to find the portal to the other world. She had to go to that place again.

It was going to be really hard for her to find the portal because there was no more snow to guide like before. Furthermore, it was already late at night. There were no street lights in the garden. All she could depend on was her tiny torch, which would only last for a short time before its batteries ran out.

Slowly she walked into the garden, trying to recall what she did last time. The more she tried to remember, the more vague her memory became. She started to doubt her memories. *What if I was just hallucinating?*

The light from her torch started to flicker before it finally went off. “No, no, no!”. She hit the torch several times, with hope it would start working again but nothing happened. “Oh damn! Now what should I do?”

She felt so frustrated. Why was she being so stupid, chasing something that wasn't even real? Pa must have hit her really hard in the head for her to lose all of her common sense. She stood up, ready to go home but then hesitated a little. Everything was pitch black. She couldn't even see a thing. Which way was home?

Once again, she felt hopeless and defeated by her own ignorance. *If I were to be reborn in the next life, I want to be a bird. I want to spread my wings, and fly anywhere my heart desires. But do birds have heart? Oh, whatever!*

She walked and walked without direction. She had to. It was too cold to stand still. *I could be frozen to death. Or maybe death was not so bad at all.* The coldness made her swollen face felt so numb. She wondered what she looked like at the moment.

As she walked, she talked to herself and hummed her favorite songs. She briefly entertained the thought of being rescued by a handsome prince, who would whisk her away and they would live happily ever after, just like in a fairytale. But her wishful thoughts quickly died when she thought back of reality. How reality sucks!

There were times when whistling sound from the wind caused Giselle to jolt several times, mistaking the sound as an unseen spirit. There were also times when her face was gently hit by waving tree twigs, and made her swollen face hurt even more. But nonetheless, Giselle kept on walking until she felt something different about her surroundings. *This feeling... it was the same as before!* At that moment she knew she had found what she was looking for.

10

Ava sat in her boat in the middle of a turquoise-colored pond. The pond was surrounded by skyscraper-tall trees where the leaves and branches formed a dome-shaped canopy which allowed only rays of light to pass through. Its crystal-clear water gleamed wherever the light hit the surface.

If she was not studying at home, she would be out rowing on her boat. She would row to the center of the pond and sing the song taught by her Papa.

*Cross the water and travel deep*

*To the darkness where the stars asleep*

*Let the lights guide the faithful spirit*

*And seal the soul to the land above it*

The melody was very enchanting. When she sang, she felt a soothing energy flowing into her body. She repeated the verse over and over with her sweet, tender voice.

Underneath the water, there were fish swimming and playing around water lilies' pads which grew on the pond's surface. Sometimes she would bring fresh worms to feed the fish.

This place was a heaven to all living things but when she thought of the prophecy, she became sad and angry. Why would someone do something so evil? She wished for once the prophecy would not come to pass but she knew that would be impossible. Her people lived believing in the day mentioned in the prophecy. So did she. The day would surely come.

She was suddenly struck by a strong, familiar sense which made her stopped singing. Slowly she picked up the oars and rowed back to the land. She ran through the gigantic trees, carefully avoiding shallow roots, not to trip herself. She reached an open area which was almost covered by beautiful lupine-like flowers. She continued walking, until she reached a garden area. There she saw the one she was expecting for.

“You came back,” she said, smiling.

Giselle looked at Ava and returned her smile.

11

She couldn't believe what she saw. For the umpteenth time, she stared at the mirror, looking for any mirror trick but she found none. How was it possible? Her bruises were not only gone but her skin was smoother and fairer than before. On top of that, the swelling had also subsided, leaving no trace of physical abuse at all. Giselle patted her face hard. Nothing. She didn't feel any pain which meant what she saw wasn't some funny tricks playing on her.

“Are you... using magic?” she asked Ava, hoping for an answer.

Ava smiled. “That is our gift. To heal.”

“What are you?” Before Ava could answer, she quickly continued. “I don't mean to be rude by asking 'what' and not 'who'. You know... I'm just curious. You look like us but... not exactly like us.”

Without answering her question, Ava walked towards her desk. On the desk was a vase with a flower, looked like a rose, sprouting a new bud. She placed her palm above the flower bud, chanting a few strange words, and to Giselle's surprise, the flower blossomed beautifully.

“We were once nymphs. Our ancestor fell in love with a mortal man, a lone traveler who was attracted to her singing. Of course that was a forbidden love. Being with a mortal would make us loose our identity and later would bring forth a destruction to our kind - that was the belief, that has become a prophecy. But our ancestor could not bear the thought of losing him so she accepted her fate, drove away by her people and lived with the man she loved. That was how our generations were born, from the love between a nymph and a mortal. Isn't it romantic?”

Giselle found the story to be really enchanting. It was like listening to a beautiful fairytale, only it was real. “What happened to your ancestor?”

“She lived happily ever after. When her husband died, she felt so lonely. Nymphs do not die from an old age or illness. But what's life without love? She decided to gave her life up, to grow old and die just like her husband,” replied Ava, with a smile.

“So the destruction of your kind was just a superstition?”

“Oh, it's very real. It just,” she paused, “hasn't happen yet.”

“And... how long has it been since that time?”

“More than a hundred years ago.”

The answer made Giselle's jaw dropped. *This was just nonsense. Waiting more than a hundred years just for a some make-believe destruction to come true?*

“Is something bothering you?” asked Ava, noticing Giselle's disturbed look.

“Didn't it ever occur to you that the destruction foretold might have just been a myth? Just to scare your people so that you would stay away from a mortal?”

“Do you believe in faith?”

“Huh?”

“To you, it might just be a myth. But to us, the words coming from our ancestors are sacred. Those are not just words, but prophecies passed down since the ancient time. The first prophecy, where a nymph would fall in a forbidden love, had come to pass. The second one shall too without a doubt. Until the day comes, we will continue being ourselves. We will grow old and die. We will continue sealing our souls with nature, nourishing, protecting. That's what we are. What you saw and what I did wasn't magic. I was just releasing my spiritual energy to be absorbed by the other life forms.”

Her words made Giselle completely speechless. Hearing such words from the mouth of a little girl was really impressive. She started to grow respect towards Ava who showed an incredible maturity.

Many questions were thrown related to Ava's world but to her surprise, the girl did not ask anything about hers. *Isn't she curious about what the other side of the world looks like?*

“Ava, isn't my world a mystery to you?” asked Giselle, trying to figure out.

“No. Your world and your people are very predictable. There's no mystery in it.”

There was no hesitation in her answer as if she was quite sure of it, which offended Giselle much. “That's not fair. You should at least get to know our people before coming to such conclusion.”

“I've learnt everything that I need to know about your people.”

“And you think you know everything about us?”

“Absolutely.”

Giselle took a deep breath. She wanted to share her world with Ava but this little girl showed no slightest interest in it. Nothing at all. *Ah! What does she know? She is just a spoilt kid who never been out of her world.*

“You see, Ava, in our world, there are a lot of cool stuff that you won't find in here. There is this box that we called a television. We can see moving pictures in it. There is also a giant looking bird, known as an aeroplane, where we can fly high up in the sky in it.”

Ava seemed unimpressed by her story.

Giselle didn't want to give up just yet. “Do you know that you can actually talk to someone who lives far away from you, like you were having a normal chat?”

Ava turned to look at her. “Would you like to try some of our fruits? They are very nourishing and delicious.”

Giselle bit her lip. *This girl really did it this time, really make me angry. She completely ignored me. Kid or no kid, I'm not going to tolerate this anymore. I'm getting out of here.*

Without wasting anymore time, she stood up. “It has been my pleasure to be here. Thank you for healing me, but I'm afraid I have to go now.”

“Do you want me to lead you to the way out?” asked Ava.

There was a note of sincerity in her voice and that made Giselle even more offended. *She doesn't even try to stop me!*

“It's alright. I can find my own way home. After all, I come from the world where we don't really depend on other people.” She didn't understand why she answered and acted childishly just because some kid showed no interest in her world, but she did.

After giving a quick waving goodbye, Giselle walked towards the door but paused when she saw a painting of a very attractive woman in Ava's room. Something about the painting captured her attention.

“Who is this woman?” she asked.

“Arini,” replied Ava.

Giselle looked at the painting for a while, before turning to look at Ava. “Could she be your ancestor?” Her eyes sparkled, hoping to score another enchanting story.

“No.” As usual, Ava's reply was very brief.

“Then, why do you keep her painting here?”

“To remind us of her betrayal.”

If before, Giselle's eyes were sparkled, now they were burning with curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“Are you not leaving?” It was now Ava who was curious.

“No, I'll stay.”

12

When Giselle got back home later that night, Elizabeth was already asleep. Her sister might have fallen asleep right after she left. Fleur was lying down neatly on her arm. Elizabeth loved Fleur as much as she did. Sometimes she spotted Elizabeth confiding to Fleur, and the cat would act as if she understood every word.

The thought of it made Giselle smiled. That wasn't the only thing she saw. There were times where Elizabeth would play mother and daughter with Fleur, or become a doctor to the 'sick' Fleur, or pretend to be a great singer performing in front of her 'loyal fan'. Elizabeth actions with Fleur amused her a lot.

Fleur wasn't just a pet for them. She was part of the family. A brilliant feline, she understood Giselle's and Elizabeth's emotions. Whenever one of them was sad, Fleur would come and rub her face on their ankles while making a sweet purring sound. There were also times when Fleur would just sit and stare at them with her dazzling green eyes or demand a belly scratch. Looking at Fleur's cute behavior was enough to melt away their problems at that moment.

Giselle looked at them for a few more seconds, gave a goodnight kiss on Elizabeth's forehead, gently petted Fleur and went to bed. But she couldn't sleep that night. Her mind was constantly thinking about Arini, about the story that surrounded the mysterious woman. Arini, it was such a distinguished name...

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*At the age of 8, Arini witnessed an event that changed her life forever. She was in a waiting room at Wak Joko's house, an infamous shaman in Madunia, a country known as 'the nest of black magic practitioners', tagging along her father who wanted to get a lucky charm for his paddy field. There were so many people there, coming from different part of Madunia for various reasons.*

*Among them, a tiny woman in late 20s caught her attention. The woman was wearing a loose white top with blue sarong, a common costume for Madunian women. She sat at a corner of the waiting room, shaking and mumbling to herself. Her eyes constantly moved, looking at the surrounding.*

*“Arini,” her father whispered.*

*Arini switched her look from that woman to her father.*

*“Watch carefully how this works. If you can master this knowledge, there are a lot of things you can achieve in this world,” said her father.*

*She just nodded and continued watching the people in that room. One by one went into a room where Wak Joko was seated. Those who went in would come out with a different expression, mostly a happy face.*

*What drove these people, and her father, to meet the shaman was beyond her understanding. She grew up in a family where she was the only child. Her father was a paddy farmer who hadn't done well for the past few years and her mother was just a housewife.*

*There were times when they had nothing to eat and her mother would tie her stomach tightly so she wouldn't feel hungry. There were also times when her father would knock on someone's else door just to get a piece of bread to feed the three of them. The past few years hadn't been easy on them. It was last night when she overheard the conversation between her father and her mother where they decided it was time to seek help from a shaman.*

*What could a shaman do? She was curious especially when she saw the woman at the corner. Other people seemed very normal, just like her father but the woman looked a little off, as is she belonged to a different world.*

*“Arini, let's go.”*

*Her father's voice interrupted her thought. It was their turn to see the shaman. They were just about to enter Wak Joko's room when a sudden scream from the woman at the corner petrified their moves. A couple of old guys tried to calm her down but were thrown off by an unbelievable strength. It took a strength of seven young strong men to finally get hold of her from going berserk but that didn't stop her from struggling, trying to break free.*

*Wak Joko, a huge, dark man, about 5'8” in mid 60s, walked out from his room towards the screaming woman. When she saw the shaman, her scream turned into a frantic shriek, as if she was trying to get away from him. When that attempt wasn't succeeded, she started cursing him in an unknown language. Her voice became deep, almost like whispering but in a ghostly way. Wak Joko put his hand on her forehead, enchanting some spells. There seemed to be an internal fight going on between him and the woman before she finally gave in. The struggle she put exhausted her body, and she collapsed.*

*Arini watched everything in excitement. The experience should scare her to the bone but instead she was fired up. She understood what her father meant by 'the knowledge' now. If she could posses such power, she could even rule this place. There was no need to beg for a piece of bread anymore, nor going to bed with an empty stomach. This power should be able to change their lives, for the better. At that moment, she found her goal in life.*

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Giselle woke up in the middle of the night, feeling confused. That was a weird dream. She dreamt about Arini when she was a kid. Ever since she learnt about her, she was instantly drawn to that woman. She jerked her body in an upright position, thinking about it. Somehow she felt a resemblance of Arini inside herself. Their struggle, their desire, they were alike. But Arini, in front of the eyes of Ava's people, was an evil person. She tried to destroy their world. Giselle shook her head. *There was no way we were alike. I'm not going to be like her. Never.*

13

“So, she came again?”

Ava nodded. “Yes, Papa.”

“Does she know about Arini?” A tone of curiosity was detected in his voice.

“Yes. In fact, she was really interested in her.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I have a feeling that the time of promise is about to come,” he said.

Ava walked towards her father and hugged him tightly. “Don't worry Papa. We'll be ready this time.”

He kissed her gently on the forehead. “Don't fail us, darling. Our very existence depends on you.”

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The origin of the male nymph was exceptional. It didn't happen in a year or two but after the third generation. When their ancestor mated with her human husband, she gave birth to four beautiful female nymphs. After her husband died and her daughters reached adulthood, she had to find a way to continue her lineage. Her future granddaughters couldn't be conceived the same as she was before, by mating with the other divine creatures, because they were already castaways. The only way she could think of was to get human male companions for her daughters.

She knew it was not going to be easy. Not all human would be receptive to the idea of marrying someone from the other world. She understood that from her experience. Her late husband was rejected by his own family for marrying her. If nothing were done, there would be no heiress to her family.

It was not a solution to this problem but she had no choice. Using her four beautiful daughters as baits, she went to the human world and tricked male travellers who walked by their paths into mating them. And after that, her granddaughters were born. In each subsequent generation, the mixed born nymph inherited more human gene and finally in the third generation, the first male nymph was born. To avoid the nymphs from losing their identities, they were banned from having any more contact with a human, and were only allowed to mate with the male nymph. Since then, more and more male nymphs were born, until they could have their own families and lived a normal life.

The first male nymph was appointed as the ruler of their people. Although he mated with several female nymphs, he had only one wife. Ava came from that lineage and as the only child in her family, she had to be the one, to carry the fate of their people.

It was such a huge burden placed on her small shoulder, but she had to perform the responsibility without fail. Since the day she met Giselle, she had increased her knowledge on the prophecy. She wasn't sure if Giselle was the one, but she couldn't afford to take any risk.

*Cross the water and travel deep*

*To the darkness where the stars asleep*

*Let the lights guide the faithful spirit*

*And seal the soul to the land above it*

The song was repeatedly sang until it echoed in her head even when she stopped singing and the verse was carved right into her heart, so firm that she could never forget about the meaning, ever.

14

“Giselle! Giselle! Wake up!”

Elizabeth's frantic voice woke her up from a deep sleep. She rubbed her eyes in confusion. “What's wrong?” she asked.

“Your face... there are no more bruises!” replied Elizabeth, surprised and excited at the same time.

Giselle, still half asleep, thought for a while before answering, “Oh, that,” and went back to sleep.

“Giselle!”

Elizabeth shook her body hard, but she couldn't bother to wake up. All her little sister wanted to know was how was it possible for the bruises to disappear overnight, which she had no answer to give. *'Tell whatever you want to your people, but no one will believe you. You can't even prove that the portal exists. You'll bring more harm to yourself than to us'* were the words from Ava when she expressed her intention to share her little adventure in the other world with her sister and friends.

What could she possibly tell Elizabeth? That she was healed by a castaway nymph in a world that awaited for a catastrophe to happen? She hated the idea of keeping something important like this from her precious sister but Ava's words... *But wait! What did Ava really say?* As far as she understood, Ava did not stop her from telling the truth, the only concern was to make others to believe in her story. And she did not have to tell the others, Elizabeth alone would be sufficient.

Giselle slowly sat up and looked at her sister. “Elizabeth, listen to me very carefully.”

15

“How does Ava look like?”

“Do they have snow down there?”

“I wonder what they eat?”

Thousands of questions were asked since Giselle broke the story of the other realm to Elizabeth. Her little sister was really fascinated by her unexpected adventure. To Elizabeth, Giselle had become an unsung hero, chosen by the people from the other side but unknown to her own world.

Even though that was a story from two years ago, whenever she thought of Elizabeth's first reaction, she would still be amused by it. Elizabeth, who was now 16, still looked up to her, admired her more and more. Each time she took a trip to the world down under, Elizabeth would ask about her adventure that day, and Fleur was made to listen to her story as well, although the feline would always ended up napping on Elizabeth's lap. Once in awhile, Giselle would bring some delicious fruits back so her sister could get a taste of it.

Seeing Elizabeth's passion towards her adventure somehow hurt her a little bit. She wished to bring her little sister together to the other world but it was not possible. There she stood in front of the portal, wondering, why couldn't Elizabeth see it? Fleur could at least sense the presence of the portal, Giselle was sure of it, because she hissed when they got close to the portal, as if something was scaring her, but still the feline could not get through to the other world. As Elizabeth would say, 'Only the chosen one shall pass', it seemed to be true because Ava had also said the same, 'The portal chooses whom can pass through it', when she confronted her with this matter.

What was so special about her, that she became the chosen one, did not really matter to her. She found the freedom that she was longing for. The only regret she had was that Elizabeth had not been able to share the same feeling. There must be a way. *Someday, I'll find it.*

Through the past two years, she had come to a better understanding of the other world. The place was called Ira, an isolated land reserved for the castaways. Despite the fate that would fall upon them, the half-breed nymphs, as what they called themselves, lived their lives to the fullest. They celebrated whenever a new baby was born, they danced together in joyous moment, they sang for happiness and they cheered each other up. Never once she experienced any dispute nor tension among them. They all lived happily and peacefully, something that was lacking in her world.

Ava had also blossomed into a fine young teenager, taller and prettier. Her wisdom shone through her maturity. She was the proud of her people, the jewel in the crown. Giselle had come to respect and love Ava, who showed her that every living being had its own purpose to serve, including herself.

The past two years had also seen the changes in Giselle in a lot of way as well. If before, she had always been the talk of the town because of her unmarried life, but now, no one dared to speak ill of her, nor Elizabeth in public. Since the incident with Beth and a few more after that, the town people had become very careful when it came to them.

A couple of days after Greta Jones' wedding, there were a lot of speculations circulated about the fate that would fall upon her, especially when Pa's brutal behavior was not a secret among them. Some predicted that Giselle had already become a dead girl walking, badly beaten and out of shape. The others thought that she might have been thrown out of the house and left to wander by herself. Whatever the prediction was, none of them wished for a good outcome. All they wanted to know was the worst thing that Patrick would do to her daughter.

When they saw Giselle went to Dido Grocery with Elizabeth the next day, fine and healthy, they were surprisingly shocked. New questions arose.

“How was it possible that nothing was actually happened to Giselle?”said one of them.

“Has Patrick gone soft on his daughter?” said another one.

“What? Is Patrick for real?” Another would sigh in frustration.

Giselle noticed all the negative vibes coming out from the town people but she decided not to be bothered by it, not until she went to pay for her groceries. 'What are you still doing here? You are better off dead than live with great humiliation,' was what said by the shopkeeper.

Those words pierced her heart sharper than a knife. What was wrong with these people? She was the victim and yet they were picking on her without the slightest sympathy. What did she ever do to deserve this kind of hostility? She had enough already. Nobody would stand up for her nor Elizabeth, and it was up to her to make things right this time, even if it meant she had to take care of things her way.

She handed the groceries to Elizabeth, and said, “Wait for me outside.”

Once she had confirmed that Elizabeth was already out of sight, she turned to scan the whole shop. Her eyes were locked at the left corner, which was in the middle of a renovation. There was a shelf nailed to the wall with cans of paint, nicely arranged on it. But the shelf at one end seemed to be tilted and there was a long lumber supporting the end of the shelf, preventing it from falling. Beneath the shelf lied a stack of groceries, from bags of flour to potatoes to all sorts of raw food.

“Are those for Winter Fete?” asked Giselle.

“So what if they are for Winter Fete?”

Giselle smiled satisfactorily. She had found her trump card. "Say, Don Hayes," who was the shopkeeper, "how would you feel to make history and be the talk of the people for generations?"

"What are you planning to do? Your claws won't work on me," he arrogantly replied.

She didn't respond towards Don's reply, instead her mind was rapidly planning a payback for his rudeness. The upcoming event just gave her the opening she was looking for.

16

Winter Fete was an annual festival to celebrate the birth of Dulmer. It was said that a long time ago, Dulmer was just a land of clay with nothing grew on it. One day, Mark McCane, a sailor and a sole survivor of a sunken ship was found unconscious at the coast of Krea, a fishman village near Dulmer. He was taken care by a fisherman who had found him until he was completely healed. Devastated by the fate of his sailor friends, he decided to continue his journey on foot. After almost three days of walking, he reached a wide, white land of clay. He stared at what was in front of him where an idea crossed his mind and went back to Krea.

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At Krea, Mark learnt how to fish. Using his experience as a sailor, he quickly master the skill of a deep sea fishing. He worked hard day and night, and always came back with tons of fresh fish to be sold to fish market.

If he did not go out to sea, he spent his time on his small garden planting vegetables such as tomatoes, green beans, carrots, spinach and radish, as well as basil, parsley, mint, thyme and garlic for herbs. His late father was a farmer, and he used to help him a lot when he was a kid. The vegetables and the herbs were also sold at market.

Within only a few months, he had already made a very good impression of himself, and gained the trust of the villagers. Instead of buying at the fish market, the villagers would wait for him by the coast and bought fish directly from him. Some of them even preordered a particular type of fish; if Mark managed to catch the requested fish, then the fish must be sold to them first. It was the same with his vegetables garden. Villagers started swarming at his house just to buy freshly picked vegetables.

Mark continued fishing and planting for the next three years.

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When he had enough money in his saving, he bought sacks of loamy soil and a number of pieces of lumber. He hired a horse and a cart that could transport the soil and the lumber to the land of clay he spotted three years ago. He also purchased roots of various flowers and fertilizers, and collecting some roots from wild trees and shrubs.

When everything was set, he started his journey. With the horse pulling the cart, it took only a day and a half for Mark to arrive at the intended destination. He found a place with a small stream and camped out there.

The next morning, he got down to work straight away. He started by building a rectangle-shaped frame about 50m long and 25m wide. The frame was filled with the loamy soil and fertilizer, where he dug holes on the soil and carefully planted the varieties of flower roots in the holes.

Not far from the first frame, he created a second frame which was about the same size. But this time, instead of flowers, he planted the roots from wild trees and shrubs he collected at Krea. In between these two frames, he created another set that connected the two frames together, just for grasses.

Everyday he nourished his little gardens. Once in a while, he went back to Krea to get more supplies and attended to his vegetable gardens. There were also times when he went out to the sea to fish just to gain more money.

Not all the roots he planted lived. Some died and rotted very quickly but that didn't stop him from continuing what he did. Finally in winter, his hard work paid off. Daphnes started to grow prolifically and blossomed. Other flowers such as roses, hollyhocks, daisies, tulips, irises and daffodils were blooming beautifully in spring.

He expanded his garden with more flowers, shrubs and grasses.

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The news of Mark's little gardens on the land of clay spread very quickly among the villagers of Krea. One by one came to visit. Some were helpful enough to bring more soil to cover more area of the land. Slowly the area became wider, and some people from Krea who wanted to grow crops started to move there permanently.

In winter, two years after that, a new town was born. Mark was appointed as the first mayor and he was given the honor to name the town. Dulmer, the name of his sinking ship, was chosen as a tribute to his fallen friends.

A week after that, a festival was thrown to express their gratitude towards Mark. When the next winter came, another festival was celebrated to remind them of the town's history, and as time went by, the festival gradually became an annual event, known as the Winter Fete.

Every year, the festival was held at the gardens, since the place represented the birth of Dulmer.

17

Tonight was the most awaited night for the town people, and it was definitely the perfect time for Giselle to teach Don a lesson. There would be a live performance by the town's band and lots of food. Groceries and other supplies were normally provided through Don's shop. Sometimes after 12 noon, a group of men would come to pick up the supplies and passed them to a group of housewives who would prepare the dish for tonight's festival.

*If there were no supplies, then there won't be any food prepared. The town people would become furious. Someone just had to take the blame.*

“What are you planning to do?” Don repeated his question.

Giselle flashed her best smile. *You will see.*

She walked towards the corner where the supplies were placed. “I wondered why did you use this long lumber to support the shelf? It's not safe you know,” she said, while her hand was pressing hard on the lumber.

“Hey, don't touch it!” shouted Don.

But it was too late. The lumber had already moved, causing the shelf to lose its balance. In only a few seconds, the cans of paint were already falling on top of the supplies, tearing off a lot of sacks of flour and painted most of the raw ingredients with colors.

Don's eyes widened as he witnessed what happened right in front of him in disbelief. “What... have you done?” His voice choked up.

“Ops! Accident does happen sometimes, right?” said Giselle, with a winning smile. She walked towards Don who was still petrified by the incident. “You know what Don? My claw might not be enough to harm you, but I won't say the same about the town people. I bet they would be really furious when they found out that there was nothing to celebrate tonight. If I were you, I would start running with my tail in between my legs.”

“You, demon child!” cursed Don, but there was nothing else he could do to fix this problem. Soon, the men would come to pick up the supplies and he had nothing to give. Giselle was right. The town people would be really furious and they would definitely blame him. Even if he told them the truth, no one would be stupid enough to face Patrick Campbell and demanded Giselle to take full responsibility. It was him who had had to bear the burden.

Giselle was still smiling. “Do me a favor. Don't die,” she said, and walked out of the store to where Elizabeth was waiting. “Let's go home.”

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After the Winter Fete festival, Dido Grocery had been found closed forever.

18

The next incident happened two weeks after that. This time, it was caused by a bunch of students in Elizabeth's class. They were discussing about the role model in their lives. When it came to Elizabeth's turn, with proud she named Giselle as her idol.

Her answer caused the room to be in uproar.

“You want to be an old maid like your sister?”

*What do you know? She's the chosen one.*

“I heard she had been possessed by some kind of crazy spirit.”

*Well, she can see the existence of the other world.*

“I'd rather be retarded than having Giselle as my idol.”

*Then, why don't you be?*

She wanted to scream right in front of their faces, the truth about her sister, about her wonderful journey to the other world but she had promised to keep that a secret, and she knew really well that nothing she said could ever change their minds about Giselle.

When she came home later that day, angrily, she told Giselle what had happened at school. The next day, Giselle followed Elizabeth to school. She just had to teach those kids some manners.

Unlike before, this time she didn't resort to any violence. She appeared to be where those students were. She joined them during recess. She teased them from the outside of the classroom window during their lesson. She even walked home with them.

She repeated the same thing for the next few days, until those students became very scared. Their parents couldn't do anything, more like they didn't have the courage to face Giselle since everybody in town knew by know what she was capable of doing. Some of the students started skipping school just to avoid Giselle.

Since then, none of the students had dared to mention Giselle's name anymore. They felt like her name itself was a virus, very contagious, a malign disease. If they accidentally spoke about her, they could feel her presence, although she wasn't physically there.

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Although most of the town people had stopped talking about Giselle, there were still few voices gossiping around.

“The loneliness has turned her into a loony.”

“The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. She's becoming more like Patrick.”

“Like father, like daughter.”

However, instead of saying it out loud, they whispered. They were not stupid enough to let Giselle hear about it.

But Giselle also wasn't stupid not to know what actually happened. She had always noticed a group of people who were busy talking suddenly dispersed when they spotted her, or a group of people who would suddenly divert their conversation into something random whenever she was nearby. She couldn't care less about the gossip. She understood the people really well now. They just all talk. They were harmless, and that was more than enough for her.

The way she affected people's lives now, made her felt powerful. Ava was right. She did have a purpose in life, and with her newfound capability, she could control a lot of things. *Now, everyone has to think twice before making me their enemy.*

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She was still standing in front of the portal, reflecting her memories from the past two years. She had been back and forth to Ira, each time gaining a new knowledge about the world, and yet, she still did not understand how the time actually worked there.

Whenever she came back from Ira, the time in her world remained the same as when she had left, but the moment she crossed the portal to the other side, she would be in a different day and time, as if the time in Ira moved in parallel to her world, or maybe faster. The logic behind this was too much for her to understand but that wasn't of her concern at all.

Today, she would venture into another experience, a union between two nymphs.

19

The wedding was completely different from what Giselle had originally imagined - weird and boring. In fact, it was a complete opposite - unique and lively. She had to admit that was by far, the best wedding ceremony she had been to and she was glad to be part of this.

She loved Ira. She loved the people. There were times where she had wished to be part of this world forever but as she learnt more about Ira, the more she knew it was impossible. Human and half-breed nymphs, though shared the same physical appearances, were very different in nature.

Humans eat to stay alive and would eventually die of old age and illness. Humans would do whatever it takes to survive in this cruel world. But the half-breed nymphs, they were the carefree creatures that nurtured their environment through their spiritual dancing. They never felt hatred and co-existed peacefully with all living things. They would not die from old age nor illness, but they can choose to die and reincarnated as the spirit of the forest, to offer guidance and protect their environment.

The only similarity they had with humans was their lifestyle, inherited from their human ancestor. They lived comfortably in a tree-house, equipped with hand-made furniture and cutleries. They got married and gave birth just like the ordinary humans. And this wedding was the proof.

The ceremony took place on land, in between big trees. The vertical gap in between the trees created a perfect aisle for the wedded couple to walk through. Most of the nymphs were waiting on both sides of the aisle.

The female nymphs' wore a lime green colored one shoulder, sundress type of dress. The male wore clothes similar to a hunting shirt, coupled with breeches as their lower body garment, also in lime green color. They were all singing softly while waiting for the bride and groom to arrive.

*The fate of the cursed*

*Awaiting destiny in the far away land*

*Guided by the ancient words*

*Though the end will soon befall*

*The present shall not be wasted*

The melody of the song was very soothing, refreshing one's soul but saddening at the same time, thought Giselle. The song, that reminded them of their fate, and yet they would not despair, for life was to be appreciated.

She wept. Giselle did not intend to, but she did. Who wouldn't? The fate of the people she cared about would be one day wiped out entirely. The day of promise as they believed it, though she still hoped the prophecy was just a myth.

“Why are you crying?” asked Ava, who was standing beside her. “Tears shouldn't be falling on this joyous moment, for sadness would only bring nothing but despair.”

Giselle wiped away her tears and nodded. “You are right.”

The song was slowly faded away and replaced by applauses, welcoming the newly wed nymphs. The couple was led by a male nymph playing a flute and a pair of female nymphs, who were dancing gracefully to the rhythm of the flute.

The bride and groom wore similar clothes like the rest of their kin, except for the flowers head band decorated on their head. On every step taken by the couple, new plants grew and flowers blossomed, as if the nature itself was blessing the union. The female nymphs curtsied and the male nymphs bowed as the couple walked passed them.

Thousand of pink flowers started to fall down. Giselle picked up one that stuck on her dress. *Cherry blossom!* She looked up. Her eyes widened in disbelief. All the big trees were blooming with cherry blossoms. When did that happen? The flowers were simply falling down from the trees. There was no wind. There was no one shaking the branches either. Everything seemed so magical.

“Look over there,” said Ava.

At where Ava was pointing to, two vines were seen trailing down from one of the limbs where the groom's tree house was built. The vines crawled towards the couple, coiling their hands and slowly pulling them up, until they reached the porch of the tree house. The happily newly wed couple gave their final waves before entering the house, ended the wedding celebration for that day.

20

*“Arini, you did well today. Very well, indeed.”*

*Arini gave Wak Joko a puzzling look. She thought she would be punished for what she did. “Are you not angry? I broke the rules.”*

*Wak Joko laughed. His deep voice made his laughter sounded a bit more frightening. He left without answering her question.*

*Angry? That was what he would normally feel towards his apprentices whenever any one of them broke his rules. But in this case, how could he be?*

*A young girl was poisoned through the use of a black magic. She was brought to him by her father. Wak Joko examined the young girl. He found a mixture of bamboo hairs, shattered glasses and scorpion's skin in her lung. He knew very well how she was poisoned; the poisoned was sent through wind and got into her lung when she inhaled the poisonous air. It was meant to torture the young girl to death. And more importantly, he knew who had sent the poison. He recognized the craft style because he was the one who taught that way, the exact same way, to Arini.*

*Should he be angry? Yes. But then when he looked at the work done by Arini, he was very impressed. He taught her only once, and she had mastered the skill perfectly. Normal shaman would not be able to reverse the effect of the poison.*

*Wak Joko smiled. Arini, his young apprentice who was always wearing a body-shaped cotton top and a sarong, definitely was the one with the great potential.*

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Giselle woke up, panting hard. It was about two years ago when she first heard about Arini, and since then she had constantly dreamed about her. She covered her face with her palms. Her dream felt more real each time, as if she was reliving Arini's memory. How was that possible?

She took a deep breath. The sun had risen. She had to get ready for her normal routine - being the 'mother' of the house. She was ready to get out of bed when she saw Elizabeth's bed was empty.

Giselle bit her lip. Dreaming about Arini was not her only problem. Lately, she noticed that Elizabeth had been sneaking out early in the morning before she even woke up. That made Giselle really worried. She had to find out what her sister was up to. *Please Elizabeth, don’t do anything foolish.*

21

“Aren't you going to tell your sister?” asked Dominic Tuck.

Elizabeth stared at the small stream - the Riedell stream as it was named - in front of her. Its water was flowing slowly. She was sitting on a wooden bench under a big cherry blossom tree, with Dominic sitting beside her. Slowly she turned to look at him. “ I don't know. It's... complicated.”

Dominic stood, and then knelt, facing Elizabeth. He picked up her hands and held them firmly. “We will get through this together. I promise.”

His words made her smiled. It was about seven months ago when she first noticed Dominic, a 17-year old boy who had just moved to Dulmer. He was 5'10”, blonde curly hair and quite tanned. He worked at Jimmy Jones' orchard, which belonged to Maria and Greta's father.

Since then, whenever Elizabeth walked to school, she would take a road that led her passed through the orchard. She would secretly watch Dominic working from afar, admiring his hardworkingness. It was not her only reason. She wanted a diversion from what was troubling her at that time.

Although a lot of Elizabeth's classmates had kept themselves away from her, tried not to attract Giselle's attention, there were a couple of girls who just couldn't resist themselves from harassing Elizabeth.

At first, they did not bully nor make fun of her directly. They chose a more subtle approach. Whenever Elizabeth was around, they would stare at her, and then whisper at each other with their eyes fixed on her. Elizabeth tried not to be bothered by their actions, but sometimes they made her felt a little bit uneasy.

She did not tell a single word about the two girls to Giselle. It was her problem and hers alone. She did not want Giselle to get involved. She did not want to hurt Giselle's reputation any further which had already been tarnished a few years ago.

However the more she tried to ignore them, the bolder those girls became. It was about five months ago when they resorted to a more aggressive act. They left inappropriate notes inside her books. They carved nasty words on her desk. They took her lunch box, caused Elizabeth to starve and fall sick. Still, she endured all the bullying, for Giselle's and those girls' sakes. And on one fine afternoon, they finally crossed the line.

Elizabeth was on her way home when she realized that the two girls were following her. She increased her speed, hoping to lose them but was unsuccessful. They were still following her closely from behind. Thinking of solving the problem once and for all, she stopped and turned to face them.

“What do you want from me?” asked Elizabeth.

“My, my. Look who has finally found her courage,” said Clara, the first girl.

“Just leave me alone!”

“Or what?” said the other girl, Dewy, who was now standing behind Elizabeth. “Are you going to cry for help from your freaky big sister?”

Dewy pushed Elizabeth towards Clara, and she pushed Elizabeth back towards Dewy, concurrently. They both laughed.

“Stop it! You're hurting me!” cried Elizabeth.

But they did not stop despite her plea, and became more violence. Clara pulled her hair while Dewy spun her around. Elizabeth screamed in pain. Desperately tried to break free, she thumped her right leg on Clara's foot.

Shocked by Elizabeth's unexpected action, Clara released her pull and quickly rubbed her right foot. Elizabeth took that chance to run away from them.

“Dewy! Don't let her get away!” said Clara.

Elizabeth kept on running, faster and faster. Her body couldn't cope with the pressure anymore, but she had no choice. She had to continue running. Dewy was not too far behind. At any moment she would be able to catch up to her.

Her legs started to ache. She knew she had already reached her limit. Right in front of her was the Riedell stream. She was already out of breath. *Think. Think. What should I do?*

“Into the stream.”

Elizabeth turned to look. Dewy had already caught up to her, and so did Clara. There was no way for her to get away from them anymore.

“Into the stream,” Dewy repeated. “You were thinking where else you can run to, no? Well, I don't think you have too much a choice, except to dive into the Riedell stream.”

Elizabeth glanced quickly towards the stream. The water level had risen by much. She would be drowned if she were to jump into it. She turned back towards them. “I... I can't swim.”

Clara smiled. “Then it's time for you to learn.” Without pity, she pushed Elizabeth into the stream.

“No!” screamed Elizabeth, but she was already falling. Although they were still in the summer season, the water was cold. The stream was flowing fast, sweeping her away. Big rocks were everywhere. She couldn't avoid but to collide with them.

“Help...” Her head was bobbing up and down. She could still see Clara and Dewy standing and smiling by the stream bank. They were not going to help her. She would be drowned. Too much water was swallowed. Her vision was blurring.

*Giselle, help me!*

Just when she thought she would die, someone grabbed her hand.

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“Are you alright?”

Elizabeth opened her eyes slowly. She felt pain in her chest from swallowing too much water and coughing it out. Her vision was still blurry.

“Where am I?” A very weak voice came out from her mouth.

“You are safe now.”

*A male voice.* Elizabeth tried to focus on the face of her savior. She knew that face. Blonde. Curly hair. He was the boy who worked at Jimmy Jones' orchard. With the remaining strength that left in her, she tried to push herself up, but it was too hard for her. Dominic handed out his hand and hoisted her up, until she could sit properly. She scanned her surrounding, looking for something.

“If you are worried about those two girls, they have already gone,” said Dominic.

Elizabeth smiled faintly. “Thank you.” Now that she could see him up close, she noticed that he had a pair of clear, blue eyes, and high cheekbones.

“I'm Dominic Tuck,” he introduced himself.

“Elizabeth Campbell.”

“Oh.”

A surprised tone was detected in Dominic's voice. She knew exactly what was the intonation meant. Without a word, she stood up and walked away.

“Um... wait! I'm sorry,” called Dominic from behind. “I don't mean to be rude. I... I just didn't expect you to be a Campbell.”

Elizabeth stopped, and cleared her throat before asking, “Did you wish that you had not save me, a Campbell?”

To her surprise, Dominic replied with a smile on his face, magnifying his good look. “No, I was actually glad that I did.”

22

It was definitely love, though not at first sight. She did not know when or how it started. Dominic was just helping her at first, to come up with a cover story so that Giselle would not find out. He also dealt with Elizabeth's classroom teacher regarding Clara and Dewy's behaviors; they were expelled from school right after that. For everyone's sake, this matter was kept a secret between Elizabeth, her classroom teacher and Dominic.

They had nothing to discuss anymore and yet they continued to see each other. From a simple 'how are you' to a more personal update, sharing their everyday routine. It did not take long for them to realize that they had already fallen in love with each other. And the Riedell stream became their spot, witnessing their growing love.

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*Is it possible for Dominic and I to have a future together?*

They had decided to carry their relationship to the next stage. Dominic wanted to propose the old fashion way, by asking her parents for her hand in marriage. However, that might not be the best move since everybody knew her father would not allow that to happen. Even if she were to tell Giselle, there was nothing her sister could do against their father.

“Um... Elizabeth?”

Dominic’s voice brought her back to the present. “Sorry, I was...”

“Elizabeth,” Dominic quickly cutting her off. His eyes were fixated on something behind her back.

Slowly Elizabeth turned her head towards where Dominic’s face was facing. Her jaw dropped .

“Giselle,” she sounded almost whispering.

“This is not what I expected to find when I followed you here,” said Giselle, switching her focus from Elizabeth to Dominic. He smiled when their eyes met, and bowed a little. *What a well-mannered guy.*

She turned back to look at her sister. “Care to explain, Elizabeth dearie?”

Elizabeth hesitated at first, but then decided to tell Giselle everything, except the part related to Clara and Dewy. Giselle listened to her story, attentively. Once in a while, she glanced at Dominic who was listening quietly.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” She directed the question at Dominic, right after Elizabeth had finished telling the whole story.

“Yes,” answered Dominic. Quick and simple. No hesitation at all.

“I bet you already knew by now what kind of person our father is. Especially regarding his daughter’s marriage,” said Giselle, hoping that Dominic would simply drop his marriage plan.

“Yes, but still... it's worth a try.”

“And if he still refused?” Giselle raised her tone a little bit. She was not trying to be hard on them, but she did not want Elizabeth to go through the same pain she had experienced before.

Dominic shot a ‘should-I-tell-her-the-truth’ look at Elizabeth. When she nodded, he smiled and said, “We are going to run away from here, and get married in Krea.”

Stunned, Giselle took a deep breath. For a few seconds, she could not find any word to say to them. “This is the craziest thing I've ever heard in my entire life, well, apart from Ma marrying Pa of course,” she said finally.

Dominic opened his mouth to answer, but Elizabeth quickly cut him off. “What's so crazy about two people who are deeply in love, and want to spend the rest of their lives together? You would understand that, wouldn't you?”

*Would I?* Her memories of Connor came back in her mind. How deeply in love they once were. They had their future planned beautifully until it was ruined by Pa. If nothing was done, the same fate would befall her dear sister.

The one standing in front of Giselle now was not the same cry baby, but a matured, grown up lady, who knew exactly what she wanted. Deeply, she was really proud of her sister.

“Okay, I'll help. Whatever it takes. I'll see it through till the end,” vowed Giselle.

23

Today felt so different. When Giselle woke up early this morning to spy on Elizabeth's sneaking-out activity, she wasn't prepared to learn the truth about her secret. What she had in mind was that Elizabeth might have found a little hideout for her solitude. It was never occurred to her that Elizabeth had actually found love! She was caught in surprise, but in a good way.

Finding out her sister's big secret was not the only good news she had. Yesterday, out of the blue, Maria invited her to come over to her house for a catch up. This would be their first get together after Maria had married Jacob Gibson. Giselle smiled.

The other friends - Tessa, Annabel, Hannah and Gina - would also be there. The whole gang! She had longed for this moment - hanging out, gossiping and laughing together with her best friends.

Since there were still a lot of times before the gathering, Giselle decided to take a long road to go to Maria's house. It was the hardly used, gravel road that went up to the hilly side of Dulmer. The travel time would take twice than the normal distance to Maria’s house but that did not bother her at all. She liked it that way; to be far from the good for nothing townspeople who only knew to judge her and Elizabeth.

Whenever she spotted beautiful wild flowers, she would pluck them as a gift to Maria for inviting her over. Her thought was filled with memory from this early morning. *“You can come with us and together we can live as one happy family.”* Those were Elizabeth's words, echoed in her head. And that was what she had wanted all along, to live happily with her little sister. *If only I was brave enough to make such resolution years ago...*

The sun was shining brightly, balancing the cold temperature. She had only walked a third of the distance. It was still a long a way to go but the warm day made her walk easier.

She followed where the road led, kicking big rocks that were in her way. Luckily she wore thick-soled boots; though the soles were already worn-out a bit, still they were good enough to protect her feet from getting hurt due to the long walk on the gravel road. She continued walking until she had reached what seemed to be the end of the road.

This would be the toughest challenge encountered for those who had taken this road. Fortunately for her, the weather was on her side. If it was cold and frosty, the road would be dangerous. Giselle stared at what lay in front of her. A steep, 40-step staircase. Each step was about 20 centimeters high.

*Breathe in, breathe out.* Slowly she climbed up the first step. *39 steps more to go.* She counted the number of steps she had taken so far. For some reason, she had the feeling that by counting the number of steps while climbing up, it would affect her psychology, and thus reducing her weariness. A similar effect to counting sheep as a means of attaining sleep, she thought.

*30 more steps... 20 more steps.* Giselle stopped for a bit to relax her muscles that had started to sore. Her mind wandered off slightly*. What is Maria doing right now? Hopefully she is preparing something. Cold iced tea would be nice.*

She took another deep breath before continuing. *10 more steps.* She grasped the left rail of the staircase tightly and pushed herself up. *5... 4... 3... 2... 1.*

“Yes!” Giselle put her hands up, as if she had achieved a great victory. After this the road would continue on a flat ground before going downhill. From here, it would take another 20 minutes to get to Maria's house.

She was just about to resume her walk when she spotted a bunch of bamboo trees on the left side of the road. Her heart beat rapidly. Slowly she walked towards those trees and squatted in front of them. Her body was quivering with excitement as soon as she touched the trees. The sensation - something that she remembered extremely well.

24

*“This is the hair from a bamboo tree,” explained Wak Joko. It was Arini’s first lesson on poison. They were sitting cross-leg in the middle of his living room. A small square tablecloth was spread out between them. He was holding a piece of bamboo in his hand. “Do you know what it is used for?”*

*Arini nodded. “Those who are poisoned with this will be spread with itchiness on their neck, as well as on their body.”*

*“What else can create the same effect as the hair from a bamboo tree?”*

*She closed her eyes, thinking deeply before answering. “The hair from a sugarcane tree or the hair from a bamboo shoot. And also, a live caterpillar.”*

*Wak Joko smiled satisfactorily. Clearly Arini had done her homework. Since day one, he was really impressed with her ability to understand this craft easily. She really was something. The gifted one.*

*“Itchiness is not the only requirement to make this poison to work. There are three other essential elements, which are poisonous, chemical and sharp substances,” Wak Joko continued to explain. “Normally the poisonous substance is extracted either from a snake's venom, oil from a smoked scorpion or a frog's skin, or from a jellyfish. It can also be extracted from poisonous plants.*

*The chemical substance is the easiest to get. Farmers use it everyday, to spray their field. The last element, the sharp substance, is used to hurt your victim. It can be of glasses, hair, silk thread, human's nail, animal's claw or egg shell.”*

*Arini listened to the explanation carefully. She already knew about the substances. She had read all about them. What she wanted to know the most was how to practice this craft in the real world. Should she ask?*

*As if he understood what was inside Arini's mind, Wak Joko stood up and walked to his old cupboard. He took out a few ingredients from the top shelf and put them inside a stone mortar, which was on a small desk next to the cupboard. Then he walked back to where Arini was. He put down the mortar on the tablecloth and started crushing the ingredients with a pestle. Once all of the ingredients had become finely ground, he stopped.*

*“Look closely,” he said. “The powder is soft and smooth. Perfect for the next step.”*

*Every single word uttered by Wak Joko were precious to her. She had to get everything right, without any mistake. 100% accurate.*

*“This poison can be applied in two different ways; depending on where your victim is. If your target is near, the poison can be put into his food or drink, without him knowing it. The second way is more complicated,” Wak Joko paused and stared at Arini's face. Judging from her expression, he could tell that she was very much interested in this matter.*

*“What is the second way?” she asked, when she realized that Wak Joko had deliberately took a long pause.*

*“You do know that this is not a child play, don't you?”*

*Arini nodded. She never thought of it as a game. She was dead serious from the very beginning.*

*“The second way requires a little bit of help.”*

*“From whom?”*

*“What. From what,” Wak Joko corrected her.*

*His answer made her trembled with excitement. She waited patiently for him to go on with his clarification.*

*“It is what we called The Unseen. It feeds on fresh guts. A good shaman would be able to kill its kind. But a great shaman would be able to summon and control The Unseen, and become its master.”*

*Her curiosity grew. “How does The Unseen help?”*

*“Look at the powder we just made. Smooth and fine. Easy to be carried by the wind, with the help of The Unseen. It will sprinkle the powder near the victim so the poison will be inhaled, or it will coat the victim's body with the poison. Sometimes, this poison could be accidentally inhaled by other people, if they happen to be near the victim. To make sure the intended victim is poisoned, the shaman can instruct the The Unseen itself to get into his body, and release the poison from within,” answered Wak Joko.*

*That was the most interesting thing she had ever heard in her life. Her pupils dilated. She was not hiding her excitement anymore.*

*Wak Joko noticed her enthusiasm. No, it was more like a strange vibe, he thought. He could not figure out what it was. One thing for sure, he would have to monitor her closely. Not only for her extraordinary ability but also for what she was capable of.*

*“Remember Arini. This is not to be used for a personal gain. I teach you this craft so that you can use it to help people who had fallen victim to the black magic.”*

*“Of course,” said Arini, grinning, like a Cheshire cat.*

25

“Coffee or tea?” asked Maria.

“Tea, please. With ice cubes, if you have some?”

Maria smiled. "Still not drinking coffee, are you?"

Giselle shook her head. It was not that she hated coffee. She tried once and loved the taste. Unfortunately the strong caffeine in the coffee made her head spun like crazy.

Flowers in a tall, glass vase caught Giselle's attention. Those were the wild flowers she had plucked on her way earlier. Maria did not waste any second. She decorated the flowers beautifully with a few fresh green leaves from her own garden. Giselle smiled. Another one of Maria's specialties, apart from being a brilliant pianist.

“Sorry for not catching up sooner. It took me quite a while to convince Eric that you are not the bad person here, but simply the victim,” Maria apologized.

“That's alright,” said Giselle. She was truly grateful to be able to spend time with her friends again. But something was not quite right. She had arrived almost half an hour ago, but the others were still not there yet. Every few seconds, she would glance at the clock on the wall. Sometimes, her eyes were directed towards the kitchen, hoping that her friends would make a surprise entrance from the back door, like they always did.

“Umm Giselle, there's something that I need to tell you,” said Maria, noticing Giselle's restlessness. She held Giselle’s hand gently. “Tessa, Annabel, Hannah and Gina - they sent their regards to you. Unfortunately, they won't be able to come. It seems like their husbands still thought that you are a bad influence... I'm sorry, honey.” There was a sincere, apologetic tone in her voice.

The news really broke her heart. *Hanging out like the old days, huh?* But she tried not to show her frustration. There was one thing that she learnt from all these horrible experiences - no matter what, she had to maintain her composure, not to give in in any situation. Giselle forced herself to smile. “How are they doing?”

“They are all doing great,” replied Maria, a bit relieved. She was reluctant to bring up the topic of their friends at first; afraid of hurting Giselle's feeling. But now seeing that Giselle was completely okay with it, she had nothing to worry anymore.

“Tessa had just given birth to her second daughter last month. The funny thing was, she was throwing a helluva baby shower when her water suddenly broke! Can you imagine that? I wish you could see the look on our faces. So hilarious!

Everybody was panicking, especially Gina. Did you remember how she reacted when she found a spider inside her school bag? Jumping and screaming like crazy? She reacted the same way! Oh dear... she was still the same old Gina.” Maria was laughing hard that she had to pause for a while.

“And then what happened?”

Maria wiped her teary eyes - from too much laughing - before continued with the story. “The next part was epic. On an impulse, Tessa decided to deliver at home. Everybody was looking at Annabel at once. You know, her mother is a midwife so everybody was just assuming she would know what to do. But she was just standing there, with her jaw dropped and her eyes wide opened.

Luckily Mrs. Gregg was there. She quickly took charge and instructed us on what to do. Thank God, the baby was delivered without any complication.”

“Hannah was not there?” asked Giselle.

“She was, but she wasn't there during the incident. She arrived right after the baby had been delivered. When she saw Tessa was still in her labor position and the baby's skin was still covered in vernix, she did what she does best.”

Giselle covered her mouth with her palm. “No way! Don't tell me she fainted?”

Maria nodded her head vigorously.

She could not hold herself any longer. Finally Giselle let out a good laugh. Her girlfriends were still the same like before; exactly like when they were in their high school. Only God knows how much she missed them.

26

It was already two o'clock in the morning, but Giselle still could not sleep. How could she be? Her meeting with Maria earlier was still playing in her mind. Her girlfriends seemed to live a happy life but she was still trapped in her old life.

Maria's kindness. Tessa's baby shower. Gina's quirkiness. Annabel's dumbfounded attitude. Hannah's late entrance. The story still lingered in her head. She was once part of them. It took only one selfish decision by Pa to destroy everything she once had - her friends and her happiness.

The memories from her high school re-entered her vision. They were always together back then. Every morning, they would wait by the Jones' orchard to walk to school together. During break time, they would pass around each other's food to share. If any one of them was sent to a detention class, the rest of the gang would commit a “crime” that would earn them the detention as well. “For better or worse” was their motto at that time. But now it seemed like it had become only for the better...

She turned to look at Elizabeth. In the darkness of the room, she could not see her sister's face but from the sound of it, she could tell that Elizabeth was sound asleep. *How lucky she is.* She had found her happiness and was willing to do anything to keep it.

Tears was welling up in Giselle's eyes. She had made a resolution not to cry. To become strong. But still she could not control those tears from trickling down. What had she done to the world to be punished this way? She didn't deserve to be treated like a criminal. She was only protecting herself and Elizabeth from getting hurt.

Would it be better if she had just died and disappeared forever? Honestly, she had been thinking about dying for quite some time now. What holding her back was the desire to protect her sister. But now Elizabeth did not need her protection anymore. So...

*“You can come with us and together we can live as one happy family.”*

Those beautiful words - Elizabeth's words. Giselle shook her head. There were still things that she wanted to do with her life. Like getting married. Starting her own family. Live happily ever after.

Giselle wiped out her tears. Then she placed her hands on her chest, slowly breathed in and closed her eyes. She would not lose to this world. No matter what.

27

It was a calm evening at Ira, like it normally was. Ava was doing her usual routine after she had finished studying during the day - strolling along the stream in the garden full of blooming flowers. She wanted to engrave the beauty of the scenery as much as she could in her memory, before the day of promise came. She could not tell for sure when it would happen, but if it were to happen during her time, those beautiful memories would strengthen her spirit to face what was to come.

She walked for a few more minutes before halting at a roses site. It housed a few different varieties with lots of different colors. An insanely mesmerizing view. She bent down to smell the roses. The strong scent released by the flowers flew straight into her nose, making her smiled contently.

Her eyes caught a small, light green moving caterpillar on one of the roses' leaves. Slowly, she raised her right hand and placed it slightly above the caterpillar. Few strange words were chanted from her lips. The caterpillar was suddenly engulfed in a pale blue glow. Bit by bit, its small body grew larger.

Once it had stopped expanding, it formed itself into a pupa. Ava continued chanting. Inside the pupa, she could see the caterpillar was rapidly changing, undergoing a transformation, the metamorphosis. The process continued for a few more seconds, and finally an adult butterfly emerged from the pupa.

Ava stopped her chant and observed the butterfly closely. It wings were plain green, with almost no pattern visible. A thick black line surrounded the edge of the wings. The butterfly started flapping. It flew towards Ava, rested on her shoulder for a couple of seconds before flying away.

Her eyes followed the butterfly until it disappeared from her vision. She smiled. No matter how many times she did this, she was still enchanted by the beautiful transformation.

The wind blew softly on her face. She inhaled deeply. As she was about to continue her walk, she saw a plant sprouting from the ground not far from where she stood. She stared at the plant that was suddenly growing.

The plant looked like a small, green stickman without legs. Its head was round, about the size of a ping pong ball. Shooting out from its thin stem were a pair of leaves, which looked like its hands. When the plant spotted Ava, its round face distorted a little bit, as if it was trying to convey something. She knew straight away what it was.

*The Message-Bearer.*

Ava heard of the Message-Bearer before but had never encountered one. It was said to only appear to deliver bad news. She leaned closely towards the Message-Bearer, and read through its distorted face.

*Show me*, she said telepathically.

The Message-Bearer made a quick screeching sound before disappeared into the ground. It appeared at about one meter in the northeast direction, and then disappeared again, continuously bobbing on the ground.

Ava looked at the path it was making and started following it. The Message-Bearer was moving very fast so she had to run, not to lose it. The plant led her out of the garden and into a jungle of big trees. Ava ran faster to catch up with the Message-Bearer whilst gracefully avoiding shallow roots that shoot out from the big trees.

She continued running until she reached an open area, the green prairie, as they called it. Ava looked around her surroundings. The Message-Bearer had gone. It had served its purpose. Now it was up to Ava to do her part.

Up above the sky, long clouds were gathering. What was once a clear blue sky was now painted with a gloomy sky. The wind was blowing hard, causing falling leaves to fly into the green prairie.

Her long, loose hair was heavily swayed, and so did her soft silky white dress. But Ava did not move a muscle. She was just standing still, lifting her head towards the sky. There was a trepidation shown in her eyes.

*So, it has begun.*

28

A week had passed since Giselle found out about Elizabeth's secret. Until now, she had a mixed feeling about it. Happy, scared, and may be a little jealousy. Elizabeth and Dominic were so determined to make their relationship to work, even though they would have to go up against Pa. She totally envied her sister's resolve.

“Haaaa...” She let go a long, deep sigh. She was sitting in front of the mirror in the bedroom, staring straight at her own reflection. What she saw was a troubled looking face.

A lot of things were playing in her mind right now. It was not just about Elizabeth. There were also Maria and her girlfriends. After her meeting with Maria that day, she realized another harsh reality - she might lose her friends forever.

She picked up a comb in front of her, and styled her hair into a hair bun. Not happy with how she looked, she changed her hair style into a simple ponytail. After some thought, she let her hair loose.

*Nothing really work for me this week. I even have a bad hair day.*

She let go another deep sigh. Normally, Giselle would seek comfort at Ira, but even on the other side of the world, the atmosphere was not much different from her world. Ava was acting a little strange, and ignored her most of the time.

What had happened for the past week made Giselle think. Was she really the source of all troubles? Did she really bring discomfort to everybody around her?

She continued looking at herself through the mirror. There was something else. *Arini.* Before this, she only dreamt about that mysterious woman in her sleep. But lately, Arini's memory started to emerge even while she was wide awake. As if she was trying to tell Giselle something...

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*This should be the right place, Arini said to herself. She was deep in a jungle, full of tall trees. What stood right before her eyes was a huge, dark hole, about two meters wide and three meters tall. It was an entrance to a cave.*

*A satisfaction smile was carved on her face. She had been planning this for quite some time now - since she heard the name for the first time. She could not wait to complete her quest. To tame The Unseen.*

*Getting the information on the whereabouts of The Unseen was not an easy task. Wak Joko would not tell her the details. 'It is not the time yet' was what he told her. So she had to find an alternative mean - to steal the information from the other shamans.*

*To achieve her goal, Arini decided to start with the invisibility skill. It was the skill that she had obtained without the knowledge of her teacher. As a new apprentice, she had to follow the designated syllabus. Furthermore, the invisibility skill was meant only for advanced students. It would take a few more years before she would be formally introduced to the craft. But the impatient Arini could not wait that long.*

*Each time, when there was nobody around, she would leaf through the Shaman's practice book for advanced level, which was kept at Wak Joko's small library. The art of invisibility skill was a little bit complicated. Not many shamans could practice the art well. Arini, being a highly gifted student in this area had no problem mastering it, despite the fact that she was just a beginner at that time and studied the craft without any supervision.*

*Once she had enough confidence to practice the skill, she sneaked in to listen to a few of low-level shamans' advanced classes. However the information she was seeking for did not come easily. Because most of the low level shamans were only focusing on a simple healing, they hardly touched on The Unseen. To be exact, they did not know much about it. She could not risk tailing the high level shamans because her invisibleness would be detected easily.*

*For several weeks she observed the low level shamans without any success. She almost gave up, until one day she accidentally overheard a conversation between two advanced students - her seniors - about The Unseen. She quickly made herself invisible and listened to the conversation with full interest. They were discussing about the place where The Unseen could be found. This unexpected information was enough to make Arini delighted.*

29

*The next step was to learn more about the so-called The Unseen. How did it look like? What was it weakness? How to tame it? To gain these information, she started following those two seniors home and got into their rooms whenever they were not around. It did not take her long to discover one of their personal books which contained the information needed regarding The Unseen.*

*Finally she was there, standing in front of the cave in her quest to tame the spirit. Without a moment of hesitation, she stepped into the cave.*

*Since the entrance was huge, she could clearly see the inside of it. Its hard soil floor was paved with pebbles, patterned with bird droppings. The ceiling was covered with bird's nests, belonged to swiftlets. The nests were actually formed out of the bird's saliva, which had dried and hardened. Traditional healers used the nests as medical concoction, and some people would pay a high price for this item, which could also be turned into an exotic cuisine.*

*If she were into a luxurious life, with the bird's nests right in front of her, she could be said to have struck gold. But that was not what she desired. What she wanted the most was power. To be the most powerful human being in this world. To rule this world. That was who she wanted to become.*

*With that ambition in mind, she walked further into the cave. The only path she could take was a narrow passage which was about 50 meters from where she was standing. Thanks to her slender body, she could fit into the passage just fine, though she had to stoop a little bit. She took out a gas lamp that she brought from home.*

*The passage was pitch black. Even with her gas lamp, she could not see the end of it. But judging from the direction of the passage, she could tell that it was leading her further downward, which meant the cave was actually deeper than she thought.*

*After several minutes of walking, the surface became rough and uneven, made it harder for her to walk. When she brought her gas lamp closer to the floor, what she saw was pieces of bones. Human bones? Animals? She could not really tell.*

*“Arini... Arini...”*

*A soft voice whispering in her ears caused her movement to halt. Who was there? She turned to all sides but no one was around. Assuming that might just be her imagination, she resumed her walk.*

*“Arini... Arini... Arini... Arini...”*

*More whispering voices, echoing one after another. Arini inhaled deeply. She knew what the voices were. The Lost Souls. At least that’s what they were called. Souls that dwelled deep inside a cave. Their purpose was to create fear in a human heart.*

*'I am not afraid of The Lost Souls', she assured herself. After all, she came all the way here to conquer The Unseen. What good would it do if she were to succumb to the fear planted by the other spirits?*

*Ignoring the voices, she proceeded along the passage. But she could still hear them, following each of her footsteps, mocking her bravery. 'Go away', she said out loud in her mind. But the voices grew louder.*

*Arini realized that The Lost Souls would not simply go away, unless she did something. With that resolve in mind, she stopped, knelt down and closed her eyes. She tried to feel her surrounding, to become one with it.*

*She could feel a chilly sensation surrounding her neck. A feeling of a soft hand touching and stroking her hair. It made her tingled with rage.*

*For a few more seconds, she let them play their part. She finally understood everything. The bones and The Lost Souls. They were connected. Which meant the Lost Souls were once just humans who gave in to their fear and died in this cave. Their souls could not move on, so they wandered in the dark, trying to lure other human into fear. 'Is that all you could do, you filthy losers?' She said, telepathically.*

*“You... will... be... one... of... us...”*

*Arini snorted. 'Don't you ever think of lumping me together with the likes of you. I'm far better than that!'*

*The voices chuckled. They kept on whispering her name but Arini remained calm. She was well aware that the Lost Souls could do nothing more than planting fear into her heart.*

*'That's as far as you will go, The Lost Souls. From here onwards, you will leave me alone. You can't have my soul because I'm Arini. I’m the greatest person in this world. Nobody, not even The Lost Souls, can break my spirit.' With those last words uttered from her mind, Arini opened her eyes and stood up.*

*She resumed her walk along the passage. The voices were still whispering but she just ignored them. Languidly the voices disappeared. She took a breath and slowly let it go. She had passed the test. She had conquered her fear.*

30

*A lot of times were wasted, dealing with The Lost Souls. She had to move fast. She had to tame The Unseen as soon as possible. She needed to get out of this cave, and out of the jungle before the sun set. The last thing she wanted was for Wak Joko to be suspicious of her if she did not return home today and missed her lesson the next day.*

*She looked around her surrounding. She had arrived at the end of the passage, which looked like the very bottom of the cave. It was still pitch black, but with the gas lamp held tightly in her right hand, she could see her surrounding within two meters in radius.*

*Now, where to look for The Unseen, she muttered to herself. Although she could not see the actual size of this bottom part of the cave, from the sound of what could be hundreds of bats flying in the cave, she could deduce that it was a huge one.*

*The size of the cave was not her only problem. While she strongly believed that The Unseen was definitely in this cave, she was not sure if she could find it. Firstly, she did not know which direction to go. Secondly, this bottom cave might have several passages within it. The darkness obstructed her capability to observe the situation thoroughly. What she could rely on now was solely her instinct. But even her instinct...*

*'Ah! Forget about the uncertainty. I'm already here. Might as well take my chance.'*

*Just walk straight, she told herself but her legs did not walk towards the direction she had in mind. Instead, she headed towards 10 o'clock from where she stood, as if she was guided there by something.*

*“Hisssssssss.”*

*“Hisssssssss.”*

*Hissing sounds, very familiar to her ears were heard not far from where she currently was. The sounds that belonged to multiple snakes. Not just any snake, but the poisonous cobras.*

*She could hear her heart beat rapidly. This was an unexpected encounter. She was prepared for a lot of dangers but not cobras. She hated the reptile. How could she forget her near death experience, being bitten by a cobra when she was just 10? If her father did not rush to Wak Joko's place, carrying her on his back, she would have had not made it.*

*The trauma she had to live with each time she saw one was something that was not easily deleted from her memory. And right here, right now she had to face many of them while she was alone in this cave.*

*She wanted to turn back but her fear prevented her from doing so. For the first time in her life, she felt so helpless.*

*The cobras were now within her visibility range. Black, shiny skin. They were crawling all over the place. Arini swallowed her saliva. Her body shook tremendously and she felt on her knees. The gas lamp was released from her grip, fortunately the light remained.*

*There was not much air inside the bottom cave. The temperature was extremely hot. Sweat was trickling from her forehead. She held her chest tightly. It was getting harder to breathe.*

*'This cannot be happening to me. I can't die here. Not like this.'*

*“Argh!” The entire dark cave was filled with her scream. It was not just the pain she felt in her chest. The cobras were getting on her body as well, and one was already inside her sarong. It was only a matter of time before she would be bitten to death.*

*Her whole body had already betrayed her. With her hand still held tightly on her chest, she toppled over. Her vision was blurring. There was nothing else she could do. This was the end. She gave a final look at what was in front of her. A few cobras and a weird looking snake - a double-headed black snake with three white spots on its head, staring straight into her eyes.*

*Double-headed snake. Black skin. Three white spots. She read about it somewhere. But what was it about? She tried to remember but she was no longer in her right mind. Accepting her fate, she closed her eyes.*

*At that instant, on the brink of death, a memory from not long ago was suddenly triggered from her subconscious mind. A conversation between two students. About a weird looking snake. Double-headed. Three white spots...*

*'That is...'*

31

*Awakened by her own thoughts, she opened her eyes. The crawling reptiles were still lingered in front of her. But her focus was only on the double-headed snake. Ignoring her painful chest, she forced herself to sit up.*

*“This is... everything is... just... an illusion,” said Arini, gasping. “These snakes... are nothing more... than the projection... of my fear. Am I right!?”*

*Though she was struggling with her breathing, her eyes were still fixated on the strange looking snake. The same could be said about the reptile. It had been facing Arini all the time, right from the moment she spotted it, with its tongue stuck out.*

*They continued staring at each other for a short while. Arini's eyes twitched slightly. Her mind might be playing a trick on her but for a split second she actually saw that the double-headed snake was grinning! Her body jerked backward a bit. Was it even possible?*

*'It taps into your fear and then uses your fear against you.' Those words which she overheard from the conversation between the two students rang in her ears.*

*'It makes you see things.'*

*Unlike The Lost Souls who just simply planted fear into a human's heart, the creature in front of her actually drew the fear out of its victims, and slowly broke their spirit. The more broken they got, the stronger it became.*

*“Your mind trick.. won't work on me anymore... None of these... are real.” Merely spouting the words would not be enough to beat it. Arini knew that she had to completely believe in herself. And to do so, she needed to discard her ultimate fear over cobras.*

*Gathering all her courage, she steadily extended her right hand towards those snakes. If she could at least touch them without freaking out, the act alone should be enough to prove that she had no fear in her heart.*

*“You... are not real.”*

*She repeated those words, at first slowly. But as her hand was getting closer towards the reptiles, she said them out loud.*

*The closest cobra to Arini, reared up its body, showing its fangs and hissing loudly. Its hood was also extended.*

*It was like a deja vu. Arini remembered this scenario vividly. This was how she got bitten and almost lost her life. However this time, it was different. These were just illusions.*

*But, what if she was wrong? She would definitely lose her life in this dark cave and her body would never be found. It would be such a pitiful death for her.*

*There was only a 50-50 chance and this was the risk she was willing to bet on. Without giving a chance to be swayed by her own fear, she quickly grabbed the raising cobra and shouted 'You are not real'. To her surprise, poof, the cobra disappeared, and what left in her grasp was just a bone of an unknown species. In fact, all of the cobras had turned into bones.*

*Arini turned to look at her surroundings. There were only her and the double-headed snake.*

*“Show me your true self!” she demanded.*

*The double-headed snake hissed and stuck out its tongue. Then languidly it reared up, and morphed into a two-meter tall man. No, the shape resembled a man, but when Arini looked closely, it face did not look human at all.*

*Long dark straight hair. Red eyes, sharp fangs and beak nose. A tiny horn stuck out from its forehead. The skin was dark brown. He was not wearing anything except a loin cloth.*

*“I am now your master. Your life belongs to me, and you will serve me until the day I release you,” said Arini.*

*The creature bowed at her.*

*Arini smiled. She made it. She had tamed The Unseen.*

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“Giselle.”

No answer.

“Giselle!”

Elizabeth's sharp tone broke Giselle away from her thought. She turned to look at her little sister.

“It's time,” Elizabeth reminded her.

“A-ah. Okay.” Giselle turned back towards the mirror and quickly combed her hair. From the reflection, she could see Elizabeth walked out of the room.

She sighed for doing it again - daydreaming about Arini. There was definitely something wrong with her. But now was not the time to think about this. Dominic would be arriving soon, to request for her sister's hand in marriage the old-fashioned way. She had to be there in her right mind, to support Elizabeth. And of course to plan for their next move the moment Pa rejected Dominic's proposal.

Giselle looked at her reflection once again and smiled before making her way to the living room.

32

“Okay,” said Pa. Nothing more, nothing less.

His short answer caused every single person in the small living room to be in shocked, mouth agape. For a few moments, no one said anything. They just blankly stared at Pa, who was rocking his chair like he normally did, emotionless as usual.

Had Pa really gone soft?

“You have no objection to this marriage?” Dominic was the first to break the silence.

“No.” As before, his answer was short.

Dominic grabbed Elizabeth’s hand, who was still in shock, and turned to look at her with sparkling eyes. “We can start planning for the wedding as soon as possible.” He then looked back at Patrick before continuing, “if it is okay with you, Mr. Campbell?”

“Do as you please.”

Pa’s reply, although emotionless, made Elizabeth broke down into tears. She squeezed Dominic’s hand, and then they hugged each other tightly, as if a hard battle had just been won.

A joyous moment for the two lovers but Giselle could not bring herself to join in the happiness. She was completely troubled by Pa's answer. Obviously, she was not an expert in understanding Pa's behavior. However, what she had just witnessed and heard were enough to confirm her suspicion.

It was something that she had been questioning herself a lot.

There were various occasions happened in the past that made her wondered. Pa implemented strict rules that had to be followed by the whole household. Disobeying the rules meant certain punishment. But there were a few things not related to the rules where she was forbidden from doing, but Elizabeth was permitted to.

For example, she was never allowed to have a sleep over at her friend's house, but Elizabeth was never refused from doing so. When Giselle protested Pa's decision, she was grounded for a week, without any contact with her friends. She could not also participate in her school field trip but Elizabeth was allowed to join hers.

Then, the incident with Beth and Jen. At first, she thought Pa was angry because she humiliated his family. But for some reason, she had a feeling that was not why Pa had beaten her into a pulp. Something else was involved.

And then, there were also the incidents at Don's shop, and Elizabeth's school. She was pretty sure Pa had heard of those. But he did not say a word about any of them, instead he gave her the 'I know what you did' look. Although Pa did not get physical at that time, his silence stare carried the same weight as his physical punishment.

As far as she knew, Elizabeth was never gotten the same treatment. She was only punished if she broke the house rules, which she rarely did. Other than that, she was pretty much free to do what her heart desired. Like getting married to the man she loved.

Her eyes watched the happiness celebrated by the couples in front of her. Giselle forced herself to give her little sister a warm smile.

Noticing her sister’s feeling, Elizabeth walked towards Giselle, cupped her face and slowly pulled it towards her shoulder. She understood what was playing in Giselle’s mind at that moment.

“Don't worry Giselle,” she said softly. “You'll be staying with us after the wedding and we can always be together.”

“That is not going to happen!”

Pa, who before this was just sitting quietly on his rocking chair, snapped out of sudden.

All eyes were now looking at him. The calm, peaceful mood they had previously was now gone, and replaced by an eerie surrounding. Pa was back in his original self. He stood up, facing Elizabeth.

“Do whatever you want with your life. But Giselle stays.”

With that, he left the room, leaving all of them dumbfounded.

Ma, who sat at the corner of the room, as usual, did not give any respond. Like her husband, she also quickly got up and left the room.

Though Pa was not in the room anymore, the atmosphere surrounding them was still tensed. For quite a long time, the room was filled with silence. No one managed to come up with the right words to say, let alone repairing the broken mood.

"Why?" Elizabeth's soft cry finally broke off the silence.

She had already slumped on the floor. It was hard to believe the happiness she had enjoyed a few moments ago was now gone. Dominic came to her side and patted her back. "We'll figure something out."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “We can move far away from here right after our wedding... and bring Giselle together... Pa won't find out... and... and...”

“Elizabeth.”

Hearing Giselle's voice, calling out her name, made her heart crushed. Quickly she jumped off her feet and held Giselle's shoulder tightly.

“Don't worry Giselle. You'll come with us no matter what. I'll find a way to...”

“Elizabeth.”

Once again, Giselle called out her name softly. She wiped away the tears that had started falling on Elizabeth's pale cheek.

“It's okay,” she said, forcing herself to smile. “You don't have to worry about me. I'm your big sister. It is my job to take care of you. Not the other way round.”

Elizabeth's tears could not be stopped anymore. They poured down heavily. Slowly she buried her face on Giselle's chest and let out a loud cry.

Would it be better if Pa had refused to this marriage so they could plan their escape together? Giselle doubted it. Gently she stroked Elizabeth's hair. She felt sorry, not for herself, but for Elizabeth.

Everything became clearer now. She reflected on Pa's behavior, in the past and present. It was really wrong of her to think for one second that Pa had gone soft.

That was far from the truth. The truth was even harsher. Pa had never cared about Elizabeth.

But that did not mean Pa cared about her either. That man was not capable of loving anybody. Not towards his wife. Certainly not towards his daughters. Which made this whole thing scarier than it already was.

What kind of plan did Pa have in store for her?

33

Lit only by a dim bed lamp, Ma continued knitting her new made poncho. She had no need for the garment. She knitted just to forget her troublesome mind.

Her husband was sound asleep by her side but she could not bring herself to join in. She still could not shake away her frightening feeling. Not just from today's incident, but from the moment she met Patrick.

Long ago, she was like any other girl. Connie Moore was her name. She was not a bubbly woman, but she was not as cold as she was now. She had friends, and a family who loved her. More importantly, she also had a dream.

A dream that was cruelly ended on that fateful day.

Though it happened more than 20 years ago, she still could not forget what happened on that day. She loved to dance. Her only dream was to become a dancer. None of her family or friends knew about her talent in dancing. She wanted to keep it as a surprise.

Thus, to fulfill her dream, she secretly practiced dancing. Not in her room, but at the outskirt of Dulmer, where other people rarely went to. There, she would dance to her heart content. The music she danced to, was only in her head. That was her greatest talent - the ability to gracefully move her body according to what was on her mind.

On that fateful day, she went to the outskirt as usual to practice. She had just thought of a new move and could not wait to try it out. Once she had perfected the move, she would go to Treinda, a big city more than 200km away from north Dulmer, to enter a dancing competition. Her family and friends would definitely be surprised if they found out about it, and a win would make the situation even better. She could already imagine their shocking and proud expressions when she delivered the great news.

The thought of winning the competition made her smiled.

Her new dance move was about joy and happiness. About a bright future. She would dance towards that future.

Starting with a slow motion movement, steadily she picked up the tempo, getting faster and faster until she was completely immersed in it.

When her mind became one with the dance, she let go of her thought and let the body moved by itself. She twisted and hopped, and then switched to slow motion gestures before picking up the tempo again. Whatever she did, she could only spell perfection.

She did one more round of practice, and then lied down on the soft grasses underneath her feet. She took a long breath. Her heart was still beating rapidly but she was happy. The dance moves were already perfect so she just wanted to enjoy the moment. Bathing under the warm sun while dreaming about her future. What could be better than that?

As she closed her eyes, thinking of what her near future might look like, the sound of someone, or maybe something, approaching, interrupted her thought. Surprised by the unexpected visitor, she instantly got onto her feet. Who could have been in this place other than her?

For a few moments, she was just standing still. She did not have the courage to check who, or what was it, and at the same time she did not feel like running away.

The approaching sound became louder and louder. Finally she saw the unexpected visitor - a foreign young man, covered in blood, reaching out his hand to her. All her fears were completely subsided the moment she held his hand.

34

Everyday she would go to the outskirt without fail, not to practice her dance move but to see the young man. Ever since she found him covered in blood, she had tended to his wound, nursed him until he had fully recovered.

Day by day, she grew fond of him. Of his survival skill. Of his skillful hand, building his small shelter in the wood from nothingness. She could not care less about his ugly look. Slowly she forgot about her dream, as she was consumed by an immense feeling.

Patrick.

His name kept on resonating in her ears day and night. All she could think of now was to be with him forever. She barely ate since all her portion was saved for him. It did not matter if she felt hungry all the time, as long as Patrick was stuff.

Love is blind.

She accepted the fact that she was now madly in love with him and she would do anything in the world for him. As long as he was happy. That was her vow.

Her sudden change of behavior worried her parents. So they decided to tail her one day and was surprised to find out about Patrick. They saw it straight away, for whom Patrick really was, and how Connie had fallen to his trick.

But Connie did not see it that way and insisted on being by Patrick side forever. Finally, gave in to their only daughter's request, they allowed them to tie the knot, in a closed ceremony.

After their marriage, Patrick moved in with them. It didn't take him long to show his true color. He took control of the family and did not hesitate to punish if anybody dared to defy him.

Realizing the disaster that she had brought upon her family, Connie tried to make up by helping her parents ran away. But Patrick discovered her plan and caught them before they could run away. Her parents were kept in a store room, without any food and water, and left to die.

Connie, who was pregnant with Giselle at that time, decided to end her life out of regret. She went out to the main road one night, stood in the middle of the road, and waited to be hit by any vehicle passing by. But her action was futile when she was saved by one of the townspeople, who later brought her back home.

“Don't you harm my child, in any way, ever again.”

Those were the words uttered by Patrick. Words which lifted up her hope at that moment. For once, she believed that her husband was capable of loving and the child she carried would change their lives. Believing in a better future, she held onto this hope until Giselle was born.

But Patrick did not show any sign of changes. He remained being the same horrible guy as before. Even until she gave birth to Elizabeth, her hope seemed futile.

She did not realize when she had started to lose hope. Be it to live or to die. Before she knew it, she had become a living toy. Soulless, and lived to blindly obey Patrick.

There would be time once in a while when she was brought back to her senses by her own guilt. But each time it happened, she completely shut her feeling down. To her, it was better to be emotionless, rather than living in guilt.

That was her resolve. For about two decades now, she had endured her misery and fear. There was no turning back.

*I'm sorry Giselle, Elizabeth. This is the way you are meant to live with.*

35

Roses. Daisies, Dahlias. All sorts of colors. Spring definitely brought the flowers out of their hidings. Blooming majestically, occupying the green land. Lupines could also be found growing wildly, added to the beauty of the scenery in front of her.

The garden was absolutely the best place to appreciate these beauties, but Giselle was not there to enjoy the scenery. She had dove into a deep thought for a while now.

Was there anything special about her that made Pa behaved that way? The punishments she received - were they meant to protect her in some way?

*Impossible.* She discarded that thought away. Protecting her would be the last thing in Pa’s mind. So what was it then?

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Joshua gave me a little trouble today.”

A familiar voice greeted her from the right. There stood Maria, with her son, Joshua, in a stroller.

Giselle had already fallen too deep into her thought that she almost forgotten her actual reason for coming to the garden. She replied to Maria with a smile, then peeked into the stroller.

“Sleeping already, huh?”

“You have no idea what he did. Screaming. Stomping. He just wanted to watch his favorite cartoon on TV. I had to promise him a big scoop of ice-cream to get him out of the house. And now look at him, already asleep. Calm and peaceful, like a little angel.”

“Sounds like you have a lot of fun.”

Maria let out a small laugh. “Indeed, I am.” She sat beside Giselle. “I brought you some sample flowers. All you have to do is to choose the one you like.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know. I can always buy the flowers myself and send it to you.”

“Ah, it’s not a problem at all. I know where to get fresh flowers with great prices.”

“You never change. Always going for a cheap bargain. It’s hard to make money with you as a customer,” said Giselle, poking on Maria’s shoulder, softly.

They both laughed.

“Are you sure about this? A flower head band for Elizabeth on her wedding day?” asked Maria.

Giselle nodded. The wedding she attended in Ira was exactly how she wanted Elizabeth to experience. If she could not bring her little sister to the underground world, she would bring Ira’s culture to her instead.

*Ira, huh?* She had not been down there for quite sometimes now. She was busy planning for Elizabeth’s wedding. Furthermore, the people in Ira, especially Ava, acted different than usual. She wondered what happened.

“Giselle?”

“Huh?”

“There you go again. Daydreaming.”

“Sorry, I was just...”

“Are you really okay? We can discuss about this head band thing some other time. If you want to talk...”

“Maria, I’m okay. It’s not what you think.”

It was the truth. Giselle was no longer concerned about becoming an old maid. She had decided to accept her fate with an open heart. But lately what truly bothered her was Pa’s true motive.

“Hey Maria.”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever figured out what you really want to do with your life?” asked Giselle, trying to change the subject.

Maria took a little moment before she answered the question. “I guess all I want is to be a good wife and mother, and live a happy life. Why do you ask?”

Chilly wind blew softly, carrying the smell of the roses. Giselle inhaled deeply. “I don’t know. For some reason, I felt as if I’d been asked this question before,” she finally said.

“Oh, then what answer did you give?”

36

*“Why are you doing this?”*

*Wak Joko was breathing hard. He did not predict Arini to become really strong in just a few years after she suddenly disappeared on him. He was completely outmatched by her power.*

*Arini smiled. “I travelled through out this country, challenging each and every great shaman there is. And you know what? They were all pathetic. Just like you. I’m so frustrated. You don’t even live up to your reputation.”*

*“What would you gain from this?”*

*“Power.”*

*“For what purpose?”*

*“Hahahaha!” Arini laughed. She walked towards Wak Joko, who was already down with both of his hands hammered to the floor and then stepped on his right hand.*

*“Arghh!” he screamed.*

*Arini stared at her former teacher. Her eyes were no longer sparkling like when she was still his apprentice. They were vicious, like a predator looking at its prey.*

*“That’s why I said you are pathetic. You don’t understand what possessing a great power means. Look at you. If you use your power to rule this world, you won’t end up a hopeless old man like you are now.”*

*Wak Joko curled his lips, enduring the pain. He lifted his head, and looked directly into Arini’s eyes. “This ability that we possess is meant to help people. Not to rule them. Didn’t I tell you not to sway from the right path? If you give in to this, it will consume your soul. And there will be no turning back after that.”*

*His words did not reach her heart at all. Arini crouched beside him while holding his face in between her two fingers.*

*“Blah... blah... blah... I’m tired of listening to your what’s-right-what’s-wrong lecture. You’ve lost your battle and your right to tell me what to do. If you want to stop me, then win this fight. But it’s already too late for you, no? You’re already at the end of your limit.”*

*There was no point in continuing with the talk. Wak Joko realized that nothing he said would change Arini’s mind. He knew her very well. Once she had decided, she would be committed until she achieved her goal.*

*But that did not mean he had given up. To let Arini continue with her plan was the same as destroying the world itself. She was too dangerous.*

*As long as he was still breathing, he would not allow Arini to do what she pleases. He closed his eyes, concentrating on all five necessary elements from his surrounding to create the most powerful magic, his trump card - the magic that was never revealed to anybody. He would never have thought that the day would come for him to use it.*

*Summoning all five elements, Wak Joko quickly chanted the spell. He had only one chance. If he failed this, the future of humanity would be in despair. After reciting several lines of spells, he could feel his body was overflowing with energy. I could do this, he convinced himself.*

*He was almost finished with the spell when he suddenly felt out of breath. He opened his eyes. What he saw was Arini’s devilish smile, directing at him.*

*“Chanting a spell, really? You think I would allow you to do that?”*

*Ignoring her, Wak Joko tried to resume his spell. But he found himself getting harder and harder to breathe. As if his life was being suck out of his body.*

*“What... did... you... heh.. heh... do to... heh... me?” he asked, panting hard.*

*“Is that your dying wish? Hahaha! Alright, I shall grant it to you then.”*

*Arini walked away from him. Wak Joko tailed her movement with his eyes, looking for an opportunity to continue chanting his spell. But before he could even find that moment, he was surprised to see what had appeared before him. A horny, red-eyes creature. His mouth agape.*

*“The Unseen?!”*

*“Hahaha! Surprised, aren’t you? See, there’s no one who can stop me now. What you see is not just a mere creature. He’s the most powerful creature in the realm of spirit. With him by my side, I’m invincible.”*

*Wak Joko understood what had happened to him before. The Unseen had gone into his body and blocked his breathing. Now that it was out of his body, he could breathe normally again. But what was revealed to him was not a laughing matter. Arini was serious. She definitely had tamed the most powerful servant any human could hope for. What would happen to the world after this? Even his trump card spell would not be able to stop the creature this powerful.*

*“Well dear teacher. Any last word?”*

*“Arini, please stop this madness!”*

*“No, can’t do.”*

*“That servant of yours, it will devour your soul once you’ve died. Your soul won’t be able to move on, and it will be forever trapped in his body. It gets stronger each time its master died by devouring their souls. Do you want that to happen to you?”*

*“You are right. Possessing this power alone is not enough. Sooner or later, I will die too, and my soul will be devoured by my own servant. If that happened, all that I’ve worked for would have been for naught. That’s why I’ve decided. After taking your life, I would travel to the faraway land. There are whispers going on in the other realm. About an outcast race that could grant human an immortal life.”*

*“Arini, what is it that you really want to achieve?”*

*Arini did not answer the question straight away. She walked closer to Wak Joko and then sat beside him. Her hands touched his face slowly.*

*“To be the rightful ruler of this world. The Goddess.”*

*“I won’t allow that to happen.”*

*“Yeah? What can you do, old man? Stop me if you can.”*

*That’s exactly what I’ll do. No matter how long it will take, I’ll make sure you won’t succeed, he said to himself. He had finished chanting his spell without Arini noticing it. But that spell was not strong enough to be used just yet. Someday, someone would definitely carry his will and stop Arini.*

*“Your cockiness and overconfidence are your weaknesses. They will be used against you. When that day comes, you shall taste your own demise.”*

*There was no response from Arini except she was smiling. She wanted her triumphant face to be the last image buried into Wak Joko’s eyes, before she broke his neck.*

37

There was nothing else to do except to carry on with her mission. Ava wished that this day had never come. Carrying the fate of her people was a pain to bear but the task she was entrusted to must be executed without fail.

*“I’m sorry Ava. You alone, must complete this mission. If only Evangeline had the courage at that time...”*

Her father’s words kept on ringing in her ear.

This task had brought her to Nau, also known as The Undying Land. According to their legend the nymphs who gave up their immortal lives were reborn in this land. She needed their powers to save her people. Since they had been labeled as the outcast and their connections with the other nymphs had been completely severed, no help would be given by their estranged kin. The soul of the reborn nymphs was their last hope of survival. The hope that she wished to be granted without prejudice.

It took her almost two weeks to reach Nau. It was not a place that can be easily reached on foot. Nau was situated in the middle of Lake Kawa. To get there, she had to cruise on this humongous lake using a leaf which she enlarged and strengthen using her ability. Her skill in rowing also helped in steering the leaf-boat towards the right direction.

The journey was not a plain sailing. Numerous obstacles came along the way. A sudden shake on the calm water. A thick fog to throw her in the wrong direction. An illusion of creatures which appeared before her eyes.

Those were expected. Nau was the sacred land guarded by millions of spirits. Only those with the purest of heart could get through the guardians unscathed.

Ava had passed the first ordeal. She did not come with any ill intention but the desire to help her people. But the desire alone was not enough to fulfill that wish. She had to prove that she was worthy of their trust. That she was the ultimate savior for the people of Ira.

In front of her was a small entrance to a cave, about 5.5 meters high and the width was just enough to fit two average size people side by side. She went in.

Nothing was visible inside the pitch black cave. All she could hear was the sound of water flowing heavily. Ava pulled out a small jar from within her dress pocket. A few fireflies were flying inside it.

Placing her hand on top of the jar while chanting some words, the lights from the fireflies became brighter. Using those lights as guidance, she continued to walk.

*Cross the water and travel deep.*

The inside of the cave was of a decent size. There were times when she had to bend down a little because the ceiling was too low. The walk path was narrow. She had to be extremely careful while walking on it. One wrong step could cause her to fall into the fast flowing stream of water. Since the cave was hidden from direct sunlight, the temperature inside it was a little bit chilly. The rocks that covered the wall of the cave felt so cold, as if they were made of ice particles.

Although she was carrying a heavy burden on her shoulder, the mesmerizing view inside the cave put her a little bit at ease. The sound of water in the depth of the silence was really pleasant to hear. The stream was more like a spinning whirlpool, rather than a normal flowing river. And after walking for about 200 meters, she spotted a torrential underground waterfall.

Her mouth agape, astonished by the indescribable beauty. If it wasn’t for the mission, she would have spent a longer time there.

*Time, huh?*

What time did she have? The lives of her people were on the verge of extinction. Even if she managed to accomplish what she was set out to do, she would not be able to come back to this place. Not even to Ira. Embracing the uncertainty of her future, she continued forward.

38

The pathway inside the cave was getting narrower and lower, made it harder for her to walk. She had not yet found what she was looking for. In fact she was not sure of what to look for.

‘You’ll know once you see it’ was what her father said. All she had to do was to believe in those words.

She walked until she arrived at a large area inside the cave. *This is not it.* She scanned her surrounding. There was another pathway that led to another place. The stream was also flowing into that direction. She walked towards it. When she was about to step into the pathway, the lights from the fireflies suddenly died out. Ava found herself to be in a complete darkness.

Without being able to see a thing, she had to rely on the cave wall to guide her way. Gently she pressed both of her hands onto the side and the top of the cave – the side wall was to show the way, whilst the top wall was to prevent her head from hitting the ceiling whenever the height of the pathway lowered.

Walking in the dark while the temperature continuing to drop was not very pleasant. She almost slipped a few times. Each time, her heart pounded rapidly. If she were not careful enough, she would fall and wash away by the strong stream.

She walked for another minutes until she reached a point where everything was extremely quiet. Not even the sound of water could be heard of. Does the river stopped abruptly?

In the midst of confusion, she saw something unbelievable.

*To the darkness where the stars asleep.*

*Let the lights guide the faithful spirit*

*And seal the soul to the land above it*

She recited the rest of the song, quietly. What she saw within this pitch-black area was thousands of tiny points, glowing on the ceiling of the cave. It was as if she was watching thousands of bright stars shining from a clear sky.

*So these are the souls of the nymphs.* She had found what she was looking for.

“We know why you are here, little girl.” A voice was heard in the dark.

“You seek for power to save the lives of your people.” A second voice joined in.

“Will you lend me your powers?” asked Ava.

“Are you determined to sacrifice everything that holds dear to you?” It was the first voice again.

“Nothing is more important to me than my people.”

“Very well. We shall grant your request,” said the second voice. “However you will have only one chance. If you fail, everything, including your own life, will be forever gone. Are you ready for the consequences?”

“I will not fail.”

“Then, give me you hands,” the second voice continued saying.

Ava lifted up both of her hands. She could see the lights from the ceiling raining down onto her palms. Her body felt different, as the energy kept on flowing in.

“We have lent you our powers. Good luck,” said the first voice.

Ava wanted to express her gratitude when she was suddenly knock unconscious. When she opened her eyes, she saw a very familiar surrounding. She was back in Ira.

39

Wedding dress. *Check.*

Marriage celebrant. *Check.*

Venue. *Check.*

Food. *Check.*

Wedding invitation. *Check.*

Decoration. *Check.*

Giselle looked at the wedding list several times. Since Pa and Ma did not bother at all to take part in Elizabeth’s wedding, she had to step up.

*A wedding to remember.*

That was her vow. Though it was not hers, she still wanted Elizabeth to have the most perfect wedding. Perhaps like what she experienced in Ira.

*Ira.* She wondered what was going on in that place right now. Elizabeth’s wedding would take place in two weeks’ time. Giselle had her hands full with the wedding preparation. She had no time to visit Ira at all. Right now, Elizabeth was her top priority.

Her planned wedding was just a small ceremony, to be attended by only close friends and those who were not prejudice. Wedding should be a joyous event. Only the tears of happiness could be shed on that day. Not sadness. That was the reason why she was so selective with her guest lists.

Because of the upcoming wedding, the townsfolk had started gossiping again, especially about Giselle’s fate. About her unfortunate life where the little sister would marry before the older one. About her future, whether she would continue being single, or would she be able to break the ‘Campbell’s curse’ as the townspeople called it.

Whatever the gossips were, it did not matter to her anymore. She would not take any of it to the heart. Partly because she genuinely felt happy for Elizabeth and truly wished for her happiness.

Another reason would be because she had made up her mind. She would leave Dulmer for good after the wedding. Leave her uncaring parents. Leave the good-for-nothing townspeople. She would start a new life, far far away. She might have to say goodbye to Elizabeth too but she was not even worried. She knew Dominic would take a good care of her sister. She was confident that he would give Elizabeth the happiness that she deserved.

Beads of tears could be felt dropping from her eyes. Saying goodbye to Elizabeth would be the hardest thing to do. She had to fully prepare herself when the moment comes.

She wiped away her tears while rechecking the wedding list. There was nothing else for her to do for the day. Everything had been taken care of. She would use the rest of the day to ease her mind, strolling around town, which she had not done much in the past few years.

Once in a while, taking a walk like this without having any worries in mind made she felt so refreshing. *Maybe I should do this more often when I have moved to a new place.*

“Giselle Campbell. That is very unusual of you to show your face freely in public.”

Giselle took a deep breath. This was why she hated this place and its people. Her happiness was always cut short. She turned to face that person.

Melissa Lynd.

Another annoying figure, in the same category as Beth and Jan. Her hair style was always the same – a half bun at the top of her head, like a top-knot, whilst the rest of her hair was let loose. From far, she looked like wearing a wig that was never removed. Her face was always covered in thick makeup. Even her appearance was annoying in Giselle’s opinion.

“I heard your precious sister is getting married soon, I hope this won’t make you depress and go around stealing other people’s husband,” said Melissa.

Melissa was known to be rude. But unlike Beth and Jan, her attitude was most likely caused by her paranoia. Ever since she had her first boyfriend, she showed insecurity through her behavior. She always thought the other girls would snatch her boyfriend away.

After her marriage to Jack Marr, her insecurity changed from bad to worse. Even a decent ‘hi’ towards her husband was enough to make her go berserk.

*Poor Jack Marr.*

Since Melissa was acting like that with all women, Giselle decided not to be bothered by her annoying attitude. A worry-wart woman like that was not worth her rage.

“Remember this. You had been warned!”

*She just does not know when to shut up, does she?* Ignoring Melissa’s threat, she continued her walk. Slightly five minutes later, she heard Maria’s voice calling out her name from behind her back.

“Giselle! Thank God I found you.”

“Maria, what’s wrong?” Seeing her best friend running and panting like that, something terrible must have happened.

“Haven’t you heard? Clark Boyd falls ill out of sudden.”

“How bad?”

“Very bad. He spewed blood and collapsed afterward. Nobody knows what actually happened to him. If worse comes to worst…” Maria halted.

Giselle cleared her throat. She knew exactly what Maria was about to say. Clark Boyd was the tailor she hired to sew Elizabeth’s wedding dress. If he did not get any better soon enough, the dress would not be ready by the wedding day. This could spell a disaster in her dictionary.

“We still have time. We could still find other available tailor who is willing to do the job,” convinced Maria.

To find an available tailor who was willing to sew a wedding dress for Patrick Campbell’s daughter was the real issue here. It was really hard to find someone who would completely leave Giselle alone. Most of them would at least say something annoying, purposely or not.

But Giselle had no choice. This was something that she had to bear. Together, they went to the nearest tailor they could think of. On the way there, they ran into a commotion. Curious, they stopped.

“What’s going on here?” asked Maria to the nearest bystander.

He looked at Maria, and then shrugged. “I don’t know. The old man suddenly spewed blood and collapsed.”

“He is not the only one,” said the other bystander nearby. Earlier, the same thing was also happened to Chanel Brown and Emma Gibson.”

The situation there became quite a tumult. The crowd had become bigger, with people talking and speculating about the incident.

Giselle and Maria looked at each other. ‘What on Earth is happening to Dulmer’ expression was written on their faces.

40

At this moment of time, Dulmer was in the state of panic. More and more people fell prey to this mysterious disease. Those who had collapsed earlier were already dead.

Because many had fallen victim to the disease, earlier symptoms had started to become apparent. At first, noticeable rashes would appear on the victims’ body parts. Soon after, these rashes would become itchy and scabby. Not only the skin, the victims’ health was also affected. Later on, they would spew blood and collapse before the disease took their lives. What so scary about this was the victim normally lasted for a maximum of three days only.

Though the symptoms were fully known, no doctors were able to do anything to prevent the disease from spreading, let alone to cure it. Even worse, the doctors themselves were not immune to this disease.

If this continued, Dulmer would be a town full of dead people. This terrible news had travelled to the other towns, nearby and far. Fearing of becoming affected, security at the neighboring towns was tightened. The people of Dulmer had now become prisoners at their own place, with no way out. No help was coming in either. All they could wish for was for a miracle to happen.

Giselle was no exception. She hardly went out of the house. Most of the time she would just sit quietly in her room, constantly thinking of a way to get out of this mess. She refused to stay in Dulmer and die, and vowed to survive, together with Elizabeth.

Her eyes were directed at Elizabeth’s bed. Her sister went out to meet Dominic as usual. Although their wedding had been called off due to the outbreak, that did not stop them from meeting each other everyday. Their unbreakable bond was something Giselle would hope to have one day.

As she planned for a possible escape, Elizabeth walked into the room. Her sister’s face looked trouble.

“Elizabeth, is everything okay? You are back earlier than usual.”

Elizabeth didn’t answer. Her right hand was placed on her right shoulder, while her eyes were looking down on the floor.

“Elizabeth, what’s wrong?”

“I… I… “

Her voice stopped. She did not know how to deliver the news to Giselle. What she just found out was so hard to accept.

Giselle smiled. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

“Giselle, I’m… I’m going to die soon.”

“What are you talking about? How are you going to… “

She halted. *Oh my gosh! She doesn’t mean ‘that’, right?*

For a few moments, there was only silence between them. Giselle wanted to ask for a confirmation, but she could not bring herself to. She was afraid to hear the answer.

“Giselle, I’m scared.”

Slowly, Giselle walked towards her. “Show me,” she said softly.

Elizabeth unzipped her dress, and pulled her left shoulder sleeve down. What could be seen on her upper arm justified her fear.

Giselle covered her mouth with her right palm. *It can’t be*. She wanted to scream but she knew it was not the time for that. What she should do now was to be strong for Elizabeth. With tears trickling down from her eyes, she hugged her dear sister tightly.

41

Dominic had just left a few moments ago. He wanted to stay by Elizabeth’s side but she refused. She did not want him to see her in her worst condition.

Giselle also thought Dominic should leave, though for a different reason. She knew Elizabeth’s condition was worsening, that her sister did not have much time left. Knowing that, she wanted her face to be the last image buried in Elizabeth’s eyes before they were closed forever. She wanted her last moment to be the two of them together. She was being selfish but she did not care anymore. Elizabeth was everything she had in this world and she was about to be taken away from her, forever.

Lying together on the bed, Giselle pulled Elizabeth closer to her. Seeing her sister’s pretty face getting paler and thinner, she wished she could take her place and bear her pain.

“Giselle…”

Elizabeth’s voice was really weak. Giselle brought her ear closer to Elizabeth’s mouth.

“I’m scared. I don’t want to die.”

“You don’t have to be afraid. I’m here. I’m not gonna leave you.”

As if understanding Elizabeth’s suffering, Fleur, who was just sitting in the room all this time, jumped onto the bed. She purred softly, face rubbed against Elizabeth’s leg, and lay there.

“See? Fleur will also be by your side. We won’t leave you,” said Giselle.

“Giselle, will we meet again in the next life?”

“Of course we will. In the next life. And even after that. Just the two of us, forever.”

“Promise?”

Giselle lifted her pinky finger. “Pinky swear.”

“Giselle.”

“Uh-huh?”

“You will find happiness, even after I die, won’t you?”

Giselle cleared her throat. “I will,” she said, trying not to cry.

“Giselle.” Elizabeth started coughing. “My chest hurts.”

“Shhh. Don’t talk anymore. Just rest. You’ll be fine.”

The coughing continued, and worsening. Finally the sign of fatality emerged. Elizabeth spewed blood from her mouth. Giselle held her hand tightly, comforting her sister. Fleur was also awoke and walked closer to Elizabeth’s face.

“Take care of Fleur.”

Giselle nodded.

Elizabeth let out another hard cough.

“Giselle… I love you.”

“I love you too.”

42

The day was cloudy with a little bit of drizzles. The wind blew softly. It seemed the weather itself was mourning.

There was no one left except Giselle. Not many people attended Elizabeth’s funeral. Maybe because the townspeople knew death was already a norm – everyday there would be someone dying due to the outbreak – so there was no point in mourning other people’s death.

Dominic came to help with the funeral earlier. He even offered to help Giselle if she needed anything. He was such a nice guy till the end, thought Giselle. Too bad Elizabeth had to leave this world too early.

Pa and Ma was nowhere to be seen. They were not there when Elizabeth was still alive. Definitely they wouldn’t be there to bury their own daughter. But for Giselle, she was matter-of-factly happy that her parents were not there. Otherwise they would just be sore in her eyes.

The dead would not be coming back. The alive should continue on leaving. But it was the hardest thing for Giselle to do. All this time, she bore her sufferings for Elizabeth’s sake. Now that her sister was gone, her life felt meaningless.

“Why? Why it has to be Elizabeth and not me? I deserve more to die than her!” she shouted, butting her head to the ground.

Giselle wiped out her tears that had started falling. “Hey Elizabeth, tell me what should I do? ”

The rain suddenly poured heavily. She looked at the sky. The rain cloud was getting darker. There was nothing else she could do. Reluctantly she stood up.

“Hey Elizabeth, I’m leaving now. Wait for me on the other side, okay? Till then, take care. I surely gonna miss you sis.”

She stared at Elizabeth’s grave momentarily. *Goodbye Elizabeth.* She turned and left the cemetery.

43

She walked aimlessly. Giselle had decided to leave her home for good, though she had yet to determine her new destination.

There was nothing else left for her in that cursed house. Only her heartless parents whom she was willing to abandon. She could not care less about her belongings. Or Elizabeth’s. Or…

She halted. She did miss one thing.

Fleur.

Face palming, she turned towards the direction of her house. How could she leave Fleur behind? She was part of her family. Furthermore, she had made a promise to take care of her.

Fleur might still be mourning, thought Giselle. She was planning to bring Fleur to the funeral, but she didn’t want to move from Elizabeth’s bed. So Giselle just let her be. She only hoped Fleur would still be there by the time she got home.

She walked hurriedly, did not want to waste any more time. But her effort was interrupted when she heard a familiar, annoying voice calling her name from behind.

Melissa Lynd.

Irritated, she turned to face Melissa. “What do you want?”

“I just want to warn you. Stay away from my husband!”

Giselle inhaled deeply, trying to control her emotion. “Don’t worry. I’m not interested.”

“Don’t play dumb. Do you think I’m stupid? I know what you are doing, old maid. You’ve been sneaking around my house, peeping on my husband.”

For the second time, Giselle inhaled, deeper this time. She had no time to waste on Melissa’s madness. Not after what she had just been through. Ignoring Melissa, she resumed walking.

“Yes! Yes! Go away and disappear, just like your unwedded little sister. Never show your face… eeek!”

Before Melissa could finish her sentence, Giselle’s hand was already squeezing her neck, making her unable to breathe. She struggled to release herself but was unable to. Breathing became even harder for her.

As if just awakened from a bad dream, Giselle let go of her hand. She was surprised by her own action. Melissa was almost killed. For a few seconds there she stared at her own hands.

She was angry with Melissa for badmouthing her deceased sister. True, she wanted to slap Melissa in the face. But to strangle her? She could not remember resorting to such action. It was like her body moved on its own.

But what was this feeling she just experienced? Her heart pounded rapidly. Her body trembled. It was not a regret. Not a fear either. It was an excitement.

She looked at Melissa who was still lying on the ground. Her hand was itching to take Melissa’s life.

*Kill her.*

*Kill her.*

An eerie voice echoed in her head. Submitting to the suggestion, Giselle walked slowly towards Melissa. Deep down she knew it was not the right thing to do but for some reason she wanted to. She wanted to know how it felt to murder someone.

Sensing Giselle’s murderous intent, Melissa tried to run but Giselle was faster. She knocked her down. Once again she squeezed Melissa’s neck with her right hand. However this time, she did not apply too much force in it.

Instead she chanted a spell. She had never learnt casting a spell but she chanted it as if it was at the back of her mind. Flawless.

Life was slowly sucked out of Melissa’s body. Her eyes were wide opened. Finally she let out her final breath.

Giselle inhaled deeply. She did it and the feeling was great.

44

Pa was rocking on his chair that night. He felt something different. The wind reeked of blood. He smiled. This might his first smile ever since he was born.

A sound of footsteps was approaching. He did not even bother to look. He knew whose those footsteps belonged to.

“So you have finally awakened,” said Pa, still not turning.

“Is Elizabeth’s death part of your plan, too?” asked Giselle.

“No, it is not. But if I knew she would function as your catalyst, I would have killed her myself.”

Without a moment of hesitation, Giselle grabbed Pa’s collar and brought him on his feet. “I dare you say that again.”

Pa smiled. “What a beautiful sight. That’s the kind of reaction I’ve been waiting for. Everything I did was for this moment. You surely took your time. If only you had killed Beth and Jan at that moment, I don’t have to dirty my hands like this.”

“For once, you are quite talkative,” Giselle responded with a smirk. “So what spell did you cast to create this outbreak?”

Pa let out a laugh. “You should know better. I don’t have such a skill. Everything was prepared by *her*. I just completed what she left behind. Although I have to say it took me quite a while to figure out the way.”

“You must be very proud of yourself. Under normal circumstances, a loyal servant like you would be rewarded handsomely. But in this case, I have to say, it’s not happening. I won’t forgive you for killing Elizabeth.”

“Then I’ll say I have fulfilled my duty well.”

“Wise words. Only your death will satisfy me. Now, please die for my sake.”

Pa bowed his head. “Gladly”.

Without hesitating, Giselle twisted Pa’s neck, ended his life. The strength that she gained the moment she killed Melissa, was overwhelming. She felt so powerful.

She looked at Pa’s lifeless body on the floor. “Oh, I forgot to say thanks. And… ‘good job’ raising me.”

45

“Ain’t you gonna come out from your hiding?” asked Giselle. She was now comfortably rocking on Pa’s chair.

Her question made Ma trembled with fear. She just witnessed her daughter took her husband’s life cold-bloodedly. No regrets, whatsoever.

“Come out here, Ma.”

Silence.

“Or do you prefer me to go there and drag you out here?”

Ma sucked in a deep breath. Slowly she came out from behind the door and walked towards Giselle. Her legs were shaking.

Giselle just watched Ma’s taking her own sweet time to get to her. She hated to wait but at the same time she did not want to move away from the chair. So she tapped her fingers on the armchair to channel out her frustration.

“Now, what should I do with you?” she said when Ma had finally stood in front of her.

“Please… forgive me,” plead Ma, kneeling and begging for her daughter’s mercy.

“Oh? Why should I?”

“I’m… your mother.” The last part was more like whispering. Maybe because Ma realized she had never been a ‘mother’ to them.

Her answer made Giselle snorted. “So, now you are my mother? Tell me, ‘mother’, what have you done for me and Elizabeth?”

Ma averted her eyes out of guilty. *Nothing*. She knew she had not been a mother to her daughters. But that was because she was really scared of Patrick.

“Can’t really think of anything, can you? You know what Ma, all these happened because of you. If I had to point a finger, it would be at you. You are the one to blame.”

Ma was at a loss for words. She knew her mistakes. If only she was a little protective of her daughters… But nothing could amend those mistakes now. “I’m sorry,” were the only words she could say.

Giselle looked at Ma, disgustedly. Since her awakening, everything was made clear to her, of the truth. What role did Pa play. And how stupidly Ma fell under his scheme.

She bit her lower lip, controlling her anger. If only she realized who Pa really was sooner… Tan-colored skin, dark hair and eyes, and physically different from the rest of the townspeople. Obviously Pa came from a far away land. Those distinct features were so much like *her*.

Like Arini.

This was Arini’s plan all along. Pa was just merely her pawn, fulfilling his duty if something were to go wrong. And it did go wrong.

Arini lost her battle in Ira. Instead of being killed, she was cursed by Evangeline, Ava’s ancestor. But Arini was not an amateur. She did not go into battle without preparing for the worst-case scenario. She implanted her soul into Pa through dark magic, which would be later transferred to his offspring.

The curse put on Arini was supposed to banish her soul into a different world but because of the magic that she casted on herself, her soul was still bound to Earth. She would be reincarnated the moment Giselle was fully awakened.

However, that did not happen entirely as planned. Maybe due to the curse casted by Evangeline intertwined with Arini’s dark magic, though Giselle had fully awakened, she only regained Arini’s memories and abilities. The soul and the conscience were still hers. And that was why she hated her parents so much.

*Anybody who harmed Elizabeth in any way would not be forgiven*.

“So, have you said your final prayer?”

“Giselle…”

“Goodbye Ma. Please send my regards to Pa in hell.”

46

The house felt so quiet. No Elizabeth, only two dead bodies lying on the floor. Definitely not an ideal company for Giselle. She let out a sigh.

This was not the ending she had had in mind. But there she was, all alone. Fate was being too cruel on her. What else could be done? There was no way to turn back time. The only option was to go on with what had been laid out for her – Arini’s ideal.

Giselle walked over her parents dead bodies, towards her room. The moment she looked into it, her mind was flooded with Elizabeth’s memories. But strangely enough, she did not feel sad anymore.

*Arini is such an ice queen.*

She wanted to mourn her sister’s death a bit longer, but even that feeling had been taken away from her. *This is not fair. Damn it Arini! Stop messing with my soul.*

It did not matter how much she resisted, how much Giselle’s consciousness still left in her, she knew her mind was no longer for her to control. Sooner or later, Arini would take over her completely. It would be wise just to succumb to her desire now. After all, Giselle had nothing else in this world.

As she was about to leave the room, she heard a hissing sound. Giselle turned to look. It was Fleur. For some reason, the feline looked at her as if she was a stranger. No, more like she was a monster.

“Hey Fleur, don’t you recognize me anymore? It’s me, Giselle.”

Fleur continued with her hissing.

*Great. I’m emanating an evil aura now. Thanks a lot Arini.*

Giselle walked closer to Fleur, tried to pat her in the head but she was scratched in return. *Seriously?*

Anger started to cloud her judgment. She had had enough. Being treated like an evil by the townspeople was one thing, but by her own pet? The one whom she rescued and poured in with so much love? There was a limit to everything.

She grabbed Fleur by the neck and lifted her up. The feline struggled to let loose but Giselle held her so tightly. She looked at Fleur in the eyes.

“Why don’t I send you to where Elizabeth is?”

And just like that, she snapped the feline’s neck, and threw it on the floor. *That makes three dead bodies in the house*.

Giselle sat on her bed for a while, thinking. A few seconds later, she materialized Arini’s familiar, The Unseen.

‘Ugly’ was the first word that came to her mind when she saw it. The creature bowed to her.

“Take care of all these dead bodies. I want the house to be clean. No traces of them at all,” ordered Giselle.

The Unseen bowed again.

“And oh, I’m going out for a while to visit ‘a friend’. Feel free to wreck havoc in town, or the whole Dulmer if you wish. I’m giving you a free rein for today.”

With that, she left the house.

47

Trees that used to grow healthily were all withered away. No more greenery that once soothing the soul of the surrounding creatures. The place had now become an almost barren land. Nothing much left to see, nor to enjoy.

Despite that, Ava was still looking outside her room’s window. Her people were all gone. She was the only one left in Ira, waiting to face her fate.

She turned her gaze towards the portrait of Arini. After a moment of staring, she switched back to the outside scenery.

“My, my. What a sight! The prophecy has yet to come, but Ira has already doomed. Am I too late for the party?” said a familiar voice.

Ava smiled nonchalantly. “The party is already over. Feel free to go back from where you came from,” she said without looking.

“Haha. You are as cold as always, Ava.”

“Why are you here?”

“You know exactly why I’m here. To claim my prize.”

“So, which one are you? Arini or Giselle?” Ava finally turned to face her uninvited guest.

“It’s none of your concern especially when your life is about to be over,” replied Giselle.

Ava stared at her, straight in the eyes. “I see,” she said after a few seconds. “Arini doesn’t have a full control over you yet. What a shame.”

“If you are trying to provoke me, it’s not working.”

“I’m not. I’m just stating the obvious.” Though the one standing in front of her was not a full reincarnation of Arini, Ava was fully aware of Giselle’s ability. After all, she retained all of Arini’s memories, which meant she was capable to use Arini’s dark magic.

In Ava’s point of view, that was actually a bad news. A fully reincarnated Arini would erase Giselle’s existence completely, with only her remained. However, with Giselle’s and Arini’s memories together in one place, it was like two people managing one body. That could cause instability since both of them had different personalities. And instability could lead to unpredictability, which was way worse.

Whatever the situation was, she had to do what she was set to do. To ensure the survival of her people. Ava gave Giselle a nonchalant look.

“So, how do you propose we settle this battle?”

PART II - THE GODDESS