



# UNHALLOWED HALLS

LILI WILKINSON

A gripping dark academia fantasy from the  
award-winning author of *A Hunger for Thorns*



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*For Michael, who has a knack for demons*

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I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities.

– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird,  
and a darting fish in the sea.

– Empedocles

For all things turn to barrenness  
In the dim glass the demons hold,  
The glass of outer weariness,  
Made when gods slept in times of old.

– William Butler Yeats, 'The Two Trees'

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# ONE

15 September

‘What did you do?’

Streaks of rain glitter on the windows as the train races through unending bleak moorland. I didn’t think the journey would take so long – night has fallen and all I can see past the raindrops are shadows, deep and full of secrets.

The carriage is nearly empty – a woman bent over a laptop, fingers tapping a staccato counterpoint to the steady rhythm of the train. A man asleep, his head against the window. Three teenage girls, their feet on the seats. One of them stares at me from under false eyelashes, her question hanging in the air.

‘What did you do?’

I always imagined British people would have posh accents, but this girl is proving me wrong. I can smell hairspray and spearmint and cherry lip gloss.

Since they got on a few stops ago, the girls have filled the carriage with their presence. Their shrieks of laughter, their cursing, the snap of their gum. I feel a stab of jealousy at their ease with each other, with the world. They inhabit their bodies so comfortably, propelling themselves through time and space with such confidence. I can’t imagine how it must feel.

The girl is still waiting for an answer, but I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I did.

She stands and approaches me, swaying with the movement of the train.

She's wearing an outfit that is simultaneously casual yet completely over-the-top – camo-print tracksuit bottoms and a lurid green tube top. Her makeup is thick and applied with painterly precision, her skin unnaturally orange, her brows like perfectly sculpted punctuation marks.

She nods down at the brochure poking out of my battered copy of *Middlemarch*. I've been using it as a bookmark.

'That school is for posh fuckups,' she says. 'So why are you going? Drugs? Stealing? Did you get into fights?'

I follow her gaze back down to the Agathion College brochure. Images of arched windows and turreted spires surrounded by romantic moorland grace the glossy pages. Blue-grey stone walls, wreathed in creeping ivy. Serious-looking students in wool kilts and tweed blazers bent over ancient books. When the brochure arrived in the mail, along with a full scholarship offer, it seemed too good to be true. It still does. I imagine myself there, surrounded by books and knowledge and history. I'll wander the moors like Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* and curl up in the huge stone castle with a steaming cup of tea to read Dickens and Austen and my beloved Shakespeare.

A life of the mind.

Maybe sometimes I'll engage with the other students, debating poetry or philosophy. Not *friends*, because I'm not doing that again. Colleagues, perhaps. Intellectual peers. Previous Agathion students have gone on to become famous politicians, writers and artists, according to the brochure. There's even one former British prime minister who attended.

'Bet she killed someone,' says another of the girls, whose long fingernails are pointed slashes of teal and gold. 'She looks the type.'

Do I?

I stuff the book and brochure into my backpack. Out of the corner of my eye, I see green Tube Top Girl recoil slightly, and I know she's noticed my hands.

'Come on,' the girl with the long fingernails says. 'Before she puts a spell on you.'

I let my gaze drift up to meet Tube Top Girl's, and see the faintest hint of fear there, behind her enormous false lashes and brash confidence. My hands curl in on themselves, obscuring my shiny pink palms.

The girl shrugs and returns to her friends.

My parents offered to come with me, but I insisted on travel-ing by myself. I wanted to get on board that plane and never look back. I wanted to



get as far away from Lakeland, Florida as I possibly could. From the smell of burning flesh and jasmine, and the sound of Cassidy screaming.

Agathion feels like the only way out.

A place where I can learn to control myself.

I can feel the train start to slow. We're nearly there.

I feel a twinge in my abdomen – an echo of the deep, dragging pain that is so familiar to me, and my pulse quickens.

*Not now.*

*But, I remind myself, I only just had my period.* This is nerves.

I stand and head down the swaying carriage to the luggage rack. I have to pass the three girls, who look up at me as I walk.

'Loosen up a bit, hey?' the bold girl says. 'Let your freak flag fly.'

My cheeks feel hot and sweat prickles down my back. I am frozen in place, pinned by the casual, insolent gaze of this girl who I've never met before and will never see again. She doesn't matter, so why can't I move or speak? The dragging sensation in my belly intensifies.

Someone screams, and I'm back at St Catherine's, my hands burning and my lungs filling with acrid smoke.

But it isn't Cassidy screaming. It's just the squealing of brakes as the train slows. I'm thrown forward against the bold girl as we shudder to a halt.

'Hey,' she says, laughing. 'Buy me dinner first!'

Her skin is smooth against mine; the scent of her lip gloss is overpowering.

I scramble up and away to the luggage rack.

I can't miss my stop.

I can't.

The doors hiss open, and I am shaking with panic. I grab the handle of my suitcase and yank, but it's stuck. I pull and pull, but it won't budge. I try pushing instead, trying to jostle it into a better position, but that only seems to make the problem worse. I kick it.

Outside, the train's whistle blows.

I'm out of time.

'Do you need a hand?' asks the bold girl.

It's too late. The train is about to leave the station.

And I realise that whatever's in that suitcase – I don't need it.

I'm coming to Agathion to live a life of the mind.

I have everything I need.

‘Weirdo,’ mutters the girl, turning back to her friends.

I leave my suitcase behind and step off the train.

The platform is sparse and entirely empty. The air is cold – much colder than I expected. I breathe deeply until my lungs ache, and I love the feeling. Icy drizzle caresses my skin, and I turn my face up to it.

I’m here. I’m really here.

A fluorescent light spits and hums next to a weathered sign reading RANNOCH MOOR. The train pulls away behind me, disappearing into the darkness. For a moment I panic again, thinking I’ve gotten off at the wrong station. But I checked a million times. I’ve rehearsed this journey in my head over and over.

There’s a ticket office, but it doesn’t look like it’s been open for years. I step through the gate, and peer into the darkness. I can hear something huffing out there. Some kind of animal – barrel-chested and hulking.

A hazy orange glow emanates from behind the ticket office. I head towards it, past an ancient-looking pay phone and down a set of stone steps, finding myself on a worn dirt road.

Before me is a lamp, burning golden, affixed to, impossibly, a horse and buggy – the kind you might find in a Regency novel. The horse is black and broad, its head bowed, its breath blowing out in steaming clouds. It shifts from one foot to another as I approach, and nickers softly.

Perched in the driver’s seat, reins slack in one leather-gloved hand and the other holding an umbrella, is a tall, thin woman wearing a dark wool coat. Her steel-coloured hair is pulled back in a rather severe bun. Dark eyes turn to me, sharp as struck flint.

‘Page Whittaker?’ She’s Scottish, her accent elegant and polished.

I nod.

‘I am Magistra Hewitt. I’ll be your tutor during your time at Agathion.’

According to my internet sleuthing, every student at Agathion is assigned a tutor, who acts as a mentor and guide. There are regular teachers too, but it’s the tutors who live on campus with us and provide the unique experience of Agathion.

I look up at this woman, and I see intelligence in her eyes and the worn lines of her face. She seems a little terrifying, but I’ll take it over the limp sacks of apathy that passed for teachers back home, who could do nothing for me other than shrug and shake their heads.

Magistra Hewitt looks down her strikingly assertive nose at me. Her eyebrows seem permanently raised in a manner that makes me feel like I'm being assessed.

'You have no luggage? Good.'

She tilts her head at the bench next to her, and I scramble up, feeling awkward and entirely out of place in my jeans and puffer jacket next to her simple elegance. She adjusts her grip on the umbrella so it covers both of us.

'One of the foundational principles of Agathion is that you come as supplicants, like the akousmatikoi of Pythagoras, who shed their hair, their clothes and their names, and spent five years in total silence as a form of initiation.'

Without thinking, I raise a hand to my ponytail, and she smiles a thin-lipped smile.

'Fear not, Miss Whittaker. You may keep your hair. And your name, for that matter. And we will not require five years of silence.' She hesitates, side-eying my puffer. 'You will be provided with a uniform, of course. You bring no baggage, figurative or literal. No technology. These things link us to the material world, and Agathion is a school for the mind.'

Yes. That's why I'm here.

“ ‘Tis the mind that makes the body rich,” I quote. “And as the sun breaks through the darkest clouds, so honour peereth in the meanest habit.”

If the magistra is impressed by my knowledge of Shakespeare, she shows no sign of it. Instead, she twitches the reins, and the horse starts to walk forward. I shrug my backpack off and hold it in my lap. My new tutor eyes it with distaste.

The horse pulls us into the darkness as rain patters on the umbrella like a caress. The lantern hanging from the side of the buggy casts a dim golden glow around us, but beyond the horse's nose is nothing but black. I wonder how it knows to stay on the road. *Has it done this trip many times?*

'Ms Hewitt?' I ask tentatively.

'Magistra Hewitt,' she corrects, but not unkindly.

'Magistra Hewitt. Does everyone get picked up in a horse and buggy?'

She hesitates again before replying. 'We have learned that keeping a car on campus overnight can be rather more temptation than some of our students are able to resist.'

I think of the girl on the train.

*That school is for posh fuckups.*

‘Of course the day teachers bring their own vehicles,’ she adds as an afterthought, like she forgot there *were* day teachers. ‘But they leave midafternoon, and the rest of the staff depart after dinner.’

‘But not the magisters?’ I ask.

She shakes her head. ‘We are your mentors,’ she says. ‘We live here alongside you, to guide you at all times.’

I hope she doesn’t mean *literally* alongside us. I don’t want to share a bedroom with a teacher.

‘Agathion College is located on the Great Moor of Rannoch,’ Magistra Hewitt continues. ‘There is evidence that it has been a home for unwanted or troubled children for more than a thousand years. However, it was in the eighteenth century that we transformed the school into an exclusive haven for *gifted* young people. A sanctuary for those who live in the realm of the mind, who seek to see past the shadows and distractions of base feelings, and glimpse the true secrets of the universe.’

There’s a note of pride in her voice, like she was personally responsible for this shift in educational philosophy.

I breathe in the rich scent of the moor, earthy and botanical. There’s a faint edge of woodsmoke as well, sweet as incense. It smells glorious.

‘You’re lucky to be here, Miss Whittaker,’ Magistra Hewitt says. ‘We don’t often offer scholarships.’

I want to ask *why me?* How did they even know about me? Did they hear about what happened at St Catherine’s?

‘Try not to feel intimidated by the backgrounds of the other students. At Agathion, all are equal. Bloodline, wealth, class – these things cease to exist when you cross the threshold. I’m sure you’ll make friends.’

Unlikely, but that’s not why I’m here.

‘You’ll have questions, I’m sure,’ Magistra Hewitt continues. ‘I ask that you save them for our first meeting.’

I nod again.

‘You’ve missed dinner,’ Magistra Hewitt goes on. ‘But a tray has been sent up to your room. We’ll meet in a few days, after you’ve settled in.’

I know from my obsessive googling that Agathion doesn’t have set terms or holidays – students arrive and stay until they graduate. I’m still not really sure what that means – is there an exam or test that has to be passed, or is it something the magisters decide? Some alumni seem to graduate after only

six months, but I've read about others who stay for three or four years – like superstar violinist Ryu Yasuda who was an Agathion student in the 2000s.

The horse speeds up a little as the lantern's dim yellow light falls upon a huge set of gates, black iron wrought in heavy bars, topped with a row of wickedly sharp-looking spikes. The gates are open, and the horse's gait seems to lighten, as if it is anticipating a nice dry stable and a bucket of oats.

The scent of woodsmoke grows suddenly strong and pungent as I get my first glimpse of Agathion, looming magnificent and haughty from the darkness like a castle from a fairytale.

My extensive research means I already know that Agathion has been a school since the mid-1700s. The hill where the school sits has been inhabited since before the Romans invaded Britain, according to archeological records. I know that there is a small farm that raises pigs, ducks and chickens, as well as growing many fruits and vegetables.

But the facts I've ingested from brochures and websites don't come close to actually *being* here. Now I really see the exceptional grandeur of Agathion. The embellished mouldings and plasterwork. The turrets and spires, thrusting sharply into the night sky. The grotesquerie of the gargoyles that spout inky rainwater from where they crouch on the edge of the slate-tiled roof. The central tower, tall and proud. Wet stone glistens darkly, and shadows gather at the edges of the building where golden light that spills from the narrow, arched windows cannot reach. The air is cold and rarefied, scented with smoke and damp earth.

I feel like Catherine Morland arriving at Northanger Abbey. Or Jane Eyre approaching Thornfield Hall.

It feels *right*.

Magistra Hewitt gets down from the buggy, every movement controlled and graceful.

It's only been twenty minutes or so, but I already worship her. I swing my backpack over my shoulder and stand to dismount.

'Leave it,' says Magistra Hewitt without looking over her shoulder.

I hesitate. My phone is in that bag. I promised I'd call my mother once I arrived safely. My copy of *Middlemarch*. A notebook. Pens. My shower caddy, containing a toothbrush, deodorant, moisturiser and several packets of the little white pills that are the only thing that can take the edge off my



period pain. The magistra doesn't look back as she strides across the courtyard to the main door of Agathion.

I leave the backpack in the buggy and scramble down, hurrying after her.

Gravel crunches under my feet. I can barely feel my hands, and my nose is dripping from the cold. But I don't care.

I'm here.

Magistra Hewitt's wool coat flares out behind her as she climbs the broad steps that lead to the door, and I see her leather boots and immaculately tailored black trousers. She pauses so I can catch up.

The door is massive – ancient-looking wood more than double my own height. In the centre is a wooden shield bearing Agathion's crest – a gold cup with a sword before it, a red ribbon swirling around them both. Beneath this is carved the school's motto – ANIMUS SUPRA CORPUS.

*Mind over body.*

It's exactly what I need.

'Welcome to Agathion College,' Magistra Hewitt declares, and pushes the door open with a grand sweep of her arm.

A noise drifts out from inside – the pounding of feet and ...

Screaming.

And I'm back there again, where I always end up. The wilderness behind the gym at St Catherine's, my hands burning, my lungs full of smoke and jasmine.

Staring at Cassidy, who won't stop screaming, her gaze fixed on the blackened, scorched earth.

My vision blurs and I'm in the real world once more. I get a glimpse of a grand hall beyond the door – polished marble floors and golden light spilling onto wood-panelled walls. A huge sweep of staircase rising upward, enclosed with a carved wooden banister. Enormous, gilt-edged paintings and hanging tapestries.

And screaming.

I clench my fists to stop myself from clapping my hands over my ears.

Why won't it stop?

Magistra Hewitt will think I'm broken. She might even send me home. I have to keep it together.

But Magistra Hewitt has frozen in the doorway, her shoulders stiff. The screaming is getting louder, and I contemplate the possibility that it isn't in

my head this time. It's high and panicked and ragged and ... not human. It sounds almost metallic, like the grinding of metal on stone.

It's joined by a kind of shuddering, galloping sound, like an irregular drum underneath the screaming. The stone floor beneath me vibrates.

Magistra Hewitt suddenly leaps to the side as a ... creature ... comes charging across the foyer and sweeps me off my feet. It seems huge and monstrous, all lumpen grey flesh and bristles and yellowing, cracked teeth in a wet mouth that is wide and screaming, screaming, screaming. Black, glittering eyes are fixed on me, and I see nothing but rage.

Whatever this thing is, it's trying to kill me.

I try to roll away from it, but it tangles me up in its filthy legs, its cloven hoofs striking dully on the marble floor. My cheek is pressed against the stone threshold, and dimly I notice the marks carved into it. The script is unfamiliar, runic, the lines worn down over time and black with grit.

'Get off her, you old fool.'

Hands scoop up under my arms and drag me to the side, sliding over the marble away from the creature, and as it slips and scrambles to the threshold, I finally see it for what it is.

A pig.

It's a pig.

A huge one – it'd be easily twice my weight or more. Grey and bristled and fleshy, with muddied legs and an ugly face, all thrusting snout and tiny dark eyes.

'Get out,' Magistra Hewitt says to the pig. Her voice is calm but firm. 'You're embarrassing yourself.'

The pig lets out another grinding, bloodcurdling scream, and then leaps over the threshold and crunches across the gravel driveway, vanishing into the darkness. I hear the thundering of hooves on turf, then it is gone.

Magistra Hewitt leans down and helps me to my feet. 'Are you hurt?'

My heart is pounding so fast I'm afraid it is going to burst from my chest. I clench and unclench my shaking hands to try to regain control.

'Miss Whittaker? Can you hear me?'

'I – I'm okay.'

Behind Magistra Hewitt, I see a boy appear, skidding around the corner from some unseen corridor, his eyes widening when he sees us.

The boy is absurdly handsome – golden-brown skin, aristocratically hooked nose, gently curling dark hair, and laughing eyes fringed with thick

lashes. He's exactly the right size and shape – like someone was asked to make a perfect human. His Agathion uniform fits him like it's been tailored – white shirt, dark grey wool trousers, and a brown tweed blazer with brass buttons. His burgundy tie is askew in a deliberately casual manner. He oozes charm in a way that makes me want to crawl under something dark and damp and stay there forever. This boy is a totally different species to me.

He straightens his tie just as Magistra Hewitt turns around.

'Mister Alimardani,' she says in a clipped tone. 'What on earth is going on?'

The boy spreads his hands and shrugs. The gesture is understated, but the boy moves with a fluid grace. I've never seen someone so confident in their skin before – he makes those bold girls on the train look like ... well, like me.

'Old Toby must have escaped from the farm, Magistra,' he says, his voice as smooth and confident as the rest of him. 'I was studying in the library when I heard the commotion.'

She stares at him for a considerable while, as if she's waiting for him to confess something. He gazes back, totally unconcerned, his mouth curved in a nonchalant smile.

Magistra Hewitt lets out a small, frustrated sigh. 'This is Page Whittaker,' she says curtly, indicating me with a nod of her head. 'Take her upstairs. Room 207.'

'Of course, Magistra.'

Magistra Hewitt goes sweeping out the front door and disappears into the darkness. I wonder if she's going to go and catch the pig with her bare hands. Or if the pig will simply obey her command to return to its sty. She seems pretty persuasive.

The boy reaches out a hand for me to shake, his eyes warm. 'Nice to meet you. I'm Cyrus. Named after Cyrus the Great, and while I'm not a particularly skilled military leader, nor am I the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, I am, like my namesake, pretty great.'

My own hands are still trembling with adrenaline, but I've automatically extended one to be shaken before I remember the scars on my palms. I wait for him to flinch, for his eyes to take on that cast of fear and disgust that I saw in Tube Top Girl's. But his expression doesn't change. Cyrus looks like

he's been shaking hands his whole life. His grip is firm and confident but not overpowering. He grins at me.

'Bit of a dramatic start to your first night here,' he observes. 'Are you okay?'

I nod. I know I should say something, but I'm out of practice. Not that I was ever particularly good at talking to other young people. Or anyone, really.

Especially not boys like him. Boys who seem like actual princes.

'Old Toby is our school mascot,' he explains. 'He's a cheeky bugger, but usually pretty harmless. I've never seen him like that before. He really went for you.'

Cyrus is gazing thoughtfully at me, as if trying to figure out exactly what it is about me that would cause a giant pig to go into a frenzy. I see the wet mouth again. The cracked tusks and the tiny black eyes. Cyrus sees my shudder and chuckles.

'I'm sure you'll come to like him.'

His accent is unfamiliar to me. Posh British but with something else that elongates his vowel sounds and clips his consonants.

He leads me past the grand staircase, outside again, and into a covered walkway that runs around the edge of a central courtyard. Unfamiliar shapes loom in the darkness, glistening with rain. Trees, maybe, or statues.

A faint whisper tickles my ear, and I spin around, but there's nobody here except me and Cyrus. I shiver. The courtyard is large – the glow from the surrounding windows doesn't reach the centre of it. 'This is the forum,' Cyrus says. 'Everyone eats lunch here, unless it's raining. We've just come from the South Wing, which is the kitchen and the dining hall. Student dorms are the East Wing, the library and classrooms are to the north. The West Wing is where the magisters have their offices and living quarters.'

He turns without waiting for a response, and we go back the way we came. I follow him up the grand staircase. Up close, I can see that everything isn't quite as opulent as it first appeared. Or at least, not anymore. There is dust in the corners. The gilt picture frames are tarnished, and there are moth holes and worn patches in the tapestries. But it doesn't feel neglected. Just comfortably lived-in. The staircase is the same blue-grey stone as the walls, each indented in the middle, where feet have been treading every day for hundreds of years.

And now my feet join them. My sneakers feel very out of place here, and I wonder when I'll get my own brown leather shoes and tweed blazer.

The grand staircase opens into a wide corridor, carpeted in worn crimson. Windows along one side look out over the courtyard – the forum, Cyrus called it. I can't wait to see it in the daylight – all this darkness is giving me the creeps. The corridor is unheated and smells damp and old. I hope the bedrooms are warmer. Cyrus leads me past a few closed rooms, and then up another smaller staircase, this one made of dark polished timber that creaks under our footsteps.

'The main building is four floors, but a lot of it is empty – there's fewer than a hundred students. Is Hewitt your magistra?'

He doesn't turn to look back at me when he asks this, so I have to answer with my voice.

'Yes.'

Great work, Page. Very good talking.

Cyrus pauses and turns to face me. 'So you do talk. I wondered. Sometimes people don't, when they get here.'

I feel my cheeks get hot, and I imagine what it must be like to have someone like Cyrus as a friend. He seems kind. Open. He's probably funny.

But I'm not here to make friends.

'American?' he guesses.

'How can you tell?' I ask, my accent giving me away.

'A vibe.'

He says it in a way that makes me unsure if it's a *good* vibe.

'Look,' Cyrus says, taking a step towards me. I smell sandalwood and a hint of rosewater. 'It's scary. I get it. Starting at a new school, especially one like this. But you'll like it here, I can tell. Just ...' He hesitates.

'Just what?'

'Be careful about what you tell her. Hewitt. And the other magisters.'

His tone is serious, and I'm imagining all sorts of horrors – there are plenty of online forums about exclusive boarding schools, full of dark stories of abuse and cruelty. I've never seen Agathion mentioned on those forums, but that doesn't mean nothing bad happens here.

I know what teachers are capable of.

For a moment I think Cyrus is going to say something else, but a door slams somewhere down the hallway, and he shakes his head and smiles.

'You must be tired,' he says.



We go up another flight of stairs – these ones narrower and creakier still – and emerge in a corridor studded with wooden doors, each one affixed with a brass number.

‘Here’s you,’ he says, opening a door. ‘There are no locks – we don’t really have any possessions, so there’s nothing to steal. But make sure you knock before going into anyone else’s room. Boys are on the next floor up – Agathion talks a lot of talk about being enlightened, but they also love to enforce a binary.’

He ushers me into the room.

‘Bathrooms are down the hall. Breakfast is served between seven and seven-thirty. Someone will give you a copy of your timetable.’

‘Thank you,’ I manage.

‘And, hey.’ Cyrus leans forward conspiratorially. ‘Don’t be like Alexander. But don’t be late for breakfast, either.’

I open my mouth to ask who Alexander is, but Cyrus just taps his nose, then turns with the grace of a dancer and saunters away.

I close the door, noticing more carved runic marks on the doorframe, then turn to look at my room.

It’s small, with a low, heavy-beamed ceiling and a slanting dormer window. Outside all I can see is raindrops and blackness. The damp chill hangs in the air here, too.

Most of the room is taken up by the bed, an impressive carved wooden structure with a velvet-lined canopy that has seen better days. There are moth holes in everything, which explains the strong odour of camphor. At least the bed itself is neatly made, with crisp white sheets and thick wool blankets. I hope they’ll be thick enough. It’s freezing in here.

A narrow door reveals a built-in wardrobe containing my Agathion uniform – tweed blazer, white shirt, burgundy tie, and a choice between wool pants or a pleated skirt. There’s also a knitted sweater and a cardigan in soft scarlet lambswool. Brown leather shoes with brass buckles. A chest of drawers contains underwear, bras, white socks, a white nightgown and soft flannel pyjamas. Two towels are neatly folded on a shelf, and a cloudy, tarnished mirror is attached to the inside of the cupboard door. The scent of camphor in the cupboard is so strong it makes my eyes water.

I have a bedside table with a brass lamp and an old-fashioned alarm clock. I open a drawer to see a small leather case containing a toothbrush, a hairbrush, and a selection of toiletries in little glass bottles that make them

look like vintage apothecary supplies. I find hair ties and burgundy ribbons, as well as a discreet pouch for pads and tampons.

A small wooden desk sits against one wall with a simple chair. A tray is on the desk, covered with a silver cloche. I lift the cloche and see a bowl of soup, with a pale bread roll and a pat of butter. My stomach growls, but I'm not done exploring.

There's a stack of blank notebooks on the desk – clothbound in scarlet and burgundy, with thick, textured pages. In a drawer I find pencils and a black fountain pen, its silver nib sharp as a knife. I pick it up and examine it – I've never used one before. There are pots of ink in the drawer as well. A leather satchel hangs from a hook on the back of the door.

I imagine myself up here, all wool, tweed and leather, surrounded by great works of literature, scratching notes with my fountain pen. It feels too romantic to be real.

I open the window and breathe in the icy night air until my lungs ache.

The soup has been here for a while and is barely warm. It's over-salted and has a strange aftertaste, botanical and sharp.

Voices murmur from the room next door to mine, and *thumps* sound from overhead.

I finish the soup, suddenly overcome with weariness. It's been a big day.

I pull on the pyjamas and climb into bed, then get up again and add a cardigan and two pairs of socks.

I'm not sure if I'll ever be warm again.

## TWO

16 September

I wake to find a knife on my pillow.

It's like a miniature sword, the same shape as the one on the Agathion crest, with a ring on the pommel.

It wasn't there when I fell asleep.

The blade looks old, pitted and scratched.

It feels like a warning. I sit up, and discover that the knife is the least of my problems.

My bed has been transformed into a cage. Spider-thin thread, the colour of dried blood, is strung around the canopy in the most intricate of cat's cradles, lines crisscrossing and intersecting to form stars, circles and pinwheels. It's so dense that I can barely see beyond it.

Whoever did this must have been in my room for a long time. How did I not wake up?

The sharp botanical taste of the soup is still in the back of my throat.

Was I *drugged*?

My stomach churns at the thought of it. Is this a prank? Or a test? The threads are wound around the four posts of the bed and affixed to the pegs that line the top and bottom of the bed. I realise where I've seen pegs like these before.

This bed is repurposed. It was once a *loom*.

I reach out a finger and touch a thread. It's taut and strong but so fine I can barely see each individual line.

Through the thick web, I see the old-fashioned alarm clock on my bedside table.

It's ten past seven.

I've overslept. I *never* oversleep.

Breakfast has already started.

My chest feels tight. My hands are clammy.

None of my Agathion research mentioned anything like this.

I really need to pee.

I pick up the knife and am about to slash through the threads, when Cyrus's voice sounds in my head.

*Don't be like Alexander. But don't be late for breakfast, either.*

I liked Greek mythology when I was a kid. All the stories of fickle gods throwing tantrums and turning people into things. But the history of ancient Greece and ancient Greek philosophy – well, I'm no expert, unless there's a Shakespeare play about it, like *Troilus and Cressida* or *Timon of Athens*. Still, even I know about Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot.

There was an oxcart hitched to a post with an intricate knot. An oracle foretold that whoever could undo the knot would rule Asia. Nobody could do it, and the knot stayed there for more than a thousand years, until Alexander the Great arrived in town and slashed the knot right through the middle with his sword, freeing the cart.

*Don't be like Alexander.*

It is a test, then.

I don't cut the thread.

I wonder if I can stretch it – work a hole into the pattern that's big enough for me to climb out.

But this seems impossible. The thread is wound tight and very fine. Any attempt to stretch it will cause it to break, and surely snapping the thread is the same as cutting it.

Maybe I can unravel it. I spend a moment searching the red silk for a loose end that I can pull. But there is so much of it. It would take hours to wind them all away so I can escape, and Cyrus also warned me not to be late for breakfast.

*Be logical, Page.*

I can't break the thread. But maybe I can *move* it.

I stand up and examine the pegs that run along the edge of the canopy. They're made from wooden dowels, each one inserted into a little hole drilled into the canopy frame. There are hundreds of them, but I'd only need to get rid of a few ...

I grab the knife and reverse it, using the hilt to hammer at the pegs from the inside, so they push through the hole in the frame. It takes me a few minutes to get the angle right, balanced on my tiptoes on the soft mattress, but after a moment's effort, the first peg pops out, taking several lengths of red thread with it. It doesn't travel very far – the thread is wound and crisscrossed with such complexity that it snags on the pattern. But it's a start. I move to the next peg and hammer it out. Then the next, and the next. With each peg, the hole in the cat's cradle gets larger. After a few minutes' work, there's a gap in the design that's wide enough for me to sidle out, and I drop to the carpet with a thud.

I had plans for this morning. To see the moor for the first time. To gaze out at Agathion's grounds in the early morning light and ready myself for the day. To don my uniform, one piece at a time. It was supposed to be a ritual. A new beginning.

Instead I'm dashing down the corridor in my pyjamas to the bathroom, yanking a brush through my hair as I do so. The corridors are empty and silent.

The bathroom is wet and freezing cold. Globbs of toothpaste congeal in porcelain sinks, and everything smells artificial and feminine – hairspray and cosmetics, which I didn't think we were allowed to have. I pee, then turn the hot tap on, but only ice-cold water emerges. I splash my face, then sprint back to my room.

My jeans and puffer jacket from last night are gone, along with my underwear. Will I ever get them back?

I yank on my uniform without reverence or ritual. White underwear. White bra. Ivory cotton shirt. Brown stockings. Tartan wool skirt. Knitted sweater. I've been practising how to tie a tie at home, using the one my father wears to weddings and funerals. His limp polyester thing is from a different universe from this buttery-soft silk, and my awkward cold fingers fumble. My attempt is embarrassingly bad, but I don't have time to try again.

My school shoes are the right size, but the brown leather is stiff and unyielding. I'll have blisters by the end of the day.



I pull on the brown tweed blazer. The herringbone pattern is subtle yet intricate, the wool soft but firm under my fingers. There are suede patches over the elbows and brass buttons at the cuffs. I run my fingers over the sword and cup of Agathion's crest embroidered on the front pocket, and I feel my heart grow steady.

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The worn-carpeted corridors of Agathion are empty as I make my way down the creaking wooden stairs. I glance out the window into the courtyard, but everything is heavy fog. I can just make out a looming shape, a dark, monolithic thing, half-swallowed by grey emptiness. But I don't have time to wonder about it. I follow the sounds of adolescent chatter and the scraping of cutlery on crockery until I find the dining hall.

I pause outside the door for a moment, not sure what to expect.

The bitter, sharp taste is still at the back of my throat.

Heads turn as I enter, and I feel the burning heat of attention. My collar is too tight, my wool stockings too itchy. My hands are hot and big, too big, like shiny pink balloons attached to my arms. The dining hall is crowded with tweed and bright eyes. It's a large room – big enough to accommodate all eighty-ish Agathion students, sitting at tables of six or seven. A huge fireplace is against one wall – large enough to roast a whole pig on a spit by the looks of it. Above the fireplace, mounted on a wall, is a huge, ancient-looking sword, with a flat blade and a simple iron ring attached to the pommel. The full-size version of the knife on my pillow. I touch my blazer and the sword embroidered there.

Four black-robed adults sit beneath a huge stained-glass window depicting the seven labours of Hercules. I recognise Magistra Hewitt at once, her eyes turning sharply to me. Beside her is a sallow-faced old man in wire-rimmed spectacles. I'm guessing he's the headmaster, Archon Leek. Next to him is a somewhat younger woman with a thick bun of dark hair, who is murmuring to a large, bald-headed man.

The old man – Archon Leek – stands slowly, his chair scraping as he pushes it back. His eyes don't leave mine, his gaze assessing.

There's a moment of silence that lasts for an eternity. Empires rise and fall in that moment, and all I want to do is disappear.

Then the Archon brings his hands together in a slow but firm clap, the sound sharp in the silent room. He brings his hands apart and together again. And again.

Then there's a noise like thunder, a rolling pounding that I realise is people's feet stamping on the floor.

The room breaks into applause. A few people whoop and cheer.

I am so confused.

'Welcome, Piglet!' says Cyrus, coming forward to pat me on the back.

A girl with braces and tight plaits hands me an empty plate, and Cyrus ushers me over to several tables at the side of the room, which are groaning with mountains of food.

'The red thread is an Agathion tradition,' he explains with a smile. 'The first step towards freedom is to truly see the things that bind you. The web. The net. The cage. It's only then that you can break free. Something like that, anyway.'

I glance back to the high table, and see all four magisters watching me. I think I did the right thing, so why do I feel like a mouse being watched by a parliament of owls?

I shake the feeling off and consider my breakfast options.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, in terms of the food at Agathion. Maybe some organic brainfood kale-smoothie business. Or limp bain-marie misery. What I didn't expect was an Enid Blyton level of boarding school food-porn.

I see platters of sausages that aren't pallid or greasy – they're bursting with fat and look like they've just come off a sizzling griddle. The scrambled eggs are creamy yellow and appear as light and pillowy as goose down.

There are mountains of crumpets. Great slabs of butter. Tureens full of baked beans – clearly not the lurid orange kind you get in a can. These beans have been lovingly spiced and stewed. I see grilled tomatoes and mushrooms, and slices of something dark and rich-looking. A vat of porridge. Jugs of creamy milk and freshly squeezed orange juice.

It's a bit overwhelming, to be honest. I take a crumpet, some butter and jam, and an apple from a spilling cornucopia of fresh fruit.

'Did you use the knife?' Cyrus asks me.

'Of course she did.'

These words come from the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, who has sailed up to Cyrus. She has golden-brown skin and a mass of dark hair that is so shiny and bouncy, it's like a living thing. Her gaze slides over me as she registers that I'm of no interest to her. She makes me want to vanish, to sink into the ground like the Wicked Witch of the West, to dissolve until I'm nothing but a smudge.

Cyrus waits for my answer. I nod.

His expression falters a little, like he's disappointed. The girl makes a satisfied little noise.

'I didn't cut the thread, though,' I say.

A grin spreads across Cyrus's face. The girl shrugs and drifts back to a table of girls who are beautiful, but not quite as beautiful as she is.

There's this thing with trees in a forest called crown shyness: if you look at the canopy, there's a little gap between the outline of one tree and the ones next to it, so they never quite touch each other. This girl is like that. The others aren't avoiding her – just giving her space. And she occupies that space with such a haughty sense of entitlement. I can tell she's the queen of them. Possibly of the whole school.

'Good work, Piglet,' Cyrus says.

Then he's drifting away too, off to his own table. I feel a sting of disappointment, and realise I've been hoping Cyrus would invite me to sit with him. There's an empty seat available and everything.

Perhaps the invitation was implied?

No.

No friends.

Not after what happened to Cassidy.

A scruffy boy with an untucked shirt and dark hair falling into his eyes slides into the spare seat that could have been mine. He says something that causes the other people at the table – a magnificently tall, broad-shouldered girl with a shaved asymmetrical haircut and a much shorter, slight boy with neat pale curls and silver-rimmed glasses – to burst out laughing.

I swerve away from their table and nearly collide with a skinny boy staggering under the weight of the biggest breakfast I've ever seen.

'Careful!' he says, and I scurry to an empty seat. Each table is stocked with a large pot of what I assume is tea, with a cup and saucer at each place. I notice a staff member in a starched grey uniform moving around replacing the pots with fresh ones.

There are three other people at my table. One is down near the end with his nose buried in a book (Virgil's *Eclogues*), and two are deep in conversation about some recent sporting match that I'm not nearly interested enough to learn about. Without pausing their conversation or looking at me, one of the sporty girls leans over and pours tea into the cup in front of me.

'Thank you,' I say.

She nods distractedly and keeps talking.

There is milk, sugar and lemon on a tray in the centre of the table, but I'm hardly a tea expert, so I leave mine plain. As I look around, I see that whenever anyone sits at an occupied table, they get a cup of tea poured for them. Another Agathion tradition, I guess.

I lift my teacup from its saucer. It is fine bone china, delicately painted with fat purple-black mulberries and feathery green ferns. The rim is lined with gold. I'm almost scared to hold it in case it breaks. I take a moment to breathe in the fragrant steam, and then take a sip of the amber liquid. The tea is bitter and bold, with hints of honey and spice. The warmth of it spreads through me and brings a sense of serenity.

The crumpet is also amazing. Buttery soft, with the jam exquisitely balanced between sweet and tart. I wish I'd taken five. The rich tannins of the tea cut through the sweetness of the crumpet, and it's all perfect, so why don't I feel satisfied?

My gaze drifts back to Cyrus and his friends.

I've never fit in at school before. Or anywhere, really. I had one friend at St Catherine's, and look at what happened to her.

I know that I didn't come here to make friends. I came here to learn self-control. To live a life of the mind, like the brochure promised me. To not be ruled by feelings, to be led only by logic and rationality.

But ... would having friends be so bad? Especially if they were *intellectual* friends. People who could challenge me. Keep me in that rational realm.

I want to be over there at Cyrus's table, I realise. I want to be part of that conversation. I want the social ease they have with each other. The familiarity. There is so much I want that sometimes I feel like I'm nothing *but* want, held tenuously together with skin and bone.

My whole life, I've felt like I'm longing for something, without knowing what it is. I thought maybe coming here would help. Maybe in this beautiful

place, surrounded by books and ideas ... maybe I could rise above my feelings, my *wanting*. Exist on a higher plane.

But maybe the problem wasn't my old schools. Or my family. Or the other kids who always looked at me like I was something completely alien to them.

Maybe the problem is, and has always been, me.

I don't hear a bell ring or anything, but students start to get up and drift towards the door. I notice the girl from before – the queen – pause by Cyrus, laying a hand affectionately on his arm. There's such ease in that gesture, I know she does it every day. He leans forward and brushes his lips against her cheek, and her lips curve in a smile.

Of course they're dating. The king and queen of Agathion.

Cyrus's eye catches mine, and I feel heat spread through my cheeks as I'm caught staring. The queen follows his gaze to me, and the faintest wrinkle appears in her perfect forehead.

'Are you the Piglet?' A horse-faced boy stands in front of me, holding a crumpled sheet of paper.

I nod.

'Here's your timetable and weekly reading list.'

He shoves the sheet of paper at me. A timetable on a grid and a list of books, covered in amber-coloured stains.

'I spilled tea on it,' he says by way of explanation.

The timetable seems ... unfinished. Only one actual class per day, plus a weekly lecture and a meeting with Magistra Hewitt.

The reading list, however, is extensive, and largely unfamiliar to me. Marcus Aurelius. Thucydides. Plutarch's *Lives*. Plato's *Republic* and *Parmenides*.

I wasn't expecting to see any Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison, but no Dickens? No Austen? No Dumas? No *Shakespeare*?

This must be just my history reading list. There'll be a different one for literature, I'm sure of it.

Am I supposed to read all of this in a week? I feel a little throb of anxiety – what if I'm not smart enough to be here?

I look up, but the horse-faced boy is gone.

My one class isn't until after lunch, so I guess it's time to get reading.

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The library is everything I've ever dreamed of.

Cluttered but grand, with dark wooden bookcases that fill every inch of wall space. On every surface there are books bound in leather and cloth, with gilt lettering stamped on the spines. There are wooden ladders on wheels to reach the higher shelves, and narrow spiralling staircases in black wrought iron travel to balconies crammed with more books.

The thing about books is that they're complete. When you read a book, you know the whole story will be contained within its pages. All the information the author wanted to convey is there. Not like human minds or memories, which are weak and unreliable. Books don't change. They don't forget. They don't start screaming whenever they see you.

Books are better than people.

Books are safe.

A silver-haired woman perches on a stool behind a large mahogany desk. She glances up as I enter and nods briefly in greeting, then goes back to her work, which appears to be repairing the binding on a particularly old tome. She isn't wearing academic robes, so she's not a magister. She must be a member of the day staff. She looks like someone ordered a stern librarian from a brochure – pointy grey face, tight grey bun and neat, unflattering grey skirt and jacket.

A huge card catalogue crouches by the entryway beside a towering grandfather clock, and at one end of the room I see several wooden desks with leather inlay, lit with green banker's lamps. Students sit at these desks poring over old books. Some wear white gloves and turn ancient pages with extreme care. Others have piles of different texts spread out before them, scribbling notes with pencil stubs.

A tall, narrow window lets in thin light from outside. Beyond the window, all I see is grey.

I stand there for a moment and take it in, inhaling the aroma of leather and the earthy, almost biscuity smell of slowly decaying paper – the gloriously comforting, soothing scent of old books.

Eyes turn towards me, staring. I feel naked, like these people already know that I come from an ordinary school and an ordinary family, from an ordinary suburb of Florida. I'm not rich or famous or important. I'm an impostor at this posh school with its tweed blazers and ties and fancy breakfasts and haughty ivy-clad towers.

I wonder – not for the first time – if I’ve been kidding myself all along. The one nagging doubt I’ve had about coming here has never been that Agathion wouldn’t hold up to my own fantasies. It’s that *I* wouldn’t. What if I was a clever, weird fish in my ordinary pond, but now I’m nothing more than a below-average minnow? A maladjusted tadpole? What if my intelligence – the one thing that I’ve built my identity and my self-worth around – is not enough? What if everyone here is smarter than me, and they all know it?

What if I’m *ordinary*?

The librarian looks up at me, like she can hear my thoughts.

‘Can I help you with something?’ Her tone suggests that she doubts it.

My cheeks burn, and the library suddenly feels too hot and close. The collar of my blazer itches against my neck.

‘Literature?’ I manage.

The librarian raises an eyebrow, but points to rows of tall wooden shelves at the back of the great room.

I scurry to where she indicates, away from prying eyes and curious whispers.

Dark leather spines welcome me, and I run a hand over them, feeling my heart slow. This is where I belong. Here, with the books.

I seem to be in the wrong section, though. I can see Ovid and Virgil, and a slim volume of poems by Sappho. Where is the *English* literature? Or ... anything written after the fall of Rome, for that matter? I move deeper into the narrow space and go around a corner until I’m surrounded on all sides by high wooden shelves that clearly haven’t been dusted for a while.

Cicero. Livy.

Hesiod. Herodotus.

I know that Agathion loves its classical scholars, but surely there must be *some* English literature here?

Right?

I’m so focused on the books that I don’t notice I’m not alone, until I tread on someone’s foot. The owner lets out an outraged yowl, and I spin to face them.

It’s the scruffy boy from before. The one who sat next to Cyrus. He has pale skin, fine cheekbones and lips that look almost bee-stung. The top two buttons of his untucked shirt are undone, his tie askew in a way that doesn’t look deliberate. His shoes are scuffed and his laces untied. A sprig of

lavender is attached to his blazer lapel with a safety pin. He looks like he slept in his clothes, and there is very clearly a large book stuffed up his sweater.

‘Sorry,’ I say.

He stares at me, like I’m some kind of banshee that’s been summoned to ruin his day.

‘Who are you?’ he asks in a thick Scottish accent. ‘I haven’t seen you before.’

‘I’m new,’ I say. ‘I – I think I met your friend last night. Cyrus?’

The boy narrows his eyes. ‘Handsome? Charming? Probably getting himself into nine kinds of trouble?’

I remember the pig and Cyrus’s cheeky grin. ‘That’s him.’

‘He’s nice to everyone,’ the boy says dismissively. ‘You shouldn’t take it personally.’

I don’t know if the boy means this statement to be hurtful, but I am already having quite a day. Mortified, I feel blotches spread across my cheeks and tears start in my eyes.

No. No feelings.

I try to breathe, to get control over my body that is spiralling into physical panic.

‘Hey,’ says the boy, frowning. ‘I didn’t mean – are you okay?’

‘There isn’t any *literature*,’ I manage to get out. My hands feel hot, my chest tight.

Footsteps sound nearby, and the librarian appears.

‘Oak Redferne,’ she says in clipped tones of disapproval. ‘Is there something up your jumper?’

Oak clears his throat and grabs my elbow. ‘Sorry, Ms Winston,’ he says. ‘But Piglet here is looking a wee bit peely wally—’

‘My name is Page,’ I croak.

‘If you say so,’ the boy replies, steering me past bookcases and study desks.

‘Come back here at once, Mr Redferne,’ the librarian says.

‘Can’t!’ the boy – Oak – calls over his shoulder. ‘She really needs some fresh air.’

The librarian makes a frustrated noise, but doesn’t attempt to follow us. I half expect Oak to abandon me in the corridor outside the library, but to his



credit he guides me down a flight of stairs and out a large wooden door into the central courtyard.

Agathion is still wreathed in fog like a castle floating in the clouds. I'm desperate to see the landscape beyond the school – majestic mountains and bleak, romantic moors. But currently there's nothing but mist.

Oak strides long-legged into the white emptiness as if it's an old friend, stretching out his arms and brushing his hands through the mist, which swirls and dances around his fingertips.

He looks like a creature from another world. A fairy prince or perhaps a trickster crow in human form.

'Are you coming?' he says over his shoulder.

I guess I am. I scurry after him, the cold air seeping into my bones. I've never been this cold ... but I've also never felt this alive. The muggy heat of Lakeland, Florida, left me in a kind of perpetual daze. My mind feels sharper here, my senses heightened. I can smell the fresh scent of frost, the tang of manure from the farm. The damp musk of ancient stone.

'Who's your tutor?' Oak calls back to me.

'Um,' I reply. 'Ms. – Magistra Hewitt.'

'And did Hewitt tell you what you should be doing today?'

'I have a class this afternoon. And someone gave me a reading list.'

'Do you have a tour guide?'

'I think I'll just head back to the library and get a start on this.' I wave the list.

Oak sighs, a deep, world-weary exhalation. 'It's your first day,' he says. 'Someone should show you around. And I guess for lack of any other volunteers, I'm the someone.'

I almost expect him to turn and head back inside, but instead he strides away into the mist, towards the centre of the courtyard.

Am I supposed to follow?

'Come along, Piglet,' says the boy.

'That's not my name,' I manage to say as I scurry to catch up.

He shrugs. 'Every new student is Piglet,' he says over his shoulder again. 'Agathion tradition.'

'How long does it last?'

'Until a newer piglet arrives.'

Great.

‘This is the forum,’ Oak says, spreading his arms and twirling in the mist. ‘The social hub of Agathion.’

Something huge and dark looms out over me.

A stone.

A massive stone, standing on its end, reaching almost to the second floor of the surrounding building, and at least six feet wide.

‘What’s that?’ I ask.

Oak’s jaunty expression dims. ‘Standing stone,’ he says, his voice somewhat solemn. ‘One of six. This hill is a sacred place. Or it was, until someone built a school on top of it.’

I peer through the mist, trying to make out the other stones, but find none.

‘They look very old,’ I say.

Oak nods. ‘Four and a half thousand years, give or take. They have names, too. This one is Sgeul-Rùin, which means *secret* in Gaelic.’

Four thousand years. It feels impossible that something so ancient and special is just ... plonked in the middle of a school courtyard. Shouldn’t it be behind a rope? Protected somehow?

‘What are the other ones called?’ I ask.

‘Ùir,’ Oak says, pointing through the mist. ‘Earth. Anail, which means *breath*. Fuil is blood. Tiodhlac is a gift or a present. And Cuimhne. Memory.’

I reach out and touch the rough stone of Sgeul-Rùin, and Oak seems to flinch as my fingers make contact.

It’s biting cold. Something whispers in my ear, and I drop my hand, wiping damp fingers on my skirt.

Oak’s eyes are slightly narrowed. ‘Come on,’ he says and strides off.

I follow, trying to shake off the feeling that the stones are watching me.

We cross the courtyard, passing an elegant open rotunda with a domed roof supported by white columns.

‘The monopteron,’ Oak informs me. ‘Sometimes people hold debating matches or poetry readings and use it as a kind of stage. But mostly it’s just somewhere to sit and eat lunch.’

It’s hard to imagine anyone actually choosing to spend time here, it’s so cold and damp and miserable. But I’m sure it must improve when the sun is out.

If it ever comes out.

‘It looks like it belongs in ancient Greece,’ I comment. ‘Not the wilds of Scotland.’

Oak makes an indelicate noise that’s halfway between a snort and a laugh. ‘The magisters are obsessed with the Greeks. Apparently Edinburgh was known as the *Athens of the north* during the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century,’ he says. ‘Agathion took it a wee bit literally when it changed from a boarding house to a school, and it’s been that way ever since.’

Oak strides back into the building on the north side, and I scurry after him, across the entry hall and out the main door. There are scratches on the floor where the pig tried to attack me, and I feel my heart start to pound at the memory.

Outside once more, Oak leads me around the side of the grand main building and into the mist. The gravel driveway is empty.

‘Where are the day staff?’ I ask. ‘I thought they drove here.’

‘They park down the hill,’ Oak says. ‘Magisters don’t like cars on the property. Spoils the view.’

Not that we can see any view through the fog.

‘Keep up,’ he says briskly. ‘You dinnae want to get lost.’

‘Are you from around here?’ I ask. ‘Your accent ...’ I trail off, hoping I haven’t said something embarrassing or offensive.

‘I’m from the east coast Lowlands,’ he says. ‘Geographically not that far, but culturally ...’ He shakes his head. ‘Well, everywhere is culturally distant from Agathion.’

He leads me across wet grass to where a lone tree emerges from the mist: a huge, spreading thing with gnarled, lumpy bark, covered in bulges.

‘Once,’ Oak murmurs, gazing at the tree, ‘this land was all ancient forest. Thick and green and full of life for thousands of years. This is all that’s left.’

‘What happened to it?’ I ask.

Oak shrugs. ‘Ice ages, angry elemental goddesses, humans. Take your pick.’

Branches sprout from the wide trunk, not in the elegant, majestic way that trees should, but every which way, like the tree put no thought into it at all. Moss and lichen cling to the trunk and the older boughs, but the newer branches are bright green and supple as whips.

‘Relative of yours?’ I ask, trying to sound like I’m the kind of girl who makes witty jokes all the time.

‘Something like that,’ he says, laying a hand on the tree trunk, the gesture fond and familiar, like he’s greeting an old friend. ‘It’s a wych elm. The only elm truly native to the British Isles.’

‘It’s ... beautiful,’ I say, though in all honesty it looks pretty weird.

He runs his fingers over a ring of pockmarks, like dimples in the bark. ‘People used to embed pig teeth in the trunk,’ he says. ‘And then chew the bark to relieve toothache.’

‘Did it work?’

He hesitates for a moment, a soft smile on his lips. ‘Depends on the pig.’

I see a brief flash of cracked yellow tusks in my mind and suppress a shiver.

Oak reaches out to one of the flexible young branches and bends it towards him until his fingers brush a yellow leaf, oval shaped, with a pointed tip and serrated edge. He sighs happily, and I hide a smile at his enthusiasm.

“‘One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,’” I quote.

Oak’s eyes snap to mine. ‘You like the bard.’

‘You like trees.’

He grins. ‘Doesn’t everyone? Come on, say hello.’

He gestures at me, and I press my own hand against the tree, the bark rough against my scarred palm. I don’t know if it’s my imagination or not, but it feels like the tree is bending its boughs in greeting.

‘This one has seen some things,’ Oak murmurs. ‘Great and terrible things.’

‘Is it a thousand years old?’ I ask.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Only five hundred or so. There’s a roost of owls that have lived here for many generations. They bring back stories of all the happenings on the moor.’

Oak is like a character from a fairy story, and I can’t quite believe that he is real. That *this* is real. That I’m standing on the edge of a moor, steps away from my castle-like school wrapped around a ring of ancient standing stones, talking to a boy with a silver acorn dangling from his earlobe, who recognises quotes from *Troilus and Cressida* and says he talks to owls.

I almost believe him.

He snaps off a twig and hands it to me. 'Tuck it under your pillow,' he says. 'It'll give you prophetic dreams.'

I let my hand fall from the bark. I'm not sure I want to know my future, but I slip the twig into my blazer pocket.

Oak slides the book from under his sweater, glancing sidelong at me as he slips it into a fork of the wych elm. I catch a glimpse of the title. *Malleus Maleficarum*.

*Hammer of Witches*, if my Latin is correct. I guess Oak does give off a neo-pagan vibe.

The fog is lifting, and my gaze is drawn away from the wych elm to the sombre vastness of the moor. I see it properly for the first time, stretching in every direction, wild and ageless.

Uneven, uncultivated land, clad in rough-looking brownish grasses and bushes, broken here and there by an outcrop of craggy stone, or a still pool of water, reflecting the sky, grey and uncertain overhead.

Snowcapped mountains rise in the distance, hazy and still wreathed in clouds. But the moor itself is ... nothing. The desolate, bleak silence of it is overwhelming, and all of a sudden I feel like I'm about to cry.

'It's so ... empty,' I say, swallowing down a lump of emotion.

One side of Oak's mouth lifts in a smile. 'It's not empty,' he says. 'It's pure, dead brilliant. Come on.'

He strides off into it, and for a moment I hesitate, afraid. Of what, I'm not sure. After all, what could possibly happen to me? There's no danger out there. I'd be able to spot a predator from a mile away. Do they even have predators in Scotland? Wolves, maybe?

There's no fence around the school grounds. No clear boundary between Agathion and wilderness. But I feel a shift as I step onto the moor. The air grows colder, heavy with the smell of stagnant water and something else, a kind of honey-floral scent that makes me strangely uneasy.

I stumble to keep up with Oak as he charges over the ground that rises into rough tussocks of almost colourless grass, then sinks into sullen hollows of stagnant bog water. It's a world away from the lush foliage and manicured emerald lawns of home.

The moor is littered with huge grey boulders, each as tall as me, pitted with age and spattered with greyish lichen.

'Stories say they were thrown by giants,' Oak says, leaning against one. 'Two brothers who each claimed this land as his own.'

‘Who won?’ I ask.

‘Neither,’ Oak replies. ‘They killed each other.’

A white tree skeleton is the only hint that this place was ever full of life. It stands starkly against the browns and greys, a ruined sentinel guarding a land bereft of any treasure or worth.

‘It’s all just so ... bleak,’ I say. ‘So lifeless.’

‘You’re not looking hard enough,’ Oak says. ‘Here.’

He drops to his haunches, and his fingers gently brush a tiny, starry white flower growing from a crack in the boulder.

‘Saxifrage,’ he says. ‘And here is some pixie-cup lichen. And here ... reindeer moss.’

I crouch down next to him, and he points out long straps of lady’s bedstraw. Spearwort and wood sorrel, eyebright and marsh violet. His entire being seems to come alive out here, and I find it hard to look away from him, from his sharp features that seem to soften on this moor, the faint spray of freckles across his nose.

‘What’s that smell?’ I ask. ‘Like flowers and honey?’

‘Heather,’ he says, pointing at a low-growing, bushy plant with green spears and bright purple flowers. ‘A personal favourite.’

I wish I could agree. Something about it sets me on edge. The scent is familiar somehow, although I’m sure I’ve never smelled it before.

Oak points out a dragonfly, hovering low over a marshy pond. ‘There are birds, too,’ he says. ‘Ptarmigan and meadow pipits and cuckoos. And deer, of course. And hairy coos.’

‘Hairy whats?’

He chuckles. ‘Coos. Cows.’ He says it in an exaggerated American accent.

I breathe in the botanical scent of sage-scented shrubs, the thick, peaty scent of the earth, the sour funk of stagnant water.

And the sweetness of heather.

Tears well in my eyes again, and this time I can’t stop them. Something about this place makes me feel so very, very sad.

I feel a hand on my arm, and turn to see Oak watching me. He doesn’t ask why I’m crying. Doesn’t look like he thinks I’m a freak. He nods a little, like he gets it.

‘Let’s go,’ he says, his voice gentle.

We head back up the hill, and I take in the grandiose grey spires of Agathion anew. Its main tower, silhouetted against the dismal sky. Gables and ivy-crustled walls, ancient and full of mystery.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ I murmur.

‘It’s only a building,’ Oak says dismissively. ‘Shall we go see the farm?’

We pass a tangle of blackberry bushes, bare canes under winter frost. But in the garden itself, rows of cabbages, lettuce, carrots and leeks, seems to be doing well despite the cold weather.

Oak opens a wooden gate and ushers me through. As I step over the threshold, my shoes sink into soft soil, and I wonder if they have some kind of heated water system to stop the ground from freezing.

I suggest this to Oak, who snorts. ‘That sounds like a lot of unnecessary effort,’ he says, ‘when you could just use magic.’

I can’t tell if he’s joking or not.

On the far side of the farm, I see bare-branched fruit trees, as well as some that are still heavy with their autumnal crops – pomegranates, persimmons and apples, glinting gold and pink in the morning light.

Chickens scratch in the soil beneath the twisted boughs, making contented creaky sounds.

It’s peaceful, the scent of freshly dug earth and compost. The stacked slate walls around the farmyard. The ramshackle outbuildings that look as if they could be hundreds of years old. The door of the main building is open. It looks like a small cottage, and I wonder if anyone lives there.

Eyes flash at me, and I let out an involuntary gasp.

There’s a man watching me from the shadows of the doorway. He’s old, with weathered lines etching deep furrows in his skin. He wears a threadbare brown shirt and grey wool trousers that have been patched so many times that they’re mostly patch. His boots are muddy, his hair thin grey wisps that stand in contrast to his sun-weathered skin, mottled with liver spots and age.

His eyes are locked with mine, unblinking and intense. I feel pinned, scrutinised, exposed.

Oak turns to look at me, following my gaze to the man in the shed.

‘Good morning, Mr MacCrimmon,’ he says cheerfully.

The man touches a hand to his tweed flatcap. ‘Morning, Mr. Redferne. Got yourself a new wee piglet there, I see?’

‘Aye. Mr MacCrimmon is the groundskeeper,’ Oak tells me. ‘Come on. We should pay our respects to Old Toby.’

I shudder, remembering yellowed tusks and shining black eyes. ‘The pig that escaped?’

Oak hesitates for a moment. ‘So you heard about that.’

‘I had a front-row seat. He was exiting the building as I was arriving.’

I don’t tell him that Old Toby tried to kill me, because in the light of day that seems ridiculous. The pig was trying to get out of the building, and I just happened to be standing in the doorway.

Old Toby is less terrifying in the daylight, when I’m not at risk of getting trampled by his hooves.

But he is still ugly.

Grey skin, caked with mud and covered in thick black bristles. Cracked yellow tusks. A snout crusted with some kind of greenish slime.

‘He’s our school mascot,’ Oak explains. ‘Plato reminds us in the *Republic* that beasts are ignorant and ruled by appetite, and philosophers are wise and ruled by reason. So, you know. Be less like Old Toby, or at least that’s what the magisters want you to think.’

I feel my shoulders straighten a little. That’s why I’m here. I don’t want to be a beast. I’m a philosopher.

Mind over body.

“‘ Knowledge is the food of the soul,’” I quote, and Oak glances over at me, a half-smile on his face.

‘Hard advice to follow when they serve cranachan for pudding.’

‘I don’t know what that is,’ I admit.

‘Raspberries and cream,’ Oak says. ‘With a crunchy top and a wee dram of whisky.’

Old Toby finally notices us. His beady black eyes turn to me and he opens his wet, grey mouth and starts to scream, high-pitched and urgent.

And I’m back at the Devil’s Chair, my hands burning, Cassidy screaming and screaming and screaming.

‘Bloody hell,’ Oak mutters, clapping his hands over his ears.

Mr MacCrimmon appears, clambering over the stacked stone wall into the sty. His eyes turn to me and Oak, his brow creased deep with a frown.

‘What did you do?’ he asks, exactly like the girl on the train.

I can’t respond. Can’t move.

‘Nothing,’ Oak replies, backing away. ‘We were just standing here.’



Mr MacCrimmon makes an exasperated noise, turning to the still-screaming pig.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Oak says, putting his hands on my shoulders and steering me back up the hill towards the main school building. The touch of his hands jerks me back to the real world, away from nightmares and memories.

Old Toby’s metallic screams fade away, and Oak slows, looking over at me, his expression intense. ‘You’re not like the other students here,’ he observes. ‘Are you?’

I remember what Magistra Hewitt said in the buggy last night.

*Bloodline, wealth, class – these things cease to exist when you cross the threshold.*

I’m starting to get the impression that this is not the case.

‘I’m not rich, if that’s what you mean,’ I say. ‘My parents aren’t anyone important.’

He raises his eyebrows. ‘An ordinary suburban teen?’ he asks in an exaggerated American accent, the same one he used earlier.

I nod, even though I know this isn’t exactly true. Oak’s lip curls in a faint smile. He knows it, too.

I want to ask him why he’s here. Who his parents are. But I don’t, because it seems rude to pry.

‘Do you like Agathion?’ I ask, hoping to deflect the conversation away from my ordinariness, or lack thereof.

A little frown creases his forehead, and he shakes his head with a half-smile. ‘That’s a complicated question,’ he replies. ‘It’s a long way from anything, and it’s freezing all the time and the magisters ...’ His face clouds over.

Cyrus warned me against the magisters, too.

Have I come all this way only to find more bad teachers?

‘Do you ever think of just ... leaving?’ I ask.

‘Sometimes,’ he admits. ‘It would certainly be easier then ...’ He sighs. ‘But my friends are here – and I care more about them than anyone else in the world.’

There’s a fierceness behind his words. A bright loyalty that lights him up like a candle. For a moment, the shapeless longing that permeates me sharpens into something clear and absolute.

I want someone to care about me like that.

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# THREE

16 September

Students are streaming out of the main building into the courtyard with blankets and picnic baskets. The fog has lifted, and I can finally see the whole space clearly. A well-maintained lawn spreads between crisscrossing paths that all lead to the Grecian rotunda in the centre – the monopteron, as Oak called it. All around us, the walls of Agathion rise haughtily, sombre grey and ivy-clad. Turrets and spires sprout from the rooftops like hackles, with the tower over the front entrance being the highest of all.

I can see the ring of standing stones, too. Six monoliths rising from the earth. But in full daylight, without the fog, they seem less imposing. They are hewn from the same stone as the walls of Agathion, so they blend in, surrounded as they are by neatly arranged shrubs and flower beds. Not exactly picnic weather, though.

It can't be more than sixty degrees, the air damp and the clouds overhead threatening rain.

Oak leads me to where Cyrus is spreading a red tartan blanket on the grass nearby, while two other students unpack a wicker basket, the same two I noticed at breakfast. One of them is a slightly built boy with white-blond curls and silver spectacles. He's so pale he seems ethereal, his uniform perfectly fitted and neat. A fierce intelligence glints in his eyes, which are focused on a tall, broad-shouldered girl who looks like she's about to tear someone's limbs off.

The tall girl has hair that is shaved on one side and cut in a glossy black bob on the other. She's wearing something that I can only assume is the Agathon sports uniform: burgundy knickerbockers with knee-high socks, a white collarless shirt, and a cream cable-knit sweater with burgundy and grey stripes at the hem and cuffs.

'What happened?' Cyrus asks her.

The girl lets out a low growl, yanking sliced ham and sandwiches from the basket.

'Careful!' Oak says. 'Dinnae take it out on the bread. We like the bread, yeah?'

'Ren?' Cyrus presses.

The girl glowers at a bowl of hard-boiled eggs like it has insulted her mother.

Cyrus looks at the blond boy, who rolls his eyes and shakes his head. 'It was nothing,' he says quietly.

'It was *not* nothing,' the tall girl says in a broad accent that I *think* is Australian.

I'm somewhat distracted by the frankly ridiculous contents of the picnic basket. As well as the sandwiches and eggs and ham, there is a mountain of scones wrapped in a chequered cloth, along with mulberry jam, clotted cream and a giant thermos of tea.

'Let's have lunch,' says the blond boy, putting a hand on the tall girl's arm.

She makes a frustrated noise at the back of her throat but doesn't pull away. 'It's the *fifth* time,' she growls. 'I'm going to rip out his spine and turn it into a coatrack.'

'Ah,' Oak says. 'Magister Kovacevic misgendered Gideon again.'

The blond boy shrugs ruefully. 'He's old,' he says. 'I don't care.'

'*I* care,' the tall girl says, her eyes fierce.

'She's normally very friendly,' Cyrus comments to me.

The tall girl finally notices me, and her expression completely changes in an instant, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. Her anger totally dissolves, and she beams, springing to her feet. 'Is this the piglet?' she asks.

Cyrus nods. 'Piglet, this is Ren. Lauren Hyong.'

'Just Ren,' she says, leaning over and enfolding me in a crushing hug that walks the line between friendly and confronting.

'*Ren*,' hisses the blond student.

Ren steps back. 'I'm so sorry,' she says with a rueful grin. 'I'm supposed to be working on asking for consent.'

'Not everyone likes being mauled by you,' the blond boy says.

Ren winks at him. 'You like being mauled by me,' she says.

He blushes. 'Well, of course *I* do,' he mutters, flustered.

'And this is Gideon Hall,' Cyrus continues, indicating the student with the silver-rimmed glasses. 'He's a genius.'

'Hello,' I say.

Gideon smiles at me, cheeks still stained pink. 'Greetings.'

'You've already met Oak Redferne,' Cyrus continues.

Oak flicks his fingers to his brow in a casual salute.

'Which just leaves Lacey Ortiz ... Lacey!' Cyrus calls towards a gaggle of girls nearby.

They're sitting on a blanket in front of the monopteron. Lacey is perched on the step of the rotunda, so she's raised above the others.

A queen on her throne.

She parts from her courtiers and sails towards us. I resist the urge to curtsy.

'The piglet,' Cyrus says, presenting me like a trophy. 'Her name is Page.'

'Welcome,' says Lacey, in a tone that conveys no such sentiment.

It isn't a queen's job to make you feel comfortable.

'Nice to meet you,' I manage.

'Yay, a fellow American,' she says flatly. 'Let's be best friends.'

I squirm inside. I hate girls like her. I'm hoping she'll return to her throne, but instead she settles down next to Cyrus, who slings a casual arm around her shoulder.

'Eat lunch with us.' Cyrus says to me. It isn't a question, so I sit down on a corner of the picnic blanket, trying not to take up too much space.

Lacey's lips thin. 'Really?' she murmurs to Cyrus. 'We're not going to ...' She trails off with a suggestive look and a wave of her hand.

Cyrus lays out six enamel mugs and starts pouring tea. 'It's such a nice day,' he says, gesturing at the ominous clouds overhead.

The others exchange meaningful looks, and I want to crawl into a hole and never emerge.

'It's fine,' I say, starting to stand up. 'I'll go - '

Cyrus grabs my arm and pulls me back down. 'You most certainly will not. You are new, and we are being hospitable. Aren't we?' He shoots some

meaningful looks of his own.

Ren smiles. 'Of course we are,' she says. 'Did you get here last night? How are you finding it?'

I nod, flustered. 'It's good,' I say. 'Cold.'

She snorts. 'Too right. I'd love to tell you that you'll get used to it, but ...'

'Eat, drink and be merry!' announces Cyrus, raising his enamel mug in a toast. 'For tomorrow we may die.'

'You're such a drama queen,' Lacey says, rolling her eyes.

Cyrus winks at her and bites a hard-boiled egg in half. 'Help yourself, Piglet,' he says with his mouth full, gesturing to the picnic spread.

I take a sandwich. 'Do you always eat outside?' I ask.

Oak nods. 'Unless it's really raining. Some guff about Aristotle and bile and humours.'

'Walks, too,' Ren volunteers. 'And swimming. There's a lake nearby. The magisters reckon exercise can help the mind control the body.'

'Socrates approved of eating until satisfied and taking a moderate amount of exercise afterward,' Gideon says. His voice is husky and soft, his accent Canadian, I think. 'A method advantageous to health and proper to unbend and divert the mind.'

'Agathion is very big on unbending minds and controlling bodies,' Cyrus volunteers, and Oak chokes on his mouthful of sandwich.

'So what did you do?' Lacey asks me, in a perfect echo of the girl on the train.

I freeze, my mouth full of egg and cress.

'You don't have to tell us,' Cyrus reassures me. 'If you don't want to. But it's fine if you do. We're all here for a reason.'

'Cyrus is a playboy prince,' Gideon says with a little grin, and Ren snorts again.

'I'm not a prince,' Cyrus says. 'My *father* is. A very minor prince. Seventeenth in line to the throne of a very small Arabic principality.'

'Still royalty, though, isn't it?' Ren replies. 'And either way, your extremely conservative family doesn't love your lifestyle, so they exiled you here.'

Cyrus shrugs. 'What can I say? I like having fun. Sometimes I have a little too much fun.'

'Understatement of the century,' mutters Lacey, but her tone is fond.

He grins and leans into her. 'Your turn,' he says.

She looks like she wants to refuse, but her mouth twitches at his meltingly charming smile and she sighs. 'My mother is Octavia Ortiz,' she says, as if this explains everything, which it kind of does.

I don't really *do* popular culture, but even I know of Octavia Ortiz. She's one of the richest, most famous actors in the world. I didn't know she had a daughter.

'Poor little rich girl, right?' Lacey says, her tone dark. 'That's me. Super spoiled by my celebrity mother, but still so angry. So sad.'

Her voice wavers a little as she says this, and I find myself completely reassessing her in that moment. Perhaps I was too quick to write her off as a mean girl.

'My family are Australian Korean,' Ren volunteers. 'They own half the newspapers in Sydney. They kicked me out when I made an accusation against a handsy uncle who also happens to be the CEO.'

Gideon reaches across and squeezes her hand. She smiles at him gratefully.

'And you?' I ask him, trying to be brave. 'Did your family have a problem with you being ...' I trail off before saying *trans*, because I don't want to make assumptions.

To my relief, he smiles, revealing twin dimples. 'Not at all,' he says. 'My parents are wonderful. Very supportive. And not royal or famous or rich. I'm pretty ordinary.'

'Gideon, *nothing* about you is ordinary,' says Ren very seriously, a look of utter adoration on her face.

He grins fondly at her, then turns back to me. 'I'm here because of my own hubris. I wanted to see if I could break the electronic security of a very large international financial security agency.'

'And could you?'

'Of course.' He says it like it's no big thing. 'But I was cocky. Got caught. The judge sentenced me to juvenile detention, but my mother is a clinical psychologist who had a very influential client who owed her a favour. They pulled some strings and I ended up here.'

I'm glad there's at least one other student here who wasn't born into impossible wealth and privilege.

Cyrus nudges Oak. 'Do you want to share your origin story?'

Oak makes a face. 'Not particularly.'

‘Someone’s a bit cranky today,’ Cyrus says, raising a perfect eyebrow before turning to me. ‘Have you heard of the Redferne witches?’

I nod. Cassidy went through a witchy phase. She wore a lot of silver jewellery and crushed velvet, read *Le Morte d’Arthur* and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, and of course the complete works of Jadis Cassandra Redferne. Jadis lives in a castle and does so-called rituals and sells overpriced merch on social media. Crystals and candles and essential oils, that sort of thing.

‘Jadis Redferne is Oak’s mummy,’ Cyrus says. ‘The first son born to the sect in over a century.’

Oak sighs. ‘Dianic witches think magic should only come from feminine energy,’ he explains. ‘And that feminine energy only belongs to people born with vaginas.’

‘Essentialist binary nonsense,’ mutters Ren, scowling, and Gideon pats her on the knee.

I want to ask what exactly he means by *magic*. Like, real magic? Back home in Florida, I would have laughed. But here on this bleak and sombre moor, surrounded by ancient standing stones, real magic feels less impossible.

‘In any case,’ Cyrus says, ‘we think Oak is perfectly magical just the way he is.’

Oak gives him the finger, but he’s smiling.

‘I love you, too,’ Cyrus says, before turning back to me. ‘As you can see, we are all miscreants, but none of us are particularly villainous. Merely misunderstood.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Lacey says under her breath.

They turn to me, expectant.

I have absolutely no idea what to say. How can I explain what happened at St Catherine’s, when I don’t even know?

Cyrus clearly notices my discomfort, because he throws a scone at Oak. ‘Pull a card for her,’ he says.

Oak retrieves the scone and takes a bite. ‘No, thanks.’

A frown appears on Lacey’s perfect forehead. ‘Cyrus,’ she says quietly. ‘What are you doing?’

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘I don’t need ...’ I trail off, unsure exactly what it is I don’t need.

I help myself to a scone while I gather my thoughts, copying what the others have done, spreading a thick layer of jam, and topping it with a



dollop of cream. It feels deeply British and I love it.

‘She solved the thread puzzle. Plus she arrived at exactly the same moment Old Toby escaped,’ Cyrus says. ‘And he ... *went* for her. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘And?’

‘And you don’t think it’s portentous?’

‘I do not,’ says Oak.

I take a bite of my scone and it is the greatest thing I have ever tasted in my life. Buttery and crumbly. The jam is the same as I had at breakfast – perfectly tart – and the cream is unlike anything I have ever tasted, slightly nutty and a bit like cream cheese but one million times better.

‘Oh my *god*,’ I say, my mouth full.

Cyrus laughs. ‘They’re good, aren’t they?’ He turns back to Oak and snaps his fingers. ‘Card, witch-boy. Now.’

‘Fine, O King of Kings.’ Oak glares at Cyrus but reaches into his blazer pocket and withdraws a deck of cards.

They’re clearly handmade on mismatched pieces of card, with sketched illustrations on each one. I catch glimpses as he shuffles them – all scribbled ink images of swords and coins and people with blindfolds.

‘Tarot?’ I ask. ‘You’re going to tell my fortune?’

My tone must be dubious, because Cyrus smiles and purses his lips, like he knows a secret.

‘I was a sceptic too,’ Gideon says to me quietly. ‘But in the end ... Who’s to say what’s real and what isn’t?’

‘Descartes,’ Lacey replies scornfully.

Wasn’t expecting the queen bee to casually drop a Cartesian philosophy reference into the conversation. Agathion is full of surprises.

Gideon smiles. ‘Precisely. Cogito, ergo sum. If nothing is real, then tarot cards are no less real than a tree, or the sun, or this scone.’ He takes a bite. ‘Sure does taste real.’

‘Any predictions?’ Cyrus asks Oak, a twinkle in his eye.

‘A page, surely,’ offers Ren, climbing to her feet.

Lacey groans.

‘Because her name is *Page*,’ Ren says entirely unnecessarily. ‘Anyway, I have to go. Archery starts in ten minutes.’

Gideon stands up as well. ‘I’ll go with you.’ He looks down at me. ‘It was nice to meet you, Page.’

He's the first person to call me by my actual name, and so immediately becomes my favourite student at Agathion.

The two of them join hands and disappear across the courtyard, heading back into the school.

Oak holds the deck of cards to his lips and regards me. I feel oddly vulnerable under his gaze.

'Four of wands,' he says at last.

'He's never wrong,' Cyrus says to me. '*Never.*'

'Why the four of wands?' I ask.

'Homecoming,' Oak says shortly. 'The desire to belong.'

Is that how I come across? Lonely and desperate to make friends?

I lift my chin. He doesn't know anything about me.

He puts the deck face down on the picnic blanket and fans out the cards with a smooth, practised movement. Then he gestures at me to pick one. I point without putting much thought into it.

Oak slides the card out and hands it to me with a bored flick of his wrist. He doesn't bother to check if he's right.

I look down at the card and suddenly my hands throb with heat. Cassidy is screaming, her voice ragged and raw.

The card slips from between my fingers, and Oak reaches to pick it up. He stares down at it, frowning, then shuffles the card back into the deck, spreading them out once more.

'Pick again,' he says.

A drop of rain falls, and I hear a distant roll of thunder. Cyrus and Lacey are watching me. They seem on edge.

I swallow and point to a card without touching it, keeping my hands balled up tight so nobody will notice the scars. Oak's long fingers slide the card out and pick it up. He stares at it, biting his lip, then looks up at me.

'Why are you really here?' he asks, his tone abrupt.

'Calm down, my friend,' Cyrus says. 'No need to interrogate the poor piglet.'

He plucks the card from Oak's hand, and his expression falters as well.

'What is it?' Lacey asks, then peers over Cyrus's shoulder. 'Yikes.'

'It's not actually bad, though, is it?' Cyrus asks Oak. 'Like how you said the Death card is really about rebirth and new beginnings?'

'This one is actually bad.' Oak's jaw is tight as he scoops up the rest of his cards and shoves them into his satchel, not bothering to smooth them

back into a regular deck. Some get bent and crumpled, but he doesn't seem to care.

'Wait,' Cyrus says. 'Everyone just wait.'

He digs in his own satchel and pulls out a small box made of intricately inlaid wood. At first I think it's a pencil case, but as he slides the top off and unfolds it, I realise it's a mini chess set.

'Look,' he says, rummaging through the tiny carved pieces. 'Remember the cards we all pulled?' He holds up a knight. 'Ren was the Knight of Cups, right? Gideon was the High Priestess. 'He holds up a bishop. 'Oak, you were the Hanged Man.' He scoops up a fistful of pawns. 'And Lacey, you were the Queen of Swords.'

Lacey waves a dismissive hand. 'And you were the King of Wands,' she says. 'What's your point?'

Cyrus points at me and holds up the tarot card.

My stomach turns to acid.

It's the same one as before.

A tall stone tower rises from a jagged mountain, a golden crown perched atop it. The night sky is being split open by a bolt of lightning, which has set the tower on fire. Flames spill from blackened windows, and bodies plummet from the windows to their certain deaths.

The tower is falling. The crown has been blown off it by the lightning strike, and the only thing left is death and destruction.

I feel the heat of the fire that billows from the windows. Hear the screams of the falling figures. My nostrils fill with the scent of jasmine and burning flesh as I stare at the words printed on the bottom of the card.

THE TOWER.

I glance up at the tallest tower of Agathion, jutting furiously into the heavy sky.

The ring of stones seems to loom a little taller around me, as if they have suddenly sprung to attention.

Cyrus doesn't seem to notice how shaken I am by the card.

'She's the rook,' he's saying to the others. 'The castle. The *Tower*. The last piece. With her, we make a *full set*.'

'Seems like a bit of a long bow,' Lacey says dubiously.

'I told you she was portentous,' Cyrus says smugly, ignoring her. 'And I was right. Go on, tell me I was right.'

‘Just because someone is portentous,’ Oak snaps, ‘it doesn’t mean we *make friends with them.*’

‘Cyrus,’ Lacey says quietly, but loud enough for me to hear. ‘Have you considered the possibility that she *is* here for a reason, but not one that will help us? Look at her – she doesn’t belong here. Who are her parents? This is a school for the children of *exclusive families*. There’s nothing exclusive about her. She looks like she’s stepped right out of some middle American shopping mall catalogue. She’s *ordinary.*’

Her words are like knives, stripping me of my clothes and my skin, leaving me bare and bleeding.

*Ordinary.*

It used to be my greatest fear. That I’d be ordinary. That I’d end up in some ordinary life with an ordinary job in an ordinary town. That I’d never find whatever I was longing for.

I have bigger fears now.

‘Don’t be such a snob,’ Cyrus says, his tone still light and casual.

‘I’m not being a snob,’ Lacey says between gritted teeth. ‘I’m saying there’s a *reason she’s here*. You didn’t invite her. But *someone did*. Think about why that might be.’

I pull the sleeves of my sweater down over my hands, deeply uncomfortable.

‘Come on,’ Cyrus says. ‘It’s not like I invited her to join ...’ He looks sidelong at me. ‘... *secretum nostrum clava.*’

‘Bloody hell, Cyrus,’ Oak says. ‘Saying *our secret club* in Latin is almost worse than saying it in English.’

‘Oh,’ Cyrus says with a shrug. ‘Would you rather I said the Knights of—’

‘Cyrus,’ Lacey says sharply, cutting him off.

Oak spits out something in a language I don’t know but guess is ancient Greek.

‘Now, come on,’ Cyrus says. ‘That’s uncalled for.’

I have that sickening feeling again that maybe I’m not smart enough to be here. With these people who casually name-drop Descartes and can speak multiple ancient languages. I know a bit of Latin, but no Greek at all, modern or ancient.

Should I?

Oak is frowning at me. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling,’ he murmurs, like he’s talking to himself.

So do I.

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# FOUR

16 September

I'm confused when I arrive at my first and only class for the day, because the room looks nothing like a classroom. It's too small, for a start. A rather shabby desk is at one end, and bookcases line the wall. There are three battered leather armchairs, and what looks like a dining chair by the window. A few large cushions are strewn on the ground, heavy, moth-eaten brocade. The air is thick with the scent of old books and damp carpet.

I double-check my timetable, but I definitely have the right place. Then a pair of girls sail past me into the room, both squeezing into one of the armchairs. A lanky boy follows, sprawling on a floor cushion. I take a breath and enter, choosing the chair by itself over by the window.

A few more students trail in, including Gideon. He smiles at me and waves, and I wave back, relieved that he'd already left when I pulled my disastrous tarot card.

There are maybe twelve students in total. A few are sipping tea from enamel mugs. Nobody seems to have any books or stationery. I didn't know what I'd need, so I have my satchel containing notebooks and pens. I kick it all under my chair.

Eyes turn curiously to me, and a few students smile in greeting, but nobody attempts to start a conversation. They're all clearly wrapped up in their own worlds, their own cliques.

It's like they can tell that I'm not one of them.

I can smell the entitlement on them. They enter every room like they own it. Like they know there aren't any problems that money can't solve.

Someone walks in who I assume is a teacher, a mild-looking middle-aged man with thick glasses and a tweed blazer. He doesn't seem to notice me as he takes a seat behind the desk, and the chatter in the room dies down.

'Good morning, Professor Hughes,' one of the girls says politely, and he nods at her, then looks down at his notes.

"Nothing is evil which is a part of nature," he says, his voice reedy and thin, then leans back in his chair, as if his work is done.

I think about the tarot card. The lightning striking the tower. Does it represent a force of nature, random and unpredictable? Or some kind of divine punishment?

'Everything is nature, though,' Gideon remarks calmly. 'It's arrogant for us to assume humans exist outside of nature.'

One of the armchair girls nods. 'Aurelius was talking to nature when he said, "All things come of you, have their being in you, and return to you."'

Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius? Something by him was on the reading list I was given this morning. He was a Roman emperor.

'But he draws a strong distinction between body and mind,' says a boy on the floor. 'And urges us to use the power of the mind to free the body from passions.'

'Was that in Staniforth's translation?' someone else asks. 'Because I find Long's to be far more faithful.'

The girl in the armchair makes a little smug noise. 'I read it in the original Latin.'

'Of course you did,' the boy says, rolling his eyes.

I'm totally out of my depth.

There's a moth crawling up the side of one of the bookcases, fat, pale and dusty. I can't look away from it. It makes slow but inexorable progress. I wonder where it's going, and why. Does it even know?

The debate washes over me, with occasional snippets and quotations standing out.

*Soon you'll be ashes or bones.*

*Shame on the soul.*

*You have something in you, powerful and divine.*

Today wasn't the first time I've seen that card. The Tower, with its lightning and destruction.

---

Cassidy had a tarot deck. I was never very interested, but she read for me occasionally. I'd humour her as she talked about grand adventures ahead, about challenges overcome, and happily-ever-afters. The very first time I selected a card, it had been the Tower. I'd flipped it over, and Cassidy had frowned at the lightning bolt and the falling bodies.

*Nope*, she said as she crumpled the card in her fist and tossed it over her shoulder.

*You're bold*, I observed. *Attempting to thwart destiny.*

*I make my own destiny*, she replied carelessly. *Pick another one.*

I did.

*Temperance*, I said, showing her.

*Much better*. She nodded. *This one's about finding balance. Climb down from your intellectual tower every now and then and play in the mud with the rest of us mere mortals.*

I laughed and kissed her.

---

'Should we even be reading Aurelius?' one student asks, looking scornful. 'He was a *Roman*, after all.'

'Shockingly, people have had interesting things to say who didn't live in Classical Greece,' another responds dryly.

'Don't let the magisters hear you say that.'

There's a titter of laughter, but Professor Hughes's eyes dart towards the door, as if he's afraid a magister might burst in and witness this apparent sedition.

I lean my head against the window, feel the cold glass on my skull. The rain is coming down in earnest now, the moors swallowed up by greyness again.

'Cicero. Virgil. Seneca. Ovid. Absolute masters of their form. Not to mention Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.'

'What about philosophy in China, or India, or the Middle East?'

'Ancient Egypt. Herodotus says that's where philosophy began.'

'Oh, so now we're believing everything Herodotus said.'



Another ripple of laughter goes around the room.

I know that the whole philosophy of Agathion is to reject the urges of the body. To control the body with the mind. To exist in that higher realm.

But my body won't shut up.

I'm hungry.

Thirsty.

I need to pee.

The scars on my palms are itchy.

My feet are cold.

I'm suddenly aware of the silence in the room and realise everyone is looking at me, expectant. Professor Hughes, too, frowning a little as if he's not sure where I came from. A question is hanging in the air, but I have no idea what it was.

'Um,' I say, feeling my cheeks burn. 'I'm sorry?'

'Do you have any thoughts in response to this week's reading?' Professor Hughes has narrowed his eyes behind those thick glasses. Like he knows I'm a fake. That I don't belong here.

I have not done the reading. I have never read Marcus Aurelius. I know almost every Shakespeare play by heart. I've read the complete works of Dickens, Austen and all three Brontë sisters. But that doesn't seem to matter here.

Surely there are literature classes at Agathion? Or ... anything else?

Aren't there?

I hear a snorting noise, like a pig's oink. Someone else giggles.

The room starts to swim around me, and my eyes stray back to the fat, pale moth, which has reached the top of a bookcase and is crawling away into the shadows.

If only I could join it.

A part of me wishes my tarot card would come true in this moment, striking the school with lightning and ending this burning humiliation.

Instead, Gideon jumps in.

'I think we've been focused on the wrong thing,' he says. 'Aurelius's point in *Meditations* was not to start a debate on body versus mind. He just wanted people to be good. To be ethical—'

'Ethical according to whom?' one of the armchair girls interrupts.

Professor Hughes glances at his watch. 'A question for next time, perhaps,' he says, rising to his feet. 'Remember, on Wednesdays our lessons

are peripatetic, regardless of weather.'

My research into Agathion led me to reading about Aristotle's peripatetic school. Before I got here, the idea of rambling the moors and debating philosophy seemed gloriously romantic. But now I picture myself slipping in the mud, unable to answer anyone's questions, and feeling like the lowest of the low.

Gideon pauses by the door, waiting for me to exit.

'It's a steep learning curve,' he says sympathetically. 'And Professor Hughes isn't the most engaged teacher. It'll get better.'

His pity is worse than rejection, in some ways.

---

On my fourth day at Agathion, I finally meet with Magistra Hewitt.

I get there early, taking a deep breath outside her office door before knocking.

Was the knock too timid? Should I be assertive and bold? Should I not have knocked at all?

'Come,' says a voice from inside.

Magistra Hewitt's office is dignified and cluttered with leather-bound books, marble busts, and furniture made of old mahogany and worn leather. It's a little shabby, though. Dust collects on the mantelpiece, and the fireplace is stained and blackened with ancient smoke. An edge of wallpaper is peeling, and part of the wall sags with what looks like moisture damage. A tarnished gilt frame hangs above the mantel containing a rather graphic depiction of an eagle pecking out Prometheus's liver.

A huge dog lies on a faded rug in front of the fire – some kind of wolfhound, I think, grey and shaggy with legs nearly as long as mine.

'Don't mind Peritas,' Magistra Hewitt says. 'He's a terrible guard dog.'

The fireplace is burning sullenly, and there's a faint scent of cloves and hickory in the air.

Magistra Hewitt sits at a desk cluttered with old books and handwritten notes in looseleaf. There's a fountain pen in a little stand, and a pot of tea on a tray with two cups. An arched window of leaded diamond panes overlooks the forum, where I glimpse the elegant white rotunda – the

monopteron – and beyond it, the hulking grey mass of one of the standing stones.

‘Tea?’

She doesn’t wait for an answer, pouring me a cup while I sit down in the chair opposite hers.

‘I hope you are settling in,’ she says.

I nod, although I’m not sure I am.

‘I hear you solved our little initiation puzzle,’ she continues. ‘Very well done. Most students cut the string.’

I want to ask her about the soup, ask if they really did drug me. But I’m distracted by her praise, and the warm glow I feel at her approval, and she continues with barely a pause.

‘Your parents have been notified of your arrival. If you like, you can send them letters, but we encourage our students to limit communication with the outside world. You’ll have a great deal of freedom here at Agathion, but that freedom is a privilege, and students who cannot handle that will be asked to leave. There are certain behavioural expectations, of course. You must be in your room by ten p.m. and not leave it until six in the morning. Romantic relationships between students are discouraged, but we are aware that to try to prevent them entirely would be like trying to prevent the sun from rising each day. We merely ask that you be discreet and sensible.’

I nod. A romantic relationship is definitely not on my to-do list.

‘Please remove your shirt.’

My hands are undoing buttons before I have a moment to question why.

The magistra pulls on a pair of latex gloves, then opens a wooden case and removes a device from inside. ‘Do you know what this is?’ she asks.

‘A sphygmomanometer,’ I reply. ‘My father is a nurse.’

She nods and takes my blood pressure. I feel awkward sitting before her in only my bra. Exposed. I don’t like it.

‘How is your endometriosis managed?’ she asks.

I don’t ask how she knows about my endo. I guess she has my medical records.

‘Medication,’ I tell her. ‘Painkillers ... in my backpack.’

Magistra Hewitt jots some numbers onto a piece of paper in my folder. ‘We’ll teach you new methods of pain control while you’re here,’ she promises. ‘Better methods. When is your next period due?’

‘October eighth,’ I tell her. ‘But it’s not exactly regular. Sometimes it’s early. Sometimes it’s late. Sometimes it doesn’t come at all.’

Those are the best months, like I’ve been given a reprieve.

Magistra Hewitt nods and writes something in the folder.

Then she opens a second case and withdraws a butterfly needle, clipping a little glass vial to it.

‘Your arm,’ she says, then notices my discomfort. ‘We want to make sure you’re healthy.’

Do all boarding schools do this? I present my arm, and glance away as the needle goes in. I don’t mind the pain – it’s nothing compared to a period – but I don’t love the sight of blood.

‘Your birthday is the first of November?’

‘Yes,’ I tell her, and she smiles, unclipping the vial, now full of dark red liquid.

The magistra packs everything away as I pull my shirt back on.

‘Now,’ she says. ‘Your coursework. What languages do you speak?’

‘French and Spanish. A little Latin.’

A corner of her mouth quirks. ‘Impressive. We don’t teach secondary languages. You will continue with your Latin and take ancient Greek as well. I’ll schedule you some additional reading so you can catch up with the other students. We follow a strictly classical curriculum here. Agathion’s strength lies in the trivium – grammar, logic and rhetoric. Here, we believe that rationality usurps everything. You are also expected to be well-versed in mathematics, history and the classical sciences. You are encouraged to develop your own academic pathway according to your interests, under my supervision. Your classes will be led by our day staff, who use the Socratic method to encourage debate and original thinking. Once you find your feet, you can begin to develop a research project.’

‘Um,’ I say timidly. ‘The class I’ve been assigned seems to be history or maybe philosophy. I was hoping to study literature?’

A small frown appears between the magistra’s elegant brows. ‘Your tutor will at some point assign readings by Aeschylus and Euripides. Aristophanes, perhaps, for a little light relief. Homer, of course. And I believe that some of the day teachers encourage the reading of Ovid, although personally I cannot abide the Romans.’

‘What ... what about English literature?’ I venture. ‘Shakespeare? Austen? Dickens?’

Magistra Hewitt's expression turns slightly sour. 'I suppose in your free time you could dally with some more ... *modern texts*.'

I swallow. I knew Agathion prioritised Classical learning. But I didn't quite grasp how intense it would be. I had just assumed that ... coming to the UK, I would be studying English literature. The wave of disappointment is intense, and I feel a lump rise in my throat as so many of my fantasies evaporate.

The magistra doesn't seem to notice any of this.

'You will also be required to choose an athletic elective – no, don't look at me like that. Exercising the body teaches control.'

I try to look enthused, but the magistra can tell I'm not thrilled by the concept of enforced physical activity.

'Plato was a skilled wrestler,' she informs me. 'Polo was played by Saladin, Alexander the Third and Theodosius the Calligrapher. Odysseus proved his royal blood to King Alcinous by throwing a javelin, and his identity to Penelope by stringing and shooting his bow.'

'If it was good enough for Odysseus ...' I trail off.

'Indeed. We offer archery, athletics, fencing, swimming, charioteering and pankration.'

'I don't know what that last one is.'

'An ancient Greek martial art.'

Even the *sports* here are from ancient Greece. 'Ah,' I say. 'No thank you.'

'You may take a few weeks to observe each sport and decide.'

She folds her hands and observes me for a long moment.

'Magistra Hewitt, may I ask a question?'

'Of course.'

'Why am I here?'

She tilts her head to the side. 'You accepted a scholarship offer.'

'But why was I offered a scholarship?'

'Because of your academic potential.'

'H-how did you know about it? About me?'

Magistra Hewitt smiles thinly. 'We have our ways of separating the wheat from the chaff.'

'Are there other students here on scholarship?'

A slight pause. 'Not currently.'

'So why me?'

The magistra looks down at the folder in front of her, and I'm suddenly more aware of the spicy, smoky scent in the air.

'Hmm.' Her eyes scan various documents – old school transcripts, I assume. 'I see several references here to behavioural issues.'

*Behavioural issues*, like cutting class and not turning in assignments.

And ... the other thing.

Magistra Hewitt's eyes meet mine, sharp and knowing.

How much does she know about me?

'You are highly intelligent,' she says. 'Agathion is a selective school, and we only take the best and brightest young people. But also our students have suffered. Things aren't easy for you – precisely *because* of your intelligence. You walk on a different plane to other people, and it can be a hard road. Agathion will guide you along that road.'

This doesn't seem like enough. Surely there are plenty of kids who are as smart as me. My mouth feels dry, and I reach for my tea, lifting the saucer and cup together the way the magistra does.

The magistra is considering me, her head on one side, her eyes shrewd.

'You feel nervous about fitting in with the other students. Agathion is an exclusive college – some of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the world send their children here. We don't often see students like you. But rest assured that the Agathion model is to leave all of that behind – it's one of the reasons why students are divested of their possessions on arrival. There are no class divisions here. No peer pressure or cliques. Only bright, curious minds engaged in the endless pursuit of wisdom.'

It sounds great, but I can't help thinking about the way Lacey looked at me at lunch, like I was less interesting than an ant.

*There's nothing exclusive about her.*

There are definitely cliques here.

'I'm not here to make friends,' I tell the magistra. 'I'm here to learn.'

She smiles gently. 'It's possible to do both. I would encourage you to form bonds with the other students. They will benefit from being exposed to someone like you.'

She makes it sound like I'm some kind of tragic orphan to be studied.

'And ...' Magistra Hewitt's eyes become even sharper. 'Some of our students have exhibited ... challenging behaviours in the past. I trust you will let me know if you see anyone acting in a manner which could be considered ... dangerous.'

Is she asking me to spy on the others students for her?

The wolfhound by the fire sighs and twitches.

‘Tell me about your family,’ Magistra Hewitt says, abruptly changing the subject.

What is there to tell? ‘My mother works in a bank. My father is a nurse at a retirement home.’

‘Siblings?’

‘Just me.’

‘Are you close with your parents?’

I shake my head. ‘They don’t really ... get me. They’re fine. Ordinary, I guess. Regular people living regular lives. I was always ... different.’

The magistra nods. ‘You knew those *regular lives* were merely shadows on a cave wall.’

I may not speak ancient Greek, but I do know the allegory of Plato’s cave. In it, prisoners are chained in a cavern for their whole lives, staring at a blank wall. Behind them, objects pass before a burning fire, throwing shadows onto the wall. The prisoners can’t move or turn around, so all they ever see are the shadows. They don’t know that anything else exists. To them, the shadows are the entire world. If the prisoners were suddenly released and allowed to leave the cave, many would be overwhelmed by reality – the bright lights and colours and textures. They would choose to return to the cave, to the familiar. But a few would bravely venture forth and learn about the real world. These few, Plato argues, are the philosophers, masters of natural sciences, of theory, of mathematics and deductive logic.

Magistra Hewitt thinks I am a true philosopher. My body hums with the thrill of this. ‘Exactly,’ I say.

‘I imagine that would have made school very difficult.’

I nod. ‘I don’t think schools are made for people like me. When I was in elementary school, the other kids were filling out handwriting sheets and ticking boxes, and I wanted to know how old the stars were. Teachers never knew what to do with me – I was always smarter than the other kids, often smarter than the teachers. I didn’t bother doing any assignments, because everything seemed too ... basic. Why turn in homework that my teachers didn’t understand? Why do anything, when the world is terrible and I couldn’t see any path to change it from where I was? My parents took me to

specialists who said I was gifted, but ... it never felt like a gift. It felt like a curse.'

I blink. I haven't talked this much in months.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I'm babbling.'

Magistra Hewitt leans forward. 'Don't be sorry,' she says. 'I want to know everything about you.' She folds her hands elegantly on the desk in front of her. 'You have a gift, Page. All the students here do. Everyone here is like you, in some way. Bright young people who don't fit into the expectations that society has for them. Here you can step out of the cave of *regular life* and explore the true world. Grow into the very best version of yourself – without anything holding you back. When you walk out of here, you will go on to achieve extraordinary things.'

Tears start in my eyes.

'Say more,' she says. 'Tell me about your most recent school. The one where the ... incident happened.'

My palms start to itch. 'How do you know about that?'

'It was widely reported in the media.'

I frown. The papers didn't use my name, or Cassidy's.

'My parents sent me to St Catherine's. They thought I needed discipline.'

Magistra Hewitt shakes her head and makes a disapproving noise. 'Discipline places the problem in the realm of the body,' she says. 'You do not need discipline. You need control. We can help you with that through the cycle of mentorship. The mentor–student relationship is central to life here at Agathion, and it is cyclical. Socrates mentored Plato. Plato mentored Aristotle.'

'And Aristotle mentored Alexander the Great,' I supply, and feel a flush of pleasure when she nods approvingly.

'The student becomes the teacher,' she says with a gleam in her eye. 'And the teacher becomes the student.'

I'm not sure if there's anything I can possibly teach Magistra Hewitt. Was she like me once? Did she find her place here? Is the elegant confidence she carries herself with something that she had to learn?

'Were things better?' she asks. 'At this new school?'

Her tone implies that she already knows the answer to this.

I shake my head. 'It was exactly the same,' I tell her. 'Same teachers. Same students.'

Except for Cassidy.



---

Cassidy, with her blue hair, her thick black eyeliner and her zero-fucks-given attitude. She found me on my first day at St Catherine's. I'd given up after two classes and was hiding in the library, in the back section with the encyclopedias that I knew nobody would ever go to, because who would ever look at an encyclopedia when they could just google?

Her shadow fell over me, and I looked up from my battered paperback copy of *Anna Karenina*. Her black stockings were ripped, her leather shoes scuffed. She wore the plain cotton school dress like an act of defiance – somehow managing to make it look unbearably cool. I was utterly terrified of her.

She sat down beside me, pulling an encyclopedia from the shelf.

I had no idea what to do. Was this some kind of bullying tactic? Should I introduce myself? Or flee?

I did neither. After a moment, I returned to Tolstoy, but couldn't take a word in.

After five minutes of silence, she finally spoke.

*Did you know this place is haunted?*

I blinked, unsure if she was talking to me. But there was no one else around. *The library?* I asked.

*No, she chuckled. This school. Have you heard of the Devil's Chair?*

I shook my head.

*It's a weird rock, behind the gym. Nobody ever goes there anymore, but I heard that the rock is haunted.*

*Haunted how?*

She leaned close to me. *Three kids have died there. All on separate occasions. Don't you think that's spooky?*

*I guess, I said.*

*You want me to show you?*

It was exactly the kind of thing my mother would warn me to stay away from.

I nodded, and Cassidy shut the encyclopedia with a snap, climbing to her feet and reaching out a hand to help me up.

I'd never had a friend before. It felt like my heart had opened up, from a tightly closed bud to a blossoming flower. For the first time in my life, I

actually looked forward to going to school. She was the last thing I thought about before going to sleep and the first thing on my mind when I woke.

Sometimes we didn't make it to school, and spent the day wandering back alleys, or seeing how long we could sit in a cafe sharing a single cup of coffee before the proprietors kicked us out.

Other times we would actually make it to class, ignoring the teachers and writing each other long letters. I'd write her poems in French with the translation underneath in green pen. She'd copy out pages of song lyrics by the Cure, Doll Skin or This Broken Tree.

But mostly we hung out by the Devil's Chair. Behind the gym, where the kudzu and alligator weed grew thick, we could sprawl and talk all day without getting spotted. Nobody ever went there. The groundskeepers didn't bother with it. It was the place where broken chairs went to die.

The Devil's Chair itself was a jagged limestone thing, almost as tall as me. It was vaguely chair-shaped and covered with the engraved names of brave students.

Cassidy loved it. She was well into her witchy phase by then, and wanted to hold a seance to raise the spirits of the dead students.

But I always refused. I told her that I didn't believe in ghosts, but the truth was quite the opposite. I could *feel* something there, trapped in the stone. I knew it wanted to be let out, and I knew it was dangerous.

It didn't take long before my friendship with Cassidy slipped into something more.

I hadn't even *considered* that she might be interested in me like that. Frankly, I was astonished that she was interested in me at all, even just as someone to relieve the monotony of the school day. After all, what was I? A big nerd with no friends.

One afternoon, we were lying on our backs near the Devil's Chair, staring at the clouds.

*One day I'll be doing this,* Cassidy said. *But I'll be in Central Park.*

Cassidy often talked about going to New York. She wanted to work as a waitress during the day and sing in an all-girl goth-punk band at night.

She rolled onto her side. *You could come with me,* she said. *Get a job at the Strand Bookstore. We'll rent a one-bedroom walk-up in the East Village. We'll live on pierogi and cheap red wine. It'll be perfect.*

I rolled to face her. I could see it. A room full of Christmas lights and thrift-store lamps and furniture we found on the street.

But I knew it wouldn't happen. Not because Cassidy wouldn't make it to New York. She would. She'd make it all happen. Cassidy could do anything she set her mind to.

I knew it wouldn't happen for me. I knew I could never give her what she really wanted.

I've never been good at people. At feelings.

*Control yourself*, Mom would always hiss when I was little. When I got upset or excited. *Calm down*.

She always seemed nervous around me. Like I had to be kept calm or something terrible might happen.

And she wasn't wrong.

*I think you're beautiful*, Cassidy said, a slightly nervous smile dancing on her lips.

The moment stretched between us. I could feel her breath on my cheeks. Smell her vanilla and cherry scent. I was suddenly powerfully aware of my body as a physical entity. I spent so much time in my mind, trying to stay in control and longing for something I couldn't name. It was exhausting. But in that moment, nothing in my head mattered. No mind. Only body.

A body who wanted to touch and to be touched.

Our first kiss was sweet and gentle and utterly perfect. Heat came later, along with giggles and gasps and nipping teeth and fingernails digging into skin.

When we were together like that, I could let go. Forget about staying in control. The relief I felt was staggering.

Cassidy made me feel alive.

---

'Tell me about what happened to you,' the magistra says, her voice gentle. 'The incident at your school with the mathematics teacher.'

And it all comes crashing down.

'I don't remember,' I tell Magistra Hewitt.

It's the truth. Mostly.

'Tell me what you do remember.'

I remember Cassidy screaming.

And screaming.

And screaming.

I remember the scent of jasmine and burnt flesh. I remember seeing a pile of blackened, smoking bones and ash on the bare earth by the Devil's Chair.

*Spontaneous combustion* was what they called it on the news. The coroner's report was more circumspect, citing a rogue lightning strike and the synthetic fabric of Mr Hearst's polo shirt.

'Miss Whittaker?' Magistra Hewitt presses.

I shake my head. 'I'm sorry,' I say, my voice hoarse. 'I don't remember.'

Her left eyelid twitches, just slightly. 'Perhaps we should turn away from the past for now,' she says. 'What of the future?'

'What do you mean?'

'Imagine your ideal future. What is that you truly *want*, Miss Whittaker? Power? Money? Knowledge?'

*Freedom.*

'I don't know.' This seems to be the only answer I can give Magistra Hewitt, and I can tell she's disappointed.

An old clock on the mantelpiece chimes. The giant dog stirs, his paws twitching.

'We have big plans for you, Miss Whittaker,' Magistra Hewitt says. 'I trust you won't disappoint us.'

I don't know what this means, but it feels like the meeting is over. I get to my feet.

'I need to see Cyrus Alimardani,' she says. 'Could you kindly find him and send him to me?'

---

I ask around until someone tells me that Cyrus is studying in his room. I climb up to the boys' dormitory and knock on his door.

'Piglet!' he says, smiling broadly. 'I was hoping I'd catch you. Wanted to apologise for that weirdness with the tarot card.'

He ushers me into his room. It's laid out like mine, with a desk and a loom bed. But it seems more comfortable somehow. It smells like Cyrus – sandalwood and rosewater. There's a bunch of flowers in a jam jar on the windowsill, bright purple and dusty pink.

A half-finished mug of tea is on his desk, beside a pile of books. *The Heptameron. Chaldean Oracles. The Key of Solomon the King.* An open notebook reveals neat, elegant handwriting and some rather occult-looking symbols.

Cyrus reaches out a hand and flips the notebook closed, and I feel heat flush in my cheeks at being caught snooping.

‘Magistra Hewitt wants to see you,’ I say.

A slight frown crosses his face. ‘Did she say why?’

‘No.’

‘Hmm.’ Cyrus pauses for a moment, and for the first time I see his casual confidence slip. He looks ... uncertain. Then he takes a deep breath. He reaches into his desk drawer and withdraws something that looks like a little doll made of twisted dry grass. He slips it into his pocket.

‘Just in case,’ he tells me with a flashing smile.

‘In case what?’

He looks at me, biting his lip. ‘Lacey’s right,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘They definitely brought you here for a reason. But you don’t know what it is, do you?’

I remember the magistra’s words. *We have big plans for you.*

I shake my head. ‘No idea.’

‘I believe you. Look ...’ He digs in his desk drawer again and pulls out a tarot card. *My tarot card.*

The Tower.

I flinch when I see it, but he flips it over and scribbles on the back of it in black ink.

‘I think you can help us,’ he says. ‘And ... if I’m not around to invite you properly, I want you to know how to get to the Sanctuary.’

‘The what?’

‘The Sanctuary of Delphi. It’s in Agathion’s central tower. It can be a bit tricky to find, but I have a feeling you can do it. It’s at the top of the spiral where the unicorns graze. Pluck the third rose from the left and speak the password.’

I stare at him. ‘The ... password?’

He presses the tarot card into my hand. ‘Don’t tell the others, okay?’ he says. ‘Lacey will kill me. But ... if you need it, I want you to know how to get in. I think the Knights are going to need you.’

‘The Knights?’

‘The Knights of Empedocles.’

And with that he’s gone, loping down the corridor with long, casual strides, his shoulders square and his head held high.

I look down at the card in my hand and read Cyrus’s elegant script.

*For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.*

This is meaningless to me.

Who is Empedocles? Another ancient philosopher?

*You don’t belong here.*

Does everyone else here know about Empedocles, the same way they all can freely quote Aurelius and read Latin and ancient Greek?

Perhaps I should have spent more time in my intellectual tower after all. Then I’d be able to keep up.

---

I dream of Cyrus, even though we barely know each other. He’s wearing a dark robe, holding a tarnished bowl in his hands.

A crack of thunder sounds, and the bowl breaks open, spilling thick dark liquid that I think must be blood. I cry out, and Cyrus’s eyes dart to mine, but they aren’t eyes at all. Just dark, unending voids like a gap between worlds.

# FIVE

20 September

On my sixth night at Agathion, I arrive in the dining hall to find myself in something out of a fairytale. The room is decorated with hanging tapestries, garlands of spruce and pine, and everything is touched with the warm glow of candlelight. It's like Christmas, although it's only September.

There's gleaming silverware and gilt-edged china embellished with the Agathion sword-and-cup crest. Chandeliers sparkle below a vaulted ceiling with heavy, exposed beams.

It's freezing, of course. I haven't felt warm since I arrived at Agathion. Is being cold part of some ancient Greek philosophy? With the kind of money the school must charge all these rich families, surely they could afford some heating.

The other dinners I've attended have been much the same as breakfast – mountains of delicious food, but fairly free from ceremony. This one feels different.

On the table where the magisters usually sit, an enormous roast pig lies on a bed of greenery, a red apple in its mouth and a wreath of mulberry leaves atop its head. Its skin gleams orange and gold in the candlelight, a mulberry shining black and unseeing from each eye socket.

It smells amazing, and my stomach rumbles. I pause in the doorway, wondering if there are rules about where I should sit. I scan the room for familiar faces and spot Lacey, with her ladies-in-waiting, looking bored and

beautiful. At another table, Oak sits with Ren and Gideon, frowning and talking, their heads close together. I can't see Cyrus anywhere.

Gideon catches my eye and waves, but his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. It's not exactly an invitation, so I don't go over to them.

I find a spot on the end of a table, next to a girl with braces and plaits. She smiles and introduces herself as Clementine.

'What's going on?' I ask, indicating the decorations and the roast pig.

Clementine shrugs. 'I'm not sure,' she says.

I look around the room again. 'Do the day teachers ever stay for dinner?'

'No,' Clementine replies. 'Only the magisters.'

As if she's summoned them, four magisters enter the room, and the chatter dies down. Magistra Hewitt is first; followed by Magister Kovacevic, the bald man who I've seen each morning at breakfast; and Magistra Galal, a smaller woman with a large dark bun. With them is a younger man who ...

I blink.

He looks somehow familiar.

'Who's that?' I ask Clementine in a low voice

'I don't know,' she whispers. 'He must be new.'

The magister is young, much younger than the others. And handsome, underneath his thick-framed glasses and scraggly beard. I'm *sure* I've seen him somewhere before.

The room falls totally silent as Archon Leek enters.

He looks taller than usual, the deep lines carving a permanent scowl into his face. Like the other magisters, he's wearing a black academic robe, but he also has an embroidered cape-thing that drapes over his shoulders.

He's carrying a sword.

One I've seen before. I glance up to see the same broad, flat blade with the ringlike pommel mounted over the great fireplace.

'How many of those things do they have?' I ask Clementine.

'Loads,' she murmurs. 'There's some old local legend about it. You can buy replicas at the gift shop in town.'

The one the Archon is carrying looks old – heavy and scarred, the blade's edge pitted and nicked. But it's been well cared for. The metal – it looks too dull for steel, so maybe iron – catches the light from the candles, and for a moment it appears to be glowing from within.

It's exactly like the one on Agathion's crest.



‘Good evening, students,’ he says, his voice deep and cracked. ‘Please be upstanding for our school song.’

The hall is suddenly full of the sound of scraping chairs as everyone stands.

I’ve never had a school song before. At St Catherine’s we sang the national anthem, and they occasionally made us attend mass, where we’d mumble our way through a hymn. But this is all new to me.

Deep voices begin to chant – atonal, rhythmic words that sound ancient and powerful. Only a few students are chanting, mostly boys with low-pitched voices. The melody is strange but simple. Maybe a few bars, then it begins to repeat.

More ancient Greek.

Over the top of the chanters come more singers – tenors following a complex pattern that is more recognisably melodic. As their phrase finishes and begins again, a third group of singers join in – clear, reedy sopranos, their voices soaring high above the rest.

The three parts blend in unexpectedly beautiful ways, forming strange and ancient harmonies. The result fills me with what I can only describe as awe, and tears start in my eyes. Suddenly the world feels much, much bigger than it did before, and I know I made the right choice in coming here.

As the singing fades, the Archon raises a hand for silence once more.

‘We have much cause for celebration,’ he says. ‘Firstly, we have a new student, Page Whittaker, who joined us a few days ago.’

I wasn’t expecting to hear my name uttered from his lips. The Archon’s gaze rests on me, and I feel my skin prickle under his attention. The other students turn as well.

‘Welcome, Piglet,’ the Archon says, although there isn’t much warmth in his tone. ‘I know you will find your true purpose here at Agathion.’

His eyes linger on me for a moment, and I repress a shiver.

The students take their goblets and raise them in a toast. ‘Oink! Oink!’ they intone in unison.

I raise my goblet in response and try to smile. But my gaze drifts to the roast pig on the table, and I remember the wet mouth and cracked yellow tusks of Old Toby as his face screamed into mine on the threshold of Agathion. My hands start to itch, and drawing a breath becomes a

challenge. I put the goblet to my lips, but I can smell that same sharp botanical scent from the soup on my first night at Agathion.

I don't swallow.

The Archon looks around the room once more, and as the intense scrutiny of the other students fades, I find I can breathe again.

'We also welcome a new faculty member – Magister Zhang.' He gestures to the younger staff member, who bows his head in greeting. 'We are very lucky to have him join us. I'm sure you will all make him feel welcome and show him the deference and respect he deserves.'

This statement is met with silence. I feel like we should applaud, but apparently that's not the Agathion way.

'Life at Agathion moves in a circle. As we welcome new pupils and magisters, we also must bid farewell to our dear friends and colleagues. Tonight we celebrate the retirement of one of our most dedicated staff members, Magister Kovacevic.'

There's a crashing sound from one of the tables, and I look over to see that Oak has spilled his goblet. Gideon reaches over with a napkin to mop it up.

They both look ... bad. Like they're about to be sick.

The pink-faced bald man raises a hand in acknowledgement, like a king recognising his subjects.

The Archon continues. 'Magister Kovacevic has been a faculty member at Agathion for forty years, and although we are sorry to see him go, we very much hope he enjoys a peaceful and joyous retirement.'

Magister Kovacevic doesn't seem to respond to this. He's staring at the roast pig, practically drooling.

'For many,' the Archon says, 'Agathion is a cocoon. A safe, welcoming place where your past actions dissolve, where you can escape the confines of the body that has trapped you for so long, and embrace true enlightenment – the very pinnacle of your life cycle.'

There's a tension in the air. Heads are turning towards the main doors, and a low hum of whispers is sounding throughout the room.

'What's going on?' I ask Clementine.

'Graduation,' she responds with a frown. 'Usually it only happens in November.'

In all my googling, I never quite figured out how a student graduates from Agathion. It seems like some stay only for a few months, but others

stay for years. There doesn't seem to be a fixed time. I ask Clementine, and she shrugs.

'The magisters determine when you're ready,' she says.

'Is there an exam? A test you have to pass?'

She shakes her head vaguely.

The Archon gestures to the door. 'Please join me in welcoming our six graduating students as they prepare to leave the cocoon.'

The door opens and six students enter. They each wear a plain white linen robe and a garland of leaves on their heads, just like the roast pig.

I don't recognise the first five, but the sixth is Cyrus.

That must be why Magistra Hewitt wanted to see him.

I hear a gasp, and I look over to see Lacey, her hand to her mouth and her eyes wide.

She didn't know her boyfriend was graduating today.

'Interesting,' Clementine murmurs to me, gazing up at the graduating students. 'Tom Lewis has only been here for three months.'

'I guess he learned self-control very quickly.'

'Or the magisters think he's a lost cause.'

'What about Cyrus?' I ask her. 'How long has he been here?'

'No idea,' Clementine says. 'He and his friends are super cliquey. I don't know anything about any of them.'

I glance over at Oak, Ren and Gideon. Oak looks ready to punch someone. Ren and Gideon are holding hands. They look utterly devastated.

I guess they didn't know either.

Did Cyrus know? I think back to our conversation yesterday.

*If I'm not around to invite you properly.*

'In true Agathion tradition, we will be feasting on succulent pork tonight,' the Archon says, gesturing to the roast pig. 'Pigs appear often in the writings of the Greeks – they symbolise the body and its more base desires for greed and excess. Just as the witch Circe transformed Odysseus's men into pigs, our own corporeal desires can overwhelm the mind, drowning out reason and logic. However, Odysseus was canny and managed to avoid this transformation, by using his wits and not succumbing to the pleasures of the flesh. Therefore we may eat our feast tonight, and we may enjoy it. Because here at Agathion, we know how to control our bodies. We need not live in monastic simplicity. Our minds are strong enough to embrace moderation.'

Sounds like the founders of Agathion just really liked good food.

The Archon lifts his goblet. 'Please raise your glasses. To Odysseus.'

I'm looking over at Oak as the students repeat the toast, but he doesn't touch his goblet, or say anything at all. His face is all cold fury and defiance.

I mean, sure. I've read the *Odyssey*. Odysseus was kind of a dick.

The Archon raises the sword above his head. 'Let the feast begin.'

He drives it down into the body of the roast pig, where it makes a sickening squelching noise. Magister Zhang flinches.

A kitchen staff member emerges with a long, sharp knife and slices into the pig. The Archon reaches forward and removes the red apple from its mouth, presenting it ceremonially to Magister Kovacevic, who receives it with a broad grin and takes a big bite.

He closes his eyes in bliss while he chews, looking like he hasn't eaten in a thousand years.

'I thought there'd be more live-in staff,' I say to Clementine. Seeing the magisters together like this somehow makes their numbers feel even smaller than usual. 'Five doesn't seem like a lot for eighty kids. Especially ...' I trail off, not wanting to seem rude.

'Especially for *troubled teens*?' Clementine replies, making a face. 'Yeah, we're pretty well behaved here.'

'Why?' I ask. 'It doesn't seem like there's a lot of discipline.'

'There's discipline,' she says dismissively. 'If you're really bad, you get sent to the Desmoterion.'

'The what?'

'It's where they imprisoned Socrates,' she says, her tone slightly surprised that I don't already know this obvious piece of general knowledge. 'Except it isn't really. It's a solitary confinement room in the cellar.'

I glance around the dining hall, uneasy. The Agathion brochure didn't mention solitary confinement. It mentioned successful past alumni who went on to be famous actors and entrepreneurs and politicians.

'I thought Agathion was about *self-discipline*,' I say.

'It is, mostly. We know how good we have it here,' Clementine says. 'We've all been to other places – wilderness retreats, reform schools, military academies. This place is paradise compared to the alternatives.'

Why risk getting chucked out when you know the next place will be a million times worse?’

My eyes drift back to Cyrus, who is standing on his own. The other graduating students huddle together, chatting animatedly, but Cyrus gazes at the window, as if he’s imagining flying away. I remember the tarot card he gave me.

‘Do you know how to get to the central tower?’ I ask Clementine.

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t think you *can* get up there,’ she says. ‘I heard it’s just decorative.’

The magisters have filled their plates, and now students begin to line up, helping themselves to piles of glazed carrots, roast potatoes, fresh bread and thick, glistening slabs of roast pork with great slopping ladles of gravy.

Clementine stands up and makes her way over to the food without saying another word. I wait a moment because I don’t want her to think I’m clinging to her, but I end up standing behind Lacey in line for the food. One of her minions notices me and whispers something in her ear. Lacey turns around, a cold glint in her eye.

‘Enjoying the spectacle, *Piglet*?’ she asks with a sneer.

She’s clearly upset, I guess about Cyrus graduating. But because she’s a queen, she’s decided to take it out on me. I swallow, wishing there was a way I could avoid this particular confrontation. ‘I’m sorry that Cyrus is leaving,’ I tell her. ‘You looked surprised.’

Her eyes blaze from coldness into fury. ‘You’re not *one of us*,’ she says scornfully. ‘Whatever’s going on with Cyrus is none of your business.’

I flinch back as if her words have actually burned me. My mouth turns dry and my ears start to ring.

Oak appears, his knuckles white against the brown tweed of Lacey’s blazer where he grips her arm. ‘Lacey,’ he says.

‘Don’t *touch* me,’ she whispers furiously, shaking her arm free.

‘We’re all upset,’ Oak murmurs back. ‘You don’t need to take it out on the piglet.’

Lacey makes a disgusted noise. ‘Not you too!’ she hisses. ‘She can’t be trusted. How do you know she’s not ...’ Her eyes turn to the teachers’ table in the centre of the room, where Magister Zhang and Magistra Hewitt are chatting in low voices to Magistra Galal.

‘I *don’t* know,’ Oak replies through gritted teeth. ‘Which is precisely why I am not *making a huge fuss* in front of her.’

Lacey stares at him, a look of burning rage written clearly on her face. Then she turns and stalks back to her minions, who flock around her like a protective gaggle of geese.

Cyrus hasn't taken a plate – he's standing alone on one side of the room, gazing at the feast.

Is it weird that none of his friends have gone to talk to him? Not even Lacey?

I catch his eye and he smiles, so I go over to him.

'Hey,' I say.

There's something a bit off about his smile – it doesn't seem to have the same roguish twinkle as before.

'Hello there,' he says.

'Congratulations on graduating,' I say.

'Thank you.' His voice is smooth and calm, but like his smile, it isn't quite right.

Or is it?

I barely know him, after all.

'Did you really not know you were graduating?' I ask, curious. 'Was there a test? An exam?'

I think of the bowl of soup in my room. The sharp, bitter taste of it. Maybe he was drugged, too. Maybe that's why he seems strange.

Cyrus chuckles. 'It's all a test,' he says. 'Right from the very beginning.'

'Sure,' I say, playing along. 'I mean, isn't that just being a teenager? It's all tests.'

'Hmm.' He nods and looks at the students again thoughtfully.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

'Honestly?' he replies. 'I can't fucking wait to get out of here.'

'Really?' I say. 'You seemed pretty content at lunch the other day.'

'Sure,' he says vaguely. 'At lunch.'

A crease appears in his brow. His tongue darts out and he licks his lips.

'Well,' I say, 'until everyone freaked out about the tarot card.'

Cyrus nods, but I can tell he isn't really listening. 'I'm sure it was nothing,' he says mildly. 'Young people fight all the time. It'll blow over.'

I blink. It wasn't exactly a *fight*. Was it?

'Tell me about the Knights of Empedocles,' I say.

Cyrus's entire posture changes in an instant. His head snaps around to me, alert and suddenly very, very focused.

‘What did you say?’ he says. ‘Where did you hear that?’

I shrink back from him. ‘Y-you mentioned them yesterday,’ I stammer. ‘In your room. I – was curious.’

He stares at me for a long moment. ‘A stupid game,’ he says at last. ‘I was only teasing you.’

‘Oh.’ This is the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had.

‘Goodbye, then,’ Cyrus says, a frown creasing his brow, and wanders off.

I watch him as he goes, slightly dazed. *A stupid game*. Is that really all our conversation was? More hazing for the piglet?

I hadn’t thought so, but maybe I thought wrong.

Maybe he never wanted to know me at all.

---

I line up with everyone else, and I take a bit of everything – carrots, potatoes and parsnips, mushy peas, Yorkshire puddings and apple gravy – and make my way back to my table. The scent of the pork is amazing, rich and spicy. I can smell cloves and ginger and star anise.

Someone slides into the seat next to me, and I look up to see that it’s not Clementine but Oak.

He seems more pale than usual, his lips thin and quivering with ... what? Rage? Misery? Fear?

‘What did he say to you?’ he asks, without preamble.

‘Cyrus?’ I reply. ‘Nothing, really. He seemed ... weird.’

‘I bet.’

He doesn’t have a plate. ‘Not hungry?’ I say.

‘Nope.’

He pushes his dark hair out of his eyes, and I notice a faint tremble in his long fingers. The silver acorn dangling from his ear glints in the candlelight.

The students opposite me are digging into their dinner. At the head table, Magister Kovacevic is tearing into his with gusto, pink juices dripping down his chin. Oak looks away, his pale skin tinged with green. He looks utterly miserable as he picks at the glittery black polish on his nails.

A sudden memory surfaces, of Cassidy painting my nails in our secret spot by the Devil’s Chair. We were supposed to be in math class, but we never went if we could help it. We’d get caught later on and thrown in

detention. But at least we wouldn't have to sit through Mr Hearst explaining quadratic equations while staring at our boobs.

Well, at Cassidy's boobs. I didn't have much to stare at.

The nail polish had been a deep red, with a name like *Vampyre* or *Temptress* or something. Cassidy was doing a terrible job, and my fingers looked like they'd been through a massacre.

I'd splayed them out in front of me like zombie hands, shuffling towards her making grunting noises while she laughed and squealed.

The memory blurs, and Cassidy's laughter morphs into a long, harsh scream.

I blink, and rub my palms against my skirt to stop them from tingling.

Oak is still fixated on his fingernails.

I glance around and see Ren and Gideon sitting at the opposite end of the long table to me and Oak. Ren looks close to tears, and Gideon is talking softly to her, stroking her hand with his thumb.

Lacey is sitting with her ladies-in-waiting. They huddle around her like living armour, trying to make distracting chatter. The queen is trying to look unconcerned, but her eyes keep straying to Cyrus. I notice she hasn't touched her dinner.

Fair enough. Her boyfriend is leaving, and I don't think he's spoken to her or even looked at her all night.

At the head table, Cyrus clinks glasses with one of the magisters. They are smiling and chatting with each other. Cyrus looks like he belongs there, in that world of adults. Can't he see his friends are upset?

The other graduating students seem relieved to be leaving, but they don't have the same social ease as Cyrus. They talk together, trying not to draw any attention to themselves.

With a grunt of pleasure, Magister Kovacevic abandons his fork and starts digging into the pig carcass with his bare hands, shoving handfuls of meat and fat into his mouth, and following them with great gulps of wine from a goblet that is constantly refilled by a discreet member of the kitchen staff. The other magisters don't look at him or talk to him, they just chat politely to each other as if he isn't there covering the front of his robes in grease and spilled wine.

So much for the Archon's lecture about moderation.

Is he always like this? Is he having some kind of episode? Maybe he's drunk. I'm sure it's not the first time someone has behaved abominably at



their own retirement party. He looks pretty old – perhaps he’s senile.

‘Hey,’ I say to Oak, who is still looking down at his fingers, his jaw clenched. ‘Who does the thing with the red thread? Who wrapped my bed up and put the knife on my pillow?’

He doesn’t respond, still picking at his fingernails.

‘I mean, is it the school? Or the students? Because ... I think I was drugged. Something in my soup, so I wouldn’t wake up. Do you know anything about that?’

Nothing. The little pile of glittering black flakes is growing.

I take a breath. ‘Just now, it was like Cyrus barely remembered. I know I only met him a few days ago, but ... he would have recognised me, right? I wonder if ... if he’s been drugged, too.’

‘It’s the magisters.’ His voice is like stone.

‘I’m sorry?’

He presses a finger into the glittery black pile. ‘The magisters are the ones who make the red thread cage. It’s a kind of test.’

‘What are they testing for?’

‘Character.’

This tells me nothing. ‘Oak. What’s going on?’ I glance over at the raised table, at Magister Kovacevic and his fistfuls of meat. ‘This isn’t ... normal.’

He turns to look at me, and his eyes are as cold and dangerous as Odysseus’s wine-dark sea.

‘Stay out of it.’

I feel a sting of shame at his rejection, followed by a hot flare of anger. If it’s none of my business, then why did he come and sit next to me?

‘Is this still about the tarot card?’ I ask. ‘Because I don’t believe in any of that stuff.’

I almost sound like I mean it.

‘Just because you don’t believe in it,’ Oak says, his voice quiet, ‘doesn’t mean it isn’t true.’

‘You think I bring death and destruction?’ I sound like I’m about to burst into tears, and I hate it.

Oak doesn’t respond. Instead, his gaze travels up to the head table to Magister Kovacevic. His skin is bright red and glistening with sweat. Meat juice drips from his chin. He licks grease from his fingers and makes a moaning noise of pleasure.

I've only been here for a few days, and I've already let my feelings get out of control.

I'm here to get away from all that. To live a life of the mind, not the heart.

I can't lose control again.

I *can't*.

Magister Kovacevic lets out an animal-like roar. '*More*,' he cries.

A member of the waitstaff steps forward to refill his goblet with wine, but he pushes her aside, the goblet tumbling to the floor. He shoves his chair back and crawls onto the table towards the pig, one knee sliding on his own greasy plate, the other in a dish of glazed carrots. Students stare openly as he clambers on top of the pig carcass, straddling it and tearing chunks of meat from it with his hands, shovelling them into his mouth, making guttural, almost sexual noises as he does so.

The Archon doesn't seem at all perturbed. The other magisters barely spare him a glance as they continue to eat calmly, taking small, measured bites of roast pork and vegetables.

Cyrus, who is seated right next to Magister Kovacevic, doesn't seem worried either. He watches calmly as Magister Kovacevic snaps a bone in half and guzzles the marrow, a little whisper of a smile around his lips. Then he picks up a silver spoon and peers at the back of it, as if he's using it as a mirror to admire his reflection.

Magister Kovacevic has shoved his entire head into the cavity of the pig's rib cage. I can hear licking and sucking and crunching.

No student is eating anymore. Everyone is staring at the table. At Magister Kovacevic.

Oak pushes back his chair and stands. 'I can't be here,' he mutters.

'Wait,' I say, and get up to follow him, but he's too quick, striding through the crowd and vanishing.

Magister Kovacevic pulls his head from inside the pig. His face is covered in globs of fat and congealed blood.

'Probably time to turn in, old friend,' the Archon says, his voice strangely gentle.

'Hhhhhungry,' says Magister Kovacevic in a harsh voice.

His movements are jerky and strange. As the Archon leads him down the steps from the raised dais, he lurches towards a pretty girl with glossy black hair, reaching out grasping hands and opening his mouth as if to give her a

passionate, slobbery kiss. The girl shrinks back with a squeal, and the Archon steers him away.

As Magister Kovacevic brushes past me, I can smell congealing fat and sweat and ...

Flowers, honey-sweet.

The scent of heather.

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# SIX

20 September

It's hard to sleep. I keep going over the events of the feast in my mind. Cyrus's weird behaviour. Magister Kovacevic's greasy, gaping mouth, his jerky, unnatural movements. The overpowering scent of honey-sweet heather.

In the dark of night, I can't help but think about another sweet floral scent. Jasmine. Behind the gym at St Catherine's, mingling with the scent of charred flesh and bone.

I have that sick feeling you get when you haven't eaten.

Why weren't the other magisters more concerned by Magister Kovacevic? Is this normal behaviour at Agathion?

I wonder if he'll remember the feast in the morning. If he'll be embarrassed.

I guess I'll never know – he's probably left by now.

I startle at every creak and thump. Wind whistles through gaps in the stone walls, and there's a scrabbling sound coming from the ceiling that might be mice.

Once or twice I slip into a kind of half-sleep, only to be jerked awake again by a low, quiet chuckle sounding right in my ear. I sit bolt upright, fumbling for the switch to my bedside lamp.

Warm light floods the room.

I'm alone.

But it doesn't feel like it. It's almost as if I can sense something, deep below Agathion College. Something vast, so vast I can barely comprehend it.

The hair prickles on the back of my neck and my arms break into goosebumps.

Something is wrong.

I get out of bed, unsure of what to do. Rain hammers against my window, and a clap of thunder sounds overhead, so loud that I feel the floor beneath me tremble. A flash of lightning illuminates the bleak, sodden moor, and I reach out to steady myself against the windowsill, thoughts of the Tower card running through my mind.

I know I'm being ridiculous.

I came to Agathion to learn control over my mind and body. To live a life of the mind. Not to cower, terrified in my room, jumping at shadows and figments of my imagination.

I need to get myself under control. I'll go to the bathroom. Splash my face with water. Use the toilet. Then back to bed.

The hallway outside my room is dark and still. My feet pad silently in socks down to the bathroom. On my right are other bedroom doors, each one containing peacefully sleeping Agathion students, unburdened by nightmares. On my left are the huge arched windows that look down onto the courtyard – the forum, as I'm learning to call it.

A light moves in the darkness outside, making the raindrops on the window glitter.

I peer down at the forum. There's someone out there, in the rain. Holding a lantern. Multiple someones. Four hooded figures, gathered at the edge of the forum beside one of the huge standing stones.

Three have their heads bowed against the rain, but the third, the one holding the lantern, glances up at the windows, as if he can sense my presence.

It's the new magister – Magister Zhang, his face illuminated by the golden glow of the lantern, one of his hands pressed against the dark, wet stone.

I shrink back, but if he's seen me, he doesn't show any indication.

I should go back to my room. Go back to bed.

But I don't.

I continue down the corridor, past the bathroom, and head down the stairs, the stone cold through my socks.

On the ground floor, I slip silently across the foyer, listening for voices, but the sound of the rain drowns out everything.

They've moved – now Magister Zhang stands in front of a different stone, his breath coming in steaming clouds. Now I'm closer, I'm pretty certain the hooded figure next to him is Magistra Galal. The third figure is definitely Magister Kovacevic. His hood has slipped back, and he leans heavily on Magistra Galal and the fourth figure, who has their back to me. Magister Kovacevic is wearing the same grease-stained robe he wore at the feast, but now he also wears a kind of necklace made of woven red thread. His face looks clammy and pale and he's shivering and breathing heavily. He must have gotten really drunk at dinner. Maybe the others are helping him to walk it off.

I don't recognise the fourth figure at all, the one holding the lantern. I don't think it's the Archon or Magistra Hewitt. Could it be one of the day teachers? Or a student?

I watch from behind a weathered column as Magister Zhang bends down and scrabbles in the sodden grass at his feet. Then he presses a muddy hand to the second stone. I creep closer.

'Alva shouldn't have let him get so out of control at the graduation dinner,' Magister Zhang is saying to Magistra Galal. 'We have a reputation to maintain.'

'You've been away too long,' Magistra Galal replies, her tone offhand. 'These kids are used to seeing adults behave despicably. Who are they going to tell?'

Too long? Magister Zhang has been here before? He can't be older than thirty. Was he a student here once? Is that how Magistra Galal knows him?

She and the fourth figure support Magister Kovacevic, half-dragging him to the next stone in the ring.

I follow, keeping to the shadows.

At the third stone, Magister Zhang leans forward and huffs out a breath onto its surface, then shudders.

What am I seeing here? Some kind of post-graduation tradition? Magister Kovacevic moans, and Magistra Galal shushes him, glancing up nervously at the windows which surround the forum.

Zhang has a sour scowl on his face. 'I see the old place hasn't changed.'

‘Did you expect anything else?’

Magister Zhang sighs. “Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas,” he says morosely. ‘Now, now, Walter,’ Magistra Galal replies. ‘You’ve had your turn.’

Magister Zhang’s first name is Walter?

At the fourth stone, Zhang holds out a hand expectantly to the fourth figure, who lets go of Kovacevic to dig in the folds of their robe. Magistra Galal lets out a yelp of protest as Magister Kovacevic slides to the ground with a wet-sounding grunt.

‘I can’t hold him up on my own.’

Through the rain and the gloom, I see that this stone contains a small, shadowed alcove in its ancient surface. The fourth figure passes something to Magister Zhang, who places it in the alcove. I can’t tell what it is, but it’s small.

They haul Kovacevic to his feet once more, dragging him over to the next stone. Magister Zhang leans forward and whispers something to it.

‘Hhhhungry,’ Magister Kovacevic rasps. A thin line of drool slips from between his lips, glinting in the light of the lantern.

Magister Zhang makes a disgusted sound as he drags Kovacevic through the wet grass. ‘I hate this.’

‘Be grateful you didn’t have to do it last time,’ Magistra Galal says.

‘Was it this bad?’

‘Worse.’

Magister Zhang shudders. ‘I don’t want to know.’

‘Then stop complaining.’

Zhang leans his head against the sixth and final stone for a long moment, his eyes closed.

Magister Kovacevic groans. ‘Nnno,’ he says. ‘Not yyyet.’

‘Apologies,’ Magistra Galal says to him. ‘But you are out of time.’

Magister Zhang straightens up, shaking his head a little as if to clear his mind from fog. ‘Okay,’ he says. ‘We’re done.’

They start to make their way into the centre of the courtyard, towards the monopteron. I creep forward, my hand resting on one of the giant standing stones. It radiates a splintering cold energy that saps the heat from me. I can smell petrichor and ozone, and something else that I’ve never encountered before but am absolutely certain is the scent of snow.

Magister Zhang's lantern goes out, and the forum is plunged into darkness.

Then the world slides away from underneath me.

For a moment I feel like I'm falling through a vast, formless abyss. It's as though time and space cease to exist, and I'm hanging there, falling without direction, while vast unnameable shadows loom in the corners of my vision.

And then I'm back on firm soil, my hand still resting on rough, rain-soaked stone.

The rain has stopped.

Faint whispers tickle at the edge of my consciousness, although I can't make out any distinct words or voices. An icy breath touches my cheek.

Everything is different.

The dark walls of Agathion have vanished, and I'm out on the moor.

A pale moon washes everything with colourless light, bare and bleak. At night, the moor feels even more wild and unknowable. There are no larkspurs or dragonflies or beetles to bring the endless desolation to life. I can't make out any flowers or little green leaves. The huge granite stones still tower over me, stark and sombre, like crumbling gravestones. They are ancient, misshapen and crusted with silvery lichen on the outside.

I hear a distant rumble of thunder, but there are no clouds overhead. Only unfamiliar stars.

I can't see Agathion anywhere.

Just moor, stretching out before me like a woolly, colourless blanket in all directions.

On the inside of the circle, it looks like there is nothing growing. No moss or grass or lichen. Bare earth, and a huge stone slab in the middle where the monopteron was, like an altar.

Am I dreaming?

Magistra Galal and the robed fourth figure are coaxing Magister Kovacevic down onto this stone slab. Kovacevic crawls onto it like a reluctant dog, emitting little whines and moans, and lies down on his back.

Magister Zhang steps forward and loops more red thread around Kovacevic's wrists and ankles. Kovacevic doesn't protest, although his breathing is fast and erratic, his body shaking so much I wonder if he's having a seizure. His cheeks and the tip of his nose are blotchy and red.

This is no old-school tradition. No hazing ritual.

This is ... the *other* kind of ritual.



My palms start to itch, and I rub them against my wet pyjamas.  
Agathion is a school of rational thought. Of intellectual rigour and logic.  
There isn't any of that stuff here.

Is there?

'Come on,' Magister Zhang says shortly. 'Let's get out of here.'

Magistra Galal looks distastefully down at Kovacevic. 'Shouldn't we stay?'

'Absolutely not,' Magister Zhang says. 'I don't want to see that shit.'

They turn and walk back the way they came, and as they do so, the fourth figure's hood slips a little. I bite back a gasp.

It's Cyrus.

What is he doing here with the magisters?

One by one, they pass through the gap between the standing stones, flickering and vanishing from sight.

I should go back to my room. Whatever is happening here tonight, I'm not a part of it, and I don't want to be.

I could be all cosy and safe in my bed right now.

I could be back home in Florida.

But what if I can't get back? What if I'm stuck here, in this strange place?

I don't even know what it is. The past? Another world?

This sort of thing isn't supposed to happen.

So why does it always happen to *me*?

Kovacevic is moving, like he's trying to get up, but it's as if the loose threads of red string are keeping him somehow pinned. He thrashes and trembles, his head falling to the side, facing me, his eyes locking onto mine.

I feel a surge of nausea.

The redness on his cheeks and nose has swollen into blisters. He reaches out a hand to me, and I see his fingers are also covered in angry blisters.

'*Help me,*' he rasps in that distorted, inhuman voice.

Am I doing this? Is he dying because of me?

I hear my own breath, coming harder than before.

My palms are burning against the cold night air.

I can smell flowers.

I have to stay in control.

I sink down onto my haunches and stare at my hands. Beneath streaks of mud and grit the scars are pink and shiny.

This is what happened at the Devil's Chair. With Cassidy and Mr. Hearst. It's happening again. *No, no, no ...*

Magister Kovacevic's grunting, gasping noises are growing louder, more agitated. He writhes on the altar as frost appears on his wet eyelashes, and his filthy robe grows stiff.

Then his head is thrown back as he screams, a primal sound that stirs some kind of deep and ancient terror inside me.

The blisters on his cheeks burst, splitting his skin open. The weeping liquid from them freezes solid.

I can't make it stop.

The scream quickly becomes a gurgle, then a rasping, wet choking sound as he tries and fails to draw breath. His skin grows mottled and dark, his fingertips turning black.

The air is heavy with sweet scent of heather.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper. 'I don't know what to do.'

Magister Kovacevic has gone still, his skin completely black now. So still, I'm certain he has frozen solid. The temperature drops even further, and I feel frost appear on my own lashes. The icy air burns my lungs when I inhale, and my toes tingle with pins and needles.

The faint whispers grow frantic, but I still can't make out any actual words. The body – because that's all Magister Kovacevic is now, nothing but a body – emits a kind of shudder – not a living movement, but a trembling that feels almost geological, like an earthquake or a collapsing glacier.

The air around it shimmers, and it's like reality itself is bending.

It happens in the blink of an eye. The body doesn't so much vanish as ... disintegrate into nothingness. Collapsing in upon itself like a dying star.

Then it's gone.

Nothing left. No ice or dust or bones. Nothing but a faint haze in the air, and a wisp of something dark red, the colour of dried blood, that spreads and dissolves until I can't make it out anymore.

My palms throb, and pain pulses deep within me. I can hear someone crying and dimly realise it's me.

I did this. I killed a teacher.

Again.

The ring of stones grows silent, save for the whistling of wind on the moor, and the faint whispers on the edge of my consciousness.

I'm completely alone.

Panic rises in me, and I turn and run out of the ring of stones.

For a moment I have that sense of weightlessness, of falling through a void. Then earth hardens under my bare feet, freezing rain trickles down the back of my neck, and the walls of Agathion rise around me once more.

I manage to find my way back to my room, change my wet pyjamas, and fall into bed, sure that sleep will never come. Every time I close my eyes I see Kovacevic turning mottled blue-black, his open-mouthed cry splitting his whole face open as blisters burst and freeze on his skin.

My toes are numb with cold. My face. My eyelids. The only part of me that isn't freezing is my hands. My palms are itchy like they've been sunburned.

I came here to escape this.

I thought Agathion could fix me.

But I was wrong.

I *am* wrong.

# SEVEN

21 September

Dawn comes eventually, struggling in through my window as grey as dishwater. My eyes are red raw from sleeplessness, my mind still churning through the events of last night.

I came here to escape this. To escape what happened at St Catherine's.

I thought Agathion would save me. But there are dark things happening here. Dark things feeding the darkness already inside me.

Should I leave?

The thought of it makes my heart ache. I've only been here a week, but it feels more like home than anywhere ever has.

My hands and feet are still muddy, and I desperately want to wash away the sight of Magister Kovacevic. The sound of his scream. The icy blisters bursting on his cheeks.

I make my way to the bathroom with plenty of time to spare before breakfast.

As I approach, the door swings open, and a pair of girls wearing nothing but towels scurry out.

Their eyes dart to me curiously. I look away, because they are nearly naked and looking at them would be weird. But is looking away *weirder*? Should I smile? Introduce myself? Make a joke about last night's dinner?

Unease writhes in my belly. Did anyone see me, last night, creeping around in the rain?

Does anyone else know about the ring of stones, and the ... *other* ring of stones, wherever or whenever it is?

I don't know if I'll ever get comfortable with showering at school. I never did it before I came here – it felt too weird to be so exposed in front of other students. At St Catherine's, other girls would parade around naked in the locker rooms, flashing perky breasts and perfectly manicured pubic hair. I always locked myself in a bathroom stall and struggled out of my sweaty gym clothes back into my school uniform, which would chafe and itch for the rest of the day.

But I'm at boarding school. For now, anyway.

I've been showering late at night, or even midafternoon, to try to avoid the morning rush. But my feet and hands are filthy with mud, and this morning it can't be avoided.

I slip into the bathroom and find myself surrounded by damp girls in various stages of undress. It's crowded, especially around the mirrors where girls twist their hair and pout their lips, seemingly unaware of the dark secrets this school is hiding. Of course Lacey is there, in prime position. She glances at me with disinterest, then turns back to the mirror and applies eyeliner to her already enormous, perfect brown eyes.

I was under the impression that we weren't allowed to have makeup at Agathion. Doesn't everyone get their luggage taken away on arrival? Not that I care – I've never worn makeup before, and I'm certainly not intending to start now.

I duck into a stall and lock the door, sitting down on the toilet and closing my eyes.

Blackened fingers.

Blisters burst and freeze.

The smell of heather.

'I can't believe Kovacevic got so wasted,' I hear one of the girls say.

'I *know*, right? So unprofessional.'

'Did you see the way he went for Althea?' one girl says. 'Practically assaulted her.'

'Yes, ew. Poor thing.'

'Men are disgusting.'

'Coralie had him as her magister and said he was beyond useless,' says the first girl. 'He fell asleep in their meetings all the time.'

'Does that mean she has the new guy now?'

The first girl nods. 'She's so lucky. He's a dreamboat.'

The second girl sighs. 'What I wouldn't give for an hour with my stylist.'

'Ugh, right?' says another one. 'A pedicure.'

When I emerge from my stall, the queen and her courtiers are gone, only a few quiet stragglers left behind.

I duck into a shower cubicle and turn the ornate brass taps, clambering out of my pyjamas as I wait for the water to heat up.

The shower tiles are beautiful – thistles with vibrant purple flowers and spiked sea-green leaves. Some are cracked, though. The grout is crumbling and black with mould and scum.

The water isn't getting any warmer, and I realise that maybe it isn't going to. In any case, I can't wait here all day, and I really do need to shower.

I take a breath and duck under the water, letting out an involuntary yelp. It's ice cold – like pounding needles of pain. I lather up as quickly as possible and rinse in record time, emerging frigid and shivering.

A girl brushing her teeth looks at me sympathetically.

'Morning, Piglet.' she says around her toothbrush.

'There's no hot water,' I tell her.

'Morning showers are always cold. It's supposed to enliven the brain, according to Hippocrates. They turn the hot water on at midday.'

I add Hippocrates to my mental list of things to read up on.

The mood at breakfast is subdued, like everyone has a hangover from the feast last night. The magisters sit at their table as they always do, chatting quietly.

The Archon's dark eyes turn to me as I enter the room, as if he can sense my presence.

Does he know what happened last night?

Does he know I saw it?

I swallow, and hurry over to grab a plate and some toast.

Ren, Gideon and Oak are sitting together looking miserable. Even the sweet pea blossom pinned to Oak's blazer lapel is drooping. Ren smiles at me, though, so I carry my toast and eggs over to them, and sit at their table.

Gideon pours me a cup of tea, and we sit there for a moment in silence.

Oak frowns in a thoughtful sort of way. 'Sorry I was a dick to you last night,' he says. 'Nothing personal.'

His eyes meet mine and I see genuine remorse in them. His lips quirk in a tiny smile, and I find that I don't really want to look away.

‘It was a weird night,’ I reply. ‘I take it graduations aren’t always like that?’

Ren rubs the shaved part of her head. ‘Not usually, no.’

‘Last night was our first retirement,’ Gideon remarks. ‘I didn’t care for it.’

I look back down at my breakfast.

‘I don’t understand *why* it happened last night,’ Oak mutters, pushing scrambled eggs around his plate. ‘Graduation isn’t supposed to be until Samhain.’

Ren sighs. ‘I wish Cyrus was here,’ she says. ‘He’d know what to do.’

‘He probably still is,’ I tell her. ‘It’s probably not too late to find him and say goodbye.’

Oak lets out a little snort. ‘I bet he was out of here as soon as the feast was over.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘He was here late last night. I saw him.’

I regret the words as soon as they are out of my mouth.

Gideon turns sharp eyes to me. ‘Saw him where?’

What am I supposed to say? That I followed Cyrus through a void in space and time to another version of the ring of stones? That I watched as Magister Kovacevic froze to death?

That I’m the one who made it happen?

They are all watching me. Waiting. ‘I – I got up to go to the bathroom. I saw him from the windows that look over the courtyard.’

Oak leans over so fast he knocks over his teacup, spilling amber liquid everywhere. ‘What was he doing?’ he says, while Ren mops up the tea with her napkin.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, not entirely dishonestly. ‘I just glimpsed him. He was with Magister Zhang and Magistra Galal.’

‘Anyone else?’

I think about Magister Kovacevic, mottled black and dying. ‘No.’

‘Did Cyrus do anything?’ Oak asks. ‘Say anything? Interact with the stones in any way?’

How does he know?

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I only saw him for a moment.’

I can’t say any more. I’d have to tell them everything, and I’m not ready for that. Oak’s face falls, and I feel a little emotional twist at having disappointed him.

‘What’s Samhain?’ I ask, trying to change the subject. ‘You said that’s when graduation usually happens.’

‘First of November,’ Oak replies. ‘It’s when the walls between worlds are thinnest. Good time for magic.’

Gideon and Ren exchange a quick glance at Oak’s use of the word *magic*, then look back at me as if to gauge my reaction. Perhaps a week ago I would have laughed, but after what I saw last night, the idea of magic doesn’t seem very funny anymore.

‘November first,’ I say. ‘My birthday.’

‘Your birthday is on Samhain?’ Oak asks.

I shrug. ‘I guess so.’

Oak glances up at the high table. I follow his gaze and see the Archon watching us, a very faint smile on his thin lips, so faint I’m not convinced it’s there at all.

‘Maybe Lacey was right,’ Gideon murmurs. ‘Maybe they did bring her here for a reason.’

I don’t like the sound of that.

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My class that morning is Peripatetic Philosophy. It’s much the same as my previous class, a spirited discussion of the reading, in which Professor Hughes asks an introductory question, and then a debate is entirely led by the students. The difference is this class takes place on the moor. A thin drizzle seeps from oppressively low grey clouds, and after five minutes my feet are soaked, and I’m totally freezing. I’m barely listening to the debate, something about a shepherd and a tomb. Instead I’m gazing all around for a glimpse of the ring of stones from last night. The twin to the ring inside Agathion.

But all I see is moor, vast and dismal, the only colour the faint wash of purple from the blooming heather.

I’d love to believe that I dreamed it all, but I know I didn’t.

‘In Cicero’s analysis of Gyges,’ a student is saying, ‘he asserts that a good person makes decisions that are good for their soul, not because they’re afraid of some kind of punishment.’



‘I have no idea what they’re talking about,’ I confess quietly to Gideon. ‘Who or what is Gyges?’

He flashes me a quick grin. ‘It’s a ring,’ he says. ‘Named after an ancient king. Plato tells a story where a shepherd comes across Gyges’s tomb, and in it he finds a magic ring that bestows the power of invisibility.’

‘I think that was Gollum.’

Gideon chuckles. ‘Tolkien was a big fan of ancient mythology.’

‘So what’s Plato’s take on it?’

‘He says that even if the shepherd is a good man, he’d use the ring for selfish means. He’d steal and cheat until he became a god among men, mighty and utterly corrupt.’

‘So he’s saying nobody should have that kind of power, because it’ll always turn good people into monsters.’

Gideon glances over his shoulder at the grey spires of Agathion, bristling on the gaunt shoulder of the hill like some spiny beast. ‘Exactly.’

We fall a little further behind the other students. Despite the drizzle, I can’t help but admire the desolate beauty of the moor. I notice the flowers that Oak showed me on my first day. Saxifrage. Marsh violet. Eyebright. I remember the way his face lit up as he spoke, the way he pushed his hair from his brow with his long, elegant fingers. A bird wheels overhead – some kind of hawk or falcon, I think. Gideon’s calm presence is soothing to my troubled mind, and I find my shoulders starting to loosen up, my dread replaced with curiosity.

‘What do you know about the ring of stones in the forum?’ I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

Gideon shrugs. ‘Not much. They were placed sometime in the Bronze Age, around four thousand years ago, according to radiocarbon dating.’

‘What were they used for?’

‘Nobody is really sure. Some scholars say they were temples or lunar observatories, but they’re only guessing. We don’t know who built them or what language they spoke.’

I shiver and gaze around at the bleak grey expanse of the moor. It seems wild to me that with all the science and technology we have at our fingertips, there’s still so much we don’t know.

‘It’s easier than you might think,’ Gideon remarks, as if he can read my thoughts, ‘for entire civilizations to just be lost. We think of ourselves as

permanent, but in a few thousand years there might not be any trace of us, other than microplastics.'

A student appears, jogging across the moor from school, his cheeks pink from exertion. 'The Archon wants to see the piglet,' he pants.

The dread returns in a sickening rush as a murmur of surprise washes through the other students. Gideon's pale brow creases.

We're at least half a mile from school. 'Right now?' I ask, unable to conceal the tremor in my voice.

Professor Hughes adjusts his collar, as if he's suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. 'Hurry along,' he says to me. 'Don't want to keep Archon Leek waiting.'

The way he says it makes me wonder if all the day teachers are afraid of the magisters.

'Bye,' I say to Gideon.

'Good luck,' he replies, but his eyes are slightly narrowed, like he's suspicious of me.

The Archon is sitting at his desk, silver-rimmed spectacles balanced on his nose, an old leather-bound book resting in front of him.

'Please sit down,' he says, gesturing to a chair.

The Archon's office is similar to Magistra Hewitt's – lots of dark polished wood and books and antique furniture. It's bigger, though, with a bay window looking out over the moors, and a huge glass cabinet lining one wall, full of what looks like ancient Greek pottery.

'It's mostly Minoan,' he says, following my gaze. 'From around 1500 BCE. But there are a few older pieces of Vasiliki ware as well. Have you ever been to Greece, Miss Whittaker?'

I shake my head. 'I'd very much like to, someday,' I say.

'Perhaps that day will come sooner than you think,' he says enigmatically. 'It's a long time since I've been anywhere. But I hope to change that soon.'

'Are you planning on retiring?' I ask, trying to be polite. He looks much older than Magister Kovacevic did.

The Archon laces his fingers together, a thin smile spreading on his lips. 'Something like that.'

I remember the rich smell of roast pork, the gibbering senselessness of Magister Kovacevic lying on the stone slab, his face purple with frostbite.

‘The thing I find fascinating,’ the Archon says, ‘is how the philosophy of the Greeks is so logical and unemotional. Thales of Miletus was the first to turn away from the gods, and search for answers in the world of natural science. Pythagoras created the concept of deductive reasoning. Protagoras also urged men to reject the gods, claiming that “man is the measure of all things”. And of course Socrates’s devotion to science and reason was so absolute that he gave up his life, rather than betray his own philosophy. And yet all these schools of thought grew from people whose gods were ruled by the tempests of emotion.’

I nod, as the Archon doesn’t appear to want me to participate in this discussion. He may be a fan of Socrates, but Socratic dialogue doesn’t seem to be his thing.

My attention is drawn to an object on the very top shelf of the glass cabinet. It isn’t pottery. It doesn’t even look Greek. It’s a small bowl with a handle on each side, made from brass or copper. It’s a squat, ugly thing, the inside of it black with tarnish, the outside speckled with green patina. It doesn’t look like the kind of thing anyone would want to put on display, but I guess I don’t know anything about antiques.

‘Plato,’ the Archon continues, ‘recognised that most men live trapped in the cave of ignorance, while some are destined for greatness. Some men can glimpse the secrets of the universe by turning away from shadows and make-believe.’

How can I turn away from shadows when they follow me everywhere I go?

‘Consider, for example, the many stories of betrayal found in Greek myth. Jason and Medea. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Ariadne and King Minos. So much trust squandered by affairs, lies. So much bloodshed comes from betrayal, don’t you think?’

I’m really not sure what he’s getting at, but I’m deeply uncomfortable. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Tell me, what is your impression of the other students here?’

‘Um,’ I say. ‘Everyone has been very nice.’

He smiles blandly. ‘Spoiled brats, all of them,’ he says. ‘Privileged sons and daughters of elites, who have never known a day of hardship. Have never known what it is to fight for their very existence. They’re nothing like you and me.’

I stare at him. What is going on? ‘Okay,’ I manage.

He reaches into a drawer and pulls out, of all things, a live, fat moth, cradling it in his gnarled hands. It looks just like the one I saw in my first class, and for a moment I wonder, irrationally, if it's the Archon's pet, if he's been using it to spy on me. Fuzzy antennae wave gently as the moth takes in its surroundings.

'You and I know what it is to be different, don't we, Miss Whittaker? What it means to suffer.'

He brushes the moth's furry abdomen with a gentle finger, and I suppress a shudder.

'Atreus and Thyestes were brothers, you know. When Thyestes betrayed his brother, Atreus cooked up Thyestes's own children and served them in a great feast. Thyestes gorged himself on their flesh, belching with satisfaction.'

He glances up from the moth, and I'm sure he knows I'm thinking about Magister Kovacevic at the retirement feast, his head inside the cavity of the roast pig.

'Perhaps, sir,' I venture, 'perhaps the Greeks developed their philosophy as a response to these tragedies of unpredictable gods and kings. Perhaps they believed that peace and prosperity could only come from outgrowing the tales of old.'

The Archon's face stretches in a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. 'Very astute,' he says, even though I'm pretty sure it wasn't. 'Our students here at Agathion are much like those unpredictable gods. They are fickle and selfish, driven by their baser desires. Too often they let themselves be swayed by the impulses of the body, which lead them to betrayal and ruin. We try to help them, of course. We teach them self-control to the extent we can. But they are not true philosophers. Not like you and me.'

What does he see in me? Is it because I came from a regular family? Because I'm not rich like the other kids here? I don't think I'm smarter than they are – I know I'm not. I don't speak ancient Greek, and I can't quote Marcus Aurelius or Hippocrates at will.

'Agathion is a special place,' he continues. 'You can achieve great things here. Do not fear me, Miss Whittaker. You and I, we are on the same side.'

'Yes, sir.'

I glance back up at the ugly copper bowl. It stands out, awkward against the crisp, structured lines and shapes of Greek pottery.

'May I ask a question?' I say timidly.

‘Of course.’

‘One of the other students mentioned that graduations usually happen on November first. So why was there one last night?’

The Archon lays his palm flat out in front of him. The moth spreads its wings and launches itself into the air, fluttering up towards the bay window.

‘Last night was ... unusual,’ he says. ‘But our standard graduation will be held on the first of November.’ A smile stretches his lips. ‘I believe that is your birthday.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We’ll be sure to make it special for you.’

The moth beats its wings against the window, as if trying to escape.

‘Which student was it?’ the Archon asks. ‘Who talked to you about graduation?’

‘I – I can’t remember,’ I lie. ‘I don’t know everyone’s names yet.’

One of the Archon’s eyebrows twitches, ever so slightly. He leans back in his chair. ‘As you know, this is a school for troubled young folk. Unfortunately, some students will try to break the rules. Will toy with danger. We do everything we can to guide them towards better choices, but sometimes disciplinary actions must be taken.’

I nod, trying to look like the kind of student who would never need to be disciplined.

‘There are some students who are beyond our help. Who have ... sinister aims. I trust that if you see anything of this sort, you’ll tell me.’

‘Yes, sir.’ He wants me to spy for him, just like Magistra Hewitt.

His eyes narrow, and the mood of the room suddenly shifts, like he knows I’ve been dishonest with him. I feel suddenly cold and shivery, as if I’m coming down with something.

‘I’m talking about dark magic, of course.’

He watches me carefully for a reaction to his use of the word *magic*. I adopt an expression of confusion.

‘Magic, sir?’

The Archon holds out a hand, and the moth flutters back down to his palm.

‘What else would you call it? Magic is what humans have always termed *the unexplainable* – there’s no need to be coy,’ he says, gazing down at the moth. ‘I know what happened at your previous school.’

Dread drops in my gut, heavy and stone-cold. I get the feeling he knows a lot more than what the newspapers reported.

His eyes flick up to mine. 'Magister Zhang tells me he saw you out of bed last night, after curfew.'

He knows everything.

He knows what happened to Magister Kovacevic.

He knows I did it.

'I'm sorry, sir,' I whisper. 'I didn't mean to ...'

He reads me like an open book, seeing all my guilt and fear. 'You must learn to control yourself,' he replies. 'Or else I'm afraid you will have to leave Agathion.'

'I want to learn,' I tell him. 'That's why I'm here.'

He smiles, benevolent. 'I know. You must remain calm. Remain logical. Do not let yourself be ruled by your body. That's what you want, isn't it?'

Tears are welling in my eyes. 'Yes,' I reply fervently. 'Yes. I wish I didn't have a body at all.'

'I have high hopes for you, Miss Whittaker,' the Archon says. 'Make the right choices and you will soar. But if you lose your way ...'

His fist closes around the moth, and my breath catches in my throat.

'Do we understand each other?' he asks.

I nod, unable to speak.

'Very well. That will be all.'

The Archon shakes the crumpled, dusty corpse of the moth onto his desk. I can't help but stare at its bent wings as I stand to leave.

I made a mistake, getting involved with Cassidy. I let my emotions take over the *impulses of the body*, as Archon Leek put it. And it was disastrous.

It's happening again, I know it. I'm letting myself *feel* too much. *Want* too much. I should stay away from Oak and Ren and Gideon.

Stay away from anything ... supernatural.

I guess now I believe in magic.

Or perhaps I always did, but just haven't wanted to admit it.

Either way, I'm done.

I tell myself this as I leave the Archon's office.

I tell myself as I read Hippocrates in the library.

But at dinner, I find myself drawn once more to the table where they sit. I don't tell them about my meeting with the Archon, and they don't ask, even though Gideon must have told them about me being called out of class. We

don't talk about graduation, or Cyrus, or Magister Kovacevic. We pretend that nothing weird is happening at Agathion, like we're regular teenagers chatting about regular things. Oak's eyes linger on me, and I feel warm for the first time since coming to Agathion.

Back in my room, I pull out the tarot card that Cyrus gave me and read his elegantly written words again, wondering once more about the Knights of Empedocles, and how I can get to the tower.

---

I settle into a kind of rhythm at Agathion. I attend my daily class, meet occasionally with Magistra Hewitt, and read in the library under the stern eye of Ms Winston, desperately trying to catch up. When I can find the time, I explore the seemingly endless halls of the draughty old building, searching for the spiral staircase that Cyrus told me about. The one that leads to the Sanctuary of Delphi. There's a whole floor of empty rooms, blanketed in a film of dust, and I drift through them like Miss Havisham, imagining the lives and stories that must have occupied them over the years. The building *feels* significant. Like it has seen a lot. Felt a lot. The wind whistles in through cracks and makes the moth-eaten curtains sigh. Doors slam, sometimes, unexpectedly, and everything creaks and groans, as if the building were a living thing, an aged, gaunt beast, crouching grim and grand on the moor.

Sometimes, on these solitary excursions, I hear the faint strains of violin music echoing along the corridors. But try as I might, I always get turned around in the labyrinth of rooms and passages, ending up where I started. If there really is a spiral staircase, then I don't find it.

At mealtimes, I sit with Ren, Gideon and Oak, in the dining hall for breakfast and dinner, and outside on a picnic blanket at lunchtime. I try not to look at the huge standing stones that border the grassed forum. Try not to think of that strange other ring of stones, and what happened to Magister Kovacevic.

The Archon said I would learn control here at Agathion. I don't know by what method he meant, but I find that studying is helping me feel more calm. More centred. I get used to researching without the internet. I can't quickly look up a word or a reference, can't turn to Wikipedia whenever I

need to know what the deal was with this or that dead Roman senator. I'm so used to working at a thousand miles per hour, but this slower pace feels *right* somehow. It allows me to delve more deeply into philosophical theories, instead of just skating across the surface.

It's hard work. I'm not really used to hard work. Everything usually comes so easily. I'm enjoying it, although there's a certain time of the afternoon when I become all drowsy and it's difficult to stay awake.

Today, a rare beam of sun is struggling through the tall arched windows in the library, dust motes dancing hypnotically, soothing me into a kind of dreamy daze.

Magistra Hewitt's voice echoes in my mind.

*What is it that you truly want?*

I'm half-asleep, lulled into a state of relaxation by the sunlight and Aurelius's *Meditations*, so my defensive walls are weak. For a moment, I let myself fantasise about the future.

I'm in the library, still, poring over an ancient book. A shadow falls over the page, and I look up. It's Oak, his eyes focused on the crumbling pages. He lays a fond and familiar hand on my shoulder as he leans over to point out a particular passage. Ren and Gideon are there, too. And Cyrus, drinking tea from a strange black bowl. There is laughter and warmth and connection between us all. Familiarity, along with the thrill of discovery, of uncovering ancient secrets.

The sun goes behind a cloud.

Oak turns the page, and a cloud of moths explodes from the book, fluttering out on silent, dusty wings. One of them brushes my cheek, and it's as cold as ice.

Cyrus drops the black bowl on the floor, and tea spills out.

But it isn't tea.

It's blood.

I sense that vast presence again, deep below Agathion. It throbs, and the building starts to tremble, books slide off shelves and crash onto the floor. I hear the sound of breaking glass and cracking timber, and realise that the entire building is collapsing around me.

Lightning flashes outside, and I hear the familiar sound of Cassidy's scream ...

I'm startled awake by the chiming of a grandfather clock that stands proudly by the library card catalogue. My fantasy must have slipped into a



genuine dream.

The library is deserted and silent. Even Ms Winston has gone. Darkness has swallowed the moor outside the large windows. The clock informs me, unbelievably, that it's nearly eight o'clock. I've missed dinner. The lecture is about to start.

I close my notebook and look down at the pen in my hand, frowning as I realise it isn't a pen at all. It's the wych elm twig that Oak handed me on my first day at Agathion. I've forgotten all about it.

*It'll give you prophetic dreams,* Oak said.

No, thank you.

I snap the twig in half, leaving both pieces behind on the desk.

---

The lecture hall is stuffy and smells of mothballs and slightly musty old carpet. It's crowded, too. Every Agathion student is present, but my eyes are drawn to Oak, slouched in the back row, looking more like a ragged crow than ever, a single violet limp on his lapel.

I reach into my pocket and run my fingers along the edges of the tarot card.

The Tower.

The Sanctuary of Delphi.

The Knights of Empedocles.

I head towards the spare seat next to Oak. But someone takes it before I can get there. Oak looks up and smiles apologetically.

I hear a trill of laughter and see Lacey, a few rows in front, her head tilted forward and a wicked glint in her eye. Her minions all titter along with her.

Are they laughing at me?

She doesn't seem to be missing Cyrus anymore. I guess now she gets to rule on her own.

I sit by myself at the very front of the room, next to the wall. The students nearest to me are talking about the steak-and-kidney pie that was served at dinner. I have no desire to join in.

Lacey giggles as I pull out my notebook, but I am determined not to be like Orpheus and look back.

Magistra Galal appears, her academic gown swirling around her as she approaches the podium, and the room grows quiet.

‘Good evening, students,’ she says, leaning over an ancient-looking microphone, which crackles and pops as she speaks. ‘I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities.’

‘Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,’ a student behind me mutters.

Better add Ovid to my reading list.

‘The Greeks tell many tales of transformation,’ Magistra Galal says. ‘Zeus was known to take the form of a swan or a bull. Arachne was turned into a spider by a jealous Hera. A colony of ants became a fiercely loyal human army – the Myrmidons.’

My abdomen feels heavy, and I feel a familiar creeping dread. My period isn’t technically due for a while, but it’s come early before. It’ll be my first at Agathion. I’m not looking forward to it, especially as it sounds like Magistra Hewitt isn’t planning on giving me my pills back.

Cassidy grounded me in my body, made me enjoy being a human being who could feel and touch and taste. But my period turned my body into a prison. A cage of pain. For at least two days every month, I’d find myself sweating and retching on the bathroom floor, my skin pallid and clammy as pain tore through me.

My mother took me to doctors, but they all just shrugged. ‘Periods are painful,’ they’d say. ‘Take an Advil.’

Advil didn’t even touch the sides. I graduated to stronger painkillers, but they upset my stomach which was already churning from the pain. I wanted to go on birth control, but Mom’s health insurance didn’t cover it, and my parents felt weird about putting me on birth control, like it would encourage me to have sex.

Of course I was already having sex, but Cassidy wasn’t exactly going to get me pregnant.

‘We find more evidence of these transformations in biology,’ Magistra Galal continues. ‘Such as the complete metamorphosis of the emperor moth. These creatures hatch as caterpillars from eggs no larger than a grain of rice. The caterpillar will shed its skin multiple times as it grows, becoming more vibrantly coloured with each successive reveal. Then, it will wreath itself in silk, emerging eventually as a magnificently winged creature, nothing like the grub that entered the cocoon.’

Was that the point of the stunt with the silk around my bed? A metaphor for transformation? I frown down at my notebook, trying not to think of the Archon's fist curling around the dusty body of the moth.

I hear Lacey let out a little yelp of laughter, and Magistra Galal frowns at her. 'Aristotle speaks of these things in *The Generation of Animals*,' she goes on. 'He reminds us that Pamphile, daughter of Plateus in Cos, was the first to weave a fabric from the combed-out cocoons. Silk, then, becomes a literal manifestation of metamorphosis.'

Another book to add to my list. Will I ever catch up?

I glance over my shoulder only to realise that Oak is already looking at me. Our eyes meet and I feel something mothlike flutter in my belly. He glances away, his cheeks flushing. I notice that Ren isn't there anymore. She must have ducked out.

'Science has built upon this framework of Aristotle,' Magistra Galal says. 'And we now understand more fully what happens inside the cocoon. The caterpillar does not grow wings. It does not turn into a moth. It *unmakes itself entirely*. The total substance of it is dissolved into a viscous fluid. And from this slime, a brand new creature is assembled.'

Why am I finding it so hard to focus today? The room is warm and stuffy. While there is no actual pain, I'm uncomfortably *aware* of my abdomen. Of my various reproductive parts performing their functions, like rumbling clouds before a torrential downpour.

'But research shows us that newly formed moths retain learned behaviours from when they were caterpillars. Which is to say ... they can *remember*.'

I bite my lower lip hard, hoping the pain will help me focus. I turn to look at Oak again, only to see Gideon get up and dart down the aisle – presumably after Ren.

A classic school hookup, by the looks of it.

'Orpheus taught his followers that the body is a prison,' Magistra Galal says, and I nearly reply *damn right it is*. 'A prison for an immortal soul that longs for freedom.'

I know I should be interested in this. It's why I'm here, after all.

'Plato believed that a soul was reincarnated many times,' Magistra Galal says. 'Some human, some animal. Empedocles, too, wrote of the transmigration of souls.'

Empedocles?

As in, the Knights of Empedocles?

I look back at Oak, to see his reaction to this, but he isn't there. He must have snuck out after Ren and Gideon. I guess they have plans. Plans that don't include me.

It stings more than I'd like to admit.

'Empedocles claimed that the purer one's life was, the purer one's next reincarnation would be, onward and upward in a spiral, the very pinnacle of which was to be rid of the mortal body entirely and exist on higher planes of reality.'

I sit forward in my seat, fixing my attention ahead of me again. This is what I'm here for. To be rid of my mortal body. Its pains and impulses and weaknesses.

But where are Oak and the others going?

I try to focus on Magistra Galal.

But I'm weak.

Why didn't Oak stop that other student from sitting in my seat? Why didn't they tell me they were going to sneak out?

We're friends, aren't we? I sit with them at meals. We hang out together.

Yet even as I think it, I know they have secrets from me.

Magistra Galal's eyes turn to me as I stand up and shuffle along the row of seated students. The Archon will hear about my unruliness. He won't like it.

What am I *doing*?

I scurry to the back door of the lecture hall, and out into the corridor, just in time to see Oak disappear around a corner. I follow quietly, stopping when I hear voices ahead.

'Let's hurry.' It's Oak. 'We want to be back before the lecture ends.'

'Why does it have to be now?' Ren asks.

'November first is only a few weeks away,' Oak says. 'We have to be ready.'

'He's right,' Gideon agrees. 'We need to step things up.'

Their footsteps retreat, so I head up the stairs and pause at the end of the corridor that leads to my room. I could simply go to bed. It would be the sensible thing to do.

But evidently I'm not very good at being sensible.

I follow them, walking slowly and hoping no floorboards creak. They head up the stairs past the dormitories to the fifth floor, which as far as I'm

aware is largely unused. I follow them down another corridor, and up a half-flight of steps. I keep my distance, making sure they don't see me. This area of Agathion is abandoned, the rooms empty except for the occasional piece of furniture draped in an ancient-looking sheet. Dusty portraits scowl down at me from the walls. I move from room to room, following the sound of footsteps and creaking floorboards ahead of me. But then suddenly the sounds stop. I creep into the next room, and find myself alone with a case of dusty books, all in Greek of course, and a portrait of a dour-looking lady in a bonnet. There's only one door – the one I came through. It's a dead end.

I must have gotten turned around.

I strain my ears for any voice or footfall, but all I hear is the high whistle of the wind outside, screaming across the empty moor.

I head back to the lecture theatre, slide into my seat, and continue taking notes. No more distractions. I have to focus.

# EIGHT

21 October

After five weeks at Agathion, I finally feel like I'm catching up. I volunteer an opinion on Socrates in class and don't feel like a total fool. I watch Ren dominate a fencing match and an archery demonstration but decide neither is for me.

My period doesn't arrive early, nor does it arrive on its due date, nor the week after that. Maybe Magistra Hewitt is right, and I'm learning control. Or maybe it's just the fact that my body can't ever warm up enough to ovulate. The days are growing shorter, and bitter cold comes creeping in under doors and through cracks in walls as Agathion is battered by unpredictable and merciless winds.

In the mornings Agathion's grounds are frozen, the skeletons of the trees rimmed with glittering frost. It's beyond beautiful, and I find myself eagerly anticipating seeing my first snow.

I start to relax around Oak, Ren and Gideon. I let myself be silly, and they laugh. We talk about big ideas and small nothings, and I love every moment of it. The hurt I felt after the lecture fades, and when Oak asks me to accompany him for a walk on the moor, I accept. He points out wood anemones, fly agarics, moonwort, and the occasional newt or water vole. He seems so alive out here, it's hard to take my eyes off him.

This feeling of *belonging* is new to me, and I'm relishing every second.

But sometimes, when I join them on the picnic blanket at lunchtime or slide into my seat at breakfast, I know I'm interrupting something. The conversation cuts off suddenly, and they exchange guilty glances.

'I can go if you want,' I say one evening at dinner. 'I don't want to interrupt.'

'No,' says Gideon hurriedly. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Sit with us,' Oak agrees, his eyes on mine. 'Please.'

Inside I am burning. With anger and shame and rejection.

And *longing*.

I want to be one of them. I want to be in the inner circle. I want to know all their secrets, about the magisters and magic and everything that's going on at Agathion.

But most of all I want them to want *me*.

I want to find the tower, even though I know I'm risking my future at Agathion. I can't stop thinking about it. It haunts my dreams, along with the other tower. The one from the tarot card.

But I smile and sit and eat dinner with them, because almost belonging is better than being alone.

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Dawn is only just beginning to creep over the moor as I make my way outside. I'm observing a physical education elective called Charioteering, which for some reason is scheduled before breakfast. I'm sure Hippocrates or Asclepius or some other old dead Greek guy once said something about getting up early being good for the humours.

'Bloody hell, it's cold,' Ren says cheerfully, her voice impossibly loud in the solemn silence of the morning. 'I don't reckon I'll ever get used to it.'

She's wearing a huge overcoat over her Agathion sports uniform, which makes her already broad shoulders look even more magnificent. A woolly hat is pulled down over her asymmetrical haircut, and her face is almost buried under a knitted scarf.

'Charioteering is my favourite elective,' she continues. 'And archery. And fencing.'

'You do more than one elective?' I ask.

‘Oh, I do all of them,’ Ren says, as if this isn’t a totally off-the-wall thing to utter. ‘I like to keep moving. Only way I can stay warm.’

Apparently charioteering involves horses. They’re in pairs, harnessed to small wooden chariots on the gravel. I hang back, uncertain.

‘My first boarding school was horsey,’ Ren comments over her shoulder as she strides towards them. ‘Just outside of Sydney. Do you ride?’

I shake my head as I scurry after her. You don’t really encounter horses in Lakeland, Florida, and I was never the kind of person who wanted to seek them out. Horses are big, and they bite and kick. Other students emerge from the main building and make their way towards the chariots. They’re all wearing the weird knickerbocker ensemble that is the Agathion sports uniform. I feel awkward in my skirt and stockings.

‘This is Kyniska,’ Ren says, stroking a chestnut horse’s flank. ‘Named after a Spartan princess who was also a groundbreaking charioteer. She’s built like a brick shithouse, but she’s a total sweetheart. Go on, give her a pat.’

I reach out and touch the horse’s rough coat with my fingertips. She shudders, and I snatch my fingers back. Ren chuckles.

‘You have to be confident with horses,’ she says. ‘They can tell if you’re not sure.’

She pats the other horse, a black and angry-looking beast of a thing. ‘And Areion. He’s super fast but has a temper on him. Stay away from his teeth, because he *will* bite you.’

The black stallion gives me a baleful glare and blows air through his cheeks.

‘Up you get,’ Ren says, and I clamber onto the chariot. There’s no seat or anything, it isn’t like the buggy that Magistra Hewitt picked me up in. It’s more like a basket attached to two wheels. Ren and I stand shoulder to shoulder, and she gives the reins a confident twitch. The horses start to move, and I grip the wooden railing of the chariot. It’s actually more stable than I expected, but I still don’t want to fall off.

‘Do we have to race the other students?’ I ask.

‘Nah,’ Ren says. ‘Today is only practice. We’ve got a couple of hours to hoon around wherever we want. I’m going to take you on my favourite trail.’

The other chariots are all moving too. There are no adults in sight. ‘No supervision?’ I ask.



Ren smiles. 'Agathion is big on self-discipline.'

'Sure,' I say. 'But are horses really an appropriate thing to practise self-discipline on?'

'Have you read Plato's Chariot Allegory?' Ren asks.

I actually have, thanks to my long hours of catch-up reading in the Agathion library. 'Two horses,' I say promptly. 'One is of noble breeding, rational and moral. The other is led by passion and impulse. The charioteer must drive them towards enlightenment, controlling each horse with skill, intellect and reason. The charioteer is a metaphor for the soul, and the horses represent the helpful and unhelpful impulses of the body.'

Ren waves a dismissive hand. 'Yeah, that's it,' she says. 'Agathion *loves* a practical demonstration of a philosophical theory. Have you done Sisyphus yet?'

I shake my head and Ren makes a face. 'Pushing a rock up a hill all day isn't exactly my idea of a good time,' she says distastefully.

'Hopefully there's no practical demonstration inspired by Prometheus,' I say, and Ren laughs.

'Yeah,' she says. 'I like my liver where it is.'

She hauls on the reins and the horses pick up speed, the sound of their hooves rising to staccato thuds. The chariot rocks to one side as we turn off the gravel driveway onto a rutted track, leaving the others behind us.

The fog swallows us up, and I have no idea how the horses can tell where they're going.

The bumpy track we're on narrows, two muddy strips that occasionally get swamped by mud or heather or a still pool of greyish water.

'Ready?' Ren says, turning to me. There's a gleam in her eye that makes me nervous.

'For what?'

She grins and flicks the reins. 'Fang it!' she yells to the horses, who surge forward into the fog, hooves pounding on earth.

The chariot rockets along the track, mud flinging up to spatter its sides. Ren lets out a whoop, and I feel as if my teeth are going to rattle right out of my skull. I cling to the chariot, but despite my mortal terror, I find myself grinning back at Ren. The wind in my face feels good, like it's blowing away shadows that have gathered there for far too long.

It blows away the fog, too, the moor appearing around us, wild and desolate. We thunder past huge boulders and the occasional white tree

skeleton. The mountains in the distance are still shrouded in fog, and it's easy to believe there's nothing else left in the world, nothing but endless unbroken moor, on and on forever.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Ren yells. 'When I first got here, I thought the moor was so ugly. I'm used to Australia, you know? Rainforests and beaches and gum trees.'

'Australia has big stretches of nothing, too, doesn't it?' I raise my own voice to be heard over the thundering hooves.

'Oh yeah,' she replies. 'I did a trip across the Nullarbor once, and it was flat nothingness as far as the eye could see. Red dirt and bushy scrub, until all of a sudden it just falls off into the sea from these bloody huge cliffs.'

The way she says *Nullarbor* in her accent makes me think it must be an Australian Aboriginal word, but after I mentally repeat it to myself, I realise it's Latin. *Null arbor*. No trees.

'But that's more like a desert,' she says. 'Hot and dry. Here it rains *all the time*, and I don't reckon I've really been able to feel my toes since I got here.'

'I'm glad I'm not the only one.'

I glance over my shoulder, but we've left Agathion far behind. There's no sign of the other chariots, either. It's only me, Ren and two horses, surrounded by rugged wilderness.

I want to ask her about the tower. About the Knights of Empedocles. Surely of all of them, Ren is the one most likely to be honest with me.

But I don't want to force my way into their secret club. I want to be invited. To be wanted.

'How long have you and Gideon been together?' I ask instead.

Ren's grin softens. 'Six months. In summer all the students hike out to Loch Rannoch,' she tells me. 'It's a week of outdoor activities, with camping and fishing and astronomy. On the last day, we have to swim across the loch – Agathion is very big on swimming.'

'Let me guess,' I say. 'The ancient Greeks were into swimming?'

She grins. 'Ding, ding! Odysseus was a great swimmer. And Plato said that unwise men could neither read nor swim.'

Swimming, I can do. Plenty of swimming in Florida.

'It's a big lake,' Ren says. 'Dark and deep and colder than a witch's tit.'

'So what happened?'

‘If you ask Gideon, he’ll tell you he was struggling in the water and I rescued him.’ Her eyes grow distant and fond as she remembers. ‘But that’s not what happened at all. It was me who needed rescuing. I’d been showing off. Pushed myself too far. And then I got a cramp, and all of a sudden I couldn’t keep my head above the water. I panicked – it was like I’d forgotten how my body worked. But Gideon was there. He was so calm. He got me to float on my back and helped me slow my breathing down. He waited with me, the two of us floating on our backs out there in the middle of the lake, and told me all about otters.’

‘Otters?’

‘He told me how they nap like that, lying on their backs. That sometimes they wrap seaweed around themselves, like an anchor, to stop them from floating away. And they hold hands with each other so they don’t get separated. And then he took my hand ...’

She trails off, apparently lost in the memory.

‘It was like a bolt of electricity going through me,’ Ren says at last. ‘And I just *knew*.’

I loved Cassidy. Of course I did. I think she was the only person I have ever truly loved. But did I feel that unshakeable certainty? I’m not sure I’ve ever felt that sure of *anything*.

It must be nice.

Cassidy used to make my whole body thrum with energy. I felt *alive* around her in a way I never had before. But now thinking about her is all mixed up with what happened. I don’t know how I feel now. When I picture her face, all I can see is the last time I saw her, in the children’s wing of Lakeland Hospital, her mouth open in an unending scream.

‘Listen to me, banging on about my love life,’ Ren chuckles. ‘Look, we’re here.’

I look around, but I’m not sure where *here* is. Ren jumps down from the chariot and begins to stride away, expecting me to follow.

‘Wait,’ I say, unable to contain my questions any longer. ‘Tell me about the Knights of Empedocles.’

Ren stops, turning back very slowly. ‘Who told you about the Knights of Empedocles?’

‘Cyrus.’

A faint smile passes over her face. ‘Of course he did. What else did he say?’

I choose my words carefully. 'That you have a sanctuary in the tower. At the top of a spiral staircase.'

Ren shakes her head. 'Did he tell you about the book?'

The book. The room I ended up in when I followed them. The dead end. It had a bookcase. The kind of bookcase that might lead to a hidden tunnel, if I were the heroine in a gothic novel.

My heart leaps, but I keep my expression neutral. 'Of course.'

'So what's stopping you from barging on up there?' Ren asks. 'I would have.'

I shrug. 'I guess I'm waiting for a proper invitation.'

Ren bites her lip but doesn't respond. Silence stretches between us, long and heavy with secrets. Areion snorts, pawing the turf with his hoof.

'We've talked about it,' Ren says at last. 'About you. But we all have to agree before we can ...' She trails off, shaking her head. 'Believe me when I say it isn't about you. I mean ... don't take it personally, yeah? There's ... stuff ... going on, and honestly, it's probably better if you don't know about it.'

I nod, my jaw clenched. I don't want to cry in front of her.

'But we're still friends,' Ren insists. 'I swear it.'

I want to believe her.

'Come on,' she says at last. 'They're waiting.'

Who's waiting?

'Will the horses be okay?' I ask. 'You don't have to tie them up or anything?'

She chuckles, leading me away from the track and over a little hilly rise dotted with white stones thrusting upward, bone-sharp and spattered with lichen. They seem too evenly spaced to be natural, but they've also clearly been here for a very long time.

'We think there might have been a settlement here, once,' Ren says, following my gaze. 'Cool, huh?'

I nod, although it's also a little spooky.

The other side of the rise drops sharply, creating a low overhang that's sheltered from the wind. Two figures crouch there, pink-cheeked and beaming.

'Surprise!' Gideon says. 'We thought we'd bring you some breakfast.'

Oak hands me a steaming enamel mug, and I gratefully wrap my frozen fingers around it. Ren grins at me, and we sit down on a spattered rock

while Gideon unpacks bacon and egg sandwiches from a picnic basket.

‘How did you find charioteering?’ Gideon asks.

‘Not sure it’s for me,’ I reply. ‘I’m a bit scared of horses.’

‘Pfft,’ Ren says. ‘You just need to get used to them.’

She’s digging into her sandwich with gusto. I guess if she is going to tell the others that I know about the Knights, she isn’t going to do it in front of me.

‘You’ve been here for over a month now,’ Gideon says to me. ‘Are you missing your family?’

‘Not really.’ This is an understatement. I’ve barely thought about my parents since arriving. I doubt they’ve thought much about me, either.

‘Your friends, then?’

This is harder to shrug off. ‘I don’t really have any friends,’ I say, trying not to think of Cassidy.

‘Of course you do,’ Ren says staunchly. ‘You have us.’

I smile politely, but I know it’s not true. Ren and the others let me sit with them at meals, sure. We’re friendly. But not friends. I’m not invited into their inner circle. Their little secret club.

I can tell that Ren is thinking the same thing, because she continues in a falsely hearty voice.

‘I reckon this place’d make a cracking campsite,’ she says. ‘We should all come out here for a few days in spring. Sleep under the stars.’

It’s nice she’s trying to make me feel better.

‘If we’re still here in spring,’ Oak mumbles, and Ren and Gideon exchange a look.

More secrets.

It’s less than two weeks to my birthday, which is when the Archon told me the next graduation ceremony would be held.

‘Do you have any idea who’s going to graduate next?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Oak says shortly, and we all lapse into awkward silence. A faint drizzle starts to fall. I wrap my hands around the enamel cup, letting the warm steam curl around my face as the moor fades around us, lost in rain.

‘Look,’ Oak says softly, pointing.

A stag appears from the curtain of rain, as if materialised from nowhere. Its antlers rise tall and proud, like branches silhouetted against the heavy grey sky.

‘Beautiful,’ Gideon whispers.

I murmur in agreement.

‘My uncle taught me how to shoot with a bow and arrow,’ Ren says, her voice quiet. ‘He took me hunting once, in Seosan, when we were visiting. Water deer. You’re allowed to hunt them in South Korea at certain times of the year. We hiked through the forest for hours until we found one. He wanted me to have a crack at it, but I couldn’t do it. He shot it through the neck. I watched the light go out of its eyes, and I just couldn’t stop crying. My uncle said something disparaging about girls and feelings. I couldn’t understand how he could be so ... unbothered by it.’

“Why, let the stricken deer go weep,” I quote. “The hart ungalled play. / For some must watch, while some must sleep. / So runs the world away.”

Ren turns to me. ‘Shakespeare?’ she guesses.

‘*Hamlet*,’ Oak says. ‘He’s chuffed because Claudius is so rattled after watching a play that basically accuses him of murdering Hamlet’s father.’

I glance over at Oak. I didn’t realise he was also a Shakespeare fan.

Something startles the stag, and it dashes away, fleet-footed and graceful across the uneven terrain.

We make our way back to the chariot, where the horses are waiting patiently, munching on rough serrated grasses.

‘Do you want to go with Ren?’ I ask Gideon. I’m not super keen on more charioting.

‘Nice try,’ Ren says. ‘You’re driving back.’

I try to protest, but she ushers me back into the chariot, and presses the reins into my hands.

Kyniska tosses her head, and Areion stamps the muddy earth.

‘Good luck,’ Oak says, and he and Gideon turn to walk off over the moor, carrying the picnic basket between them.

‘Just be confident,’ Ren advises.

I try to flick the reins the way I saw her do it, but the horses both shift uneasily, their flesh shuddering at the touch of the reins, as if they’re trying to shake off their bridles. Kyniska snorts.

‘Get over yourselves,’ Ren says, rolling her eyes at them. ‘Go on,’ she urges me.

I flick the reins again, and this time both horses leap forward, as if I’ve delivered them an electric shock. They break not into a gallop but a full-pelt sprint, careening off the rutted track and onto the empty moor, almost taking out Oak and Gideon. Ren grabs the reins and yells at the horses, but

both have their ears flat against their heads thundering over the uneven turf, the wheels of the chariot bouncing over tussocks and stones. The air is thick with the scent of heather, and I'm sure something terrible is about to happen. I don't even notice the large, low boulder until the horses leap over it, leaving the chariot to crash with the sound of splintering wood. The reins go flying out of Ren's hands, and somehow Areion manages to get free of the chariot entirely, racing off into the moor with the reins trailing behind him. Kyniska lets out a high-pitched whinny, rearing up onto her hind legs, then driving down and kicking out at us.

The chariot splinters even further, and I go tumbling off, my knees buckling until I sprawl on the grass. I can hear Ren shouting at Kyniska, but the horse is still rearing, her hooves crashing dangerously close to my head. One of them strikes the boulder, and I see sparks as her horseshoe meets the stone. Her eyes roll and flecks of foam appear around her mouth. I'm suddenly reminded of my arrival at Agathion and the panicked squeals of Old Toby. I curl myself into a ball, wrapping my arms over my head.

'Got you!' Ren says as she grabs the reins and yanks Kyniska down onto all fours. The creature is trembling with fear. I can smell horse sweat and feel the heat radiating from her flesh. For a moment I'm afraid that she, too, is going to burst into flames or dissolve into frost.

That it will be all my fault. That Ren will end up screaming the way Cassidy did.

I'll get kicked out of Agathion. I'll never learn to control myself.

I close my eyes and try to concentrate on my breathing. I think of Plato's two horses, and try to imagine steering them both towards enlightenment.

When I open my eyes, I see Ren murmuring quietly to Kyniska, stroking her nose. She reaches into a pocket and offers her a sugar cube, which the horse snuffles up. I can see Areion nearby. He's keeping his distance, but he's still all in one piece. 'Are you okay?' Ren says, reaching out a hand to haul me to my feet.

'I'm sorry,' I reply, looking at the ruined chariot.

'Not your fault,' Ren says, although it definitely was.

'Will we get into trouble?'

'I'm sure it'll be fine.' Ren shrugs. 'Accidents happen.'

Kyniska snorts again and glances over at me, the whites of her eyes showing.

Oak and Gideon arrive, out of breath from racing after us across the moor.

‘What happened?’ Gideon asks.

‘They got spooked,’ Ren says. ‘It was weird.’

Oak’s eyes are on me. I know he’s thinking about Old Toby, screaming at me from his pigpen. Humiliation writhes within me, and I close my eyes to escape his scrutiny.

He can see there’s something wrong with me.

‘You two take Page back,’ Ren says. ‘I’ll deal with this.’

‘Are you sure?’ I ask. ‘What about the other horse?’

Areion glares at us from over the moor.

‘He’ll come back,’ Ren says.

*Once you’re gone.*

I understand her unspoken words. ‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Well ... sorry, again.’

She waves a hand at me.

‘I’ll stay with you,’ Gideon offers, and Ren smiles gratefully at him.

The last thing I want right now is one-on-one time with Oak. He sees too much. I take the other handle of the picnic basket, and we set off together.

‘You’re okay?’ Oak asks me. ‘You weren’t hurt?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good.’

Ren and Gideon disappear behind us. I hope Oak knows where he’s going, because all I can see is grey rain and sodden heather.

I watch him out of the corner of my eye. He turns his face up to the sky, his eyes closed, the rain falling soft on his skin. A damp lock of hair slips down his forehead, and I have a sudden urge to reach out and brush it back. He opens his eyes, turning to look at me.

‘Are you going to tell me what happened, back there?’ he asks, not unkindly.

My jaw is tight. ‘No,’ I reply. ‘Are you going to tell me what’s happening on November first?’

His only response is a rueful ghost of a smile and the tiniest head-shake.

We trudge back to school in silence. When I finally glimpse Agathion, crouched on its bleak hillside, it looks abandoned. Ruinous and desolate, shrouded in damp blue shadows.

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The next lecture is held a few days after the disastrous chariot excursion. Magister Zhang drones on about Heraclitus of Ephesus, and I take notes like the good Agathion student I am.

But when Ren and Gideon sneak out, I follow them again.

I'm done waiting for an invitation.

I keep my distance as I drift through Agathion's abandoned rooms, until I once more wind up at the dead end, with the dour-faced bonnet lady and the bookcase.

*Did he tell you about the book?*

I examine the bookcase closely, reading every spine until my eyes fall upon one slim cloth-bound volume.

*Fragments of Empedocles.*

I tug it backwards, and something clicks. The bookcase swings out to reveal a narrow space containing a spiral staircase.

*It's at the top of the spiral where the unicorns graze. Pluck the third rose from the left and speak the password.*

In all my daydreaming about Agathion, I never imagined it would be like this. Like I'm really in *Northanger Abbey* or *The House of the Seven Gables*.

My heart hammers as I climb the stairs, the black iron of the handrail cool against my scarred palms.

It's raining again, and the clatter of raindrops gets louder the higher I climb. I know I'm in the central tower now.

At the top, I find myself in a hexagonal room with an ancient fireplace on one side. Wood panelling reaches halfway up the wall, the timber dull and swollen with moisture. The wallpaper on the upper walls is peeling and the ceiling sags with brown water stains. Moth-eaten tapestries hang on the walls, depicting scenes from mythology – Orpheus descending into the underworld. Prometheus bound to a rock, an eagle ripping out his entrails. Heracles hunting the Erymanthian boar. The last one is more Celtic in design, showing a unicorn rampant in a field of blue flowers.

*Where the unicorns graze.*

Dark ivy trails in through cracks in the walls, and it's even colder than my dorm room.

A chaise longue sits against one wall. I suspect it was once a vibrant crimson, but now it is threadbare and the colour of dried blood, horsehair stuffing escaping from the many holes chewed by ravenous moths.

A single bare bulb hangs from an ornate plaster ceiling rose, which flickers as I cross the creaking floorboards to examine one of the tapestries. The threads are barely hanging together. I'm afraid if I touched it, it would crumble to nothing.

I look down and see the dust on the floor is disturbed.

Gingerly, I take hold of one edge of the tapestry, afraid it will fall apart in my hands. It's sturdier than it looks, though, and heavier. I pull it aside, revealing the wooden wainscoting beneath. There are designs carved into the top of it, all the way around the room. Moths and roses and spindles.

*Pluck the third rose from the left.*

I count three roses from the left of where the tapestry began and lay my fingers on the carved timber.

Nothing happens.

I try pressing on the rose. Pulling it. Twisting it.

But nothing happens.

Is this some kind of elaborate prank?

*Speak the password.*

The tarot card with Cyrus's note is in my pocket, but I've read it so many times I know the words by heart.

'For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.'

There's a soft *click*, and a panel of wainscoting swings in slightly, revealing itself to be a hinged door.

Heart thundering, I push on the wainscoting and step into the room beyond.

Three pairs of eyes turn to stare at me.

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The room is lit by the glow of a thousand tiny lights, which are strung from the low rafters and drape down walls covered with bookcases. There's not a lot of floor space – everything is crowded with overstuffed chairs and side tables with dim-bulbed lamps. It's messy, but in a cosy, lived-in way that makes me think of long nights debating philosophy over cups of tea, or reading poetry aloud from battered old books whose pages are falling out.

With a thrill, I glimpse the names on some of the spines. Dickens. Eliot. Wilde. Tolkien.

*Finally.*

Oak, Ren and Gideon are standing in a circle on a patch of bare floorboards covered in white chalk marks. In the centre of their circle is a kind of statue, made of mud and twigs and leaves. It's a little over two feet tall, stocky and man-shaped, with squat legs and a featureless head.

Oak is staring at me, a peculiar mix of emotions passing over his face. For a moment I think he's pleased to see me. Then he looks worried. Finally, he settles on frustration.

'Okay,' he says, his voice strangled. 'Which one of you numpties told her the password?'

He's clutching a twig in one hand and gestures with it to Gideon, Ren, and then back to me. I take a half-step backward. Somehow, I thought he'd be proud of me for figuring it all out.

Gideon holds up his hands. 'It wasn't us,' he says.

Ren's cheeks are pink, and I realise that she hasn't told them about our conversation on the moor.

I take a step into the room. 'It was Cyrus.' I hold up the tarot card and show them his elegant scrawl on the back.

Oak groans. 'The jammy bastard.'

It's probably only my imagination, but does the little twig man shake its head as well?

'Cyrus obviously saw something in her,' Ren says. 'Potential.'

'What about her birthday?' Gideon asks. 'She could be a spy.'

Why is my birthday so significant?

Oak passes an agitated hand through his hair. 'If she's a spy, she already knows too much.'

Ren looks over at me and smiles. 'Sorry,' she says. 'We're being super rude. Come and sit down. Do you want a cuppa?'

She reaches for a large tartan thermos and starts pulling mismatched cups from a shelf, filling each one with steaming dark liquid.

Ren passes me a cup, and I gingerly sit down on the smallest, most unobtrusive chair in the room. I don't want to steal anyone's spot. I've been longing for this moment for weeks, but now that it's finally here, I feel nervous and uncertain.

Gideon accepts a cup of tea from Ren, and they sit together on a shabby sofa, so close Gideon is practically on Ren's lap.

Oak hesitates for a moment, then sighs and flops down in one of the overstuffed armchairs. He's still holding the twig, and he spins it around his fingers like he's the drum major in a marching band. He doesn't look at me.

I glance up at the ceiling and see names engraved on a heavy wooden beam.

*Clarence*

*Ethel*

*Minnie*

*Alva*

*Walter*

*Otobore*

Why is Otobore crossed out?

'So,' Ren says warmly. 'Welcome to the Knights of Empedocles.'

'Ren,' Oak says, a warning tone in his voice.

Ren rolls her eyes. 'Well, she already knows that, doesn't she?' she says. 'Cyrus already told her we have a secret club.'

'Clearly not *that* secret,' mutters Oak.

'Here's the situation,' Gideon says to me. 'This room is not known to the administration at Agathion, and they would probably not be overjoyed to discover its existence. Some of us' – he gestures at Oak – 'are concerned that you are a spy sent by the magisters to infiltrate us.'

Am I a spy? Magistra Hewitt and the Archon both seem to think I am.

'I'm not a spy,' I tell them.

'Exactly what a spy would say,' Oak says, narrowing his eyes, but there's a hint of playfulness in his voice that gives me hope.

Gideon spreads his hands. 'It's an issue of trust,' he explains. 'We have secrets that we would like to stay secret.'

'Cyrus trusted her,' Ren says. 'He seemed pretty certain.'

'Cyrus was also certain he wasn't going to graduate,' Gideon responds darkly.

'You could try something ... divinatory,' Ren suggests. 'Read her tea leaves or throw some bones?'

Oak raises his eyebrows. 'I already pulled her card, remember?'

I glance around the room. 'Is it possible the tarot card was just ... a tower?' I ask. 'This tower? Without the death and destruction?' Of course

there's already been plenty of death and destruction, but I'm not going to tell them that. And it won't happen again. I won't let it.

'Maybe,' Oak says, but I hear doubt in his tone.

'She already knows we exist,' Gideon says. 'And about this place. I trust her.'

'Thank you,' I say.

'Of course if you tell any of the faculty about this,' Gideon adds mildly, 'we will have to kill you.'

He smiles, but I get the feeling he's not joking. The other two aren't laughing either.

The Archon warned me about students engaging in dark activities. Dangerous magics.

I glance over at the mud-and-twigg statue. It is swaying gently from side to side. I look back at Oak, who is wagging the twig back and forth absently.

There's a noise behind me, and I turn to see Lacey standing in the doorway.

For a moment, I think she's only just discovered this place, too. That *she's* the interloper and I've already staked a claim.

Disappointingly, the others don't seem at all surprised by her entrance.

She, however, seems quite surprised to see me. And not in a good way. Her eyes flash, and her cupid's bow of a mouth turns down in distaste.

Of course Lacey is a part of the secret club. She's the president, probably. There's no chance she's letting me in.

'Oak,' Lacey says, not looking away from me. 'Why are we having a tea party with the piglet?'

Oak holds up his hands in surrender. 'Cyrus invited her.'

Lacey sighs wearily. 'What does she know?'

I decide I can speak for myself. 'Not enough,' I say. 'I want to know what's going on.'

'And I want a pony,' Lacey says scornfully. '*Another* pony,' she corrects herself.

'Lacey,' says Ren. 'I think we can trust her.'

'Well, that's why you're not in charge, isn't it?'

Gideon frowns. 'No one's in charge,' he says. 'That's not what we are.'

Lacey rolls her eyes and flops down on the one remaining free armchair, putting a perfectly manicured hand over her eyes. 'I don't need this,' she

groans. 'Not now.'

I feel a kind of exquisite awkwardness, perched on my chair with my cup of tea. But I can't shake the feeling that this room – these people – is where I belong.

'Why Empedocles?' I ask, thinking back to Magistra Galal's lecture.

'He was super into demons,' Ren replies, before Lacey silences her with a glare.

'I think you should leave,' Lacey says abruptly to me.

'Lacey,' Oak admonishes. 'Maybe try a slightly kinder tone of voice?'

'I think you should leave, *please*,' Lacey says, giving Oak the finger.

Oak responds by blowing her a kiss. There's a fondness in each gesture, and I wonder why Lacey doesn't sit with us at meals. I thought she'd only hung out with Oak and Ren and Gideon because she was dating Cyrus. But now I know she's in their secret club as well ... They are closer than I thought.

'She already knows about us,' Oak says. 'She knows about the Sanctuary. She knows about the Knights of Empedocles. We can't simply turn her loose, she could run straight to the Archon and clipe on us.'

'Can you ...' Lacey wiggles her fingers suggestively. 'Take care of it?'

'No!' Oak looks offended. 'I don't do that.'

Lacey rolls her eyes. 'So you do *this*,' she says, gesturing to the twiggy statue in the chalk circle. 'But a simple memory spell is an ethical bridge too far.'

'It is what it is.'

I guess we're just openly talking about magic now.

'Um,' I say. 'Are we going to talk about ...' I look at the twiggy creature meaningfully.

Oak glances at it, like he forgot it was there. 'Ah,' he says, and snaps the twig he's holding.

The creature crumbles to the floor, becoming nothing more than mud and sticks and leaves. The air suddenly fills with the rich scent of soil.

Right. Well, that explains everything.

Oak turns to me. 'Tell us something,' he says. 'You know one of our secrets. Tell us one of yours. Something you don't want *them* to know.'

'Them?'

'The magisters.'

I hesitate. What can I tell them? What would make them trust me? Should I tell them about the strange things that used to happen when I was younger? The lectures that my mother used to give me about control?

I bite my lip. It isn't enough. I know they need more.

'Well?' Lacey says impatiently.

'I think I killed my math teacher,' I blurt out.

This statement is met with stunned silence.

'See?' Ren says smugly. '*Told* you we could trust her.'

'You *think* you killed your math teacher?' Lacey asks sceptically. 'Are they dead or not?'

I picture the stinking pile of ash and bone. 'He's definitely dead,' I say.

'Tell us what happened,' Gideon says, his voice gentle. 'If you don't mind, of course.'

I open my mouth to tell them that I don't remember, but when I start speaking, I find that instead I'm telling them what I *do* remember.

'My friend – ' I break off. 'My girlfriend and I, we used to hang out behind the gymnasium. This forgotten bit of land that all the other students avoided. There's a rock there called the Devil's Chair, people said that it was cursed. That students have died there.'

They're interested now. Even Lacey is listening.

'I was supposed to meet her there one afternoon,' I say. 'But when I arrived, she wasn't alone. Our teacher was there, too. Mr Hearst.'

I take a deep breath, trying to steady the frantic thumping of my heart.

'For a second I thought that she – that she wanted him to be there. She was so fierce, I didn't think she'd let anyone do that to her. But then I saw her face, and she was crying. She looked so *helpless*, like she couldn't move. Couldn't speak. I was so scared for her. And so angry.'

Gideon reaches out and takes my hand, a kind, simple gesture that makes tears slip down my cheeks. Ren's face is fierce, her own eyes glistening.

'I wanted to hurt him,' I say. 'I wanted him to suffer. To ... to burn.'

'Good,' Ren says forcefully.

It wasn't good. I lost control. I let my feelings take over and everything went wrong.

'So what did you do?' Oak asks, leaning forward. 'How did you do it?'

I shake my head. 'That's what I don't remember. It's like I just ... went away ...'

'And then?'

‘When I came back, he was gone. There were ... ashes and burnt bones. The weeds were all black, and I could smell smoke and jasmine. Cassidy was screaming. She wouldn’t stop.’

‘What happened to her?’ Ren asks. ‘Was she okay?’

I close my eyes and swallow before answering. ‘An ambulance took us both to the hospital. I went back to see her a few days later. Signed in at the desk. Walked down the hallway. They put her in the children’s wing, so it was all colourful and bright with animals painted on the walls and baskets full of toys. There was a little boy with cancer in the bed next to her. Bald head, full of tubes. He smiled at me when I came in, then went back to his Nintendo. But Cassidy ... she looked like a ghost. Grey and limp and ... empty.’

‘Did you talk to her?’

I shake my head. ‘When – when she saw me, she started screaming again. I tried to calm her down, but that only made it worse. When I touched her it was like ...’

Like whatever Mr Hearst had done to her, what I had done was a million times worse.

Like I was a monster.

‘In the end the doctors asked me to leave. Told me to come back another day when she was feeling stronger.’

‘And did you go back?’

I nod. ‘A week later. And a week after that. Every time it was the same. She’d be fine, calm. Reading a book or watching TV. And then she’d see me and she’d start screaming again.’

Gideon lets out a slow breath. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Her parents asked me to stay away,’ I say. ‘So I did. I didn’t know what else to do.’

Oak and Gideon share a long, considering look.

‘You think this is why she’s here?’ Oak asks.

Gideon tilts his head thoughtfully. ‘It would make sense,’ he says. ‘I’m sure they monitor for this kind of thing. Was it in the news?’ he asks me.

I nod. ‘The police said it was spontaneous combustion,’ I say. ‘That kind of thing doesn’t happen every day. They didn’t name me or Cassidy, though.’

Oak waves a dismissive hand. ‘Not hard for them to find you,’ he says.



There's a long moment of silence. They don't seem to be particularly horrified by my revelation. Oak looks over at Lacey, who shrugs and rolls her eyes.

'The Knights of Empedocles is a secret rebel group,' Oak tells me. 'We're the latest iteration, but we're not the first.'

He glances up at the names etched on the beam overhead.

'Who are you rebelling against?' I ask, although I'm pretty sure I already know.

Oak opens his mouth to reply, but Lacey interrupts. 'Not yet,' she says. 'If we're going to do this, then let's do it properly.'

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# NINE

26 October

I wake in the middle of the night to the dull ache that heralds the arrival of my period. It's more than two weeks late, so I should consider myself lucky to have avoided it this long. The pads supplied to me are thick and bulky. I hope they're up to the job. I read once that the average period is only two or three tablespoons of blood. If that's true, then I am far from average.

The worst thing about periods isn't the pain, although the pain isn't great. It's the knowledge that it will happen again next month. And the one after. And the one after that. Stretching off for most of my adult life. Month after month of pain. Monotonous and unremarkable and agonising.

When I eventually sleep, I'm haunted by nightmares of erratic shadows, of membranous wings that beat silently, of crouching limbs with too many jointed segments, of a crawling, slithering chaos that pulses and gnaws hungrily at the edges of my consciousness. Of the vast, unknowable presence deep below Agathion.

Someone is kicking my bedroom door. I blearily open my eyes. It's dark outside. The clock reads two a.m.

The kicking sounds again, and I drag myself out of bed. Every fibre of me is filled with exhaustion, the kind of trembling weakness that only my period can produce. I wonder what Agathion's policy is on sick days.

Ren is standing outside my bedroom door, dressed as usual in the Agathion sports uniform. She's holding two steaming enamel mugs of tea.

That explains the kicking.

‘You don’t look good,’ she says, handing me a cup.

‘It’s the middle of the night,’ I reply.

‘Come on,’ she says brightly. ‘It’s time for your lustration.’

‘I ... I don’t know what that means.’

Ren shrugs. ‘It’s a kind of ritual cleansing. A pilgrimage in search of enlightenment.’

‘Another Agathion tradition?’

‘A Knights of Empedocles tradition,’ she grins.

The last of the sleep falls from my mind, and I feel a little thrill of excitement. ‘Like an initiation?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Is this a hazing thing?’ I ask. ‘Are you going to strip me naked and force me to do weird sex stuff?’

She laughs. ‘No, nothing like that. Don’t look so anxious. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.’

‘Give me a second,’ I say. ‘I’ll get dressed.’

‘Don’t bother,’ she says. ‘Oak will want you to be barefoot.’

I almost ask if Oak minds if I put on a bra, but decide against it.

I follow her along the dimly lit corridor, the grim faces of magisters past glowering down at us from their dusty gilt frames. Ren pauses at the top of the staircase, peering over to make sure nobody is in the grand entrance hall. Then we sneak down and go through a narrow door to a smaller staircase, which creaks alarmingly as we descend, making Ren wince. Then another narrow hallway, and another staircase. It’s as if we’re going deep into the very heart of Agathion. I can still feel the heavy, dragging pain of my period, but I don’t care. I feel as light as a feather, my whole body zinging with excitement.

It’s finally happening.

I’m going to become a Knight of Empedocles. I’m going to get all the answers I’ve been searching for.

I’m going to belong.

The air feels different down here, stale and stony. The ceilings are low, and Ren has to duck her head as we pass storerooms stuffed with old furniture and filing cabinets. One room has a heavy iron door, and as we pass it, Ren makes a face.

‘The Desmoterion,’ she murmurs. ‘Agathion’s answer to solitary confinement.’

The door has a metal panel at head height that can be pulled back to allow someone to peer in. I wonder if there’s a student in there now.

‘Does it get used often?’ I ask.

Ren screws up her nose. ‘Often enough.’

‘Where are we going?’ I ask, my voice hushed.

‘To the grotto,’ Ren responds, although this tells me nothing. We reach a dead end, but Ren runs a hand over the wood panelling until something clicks, and a part of the wall swings inward to reveal yet another passage, this one made of dark stone.

More secrets. But this time, I’m not being left behind.

We now appear to be deep in the underground reaches of Agathion. Dust and rubble collect in the corners, and cobwebs hang overhead like crumbling lace, spiders of long ago turned to desiccated husks.

We reach a wooden door, blistered with age, and I hear low voices on the other side. Ren knocks three times, and the door swings open.

‘Finally,’ a voice says. Lacey.

‘Hi, Page.’ Gideon’s face is illuminated by the warm glow of a lantern.

Oak is there, too, flashing me a quick smile as I look around. On the other side of the door is a small space, barely big enough for us all to fit. I can’t see anything of interest in here. There are no other doors. No objects. Just an empty stone room, with a rusted grate in the centre of the floor.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ Lacey says impatiently. ‘I hate it down here.’

I have a million questions, but I’m in no hurry.

‘We brought you here for a reason,’ Oak says, his tone formal.

‘Not a *good* reason,’ Lacey mutters.

‘Shut up,’ Oak says. ‘You were outvoted, get over it.’

I can *feel* the waves of disapproval radiating from Lacey.

‘There’s old magic here at Agathion,’ Oak continues. ‘Powerful magic. It’s been here for thousands of years. We think the magisters are planning to do something with it. Something big. And we – the Knights of Empedocles – are the only ones who can stop them.’

‘Okay,’ I say, thinking of the *feeling* I have of a ... presence ... under Agathion.

‘There’s a chamber down there,’ Gideon says, indicating the rusty grate in the floor. ‘It dates back to the Neolithic era – more than four thousand

years ago.'

'It's known only to the Knights,' Ren adds. 'The magisters have no idea this place exists.'

There's a pause as they all exchange a glance. I know what's coming, so I wait.

'Do you want to join us?' Oak asks.

It's not even a question. I know I should be staying away from powerful magic. That's why I came here, after all. To escape this exact thing.

But my heart wants this.

It wants *them*. To belong.

'Yes,' I reply.

'Do you swear to keep our secrets?' Gideon asks.

'Yes.'

Ren speaks next. 'Do you swear to remain loyal to the Knights, above all else?'

'Yes.'

Lacey sighs. 'Do you swear to fight the tyranny of the magisters and liberate the students of Agathion?'

I hesitate, for the first time. Liberate the students of Agathion from what?

The air in the little room grows thick with tension. Ren bites her lip.

I'm in way too deep to back out now. 'I swear.'

Oak nods, a relieved smile flashing over his face. 'Okay,' he says. 'Cool.'

Gideon grins at me.

'Is that it?' I ask.

Oak shakes his head. 'There are legends around here of the Cailleach,' he explains. 'The witch queen, or goddess, who once ruled this land. Stories say she was entombed here on Rannoch Moor, in a burial chamber deep beneath the ground.'

'You think this is a goddess's burial chamber?' I ask. I've gotten used to the idea of magic over the last few weeks, but *goddesses*?

Oak spreads his hands. 'Maybe.'

I glance down at the grate. 'You want me to go down there.'

'Lustration is an ancient Greek ritual,' Gideon explains. 'Plato's cave and all. You know. Purification of the mind and soul.'

Oak scowls. 'We're not in Greece, Gideon.'

I rub my hands together to try to stop them from going completely numb, and feel the shiny pink skin of my palms. A little purification sounds quite

good, actually.

‘Can we just get *on* with it?’ Lacey says in an exaggeratedly bored voice.

‘First, you must protect yourself against evil spirits,’ Oak says, and presses a little velvet pouch into my hand. ‘Salt, sage and juniper bark. You need to sprinkle it on the ground before you.’

I dip my fingers into the pouch and, feeling rather foolish, toss the contents through the bars of the grate, like the world’s most pathetic wedding procession.

A few weeks ago, this would have seemed ridiculous to me. But now I’ll take all the protection I can get.

‘The ritual is simple,’ Oak says. ‘Follow the tunnel and head down the stairs. At the bottom of the grotto, you may experience a vision. Guidance as to your path forward. Perhaps you will encounter something that frightens you.’

‘And then what?’

He shrugs. ‘Then you come back.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

I look down at the metal grate. It’s dark and slimy with rust. I wonder if it’s too late to back out.

‘Remember that the shadows on the wall of the cave are only that,’ Gideon says, his tone reassuring. ‘Mere shadows. Plato says true enlightenment can only come if we leave the cave, no matter how difficult that transition may be. You must turn away from the comfort of the shadows and make your way up that rough ascent, that steep way up. You must never stop until you stand in the blinding, radiant light of the sun.’

Oak sighs. ‘You sound like a magister,’ he grumbles. ‘This tomb was here for two thousand years before Plato was even born.’

Gideon grins fondly at him.

Ren pats me on the back, then reaches down and lifts the grate, which squeals on an ancient hinge. ‘You’re gonna do great.’

Lacey makes a disgruntled sound.

A strong scent rises from the hole. Wet stone and something else ... ice and disrupted storm air. A shiver creeps over me.

‘You can jump down,’ Ren assures me. ‘It’s only a metre or so.’

If they wanted to kill me, this’d be a great way to do it.

I sit on the edge, my legs dangling into darkness.

‘Jump,’ says Oak.

I look up into his grey eyes. His lips quirk in a half-smile, and I feel a zing of connection. ‘Trust me,’ he murmurs.

And in that moment, I do trust him.

I jump, splashing into ice-cold water that just covers my feet.

Ren is right, the hole isn’t deep. My head still pokes above the grate, eye level with the others’ shoes. Oak hands me a lantern. It looks like the one that Cyrus carried that night in the forum.

The water is dark and very, very cold. So cold it makes my teeth ache. The stone below it is slippery, and I plant my feet carefully, ducking my head so I’m entirely in the tunnel.

‘Good luck,’ I hear Gideon say, and he sounds further away than he is.

Two more steps and it’s as if I’m totally alone. I can’t hear any murmurs from the others waiting behind me. My neck feels stiff, and I get the feeling that if I turn back, something terrible might happen, like Lot’s wife turning to salt.

All I can hear is the steady trickle of water. I feel like I’ve slipped out of time, like I’m Orpheus descending into the underworld.

This part of the tunnel isn’t long. After a few minutes, I reach a kind of curtain made of small white bones tied to string. I take a deep breath and push through the curtain, which clatters and rattles like the curtain of plastic beads my grandmother used to hang in front of the back door to stop the flies from getting in.

The tunnel opens up into a larger space, and I’m pulled up short at the edge of a large circular opening in the ground. I lean out as far as I dare, my heart pounding. The light spilling from the lantern reveals the strangest sight.

It’s like an inverted tower, a cylindrical hole in the earth, built from stone, with a staircase spiralling downward, through arched niches which line the stone walls.

Who built this? And why?

The water around my ankles spills off the edge like a miniature waterfall, filling the space with a gentle hissing noise.

I can’t see the bottom.

It’s like a portal into some demonic realm. A breath of ice emerges from the darkness.

I grit my teeth and take a tentative step, the surface slippery under my bare feet. I descend into darkness, around and around the spiral.

The air is damp and strong with the scent of ancient stone and ice.

I try not to think of spiders and other wriggling insects.

And other, much more terrifying things that could lurk in the darkness.

The silence down here is profound and oppressive. It feels as though the air might burst from the weight of it.

Eventually I reach the bottom. The waterfall has transformed into a fine mist that soaks away into the bare earth floor. There's nothing down here but a large stone slab, a twin of the one that Magister Kovacevic lay on, bound in red thread and dying of cold.

I look up through the spiral into the darkness above and am suddenly, utterly certain that I'm directly below the forum in the courtyard, the ring of standing stones rising high overhead.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

I'm shaking so much from the cold, I can barely stand. I sink down onto the granite slab, facing the curved stone wall, placing the lantern behind me. Shadows dance before me on the wall, hypnotic, even though nothing is moving to make them. Should I look away? Isn't that what the allegory of Plato's cave teaches us?

Is that what I'm supposed to do here? Turn away from fantasy and superstition and focus only on what is rational, like a true philosopher?

It's what the Archon would want.

There are runes carved on the walls, etched by knives probably made of flint or obsidian. What do they mean? Are they protective spells? Instructions?

The shadows dance before me, and I can hear my heart beating. It sounds like the rhythmic pounding of a drum, and again I sense that enormous ... *something*, deep beneath the earth.

Reason and logic have no place here.

The lantern goes out, and everything is black.

I hear a high whistling noise, like wind passing through rafters.

Then I'm back on the moor, the ring of stones looming above me with solemn indifference. It's night, the moon high and thin in a cloudless sky. Six figures surround the stone slab in the centre of the ring, lit by candles. Each one of them is hooded and robed, but I catch a glimpse of a pale face painted with thick blue lines and whorls.



A child is lying on the altar, wearing a white linen shift, her feet and hands bound with loops of red thread. More red thread is wound around her head and mouth like a gag. She struggles against her bonds, although they don't look particularly tight.

She can't be more than twelve years old.

One of the robed figures holds a great iron sword, the metal glinting bright in the moonlight. The hilt has an iron ring at the end.

It's the Archon's sword. The one that he used at the graduation ceremony. That's on the Agathion crest. Clementine said it was famous, a sword from some local legend.

The figure raises the sword and then swings it down towards the girl. It's enough force to kill her easily, and I cry out but nobody notices. I'm not really here.

When the sword touches the red string, it shimmers and becomes ... something else. Still a sword, but clearly a sword that no longer quite exists in the way it once did. It's simultaneously *more* than a sword, as it bends time and space around it, and *less* because it no longer seems to interact with the world like a solid object.

The sword doesn't cut the girl but slides through her flesh and bones as if they don't exist at all. It goes deep into her, and I glimpse something else. A little spark, like a candle, glowing in her very core. The blade slices the spark, and it is released like a helium balloon being let go, rising up and out of her body, which slumps, a shudder going through it.

Then she is still, and the sword is a regular sword again.

She isn't dead. I can still see her chest rise and fall. Her eyes are open, blinking. But I can tell something is missing. It's like she isn't a real person anymore. There's no spark of life in her.

Another robed figure steps forward and bends over the girl's body, his hands cupped around a tarnished copper bowl.

Then storm clouds swirl in, and I hear whispering, just beyond my conscious mind. It gets louder and louder, filling all my senses with urgent, unintelligible hissing.

Not entirely unintelligible. I make out two words.

*Help us.*

A rush of freezing air sweeps through the chamber.

My body throbs and pulses with sharp, stabbing pain, and I feel blood slip between my thighs. Pricks of blue light swim before my eyes, and I'm

sure I'm going to faint.

I'm back at St Catherine's, behind the gym. The Devil's Chair looms darkly among the tangled alligator weed.

Everything smells like charred flesh and flowers.

Cassidy is screaming. Why won't she stop?

I'm so *angry*. Blood hammers in my head. My hands are burning and I'm calling on the *thing* that I know is inside the stone, hauling it through the barrier that traps it there, pulling it into myself, where it fills me with more rage than I ever knew was possible, burning and boiling and writhing with a kind of frenzied malevolence.

Then I'm sitting in the Archon's office. He's holding the copper bowl in his hands.

*One sacrifice isn't enough, a voice says. We need more power.*

The Archon runs his finger along the rim of the bowl. *As many as it takes.*

Then I'm up in the tower again – the Sanctuary, surrounded by fairy lights and cosy furniture. Lightning flashes outside, and the tower starts to crumble, the air thick with cracking stone and shards of ice.

'No,' I manage to choke out.

Then it's all gone. I'm lying curled in the fetal position on the cold stone slab, shivering, my clothes soaked through with sweat. My throat feels sore, as if *I* were the one screaming, not Cassidy.

I have to get out of here. I grope in the darkness for the bottom of the spiral staircase, then crawl on my hands and knees, keeping my shoulder against the damp stone wall so I don't accidentally fall off the edge.

At the top, I push blindly through the bone curtain, which clatters like the chuckles of rattling skeletons, and stumble along the tunnel, my breath coming in ragged gasps.

Hands reach down to me, pulling me back up to the basement room, back into the real world and the golden glow of a lantern.

I'm shaking so much I can't stand on my own, but the hands stay on me, holding me up.

Someone is saying my name. Asking me if I'm okay.

I'm so glad they're here. That they waited for me. It felt as though I was down there for hours.

I look down at my right hand, which is clenched into a fist. With some effort, I uncurl my stiff, frozen fingers, revealing my scarred palm, and a

sprig of green, topped with pink flowers, crushed and bruised, so the sweet honey scent is released.

Heather.

My stomach churns, and I double over, vomiting onto the stone floor.

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# TEN

26 October

‘What happened?’ Oak says, his voice urgent. ‘What did you see?’

I’m afraid if I open my mouth, I’ll vomit again, but this time darkness will come pouring out of me like thick, foul sludge.

‘Give her a minute,’ Ren says.

I look up at Oak. ‘She was only a child ...’ I croak.

‘Who?’ Oak asks, leaning forward, his forehead pressed against mine.

There’s a light in his eyes that frightens me. I shrink back from him.

It’s all too much.

Oak wheels away and slams his hand against the stone wall. ‘Tell me what you saw!’ His voice is strained.

‘Oak.’ Lacey’s voice is stern. ‘Back off.’

Things must be bad if Lacey is sticking up for me.

‘We need *answers*,’ Oak snaps. ‘Samhain is only a few days away.’

‘I know,’ Lacey retorts. ‘And you’ll get answers. Don’t be a dick. You and I are going to go upstairs. The others can bring Page up when she’s had a moment to recover.’

Oak hesitates but lets Lacey lead him out of the little cellar.

Ren presses a canteen of water into my hands. ‘Here, rinse your mouth out.’

I do, and immediately feel better. ‘Thanks,’ I say.

Already the vision is retreating from my mind, feeling more like a bad dream than something I actually witnessed.

‘It’s weird down there, huh?’ Ren says.

‘Yeah,’ I reply. ‘Real weird. Why was Oak so ...’ I trail off. I’ve never seen him that worked up before.

‘You know Oak.’ Ren shrugs. ‘Always with the drama.’

‘He likes you, you know,’ Gideon adds quietly.

‘Who?’

‘Oak.’

I snort and taste bile. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘He totally does,’ Ren agrees.

‘He’s got a funny way of showing it.’

Ren sighs. ‘There’s a lot going on,’ she says.

‘I’m getting that impression.’ I shake my head, which feels as if it’s filled with cotton. ‘How long was I there?’

‘Not long,’ Gideon says. ‘Fifteen minutes, maybe?’

It felt like hours. ‘What happened when you went in?’ I ask.

‘I kind of ... fell asleep,’ says Gideon. ‘And I had this really vivid dream about an old woman sitting by a fireplace, sewing. She had white hair; she hummed as she worked.’

‘That sounds significantly more pleasant than my experience,’ I say. ‘What about you, Ren?’

Ren hesitates for a moment before answering. ‘I didn’t really see anything,’ she says, her voice overly bright. ‘I guess I’m not the vision type.’

A shadow passes over Gideon’s face, and I realise that Ren isn’t only lying to me. Whatever it was she saw inside the tomb, she didn’t want to tell Gideon either.

‘We’d better go,’ Ren says briskly, brushing invisible dust from her trousers.

‘Are you feeling better?’ Gideon asks me.

For once I answer honestly, shaking my head and bursting into tears.

I’m not a crier. Not usually. But it’s been a really full-on couple of days, and I can’t hold it in any longer.

Gideon crouches next to me on the cellar floor, draping an arm around my shoulders, and resting his cheek against the top of my head. Ren comes over and wraps her arms around both of us.

‘I’m on my period,’ I tell them. ‘It sounds pathetic, but—’

‘No!’ Ren interrupts. ‘And we sent you down *there*?’

‘You should have told us,’ Gideon adds. ‘We could have waited a few days.’

‘Periods are the worst,’ Ren says fiercely. ‘Sometimes mine is so bad I soak through two pads at once. And I used to get *terrible* pain.’

‘Used to?’

She nods. ‘Oak makes this amazing tea. Since I started drinking it, I’ve barely felt a twinge.’

‘Sounds like magic.’

‘It literally is,’ Gideon says. ‘I always hated getting my period because, well, you know.’ He gestures at himself. ‘Dysphoria. But Oak’s tea not only makes the pain go away, it makes me feel ... better about everything.’

‘I’m going to run upstairs right now and tell him to make you some,’ Ren says. ‘And you should go straight back to bed.’

‘But Oak—’

‘Oak will be busy making your tea. Knights business can wait until you’re feeling better.’

I bet Oak will be thrilled to hear this, but the thought of collapsing into bed is too tempting. Ren dashes off, and I get to my feet.

I feel a bit like a jellyfish, wobbly and insubstantial, but Gideon puts his arm around me and guides me gently through the network of cellars and up the stairs.

‘We can go as slow as you want,’ Gideon says. ‘Let me know if you need to take a break.’

‘Thank you,’ I say. ‘I hate having a body.’

I see him smile out of the corner of my eye. ‘I used to think that, too.’

‘Before you ...’ I hesitate, not wanting to be rude.

‘Before I transitioned,’ he confirms. ‘It’s okay, I don’t mind talking about it.’

‘Did you always know you were a boy?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘But I always *wanted* to be a boy. Even though it was always boys in elementary school who teased me. And, you know. The patriarchy and everything. But I still *wanted* it. As I got older, I tried to tell myself it didn’t matter. I got really into Descartes. Fully subscribed to the idea that my self was completely distinct from my body. That my body was

irrelevant. I wanted to be ... the opposite of Oak's mother, who believes that everything begins and ends with the body.'

'And did that help?' I ask, really hoping he'll say yes but knowing he won't.

He shakes his head and wrinkles his nose. 'It just led to me feeling trapped – like my body was a prison. It wasn't until I physically transitioned that I started to feel okay with myself.'

'So you don't agree with the whole Agathion philosophy?' I ask. 'That the body is only a vessel for a soul?'

Gideon hesitates. 'Bodies are important,' he says at last. 'If they weren't, then I never would have felt any gender dysphoria in the first place. Of course everyone's experience is different, but for me ... I don't hate my body anymore. I love it. I love the things it can do, the way it can make me feel. Life is just more *interesting* with a body, you know?'

I make a face. 'Maybe I want less *interesting* in my life.'

'Fair,' Gideon says with a chuckle. 'Although in that case you should probably stop hanging out with us. We're nothing if not interesting.'

'Too late now,' I reply, and although my tone is light, I can't stop thinking about the tower in my vision, crumbling to dust around me.



Back in my dorm, I strip off my filthy, wet pyjamas, leaving them in a damp pile on the floor. I pull on a clean set and climb into bed. I should probably shower first, but the water will be ice-cold, and frankly I would rather die. I'd give up a limb right now for a painkiller, but that's not an option.

After a while, the numbness in my feet eases, and I grow drowsy. I drift into ... not sleep, because I'm still in too much pain. But a kind of daze, haunted by endless spiralling staircases filled with bones and shadows.

Someone knocks at my door.

I open my eyes and am surprised to discover that the thin light of morning is washing my room grey. Through my narrow window, I can see that it's still raining, and the idea of getting out of bed seems unthinkable.

'Come in,' I croak.

The door opens, and Oak's face peers around it.

His cheeks flush pink when he sees me in bed, and I remember what Gideon said.

*He likes you.*

‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Um, can I come in for a moment?’

‘Sure.’

He glances up at the ceiling as he enters. ‘You know, I think my room is right above yours.’

I hope I don’t talk in my sleep.

‘Ren told me ... that you weren’t feeling well. I’m sorry I got so intense.’

He’s wearing the Agathion school kilt with knee-high black socks, his shirt rumpled and untucked as usual. A bright yellow dandelion is pinned to his blazer lapel. He carries a tray bearing a teapot with a cup and saucer.

His special tea.

I feel my cheeks flush. ‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘You didn’t know.’

‘I mean, I shouldn’t have behaved that way, regardless of whether or not you were feeling sick. May I?’

He sets down the tray and indicates the teapot.

I nod, and he pours steaming liquid into the teacup, then passes it to me.

I inhale the fragrant steam. It doesn’t smell like poison.

‘What’s in it?’ I ask.

‘Cloves, nettle, moonwort, yarrow. And a wee bit of ...’ He wiggles his fingers to indicate magic.

‘Right.’ I’m still not quite used to the casual way he drops it into conversation.

I expect the tea to taste disgusting, but instead it’s grassy and clean like a meadow on a summer’s day.

‘It’s good,’ I say. ‘Thank you.’

Oak smiles, distracted. I can tell he’s itching to ask me about my vision, but doesn’t want to be rude. His eyes roam around my room, falling on my discarded filthy pyjamas. He frowns, and I feel suddenly embarrassed to have him staring at my dirty laundry.

‘There’s a rip,’ he says, reaching down to pick up the flannel top.

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I think I must have fallen over, in the ... the tunnel.’

‘I can fix it,’ he says.

He reaches inside his blazer pocket and withdraws, of all things, a little travel sewing kit.

‘Oh,’ I say, flustered. ‘It’s okay. You don’t have to—’



‘I don’t mind,’ he says, hooking an ankle around my desk chair and drawing it close. ‘I actually find it quite relaxing.’

He sits and threads the needle with nimble fingers.

‘Thank you,’ I say. ‘And for the tea.’

‘Whenever I was sick,’ he says, ‘my mother would make me a special tea, and then she’d tell me a story. By the time the story was over, the tea would have done its work and I’d be feeling better.’

‘I thought you didn’t get along with your mother.’

A rueful smile passes over his face. ‘It’s more complicated than that,’ he says. ‘She – she loves me. She just wishes I was ...’

‘A girl?’

He nods, his needle whipping in and out of the tartan fabric. ‘Anyway, for all her faults, she’s an amazing storyteller.’

‘Are you going to tell me a story?’

‘If you like.’

Oak shifts in the chair, crossing his legs. His kilt rides up a little, and I catch a glimpse of pale knees, dusted with freckles and fine hairs.

‘Tell me about the witch queen,’ I say. ‘The one whose sacred tomb I puked all over.’

His mouth quirks in a smile. ‘Okay,’ he says. ‘The Cailleach. Divine Hag of the Hollow Mountain. Queen of Winter, mother to all gods and goddesses.’

‘Quite the résumé.’

‘Indeed. She was a one-eyed giantess who formed the mountains and valleys of the highlands with her giant hammer. She made streams and rivers from strands of her long white hair. Her skin was as blue as the slate of the Ballachulish hills, and her teeth were the colour of aged hemlock boughs. Wherever she went, a herd of giant deer followed, their antlers taller than the peaks of the ancient fir trees that once blanketed this land, and she was waited on by twelve devoted storm hags.’

‘Storm hags?’

‘Elemental spirits. Birdlike creatures that bring chaos in their wake – storms of ice and sleet.’

I remember the blast of ice, radiating out from the stone circle as Magister Kovacevic collapsed into nothingness. But, no – I couldn’t blame what happened to him on some elemental creature. It was me.

‘Are they like demons?’ I ask.

Oak's eyes flick to mine. 'Some might call them that. The goddess, too.'

'Are – are there other kinds of elemental spirits?' I ask.

'Of course,' Oak says, turning his attention back to my pyjama top. 'Many different kinds.'

I swallow. 'Like fire spirits? Fire demons?'

'Aye.' He pauses his stitching for a moment. 'There are fire demons.'

I run a finger over the shiny scars on my palms.

'The thing about these elemental spirits, though,' Oak says, 'is they don't really belong on this plane. In order to stay here, they must be tethered to a particular place – which is why each culture has their own gods and demons and monsters. And they need a body, of course.'

'What does that mean?'

'A soul needs a vessel,' he explains. 'You and I were born into our vessels – our bodies.'

I think of Gideon, so confident in his skin. Of my own treacherous body, with its unpredictable bouts of crippling pain. Of the promises that Magistra Hewitt made about being able to completely control the body with the mind.

Where does a soul fit into all this? Is a mind and a soul the same thing? I take another sip of tea, my mind whirling.

'When the vessel dies,' Oak continues, 'our souls escape and are absorbed back into the fabric of the universe.'

'You say that very casually,' I tell him.

'I'm sorry, you didn't order a side of existentialism with your tea?'

His eyes crinkle in a smile. It softens the sharp lines of his face, and I feel something inside me soften at the same time. He bends his head and breaks the thread with his teeth, tucking the needle back into the sewing kit and placing it in his blazer pocket.

'All done,' he says, holding up the pyjama top.

I genuinely can't see where the rip used to be.

'Thank you,' I say. 'You're ... very good at that.'

He smiles, and his cheeks turn a little pink. 'You're welcome.'

'So demons ...' I prompt.

He nods. 'A demon isn't born into this world,' he says. 'It finds its way here from somewhere else.'

'Where?'

'Another plane of existence.'

‘Even gods and goddesses?’

‘Aye.’

‘This is *a lot*,’ I tell him. ‘I’m supposed to be resting, and you are breaking my brain.’

‘I can stop if you want,’ he offers.

‘And leave me on this cliff-hanger? Tell me about demon vessels.’

‘If a body is alive, but has no soul, then a demon can possess it for a time,’ Oak explains. ‘Although the energy of a demon is strong, and the body will wear out quickly.’

I think of Magister Kovacevic, his shiny, red face buried in a pig carcass, then shivering out of existence on the stone altar.

He certainly was acting like a man possessed.

‘Can a demon ... get into someone’s body ... while their soul is still there?’ I ask.

Oak shakes his head. ‘No. Only one soul per vessel.’

My mind suddenly returns to St Catherine’s and the Devil’s Chair. I don’t remember everything that happened that day with Cassidy and Mr Hearst. But there was *something* inside me. Something that made my hands burn and Mr Hearst burn along with them. Could it have been a demon? And if it was, how did it get inside me if my soul was – and is – still there?

‘You okay?’ Oak asks, watching me carefully.

I let out a little huff of laughter. ‘Not even remotely,’ I tell him. ‘Let’s get back to Cailleach.’

He nods. ‘Every spring, Cailleach would travel west to the coast, to wash her great plaid in the Gulf of Corryvreckan. But one spring, her youngest child got tangled up in the folds of her plaid, and he slipped into the waters and drowned. Cailleach’s heart was broken. She plunged the land into the depths of winter, raising a tempest that lasted for a hundred years.’

Another cramp arrives, throbbing and dragging in my abdomen, although it’s not as sharp as before. I close my eyes for a moment, waiting for it to pass. When I open them again, Oak is watching me, his brow wrinkled in concern.

‘Here.’ He leans over and slides his fingers into my hair, under my head, lifting gently with one hand. With the other, he slides the pillow out, flips it upside down, and then slides it back under my cheek.

The cotton is cool against my skin.

‘Thank you,’ I say.

He shrugs, and I see his cheeks flush a little as he settles back into his chair. ‘Everything feels better with a cool pillow.’

And it does.

Oak is looking down at his stitchwork, and I take a moment to admire his thick, dark lashes. He glances up, and a little jolt goes through me, deliciously fresh and gentle after the dull thudding pain.

‘So the storm?’ I ask. ‘A hundred years of winter?’

‘The men and women of this land grew sick of the endless bitter cold, of the never-ending blizzard that blasted the earth.’ Oak’s voice turns solemn. ‘They had cut down almost every tree to keep their fires burning, and slain almost every deer and rabbit to fill their empty bellies. They petitioned the other gods – Cailleach’s other children. The humans demanded the winter must end, or they would worship the gods no more.’

‘Did the other gods try to cheer Cailleach up?’ I ask. ‘It was their brother who died, too. Did they offer her comfort?’

Oak shakes his head. ‘That would have been the kind thing to do,’ he says. ‘But a hundred years of winter had frozen their hearts solid, and there was no kindness to be found.’

‘So what did they do?’

‘The human priests put forward a champion. They clad him in a deerskin pelt, with a crown of antlers, and a sword known as Snàthad White-Hilt.’

‘Let me guess, a magic sword?’

‘Of course,’ Oak says. ‘It’s famous in these parts.’

He indicates the Agathion crest on his blazer – the sword and the cup, strung around with red thread.

‘What made it so special?’

‘It was made from sky-iron and could harness lightning, and ...’ He hesitates for a fraction of a second. ‘And it was said that it could sever a soul from a body.’

I remember my vision down in the grotto. The Archon’s sword, blurring and shimmering. The little girl, still alive, but somehow no longer really *there*.

‘The mortal champion hunted Cailleach through a whirling blizzard, and found her at last, weeping on the blasted heath. Each one of her tears was a shard of ice as tall as a man. The champion met her in battle, and she succumbed to his might.’

‘He killed her?’

Oak tilts his head in a *sort of* motion. ‘She was felled. Her body crashed to the earth and became the mountain Ben Nevis – the highest peak in Scotland.’

‘And her soul? Did the sword sever it?’

Oak’s eyes dart away and he shifts a little in his chair. I get the sense that he doesn’t really want to tell me this next part as the following is only one word from him?

‘Aye.’

‘A goddess soul is like a demon soul,’ I guess. ‘It can’t be ... reabsorbed.’

‘That’s right,’ Oak says. ‘Instead it ... tears a hole in the fabric of the universe – in space and time itself.’

‘Not ideal. Is that what happened?’

He shakes his head. ‘The other gods offered the priests one of their great treasures – the Anam Cuach – a cauldron that could contain the soul of a god. The priests captured Cailleach’s soul, and the storms ended.’

‘What did they do with the cauldron full of soul?’

‘The priests buried the Anam Cuach deep within the earth, so deep that Cailleach would never again feel the warmth of the sun, or hear the cries of birds, or the whistle of the wind. They knew her sleep must be deep and undisturbed. The priests hid her tomb deep within the earth, and surrounded it with a ring of sacred stones.’

The ring of stones. The inverted tower.

Suddenly this story is sounding less like a fairytale and more like reality.

‘What do the stones do?’ I ask, although I’m pretty sure I already know.

‘Sacred stones are ... apart ... from the rest of the world. A kind of in-between space that doesn’t quite belong to this universe.’

So that’s where I went when I slipped through the stones with Cyrus and Magister Zhang. I didn’t go somewhere else on the moor or back in time. It was the same stones, but ... different.

‘They put her there,’ I say. ‘In that in-between place, so if her soul woke up, it wouldn’t rip the universe in half.’

‘Exactly.’

I gaze out at the grey, unceasing rain and find myself yawning, my eyes growing heavy.

‘I should leave you to rest.’ Oak stands.

‘But my vision,’ I say. ‘I have so much to tell you.’

He shakes his head. 'It can wait until you're feeling better.'  
It's only once he's gone that I realise I'm not in pain anymore.

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# ELEVEN

27 October

I don't know what kind of witchcraft Oak performed on that tea, but I sleep solidly all night and wake up feeling more refreshed than I have in weeks.

My period pain has completely vanished, which is unheard of for the second day. Usually, the second day is the worst.

I guess Oak's special tea really is magic.

I get out of bed and pull on thick stockings, a white shirt and tartan skirt. I flip up my collar and tie the silk tie around my neck. For the first time, it looks just right, the tiny embroidered crest perfectly positioned.

I shrug on my blazer, brushing my fingers over the embroidered crest. The cup. The sword. The thread. Agathion College isn't what it seems to be. It promises logic and reason, but there are things happening here that don't belong in a world of logic.

I brush my hair and tie it back in a neat ponytail.

I look at myself in the mirror, and feel a surge of satisfaction at what I see. An Agathion student. A scholar.

A Knight of Empedocles.

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There's no one in the Sanctuary, although the fairy lights still twinkle cosily.

I let my fingers drift over a side table bearing a battered chessboard. Two moth-eaten velvet armchairs sit on either side of the board, and I feel the familiar stab of longing as I imagine sitting here, playing a well-matched rival, classical music swelling in the background.

The bookcases are crammed with the most eclectic assortment of books I've ever seen – my beloved Austen and Dickens, as well as fantasy and poetry, along with contemporary thrillers, comics and young adult fiction. I see Terry Pratchett next to Virginia Woolf next to Toni Morrison, next to a fat manga collection about a librarian who can inflict mortal wounds via papercuts. Candles sit on lavalike thrones of dripping wax. Jam jars are filled with buttons, pennies, feathers and what look like dried herbs.

There's even an old turntable and a small collection of vinyl records. I pick one up – Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes* – but I have no idea how to actually make it play, so I put it back down again.

A desk sits against one wall, strewn with sheets of yellowing paper, covered in tight, scratchy handwriting. I lift a sheet or two and see pages and pages of diagrams – pentagrams and runes and strange symbols that I can *almost* understand, but my brain keeps sliding away just as I'm about to grasp the meaning of them.

More signs and sigils are sketched on the doorframe and rafters in white chalk. Horseshoe nails are banged into each corner of the bookcase and mounted on the central beam is a yellowing goat skull, horns curving into wicked spikes.

'Who let you in?'

I spin around to see Oak standing in the doorway, holding a wicker basket of greenery, a sprig of sage on his lapel.

He gazes at me, and I notice the smudged black eyeliner under his lower lids. He strokes the soft grey-green sage leaves, and suddenly I can smell the earthy and pungent scent of them. For a moment we stare at each other, and although it should feel excruciatingly awkward, somehow it doesn't. I have so many questions, but in this moment of connection, they all fall away.

'Why did you come here?' Oak asks at last. The question is blunt, but his tone is gentle.

'I knew this is where I'd find you,' I say, looking around the little room.

'I don't mean right here,' Oak says, putting down his basket. 'To Agathion. Your family isn't rich, so why are you here?'



‘They offered me a scholarship,’ I say. ‘And I took it.’

‘Why?’

I look around at the cosy room full of books and candles and shabby armchairs. Oak grew up in an actual castle full of witches – this life must feel normal to him.

He has no idea what the real world is like.

I shake my head. ‘I couldn’t stay in Lakeland.’

He takes a step towards me, then sinks down into one of the armchairs by the chessboard, gesturing for me to take the other. He leans forward, elbows on knees, and observes me carefully.

‘Because of what happened to your teacher.’

I nod, suddenly afraid I’m going to burst into tears. ‘I don’t want to be a monster,’ I whisper.

He looks back at me, his expression softening. ‘Oh, Page. You’re not a monster.’

My name from his lips sounds delicate, his Scottish accent softening it into something lilting and birdlike.

‘Why do you think it was you?’ he asks. ‘I mean, you were there, but it could have been him. The teacher. Or your friend. Or something else entirely. Maybe it really was spontaneous combustion.’

I hesitate, then hold up my hands.

‘They were burnt raw when I woke up,’ I tell him. ‘Third degree.’

I want to tell him everything. About the other incidents. Other schools. About how my parents looked at me with fear sometimes. I want to tell him that I’m afraid I’m being possessed by demons ... But I don’t say anything. Because this connection between us is so new and fragile, and I’m afraid of breaking it.

Oak catches his bottom lip between his teeth, leaning forward to look at the scars.

‘May I?’ he asks.

‘You’re going to read my palms?’ I ask, joking.

‘Aye.’ He sees my sceptical expression. ‘The Greeks were into it. Anaxagoras wrote a treatise on chiromancy – palm reading. Aristotle taught Alexander the basics.’

‘I thought not everything was about the Greeks.’

‘It isn’t, but it seems to make people around here feel more comfortable.’

I swallow, and my palms suddenly feel sweaty. ‘Well, I guess if it worked for Alexander ...’

Oak reaches out and takes my hands in his. His touch is cool and gentle as he inspects the scar lines, the shiny pink skin.

‘So what’s my fortune?’ I ask, looking down at my hands.

‘You have a square palm and long fingers,’ Oak tells me. ‘Which indicates air. You’re observant. A knowledge seeker. Corresponds with swords in the tarot deck.’

He holds up his own right hand with its chipped nail polish, chewed cuticles and ink stains. ‘Rectangular palm, which is water, or the cups suit. Sensitive and empathetic.’

He winks, then goes back to looking at my hands, tracing lines with his fingers. The burns destroyed a lot of my nerve endings, but his touch still makes me shiver.

‘Are there even any lines left?’ I say. ‘Isn’t it all scars?’

‘The scars tell their own stories too. Your heart line is broken – you’ve lost something or someone important to you.’

‘Very intuitive,’ I say dryly. ‘I already told you my whole tragic backstory.’

Oak flashes me a quick smile that eases a little of my clenched defensiveness.

‘Your head line is strong, which is no surprise. We already knew you were canny. Your life line is crosshatched, which indicates struggle. And your fate line ...’ He frowns.

‘My fate line?’

He rubs his thumb over my palm. ‘You don’t have one. The scars have erased it.’

‘What does that mean?’

He shrugs. ‘I guess you get to make your own fate.’

‘Oh.’ I don’t hate the sound of that.

He continues to trace the lines on my hands, his eyes darting up to mine every now and then to check if I’m okay. I feel quite undone, sitting there opposite him, my secrets examined under his gaze and delicate fingers.

‘Did your mother teach you this?’

Oak lets out a little snort. ‘My mother never taught me anything. She believes that giving men power only ever ends in death and despair.’

‘I mean ...’

He chuckles. 'Oh sure, she's not wrong. But try telling that to a six-year-old kid who just wants to be a part of his family.'

He tosses off the words lightly, but I can sense the ache under them. The longing. I recognise it because I feel it, too. The connection between us seems to deepen a little, and I fight the urge to curl my fingers around his.

'So you taught yourself?'

He nods. 'I'm good at hiding things,' he says. 'My mother has a very extensive library, and I would sneak books out and hide them in my room under wolfsbane and hellebore ...' He sees my confused look and smiles. 'Flowers that keep things concealed. Anyway, by the time I was twelve, I had a pretty thorough understanding of the seven forbidden arts condemned by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.'

'Seven?'

He draws a line from the tip of my left thumb to the base with his index finger. 'Necromancy, which I'm sure you've heard of, although to be clear my understanding of it is purely academic.' Then a line on my index finger. 'Geomancy, which is divination from stones and pebbles.' My middle finger. 'Aeromancy, which is reading the winds and weather.' My ring finger. 'Pyromancy.'

'Telling the future in fire?'

'You got it.' He continues to count on my fingers, each motion feeling less like a line and more like a gentle caress. 'Hydromancy, which is water. Then scapulimancy, which is reading fortunes using animal bones. And lastly chiromancy, which is what I'm doing right now.'

He absently squeezes both my hands in his as he finishes the list, and the casual intimacy of the gesture almost makes me cry.

Then he touches the two creases at the base of my third finger. 'Morgana's ring,' he murmurs. 'Hmm.'

'What does that mean?'

Oak gazes down at my hand for a long moment. 'Good fortune,' he says at last, and I know he's lying. His eyes dart up to my lips, and for a moment I think he's going to lean forward and kiss me.

I'm surprised to discover that I *want* him to kiss me.

Then he drops my hand and the moment dissolves.

'So what's the verdict?' I ask. 'Am I a monster?'

Oak snorts again. 'Hardly. You're interesting, though. I'm starting to see why they wanted you here.'

‘They?’

‘The Archon. Hewitt. You know.’

‘You think I got offered a scholarship because I’m interesting?’

He gazes at me for another long moment, as if he’s trying to peer through a curtain and see some vital truth behind it. I feel scrutinised under his eyes. Vulnerable.

Oak coughs and gestures to the chess table.

‘Do you play?’ he asks.

‘A little,’ I reply.

Cassidy and I taught ourselves one afternoon. She’d gotten bored pretty quickly, but I loved the strategy and went on to read a pile of books by Garry Kasparov and Bobby Fischer, as well as Ruy López de Segura’s *The Art of the Game of Chess* in its original Spanish.

‘Ever play chaos chess?’ he asks, the ghost of a smile around his mouth.

I shake my head, and Oak passes me a white linen bag of pieces, keeping a black bag for himself.

‘Sixteen random pieces,’ he says, pulling out a black knight and placing it on the board in a corner square.

I must look horrified, because the faint smile blossoms into a proper grin. ‘Come on, Page,’ he says. ‘Break some rules.’

Oak draws out a pawn, which goes next to the knight, then his king, then three more pawns, until his first two rows are filled. He has no bishops or rooks, four knights, one queen and ten pawns.

‘Make sure you have a king,’ he says. ‘Some rules must be maintained.’

The first four pieces I pull are all pawns, and I’m starting to suspect I’m being tricked, but then I pull out three queens and feel much better about the whole situation.

Oak blanches slightly, but gestures for me to move. ‘Let’s go,’ he says.

I slide a pawn forward, feeling like I’m learning to play the game all over again. Without the usual pieces on the board, I can’t rely on any existing chess moves. The old familiar patterns are disrupted, which makes the game terrifying, but also completely new. It’s rather thrilling.

‘Tell me more about magic,’ I say, trying to sound cool as I attempt to manoeuvre one of my queens into position.

‘What about it?’ Oak asks, taking one of my pawns with a knight.

‘Until I got here, I thought it was make-believe,’ I said. ‘You know, influencers with jade eggs and such, dancing naked under the full moon.’

‘I mean they do that too.’

‘But there’s real stuff,’ I say. ‘Real magic. Like what you can do. You *can* do magic, can’t you?’

He brushes his hair back from his forehead and tries to look modest. “‘ In nature’s infinite book of secrecy a little I can read.’”

‘But *how* do you do it?’

‘Well,’ he says, ‘I don’t actually *do* it. Humans aren’t innately very magical. We can’t make anything happen on our own.’

‘So how does it happen?’

He shrugs. ‘We harness magic from somewhere else. Like the tea I made you, which uses the innate magic in plants.’

‘Plants are magic, but humans aren’t.’

‘Aye.’ Oak nods like it’s obvious.

‘So what can it *do*?’

‘Magic.’ Oak moves a pawn forward and tilts his head to the side. ‘It depends on where the power is coming from. If it’s plants, then it can do the things plants can do.’ He touches the sprig of sage on his lapel. ‘Protect. Intoxicate. Heal. Sleep.’

I remember the bitter, botanical taste in the soup on my first night at Agathion, and the deep, dreamless sleep it rendered.

‘But that’s all just ... cooking,’ I said. ‘Anyone can do that.’

He shrugs again. ‘Cooking is a kind of low-key magic. Transforming something from one state to another.’

I must look disappointed, because he laughs. ‘There’s other stuff, though,’ he says. ‘Other places you can get magic.’

‘Like where?’

‘Certain animals are strong with it. You can use their bones, or their fur, or their blood.’

‘You mean like a sacrifice?’

I think about my vision. The Archon, running his finger around the copper bowl.

*As many as it takes.*

Oak nods. ‘Sacrifice is always powerful.’

‘What about big magic?’ I say. ‘Have you ever done any really powerful stuff?’

He sighs. ‘There are ... conditions that have to be met,’ he says cagily.

‘Like what?’

Oak reaches out to move a knight but withdraws his hand before he touches it, narrowing his eyes and reconsidering.

‘You need a strong energy source,’ he says, moving a pawn instead. ‘There are rituals you can perform to harness power from magical beings. You’d know them as fairies, but there are lots of different kinds. Ashrays. Nuckelavees. Fachans. And then of course there are ...’ He trails off.

‘There are what?’ I demolish his knight with one of my queens.

He glances up at me from under long lashes. ‘More powerful spirits. Elementals.’

‘Demons,’ I say.

He ducks his head, almost apologetically.

‘Can you ...’ I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. ‘Can you use magic to tell if someone ... if there’s something wrong with a person? Something bad?’

I feel myself growing warm under his gaze. ‘Magic is about instincts,’ he says at last. ‘I learned the basics by stealing books from my mother’s library, but most things you just *feel*. A certain combination of herbs, or a conjunction of symbols, it feels *right*. You have to trust your instincts.’

‘And what do your instincts tell you about me?’

He hesitates, and his cheeks start to glow, matching mine. ‘I ...’ He falters. ‘They tell me you’re ... special. Special, but definitely not wrong or bad.’

I want to believe him.

‘Are you ever going to move that queen?’ he asks in a forcibly lighter tone. ‘I’m growing a beard here, and I don’t think it suits me.’

‘Oh, I don’t have to move the queen,’ I tell him, matching his tone and sliding a pawn forward. ‘Checkmate.’

Oak stares down at the board and bites his lip. ‘Curse you,’ he says conversationally. “‘Thou damned and luxurious mountain goat.’”

I feel a little flutter in my chest at his words. The thrill of finding a kindred spirit.

“‘Thou pigeon-livered stockfish,’” I say.

Oak leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. “‘You froward and unable worm.’”

Even in my wildest dreams, I could never have imagined trading Shakespearean insults over a chessboard. With a ... a friend.

I grin. “‘Thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows’.”

‘Well, *your* brain “is as dry as the remainder biscuit after voyage”.’

“‘Thou art a boil’,’ I inform him. “‘A plague-sore”, indeed, “loathsome as a toad”.’

He lays a hand over his heart in mock-offence. ‘Well, *you* are “a bolting-hutch of beastliness”.’

“‘You scullion!’” I cry. “‘You rampallian! You fustilarian! I’ll tickle your catastrophe!’”

Oak’s expression suddenly turns sly and suggestive, and he leans forward, hands braced on his knees. ‘Would you?’ he says quietly, and I feel my cheeks flush, and other parts of me grow hot and flustered.

*The impulses of the body lead to betrayal and ruin*, warns the Archon in my head.

*Life is just more interesting with a body*, Gideon replies.

Oak’s eyes sparkle, and something inside me sparkles with them.

I am in big, big trouble.

He winks at me. ‘Again?’ he asks, gesturing down at the chessboard.

I take a deep breath. ‘Sure.’

This time he beats me, but barely.

There’s a tension in the air. Something unspoken has been acknowledged between us, and the question no longer seems to be a matter of *if*. It feels like *when*.

I glance up at the clock above the door, and realise it’s past ten o’clock.

We’ve been up here for hours. We’ve completely missed dinner.

‘We should probably go to bed,’ Oak says, his voice turning a little hoarse at the word *bed*. ‘Not together, I meant ...’

His cheeks flush scarlet, and I laugh. ‘I know what you meant.’

I’m delighted by how easy it is to laugh with him. But then I remember why I came up here in the first place.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ I say. ‘My vision ... I didn’t get to tell you about it last night.’

He takes my hand, a little frown creasing his brow.

‘There’s a lot we have to talk about,’ he says. ‘Things I should tell you.’

I think of Kovacevic, exploding into freezing nothing. ‘Me too.’

‘I think perhaps you and I need to have a little faith in each other,’ Oak says.

I feel my face break open into a smile. “‘There’s no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune,’” I reply.

He laughs, a genuine cackle, and I feel ridiculously pleased that I made it happen. But whatever this is, it won't last unless we're honest with each other. I swore an oath to the Knights, but Oak still doesn't know what I did. 'I need to tell you something,' I whisper. 'Not about my vision. Something else.'

His expression grows serious. 'You can tell me anything.'

'I saw Kovacevic die,' I confess. 'I think ... I think maybe I did it.'

Oak shakes his head. 'You think ... what?'

'It was just like with Mr Hearst,' I say. 'Well, not *just* like. Mr. Hearst burned, and Magister Kovacevic ... it was like he froze to death. But it *felt* the same. Oak ...' I take a deep breath, ready to speak the words aloud that have been haunting me for weeks. 'I think maybe I brought a demon to Agathion.'

Oak stares at me for a long moment. 'Impossible,' he says at last.

'What if that's why they brought me here?' I whisper. 'They want something ... something that's inside me?'

I see a flicker of doubt pass over his face. A hint of distance intruding into our newfound closeness.

'There are so many reasons why it's not possible,' he reassures me. 'Only one soul per vessel, remember? And your soul is very much in there.' He taps my forehead. 'And on top of that, elemental spirits are bound to specific locations. Whatever it was that killed your teacher, it was *there*. Probably trapped inside that cursed stone you mentioned.'

'The Devil's Chair,' I say.

'I don't know how it managed to get out and attack your teacher,' he says. 'But it can't have been you. It isn't possible.'

'Then why *did* they bring me here?'

That flicker of doubt again. He still doesn't trust me. 'I don't know.'

I remember my vision. The Archon at his desk, running his finger around the black bowl.

*One sacrifice isn't enough.*

'Oak,' I say hesitantly. 'What would it take to ... break out a demon? To sever it from its location?'

Oak frowns thoughtfully. 'You'd need a vessel,' he says. 'One that is strong enough to contain the demon without falling apart. And you'd need power. A lot of power, to break that connection to place.'

*As many as it takes.*



‘The Archon is planning something,’ I say. ‘Something big. A sacrifice. Whatever it is ... whatever happened to Cyrus. To Magister Kovacevic. I think he’s going to do it to ... to all of you.’

Oak’s eyes narrow slightly.

‘To us,’ I amend hastily. ‘To all the students.’

But I can’t take it back. It’s as though I’ve drawn a line between us. Oak’s expression grows calculating.

‘You say you saw Kovacevic die,’ he says.

I nod, eager to prove my loyalty. ‘Magister Zhang was there, and Magistra Galal and ... and Cyrus.’

‘Cyrus?’

I nod. ‘He didn’t say anything, but it was definitely him. They all took Kovacevic to the ring of stones, but it was ... different.’

‘Different how?’

‘The school was gone, and the monopteron. There was an altar there, like the one at the bottom of the grotto.’

‘Where?’ Oak asks intently. ‘Where is this other ring?’

I shake my head. ‘It isn’t another ring. It’s the same stones, I think. It’s what you said – an in-between place.’

He stands up. ‘Show me.’

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By some kind of miracle, it isn’t raining, but my breath still comes in clouds.

Agathion is dark and silent – everyone is asleep. The cold stone walls rise around us, the windows black, like empty eye sockets. A thick blanket of darkness hangs over the forum, the monopteron obscured from view. The time-weathered stones loom above us, watching silent and still.

‘So?’ Oak says in a low voice. ‘How do we get in?’

It seems like such a long time ago.

‘Um,’ I say, trying to remember. ‘They went around to every stone.’

Oak nods and looks around at the ancient monoliths, rising silent in the gloom like eerie sentinels. ‘Which one first?’

I try to remember, standing up in the corridor outside my dorm. ‘That one.’ I point.

We walk over to it.

‘Fuil,’ Oak says. ‘The blood stone.’

‘Cyrus put his hand on it,’ I say. ‘Here.’

I demonstrate, pressing my hand against the stone. I feel a sharp jab of pain and withdraw my hand to see a spot of blood. A dark crimson smear is left behind on an almost invisible spike of rock.

And I feel ... something. An almost imperceptible shift in the air, as if molecules are being rearranged somehow.

Oak nods slowly. ‘Sacrifices,’ he murmurs. ‘You have to sacrifice something at each stone. Which one came next?’

I lead Oak to the next stone. ‘Ùir,’ he says. ‘Earth.’

I remember Cyrus reaching down, and I mimic his movement, scooping up a handful of soil and pressing it against the stone.

Again, that strange sensation of the universe transforming around me.

We walk to the next stone. ‘I don’t remember this one,’ I tell Oak. ‘What’s the stone called?’

‘It’s Anail,’ he says. ‘Breath.’

It comes back to me immediately. I lean forward and breathe onto the stone, and shiver as time and space seem to bend slightly.

‘I feel it too,’ Oak says softly. ‘I guess it means it’s working.’

‘What’s the next stone?’ I ask.

‘Tiodhlac,’ Oak replies. ‘It means *gift*.’

I frown. ‘Zhang asked for something,’ I tell him. ‘From Galal.’

‘A gift,’ Oak says, and digs in his pockets, pulling out nothing but fluff.

He puts a hand to the sprig of sage on his lapel but shakes his head. ‘We should probably keep it,’ he says. ‘For protection.’

Instead he slips the silver acorn from his ear and offers it to me.

‘Are you sure?’ I ask. ‘I don’t think you’ll get it back.’

‘I’m sure.’

I place the acorn in the almost invisible alcove on the stone. It shimmers a little, suddenly both there and not there. Then it’s gone.

The strange shift is greater this time, and I feel my stomach lurch.

‘Two left,’ Oak says as we cross the wet grass.

‘What’s this one?’ I ask.

‘Sgeul-Rùin,’ Oak says. ‘The secret stone.’

I know what to do before he’s finished speaking. I lean forward and whisper to the stone, so quiet that Oak can’t hear me.

‘When I had the demon inside me, by the Devil’s Chair, a part of me liked it. I liked how powerful it made me feel.’

Oak is watching me, and I clench my hands into fists.

‘Last one,’ I say, trying to sound cheerful. I remember Magister Zhang leaning his head against this stone, but I don’t know what to do.

‘The memory stone,’ Oak tells me. ‘Cuimhne.’

‘I have to sacrifice a memory?’ I ask. ‘Do I get to choose which one?’

But I know the answer. The stone will choose for me. What if it’s a good memory? What if it’s me and Cassidy, lying side by side, and dreaming about New York? What if it’s my mother? What if it’s chaos chess with Oak?

‘Do you want me to do it?’ Oak asks, sensing my hesitation.

‘I don’t think you can,’ I reply. ‘I did the other ones. It has to be me.’

I close my eyes and lean my forehead against the huge stone. It is ice-cold and seems to be vibrating gently. A memory surfaces of sunlight on skin.

*The gentle curve of Cassidy’s mouth. Her hair, hanging in cerulean curtains around my face as she leans over me. Her breath catching in little gasps as we move together. The scent of sweat and wild lime blossom.*

‘Page?’ It’s Oak. ‘Are you okay?’

I turn to him, my mind fuzzy.

‘Did it work?’ he asks. ‘Did it take a memory?’

‘I – I don’t know.’ I can taste cherry lip gloss. ‘I don’t remember.’

I feel a momentary pang of grief, like some vital part of me has been lost forever. But then the ground falls away from me, and I’m lost again in infinitesimal nothing as I tumble out of the universe.

Oak is gone. It feels as though he never existed. Like Agathion never existed. It’s only me, alone in a void of blank insubstance.

But then earth forms beneath my feet once more, and Oak and I are side by side again, the lichen-crusting ancient stones looming over us like spectres from a long-lost age.

I hear Oak’s breath suck in, and I know we did it.

We’re in the other ring of stones.

The one that stands apart from our world.

The moor is cold and silver in the moonlight, the bushy mounds of heather like delicate pale lace. A breath of ice stirs my hair around my shoulders.

Oak and I turn to look at each other. His eyes are almost black.

‘So this is where they do it,’ he murmurs.

‘Do *what*?’ I ask. ‘Oak, we’re here now. You have to tell me.’

He doesn’t answer.

I take a step towards him. ‘Are they sacrificing students?’

He swallows, and I take another step, deliberately invading his space, my eyes on his. There’s colour in his cheeks, and his lips are parted, as if he’s slightly breathless. He leans forward a little, his eyelashes lowering, and I’m almost sure he wants me to kiss him.

I want it, too.

Or at least I would, if only I could be sure that he wasn’t just trying to distract me.

I fall back. ‘You still don’t trust me.’

‘I want to,’ Oak says, spreading his hands. ‘You don’t know how much I want to. But I need more time—’

‘I swore an *oath*,’ I protest. ‘I thought I was an official Knight of Empedocles now.’

‘You are. You *are*. But ...’ He runs out of words, looking around as if hoping to discover more on the ground. ‘Give us more time. “Sweet flowers are slow.” Be patient.’

‘I don’t know what else I can give you,’ I tell him. ‘I’ve told you all my secrets. This place was the last one.’

‘It’s not just up to me.’

I gaze around at the colourless desolation of the moor under the heaviness of a weary night. At the unfamiliar stars that glitter, cold and faint overhead like distant candles.

‘You trust *them*,’ I say. ‘You have this little club, and you invited me in, but then you lock the door. I’m out here in the cold, staring through a window. It’s like you do it on purpose to torture me.’ My voice cracks on the last word.

‘I’m sorry,’ Oak says. ‘I’m not trying to hurt you.’

‘What did you make the others do?’ I ask. ‘What tests did they have to pass before you trusted them?’

‘The others didn’t arrive here the week before an unscheduled graduation,’ Oak says, his expression flat. ‘The others weren’t personally courted by Agathion. The others don’t get personal audiences with the

Archon. The others don't have birthdays on Samhain. The others ...' He bites his lip, shaking his head.

'Go on,' I say. 'Say it.'

His eyes bore into mine, and they see everything. 'The others don't have a history of demon raising. It wasn't the first time, was it? At your school.'

I tear my gaze away from his as bitterness rises in my throat.

He's right.

---

St Catherine's wasn't the first new school I'd been to. My parents moved me around a lot. We moved around a lot. Mom would always make something up about better school zones or a new job. But I'd see the way she looked at me.

Like she was afraid.

I remember sitting outside the principal's office in elementary school, waiting for my mom to pick me up. I was feeling sullen and resentful, because I had done nothing wrong and it was all Billy Odessa's fault.

At least once per lesson, Billy would head up to Ms Martin's desk to sharpen his pencil. He'd get it to a fine point, and then on the way back to his seat, he'd stab me in the arm. I didn't want him to see how much it hurt. I never reacted.

Until I did.

Billy emerged from the principal's office with his father. His hands were covered in black soot, his eyebrows singed. He glanced at me, and I saw fear in his eyes. Billy's father crossed himself as they passed my seat.

*You have to control yourself*, Mom said quietly in the car on the way home. *Don't let your emotions carry you away.*

*But I didn't do anything*, I protested. *It wasn't me.*

Mom didn't respond to this, but the next week, I moved to a different school.

She took me to see a priest, once. She told him about the incidents. About Billy Odessa and the girl in kindergarten who cried every time I came near her. About the thunderstorms that sometimes descended when I was angry.

The priest told her I needed an exorcism. He said I was wrong.

Possessed.

My mother nodded, tight-lipped and clearly holding back tears. We left and never went back. And never talked about it again.

---

Oak takes my silence as confirmation. He runs a hand through his ragged hair. 'I like you, Page. This would be much easier if I didn't. But there are things at work here that are more important than my feelings. And yours. I really am sorry.'

'What would it take?' I ask. 'For you to trust me?'

His expression is so miserable, I almost feel sorry for him.

But I have my answer.

I turn around and walk out of the stone circle. The world shimmers around me as I pass by the towering monoliths, and the cold grey walls of Agathion appear around me once more.

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# TWELVE

28 October

I don't sit with the Knights of Empedocles at breakfast the next day.

I take my crumpets and honey and find a seat as far away from them as I can. Someone I recognise from a class pours me a cup of tea, and I thank them.

I realise I don't really know anyone else here. I've been so wrapped up in Oak and the others, I haven't gotten to know any of the other students.

Ren looks over at me, her expression confused and concerned. She murmurs something to Oak, and he responds curtly. Ren and Gideon exchange a long look.

Lacey notices me too, a little smile of vicious triumph on her face.

They must think I'm so pathetic. So needy, following them around like a lost puppy. Trying to worm my way into their hearts.

Well, no more. I'm done.

'Where are you from?' I ask the girl who poured my tea. I recognise her from one of the athletics electives I've observed. She's an archer.

'Cardiff,' she responds, and we make polite chitchat for a while.

'What do your parents do?' she asks.

I tell her that my dad's a nurse, and my mom works in a bank.

'She's in finance?' The girl looks mildly interested.

'She's a branch manager in Lakeland, Florida,' I tell her.

The girl's eyes glaze over. She's realised I'm not a useful connection for her. There's nothing she can gain from talking to me, and before long she excuses herself.

My eyes keep straying back to their table. They're huddled close together, thick as thieves, talking in low voices, their eyes darting around to make sure they're not being overheard by anyone.

They're planning something. I just don't know what.

---

I go to class and zone out during a heated debate on the authenticity of Plato's seventh letter. Professor Hughes doesn't seem to care if I join in or not. The day teachers don't seem to care about much at all.

I observe another fencing lesson, hypnotised by the flick and swish of the sabres. The fencers wear blank masks that make them seem like monsters, and I'm sure, the way one is sure in a dream, that if I were to rip off those masks there'd be no faces underneath.

I'm losing it.

---

At dinner, I sit with Clementine, the girl I talked to at the graduation feast.

'I told you they were super cliquey,' she says, glancing over at Oak and the others.

'You were right,' I reply, then throw caution to the wind. 'Do you ever think that ... something weird is going on here?'

She raises her eyebrows. 'You mean other than the whole spooky castle, no technology, British boarding school vibe?'

'Yeah,' I say, swallowing. 'Something ... supernatural.'

She laughs. 'Has Madame Lucretz been in your ear?'

'Who?'

'Madame Lucretz. One of the day teachers. She loves a ghost story. Says this place is haunted.'

I feel the eyes of the Archon on me.

'Never mind,' I say.



---

My dreams are haunted by monsters. A slithering thing with oily skin, covered in geometric ridges. I can't see its face, or perhaps I don't want to. Instead, there's a kind of pulsing, horrifying blackness where a face should be.

I'm looking down at Gideon, lying on a great slab of stone, his eyes closed.

I hear a voice chanting in a language I don't understand. I smell burning sage and the metallic tang of blood. Beneath me, the giant unknowable *presence* below Agathion stirs.

Gideon's eyes snap open, but they are empty black nothing, like gazing into an abyss.

When I wake up, it's one minute after midnight.

The glass in the windows seems to bend and warp, and for a moment I think they're going to shatter. I slip out of bed but see nothing outside but darkness. The building around me is silent and still.

But the world feels ... different, somehow. The feeling is not dissimilar to the sensation of unlocking the standing stones. The feeling that the universe has been somehow *rearranged*.

*Disturbed.*

---

Gideon isn't sitting with Ren and Oak at breakfast the next morning.

He's nowhere to be seen. Ren and Oak don't look great either. Both of them seem pale and weary, like they haven't slept. Oak doesn't have any breakfast in front of him, only a cup of black tea. I notice he has a bandage wrapped around his left hand. A nasturtium is pinned to his lapel. Ren has an absolute mountain of toast and eggs and sausages on her plate, but she hasn't taken a single bite.

They don't seem to notice me, pining in thought. I'm like Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, sitting like patience on a monument, smiling at grief. I swallow, thinking of my strange dreams last night. That intense feeling of wrongness on waking. What if the magisters took Gideon to that other ring of stones and did ... something bad?

My resolve wavers in the weak morning light, and I long to go over there and ask what happened. But a peal of laughter from Lacey's table changes my mind. She doesn't look at all concerned. She's holding court the way she always does.

Gideon is probably just sick. A cold or a headache.

I'm jumping at shadows.

Oak glances up and our eyes meet for a brief, electric second. Then his face clouds over and he looks back down at his teacup.

He wouldn't tell me, even if I did go over there.

It bruises me more than I care to admit.

Gideon told me that Oak liked me, and I let myself believe it. I've been acting like a fool.

I'm deeply embarrassed.

The porridge in front of me suddenly tastes like ashes, and I put my spoon down.

I glance up to the high table and see Magister Zhang watching me. His right hand twitches, almost as if he's about to lift it and wave, and I start – afraid I've been caught, somehow, like the magisters know what I'm thinking. But he only picks up his fork and continues eating.

Gradually, students drift out of the dining hall. Oak and Ren both stand, Oak looking around furtively. For a brief moment, our eyes lock again, and I feel that same zing of connection. His pace slows slightly, as if he's planning to detour over to my table and talk to me. But he shakes his head, just a little, and keeps following Ren.

I have an hour to kill before my scheduled meeting with Magistra Hewitt, so I go outside to get some fresh air.

---

The rain has cleared, but the morning fog still hangs heavy over Agathion's turrets and spires. I wish I'd brought a coat with me.

Halfway across the lawn, I turn and look up at the tower, so proud and tall. I feel a twinge of unease as I imagine lightning striking it.

I keep going, then pause when I realise I'm walking towards the wych elm. *Oak's* wych elm, in my mind.

I swerve and head instead to the farm.

Old Toby is in the sty, the great bristling mass of him snuffling contentedly in his food trough. I shake off the memory of my arrival at Agathion, leaning on the fence.

The great hog looks up at me, his beady eyes glittering.

Does he remember me?

He takes a shuffling step, head lowered like he's about to charge.

I feel a spike of anxiety, remembering those crashing hooves. But the fence is sturdy. He can't get me.

*Mind over body.*

*Stay in control.*

Old Toby crosses the muddy yard until he's right in front of me. He tilts his head up, displaying his mud-crusting snout, which twitches and snuffles, as though he's trying to catch my scent.

Is he expecting a snack? A pat?

I tentatively reach out and touch him on the top of his head. His bristles are thick and wiry, his skin cracked and caked with grit.

A shudder runs through him, and then he lets out a piercing scream.

I leap back, clapping my hands over my ears.

Old Toby doesn't stop. His mouth is wet and pink, with those cracked yellow teeth erupting jagged from his gums.

The front door to the little farmhouse swings open, and the groundskeeper – Mr MacCrimmon – appears, his brows drawn together. He glares at me, as if he blames me for the noise. Like I've been tormenting one of his pigs. I raise my hands.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I didn't ...'

He leans over the stacked stone wall of the sty, whistling at Old Toby.

But the pig ignores him, still staring at me and screaming, black eyes rolling in panic.

'Is he okay?' I ask.

Mr MacCrimmon doesn't respond. He just stares at Old Toby, a frown drawing the lines on his face together into deep crevasses. He climbs over the stacked stone wall, his movements slow and careful. He crouches down until he is face-to-face with the beast, seemingly undeterred by the noise it makes.

'There, there,' he mutters. 'Easy, now.'

Old Toby's cries grow less panicked, and then slowly subside to grunts.

'What's wrong with him?' I ask.

Mr MacCrimmon shakes his head. 'I've been looking after Old Toby for nigh on forty years,' he says slowly. 'And I've never seen him so spooked.'

I swallow and resist the urge to turn and run away. 'Forty years,' I say. 'Is that a long time for a pig?'

'Aye,' Mr MacCrimmon says. 'I've never known one to last more than fifteen. And Old Toby was old when I arrived.'

'So how old is he?' I ask.

Mr MacCrimmon shrugs. 'Older than any pig ought to be.'

Old Toby looks over at me, his eyes glittering darkly.

I get the oddest feeling that he really *sees* me. All the way to the core of my soul.

And he doesn't like what he sees.

---

When I arrive for my meeting with Magistra Hewitt, I find Archon Leek sitting in one of the spare chairs.

'I'm sorry,' I say, assuming I've interrupted them.

'Don't apologise,' Magistra Hewitt says. 'Come in and sit down.'

The Archon watches me silently, a hawk hovering above his prey.

Magistra Hewitt folds her hands neatly in front of her, and gazes at me over her spectacles. 'A very serious matter has come to our attention,' she says.

I'm still feeling unsettled, my nerves frayed after being screamed at by an enormous, supernaturally old pig.

Animals can sense there's something wrong with me. The horses knew, too.

But everything seems to be normal in here. The wolfhound, Peritas, is asleep by the crackling fire. He doesn't so much as raise his head when I enter.

The firelight glints off the Archon's glasses, giving me the impression that his eyes are full of flame.

'A student is missing,' he says, his voice low and calm. 'Gideon Hall. I understand you have been spending some time with him lately.'

Missing.

Gideon isn't sick. He's *missing*.

And it seems likely that the Archon had something to do with it.

‘I – I sit with him sometimes at meals,’ I say. ‘And we have a class together.’

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘No,’ I say.

‘You didn’t sit with your friends this morning,’ the Archon continues. ‘Why not?’

Uneasiness creeps over my skin. Does the Archon think that *I* might be responsible for Gideon’s disappearance? He knows what happened at St Catherine’s. He knows about Magister Kovacevic. Does he think that I did it to Gideon, too?

A deeper fear grips me.

*What if they did, and are trying to find out if I suspect?*

Magistra Hewitt leans forward. ‘We are extremely concerned for Gideon’s welfare,’ she says. ‘So anything you can tell us would be greatly appreciated.’

She seems genuine. Oak would have me believe that the magisters are evil. Still ... what if he’s wrong?

But I swore an oath.

‘I don’t know anything,’ I say. ‘I swear it. I haven’t seen Gideon since yesterday, around lunchtime.’

‘And how did he seem, when you last saw him?’

‘He – he seemed fine. Same as usual.’

‘Anything else? Did he say anything about running away?’

I shake my head. ‘No, nothing.’

‘You don’t need to protect him,’ the Archon says. ‘Or any of your other friends. Believe me when I tell you that they wouldn’t do the same for you.’

He’s right. I know he’s right. Oak made that very clear last night.

They’ll never trust me.

I’ll never belong with them.

I swore their oath, but I’m not a real Knight of Empedocles.

‘You’re cunning, Miss Whittaker. Cunning like Odysseus. Your friends – the other students here at Agathion – they’re nothing but pigs.’

The Archon’s eyes bore into mine, and I get the impression that he has seen a great many things in his time. There is a kind of icy wisdom in those eyes. A true philosopher, unburdened by longing and the torturous desires of the body.

‘Only three days till your birthday,’ he says at last, and I sense a hum of anticipation in his voice. An almost invisible quiver.

‘I’m not really a birthday person,’ I reply.

‘This one will be ... special,’ the Archon says, getting to his feet.

His smile is cold and predatory as he exits the room.

I don’t know who to trust.

Magistra Hewitt looks down at the folder in front of her.

‘The Archon is right,’ she says. ‘You’re not like the other students here. I fear you will never truly fit in if you cannot escape from the cage of your past. A moth cannot carry its cocoon with it. You are hiding, Miss Whittaker. Hiding from yourself. From your potential. From me.’

Her eyes are watery and aged, but they hold my gaze with unflinching intensity. I feel stripped naked before her.

‘I’m trying,’ I tell her.

There’s a polite knock on the door, which opens to reveal Magister Zhang.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt, Magistra Hewitt,’ he says, his eyes sweeping over me. ‘But I brought you some tea.’

Magistra Hewitt looks startled. ‘Oh,’ she says, a little frown appearing on her brow. ‘That’s very kind of you.’

It’s clear this kind of thing doesn’t happen often.

He puts the tray down on her desk and pours her a cup. ‘It’s a special blend from the foothills of Huangshan,’ he says. ‘I know you’re a connoisseur.’

‘Indeed,’ she says, breathing in the fragrant steam appreciatively. ‘Thank you, Magister Zhang.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he says, then nods at us both and retreats, closing the door gently behind him.

Magistra Hewitt takes a sip of the tea, closing her eyes to savour it. When she opens them, she looks mildly disappointed to find that I’m still in her office.

‘I’d like to see you again tomorrow, Miss Whittaker,’ she says. ‘We have much to discuss.’

---

I can't sleep. I feel unsettled and strange, like I'm coming down with something.

The Archon's words keep ringing in my mind, over and over.

*They're nothing but pigs.*

Old Toby screaming.

Cassidy screaming.

I lean against my narrow dorm window, the icy glass cutting through the fog of confusion.

I need to get out of my own head.

Perhaps a book will help. Not the dreary Greek histories piled on my desk. I remember seeing a copy of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* in the Sanctuary. Maybe I'll slip up to the turret and take it. The others probably won't even notice.

As I pad down the silent hallway, I notice that Ren's bedroom door is ajar, light spilling into the corridor. I hear Ren's voice, and feel a tug of misery. I miss her.

'Are you sure we won't get caught?'

I pause and listen. More secrets.

'As sure as I can be,' I hear someone respond. The voice is familiar, but I can't quite pinpoint it. 'I've already coated the bottom of her cup with lethe. She should be out cold.'

*She?* Are they talking about me? And lethe? That's what the river is called in the Greek underworld, the river that makes you forget.

But they're talking about it as if it's some kind of potion.

Is that what the magisters used to keep me asleep while they wrapped my bed frame in red thread?

'I'm nervous,' Ren says.

I sidle closer, and peek through the crack in the door.

The second person is Magister Zhang.

He's in Ren's room, reaching out to run a finger down Ren's cheek. A caress.

Ren doesn't flinch away. She doesn't slap his hand.

And she doesn't seem frozen, the way Cassidy was. Instead, she leans into Magister Zhang's touch, closing her eyes and reaching out to grab a fistful of his academic gown.

'Are you sure nobody suspects anything?' she breathes.

'I'm sure,' he responds. 'Only a few days to go.'

What the actual fuck?

Ren is working for the magisters. Oak thought I was the traitor. But it was Ren all along.

*Ren.*

I can't believe it. Ren, the most loyal of everyone. Ren, who adores Gideon with the fire of a thousand suns.

Or at least, I thought she did.

Magister Zhang turns his head sharply towards the door, and I shrink back into the shadows.

'What is it?' I hear Ren ask.

'Nothing,' Magister Zhang replies. 'I thought I heard something. We'd better go. They're waiting for us.'

I flee back to my own room before they appear in the hallway, all thoughts of the Sanctuary gone.

Did Zhang see me? Are they heading to my room right now, expecting to find me unconscious? I shove a chair under my doorknob, for good measure, then climb into bed.

---

I'm certain I'll be awake all night, but I fall almost instantly into a deep sleep, only to be jerked awake an hour later, at precisely midnight.

I hear Oak's voice whispering in my ear, as if he's lying right beside me.

'Let the sword fall. Don't hesitate.'

I bolt upright, groping for the switch for my bedside lamp.

My room is empty, the chair still wedged under the doorknob. It's even colder than usual, my breath coming out in clouds in the bitter air. Frost rimes the windowpane, and the tip of my nose feels completely numb.

Can I hear whispering or is it all in my head?

The silence is deafening. No creaking of floorboards. No birds or insects. Not even the tapping of branches against the window. It's as if the whole world has been frozen, like I'm in *Sleeping Beauty*, the one person in the palace who escaped Carabosse's curse.

Only me, and that strange *something*, deep below Agathion.

I slip out of my dorm room and into the corridor, peering down from the arched windows into the shadowy forum.



Nothing looks out of place, but it *feels* different. Something has happened. Once again, the universe has been somehow disturbed.

As I'm standing there watching, four hooded robed figures emerge from the stones. They don't seem to come *from* anywhere, they just appear, and I know they've come from the other ring. The one in between worlds.

My heart starts to beat faster, and I lean forward, trying to see more.

One of the figures turns to look up at me, and I shrink back away from the window, but not before I catch a glimpse of a pale, elegant face.

It's Magistra Hewitt.

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# THIRTEEN

30 October

‘How are things?’

Magistra Hewitt peers over her spectacles at me.

‘Fine,’ I say, although they aren’t.

I barely slept at all. My mind didn’t still for a second, whirling from theory to theory.

Ren is working with the magisters. They did something with Gideon. Something bad.

‘Magistra,’ I say, exhaustion making me bold and reckless. ‘What’s so special about my birthday?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s only two days away. I think I have a right to know.’

I lift my chin and stare at her, and she stares back. A long moment, broken by her coughing and reaching for her teacup. She misjudges the distance, and the cup rattles in the saucer.

Peritas raises his head, a plaintive noise sounding in his throat.

Magistra Hewitt shushes him, and Peritas quiets, fixing her with a somewhat resentful eye.

‘All in good time,’ she says, glancing at the clock on the wall like she’s got somewhere else to be.

Her whole vibe is off today. Her usually perfect hair looks unbrushed, escaping from her bun to frame her face in steel-coloured tangles.

‘Is there any news about Gideon?’ I ask.

Magistra Hewitt shakes her head. ‘I’m sure he merely ran off,’ she says dismissively. ‘It happens.’

She seems remarkably unconcerned. Yesterday she was quite agitated that he was missing. What has changed?

‘You should probably stay away from those students,’ she adds, pursing her lips. ‘They’re nothing but trouble.’

But when I first arrived, she wanted me to spy on them for her.

Maybe I need to give her something. Get her to trust me. Perhaps if she thinks I *am* a spy, then she’ll let something slip. Some extra piece of this puzzle.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ I say. ‘I – I guess I’ve been feeling lonely since ... well, since always. And even though I came here telling myself I wouldn’t make friends, I kind of did.’ Now that I’ve started talking, I’m finding it hard to stop. ‘At least, I thought I did. But I don’t think they are very good friends. They’ve got all these secrets and ... and one of them is actually flat-out hostile towards me. But I overlooked all of it because I wanted to be a part of it, you know? To fit in. And then there’s ...’ I swallow. ‘A boy. And I have a crush on him, which is frankly a big surprise because I didn’t think I felt that way about boys, but I guess I do. About this particular boy, anyway. But ... I don’t know, he’s been acting kind of weird, and maybe I’ve been ignoring a whole bunch of red flags just because I want him to kiss me?’

Magistra Hewitt mutters something that sounds suspiciously like *Oh my god*. I feel my face turn hot and red. Why am I telling her this? I’m don’t sound like a spy, I sound like a weird teenager, oversharing to her teacher. Now it’s my turn to cough. Why does this meeting feel so *awkward*?

Peritas shifts again and lets out a whine.

Magistra Hewitt frowns at him, opening a folder in front of her and making a show of leafing through the pages. I glimpse transcripts from St Catherine’s and the other schools I went to before that.

I know what they all say. *Antisocial. Intelligent but disengaged. Would excel if only she would apply herself.*

I’ve never *wanted* to go to school before. But I feel like I belong here, in these damp, cold halls.

‘I guess I’m struggling,’ I tell her. ‘Because ... I really do believe in Agathion’s philosophy. I want to learn self-control. I want to live a life of

the mind. But ... it's hard. I guess I'm still a teenager, after all.'

'Hmm.' The magistra makes a noncommittal noise.

'I want to be here,' I continue. 'It's ... it's thrilling. The damp, cold halls. The books. The ... *knowledge*. The whole philosophy of this place. I love it. I want to belong here. I really do.'

I get the feeling that Magistra Hewitt isn't listening to me anymore. She's frowning down at my folder.

'Is that my birth certificate?' I ask, peering over to her side of the desk.

'Samhain,' she mutters, not looking up. 'On the stroke of midnight.'

My birthday again.

'Magistra Hewitt,' I say as firmly as I can. 'I think it's time you tell me why you really brought me here.'

The magistra doesn't answer. Instead she gets up from her desk and stalks over to a bookcase, taking long, unladylike strides. She pulls a book off the shelf, frowns at it, and lets it fall to the floor, where it lands with a bang, splayed open like a broken thing. Peritas leaps to his feet in shock, and slinks over to the door, his tail between his legs.

I gasp as Magistra Hewitt similarly discards another book, then another, until she finds the one she's looking for.

I want to get up and rescue the poor fallen books. How could she treat them so carelessly?

Magistra Hewitt evidently finds the book she's looking for, turning pages swiftly while frowning down at the contents. I can't see the cover or the spine, so I've no idea why this is so important.

Peritas scratches at the door, asking to be let out.

Magistra Hewitt ignores him. She drops the book onto her desk, where it falls open. It looks like some kind of almanac, with a table of dates, locations and moon phases.

She takes off her glasses and considers me, her head on one side.

'Page Whittaker,' she murmurs. 'You really are full of surprises.'

Am I? I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn't. There's a weird energy in the air. An intensity in her gaze that's ...

I shake my head.

I must be mistaken. Witnessing that weird moment between Ren and Magister Zhang has gotten into my head. Not every teacher is predatory, after all.

'We're out of time,' Magistra Hewitt says abruptly. 'Er ... run along.'

I have so many more questions, but it appears that I won't get to ask them today.

I open the door and Peritas slips out before me, scurrying down the hallway, letting out little whimpers as he goes.

---

News of Gideon's disappearance must have gotten around, because the mood in the dining hall is subdued. Voices are hushed, and eyes keep turning to the table where the Knights usually sit. Where Ren is sitting, alone, half-heartedly picking at her toad-in-the-hole.

Oak is nowhere to be seen.

Even the queen's table is quiet. Lacey isn't shining as brightly as she usually does, her hair a little limp, her golden skin dull.

'May I?' I ask Ren.

She glances up and smiles, but there's strain behind it. 'Of course, bestie. Where have you been? I've missed you.'

She seems to mean it, but who knows what's real now?

'Where's Oak?' I ask, sitting down beside her.

Ren hesitates, looking suddenly guilty.

'Let me guess,' I say. 'He's wherever Gideon is.'

'What?' She looks panicked. 'No. I mean, I don't know where Gideon is. But Oak is ... in his room. He has a headache.'

How is she so terrible at lying now, when she's been successfully sneaking around with Zhang this whole time?

'You must be worried about Gideon,' I say. 'You really have no idea where he is?'

Ren swallows, pushing peas around her plate with a fork. 'Nope. No idea.'

If Ren really didn't know where Gideon was, she'd be tearing this place apart. She'd destroy anyone standing in her way.

Wouldn't she?

I remember the way her fist clutched Magister Zhang's robes. Could her devotion to Gideon all be ... fake?

The possibility feels a bit like discovering that your adorable puppy is really a hellhound. I can't bring myself to believe it.

I'm tempted to ask her about Magister Zhang, ask if she really is having an affair with him – if she's been working with the magisters the whole time. But I choose a safer route.

'Tell me about the names,' I say. 'The ones scratched into the beam in the Sanctuary.'

Ren's gloomy expression clears a little. 'Clarence Chester,' she says. 'Ethel Hayes. Minnie Simmons. Alva Armstrong. Walter de Root. Otobore Aiello.'

'Why is Otobore crossed out?'

She shrugs. 'We're not sure.'

'Who were they?'

'The original Knights of Empedocles,' she says. 'Or at least we think they were the original ones. They lived here more than two hundred and fifty years ago.'

'Before it was a school?'

Ren nods. 'Agathion has always been a place where people send troubled kids. Back then it was a home to ditch your pregnant unwed daughters. Your gay sons. Anyone who was different or an embarrassment to the family name. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.'

There's a sadness to her voice that I haven't heard before. Ren is usually so cheerful. So upbeat.

'So the Knights of Empedocles were a secret club?' I ask.

She nods and smiles fondly. 'They were the rejects of the rejects. Iconoclasts and weirdos. Sometimes I wish I could go back in time and give every one of them a big hug.'

Now, *that's* more like the Ren I know.

'How do you know about them?' I ask.

'Bits and pieces,' she says. 'They left some notes, minutes from meetings and the like.'

'Where are they?' I ask. 'The notes. Are they in the Sanctuary?'

Ren looks suddenly cagey, and I don't press her. 'It must have been hard back then,' I say, instead. 'Before Agathion was a school.'

'The people running this place tortured those kids,' she says heatedly. 'They're monsters.'

I don't question her shift to present tense, but file it away to think about later.

Maybe she wasn't so into Magister Zhang after all. Maybe I read that whole situation wrong. Maybe he's somehow coerced her? The magisters drugged me, after all, knocked me out on my very first night here, so they could string up all the red thread.

I glance up to the high table and see Magistra Hewitt watching me.  
Maybe the magisters at Agathion are *still* monsters.

---

I absolutely do not believe that Oak is in his room with a headache, but I head up there after dinner, just in case. He told me his room was directly above mine, so it's easy to find.

Nobody answers my knock, so after a moment's hesitation I turn the knob and let myself in.

No Oak.

It's so different from my room. The bed is the same, but everything else is cluttered with books and paper and other, stranger things.

Bunches of herbs hang from the curtain rod – sage, rosemary, sorrel, and something that I think must be yarrow. There are little jars on the windowsill, filled with flowers and ground powders and bits of bark.

The desk is covered in scraps of paper, books and pots of ink. I notice a bottle of sparkly black nail polish sitting next to a half-eaten apple.

Am I violating Oak's privacy? Yes. Do I care? Not really.

The walls are papered with torn-out notebook pages covered in scribbly black ink – mostly botanical sketches, carefully labelled in Oak's distinctive spiky handwriting. But there are others, too, figures I recognise from his tarot cards, strange occult-looking symbols, and faces. I recognise Cyrus, Ren and Gideon. And ...

One of the sketches catches my eye.

It's *me*, sitting in the library gazing out the window. My hair falls in wisps from my ponytail, framing my face with delicate curved lines. My eyes are lustrous, glinting with intelligence and a kind of soulful longing. I'm holding a pen, the end caught between my teeth, my lips slightly parted. The sketch feels somehow intimate, like Oak has captured an intensely private moment.

Was he watching me in the library?

Did he know I was thinking about him?

It's been three days since Oak and I had our fight in the ring of stones. I miss him, more than I care to admit. He's become such a fixture in my life here at Agathion. Such a fixture in my thoughts.

There's a tangle of dark green yarn on the desk chair, a half-finished scarf attached to a pair of knitting needles.

Oak knits. Of course he does. The discovery brings a smile to my lips. A smile that is immediately chased away by the memory of his rejection in the ring of stones.

I turn to the books piled on his bedside table, recognising one instantly.

*Women's Business: Unlocking the Feminine Divinity Within* by Jadis Kassandra Redferne. Oak's mother.

I flick through the book, but it contains a bit too much vaginal sunbathing for my taste.

I picture little Oak, tiptoeing around a huge grey stone castle, listening at doors and longing to be invited into his mother's world. How could anyone have a child like that and *not* love and celebrate him for exactly who he is?

I replace the book, and pick up one called *Empedocles and the Transmigration of Souls*. Apparently, Empedocles claimed to be a *daimon*, an immortal who had been banished to Earth and forced into a mortal body, suffering through thirty thousand reincarnations before he was permitted to return home. My eyes fall upon a familiar phrase.

*For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.*

The password to the Sanctuary. The Knights of Empedocles. I feel like I *almost* understand what's going on, but I'm missing a vital piece.

“It is too hard a knot for me to untie,” I quote.

I reach for a slim volume called *Essentials of Chiromancy*, remembering the shifty look on Oak's face when he mentioned Morgana's ring.

He said it meant good luck, but I know enough about Arthurian myth to know that nothing to do with Morgan le Fay can mean good luck. Enchantress and older sister of Arthur, the stories painted her as powerful and vindictive, a jealous lover who was willing to burn everything to the ground in order to get what she wanted. I find the relevant page in the book



and check my palm to see that I do indeed have double lines meeting at the base of my ring finger, like a narrowed eye.

*Morgana is a goddess of war and death who marks dark souls with her ring. Those who bear it consort with demons and should be treated as dangerous.*

I put the book down.

Consorting with demons.

I have so many questions, but I'm terrified to learn the answers. I wish Oak were here to reassure me. But he's gone, and so are Cyrus and Gideon.

Who will be next?

And how does any of it relate to me and what I did? What can I do?

I sink down onto Oak's bed, letting my head rest against his pillow. It smells mossy, earthy. Like a forest glade. I close my eyes and allow myself a moment of imagining that he is lying next to me, curled around my back, his arm slung over my waist.

I want it.

I want *him*.

But he doesn't want me.

My eye is drawn to a jar of flowers on the windowsill. Bright purple and dusty pink.

What was it that Oak said about flowers?

*Wolfsbane and hellebore keep things concealed.*

I get up from the bed and reach over to lift the jar of flowers. There's a cardboard folder underneath that I swear wasn't there before.

It's full of newspaper clippings and scribbled notes. I pick up the first clipping.

## SCOTTISH HEIRESS DIES IN TRAGIC DROWNING ACCIDENT

The article is from thirty years ago, with a grainy black-and-white photo of a tall, beautiful woman, leaning on the railing of an expensive-looking yacht. She stares haughtily at the camera like she doesn't care what anyone thinks of her. At the bottom of the article, Oak has scribbled:

*Graduated Agathion 1985*

I frown. This woman – Helena van Wuster – was an Agathion student, who died ten years after she graduated.

The next article is about a young man named Eric Holm, who disappeared in Paris in the mid-1920s. He was the son of a Danish nobleman, the assumption being that he'd been mugged and thrown in the Seine.

### *Graduated Agathion 1915*

Another student who died ten years after graduation.

The next is from the seventies, a disgraced popstar who left a suicide note, but a body was never found.

### *Graduated Agathion 1965*

I scan the other articles. Disappearances, assumed to be deaths. All young people. Every one of them vanished almost ten years to the day after they graduated from Agathion College.

I crouch on the floor and start lining them up in chronological order. When I'm finished, I stand back and look at them.

One mysterious disappearance every ten years, almost like clockwork.

All Agathion alumni. All filthy rich.

Is someone *murdering* rich people?

It can't be a someone, because these deaths go back to the mid-1700s. A group of someones? A cult?

There are Post-it notes, too, with dates and names scribbled.

*Hewitt retires:*

1795

1845

1895

1945

1995

My heart is sinking now, a foreboding I can't explain filling me. Have there been multiple Magistra Hewitts? One every fifty years?

My gaze travels back to the heiress, her sharp eyes staring at me from the photo.

I ... I *know* those eyes. They've stared at me with that same cold analysis.

Helena van Wuster. Daughter of a shipping magnate.

But I would *swear* that it's Magistra Hewitt.

She's even the right age – if she hadn't died, this woman would be sixty-eight now, which seems about right. Could she have faked her own death?

But why run away from yachts and luxury to become a teacher at a school for troubled rich kids?

Agathion became a school in the mid-1700s. Just before these lists of dates begin.

*They're monsters.* That's what Ren said.

Present tense.

I remember the inhuman way that Magister Kovacevic moved.

The way Cyrus acted like he had no idea who I was.

The way he seemed to know Magister Zhang, as if he'd been here before.

What if there weren't five different Magistra Hewitts?

What if it was *all the same person*?

Goosebumps break out along my arms.

What if Magister Zhang *had* been here before, as a teacher?

Same person, different face?

I picture the Archon at the feast, holding the great heavy iron sword.

Snàthad White-Hilt.

A sword that can cut the soul from a human body.

Empedocles. The transmigration of souls.

*For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.*

I suddenly know where I've seen Magister Zhang before. Why he looked familiar. He's the son of a billionaire, and is a society playboy famous for harebrained expeditions and flagrant spending of his father's money. He went exploring in Cambodia and was never seen again. I saw a news report in the airport about it, before I got on my flight to London. His family had called off the search, and were holding a memorial service.

His name wasn't Zhang, though. It was Cho. And he's exactly the kind of kid who would have graduated from an exclusive school for gifted but troubled teens, ten years ago.

Things are starting to make sense.

A horrific, twisted sense, but sense nonetheless.

Cyrus didn't recognise me at the feast, because he *wasn't Cyrus*.

He was Magister Kovacevic in Cyrus's body.

Cyrus's *stolen* body.

My blood runs cold.

The magisters are stealing the bodies of rich, young students. They take it in turns, each leaving for ten years, living the exclusive lifestyle of the body they stole, then they die or disappear, and return to Agathion under a different name, as a new magister.

I glance at the articles. How long have they been doing it? As far back as newspapers go, that's certain.

Magistra Hewitt said that this place had been a home for unwanted children for more than a thousand years. Could this have been happening the whole time?

How do they do it, though? And if Magister Kovacevic was in Cyrus's body at graduation, who was in Kovacevic's body?

I remember my vision inside the grotto. The robed figures. The complicated runes and sigils on the ground. The altar.

I remember Magister Kovacevic's inhuman gait. The slurred speech. The unceasing, ravenous hunger.

The scent of heather.

Oak said that humans weren't innately magical. That we had to harness the power of other, more magical beings.

Elemental spirits.

Demons.

A gasp escapes my lips.

Is that why they brought me here? They think they can use me ... to what?

No wonder the Knights never really trusted me.

The Knights. Oak. Gideon.

What have the magisters done to them?

I think back through every conversation I've had with Magistra Hewitt and the Archon.

*It's a long time since I've been anywhere. But I hope to change that soon.*

The system the magisters built means they only get ten years off. They have to spend forty years at Agathion, cold and bored, waiting for their next shot at freedom.

They're planning something.

Something big.

Something that will allow them all to take a new body and leave.

And it's going to happen on my birthday, which is the day after tomorrow.

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# FOURTEEN

30 October

I rush straight up to the Sanctuary, hoping to find Ren, but there's nobody there.

My head is swimming with it all, and I don't know what to *do*.

It's nearly curfew, so I head back down to my room, bumping into a random girl coming out of the bathroom, dressed in flannel pyjamas, her breath minty fresh. She apologises, her eyes lingering on me as I stammer and hurry away.

What if she's one of the magisters in a student's body?

They could be anywhere. *Anyone*.

A thought occurs to me, and bile rises in the back of my throat.

What if *Ren* is really a magister? It would explain her intimate moment with Magister Zhang. Maybe they've been lovers for years. Centuries, even.

And they thought *I* was the spy.

Maybe that's where Oak and Gideon have gone. Maybe Ren – or whoever she really is – is picking off students, one by one, sacrificing them to the demon that I'm now certain resides inside the ring of stones?

I can't trust anybody.

I curl up on my bed, trying to steady my breath.

I have to stay calm.

I have to stay in control.

I'm not safe, and if I panic, then neither is anyone else.

The minutes tick by, and although I don't reach a state of *calm*, I start to feel more in control.

I can't stay here all night. My birthday is the day after tomorrow. I need to *act*.

Do I confront Magistra Hewitt? Confront Ren?

Run away?

What would Oak do?

My heart lurches as I realise he might be dead already. That the magisters could have sucked out his soul and taken over his body.

What happens to the souls? Oak told me that human souls get reabsorbed into the fabric of the universe. He made it sound peaceful.

But surely it must hurt, having your soul ripped out of you?

The temperature drops so fast it makes the beams above me creak and groan.

My breath escapes in clouds, and ice crystals form on my eyelashes. I watch as the grimy windows turn white with frost.

My bedside light flickers and I glance at the clock.

Midnight.

It's happening again. That intense feeling of wrongness. It happened the night before Gideon disappeared and again the night before Oak disappeared.

My heart shudders as I realise it also happened just after I arrived at Agathion. The night before the feast.

Is someone's soul about to be severed?

My ears pop, and it feels like the air in the room has suddenly been sucked away, then reintroduced again, all in a rush. I feel my hair lift from my scalp as static electricity crackles around me.

The windows seem to bend, the glass warping and vibrating with an audible hum.

Whatever is happening isn't over yet. There's a chance I can stop it.

A chance I can save someone.

---

I race downstairs to the courtyard, still and silent. I travel around the stones, offering blood, earth, breath. I wrench a button from my blazer for

Tiodhlac, the gift stone. The uniform was included with my scholarship, so I think it counts.

At Sgeul-Rùin, I whisper a secret.

‘The magisters at this school are stealing students’ bodies so they can live forever.’

A part of me hopes that this sacrifice won’t be accepted. That maybe I’m wrong. But I feel the universe shift a little under my feet, and I know that it’s true.

I race around to Cuimhne, the final stone. I lean my head against its cold, craggy surface and close my eyes.

*I’m at the beach near my grandmother’s house in Southern California, clambering over tide pools and picking up starfish. I can see Mom in the distance, dozing on her beach towel. I poke an anemone and watch its little tendrils close around my finger. The sea breathes in and out upon the shore, swirling and bubbling in and around the rocks. I find a perfectly round stone in a pool. It’s about the size of a soccer ball and so smooth it’s almost like a crystal ball. I lay my hands on it, and I can feel the thing that lives inside, as old as the sea itself. It whispers to me, and I draw it inside, letting it fill me with its watery song and the taste of salt brine. It shows me tiny fish and almost invisible squid, and points out the distant hum of a whale.*

*Mom is calling me.*

*I carefully put my friend back into its stone and scramble back over the rocks to where she’s waiting. There’s an uncertainty in her eyes. A wariness. Like she knows what I did and it frightens her.*

*I want to tell her that there’s nothing to be frightened of. That the creature inside the stone wasn’t dangerous.*

*But I know she won’t understand.*

I take a deep breath, aware that I’ve lost something precious. No time to dwell on it. The ground falls away beneath me, and I tumble through the void. It’s easier this time, the third time. I know what to expect. I’m ready when the ground forms under my feet once more, and the stones come into view. I crouch down, not wanting to be seen.

Candles are burning within the circle. Three hooded and robed figures stand in a triangle formation around the stone altar.

The formless whispers are back, and they feel somehow agitated, like someone is trying to tell me something. But there are no words, only tickles at the very edges of perception.



I creep closer, careful to stay in the shadows.

Magister Zhang and Magistra Hewitt are there. The third robed figure has their back to me, but they're tall, so it must be Archon Leek. He's holding Snàthad White-Hilt in one hand.

Sigils and runes have been daubed on the hard-packed earth in white paint, just like I saw in my vision in the grotto. They seem to shift and distort when I look at them too closely, my mind *almost* grasping at their meaning, then sliding away.

A ring of salt surrounds the altar, and in the centre of the ring I see Lacey, her hands and feet bound with red thread, lying still on her back with her eyes closed. She looks like a sleeping princess, her expression calm, her hair spreading out around her face like something from a painting.

Next to her is Magistra Galal, similarly bound, her eyes closed.

Magistra Galal is going to take over Lacey's body. Lacey's soul will be ripped out and discarded.

Have they already done it? Am I too late?

There's no sign of Oak or Gideon. Perhaps they're already dead, sacrificed to the demon.

But why now? It's still two days until my birthday, until whatever the Archon has been planning.

Magistra Hewitt begins to chant in a language I don't understand. Her voice forms low and guttural syllables like the clanging of a brass bell. Zhang holds something out, and I recognise it as the weird bowl from the Archon's office.

The other person – the Archon – is holding Snàthad White-Hilt over Lacey, point down right above her forehead.

Magistra Hewitt wraps her right hand around the blade, pulling down so her hand slices open, blood dripping onto Lacey's forehead, dribbling down to stain the granite altar.

'Hear me, spirit,' Magistra Hewitt says. 'And be reminded of our ancient bargain. You are formless, trapped within this cage of stone. In exchange for your power, we offer you a body to dwell within, so that you may briefly step outside your prison and walk among the living.' She gestures at something I didn't notice before. A little human-shaped creature, made from mud and twigs.

Exactly like the one I saw the first time I visited the Sanctuary.

What on earth were Oak and the others trying to *do*? Replicate the magisters' ritual?

*Why?*

Something is nagging at me, a memory or a hunch, but I don't have time to entertain it. It seems I'm fated to stumble upon teachers doing despicable things to students. Well, fine. If that's the way it's going to be.

I take a breath and step forward into the circle of light.

'Not today, Satan,' I say, my voice bolder than I feel.

The three robed figures turn to me in shock.

'Oh shit,' says Magistra Hewitt.

Magister Zhang is frozen in place, staring at me.

I glance at the third figure. The one holding the sword. My knees tremble beneath me as I see her face.

It's Ren.

'I really hoped you wouldn't be here,' I say, feeling genuinely heartbroken. 'I still thought you might be one of the good guys.'

'Page,' she says, her voice strained. 'I *am* one of the good guys.'

'Do you know what they're doing?' I say, gesturing at Lacey's body, then shake my head. 'Of course you do. You're doing it too. I saw you with *him*.' I point to Magister Zhang. 'You're a good liar. Amazing. I totally bought you as a hero of the people, desperately in love with Gideon. Where is he? Did you sacrifice him, too?'

'No,' Ren says, her face twisting with consternation. 'Just listen. We'll explain everything.'

Magister Zhang puts the bowl down on the ground and steps forward, hands out in front of him, placating. 'Let's all calm down,' he says, his voice quiet and calm. 'I think you'll find that once you understand what's been happening—'

'You're *killing children*,' I say. 'What else is there to understand?'

'Everything,' Magistra Hewitt says fervently.

'I'm right, though, aren't I? The magisters at this school have been killing the students and stealing their bodies. That's what happened to Cyrus. Magister Kovacevic stole his body and is probably living it up somewhere on a beach, sipping champagne.'

'Yes,' Magister Zhang says. 'Yes, you're right.'

I shake my head. I can't believe this. I can't believe that he's straight-up admitting it.

A kind of rage descends on me, and I'm back behind the gymnasium at St Catherine's again. I want to break things.

I kick over the bowl, and thick red liquid splashes across the floor. I smell the hot, wet tang of blood. It soaks into the white painted marks, turning them bright scarlet.

I scuff the salt circle with my shoe, breaking the line. Then I snatch up Snàthad White-Hilt and level it at Magistra Hewitt's throat.

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you,' I tell her. 'I've done it before.'

'Page.' Magistra Hewitt is trying to keep her voice calm, but I can hear the tremble in it. Can see the veins standing out on her neck. 'Page. It's me. The fustilarian. The plague-sore. The pigeon-livered stockfish.'

I freeze, locking eyes with her.

And there's something there. Behind her eyes. Something familiar.

It doesn't make sense.

But then again, it kind of does.

'Oak?'

# FIFTEEN

30 October

The magistra's shoulders slump in relief, and she nods. My eyes fly to Magister Zhang, my mind whirling as things fall into place. 'And Gideon?'

Magister Zhang raises a sheepish hand, fingers wiggling in a little wave. 'Hi.'

Lacey sits up from where she's been lying on the altar. 'Can we get on with this?' she asks. 'This stone is colder than my mother's prenup.'

Oak is Magistra Hewitt.

And Gideon is Magister Zhang.

That's why they went missing. They took over the magisters' bodies.

My mind reels as I mentally reassess every interaction I've had with Magister Zhang and Magistra Hewitt over the last couple of days.

Ren and Zhang were acting like lovers, because Zhang *is Gideon*.

And my last meeting with Magistra Hewitt, where she seemed so *odd*, especially when I confessed my crush on ...

'Oh *no*,' I say, clapping a hand over my mouth.

Magistra Hewitt grins at me in a way that is so incredibly *Oak* that I can't believe I didn't see it before, then puts a hand to – I do some mental pronoun gymnastics before settling on – *his* messy bun.

'Honestly, I have a new respect for Hewitt,' he says. 'It must take her at least an hour to do her hair and makeup every morning.'

The magisters aren't taking over the students' bodies. The students – the Knights of Empedocles – have been taking over the magisters.

I find myself staring at the limp body of Magistra Galal. 'And you're about to ...' I gesture to Lacey.

'Yep.'

'Is she ... is she dead?'

'She's sleeping.'

'How? How did you get her here?'

'Slipped something into her tea,' Hewitt-Oak says, straightening up the bowl and nudging the salt circle back into place with his toe.

I remember Magister Zhang interrupting my meeting with Hewitt and look at Gideon. 'That was you?' I ask. 'With the tea?'

He nods. 'We put lethe in the tea,' he explains. 'Just a strong sleeping potion, really.'

I shake my head. 'Why?' I ask.

They exchange glances, and I let out a frustrated noise. 'No more,' I say. 'We are done with secrets. I know, now. If you still think I'm working for the magisters, then you can kill me, or rip out my soul, or whatever. But no more lies.'

Hewitt-Oak nods. 'Okay,' he says, and I can hear relief in his voice.

'So tell me,' I say. 'Why become ... *them*?'

'Isn't it obvious?' Lacey says scornfully. 'We're taking over. They've been murdering kids, sacrificing their souls to a demon, and stealing their bodies.'

Ren takes a step towards me. 'That's what the OG Knights of Empedocles were doing, back in the 1700s,' she explains. 'They found out about the cultists who ran this place and tried to stop them. They left records of it all. We've learned so much from them. They got really close, but ... they failed.'

'Failed?'

'They were planning ... well, this.' Zhang-Gideon gestures at himself and Hewitt-Oak. 'To destroy the magisters and take over the school. To end the cycle.'

'What happened?'

Lacey shrugs. 'We don't know. We know what they were planning, but then all their notes just ... stop.'

‘We assume the faculty found out and killed them,’ Zhang-Gideon says. ‘There are no records of any of them graduating. No records of them at all.’

‘We’re going to finish what they started,’ Lacey says. ‘Then we’re going to burn down the school.’

‘We are *not* going to burn down the school,’ Zhang-Gideon says firmly. ‘It’s a heritage-listed building.’

Lacey narrows her eyes, and I get the feeling that this topic is one that has been revisited a number of times.

‘How long has it been happening?’ I ask. ‘The magisters, the body-swapping?’

‘Long enough,’ growls Lacey.

Zhang-Gideon spreads his hands. ‘We don’t know,’ he says. ‘There’s evidence it could have been happening for over a thousand years.’

‘Think of all those kids,’ Magistra Hewitt-Oak says to me. ‘Their lives snuffed out. Their bodies stolen and abused by greedy cultists.’

I can feel the demon trapped within the ring of stones. Feel its hunger.

It can’t leave without a body. And, according to Oak, it can’t go far, even with a body. It’s connected to this place.

‘Is it the goddess?’ I ask Hewitt-Oak. ‘The demon the magisters are sacrificing students to? Cailleach?’

‘No,’ he responds. ‘Cailleach would be a thousand times more powerful. No living body could contain the soul of a god, it’d fall apart in an instant.’

‘So what is it?’

Hewitt-Oak shrugs. ‘Some kind of elemental spirit.’

‘A spirit can’t exist without a body out there,’ Zhang-Gideon says, gesturing out at the vast night-washed moorland. ‘The stones are a kind of liminal space. Outside of reality. That’s why we can do the ritual in here.’

I nod. ‘And if the spirit goes outside the stones without a body, it tears a hole in the universe.’

‘Exactly.’

‘So the original magisters, or cultists, or whoever,’ I say. ‘They made a deal with this demon?’

‘As far as we can tell.’

‘How does it work? The ritual?’

‘They use the sword to sever the student’s and magister’s souls, catching them both in the cuach.’

I glance over at the black bowl and remember Oak telling me about a cauldron.

‘Is that the Anam Cuach?’ I ask. ‘From the story?’

‘Aye.’

‘I thought it’d be bigger.’ Hewitt-Oak shrugs. ‘Once the souls are in the cuach, they ask the demon to put the magister’s soul into the student’s body.’

I nod, understanding. ‘And they let the demon take over the magister’s body.’

‘Yep. But it only lasts for a day. They have to get the demon back in here before the body falls apart.’

‘A human body can only hold a spirit that powerful for so long,’ Zhang-Gideon explains. ‘It gets ... kind of eaten up. That’s what you saw happen to Kovacevic. The demon made him so cold that the molecules which made him up couldn’t cluster together anymore.’

It wasn’t me, after all. The wave of relief that washes over me brings tears to my eyes.

‘What if the demon runs away with the body?’ I ask. ‘Isn’t there a risk it’ll get out and tear a hole in the universe?’

‘I’m sorry,’ says Lacey. ‘Do you not understand what’s going on? The magisters are *villains*. They don’t care about the universe. Only themselves.’

The Archon’s words ring in my head once more. *They’re nothing but pigs.*

‘But what does the demon actually *do*?’ I ask. ‘Why not just use the sword?’

‘The magisters can cut the souls out with the sword, but only the demon can place a soul into a new vessel,’ Ren explains. ‘And the demon can place a soul in a body, but can’t *remove* a soul if the body is occupied.’

‘How symbiotic,’ I say. ‘So before graduation, Magister Kovacevic’s soul went into Cyrus’s body. And the demon went into Kovacevic’s body.’

Zhang-Gideon nods. ‘That’s right. Which enabled the demon to leave the ring of stones for a day and a night.’

The demon’s hunger is overwhelming. I can feel it in my own mouth. In my pores.

‘What happened to Cyrus’s soul then?’ I ask. ‘Does it go into the demon?’

‘The demon has no body,’ Gideon explains. ‘The soul... floats away.’

Lacey turns her face away from mine, but not before I see a flash of grief.

‘It’s what happens to every soul after a body dies,’ Hewitt-Oak says quietly. ‘It gets absorbed back into the fabric of the universe.’

Something is nagging at the back of my mind. Another question. I look at Magistra Hewitt’s face, strangely youthful now it’s wearing Oak’s expressions. ‘Is that what happened to her soul? And to Magister Zhang’s?’ I already know the answer.

‘It’s what needed to be done.’

Hewitt-Oak lifts his chin, as if daring me to call him out on this, and I nearly do. Zhang and Hewitt – the real ones, their souls. They’re *gone*.

Did they deserve it?

Of course. They’ve been stealing the bodies of children for hundreds – possibly thousands – of years.

But I can’t help seeing the Knights of Empedocles in a different light. I understand, now, why they didn’t want to tell me everything.

It’s a lot.

‘Wait,’ I say, looking from Hewitt-Oak to Zhang-Gideon. ‘What about your bodies? Did the demon use them up? Are they gone forever?’

‘Ah.’ Zhang-Gideon’s expression brightens. ‘That’s where we got clever.’

‘We used the golem,’ Hewitt-Oak explains, gesturing at the figure made of twigs and mud. ‘It’s an empty vessel for a soul, so the demon goes into it. But it’s not actually *living*, so it can’t leave the ring of stones. Then I snap *this* ...’ He reaches and pulls a twig from his messy bun. ‘And the golem crumbles.’

‘So where does the demon go?’

‘It stays in here, in the ring of stones.’

‘You trick it,’ I say.

‘Essentially.’

‘And how does the demon feel about being tricked?’ I ask.

Hewitt-Oak shrugs. ‘I haven’t asked.’

The clawing hunger of the demon is all around me. And its rage.

‘Our bodies remain intact,’ Zhang-Gideon says. ‘That’s the important part.’

‘I insisted,’ Ren adds, and grins at Zhang-Gideon. ‘Your body isn’t the only thing I love about you, but I *do* love it.’

Zhang-Gideon blushes. ‘It *is* weird being cis,’ he admits.



‘So where are they?’ I ask. ‘Your bodies?’

‘Over there.’ Hewitt-Oak jerks his head at a brown tarpaulin that I swear wasn’t there before.

I blink and notice that it’s been strewn with hellebore and wolfsbane flowers. More plant magic.

I hesitate for a moment, then walk over and lift an edge of the heavy cloth.

They are sitting side by side, their backs against one of the huge granite stones. They don’t look dead. They’re breathing, their eyes are open, and there is colour in their cheeks. But they look ... vacant. Oak doesn’t react to my presence. His eyes are unfocused, unblinking, the nasturtium still on his lapel but it’s limp and lifeless. Gideon, too, seems calm and entirely ... absent.

It’s chilling. Perhaps more chilling than anything else I’ve seen.

And that’s saying a lot.

Ren makes a grossed-out noise. ‘Cover them up again,’ she says. ‘I can’t.’

‘Creepy, isn’t it?’ Zhang-Gideon says cheerfully.

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘How do you make sure the demon doesn’t go into one of them?’ I gesture at Oak’s and Gideon’s vacant bodies.

‘The vessels go on the altar,’ Hewitt-Oak explains, pointing at Lacey and Magistra Galal. ‘Bound with red thread. And we draw sigils and things to direct the demon’s attention to them. Plus we’ve put protections on our bodies. Salt. Oregano. Iron. The usual.’

‘Doesn’t sound exactly foolproof. Why not stash the bodies somewhere else? Somewhere safe?’

‘They’ll die,’ Zhang-Gideon says. ‘Just as a soul can’t survive without a body outside of the stones, a body can’t survive without a soul.’

‘The stones are an in-between place,’ Hewitt-Oak adds. ‘Liminal, you know? Life and death aren’t so absolute here.’

That nagging feeling is back, like there’s still something I’m missing. ‘I’m sorry we didn’t tell you,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘It’s just ...’

‘You didn’t trust me,’ I finish for him. ‘Because of what happened to me back home. Because of why they brought me here.’

‘They’re planning something big,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘On Samhain – your birthday. We’re not sure what, but it’s going to be bad.’

I nod. 'I – I think they're going to try to break the demon free,' I say. 'The Archon told me he was hoping to retire soon. He made it sound ... pretty final.'

The lines on Magistra Hewitt's forehead deepen as Oak frowns. 'I don't know if that's even possible,' he says. 'How will they contain the demon?'

'Me,' I say simply. 'They think they can put it in me.'

'But it'll destroy your body,' Ren says. 'Like it does to everyone else.'

'I – I think maybe I'm different,' I say, and turn to Hewitt-Oak. 'You know how you said two souls can't exist in the same vessel?'

He nods.

'They can in me. That fire demon went inside me, by the Devil's Chair. And I was still there, too.'

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head slowly. 'If they could liberate the demon from this place,' he murmurs, 'and have a permanent vessel for it, they'd have ...'

'A portable demon,' Zhang-Gideon says. 'They'd be unstoppable.'

'We have to stop them,' Ren says. 'Before Samhain.'

'Great,' Lacey says. 'So can we please get on with this?'

She lies back down on the slab, next to the motionless Magistra Galal.

'You don't have to stay,' Zhang-Gideon says to me. 'It can be ... intense.'

'I want to,' I reply. 'If that's okay.'

Hewitt-Oak nods, and I step back away from them. They reform the triangle, and Hewitt-Oak slices their hand again, blood dripping into the chalice as he chants.

An icy breeze lifts the hair from my shoulders, and I shiver as a fluttering begins in my abdomen.

Hewitt-Oak begins to chant, and the flutter turns to an ache.

Not again. I finished my period a few days ago.

As the chanting continues, the circle grows colder, and the ache sharpens into an icy stab of pain.

Oak-Hewitt steps forward, holding the ugly copper bowl – the cuach – in both hands.

A cold wind whips through the circle, bringing with it the scent of permafrost and ancient trembling winters.

Ren lifts Snàthad White-Hilt above her head easily, as if it's a children's toy. Here the ring of stones looks somehow different. Shimmering, almost translucent. It's like two swords at once – one solid dark iron; the other a

ghost sword, insubstantial and luminous. She swings it in a smooth, controlled arc, right at Lacey.

‘Stop!’ Hewitt-Oak yells.

Ren overcorrects and the sword whisks past Lacey, missing her by an inch and striking the stone of the altar. Sparks fly, and Lacey swears.

‘Something’s wrong.’ Hewitt-Oak frowns, looking around at the others.

‘Oh my *god*,’ Lacey groans. ‘Just do it already.’

Another sharp stab of pain lances through me and I let out a whimper.

Thunder rolls overhead.

Ren raises the sword again, but Zhang-Gideon holds out a hand. ‘No. I’m not going to risk you getting your head chopped off, Lacey.’

Around me, the formless whispers coalesce into words, unspoken yet clear in my mind.

*help us.*

And then a single voice. Louder. Deeper. A voice that is the crackle of flame, and the grind of stone on stone. The snapping of an icicle. The thunder of an avalanche.

*let me in.*

The pain is making it hard to stand, so I sink to my hands and knees. Zhang-Gideon glances over at me, but the others are too distracted, bickering as the storm starts to howl around us.

Slaters and earwigs crawl from the earth beneath my hands and wriggle away. The wind is stronger now, bringing with it sharp, stinging drops of rain.

Voices are shouting, but I can barely hear through the storm. It feels like someone has thrust a knife into my gut, a knife made of burning cold steel. It sucks the life from me, twisting, freezing, severing me from myself. Icy wind whips my hair around my face, and the rain hardens into hail.

Ren throws herself over Zhang-Gideon, both of them crouching down low. Lacey turns fetal on the slab, her hands clapped over her ears.

The demon is pushing at my barriers, trying to find a way in. I know I can’t let it. I know what happens.

It’s happened before.

But the pain is too great. I can’t keep it out anymore.

It slips inside me, and then it’s in my mind, and we are all tangled up together, the border between *myself* and *other* collapsing.

Hewitt-Oak turns to me, confusion and fear on his face.

The demon unfurls inside me, pent-up rage and misery. Loneliness, too. And hunger. So much hunger. Hunger so powerful I can barely think of anything else.

The demon's mind is primal. Elemental. It's all raw *feeling*. It speaks in the howling of the wind across the moors. In the pounding of hail on bare earth.

*It wants.*

I try to breathe. To calm the hammering of my heart and the fracturing of my mind. I can do this. It's why I came here. To learn to control body and mind.

But demons don't care about Descartes and mind-body dualism. A demon simply *is*, and now it's in my body. I simply *am*, as well.

Hewitt-Oak reaches out a hand, and I see his lips form my name. His hand still grips the tarnished bowl, and the boundary between me and the demon slips.

*he is the one who tricked me. promised a moment of freedom but trapped me inside a clod of earth.*

*he must suffer.*

The storm flies from our fingers, sleet and knifelike shards of ice, all in a wind so powerful it knocks Hewitt-Oak backward, off his feet. He's flung across the stone circle and crashes into the side of one of the standing stones. I hear a *crack*, and the golem crumbles, dissolving into a pile of mud, sticks and leaves. The twig must have snapped.

As Hewitt-Oak falls, he gets all tangled up in the tarpaulin, revealing the two bodies underneath, even more chillingly still as sleet batters them from all directions. The salt circles that protected them start to dissolve in the rain.

Is Oak hurt?

*may his skull break into a thousand pieces.*

The demon screams in rage again, and its rage is too much; I'm afraid it might tear me apart.

Get *out*, I plead into my own mind.

But the demon won't leave. I can't concentrate. Everything is dissolving into fragments. I can't focus long enough to haul it out of me.

I remember the feeling of the demon inside me at the Devil's Chair. Back then, I acted purely on instinct, drawing that elemental force inside me, and then banishing it back into the stone when I heard Cassidy screaming.

But Agathion has taught me discipline. Taught me focus. I can see the shape of the demon's soul, and I understand how to manipulate it.

*you cannot control me*, the demon says with a mocking laugh.

*You sure about that?* I reply, into my own mind.

And with a great mental shove, I force the demon from my body.

It screams and curses me as it goes, and then suddenly I'm alone in my mind again.

But the storm doesn't stop. Wind continues to howl through the desolate circle of stones, screaming and wet with sleet.

Hewitt-Oak crawls over to me. 'Are you all right?' he yells. There is a bloody gash across his temple, where he was blasted with ice.

'I think so,' I yell back, and he reaches out and grips my scarred hands with Magistra Hewitt's long, icy fingers.

'What's happening?' Ren shouts, still bending over to protect Zhang-Gideon.

Lacey lifts her head. 'I'm still me,' she says. 'It didn't work.'

Once at an elementary school camp, a kid dared me to touch an electric fence, telling me that he'd do it, too. I was desperate for friends, so I did it. I wrapped my hands around the thin wire and felt the sudden jolt of energy run through my body. The kid laughed at me and ran away, leaving me feeling jangly and fragile, the aftereffect of both the electric shock and the emotional betrayal.

I feel like that now, the edges of my body and mind tender and bruised. But I'm me again, me and nobody else.

Zhang-Gideon peeks his head out from under Ren. 'Where's the demon?' he shouts.

'Why didn't it work this time?' Ren yells. 'Everything was the same.'

'Not everything.' Lacey squints at me through the gale.

The demon came into me instead of Lacey. I am sure of that. But I was still there.

Two souls in one body.

'Page?' Hewitt-Oak asks me without raising his voice so the others can't hear.

I forced it to leave me. It couldn't go into the golem, because the golem was broken. It wanted a body.

'She's starting to wake up,' Lacey yells, peering down at Magistra Galal.

Ren lets out a panicked shout, and I turn and see Oak.

Not Hewitt-Oak, but Oak's actual body.

It's no longer slumped against the granite slab. It's standing. Shambling forward, its expression vacant but intent.

'Hhhhhungry ...' it says.

'Don't let it out of the circle,' Hewitt-Oak warns.

But it's too late.

Oak, or not-Oak, or the demon inside Oak whirls around and starts to sprint, faster than I thought something like that could move. It darts between two standing stones and vanishes.

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# SIXTEEN

31 October

Hewitt-Oak swears and dashes out of the stone circle after his demon-infested body.

I glance at Lacey, who is still bent over Magistra Galal. 'We need to get her back to her room,' she yells, shaking her head. 'Before she wakes up.'

'We'll take her,' Ren says. 'You go get the demon.'

Lacey and I race out of the circle to discover that the storm has followed us into the real world. We take the closest door and find ourselves inside the grand entrance hall to Agathion. The huge front door is wide open, the floor wet with rain.

Did the demon come through here? Or was it Hewitt-Oak in search of the demon? I stare out into the howling storm. I can just make out the driveway, pummelled with sleet, the mud rising to swallow the white gravel. I turn to Lacey, but she's already gone. I stagger forward, my arms over my head to protect myself.

The wind is blowing with such fury, I can barely keep my eyes open, but I keep moving.

Something looms out of the storm, right in front of me, a monstrous creature writhing and lashing out with great whips or tentacles. I let out a small scream, lurching backward and slipping in the mud. I manage to keep my footing and realise that the hulking shape is nothing but the wych elm, branches groaning as they get tossed around in the storm.

A hand lands on my shoulder, and I spin to see Magistra Hewitt. No, not Magistra Hewitt. Oak, inside Magistra Hewitt's body.

Instinctively, I reach out and grip him by the arms, feeling Hewitt's bony elbows under my hands.

'I – I thought it might come here,' he yells, water pouring down the magistra's face. 'It's where I would go if I wanted to feel safe.'

He's panting heavily. The magistra's hair has come loose, framing her face in wet steel-coloured strings. There's a desperation in her eyes, a panic that demon-Oak won't be found. If we can't get it back into the circle of stones within twenty-four hours, it will destroy Oak's body forever.

And worse, without the stone circle to keep it contained, the untethered demon's soul will tear a hole in the universe itself.

In this weather, we'll never find demon-Oak outside. The moor stretches on for hundreds of miles, and it could go anywhere. Our only hope is that the demon is still inside Agathion.

'If ... if there's any of you in that body,' I say, 'it could be in your room. Or in the Sanctuary.'

Hewitt-Oak nods. 'There's no use staying out here,' he agrees. 'Not with it like this. We can't see anything.'

We dash over the waterlogged lawn and stumble back into the main building.

The halls are dark and silent.

Outside, the storm howls and thrashes, like it's trying to tear down the building itself. I remember my tarot card and shudder.

Hewitt-Oak and I take a moment to catch our breath. What I wouldn't give for a hot shower and my flannel pyjamas right now.

'Do you want to split up?' I whisper.

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head. 'I know we should,' he says. 'But ... stay with me?'

I take Magistra Hewitt's hand. 'Of course.'

It feels weird holding a magister's hand. Her skin is thin and dry, her elegant fingers long and ice-cold. But as the fingers entwine with mine, I know that it's really Oak holding my hand. That Oak and I are ... well, we're on the same side.

'What happened out there?' he asks quietly as we move off down a corridor. 'In the circle?'



‘It was inside me,’ I reply in a low voice. ‘It was the same as before with Mr Hearst. It was in me. It *was* me, and I was it. All mixed together.’

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head. ‘It shouldn’t be possible,’ he murmurs, ‘to have two souls in one body.’

‘It is with me.’

‘So how did it get from your body into mine?’

‘You pulled the tarpaulin off when you fell ... the rain washed away the salt rings. So I guess your body and Gideon’s weren’t protected anymore.’

‘I get that,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘But how did it get *out* of you?’

I spread my hands. ‘I ... told it to leave?’

This statement is met with raised eyebrows. ‘Just like that?’ Hewitt-Oak asks.

‘It wasn’t easy,’ I explain. ‘It didn’t want to go. But ... I forced it out.’

‘So you *made* it leave.’ Magistra Hewitt’s face looks thoughtful as Oak considers the implications of this. ‘You controlled it.’

‘It doesn’t like you,’ I tell him. ‘I don’t think it appreciated your little bait and switch with the golem.’

We pause to listen at a closed door for any sign of demon-Oak.

‘So that’s why the Archon brought you here,’ Oak says. ‘Because you can control it.’

‘They’re going to break it free from this place,’ I say. ‘Then they can go anywhere.’

He nods. ‘They clearly think your body can contain it,’ he says. ‘And not disintegrate after a day and a night, the way a human body usually would.’

His words hang quietly in the air, heavy with significance. We both understand that’s what will happen to Oak’s body, if we can’t find it.

‘Why me?’ I ask at last. ‘I’m no one special. I don’t come from a dynasty of witches. Why do *I* have this ability?’

Hewitt-Oak waves a hand airily. ‘Oh, that’s easy,’ he says. ‘You were born on Samhain, at the stroke of midnight. Under a full beaver moon. In Cassadaga, Florida – known as the Psychic Capital of the World – at the exact intersection of two significant ley lines. *And* according to your medical records, you were born with the caul intact. Frankly, it’d be weirder if you *hadn’t* been born with some kind of latent magic ability.’

‘How do you know all that?’

‘Your file in Hewitt’s office. She has all your medical history. And I looked the dates up in one of her almanacs.’

‘So it’s all ... nothing but an astrologically profound coincidence?’

Hewitt-Oak nods. ‘Pretty much. They must have heard about what happened at your school and thought they could exploit you somehow. What you are.’

‘And what *am* I?’ I ask. ‘A demon magnet?’

Hewitt-Oak doesn’t answer because we round a corner and come face-to-face with Archon Leek.

He looks just as surprised to see us as we are to see him, although he probably hides it better.

I swiftly let go of Hewitt-Oak’s hand, hoping the Archon doesn’t notice.

‘Magistra Hewitt,’ he says, his voice tight with surprise.

Oak-Hewitt stares at him for a long moment, totally lost for words.

‘Archon Leek,’ I say, improvising. ‘Thank goodness. We were looking for you.’

He doesn’t look at me, his eyes locked on Magistra Hewitt’s face. She looks pretty bedraggled, with her wet unbound hair and mud all over her grey trousers.

‘Indeed?’ the Archon says, his brows drawing together.

‘Er,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘Yes. Yes, we were.’

I can see he’s struggling, so I try to think fast. ‘I have something I need to tell you,’ I say. ‘About Oak Redferne.’

Hewitt-Oak makes a slightly strangled sound, but the Archon’s gaze has turned sharp and calculating. ‘I see,’ he says. ‘You’d better come into my office. You too, Magistra.’

He turns, his academic robe swirling dramatically.

It’s the middle of the night. Why is he fully dressed?

Maybe he isn’t. Maybe he has flannel pyjamas underneath his robe. The thought makes me want to giggle, despite the seriousness of the situation.

I nudge Hewitt-Oak forward, and he looks at me with a *what are you doing* face. I mouth the words *trust me*, and he sighs. ‘Come along, Miss Whittaker,’ he says, adopting the stern, pinched-mouth expression of the magistra.

The Archon closes his office door behind us and gestures to the two chairs before his desk. My eyes dart up to the glass cabinet, to the empty shelf where the cuach usually sits. Has he noticed it’s missing? ‘I think an explanation is in order,’ the Archon says, his eyes glittering beneath his

wire-rimmed spectacles as he settles into his own chair. He directs this to Hewitt-Oak, who lets out a little cough.

‘Er,’ he says, floundering. ‘Page, why don’t you tell the Archon ... what you told me.’

‘Sure,’ I say, trying to sound confident. I turn to the Archon. ‘I know the reason you brought me here,’ I say.

The Archon remains expressionless. ‘I see,’ he says mildly.

I tap on the side of my head. ‘I have a guest bedroom. A tandem sidecar.’

Hewitt-Oak’s head snaps to stare at me, and I keep talking before he can ruin everything.

‘I can hold more than one soul inside my body. It happened before, at my old school. I drew a demon in, and ...’ I let a little steel enter my voice. ‘It helped me kill my math teacher.’

Archon Leek doesn’t seem at all perturbed or surprised by this. ‘Go on.’

Hewitt-Oak has finally caught up. ‘I believe it’s time, Archon, for us to tell Page what we have planned for Samhain and how she can be useful to us.’

Archon Leek’s eyes dart to the magistra. Hewitt-Oak uncrosses and recrosses his legs.

‘Are you going to sacrifice more students?’ I ask.

I’ve gone too far. The Archon’s eyes narrow, ever so slightly.

‘First,’ he says, ‘I’d like to know why you were outside in the middle of the night in a raging storm. Magistra?’

‘I ...’ Hewitt-Oak pauses, gathering his thoughts. ‘I heard some strange noises and went to investigate. I assumed that some students were out of bed and—’

I interrupt her. ‘She saw me outside. I was heading back into the main building.’

‘I see,’ Archon Leek says. ‘Heading back from where, exactly?’

I really hope Oak will let me do this without killing me first.

‘From the ring of stones,’ I reply. ‘The *other* ring of stones.’

Hewitt-Oak stops breathing entirely. I can see the magistra’s hands gripping the arms of the chair, knuckles white. *Keep it together*, I say in my mind.

‘He knows everything, Archon,’ I say. ‘About you and the other magisters. All of it.’

The Archon says nothing, just gazes at me, his expression level. But I see the tiny twitch at the corner of his eye. He's had suspicions for a while. Now I'm confirming them.

'Oak Redferne,' he says.

I mentally urge Oak to hold his nerve and trust me. 'The very same.'

'And Gideon Hall.'

'Him, too. They have a plan.'

'Do tell.'

I shrug. 'You killed their best friend,' I say. 'They want to return the favour.'

I'm gratified to see the lines on the Archon's face deepen. 'Why tell me this?' he asks. 'Why come to me?'

'I'm glad you asked.'

I can feel Hewitt-Oak's eyes on me. Feel the tension in him.

'Go on,' the Archon says.

'You were right when you said that I'm not like the other students here,' I admit. 'I thought maybe it wouldn't matter. That we could be friends anyway. But I was wrong. The doors that are open to them aren't open to me. They've been brought up to believe that you can solve any problem with enough money, and most of the time they're right.'

The Archon frowns. 'You want money.' He seems a little disappointed.

'I want open doors,' I say. 'I want a comfortable life. I want to never fly coach again.'

'I understand.'

'Great. Now tell me about my birthday party.'

He hesitates for a moment as if deciding how much to reveal. 'The ... spirit which aids us. It is trapped in the ring of stones, but more than that, it is bound to this land. The moor. Even if we can liberate it from the ring in your' – he frowns – '*guest bedroom*, as you put it, it cannot travel far from Agathion without losing its power. We wish to untether it, to allow it to travel freely. But a significant sacrifice will be required in order to achieve this.'

'How significant?'

His eyes glitter behind his glasses. 'Sometimes a purge is necessary,' he says. 'Like Zeus's great flood. Greed and villainy must be stamped out in order to clear the path for a brighter dawn. From the ashes of Agathion College will rise something far greater.'

I try to keep my expression neutral, but I'm screaming inside. Magistra Hewitt's knuckles are white.

All of them. He's going to sacrifice all the students.

'They're going to try to stop you,' I say, thinking fast. 'Oak Redferne and his friends. They plan to raise the demon and turn it loose at midnight.'

The Archon chuckles coldly. 'They will fail,' he says. 'They have not the self-control, let alone the tools required.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'Do you know where Snàthad White-Hilt is?' I ask. 'Or the Anam Cuach?'

I use the name Oak gave the ugly bowl, and for the first time, I see uncertainty cross the Archon's face. He glances over his shoulder at the glass case, to the empty shelf where the bowl usually sits.

Hewitt-Oak is sitting very still next to me. I'm not sure he's breathing.

'They've made a golem out of twigs and mud,' I tell the Archon. 'The plan is to raise the demon, and put it inside the golem. Then they'll take the golem out of the ring of stones and destroy it, setting the demon free.'

The Archon leans forward. 'Is this some kind of joke?' he asks, his face cold and snarling, like the winds that race over the moor.

'They say once it's free, they'll order it to kill you.'

'Fools.' The Archon shakes his head, then presses his fingers to his temple. 'If the demon's soul is released without a body, it will have devastating consequences. This must not be allowed to happen.'

'Really?' I say, trying to look like I don't already know. 'What kind of consequences?'

The Archon stands abruptly and stalks over to the window, staring out into the dark storm. 'It will weaken the barrier between worlds,' he says impatiently. 'Anything could get through.'

'Monsters?' I ask, trying to sound frightened. It isn't hard.

He doesn't look at me. 'Worse than you can possibly imagine.'

I get the sense that he is running a series of scenarios through his mind, trying to figure out the best play.

'Magistra?' he says at last. 'You've been very quiet. What do you make of all this?'

I see a flash of panic move over Magistra Hewitt's face as Oak considers how best to respond.

'I checked their rooms before I came to you,' he says. 'They're gone. Probably hiding out on the moor somewhere.'

The Archon glances out at the storm once more, pursing his lips. 'We'll wait until they hold their ritual,' he says slowly. 'And intervene before they succeed.'

Hewitt-Oak swallows. 'Very well.'

'And you.' The Archon turns to me. 'What to do with you, in the meantime? I don't want you running to them and spoiling everything.'

'I won't,' I tell him. 'I swear it.'

'You won't be able to,' the Archon says, 'if I lock you in the Desmoterion.'

I swallow as I remember the heavy iron door in the basement.

'We don't want to arouse any suspicion,' Hewitt-Oak says hurriedly. 'And in any case, I believe we can trust her.'

The Archon considers her for a long moment. 'Trust is a two-faced coin,' he says thoughtfully, then turns to me. 'Do you know where the word *mentor* comes from?' he asks.

I shake my head, and the Archon looks vaguely disappointed. 'You need to read more,' he chides. 'Mentor, son of Alcimus, was one of Odysseus's closest friends. When Telemachus—' He breaks off and narrows his eyes. 'You *do* know who Telemachus is, don't you?'

'Odysseus's son.'

The smallest nod of approval. 'When Telemachus left to search for his missing father, Mentor accompanied him to guide and advise him on his journey. But he had a secret, didn't he, Magistra?'

I get the feeling this is some kind of test.

Oak-Hewitt clears his throat. 'It wasn't really Mentor at all,' he says. 'It was Athena, disguised as Mentor, to protect Telemachus.'

Does the Archon *know* that Magistra Hewitt is really Oak? Or is he alluding to the body-swapping, to check that Magistra Hewitt is still loyal to him? Or is this a test for *me*?

'You, like Telemachus, have discovered that your mentor is not ... entirely who you thought she was.'

I'm almost certain he's referring to the fact that she's hundreds of years old. Not that she's really Oak.

I swallow. 'Her body is not important,' I say. 'Bodies are disposable. Her soul is consistent, and that's all that matters.'

A cold gleam appears in the Archon's eyes. 'And do you trust your mentor, Miss Whittaker?'

I turn to Oak-Hewitt. 'With my life,' I say truthfully.

The Archon's face contorts in a satisfied smile. 'Very well. Act as normal throughout the day, Magistra. Bring Zhang and Galal to me at eleven, and we will put a stop to this.'

Hewitt-Oak nods.

The Archon laces his fingers together. 'Miss Whittaker, I'm a powerful man who doesn't like being deceived. I hope you understand.'

I try to look confident. 'I understand. You can trust me.'

---

'What the *hell* was that?' Hewitt-Oak hisses as he whisks me along the corridor. 'You told him *everything*! You ...' He's spluttering, wild about the eyes.

'Calm down,' I tell him. 'He doesn't know you've already bumped off two of his allies and stolen their bodies. And in any case, what he knows won't matter at all after tomorrow night.'

'What do you mean?'

'When we find the demon, we're going to put it in the Archon's body.'

Hewitt-Oak stares at me. '*What?*'

'Doesn't it make sense? We need somewhere for the demon to go, before your body dies. It's not going to leave without a fight, so we offer it the Archon.'

Oak makes a face. 'Is this ... ethical?'

'I'm sorry?'

'I mean, I can justify snuffing a magister's soul out of existence when we're swapping bodies, because the magisters are monsters and doing the swap is to *specifically* stop them, and therefore save lives. But this isn't going to save lives.'

'It's going to save *your* life,' I inform him. '*Your* body.'

'It seems selfish.'

'We don't have time for this,' I say firmly. 'We need to find the demon before anyone else does.'

'And we're just going to cut the Archon's soul out, and give his body to the demon?'

‘We’re going to offer it another day out in the world, then after it’s had some lovely snacks, we take it back to the ring of stones and ...’ I wiggle my fingers suggestively.

‘And the Archon’s body dissolves into atoms.’

‘Better him than you.’

Oak-Hewitt looks unsure. ‘It doesn’t feel right,’ he says. ‘I’m not sure that morally—’

‘I don’t *care* about morally,’ I growl. ‘This is what we’re doing. No more arguing.’

He gazes at me for a long moment, then nods. ‘Fine,’ he says.

‘Fine?’

‘Fine. We’ll do it your way.’

‘Good.’

He leans forward a little. ‘I like it when you take charge,’ he says, mouth curving in a smile that would send shivers through me if it was on Oak’s face, but on Magistra Hewitt’s just makes me feel profoundly confused.

‘Let’s go to the Sanctuary,’ I say. ‘If the others have found the demon, that’s where they’ll be.’

---

Ren, Zhang-Gideon and Lacey are waiting for us.

But no demon-Oak.

‘You didn’t find it?’ Zhang-Gideon asks us.

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head.

‘We put Magistra Galal to bed,’ Ren says. ‘Hopefully she’ll wake up tomorrow morning none the wiser.’

‘So, um,’ Hewitt-Oak says in a slightly strained voice. ‘There have been some ... developments.’

‘Sounds ominous,’ Lacey says, eyebrows raised.

‘We know what the Archon’s planning,’ I tell them. ‘They’re going to sacrifice all of the Agathion students, in order to sever the demon from the ring of stones. Then they plan to put the demon’s soul inside me.’

‘So they can go anywhere,’ Ren says. ‘I don’t like that.’

‘There’s more.’ Hewitt-Oak runs a hand through steely grey hair. ‘Page just told the Archon that me and Gideon have stolen his cuach and sword



and are planning to release the demon's soul into the world at midnight tomorrow.' He glances up at the clock. It's inching towards three in the morning. 'Tonight, I mean.'

Ren and Zhang-Gideon turn to me, their faces twin masks of betrayal.

'I fucking *told you so*,' Lacey growls, and launches herself at me.

'Wait!' Hewitt-Oak says as Ren grabs Lacey by the shoulders and holds her back. 'It's not like that. She – we have a plan. We're going to put the demon in the Archon's body.'

This statement is met with stunned silence.

'That's why I told him,' I explain. 'Well, that and he busted me and Oak sneaking through the corridors in the middle of the night, soaking wet and covered in mud. We had to tell him *something*. This way, he'll get himself to the stone circle, and we can overpower him. We do the ritual and put the demon in the Archon's body. Then Oak's body is safe, and the demon gets to play with the Archon for twenty-four hours until his body disintegrates into frozen atoms.'

Ren stares at me. 'We're going to kill the Archon.'

'*Fuck* yes,' says Lacey, a savage glint in her eye.

It's the nicest thing she's ever said to me.

Zhang-Gideon frowns. 'Is it ethical?' he asks.

'That's what I said,' Hewitt-Oak chimes in.

'Do not care,' Lacey says firmly. 'What I do care about is the fact that we don't actually have the demon. Because it ran away. With Oak's body.'

I sigh. 'Yeah.'

'When will the Archon come to the circle?' Ren asks.

'Just before midnight.'

'That doesn't leave much of a window,' Zhang-Gideon notes. 'Your body won't be in great shape by then.'

'We can't do the ritual much earlier than that anyway,' Hewitt-Oak says. 'Even if we find the demon, it's not like we can simply saunter downstairs with it and open the ring of stones. This is still a functioning school. Half of Agathion would end up in there with us. We have to wait until everyone's in bed.'

Lacey swears. 'The demon could be anywhere,' she says. 'It could be halfway to Glasgow by now.'

But it isn't. I can sense it. Its icy fury. Its stumbling awkwardness in Oak's body. Its hunger.

It isn't far away.

---

I know exactly what I did, now, at St Catherine's. The rage that overcame me when I saw Mr Hearst with Cassidy. I called for help – not with my voice but with my mind.

And something answered.

Something full of fire, imprisoned within the Devil's Chair. I didn't know who trapped it there or how long ago. But it was there, and it wanted to get out.

I called it inside me, and it filled my senses with furious heat.

Together, the demon and I stepped forward.

Cassidy turned to look at me, but she knew it wasn't really me. Or wasn't *only* me.

I didn't speak. I had nothing to say to Mr Hearst. I just wanted him to stop.

I put my hands on him, and he started to scream. His skin grew red and shiny with sweat. Steam escaped in wisps from his mouth, and I could hear hissing and popping as his fat rendered beneath his skin. Then he split open like a ripe melon, and everything was on fire.

I could taste brimstone and hot copper on my tongue, and the demon inside me exulted as it devoured Mr Hearst with flame.

The screaming continued, even though he was nothing but ash and bone, and it took me a moment to realise that it was Cassidy screaming.

She was curled up in a ball, her hands clapped over her head.

So I made the demon leave.

It didn't want to go back down to its deep stone prison, but that didn't matter to me. I needed Cassidy to stop screaming. I needed to tell her it was going to be all right.

I shoved it out of me, back to its stone prison.

*Hey*, I said, my voice my own once more. *Hey, it's just me.*

But she didn't stop screaming.

---

‘What about food?’ Zhang-Gideon is saying. ‘The demon wants food. Remember how hungry Kovacevic was when the demon was in him?’

‘I already checked the kitchens,’ Lacey says. ‘And the dining hall.’

‘I know where it is.’

The others turn to look at me.

This was why they didn’t trust me in the first place. I swallow. Have I proven myself enough?

I guess I’m about to find out.

‘I – I can feel it.’

‘What does that mean?’ Ren asks.

‘I have ...’ I shake my head. ‘I don’t know. Some kind of link with it. It went inside me, before it went in Oak.’

‘Told you she was trouble,’ Lacey says, although the malice has gone out of her voice.

I stand up. ‘I’m going to find it. I – I think I should go alone. The demon kind of hates Oak, and I don’t want to spook it.’

# SEVENTEEN

31 October

The wind has dropped, and the torrential rain has faded to icy drizzle as I exit the main building and step into the early morning night. I have a flashlight, snatched from a drawer in the Sanctuary. I know the Archon won't try to stop me, so I don't bother sneaking around.

I cross the sodden gravel driveway and hurry down the slope. The wych elm stands there, squat and bulbous, its whiplike branches moving slowly, almost snakelike in the storm-disrupted air.

I know where the demon is.

I can feel it.

It calls to me like it knows me. Like we belong together.

I breathe in the night air, trying to ground myself in reality.

I can hear screaming. But it isn't Cassidy.

It's coming from the farm.

High and panicked. Almost inhuman.

It's a scream I know. Metallic, like iron grinding against stone.

The bristling snout. The crashing hooves.

It's Old Toby.

Old Toby is screaming.

I find him in a corner of his sty, trying to climb over the railing. The whites of his eyes show as he skitters and slips.

He doesn't notice me. He is all instinct, fear and panic, his focus on the intruder.

Demon-Oak is crouching in Old Toby's feeding trough, scooping out handfuls of kitchen scraps – old carrot-tops and potato peel and discarded bread crusts.

It looks up as I approach, and in that moment I can see that there is none of Oak in it. This Oak is wild – not the gentle, rosemary-and-juniper scented wild that Oak is. Truly wild. Wild like a sudden, violent squall at sea. Wild like a blizzard.

Not-Oak is filthy, covered in mud, its face smeared with rotting food. Its hands are stained red, and I can see something lying still and silent in the doorway to the groundskeeper's hut. Something that looks an awful lot like Mr MacCrimmon.

I climb over the wooden railing, and cross the muddy enclosure. Demon-Oak watches me out the corner of its eye, still stuffing filthy cabbage leaves into its mouth.

Its skin is cold to the touch, and its teeth chatter.

It glances over at Old Toby, whose screams reach a new pitch.

The great hog knows exactly what Oak is. Like he knew exactly who I was the night I arrived.

'Who are you?' I whisper.

I see genuine terror in the beast's tiny black eyes, and something else, too. A kind of weariness, like he has seen all of this before.

Maybe he has.

In a move that seems impossible for an animal of his age and size, he jumps up onto the stacked stone wall, scrabbling and writhing, pulling himself up and over, thundering away from his sty and from the demon.

I hear splintering wood, and the grunts and cries of other pigs. The pounding of hooves.

'Come on,' I tell the demon, gently. 'I'll take you somewhere where you can get warmed up.'

'Hhhungry,' it moans.

'I know,' I tell it. 'But I think we can do better than pig slop.'

I lead it to the rail and help it climb over. It comes willingly, looking rather pitiful.

---

Only Hewitt-Oak is waiting for me in the Sanctuary, wrapped in a blanket.

‘I sent the others to bed,’ he explains. ‘We all need to get some rest, and there’s nothing we can do right now.’

Demon-Oak stiffens as it sees Hewitt-Oak, a low growl coming from deep in its throat.

‘It’s okay,’ I say gently. ‘He won’t hurt you.’

Demon-Oak allows me to lead it over to an armchair. I press it down onto it. ‘I know you’re hungry,’ I tell it. ‘Let’s see what we can find.’

I open the tin of shortbread and pass it a cookie, which it stuffs into its face, making satisfied grunting noises. Then I pour it some lukewarm tea, which it slurps noisily.

‘Good job,’ I tell it, patting it on the knee and straightening the limp nasturtium on its lapel.

Hewitt-Oak is staring at me, a bemused smile on his face. ‘I really can’t begin to describe how strange this is,’ he says. ‘Watching you feed me tea and biscuits and praise me like an obedient puppy.’

‘I want to make sure you’re okay,’ I tell him. ‘Both of you.’

He flashes me a weary smile, which looks far too loose and out-of-control to be on Magistra Hewitt’s face.

‘What now?’ he asks.

‘Now we wait,’ I tell him. ‘I’m sure the others will check in later. We can take shifts to watch it.’

I sink down onto the sofa next to Hewitt-Oak, feeling suddenly exhausted. I’ve been running on adrenaline for hours. Hewitt-Oak passes me another blanket, then leans forward, a kind of glowing intensity in his expression.

‘Hey,’ he says. ‘Um, I felt like a real jerk yesterday. In her office, with you. Like I was eavesdropping on a private conversation.’

‘You were.’

He acknowledges this with a nod. ‘I’m sorry. It wasn’t cool.’

I remember the word salad I deposited on her desk, all of it about Oak and my feelings, and my ears grow hot. ‘About what I said—’

‘I like you, too,’ he interrupts, Magistra Hewitt’s cheeks staining pink to match mine. ‘Just so you know.’

He reaches out and takes my hand. I look down at the elegant fingers, the knuckles a little sagging and wrinkled, the nails perfectly manicured half-moons.

‘When I first arrived here,’ I say, ‘I did not envisage that within six weeks, I would be holding Magistra Hewitt’s hand and telling her I *like* like her.’

Hewitt-Oak snorts, a goofy, undignified thing that makes Hewitt’s body look and sound utterly ridiculous.

‘How is it possible we’ve only known each other for six weeks?’ he murmurs. ‘I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.’

My heart is pounding, my entire body is alive and humming with ... what? It isn’t quite desire. I want Oak, but I want him in Oak’s body. Turns out that while connections between souls are deep and profound, connections between bodies also kind of matter.

And ... Magistra Hewitt is a handsome woman, but she is at least fifty years older than I am and that is not really my jam.

Oak trails a finger from my temple to my chin, and I close my eyes as he bends his head towards mine. I can smell the sophisticated scent of Magistra Hewitt’s perfume, all cardamom and violets. I know it’s her dry fingers that are on my skin. But I also know that it’s Oak, and the thrill of it makes me come alive in ways I didn’t know were possible.

Descartes would have a field day with this.

‘I’m not sure I can kiss you like this,’ Hewitt-Oak says, smiling and shaking his head. ‘I think it would be too ... much.’

I nod, relieved. ‘*Definitely* too much. Especially with your actual body over there, watching us.’

He lets out a snort. ‘Once I get that body back, though ...’

I grin. ‘Then we can go to town.’

Hewitt-Oak lets out a breathy laugh, then pulls away, clearing his throat.

‘So what do we do while we wait?’ he asks. ‘More chaos chess?’

‘How about I fix your hair?’ I suggest. ‘The magistra would be horrified.’

‘Would you?’ Hewitt-Oak chuckles. ‘I did my best this morning, but plaits aren’t exactly my strong suit.’

He sits on the floor at my feet, leaning his back against my knees. The feeling of his body – Magistra Hewitt’s body – against mine is profoundly confusing.

I pull free the pins that keep the remainder of Magistra Hewitt’s hair trapped, and a tumble of cardamom-scented steel cascades down her back.

I don’t have a brush, so I comb the tangles out with my fingers.

‘That feels nice,’ Hewitt-Oak murmurs. ‘Maybe I should grow my hair longer when I get back into my body.’

‘You’ll have to get better at braiding it,’ I tell him.

‘Why?’ he asks. ‘I have you to do it.’

The words hang there sweetly, and I savour them and the future they hold.

‘Not sure if plaits would suit me,’ Hewitt-Oak says.

‘If anyone could pull them off,’ I reply, ‘it’s you.’

I separate Hewitt’s hair into sections, then begin to braid it together.

‘My mother used to braid my hair every morning before school,’ I tell him.

‘You never talk about your family,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘What are they like?’

I shrug. ‘Ordinary. Incurious. Eternally baffled by me.’

‘I mean, you are quite the enigma.’

‘I know. It’s why I came here,’ I say. ‘I knew that whatever it was I needed, I wasn’t going to find it in Lakeland. This place seemed like a dream come true. A place full of kids like me, who wanted to *learn* and *think*. And when I met you and the others, it felt ...’

‘It felt right,’ he says. ‘Yeah. I know. I’m sorry we were such dicks to you.’

‘To be fair to the others,’ I reply pertly, ‘it was mostly you and Lacey being dicks. Gideon and Ren have been nothing but lovely.’

‘I truly am sorry,’ he says again. ‘And thank you for your patience. For believing in us. In me.’

“‘I am not of that feather to shake off my friend when he must need me,’” I quote.

Oak-Hewitt smiles.

‘I really felt like I found somewhere I could belong,’ I tell him. ‘But now ...’

‘It’s the problem with this place,’ Oak agrees. ‘It’s perfect, except for ...’

‘Except for the fact that the magisters are sacrificing students’ souls to a demon in order to steal their bodies and live forever?’

He nods. ‘It really drags down what would otherwise be a five-star rating.’

I coil the finished braid into a bun and pin it in place. ‘There,’ I say. ‘Much better.’



Oak-Hewitt pulls an oval mirror from a drawer and inspects his reflection.

‘Thank you,’ he says, turning his face this way and that.

‘Is it weird?’ I ask. ‘Looking into the mirror and seeing someone else?’

‘So. Feckin. Weird.’ He giggles at the sound of his Scots cursing coming out of Magistra Hewitt’s very proper mouth.

Not-Oak groans, and I get up and give it another handful of cookies. It’s shivering, so I drape my blanket over its shoulders.

Hewitt-Oak sighs. ‘You realise there’s a chance this won’t work, right?’ he says. ‘That the demon won’t leave my body? I could be stuck like this forever.’

‘You won’t be,’ I tell him, trying to sound certain.

‘I suppose it wouldn’t be so bad,’ he murmurs, gazing over at not-Oak. ‘At least I’d finally be allowed to join my mother’s coven.’

‘She wouldn’t care that your soul is still male?’

He wrinkles his nose. ‘Nah, it’s all about the body for her. To be entirely honest with you, I don’t think my soul *has* a gender. I’ve never really felt like one or the other. But I couldn’t explain that to her. As soon as she saw I had dangly bits, I was never going to be anything more than a disappointment.’

‘You’re not a disappointment,’ I say. ‘You’re amazing.’

Hewitt-Oak glances at me with a fond expression that seems girlish on Hewitt’s aging face. ‘Thank you.’

The moment lingers, and I cough and look up at the chalk names on the rafters, and wonder once again why Otobore is crossed out.

‘What do you think happened to the original Knights?’ I ask. ‘Did they get taken over by the demon and then exploded into super cold atoms?’

Hewitt-Oak sighs. ‘I think they must have.’

We lapse into silence. I feed not-Oak a cookie whenever it gets restless, and Hewitt-Oak dozes on the sofa, his expression peaceful on Magistra Hewitt’s face.

The darkness outside becomes silvery, then pink as dawn turns the horizon bloody, staining the fog crimson.

Lacey and Ren return, looking rumpled and exhausted.

‘Gideon’s gone to do his daily student meetings,’ Ren explains. ‘He thought it was best to go on with business as usual.’

I nod. ‘Good idea.’

‘I brought food,’ Lacey says, holding up a picnic basket. ‘I figured the demon would be hungry.’

Not-Oak raises its head, looking exactly like a dog that’s heard the sound of its dinner bowl.

‘You two should go and get some sleep,’ Ren says. ‘We’ll keep an eye on things up here.’

It doesn’t feel right, sleeping, when so much is at stake. But there really is nothing we can do until nightfall, and I’m too tired to argue. I stumble downstairs and fall straight into bed, passing out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

---

It’s past midday when I wake, which is great news as it means I get to have a hot shower. I stay in there for far too long, filling my lungs with steam to try to warm my insides, which still feel cold and jangly after being inhabited by an icy demon.

I pull on a clean uniform, and even though now I know the truth about Agathion, I still can’t help admiring myself in it. I look studious. Academic. The crisp pleats of the tartan skirt fall so elegantly. My tie is straight and exactly the right length. The strong lines of the blazer frame my shoulders so well. I put a finger to the embroidered crest and see the red thread. The sword. The cuach.

Instructions for stealing a soul, affixed to the breast of every student at the school.

---

The sun is out, a rare occurrence for Agathion, so I head to the courtyard to get some vitamin D before heading back up to the Sanctuary.

It seems bizarre to see regular Agathion life continuing as usual. Students are sprawled in the forum on picnic blankets, eating scones and sandwiches, drinking tea from enamel cups. I see Professor Hughes chatting to Ms Winston, the librarian, as if they are just ordinary staff members at an ordinary school. It’s deeply jarring.

Lacey is perched on the edge of the monopteron, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, laughing and chatting as if there's absolutely nothing in her life that causes her concern. She spots me loitering by one of the lichen-crusted stones and breaks away, sauntering over to me.

'Any news?' I ask.

She shakes her head. 'Ren is upstairs with the demon. Gideon and Oak are off pretending to be magisters. Business as usual, you know. But we're ready. For tonight.'

I nod. 'I guess I'll head up and give Ren a break.'

'Lace,' one of the minions calls. 'Are you coming?'

'Better go,' she says. 'Don't want people to get the idea that I actually like you.'

She says it with a hint of a smile.

I look over at the pretty girls, awaiting their queen. 'Don't you get sick of it?' I say. 'Pretending to be someone you're not?'

'Who says I'm pretending?' She tosses her hair and winks, then rejoins her friends, who glance over at me, giggling at some comment Lacey makes.

---

I send Ren off to her room, and then sit with the demon as the minutes slowly tick by. I feed the demon cookies and milky tea from a thermos, and cover it with more blankets when it shivers.

I pull a battered paperback of *Frankenstein* from the bookshelf, but it's all a bit too close to home.

And so I wait.

And wait.

After dinner, Lacey and Ren join me, and we watch the clock. Ren and I play a halfhearted game of chaos chess, but neither of us are really focused.

'Shouldn't Oak and Gideon be here by now?' Ren asks at nine-thirty.

Lacey and I exchange a look. 'They're probably with the Archon,' Lacey says. 'Gathering arcane magic supplies or whatever.'

Ren frowns. 'Are we at all concerned that we're about to face down a magician who is potentially thousands of years old?' she asks. 'Because he

is, right? The cultists have been here, sacrificing children for a really long time.'

She has a valid point.

'I'm not worried,' Lacey says. 'He thinks that Oak and Gideon are on his side. He won't know what hit him.'

She says this with a fierceness that implies that she very much wants to actually hit the Archon. With her fists.

'You're scary,' Ren observes.

Lacey grins. 'You know it.'

Finally, the clock chimes eleven, and we get up to go. I stuff my pockets full of cookies for the demon and lead it back down the spiral staircase and through the silent, dark corridors.

The sky is still clear, and I walk hand in hand into the forum with a creature who isn't Oak but looks and feels like him. Our footsteps release the scent of crushed grass and rain-soaked earth.

For a moment, I let myself imagine I'm with real-Oak, soul and body reunited. It'd be romantic, the two of us out in the night under a glittering canopy of stars.

I've only ever lived in suburbs, where stars are a few pinpricks of light on a muddy backdrop. But out here, I finally understand why people throughout history have been enchanted by the heavens.

Poets often liken the stars to diamonds, but diamonds are hard and colourless. Inert. These stars feel *alive*. They shimmer before my eyes, shifting blue, gold and opalescent pink among a darkness that is so deep and profound that I cannot fully conceive of it.

Not-Oak moans softly. It doesn't look up at the stars. 'Hhhhhungry,' it whispers.

'What do you hunger for?' I ask. 'What is it that you really *want*?'

It turns to me, its mouth working uselessly as it tries to find the right words. Tears slip from its eyes, and I feel a kind of pity for this demon, trapped for so long by the whims of selfish mortals.

'I promise when this is all over,' I tell it, 'I'll help you find some peace.'

Lacey glances at me, her expression unreadable.

I give blood to the first stone. Earth to the second. Breath to the third. To Tiodhlac, Lacey gifts me a gold cylinder of lipstick, which I carefully place on the crevice. Lacey sighs as it vanishes.

'That colour was discontinued,' she says. 'I'll never find another one.'

I lean forward and whisper to the fifth stone. 'I think I'm falling in love with Oak.'

I can't tell if Lacey and Ren hear me.

When we reach Cuimhne, the final stone, the demon becomes agitated. 'Nnnno,' it moans. 'Nnnnooooo.'

'Listen,' I tell it. 'It's only for a moment. We've got a new body for you. A fresh one. After you're all set up, I'll take you back to the school and bring you a big feast.'

I hand it a cookie, and lean my forehead against the icy stone.

Breakfast in the dining hall. Oak and Gideon are having a competition to see who can last the longest without speaking a word that contains the letter *E*.

*Obviously I'm going to win,* Oak says, his voice thick with superiority.

*I can fathom how you'd think that,* Gideon remarks calmly. *Your opinion of your own ability is as high as a mountain.*

*And rightly so,* Oak declares. *You may classify as a polymath, but I am a virtuoso and a wizard. A boy of much brain.*

*A boy of much bragging,* Gideon agrees. *But boasting may not result in toasting.*

*If you think that rhyming is going to snag you the trophy ...*

*I think that you will commit a snafu awfully soon.*

*I most certainly will not,* Oak says indignantly.

*Certainly!* I cry, pointing at Oak.

Oak claps a hand over his mouth, his other fist pounding the table in fury.

Ren is laughing so hard she inhales a mouthful of tea, and has to be thumped heavily on the back by Gideon.

I blink, and it's gone, faded like a dream.

Demon-Oak makes a low moaning noise as the grass dissolves under our feet, and we plummet through the void to the other ring of stones.

The whispers start up again, tickling at the edges of my understanding. Not-Oak shakes its head like a dog.

'Do you hear it too?' I ask it, but it doesn't reply.

There's no sign of Oak and Gideon yet, or the Archon.

'I guess we just wait,' Ren says, her voice small.

I gaze out onto the night-washed moor, cold and silent. Not-Oak snuffles at my jacket, and I hand it another cookie. Its nose is pink from cold, its

breath coming out in clouds. It trembles, and I shrug out of my blazer and wrap it around its shoulders.

Lacey glances at her watch. 'Eleven-thirty,' she says. 'They'd better get here soon.'

We both look over at the demon, who is shivering more violently now. 'C-c-cold,' it says, its voice plaintive.

'I know,' I tell it. 'We're going to help you. Sit tight.'

Lacey watches me. 'You really like him,' she says quietly.

'I liked him more when he was in his own body,' I say with a rueful smile.

'I dunno,' Lacey says, her head on one side. 'He's less argumentative like this. I don't hate it.'

Ren makes her way to the tarpaulin on the far side of the ring of stones, lifting it to reveal Gideon's lifeless form, slumped against one of the stones.

'Hey, um ...' Lacey's perfect forehead crinkles in a frown as she picks an imaginary speck of dirt from her tartan skirt. 'I'm sorry I've been such a bitch to you.'

My instinct is to tell her that it's okay, but it isn't really, so I simply say, 'Oh.'

'I'm not very good with trust,' Lacey admits. 'It's probably because of my famous mom. My therapist says I use projective identification to blame them for my own shortcomings, but I'm frankly fine with that. Otherwise, what use is it being a nepo baby?'

Ren smooths Gideon's hair, and wipes a string of drool from the corner of his mouth. Then she leans forward and gently kisses his forehead.

'It's a real lovefest in here tonight, isn't it?'

I hear the bitterness in Lacey's voice. I wonder where Magister Kovacevic is right now, in Cyrus's body. Enjoying his youth and fortune, no doubt.

I've never felt so profoundly aware of time. How slowly it passes. How inexorable it is.

I peer out through the ring of stones, but all I see is fog.

'There's ... a lot that could go wrong with this plan,' Lacey says quietly.

'Yeah.'

Not-Oak lets out a whine. Its face has turned white, the pink on the end of its nose turned darker, almost purple. Its cheeks are flushed, too, its lips turning blue. I feel the cold radiating from it.

I take one of its hands in mine. They're white, waxy and inflexible. Like cold, dead flesh.

'Frostbite,' Ren says, coming back to stand with us. 'If it gets much worse, Oak'll lose his fingers.'

I wrap the icy fingers in mine, looking around for Oak and Gideon, even though I know I won't be able to see them coming. All I see is moor. Wretched emptiness that offers no shreds of hope.

'Perhaps I should go and look for them,' Lacey suggests, but I shake my head.

'We should stay together,' I say. 'If something bad has happened, there's nothing we can do now.'

'Then what?' Ren asks.

'I should take the demon into me,' I say. 'Even though that's what the Archon wants. I can save Oak's body.'

Ren nods, but Lacey looks uncertain. 'Let's give them five more minutes.'

Fog descends on the moor, cold and damp. Now even the bleakness of the moor is hidden from us. The entire world could fall away, and we wouldn't know.

'Eleven-fifty.' I can hear the panic in Lacey's voice. It's echoed in the irregular pounding of my heart.

'Come onnn,' Ren mutters, staring out at the mist.

I keep holding my breath without noticing it.

Suddenly the fog swirls, and Hewitt-Oak and Zhang-Gideon stumble into the circle of stones.

# EIGHTEEN

31 October

I almost weep to see them, but my relief is short-lived.

‘Where’s the Archon?’ Lacey hisses. ‘You had *one job!*’

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head. ‘He sent us,’ he explains. ‘He said he was confident we could deal with ... with you.’

‘Fucking *coward*,’ Lacey spits.

‘So what do we *do?*’ Ren gestures at demon-Oak. ‘It’s going to freeze to death. The frostbite is already so bad ...’ She trails off.

‘We put it in me,’ I say. ‘That gives us time to figure out what to do.’

Hewitt-Oak shakes his head. ‘Samhain is tomorrow night,’ he says. ‘We’ll be serving you up on a platter to the Archon.’

‘So me, then,’ Zhang-Gideon says, gesturing over at the tarpaulin. ‘My body is empty. It makes sense. We’d at least have another twenty-four hours.’

‘Absolutely not,’ Ren says, her voice firm.

‘Do you have a better plan?’ Lacey asks.

Ren nods, swallowing. ‘We ... we leave it,’ she says, glancing guiltily at Hewitt-Oak. ‘I’m really sorry, Oak. But ... your body already has third-degree frostbite. Even if you got back in your body right now, and we managed to get you to a hospital ... you’d still probably have to have your fingers and toes amputated. Another twenty-four hours in that body – you wouldn’t survive.’



‘So we just let him *die*?’ Lacey asks, her voice harsh.

Ren shrugs. ‘Only his body. It’s as good as dead anyway. And the demon will go back to being trapped in the circle. We can move on.’

‘Except for Oak,’ Gideon says quietly. ‘Oak can’t move on.’

‘He can!’ Ren protests. ‘He’s got a body now. It’s not *his* body, but he’s still alive.’

Not-Oak’s moans are growing fainter. The sweat on its brow hardens into frost.

Hewitt-Oak’s shoulders droop a little, but he lifts his chin. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘I guess that’s the way it has to be.’

Agathion taught me that bodies didn’t matter. That I shouldn’t care about my body. The magisters discard bodies like snakes shedding their skin. But now I’m not convinced that there *is* such a clear difference. Oak in Hewitt’s body ... he’s definitely still Oak, but, he’s also *not*.

I’ll never be able to hold his hand under the stars. Never look into his eyes and see *him* looking back. Never be able to hold him. Or kiss him. I know there are larger things at stake, but it still seems impossibly unfair.

‘No,’ I say. ‘There has to be another way.’

‘There is,’ Zhang-Gideon insists. ‘Me. We put it in me, and get Oak to a hospital. If we leave straight away, we can save his body *and* take away both the demon and Page, so the Archon can’t do his ritual.’

‘No.’ I’ve never seen Ren like this before. Her usually sunny expression has gone, her eyes hard and her mouth set in a grim line.

Lacey narrows her eyes. ‘Don’t be so selfish,’ she hisses at Ren.

Ren clenches her fists. ‘I don’t expect you to understand,’ she says, her voice tight. ‘You don’t care about anyone other than yourself.’

‘Fuck you,’ Lacey says. ‘I cared about Cyrus.’ Her voice breaks a little as she says his name.

‘No.’ Ren shakes her head. ‘If you loved Cyrus the way I love Gideon, you never would have let him graduate.’

Lacey recoils, as if Ren has physically struck her. ‘Are you saying that what happened to Cyrus is *my fault*?’ she asks.

‘I’m just trying to protect the person I care the most about,’ Ren says. ‘I don’t see why you think that’s wrong.’

Zhang-Gideon raises a hand. ‘Don’t I get a say in this?’ he asks, trying to keep his voice light.

Ren glares at him. ‘No.’

‘It’s my body.’ Zhang-Gideon gestures over at the figure under the tarpaulin. ‘You can’t put me in a glass case, Ren. I know you want to protect me. I love that about you. But this is *my* decision.’

‘If you do this,’ Ren takes a step backward, throwing up her arms as if to protect herself, ‘then we’re *done*.’

Gideon-Zhang reaches out to take her hand, but she pulls away from him.

‘We have no choice,’ he murmurs. ‘I’m sorry.’

He turns to Lacey, who starts to loop red thread around his wrists.

Ren takes a step backward, tears welling in her eyes. ‘Don’t,’ she whispers.

Oak-Hewitt holds up the Anam Cuach and starts to chant. The air becomes charged with electricity.

I lead the shivering demon to the altar, and Lacey drapes red thread across its body. It can barely move now, it’s so stiff and cold. Its eyes look at me, pleading.

‘It’s okay,’ I tell it gently.

It writhes on the black stone, struggling to draw a full breath.

‘Hurry,’ I say to Hewitt-Oak. ‘It doesn’t have much time.’

‘Ren, please,’ Gideon says, turning to Ren in one last-ditch attempt to get her on side. ‘We need you for this. You have to do the sword.’

Ren bites her lip, wrapping her fist around the hilt and lifting the heavy iron blade.

‘Are we ready?’ Gideon asks.

Oak nods.

Gideon takes a step towards the altar, ready to lie down next to the demon.

‘I can’t,’ Ren says suddenly. ‘I’m sorry. I just can’t.’

For a moment, I think Ren’s going to drop the sword and leave. But when I see the grim expression on her face, I realise she’s intending to do something much more drastic.

Gideon turns back to her, his eyes wide. ‘Ren?’ he says, his voice barely more than a whisper.

‘I lied to you,’ she says, her voice strangely calm. ‘I said I didn’t have a vision in the grotto. But I did. I saw myself, right here, with this sword. I didn’t realise ... that it would be you. I’m so sorry.’

I leap forward to stop her, but it’s too late.

Zhang-Gideon lets out a surprised grunt as Ren buries Snàthad White-Hilt in his chest, the movement smooth and elegant.

Zhang-Gideon's hands go to the place where the blade meets his flesh and gasps. Ren leans back on one foot and pulls the blade out. It makes a wet, sucking sound as it emerges, the bright blade slick with blood.

'There,' Ren says. 'Now there's no other option. Gideon goes back in his own body. Right now.'

Zhang-Gideon stumbles backward, his legs going out from under him. The blood drains from his face and he stares up at Ren in shock and betrayal.

'What have you done?' he whispers.

'What I had to do to keep you safe.'

Blood starts to foam around Zhang-Gideon's lips. 'I don't feel safe,' he says in a small voice.

Ren whirls to face Oak. 'Do the ritual now!'

Magistra Hewitt's face wears Oak's shock and fear. 'I – I can't,' he stammers. 'Zhang's body is dying. There's nowhere for the demon to go.'

Ren's face turns white, and she grabs me by the back of my shirt and shoves me towards the altar. 'So put it in her.'

Hewitt-Oak glances at me, his expression anguished.

I nod. 'Do it.'

I lie down next to not-Oak on the altar. The stone is so cold it burns. Beside me, not-Oak convulses and gasps as the cold begins to devour it.

'It's okay,' I whisper to it. 'I can help you.'

Oak is chanting, but nothing's happening.

'It's not working.' Hewitt-Oak's voice is high with panic. 'The demon is ...' He gestures at the frost-rimed body. 'It's *busy*.'

Ren is still holding the bloodstained sword. She points it at Hewitt-Oak, who flinches away.

'Then do *something else*,' Ren grinds out. 'A spell. A trick. Anything.'

Oak shakes his head. 'I'm sorry. There's nothing.'

'What bloody *good* are you, then?' Ren wails, her composure crumbling. 'You're useless. Your mother was right – men make piss-poor witches.'

She drops the sword, gathering up Gideon-Zhang in her arms. 'We'll fix this,' she whispers as her hands grow slick with blood.

Gideon doesn't reply. His breaths sound wet, blood bubbling from between his lips.

Lacey grabs me by the shoulders, pulling me up off the altar. ‘Do something,’ she hisses.

I shake my head. What can I possibly do?

‘Use your bloody superpower,’ she says.

‘I – I can’t. I don’t know how ...’

‘Lacey,’ Hewitt-Oak says. ‘Leave her alone.’

But Lacey doesn’t let go. *‘They brought you here for a reason.’*

She’s right.

I remember the feeling of having the demon inside me. The great mental shove it took to get it out of my body.

And I remember seeing Mr Hearst with Cassidy. Remember the rage I felt. Remember reaching out for something – a tool – to hurt him with. And it was right there, waiting for me, trapped inside the Devil’s Chair.

I called it into me. I used it, and it used me.

What if I can fix this? Fix everything?

Lacey nods as she sees my expression change, and her grip on me loosens.

‘Come here,’ she tells Hewitt-Oak. ‘She needs you.’

Hewitt-Oak doesn’t ask any questions. He just takes one of my hands in his. Lacey takes the other.

‘You can do this,’ she breathes.

I take a shaking breath and close my eyes.

‘We’re right here with you,’ Hewitt-Oak assures me.

---

It seems like my whole life I’ve been afraid. Of this. Of myself, and what I can do. My earliest memories are of my mother telling me to stay in control. To stay calm. I could hear the fear in her voice, and it became my fear too.

Agathion is supposed to teach us self-control. To live a life of the mind.

*Do not let yourself be ruled by your body.*

What if the whole Agathion philosophy is bullshit? After all, the Archon and the other magisters seem to be going to considerable effort to have bodies. Young bodies, rich bodies. I wonder how much those bodies have

affected them. Changing hormones. Aches and pains. Periods and sex and everything else that tangles a body up with a mind.

I make a conscious effort to feel my body. To not hold myself apart from it. To not deny it or ignore the things it feels.

Mind *and* body.

Focus.

I feel Lacey's hand in mine. Oak-Hewitt's. They're with me. Grounding me.

I open my eyes.

Something glows in the darkness, mirroring the unfamiliar overhead.

I can *see* the souls inside my friends. Like little candles, burning bright and strong inside each body.

Except for Gideon's candle, which gutters weakly. I know that it will go out any minute now. And much as I want to save Oak's body, I know Gideon's soul is more important.

I cup my scarred hands around the candle and gently withdraw it from Magister Zhang's failing body. The movements make the flame shrink even smaller, and for a moment I'm afraid I've snuffed it out completely. But it's still there.

Only just.

'Help me,' I mutter to Lacey and Oak.

They understand what I need, and gently guide me over to Gideon's body, letting me concentrate on not letting the candle go out.

I kneel over the empty body and set the candle inside. I'm not sure what I expect to happen, but the flame is still so weak. Tentatively, I withdraw my hands and hope.

The flame shrinks until it is barely more than an ember.

'Hold him,' I tell Ren. 'Call to him.'

Ren leaves Zhang's limp body and moves over to Gideon. She's shaking so badly she can barely move. She takes his hands in her bloodstained ones and leans down so her forehead touches his. 'Please,' she whispers. 'Please come back to me.'

Her tears fall onto Gideon's cheeks.

The candle begins to glow.

Lacey's hand grips mine more tightly.

Gideon lets out a breathy moan.

'Gid?' Ren says, her voice trembling. 'My love? It's me. It's your Ren.'

Gideon's eyes flutter open and focus on Ren, and I see a flash of incredible pain.

Ren's expression falters. 'I'm sorry,' she says, her words tumbling over each other in desperation. 'I thought I had to ... I'm so sorry. I love you so much. I couldn't bear it ...'

Gideon shakes his head, a tiny expression, but one that speaks volumes. Ren shrinks back, horrified, raising a hand to her mouth.

A kind of guttural sob sounds from deep within her chest, and she turns and flees the circle, fading out of sight as she steps beyond the stones.

Gideon lets out a shaking breath, tears running down his cheeks.

'You did it,' Lacey says to me. 'You actually did it. You didn't need the bowl or the sword ... or even the demon.'

She's right. Now I truly understand why the Archon wanted me here. No more rituals, no more stones. I can pluck a soul from its body and place it wherever I like.

I'm trembling, adrenaline coursing through my body. For the first time in my life, the things that make me strange and different feel like a gift, not a curse.

'I'm not done,' I tell Lacey.

I can save Oak's body, too. I'm sure I can.

I can see the demon inside, not a candle, but a tiny ice storm, concentrated into a whirling, frozen mass the size of my fist. And I understand, somehow, that it isn't complete. It's not just that it doesn't have a body. Something else is missing. It's like it's a fragment of something much, much bigger ...

But I don't have time to think about that now.

'Come on, then,' I tell it, my arms wide. 'I'm all open.'

The demon screams at me as I yank it out of Oak's body and shove it into mine.

It remembers me. It is ... comfortable. Its thoughts entwine with mine, and I feel what it feels. I want what it wants. In Oak's body it was hungry and clumsy, but in mine its mind is sharp. Like it belongs there.

*it is crowded in here, it warns me. begone. you cannot coexist with one so powerful as I.*

'I'm not going anywhere,' I tell it.

Pain rockets through me, my body rebelling against the demonic presence.

But I know about pain. Pain I can handle.

‘Tone it down,’ I say, through gritted teeth. ‘There’s room in here for both of us.’

The demon wrestles me for control of my body, but it’s *my* body, and I’m more used to giving it commands.

Sullenly, the demon retreats into the recesses of my mind.

I still have work to do.

Ren said that the frostbite needed immediate medical treatment, and Oak’s body can’t leave the circle without a soul inside.

He’s going to be so pissed at me.

‘I need to put you back in,’ I tell Oak-Hewitt. ‘So you can go to the hospital.’

‘No,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘We’re not stopping everything just to take me to the doctor. We need to take down the Archon now. Tonight.’

‘She’s right,’ Lacey says. ‘We need to regroup.’

‘We don’t have *time*,’ Hewitt-Oak yells, the magistra’s voice cracking. ‘He is going to kill students *tomorrow night*.’

*let them die. mortals are all alike, and there are plenty more out there.*

‘Shut up,’ I say out loud.

Hewitt-Oak stops short and stares at me. ‘Is it ... in you?’ he asks.

I nod. ‘I’m okay,’ I tell him. ‘I’ve got it under control. But it would be really helpful if you could get back in your body.’

‘If I go to hospital,’ he says, ‘I won’t be here. I won’t be able to help.’

*I could eat him. then I wouldn’t have to listen to this conversation.*

‘I don’t need your permission,’ I tell him. ‘I could just do it.’

He glowers at me. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘Okay. Do it.’

This time I know what I’m doing.

I reach inside Magistra Hewitt’s body and wrap my hands around Oak’s candle. It burns bright and fierce, the scent of it sharply comforting, like pine resin and rosemary. I withdraw the candle, and Hewitt’s shoulders slump, her face suddenly slack and expressionless. She sinks to the earth by the altar, unblinking and vacant.

‘Careful,’ Lacey whispers.

I couldn’t sense much from Gideon’s candle, because the flame was so weak. Oak’s is strong, though, and it’s so deeply, purely *Oak* that it makes my heart soar.

I’m going to get him back. In his own body.

I have plans for things I'd like my body to do with Oak's body.  
*now we're talking*, the demon remarks slyly.

I reach out, the candle cradled carefully in my hands, ready to return it to where it belongs. The flame flares more brightly, as if it recognises the frozen body in front of it.

The demon inside me recognises the body, too.  
*jailer*, it hisses. *liar*.

It lashes out, fast and vicious, dashing the candle from my hands.

I don't even have time to cry out.

The flame slips between my fingers and just ...  
Vanishes.

I cast around for it, searching the air and ground, but all I find is ice and formless whispers.

The demon chuckles in satisfaction, then retreats back into the depths of my mind.

I turn to look at Lacey, who is staring at the lifeless body on the altar.

'Is – is he going to be okay?' she asks in a frightened whisper, although her eyes tell me she already knows the answer.

I shake my head. 'He's gone.'

She opens her mouth to speak, but I see her gaze shift to look at something behind me.

I turn, dread making my limbs heavy.

'Happy birthday, Page,' says the Archon.



# NINETEEN

1 November

Oak is dead.

The Archon's glittering dark eyes roam the stone circle, taking in the blood-soaked corpse of Magister Zhang on the altar. Oak's body, blackened with frostbite. Magistra Hewitt, slumped soulless and empty on the bare earth. Lacey, crouching by Gideon. And me, unable to think about anything except for the fact that Oak is dead.

It is all-encompassing. Bone-bleaching. Soul-rending.

*sink into your grief*, the demon whispers. *I can deal with all this.*

It takes everything I have not to give in.

'You certainly have been busy, Miss Whittaker,' the Archon says smoothly.

*this fool*, the demon says. *I should eat him.*

Gideon manages to stand, tears streaking his cheeks, but his shoulders are back, defiant. 'It isn't her birthday yet.'

The Archon makes a big show of looking at the gold watch on his wrist. 'It's after midnight,' he says with a smirk. 'Miss Whittaker's birthday and Samhain have already begun.'

Gideon looks confused. 'But you told me the plan was for tomorrow night.'

'I *did* tell you that, didn't I?' the Archon says, pulling a length of red thread from his pocket.

His words sink in, and I see the hope slip from Gideon's face. 'How long have you known?' he asks softly.

'I'm not a fool,' the Archon snaps. 'You think I wouldn't realise when my two closest allies have their souls removed? I'm no Telemachus. I can see through a disguise.'

I don't say anything, because Oak is dead.

The demon whispers to me, promises me escape. Promises me peace. I know it's lying, but I'm tempted.

'Whatever,' Lacey says. 'How about I kill you now?'

She grasps Snàthad White-Hilt and staggers towards the Archon. She can barely lift it, the point dragging in the dirt.

The Archon chuckles. 'Cute.'

He ties a knot in the red thread, and a gasp escapes from Lacey's lips. The red ribbon embroidered on her blazer pocket seems to come to life, snaking out and around, binding her arms tight by her sides. The heavy sword drops to the ground with a sharp *thud*. I glance over to see that Gideon is also bound with red ribbon. He struggles against it, but the ribbon must be stronger than it looks, because he can't move. It winds around his legs, leaving him completely immobilised. He and Lacey both topple to the ground.

The Archon turns his eyes to me. I'm not wearing my blazer – I gave it to demon-Oak. But the Archon's lip curls. He knows I'm not going to fight back. He can see it in me. Smell it.

Defeat.

This is all my fault.

I thought I could fix things.

I thought that maybe the thing I'd been so afraid of – my curse – maybe it was a gift. Maybe I could use it for good.

But I was wrong.

My whole body hurts, throbbing and aching.

It's the demon. I don't know if it's my body's natural response to having a demon inside, or if the demon is making me suffer on purpose.

Joke's on it, I'm accustomed to physical pain.

What's happening in my heart, though, that's something else entirely.

The Archon is weaving the red thread between his fingers, like a cat's cradle. His movements are quick, practised.

‘I have been waiting for this day for so long,’ he says, almost to himself. ‘Trapped for so long in these cold, damp halls. But no more. After today, I will be free.’

‘You don’t seem particularly sad that your two besties are dead,’ Lacey remarks from the ground, looking over at the bloody corpse of Zhang, then Hewitt’s vacant body.

The Archon doesn’t look up from his cat’s cradle. ‘We all make sacrifices,’ he says calmly.

A new figure appears in the circle, blurring into existence. Magistra Galal, a thin line of red thread tied around her ring finger and trailing behind her. Her eyes widen as she takes in the bodies – frostbitten Oak, lifeless Hewitt, and Zhang, soaked in blood.

‘Ahh,’ the Archon says. ‘Right on time. Welcome, old friend.’

The thread on Magistra Galal’s finger twitches and a student appears behind her, blank-faced and clad in flannel pyjamas, her wrists in front of her, bound in red thread, attached to Magistra Galal.

Another student appears. Then another. And another.

‘At first I thought to use the pigs for this sacrifice,’ the Archon says conversationally to me – or to the demon, I’m not sure. ‘But it is hard to control a pig, even with the thread. Humans are so much more biddable. And this way, there’ll be no one left to ask any difficult questions.’

The students don’t look up. It’s like they’re all sleepwalking, their faces slack and expressionless. They walk slowly and silently, bare feet on bare earth. I recognise Clementine and various students from my classes and the electives I’ve observed. Lacey’s handmaidens. The stillness of their faces is unnerving, as if they’re already dead.

‘What about our parents?’ Lacey says. ‘You don’t think the world’s most rich and powerful people are going to wonder what happened to their kids?’

A cruel smile creeps over the Archon’s face. ‘In my experience,’ he says, ‘parents of troubled children like you are often quite relieved when their children don’t come home.’

Lacey struggles against her bonds. ‘That’s a *lie*,’ she snarls.

‘In any case,’ the Archon continues, ‘there’s a gas leak. The day staff have been instructed to stay away. There might even be an explosion, later on. A terrible tragedy. Of course, by the time word gets out, Magistra Galal and myself will be long gone, along with our friend here.’ He nods at me.

The long line of students skirts the edge of the ring. The Archon's attention is now wholly focused on the intricate cat's cradle he weaves between his hands. I can just make out the pattern, rings and stars, dense with meaning.

Every student at Agathion will die tonight.

I couldn't save Oak, and I can't save them.

My eyes fall on Lacey and Gideon, who are still struggling against the red ribbon.

They haven't given up.

*they will*, the demon says smugly. *give it time*.

Magistra Galal has her back to me as she leads the line of students round to the other side of the ring. The Archon is busy with his thread.

I swore an oath.

I can't save everyone, but maybe I can save my friends.

*why bother?* the demon asks, but I ignore it.

I dart forward and haul the iron sword from the dirt, using it to slice through the red ribbon that binds Lacey and Gideon. They scramble to their feet.

Magistra Galal and the Archon haven't noticed us yet, but we only have a few seconds before they do.

'What do we do now?' Lacey hisses, rubbing her wrists where the ribbon cut into her skin.

'You run,' I tell her.

'But ...' Gideon looks around at the students filing in, blank-faced and unaware. 'He's going to kill them all.'

I swallow. 'I'll do what I can. But you have to get out of here.'

They hesitate, and a tiny part of me is warmed to see that they care. Lacey throws her arms around me impulsively, and I smell the peach-vanilla scent of her hair.

Then she murmurs something to Gideon, and they scoop Oak's body from the altar, staggering under his weight.

I know that he won't last long, outside of the ring.

It doesn't matter.

What's the point of a body without a soul?

I watch them wink out of sight as they step beyond the stones.

I hope, for their sakes, that I never see them again.

I take a breath, remembering the ice and sleet that shot from my fingertips to knock Hewitt-Oak over.

‘Okay then,’ I tell the demon. ‘Let’s end this.’

But there is no ice. No sleet.

*give me control of this body*, the demon says, *and I will destroy them all.*

But I can’t. I don’t trust it.

The last of the students have entered. They stand in a circle, perfectly filling the ring of stones.

How long has the Archon been planning this?

He begins to chant, still weaving the red thread. The cat’s cradle is now so dense it is practically solid red with no gaps.

Fine. If the demon won’t help me, I’ll do it the old-fashioned way.

I heft Snàthad White-Hilt, but the Archon has noticed me now. Noticed that Lacey and Gideon are gone. His eyes narrow, and he adjusts his cat’s cradle, slipping the thread over and under to form a knot.

The silk tie around my neck is suddenly tight.

Too late, I remember the tiny Agathion crest, embroidered at the base of each tie. The whole thing comes to life like a snake, squeezing around my neck, tighter and tighter, forcing my breath from me.

The sword falls from my grasp as I’m driven to my knees, hands scrabbling at the silk fabric as pressure builds in my head with a rushing sound that drowns out everything else. My vision grows orange and blurry, then narrows sharply, shadows crowding in as my brain begins to power down and I am filled with blind terror.

This is it. This is how I die.

*stop making such a fuss*, the demon remarks calmly. *he won’t kill you. you’re too valuable to him.*

And it seems it is right. The pressure on my throat releases, and my vision starts to clear. I take huge, gulping lungfuls of air as snot and tears leak from me.

*humans are so disgusting*, observes the demon.

I look down to see red thread looped around my shoulders and wrists. Magistra Galal stands before me, holding Snàthad White-Hilt.

I can’t move.

‘Playtime is over,’ she informs me, running a hand along the blade of the sword. She makes a fist over the Anam Cuach, and red drips onto the dark,

pitted surface. She carries the squat bowl over to the Archon and sprinkles the blood over his cat's cradle.

Then she lifts the ancient sword above her head, clearly straining under its weight.

The Archon continues to chant.

I watch, helpless, as Magistra Galal brings Snàthad White-Hilt down on the cat's cradle.

The students move as one, falling backward in a single smooth, soft movement.

With their eyes closed, and their peaceful faces and pyjamas, one could believe they are sleeping.

But I can see their souls. They rise and hover in the air above them, a ring of candlelight illuminating the stone circle with a soft golden glow.

It's beautiful.

And tragic.

Then I'm falling, tumbling through that blank, unknowable void. But it's not just me, alone this time. The entire ring is plummeting through that abyss. I have a peculiar melting sensation, as if I were staring into a mirror and dissolving into my own reflection. Then there's a savage, atom-altering wrench as the ancient, separate ring of stones collides with the Agathion courtyard, the two spaces merging and blending in a stomach-lurching subatomic synthesis.

The endless, moon-washed moor fades, and the walls of Agathion blur into being, tall and dark and empty.

The two rings of stones have become one.

The Archon is on his hands and knees, a triumphant light in his eyes. 'The bond that ties you to this land is cut, Demon!' he cries.

The demon erupts inside me with savage joy, filling me with dark, boiling clouds of vicious calamity.

*the world is mine, it exults. all mortals will bow before me.*

I gaze up at the proud, gloomy walls of Agathion. The place that held so much hope for me. The one place where I thought I could belong.

Little did I know that it would rip my heart out of my chest and fill the cavity with bitterness and despair.

For a moment, I wish I could smite the whole building down, just like on my tarot card.

The crumbling tower. Death and destruction.

It's what I am.

It's what I've always been.

*I could make it happen*, the demon offers, its voice silky smooth. *we could do it together. a fitting farewell to this abominable place.*

People talk about a broken heart like it's something in the past. Like the break has already happened. My heart is not broken. It's *breaking*. Being torn apart, each artery and tendon stretching and snapping.

I *long* for broken. Perhaps when my heart has finished breaking, the pain will lessen and dull.

It can't come quickly enough.

The Archon turns to me, his face grey with exhaustion. But the spark of victory is in his eyes.

'It is done,' he says.

Magistra Galal hurries over to me, her expression eager. She slices through the red thread with the sword, and I can move once more.

But I don't want to.

'Great demon,' she says, her cheeks flushed, 'we have freed you from your cage, and given you this vessel.'

I'm just so tired.

Nothing matters.

Everyone is dead.

Oak is dead.

*I can help you sleep*, the demon offers.

Sleep sounds good.

I curl my consciousness into a ball and let the demon take over.

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## HUNGRY.

*this body is so different to the others. the others make me sluggish and dull. but this one is so easy to move around, to manipulate through time and space. it responds to my commands as quick as I can think them.*

*the hunger remains, though.*

*it is a gnawing ache. a restless beast that never sleeps. there is a chasm within me, a space vast and hollow, and no amount of food can fill it.*

*a mortal stands before me. she is aged, and from her posture, I can tell she considers herself superior, a leader of mortals.*

*I know her. I have known her for many winters and springs.*

*she holds the sword of iron that bites. she stinks of it.*

*she tries not to flinch as I sniff her flesh.*

*mortal minds are greedy. I have put her into many different bodies. she is hungry for youth. for power.*

*but I am just hungry.*

*her skin is warm under my fingers.*

*I snap her neck.*

*her flesh parts beneath my teeth, and I let her blood flow into my mouth. relish the copper richness of it.*

*the soul is gone, released the instant I broke her spine, but her flesh is still soul-warmed.*

*it is delicious.*

*her companion watches me from a safe distance.*

*he does not like what he sees.*

*I suppose there is quite a lot of blood.*

*time to test the limits of my new freedom*

*‘Wait.’*

*he will offer me freedom, but it will be a lie.*

*all he offers is another cage.*

*I can smell the bodies he’s carried before. the lives he has taken.*

*we are not strangers to one another, he and I.*

*the soul inside him is twisted with greed and scorn. he will be easy to bend to my will.*

*he gazes into my eyes, and I allow him to glimpse my true form – the frozen depths of inconceivable chaos.*

*he shrinks away. I know he will not meet my eyes again lest he lose himself to insanity.*

*‘I see you are enjoying my gift to you.’*

*his voice is as smooth as an oil-slicked puddle.*

*‘I brought her here for you. A token of my appreciation.’*

*I breathe in his scent.*

*it is heavy with fear although he tries to hide it from me.*

*he thinks he is so clever.*

*he thinks I shall be placated like before, with food and wine.*



*he is wrong.  
this mortal is ... different.  
within her, I can stretch.  
within her, I can stay.  
'I know you are hungry ...'  
it is true.  
this body hungers so much.  
I can barely think of anything else.  
I want to eat him.  
but he is old and bitter.  
he will not taste good.*

*'I found you this girl. I searched the world for a body that would be able to contain you. You can live in her. Your power will prolong her mortal life. You can experience all the riches that the human world can offer.'*

*I am waiting for the part where he will ask for something.*

*'I ask for only one thing in exchange.'*

*there it is.*

*I do not move.*

*I know he finds this stillness unnerving.*

*I do not wish to make any mortal comfortable.*

*he swallows a mouthful of sour apprehension.*

*'I wish to continue our previous arrangement. To discard bodies as they age. In return, I will provide you with riches beyond your imagining.'*

*I have stared into the centre of eternity. I existed since before mortal time began. I have dwelled amid ancient gods in wondrous colossal halls, and I have languished alone in the fetid abyss of oblivion.*

*it seems unlikely there is anything beyond my imagining this mortal can provide me with.*

*he is so small. so pathetic. the most he can dream of is wealth.*

*does he not understand what I am capable of? what power he could wield through me? he could make other mortals tremble before him. could make the earth itself shake beneath his feet. but instead he longs for mere trinkets and baubles.*

*'Tell me what you desire, Demon. What do you want?'*

*to eat you.*

*to hold dominion over this land and all who dwell within it.*

*I want to destroy this place, these wretched stones. I want to watch it crumble to dust, along with the hopes of the mortals who dwell here. I want to pinch every soul within this circle between my fingers and watch them extinguish.*

*though perhaps that would give them too much peace.*

*better to leave them here for another thousand years, trapped, like I was trapped.*

*Wait, what?*

*did you not know, mortal girl?*

*You mean the souls above the students? The floating candles?*

*look harder. look up. what do you see?*

*Stars.*

*they are not stars, but souls.*

*There are so many.*

*every soul that has been sacrificed here in this ring.*

*Oak. Oak is up there. His soul isn't ... isn't gone.*

*you will never find it. one soul among many thousands. they are trapped there, in between life and death. endlessly seeking peace, but never finding it.*

*Give me my body back.*

*not a chance.*

*you will never have it.*

*I will trap you inside.*

*just as I was trapped.*

*you will never escape the prison of your mortal form.*

*I will preserve this body and it will live forever.*

*and you will howl endlessly into the void of your own pathetic consciousness.*

*I've driven you out of this body before. I'll do it again.*

*not this time.*

*the other mortal is still talking. he thinks he is winning me over.*

*but I no longer listen to his gilded promises.*

*I am distracted by the demands of this body.*

*its wet parts that leak so many different kinds of vile fluid.*

*so many functions*

*pallid ooze*

so  
    *many*  
        *needs*  
so *hungry*  
always  
    *hungry*  
how do mortals stand it

If you hate my body so much, then give it back.

*I*  
    *am*  
        *crawling chaos*  
*I*  
    *am*  
        *the nameless blasphemy*

But you *do* have a name. Do you remember it?

*I*  
    *am*  
        *the core of insanity*  
        *the primal nightmare*  
        Get over yourself.  
*I*  
    *am*  
        *the end*  
    *and the beginning*  
*I am eternity*

Give me back my body.

*never*

‘Well, Demon?’ the Archon says. ‘Do we have a deal?’

*I*  
    *am*

*hunger*

What do you hunger for?

*revenge*

Will that bring you peace?

*driving sleet*

*destruction*

*eons of ice and despair*

*the silent*

*emptiness at the centre of a vortex*

I don't think that's what you really want.

*do not seek to know me, mortal, you will slip into insanity*

What do you long for?

*no*

*I will not*

*too much pain*

I know how it feels to grieve.

I know how it feels to long for something.

I understand.

The demon howls inside me, and then is suddenly quiet, and my mind is my own once more. My grief is still there, sharp and strong as nails. But the despair has hardened into resolve.

I can't save those students.

Can't save Oak.

But maybe I can find a way to bring them peace.

'Well?' Archon Leek asks again. 'Do we have a deal?'

I flex my fingers and inhale slowly, savouring the sensation of oxygen filling my lungs, thick with the scent of old stone and blood.

'It's a no, I'm afraid,' I tell him.

He peers into my eyes, seeing only humanity, then lets out a growl of frustration. 'Where is the demon? Let me talk to it.'

'Can't,' I say with a shrug. 'It's gone.'

'What do you mean, *gone*?'

'I sent it to its room. Punishment for bad behaviour.'

Archon Leek clenches his fists. 'Get it *back*. I order you!'

I laugh at him. 'You can't order me to do anything.'

'I'll kill your friends,' he snarls.

I think of Oak, of Cyrus. Of the shocked look on Gideon-Zhang's face as Ren buried Snàthad White-Hilt in his chest. 'It's a bit late for that, I'm afraid.'

A desperate gleam enters his eye. 'You said that you longed for wealth,' he says. 'I can make that happen. I can give you anything your heart desires.'

I remember my first day at Agathion, crouching on the moor as Oak pointed out eyebright and marsh violet. His eyes were bright with joy as he gently touched each leaf and bud. A gentle breeze ruffled his dark mop of hair. He seemed so free, out there in the wilderness, surrounded by plants.

So happy.

'Archon,' I say, 'I don't think you understand what's happening here. There is *nothing* you can say to manipulate me. No threat. No bribe. There's nothing I want from you.'

The Archon's fingers twitch, and I see red thread flying between them. Before I can stop him, the thread has looped around my wrists, then my shoulders. I'm immobilised once again.

'Perhaps some time in the Desmoterion will change your mind.'

# TWENTY

1 November

I've read enough Greek history over the last few weeks to know that *desmoterion* means *place of chains*, and that it was where Socrates was imprisoned before his execution. I'm expecting something rather dramatic and gruesome, but in fact it's merely a padded room, around six square feet, with nothing in it. No lights. No ventilation. It smells musty, like stale urine.

The Archon shoves me inside, whisking the red thread from my wrists and shoulders as he does so.

'I trust after some time to think it over, you will make the right choice.'

The door clangs shut behind me, and I'm engulfed in darkness.

*give me control*, the demon whispers, sleek and seductive. *I will destroy this door with a touch. I will tear down this accursed building.*

I see a flash of Oak's tarot card, the tower sketched in frenzied ballpoint pen.

'Hard pass,' I tell it.

My heart is still thundering with adrenaline. I can feel it, hear it. It seems to echo through the tiny room, through the whole of Agathion, the thick stone walls pulsing in time to my heartbeat.

When I first arrived here, I could sense the solemnity of the building. The weight of history. I knew it was special, somehow.

Now I know that special isn't always a good thing.

These walls have absorbed so much pain. So much suffering. The presence of so many children, their lives snuffed out by the whims of greedy, ancient cultists.

Is there a way to save them? I ask the demon inside my mind. The trapped souls?

*maybe.*

Tell me.

*what will you give me in exchange?*

What do you want?

*your body.*

No.

I can almost feel the demon shrug inside me. It retreats, and I feel my heart slow, leaving me heavy-limbed and exhausted.

There's nothing else to do, so I sleep.

---

I dream of Florida, where everything is fake.

The colours are too bright. Edges too smooth. Like a clumsy Photoshop job.

My bedroom looks like a set from a TV show, harshly lit and flimsy. Plastic pens. Chequered bedspread. A bedraggled teddy bear gathering dust on a shelf.

None of it feels real, but I'm not sure if it's the dream, or if that's what Lakeland really looks like after weeks of bleak moorland and the thick, sombre walls of Agathion.

I dream, mostly, of the fridge.

Of crouching before it in the middle of the night, scooping mayonnaise from a jar and licking it from my fingers. Cramming my mouth with sliced turkey and dill pickles. Eating until I was sure I'd burst, but still hungry.

Always so hungry.

I pause. There's someone at the door.

I pad barefoot down the hallway, tiled in inexpensive fake marble, and open the front door, bright light spilling in from outside.

Cassidy has cut her hair and dyed it platinum blond. It suits her.

She's put on some weight, which suits her too. Softens her sharp angles. She's abandoned her long black skirts and silver jewellery, in favour of jeans and a black crop top.

'I missed you,' she says, leaning in for a kiss.

Nice try, I tell the demon.

I open my eyes and see nothing but blackness. I wonder how many Agathion students have been locked in here, and for how long.

---

Something scuffles in the dark, and I shrink back against the wall. Probably a rat, which isn't great, although my mind has no trouble conjuring up things much worse. I attempt a deep breath. I'm like Titus Andronicus in his grief, taking false shadows for true substances.

Footsteps sound outside, and there's a squealing noise as the metal plate in the door slides back. I can see the Archon, peering down at me, his face sinister in the angled light from his lantern.

'Are you ready to cooperate?' I hear the smugness in his voice.

'Not even slightly,' I respond.

'I don't think you understand what I'm offering,' the Archon says. 'Anything you want. Name it, and it's yours.'

"To want nothing is to resemble the gods," I quote, and his lip curls. 'You know, when Socrates was in the Desmoterion in Athens, condemned to death, his friends came to him. They said he could go free if they could raise enough money. But he told them not to. He didn't care if he lived or died. He didn't care about his body or his soul. The only thing that was important to him was that *logos* survived. The word. The argument. So he drank hemlock and died, because he knew that from his death would grow a legend that would last centuries.'

The Archon snarls at me. 'You are no Socrates.'

'You're right,' I say. 'I'm more of a Diogenes. I really have learned a lot here at Agathion. Did you know Plato called Diogenes "a Socrates gone mad"? He once saw a mouse and was inspired by how little it needed to survive. How little it wanted. So he went barefoot, wore only a single cloak, and slept in a barrel.'



He also urinated on people who disagreed with him and masturbated in public, but I decide not to mention that.

‘Congratulations on doing your homework.’ The Archon doesn’t attempt to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. ‘But you cannot survive in here. There will arrive a time when you will beg to leave.’

I shrug. ‘Maybe,’ I say. ‘But you know what’s going to arrive first? The day teachers. And they are going to find the bodies of every single student plus two magisters lying on the lawn out there. And they are going to have some questions. I expect you’ll want to be gone by then.’

‘You think I am a fool,’ the Archon says. ‘The school is closed. The gas leak, remember? No day staff will be coming. The halls of Agathion are empty. It is only you and I.’

I tap the side of my head. ‘And my friend.’

I can feel the demon watching this exchange. It seems amused. But it does not jostle for control. It seems content to hang back and watch. For now.

The Archon leaves. I can almost taste his frustration.

*you should just let me eat him*, the demon comments.

I taste the sharp tang of blood on my tongue and bite back a swell of nausea. I’ve been trying not to think about what happened to Magistra Galal. The sensation of her blood, slick between my fingers. Her flesh under my teeth.

I breathe deeply and sink back into unconsciousness.

---

There’s someone at the door.

I pad barefoot down the hallway and open the front door, bright light spilling in from outside.

Cassidy is hesitant, unwilling to look me in the eye.

‘Do you want to come in?’ I ask her.

She shakes her head so fast it’s almost a shudder. ‘Can we ... stay out here?’

We sit on the porch seat. It’s a warm morning that promises a hot, muggy day ahead. Every house on the street looks like it’s straight out of a catalogue, all faux-colonial details and neutral, HOA-approved colour

schemes. The gardens are all the same, too. Washington palm, crepe myrtle, magnolia. Box hedges. Lawns like green velvet carpets, vibrant and smooth as the nearby golf course.

It doesn't feel like home. It never did, but now I know what home feels like.

Cassidy shuffles right to the opposite end, away from me, but she's close enough I can smell her perfume – vanilla and clove oil. That hasn't changed. The scent awakens all sorts of things in me – grief and desire and the taste of salt on her skin.

Deep inside, something stirs, but I shove it back down.

I don't want anything.

Cassidy stares straight ahead, not looking at me.

'So it didn't work out?' Cassidy asks at last. 'Your new school?'

'It didn't work out,' I repeat.

'Sorry to hear that.'

Someone screams nearby, and Cassidy starts, but it's only the sound of children leaping into a neighbour's pool.

'I just ...' Cassidy takes a deep breath. 'I wanted you to know I'm okay. It took a while, but I'm okay now.'

I should wake up now. I know this is merely a fiction that the demon is tempting me with.

But I need to hear this.

I stare straight ahead. 'I'm glad.'

'And ... I met someone,' Cassidy continues even more hesitantly. 'She's a cheerleader, which ... well, you wouldn't think that was my type. I certainly didn't, but I guess the heart wants what it wants. Anyway, it's early days, but ... I think she's good for me.'

'That's great.'

'We're moving to New York together, after Christmas. She ...' Cassidy rolls her eyes with a smile. 'She wants to be a Rockette.'

The fond look on her face sends a stab of jealousy through me. Once, Cassidy looked at me like that. But now she won't look at me at all.

Something uncurls inside.

*you want her*, the demon whispers. *I could make her yours.*

I clench my jaw. I don't want anything.

'Page?' A hint of fear enters her voice, and I know she's going to ask me about what happened to Mr Hearst.

I wait.

‘That day, behind the gym,’ she says. ‘I thought you’d come to save me. I thought you were going to make him stop. But then he started to scream, and when I looked at you ...’ She closes her eyes and takes a deep, shaking breath. ‘You looked like a monster.’

There was a time when Cassidy loved monsters. When she was deep in her Jadis Redferne phase and read endless paperbacks about werewolves and vampires.

‘Imagine,’ she’d said to me once as we lay on our backs, staring at the clouds. ‘Imagine having magic powers. We could burn this whole place to the ground.’

I guess real monsters are something else entirely.

‘My therapist says it was a pretty standard cognitive reaction to trauma,’ she says. ‘That my brain couldn’t cope with what ... what he did to me and then ... what happened to him.’

I don’t say anything.

She swallows. ‘Is – is that what happened, Page?’ she asks. ‘Was it just my brain?’

I tell Cassidy what she wants to hear. That the only monster by the Devil’s Chair that day was Mr Hearst, and that his death was a freak accident. I tell her that I’m glad she’s okay. I tell her that I’m okay, too.

She nods, and her breathing slows. Relief washes off her in waves. ‘Are you ...’ She pauses suggestively.

‘Am I what?’ Is she asking about the demon?

‘Seeing anyone?’

I shake my head. ‘I almost was, but he—’

‘He? You were dating a boy?’ She seems disappointed.

I think of Oak’s mother and her gender gatekeeping, of Oak’s sparkly fingernails, of his smile on Magistra Hewitt’s face. ‘It’s complicated,’ I say. ‘And anyway, we’re not ... He isn’t ...’

Can’t finish that sentence.

Can’t think about it.

---

I blink awake. The Archon is standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the gloom. He shines a flashlight at me, and I shrink away from the harsh light.

‘I could hurt you,’ he says, and I see a glimpse of red thread between his fingers.

‘Probably, a bit,’ I reply. ‘But I know you won’t go too far. You can’t risk killing me. If the demon gets out, it’ll rip a hole in the universe, and even you’re not enough of a chaos agent to risk that.’

My mouth is dry, my throat sore. My tongue feels too big for my mouth.

‘There is a lot of pain that can be caused without risking death.’

I laugh, dry as autumn leaves. ‘I don’t think you realise how much pain I experience on a monthly basis,’ I tell him.

The Archon lets out a growl. ‘Fine,’ he says. ‘Rot in here.’

He slams the door and stalks away.

I need a plan. But it’s hard to think in here, in the dark, with my head full of demon. Everything is so stuffy, and it’s hard to stay awake.

---

There’s someone at the door.

I can just make out his shape through the opaque glass, dark and ragged. Crow-like.

He looks so out of place among the oversaturated brightness of Florida. He’s still dressed for Scotland, in a long black wool coat. His shirt is untucked, as always, and his pale, knobby knees peek out from beneath the Agathion kilt. He’s wearing heavy black boots instead of the regulation brown school shoes. His eyes are lined in black. The silver acorn glitters from his ear.

Chewed nails coated in chipped sparkly black.

His eyes meet mine, and I feel the jolt of connection between us. The spark of something intimate and beautiful and vast, as powerful as a sun.

Oak. In his own body.

The one thing I truly want, but I can’t have.

‘You’re not real,’ I tell him.

He shrugs and grins his lopsided grin. ‘Does that really matter?’ I make a rueful face. ‘Yeah. I think it does.’

‘The prisoners in the cave,’ he says. ‘They don’t know they’re prisoners. Don’t know the world they see is merely shadows. You don’t have to be a philosopher, Page.’

I love the way my name sounds on his lips.

He reaches out and gently touches my cheek. ‘We could be together,’ he whispers. ‘Always. All you have to do is let go.’

I can’t bear it.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper, and open my eyes to discover they are wet with tears.

---

There’s someone at the door.

It isn’t the Archon. The door is still closed, but weak light illuminates the wall outside the iron bars.

‘Page,’ whispers a voice. ‘Page, are you in there?’

I know that voice. ‘Ren?’

‘Oh, thank goodness. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.’

Am I still dreaming? ‘What are you doing here?’ I ask.

I hear her sigh. ‘I made a mistake,’ she says. ‘A big one. What I did to Gideon ... I was all in my head – but that’s no excuse. I need to make things right.’

My head is spinning. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Hiding,’ she says. ‘I saw everything – the Archon and Magistra Galal leading all the students into the ring. And then that terrible jolt when the other ring of stones collided with this one. Everyone just *appeared* all of a sudden, and I could see that they were all dead.’

‘Lacey?’ I ask. ‘Gideon?’

There’s a long pause from the other side of the door. ‘I saw them leave,’ she says. ‘They were heading to the train station. I – I couldn’t face them. Not after what I did.’

I can hear the pain in her voice. The guilt. But I’m glad the others got away safely.

That’s something.

‘Does the Archon know you’re here?’ I ask. ‘Where have you been hiding?’

‘On the moor,’ Ren says, and then her voice breaks in a half-laugh, half-sob. ‘I always said I wanted to camp out there. I came in to find you. He doesn’t know I’m here. He’s too busy sulking and trying to deal with the pigs.’

I blink. ‘Pigs?’

‘They got out,’ she says. ‘Old Toby has gone totally berserk. They all keep getting into the school and smashing things up. The kitchen is like a war zone.’

I swallow. ‘Ren, I need to get out of here.’

‘I know. I’m working on it. I need to get the key from the Archon’s office. He has to sleep sometime, doesn’t he?’

I hope so.

‘What else can I do?’ Ren asks. ‘What do you need?’

‘Water,’ I tell her. ‘And food.’

‘Easy,’ she whispers. ‘Hang tight, be right back.’

I hear her footsteps pad away, and I’m alone once more, engulfed in darkness.

I struggle to stay awake, and I know it’s the demon, trying to pull me down into sleep so it can ply me with more tempting dreams and fantasies.

But I hold Ren firm in my mind. I blink into the blackness and picture her face with its goofy grin. Her engulfing hugs. The kindness she showed me. The friendship.

I seem to wait an age, but time is meaningless down here.

Did I imagine Ren?

Was it another dream? More lies from the demon?

But then footsteps approach, and there’s a loud thud as something is pushed through the door slot and lands on the floor next to me. I grope in the darkness, and my fingers curl around something soft. A tea towel. I unwrap it to discover some rather squashed shortbread cookies.

‘Sorry they’re stale,’ Ren says. ‘There’re no kitchen staff.’

‘S’okay,’ I mumble around the cookies.

Ren feeds a plastic bladder of water through the bars, and I gratefully unstop it and bring it to my lips.

The coolness of the water on my parched tongue is without a doubt the best feeling I’ve ever had. I close my eyes and savour it.

‘I’d better go,’ Ren says. ‘But I’ll be back. I promise. I’m gonna get you out of here.’

Then she's gone, and silence swallows up the small, dark space once more.

---

There's someone at the door, but I'm not going to answer it this time.

Mom is in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee. She's ready for work, neat and perfect like always, with a full face of makeup and a coral-coloured dress that matches her nails. She looks startled to see me, as if she didn't know I was back.

She plasters a smile on her face that's as fake as her tan, and pours me a cup of coffee, placing it on the breakfast bar and gesturing for me to take a seat.

I slide onto the stool.

'Cream? Sugar?'

I shake my head.

I try not to think of steaming, fragrant cups of tea in bone china.

I don't want things.

There's someone at the door, but Mom and I are pretending there isn't. We sit in awkward silence.

The coffee turns sour in my gut. I should eat something, but I can't bear the thought of sugary cereal, brightly coloured and tooth-achingly sweet.

I picture a bowl of Agathion porridge with creamy milk and a pile of fresh berries.

I push it from my mind.

'I always knew you were different,' my mother says suddenly. 'That you ... weren't like other girls.'

Is she talking about Cassidy? About my sexuality? I almost laugh out loud at the absurdity of it. Being gay – or bi or pan or whatever it is I am – is the last thing on my mind right now.

'Even when you were a baby,' she continues. 'Things ... would happen.'

Okay, so maybe not about my sexuality.

'Once I put you on a blanket in the yard,' she says, her eyes unfocused as she remembers. 'It was a beautiful spring day, the azaleas were out and the sun was shining. My phone rang inside the house, and I went in to get it.'

When I came back out, you were ...’ She trails off and shakes her head with a funny little smile.

‘I was what?’

‘Glowing.’

‘Glowing?’

She nods. ‘Golden light was shining from you. And you were *giggling*. I was frightened – you were so little and I didn’t understand. I took you inside and put you in a warm bath. I thought I could wash away ... whatever it was. And it worked. You stopped glowing and started to cry.’

I stare down at my coffee. What kind of demon makes a baby glow? And where did it come from?

‘Sometimes when you were angry, I’d hear thunder rumbling overhead. When you were teething, it rained for a week.’

I glance sidelong at my mother and see tears in her eyes, threatening to ruin her mascara. I remember the incidents at school. Waiting outside the principal’s office, ready to be collected. The look of disgust in the priest’s eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I didn’t want to be like this.’

‘Oh, honey,’ she says, and her voice trembles in exactly the same way mine does. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you.’

I remember the vicious way the demon lashed out at Oak’s soul, the little candle snuffed out in an instant.

‘There are ... things,’ I tell her. ‘Evil things. They get inside me.’

‘Not evil,’ she insists.

What would she know? Her life revolves around office gossip and her ladies’ book club and finding the perfect throw pillow to match the sofa.

‘Wherever I go, bad things happen,’ I tell her.

She nods. ‘I know. I think they’re drawn to you,’ she says. ‘The ...’

‘Demons?’ I supply.

‘Spirits,’ she says firmly. ‘And ... maybe they’re drawn to you because they know you can help them.’

I stare at her, and she lets out a nervous laugh, acknowledging this whole conversation is silly and demons definitely aren’t real.

‘I don’t know what I’m talking about,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘But I know my daughter.’

There’s someone at the door.

Mom stands up, smoothing the front of her dress.



‘I want you to be happy,’ she says, pressing a tissue in the corners of her eyes. ‘I think the last time I saw you truly happy was on that blanket in the yard.’

There’s someone at the door.

‘Don’t hide who you are,’ Mom says. ‘I’ll always love you, no matter what. I’m sorry if I ever made you think different. I’m gonna let you answer the door, I’m running late for work.’

She briefly lays a hand on my shoulder, then the click of her heels recedes and she’s gone.

There’s someone at the door.

---

It isn’t the Archon this time. Or Ren.

It’s Cyrus.

Cyrus Alimardani, looking as comfortable and relaxed in the gloomy Agathion corridor as he did sprawled on a picnic blanket in the forum.

He’s wearing an open-collared linen shirt, and jeans that probably cost more than my parents’ house. In one hand, he’s holding a lantern that emits a cheerful golden glow. In the other, a white plate, fine bone china. On it is a fluffy golden scone, spread thick with brambleberry jam and clotted cream. He passes it to me.

‘Page Whittaker,’ he says. ‘We need to talk.’

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# TWENTY-ONE

3 November

I tell him to fuck off.

He grins at me. 'Not here,' he says, and grabs my hand. 'Come with me. Bring your scone.'

It's a trap. I know it is. But I allow him to pull me to my feet and lead me from the little box room. We hurry through the narrow stone passageways, my joints stiff after being still for so long.

How long was I in the Desmoterion? A day? Two days? A week?

I have no idea.

I open my mouth to ask a question, but Cyrus places a finger over my lips. 'Not here,' he murmurs. 'We need to get to the Sanctuary.'

Kovacevic knows about the Sanctuary. How? I told the Archon that Oak and Gideon were plotting against him, but I didn't say anything about the Sanctuary or about the Knights of Empedocles.

'What about the Archon?' I say. 'Isn't he up there?'

Cyrus shakes his head. 'He's gone into town.'

'Into *town*?' I ask. 'That seems very ... mundane.'

'The kitchen staff have all gone, and he cancelled the food deliveries. Even villains need to eat. He won't be back until tonight.'

We head up the narrow staircase to the main entrance hall, and I stop short, a hand going to my mouth.

The hall is wrecked. Tapestries hang in tatters. The wood of the staircase is splintered and filthy with mud. The floor is strewn with shattered glass, sheets of paper, and the ragged corpses of books.

‘What ... what happened here?’ I ask.

‘Pigs,’ Cyrus replies. ‘Old Toby led something of a revolt.’

He shudders.

We scramble up the broken staircase. The first floor isn’t much better – the carpet’s torn, the walls streaked with filth. Cyrus notices me looking around nervously and grins.

‘Pretty sure they’ve all gone,’ he says. ‘They tore through the place like a hurricane, looking for food. But then they all ran off onto the moor.’

I peer down the corridors. I’ve encountered Old Toby once before in this room, and it’s not an experience I care to repeat.

But the halls are silent and still, our footsteps echoing loud on the floors.

We climb the wrought iron spiral staircase to the little room with the tapestries. Unlike the rest, these are untouched – the pigs clearly don’t know about the secret entry behind the bookcase. Motes of dust dance gently in the air. This place is special. Protected from the rampages of pigs and demons and evil magisters.

I glance at Cyrus. If he makes me speak the password, then I’ll know he’s really Kovacevic.

He moves the unicorn tapestry aside and places a hand on the third carved rose from the left.

“‘For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.’”

He winks at me and steps through the doorway.

I swallow.

Could it really be Cyrus?

How else would he know the password?

I guess I’m about to find out, one way or another.

The Sanctuary is perfect and calm.

The fairy lights twinkle overhead, the furniture just as shabby and comfortable as it was before. A thermos of tea sits on the little table.

The one place that really felt like home.

The one place I can’t have.

Cyrus flops elegantly onto the sofa, a smug smile on his face. A *smirk*, as if he knows how discombobulated I’m feeling and he’s enjoying it.

‘I found you a clean uniform,’ he says, indicating a neatly folded pile of clothing. ‘Thought you might like to change.’

I pick up a knitted crimson sweater, the embroidered Agathion crest bold on the breast. I find a pair of scissors in a drawer and cut the crest out, then, for good measure, shred it into tiny pieces. Cyrus watches, his eyebrow raised.

‘I get it,’ he says. ‘You’re not a fan.’

‘Not a fan of being magically immobilised,’ I reply, picking up a silk tie and attacking it with the scissors.

Cyrus turns around while I change. Wool skirt. Stockings. White shirt. Sweater. No Agathion crests, so I should be safe.

I perch on an armchair, and Cyrus faces me once more.

‘Eat your scone,’ he says. ‘I know they’re your favourite.’

I carefully place the plate with the scone down on the table. I’m not getting poisoned today, thank you very much.

Cyrus takes a chunk of scone and pops it in his mouth. ‘It’s really me.’

Perhaps I should let the demon eat him. ‘Nice try.’

I feel oddly calm. I know he can’t hurt me. This is just another one of the Archon’s ploys.

‘Page. I swear it.’

‘Your oath means nothing to me,’ I say with a shrug. ‘I saw you at the graduation dinner. You didn’t even recognise me. You aren’t Cyrus.’ ‘But I recognise you *now*,’ he says, his eyes shining. ‘And I brought you a scone. You love scones. Remember the first one you had at lunch out on the forum? Would Magister Kovacevic know that you love scones?’

He gestures triumphantly at the sticky crumbs.

‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Test me. Ask me anything. It’ll be fun.’

He’s enjoying himself way too much, but I can’t help humouring him.

‘When did we first meet?’ I ask.

‘When you arrived with Hewitt. Old Toby escaped. I showed you to your room.’

‘What card did I pull from Oak’s deck?’

‘The Tower.’

‘What did you give me the afternoon before graduation?’

He grins. ‘An invitation to the Knights of Empedocles, scribbled on the back of your tarot card.’

I stare at him, and he stares back.

Is it possible? Could this truly be Cyrus? The real Cyrus?

‘How?’ I ask.

‘I *faked it* at graduation,’ he says. ‘Oak gave me a protective charm – a little straw doll to carry with me. And it worked. The ritual failed, but I *pretended* it hadn’t. The demon went into Kovacevic’s body, and I stayed me. But I didn’t want Leek and the others to know, because then obviously they would have tried to kill me. So I pretended to be him.’

I’m still so full of questions, but the numb, calm feeling is dissolving. I want it to be true. So very badly.

I’m not supposed to want things.

I mentally poke the demon.

What do you think? I ask it. Is he telling the truth? Or is he one of them?

The demon is sulking. *how should I know?* it asks. *humans are all alike.*

You recognised the Archon, I point out. And Magistra Galal.

*she was delicious. I can still taste the heat of her blood.*

I can taste it, too. The sharp tang of it at the back of my throat.

*give me control,* the demon says. *and I will tell you if he is who he says he is.*

I can’t.

‘The Archon contacted me,’ Cyrus tells me. ‘He still thinks I’m Kovacevic. He said things had gone wrong. That he needed me to help him complete his big ritual. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I led him on until I learned that he had you locked up and that Oak ...’ He trails off, and I see his Adam’s apple bob. ‘I’m really sorry, Page. I loved him so much.’

I clench my jaw until my teeth ache. ‘Me too.’

‘The good news is he still doesn’t know anything about the Knights of Empedocles,’ Cyrus continues. ‘He thinks Oak and Gideon were the ones behind it all.’

‘Is Gideon ...’ I trail off.

Cyrus spreads his hands. ‘I don’t know where the others are,’ he says. ‘But I have to believe they’re safe.’

Me too.

‘I knew there was something special about you, Page,’ Cyrus says, shaking his head and smiling softly. ‘I knew you were a Knight.’

I destroyed the Knights of Empedocles. If it wasn’t for me, none of this would have happened.

Cyrus leans forward, his eyes alight with curiosity.

‘What is it like?’ he asks. ‘Having a demon inside you?’

*it is an honour for any mortal to stare into the jaws of eternal blackness. to witness the colossal presence of an entity inconceivable to human perception. to hold an entire galaxy in the palm of a hand, and to truly understand your own insignificance.*

‘Weird,’ I say to Cyrus.

‘I bet.’

‘Cyrus ...’ I shake my head. ‘Why didn’t you *tell* us you were still alive?’

He smiles, a little wistfully. ‘Too risky. If the Archon had found out what I’d done ... it would have been the end of the Knights. The end of us all.’

‘I think the Knights are over anyway,’ I say.

‘I hope that isn’t true,’ Cyrus replies quietly.

‘You should have been there,’ I tell him. ‘Lacey’s heart was broken. She thought you were dead.’

‘I know. And ...’ He sighs. ‘I was scared. It was all too much ... the plan, the demon. The magisters. I left to keep up the ruse. I could have come back. Could have contacted you. Contacted Lacey. But I didn’t. Because I’m a coward.’

His shoulders slump, and he runs his hands through his hair before looking over at me.

‘I’m ready to make it right,’ he says. ‘What can I do?’

It’s almost an echo of Ren, on the other side of my door.

We all made so many mistakes.

I shake my head. ‘It’s too late,’ I tell him. ‘It’s all over now.’

‘There must be something,’ Cyrus says. ‘What do you want, Page?’

I allow a wry smile to creep onto my face. ‘You sound like the Archon,’ I say. ‘He tried to get me to join him. Offered me everything I could ever want.’

‘And you weren’t tempted? I would have been, and I already have more than any normal person could ask for.’

I think of Oak, bent over his sketchbook, scribbling intensely.

Oak, his hand on the bark of the wych elm.

Oak, casually slumped in an armchair while he considered his next chaos chess move.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I wasn’t tempted.’

Cyrus regards me for a long moment. 'It's good to see you,' he says at last. 'I feel like we barely got to know each other.'

In another world, things would have been different. Agathion might have been the paradise I'd hoped it would be. There would have been no demons. No evil magisters.

But if it weren't for the demons, I never would have gone to Agathion. Archon Leek wouldn't know that I exist at all. He never would have come looking for me, tempting with promises of a life of the mind. He never would have made a school in the first place.

I glance up at the warm glow of the fairy lights and think of the shimmering canopy of stars over the ring of stones.

Of souls.

Oak is up there, somewhere. Trapped, unable to find peace.

I have to help him.

*there is a way*, the demon says.

It's crafty. I can't trust it. Can't trust anyone.

*you will have to give up everything*, it warns.

Tell me, I demand.

Cyrus is watching me as the demon whispers. Does he know I'm talking to the demon?

'Okay,' I say at last, out loud. 'I understand.'

'Understand what?' Cyrus asks.

I'm frightened. I know what I have to do. I just hope I have the courage to do it.

I hear my mother's words to me, from my dream.

*Maybe they're drawn to you because they know you can help them.*

'I can help Oak,' I tell Cyrus. 'But I need your help.'

He nods. 'Anything.'

I still can't quite believe that it's really him, here in the Sanctuary. That Cyrus Alimardani is not only alive, but that he has arrived to break me out of prison at the very moment I needed him, like a handsome, cocky fairy godmother.

'We need Ren,' I tell him. 'I know where she is.'

---

The air outside is cold and fresh. I breathe deeply, filling my lungs with the now-familiar scent of earth and heather. It's delicious after the stale foulness of the Desmoterion, and I feel almost giddy. Exhilarated.

As we pass the wych elm tree, I lay my hand on the rough bark. 'I'm going to help him,' I promise.

Cyrus doesn't say anything, just watches me.

We step onto the moor, and I notice saxifrage and wood sorrel and reindeer moss. A bird flies overhead. I don't know what kind of bird.

Oak would know.

A light drizzle starts to fall. My skin tingles with it, and I feel alive and powerful.

'How far is she?' Cyrus asks.

'Not far,' I reply. 'Although it was quicker in a chariot.'

'Wish I'd brought a brolly,' Cyrus grumbles.

I smile and turn my face up to the rain. 'It's wonderful,' I say as tiny droplets land in my mouth.

We pass the splintered remains of the chariot, the bright wood turned dull after exposure to the elements.

How long ago were Ren and I here? A few weeks, but it feels like years.

So much has happened.

'Where did you go?' I ask Cyrus. 'After graduation?'

'London,' he replies. 'I – I tried to forget everyone. Tried to forget Agathion. I knew they'd kill me if I came back, after what I'd seen. Forgetting seemed like my only choice. I stayed with old friends. Partied hard.' He wipes raindrops from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. 'I'm not particularly proud of any of it.'

'What made you change your mind?' I ask.

Cyrus hesitates. 'Oak,' he says simply as he stares out over the drizzly grey moor.

'I can't save him,' I tell Cyrus, and I feel emotion rising in my throat. 'But I can help him.'

Cyrus nods, and we walk on.

---



Ren is exactly where I knew she'd be, under the overhang of the craggy rise, dressed in the Agathion sports uniform, although she's cut the embroidered crest from the knitted sweater. She's made quite the little setup, with a tarpaulin to shelter her from the weather, a sleeping bag, and a camp stove.

The drizzle has spread into heavy fog, so she doesn't see us until we're quite close. She springs to her feet with a yelp of surprise, but then grins and leaps forward to engulf me in a hug.

'You escaped!' she says. 'How?'

I jerk my head at Cyrus, who waves. 'Hi, Ren.'

She glances at me. 'Do I need to hurt him?'

'No,' I reply. 'At least ... I don't think so.'

Cyrus steps forward eagerly. 'It's really me. Let me explain—'

Ren holds up a hand to stop him. 'I don't want to hear it from you,' she says, and looks at me questioningly.

'It's really him.' Saying it out loud makes me realise that I truly believe it, and I finally let a great wash of relief pass over me.

'Right, then,' Ren says. 'Moving on.'

'Wait,' Cyrus says, outraged. 'That's it? You don't want proof?'

'To be honest,' Ren says, running her hands through her short hair, 'I don't really care if you're Cyrus or Kovacevic. As long as you can help me get to Gideon.'

Her knee is jiggling up and down. Her fingernails are chewed right down to the cuticles. There are hollows under her eyes.

Cyrus glances at me. He knows that the last time Ren and Gideon were together, things didn't go so well.

'Cyrus can help you,' I promise. 'But there's something I need you to do first.'

'Anything,' Ren says. 'Name it.'

'Let's go back to school,' I say. 'I'll tell you everything there.'

---

We trudge through the drizzle, until the vast bulk of Agathion looms before us, the spires puncturing the fog like jagged teeth. I start towards the main entrance, but Ren puts out a hand to stop me. She puts one finger over her

lips and points towards something dark and shiny that is approaching, like a huge black beetle.

A car.

‘The Archon is back,’ I murmur, and the three of us move quickly to hide behind a large glossy-leaved bush.

As it grows closer, I can hear the rumbling engine. The crunch of tyres on gravel.

The car pulls to a halt, and the driver’s side door opens.

It isn’t the Archon.

Cyrus’s breath hisses through his teeth as Lacey clambers out, wearing sunglasses and a short white dress that, while hugely flattering, looks totally out of place on the wild and windswept moor.

Gideon emerges from the passenger side door in corduroy pants and a sweater, looking up at the hulking mass of Agathion like the building is about to eat him.

‘What are they doing here?’ I ask.

‘Let’s find out,’ Cyrus suggests, and moves out from behind the bushes.

‘I can’t,’ Ren says, her face white. ‘I can’t face him.’

‘Sure you can,’ Cyrus says. ‘Buck up.’

She shakes her head. ‘What if he hates me? He should hate me.’

‘He came back,’ I say.

‘For you,’ Ren says. ‘Not for me.’

‘How about I go first?’ I say. ‘I’ll ask him if he wants to see you.’

‘Okay.’

Ren crouches in the bushes, looking like she’s about to throw up.

‘Come on,’ I say to Cyrus. ‘Or are you also too scared to face the person you love?’

Cyrus flashes me a grin, but there’s a wildness around his eyes. Fair enough. I wouldn’t want to face Lacey either.

We trudge around the bushes and up the gravel driveway to where the car is parked. There’s a faceless driver in the front seat.

Gideon and Lacey turn at the sound of our footsteps, their stances defensive.

Lacey slowly removes her sunglasses, a little frown creasing her forehead. ‘Took you long enough,’ she says to Cyrus.

Cyrus grins appreciatively. ‘Nice to see you’ve been taking care of yourself.’

If I didn't know Lacey better, I'd say she seemed totally indifferent to him. But I can see the tension in her shoulders. The brave lift of her chin as she meets his gaze.

'It's really him,' I tell her.

Lacey shakes her head, a slight smile hovering around her lips. 'I know,' she says, her voice soft. 'I know it's really him.'

She traces his jawline with a light finger, then slaps him, hard across the face. '*That's* for not telling me you were still alive.'

Cyrus presses his hand to his cheek, and they gaze at each other for a moment.

'I missed you,' he says finally.

Lacey sniffs and tries to look nonchalant. 'I guess I missed you too.' Cyrus slides his fingers into her hair. 'My queen,' he murmurs before he kisses her.

Gideon embraces me. 'Are you okay?' he asks.

I have no idea how to answer that question. 'I'm alive,' I offer.

'Is he in there?' Gideon eyes the towering walls and pointed gables of Agathion. 'The Archon?'

'Apparently he ran to the store,' I tell him.

Gideon blinks. 'Sure.'

'Ren is here, though,' I say, and Gideon's eyes go wide. 'She really wants to see you.'

He swallows. 'I really want to see her.'

'You sure?' Cyrus asks. 'After all, she did ...'

Gideon lets out a nervous laugh. 'Murder me?'

'So I hear.'

'It wasn't fun.'

'I can imagine.'

'But I know she was trying to protect me. I understand it was an act of love.'

'It was still kind of a shitty thing to do, though,' I tell him. 'It's okay if you're mad at her.'

He nods, and I see his eyes are shining with tears. 'I never believed anyone would love me,' he admits. 'Not because I think I'm unlovable. But ... people don't usually *get* me. They can't see past my IQ, or my SAT scores, or' – he makes a wry face – 'my criminal record.'

'To be fair,' Cyrus chimes in, 'it's a very impressive criminal record.'

Gideon shrugs this comment off. ‘But Ren sees me. She loves me for *all* of me.’ He waves a hand vaguely to encompass himself. ‘The whole package. It’s not okay, what she did. But I’m not ready to give up on what we have.’

‘I get it.’

I want to offer Gideon comfort, but that’s so far outside my wheelhouse. I ask myself what Ren would do – other than stab him in the chest with an ancient Scottish longsword. A hug. She’d offer him a hug. I spread my arms a little in suggestion, and tears slip from Gideon’s cheeks as he steps forward into my embrace.

I’m not sure if I’ve ever hugged a friend before. Cassidy and I embraced, of course, but that was different. This is ... nice.

*just so you know, I hate everything about this*, the demon comments, which only makes things better.

‘Thank you,’ Gideon says. ‘Okay, I’m ready.’

Cyrus jogs back down the path and beckons Ren out of the bushes.

She emerges like the most timid of creatures, her shoulders hunched, her head bowed. Gideon takes a step towards her, his sneakers crunching on the gravel.

‘Ren—’

‘Wait,’ she interrupts. Her breath hitches in her throat. ‘I need to say something.’

Gideon gestures for her to speak. Ren takes a deep breath.

‘I didn’t listen to you,’ she says. ‘I thought I knew what was best. But I didn’t. I made everything worse, and it was all because I didn’t let you make your own choices. That was wrong – beyond wrong.’

‘You thought you were saving me,’ Gideon says.

Ren shakes her head. ‘That doesn’t matter,’ she says, her voice cracking under the strain. ‘I should have listened. I should have respected your wishes. I hurt you—’ She shakes her head again, tears slipping down her pink cheeks.

‘It’s okay,’ Gideon says, taking another step forward.

‘It’s *not* okay.’ Ren can barely get the words out. Her whole face has turned blotchy. ‘Nothing is okay. I fucked up and hurt the person who I love more than anyone – anything – else in the world.’

Ren’s knees go out from under her, and she sprawls on the gravel. Gideon crosses the remaining space between them in a few strides and sinks

down to gather her up in his arms.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she croaks.

‘I know.’

‘Anything I can do to make it right,’ she says, ‘I’ll do it. Whatever it is.’

Gideon considers this. ‘Lauren Jin Ae Hyong, will you hold my hand, like an otter?’

Ren makes a sound that is half-laugh, half-sob. ‘You should hate me,’ she protests.

‘I love you.’ Gideon cradles Ren’s face with his hands and lays a kiss on her forehead.

‘I’m all stinky,’ she says in a small voice. ‘I haven’t showered in two days.’

‘I don’t care,’ Gideon replies.

‘I *killed* you,’ she hiccups.

‘Yeah,’ Gideon agrees. ‘You did. But I’m all right now. See?’

Ren lets out a wail and clings to him. I see Gideon’s eyes close in relief, and I know they’ll be okay.

‘Melts your heart, doesn’t it,’ Cyrus says dryly, but he looks a little misty.

Lacey shrugs. ‘If you say so. Not sure I’d get back together with someone who ran me through with an ancient magical sword, but I guess Schopenhauer was right. You can have what you want, but you can’t want what you want.’

Cyrus grins. ‘Here we are, then,’ he says, clapping his hands. ‘The old gang. Back together.’

Not all of us, though. The absence of Oak hangs between us like a living thing.

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask Lacey. ‘Why did you come back?’

She shrugs. ‘To help you, of course. We only left to get some supplies.’

‘Did you tell anyone what’s been happening?’ Cyrus asks. ‘The police?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Tell them what, exactly? That our school for rich troubled teens has been taken over by demons and evil body-swapping teachers?’

Cyrus nods. ‘When you put it like that ...’

Lacey walks around to the back of the black car as the trunk pops open.

It’s so good to see them all again. Even without Oak. Even though I know what has to be done.

I think maybe it will all be worth it, just for this.

Lacey hauls a giant pink suitcase from the car, big enough for her to fit inside.

‘What on earth is *that*?’ Cyrus asks.

‘I figured we needed to be prepared,’ she says, tossing her hair.

She leans into the trunk and withdraws something else.

A giant sword, the ancient blade gleaming.

‘Is that ...’ I stare at it.

‘Snàthad White-Hilt, ancient sword of Agathion? Sure is.’

‘It looks cleaner,’ Ren observes.

Lacey shrugs. ‘I had some time to kill,’ she says. ‘And you know I like things to be nice.’

‘How did you get it?’ Cyrus looks flabbergasted.

‘I took it from the ring while the Archon was busy arguing with Page,’ Lacey says airily.

‘You are truly *magnificent*,’ Cyrus states, bowing before her.

‘I know,’ she says. ‘You can bring my bag, if you like.’

She strides off towards the main building.

Cyrus grabs the handle of the pink suitcase and follows, letting out a little grunt. ‘Do you have a body in here or something?’ he asks. ‘Why is it so heavy?’

She glances over her shoulder. ‘A girl needs her things, Cyrus. I don’t fall out of bed looking like this.’

They lead the way, with Ren and Gideon walking hand in hand a few paces behind.

I bring up the rear, alone, my heart aching a little. If things had been different, then I would be reuniting with a lover, too. If Oak hadn’t—

*humans are so tedious.*

Shut up, I tell the demon. Nobody asked your opinion.

‘Seriously,’ Cyrus says as he hauls Lacey’s pink suitcase up the stairs. ‘What have you *got* in here?’

Lacey shrugs again. ‘Makeup,’ she says. ‘Skincare. Hair care. Hair dryer. Hair straightener. Hair curler. A few wardrobe options and nine pairs of shoes.’

‘*Nine*?’ Cyrus splutters.

‘Like I said, I want to be prepared for anything.’

---

We gather in the Sanctuary. Cyrus produces a packet of cookies and a flask of tea from somewhere. It feels so good to be with them all again. Together, up here in the cosy warmth. Fairy lights twinkling overhead.

Except for Oak's absence. A hole in all our hearts.

I have to help him.

Everyone looks at me, expectant.

'You know how the ring of stones is an in-between place?' I say, wondering how to explain it all.

'Is it still?' Lacey asks. 'Even though the two versions of it are now merged?'

'I think so,' I say.

*mortals have such little understanding of these things, the demon sighs. the stones are a cage, for those on the inside. but they are no longer a cage for me when I am on the outside.*

I relay this to the others. 'I don't get it,' Ren says.

'All that matters,' I say, 'is that every soul that was ever sacrificed in that ring is *still there*.'

I let this sink in.

'They ... they didn't get absorbed back into the fabric of the universe?' Gideon asks.

I shake my head. 'Which means—'

'Oak is still there,' Lacey says. 'His soul.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'They all are. All the Agathion students. And everyone before that. Some of them have been trapped there for over a thousand years.'

'That doesn't sound fun.'

'They've been calling to me this whole time,' I say. 'I thought it was the demon, but it was the souls. They're trapped. They want peace. They *long* for it. And ... I can help them.'

Ren leaps to her feet, smacking her head on a low wooden beam. 'Ow.'

'Easy, tiger,' Gideon says.

Cyrus gazes at me thoughtfully. 'You're really something, Page Whittaker,' he says. 'So what's the plan?'

'I think ...' I take a breath. 'I think I can take all the lost souls into me. Carry them outside the ring and ... let them out. Set them free.'

'What about the demon?' Cyrus asks. 'Isn't it still in you?'

'I'm sorry, what?' Lacey looks at me. 'The demon is *in you*?'

I nod.

‘Like, right now?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Sounds like we should probably do something about that,’ Ren says. ‘Like make it ... not in you?’

I don’t know how to tell them the next part.

‘Oak’s body ...’ Lacey glances at Ren. ‘We carried it into the burial chamber beneath the school. The grotto. Does that mean ... we could save him? Put his soul back?’

Ren bites her lip. ‘The frostbite ...’ she says.

‘The thing is ...’ I take a deep breath. ‘I won’t be around to do it.’

Gideon looks at me, his expression sombre. He understands.

‘What do you mean?’ Ren asks. ‘Where will you be?’

I glance down at the enamel mug of tea in my hand. ‘I ... There are a lot of souls in there. Thousands. When I let them go ... I won’t be able to hold on. It’ll be like a flood, and I’ll get carried along with them.’

There’s a long silence as everyone absorbs this information.

‘You – you’ll die?’ Ren asks, her voice small.

‘My soul will leave my body.’

Ren shakes her head. ‘No,’ she says. ‘There must be another way.’

The demon had seemed pretty sure there wasn’t. ‘It’s okay,’ I tell her. ‘I’ve thought about it and ... it’s worth it. To end the suffering of thousands of souls.’

‘What about the demon?’ Cyrus asks. ‘Will that get pulled out of your body, too?’

I shake my head. ‘No,’ I say. ‘It’ll stay in my body. Which is why as soon as the souls are gone, you have to kill me.’



# TWENTY-TWO

3 November

Ren puts her face in her hands. 'No,' she says. 'Not again.'

Gideon rubs her back.

Cyrus is frowning. 'We'll have to get you inside the ring of stones first,' he says. 'Or else the demon will escape and tear a hole in the universe.'

I nod. 'Yeah. You'll have to move quickly, before the demon takes full control of my body. As soon as the souls are out, carry my body straight back into the ring and then kill me. The demon will be released and trapped once more.'

*this is a very bad plan*, the demon observes. *I hate it.*

'You want us to do it with this?' Lacey puts a hand on the sword.

I shrug. 'It doesn't really matter,' I say. 'My soul will already be gone. You just need the body to die.'

'Then what?'

'Then we deal with the Archon,' Ren says darkly.

'What about Magistra Galal?' Gideon asks. 'What happened to her?'

'Dead,' I say, busying myself with my cup of tea.

'How?'

'Somebody ate her.'

Lacey looks at me, eyebrows raised. 'Somebody *ate* her? Who?'

I cough discreetly.

'It was you, wasn't it?'

‘I mean, technically it was my little friend in here.’ I tap my head.  
Ren very slowly and deliberately puts down her cookie.  
Lacey cackles. ‘Love it.’  
‘Do you remember it?’ Cyrus asks curiously.  
I wrinkle my nose. ‘Yeah.’  
‘You should have eaten the Archon too,’ Lacey says thoughtfully.  
I shake my head. ‘Too bitter.’  
‘I can’t believe I didn’t like you at first,’ she tells me. ‘You’re dark as fuck, and I’m so here for it.’  
‘We need to move fast,’ Gideon says. ‘Before the Archon comes back.’  
Ren thumps a fist down on the arm of her chair. ‘That *bloody* man,’ she growls. ‘All of this is his fault. It’s time someone took him on. Let him know we’re not here to fuck spiders.’  
I blink and stare at Ren.  
‘An Australianism,’ Gideon explains. ‘I find it rather charming.’  
‘One thing at a time,’ Cyrus says. ‘Let’s deal with these souls first.’  
Through the narrow window, I can see the sun is starting to set, staining the horizon orange and gold and purple. The vast brown-green expanse of Rannoch Moor spreads out under the endless sky. I feel the same kind of awe as I did when I first arrived. The same kernel of hope that I might find where I truly belong.  
Except this time, I’m not alone. My friends are here.  
I know where I belong.  
But I have to give it all up.

---

The golden tones of sunset don’t reach the forum. Surrounded on all sides by the high walls of Agathion, it is wreathed in shadows. I breathe in its now-familiar scents. Rich peaty earth. Grassy crushed greenery. The bitter note of woodsmoke.

And under it all, the sweetness of heather.

The bodies of the students are still there, arranged in that perfect circle that mirrors the ring of stones. To any common observer, they look peaceful.

But I can see their souls. They hover above the bodies. The other, older souls are gathered high up by the tops of the stones, as close to freedom as they can manage. But the newer ones still can't bear to leave their bodies. I can feel it.

The grief of them. The restlessness.

The longing.

Zhang's body still lies on the altar; Ren winces at the sight of it and the dark bloody stains that spread out from him. Gideon takes her hand.

'Are you sure there isn't another way?' Ren asks, her voice small.

I shake my head.

Magistra Hewitt's body is there, too, slumped on the ground in that vacant state between life and death. Soulless, but her heart still beating. My heart tugs as I remember her steel hair sliding between my fingers, Oak's smile on her lips.

'Do we need the bowl?' Lacey asks. 'The Anam Cuach?'

I shake my head. 'Nope. Just me.'

'Do we need ... this giant suitcase?' Cyrus asks Lacey.

'I want to keep it with me,' Lacey replies.

Cyrus scowls at it. 'My darling,' he says, 'as much as I applaud your commitment to beauty, do you *really* think you're going to need to do your hair while we're rescuing lost souls and battling evil demons?'

Lacey draws herself up to her full height. 'Cyrus Alimardani,' she says haughtily, 'I attended this school for *three years* without a hair straightener. If you think I am letting this bag out of my sight for a *single second*, then you are greatly mistaken.'

Cyrus sighs. 'Fine.'

Ren rolls her eyes fondly and takes the handle from Cyrus's grasp, lifting the entire suitcase and carrying it like it weighs nothing.

'How are you so strong?' Cyrus asks, shaking his head in admiration.

'Twenty-five reps of Gideon every morning,' Ren replies breezily.

Gideon coughs, his cheeks turning pink.

We don't look like heroes or saviours. We look like teenagers. A part of me wants to turn around and head back up the creaking stairs along the draughty corridors to my little room. To change into my flannel pyjamas and climb into my loom bed with the scratchy blankets that smell of mothballs. To be *home*.

But this isn't my home. Not anymore.

The demon inside me stirs. *no*, it says. *do not return me to the stone prison.*

Sorry, I tell it.

‘I’ll keep watch,’ Cyrus says, holding out a hand to Lacey for the sword. ‘In case the Archon decides to grace us with his presence.’

She hesitates. ‘You don’t think Ren should have it?’ she says. ‘She’s the fencing champion, after all.’

Cyrus chuckles. ‘I don’t think we’re going to be engaging in any actual *swordplay*, Lacey,’ he says.

‘Ren is the knight.’ Lacey’s knuckles are white on the sword’s hilt.

‘And I’m the king.’

She still doesn’t give it to him. Cyrus reaches out. ‘Don’t you trust me?’ he asks, a hint of vulnerability entering his voice.

Lacey’s frown melts. ‘Of course I do,’ she says softly. ‘But it’s my sword, and if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll hold on to it for a bit.’

He shrugs. ‘Suit yourself.’

‘So ... what now?’ Gideon asks, looking at me.

‘Now ... we say goodbye.’ My voice catches on the last word.

I’m scared.

Scared I’ll fail at this.

Scared of losing this feeling of belonging.

Scared of dying.

I hug each of them in turn.

Gideon is slight and pale, his glasses glinting in the twilight. ‘I believe in you,’ he says simply.

Ren crushes me in a bear hug, and I can feel her chest heaving with sobs. ‘You’re so brave,’ she whispers.

I hesitate before Lacey, not wanting to invade the queen’s personal space without being invited first. She yanks me towards her, and the fresh floral scent of her hair drowns out all my senses.

‘You’re a real badass, you know that?’ she says, her eyes full of tears. ‘The baddest.’

Cyrus doesn’t say anything, simply embraces me. I can feel the tension in his shoulders. He’s afraid too.

I feel like I should say something. Make some kind of inspiring speech. But how can any words encompass what I’m about to do?

‘I love you all,’ I tell them.

And then there's no reason to wait any longer.

I close my eyes.

Lacey takes one hand. Gideon takes the other. Ren stands behind me, her hands on my shoulders. Cyrus stands at the very edge of the ring of stones, watching for the Archon.

'We're here,' Lacey says. 'We're all right here with you.'

I focus on the feeling of her fingers on my skin.

I focus on the feeling of ice on my cheek.

I focus on *feeling*.

And then I listen.

The formless whispers tickle at my consciousness, and I open myself up to them, listening.

The tiny stars rush in around me, like moths to a flame. They whirl and dance before me, agitated.

*Help us.*

'I will,' I promise them.

For the briefest moment, one of the tiny flames comes into focus, and I can smell crushed rosemary and juniper. But then it's gone, lost in the maelstrom of lost souls, lonely and desperate for peace.

I squeeze Lacey's and Gideon's hands, steeling myself for what I have to do.

Buckle up, I tell the demon. You're getting some roommates.

The demon retreats to the furthest reaches of my mind. I know what it wants. It's hoping to steal control of my body once it's empty, before the others can get it back into the ring of stones.

'Don't hesitate,' I tell my friends. 'Not for a second. You have to be fast.'

I feel their hands on me tighten in response.

'Come on, then,' I tell the candles. 'Get in.'

Around me, the maelstrom of light stops, quite suddenly, and the tiny candles hang in the air for a moment, motionless. Then one darts forward and into me.

It feels like the tiniest electric shock in my chest. Suddenly, I can taste apples and cinnamon, glimpse a flash of long blond hair, of bubble gum-flavoured lip gloss, and evenings sprawled in front of the television, licking cheese dust off fingertips.

It feels nothing like the demon. This soul is tiny – it takes up barely any room. It's been lost in the stone circle for so long that it's hardly a person at

all. More a little spark of loneliness and longing and memory.

A second soul enters me. This one is much older, hundreds, maybe even thousands of years old. I see fingers stained blue with woad and smell the funk of rotting cabbage.

Another soul. Cherry Coke and cigarettes.

And another. Diesel and fresh-cut grass.

Lanolin and sweet rock rose.

Cloves and hickory.

Summer rain and warm fur.

Rosemary and juniper.

‘Oak!’ I cry out, but he’s swallowed up by the flood of souls entering me.

Crisp apples and sun-drenched hay.

Fresh sea air and battered fish.

Sandalwood and rosewater.

I’m losing myself in them. My own soul is getting caught up in the whirl of little sparks, its connection to my body weakening.

‘Help!’ I gasp out.

And I feel their hands on me tighten. Real, mortal, physical hands.

My friends.

They form a connection to the earth. To my body.

They remind me of who I really am. I focus on my fingers gripping theirs. And my feet, cold in soggy socks. My lips, chapped against the cold.

Bitumen and fresh-baked bread.

Acrylic paint and hops.

It’s the last one.

‘Take me out of here,’ I tell the others. ‘Outside ...’

Their hands guide me through the ring of stones, through the main entrance to Agathion, and out onto the soggy grass beyond. I feel the wind in my face, ice-cold and moor-scented. Behind me, I sense the dark mass of Agathion, but in front, there’s nothing. Nothing but open space and freedom.

Mud and heather.

Real scents, not the whirling memories of lost souls.

I breathe deeply.

Mud, thick and wet and dark. Rich with ancient stone, ground to dust by the relentless passage of time.

Heather, gentle and honey-sweet. It makes me think of sunny meadows and wildflowers, gently moving in warm breezes.

‘We’re here with you,’ Lacey whispers.

‘Don’t hesitate,’ I say again.

‘We won’t.’

‘We love you,’ Ren says, and I feel tears slip down my cheeks.

I’m ready.

I turn my face to the sky and spread my arms.

Then I breathe out, and let them all go.

Shattered nuts.

Clean laundry.

Violets.

Smoky incense.

Wet clay.

Olive oil.

Spiced wine.

Wintergreen.

Molten lead.

Orange peel.

Nail polish remover.

Rusted iron.

Woodsmoke.

Strawberry jam.

Sweat.

Blood.

I fall to my knees as all the souls pour out of me, and I feel it all. Their grief and anger and misery, mingled with the relief and euphoria of freedom.

How can anyone feel this much and not come apart at the seams? Dimly, I can hear my friends’ voices, calm and encouraging. But the urge to fly free with the rest of the sparks is strong. To drift up into the sky and become one with the universe. To be free of pain and uncertainty and fear.

I can’t hold on.

*good luck*, the demon says, and I think maybe it means it.

I’m not afraid anymore.

I let go and get caught up in the outpouring of souls.

But there’s one soul.

One.

Calling to me.

Rosemary and juniper.

I reach out to him, across a distance that is bigger than whole galaxies,  
yet somehow is contained within me.

The souls stream towards freedom.

Towards peace.

But he holds me.

And I hold him back.

We cling together, two sparks amid a flood of light, so bright it's like  
being inside a star.

Two candles, burning with hope.

And then it's over.

I'm on my hands and knees in the mud, sobbing, my fists full of heather.

But I'm not alone.

The demon is still there. It's oddly quiet, as if it has been hanging back  
and observing the multitude of human souls passing through. I expect to  
taste its rage, but instead all I can sense is sadness.

And one more soul.

Rosemary, for remembrance. Juniper, for protection.

I close my eyes again and breathe him in. 'Oak,' I whisper.

The little candle can't speak, but I feel it flare in response.

I'm still alive. My soul still in my body.

Along with Oak.

*interesting*, the demon observes. *I didn't expect that.*

'Thank you,' I whisper to Oak. 'Thank you for holding on.'

The candle glows, warm and bright.

The other souls are drifting away gently, rising up bright and golden like  
sparks from a bonfire. They seem to dissolve into the velvet night, and I feel  
their peace, sweet as spring rain and starlight.

It could have been me, my soul.

A part of me longs for that peace. The warmth of the sun.

But I have so much more I want to do.

Not all the souls are dissolving. Some of the brighter candles hover  
around the stones, as if uncertain of where to go.

*newly severed souls*, the demon observes. *they will go, eventually.*



I feel hands under me, lifting me from the grass and mud. Carrying me back over the threshold. I feel the looming menace of Agathion, its sullen shadows and ancient stones. Across the hall, lofty and silent as a tomb, the moth-eaten tapestries hang limp like burial shrouds.

Through another door and out into the forum. To the ring of ever-vigilant stones, where the bodies of students still lie, calm and serene and lifeless.

That's why their souls won't leave. Because their bodies haven't died yet. They're preserved within the ring of stones, the in-between place.

Is there a way to save them? I ask the demon. Can I get their souls back in their bodies?

*you are strong*, the demon responds. *but not that strong. the kindest thing to do would be to carry their bodies out and let them die. that way they will know peace.*

The kindest thing? I ask it. Since when did you wish kindness upon mortals?

*I do not*, the demon replies, suddenly brash. *all mortals deserve suffering and pain.*

That's more like it.

'Put her on the altar,' a voice says. 'Hurry.'

Cold stone beneath my back. Stars overhead – real ones this time, not souls.

I open my mouth to speak, but I'm dazed, and my body isn't working properly. I still feel the great wash of souls, the grief and release of them.

'Do it,' someone says. 'She said not to hesitate.'

I see the dull sheen of iron. The ancient blade.

They think I am gone, released into the skies along with all the others.

They think they are saving everyone in this moment.

They are going to kill me.

I feel Oak within me, pushing against my body. Trying to get it to move. To speak.

The blade hovers uncertainly.

I manage to twitch a finger. 'Stop,' I say, but it comes out more like a gurgle.

'Don't listen,' Lacey says. 'It's the demon.'

'Are you sure?' Ren says, standing above me, Snàthad White-Hilt raised. 'I – I don't know if I can ...'

'Give it to me, then.' I hear a brief scuffle.

‘Just wait,’ Cyrus says. ‘Wait a second.’

‘She *expressly* said not to wait.’

‘It’s me,’ I croak. ‘I have him. Oak.’

Cyrus puts himself in between me and Lacey, who is now holding the sword. ‘How?’ he asks.

I flex my fingers, movement coming back. I rise to my elbows. ‘Oak ...’ I shake my head, unsure of how to describe what happened. ‘He saved me.’

They don’t respond quite as enthusiastically as I’d expected. They’re staring at someone behind me. I sit up and try to stand but fail spectacularly, sprawling back onto the altar.

A loop of red thread has been slipped around my wrist and another around my ankles.

I turn my head to see Archon Leek, standing at the edge of the ring of stones on the other side of the altar. He’s still wearing his academic robes, with the embroidered capelet he wore on the night of the graduation feast. It’s thick with red thread that shimmers slightly, in the same way Snàthad White-Hilt does, and I know it’s imbued with magic. Probably to protect him.

He looks incredibly smug.

How did he manage to bind me with red thread from so far away?

‘Surprise,’ Cyrus says dryly.

Red slung casually between his fingers.

‘Clarence,’ the Archon says to Cyrus in greeting.

Cyrus shrugs. ‘Sorry, team,’ he says. ‘Guess I’m a bad guy after all.’

‘N-n-no ...’ Ren stammers. ‘Cyrus, no!’

‘He fooled us,’ Gideon says, his voice heavy with bitter realisation. ‘He’s not Cyrus at all. He’s Kovacevic.’

‘Clarence, actually,’ Cyrus says blandly.

I stare at him. My heart, so bruised and battered from all the little souls, feels like it’s breaking. I trusted him. I *believed* him.

Too easily.

I wanted to believe it was really Cyrus. We all did. And he played on that. Gave us what we wanted, so we wouldn’t ask too many questions.

‘B-b-but the charm,’ Ren stammers. ‘Oak’s straw doll that he gave Cyrus ...’

Cyrus – or not-Cyrus – snorts. ‘Junk,’ he says. ‘Your little friend was so confident it’d protect him.’

I glance at Lacey, expecting to see shock or horror on her face. But she looks oddly calm. I guess she is the daughter of a famous actor. She knows how to keep her feelings under wraps.

Ren, however, is totally incapable of hiding a feeling. 'You knew everything about us.'

'I did my research.'

I stare at him. 'You knew the *password* ...'

A slow, lazy smile spreads over Cyrus's face. 'Ah, yes,' he says. 'Your little club. You've been quite busy, haven't you?'

'We're not afraid of you,' Ren says, lifting her chin. 'We're the *Knights of Empedocles*.'

Cyrus chuckles, and the Archon's face twists in a cold smile. 'Silly girl,' Cyrus says. 'You aren't the Knights of Empedocles.'

A hollow feeling of dread spreads throughout me as Cyrus leans forward until he's almost nose-to-nose with Lacey.

'We are,' he whispers as he slides Snàthad White-Hilt from her hands.

## TWENTY-THREE

3 November

‘No,’ Ren says, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘It’s not possible. The Knights of Empedocles were the good guys. Rebels. Iconoclasts. They were working to take down people like you, and you destroyed them.’

‘You’re mostly right,’ Cyrus says lazily. ‘That’s exactly who the Knights of Empedocles are. But we did it. We won. We eliminated the cultists running Agathion and took over, two hundred and fifty years ago.’

Things rearrange in my mind as this information sinks in. The Knights of Empedocles weren’t killed by demon-worshipping cultists. They did exactly what they set out to do. Stole the cultists’ bodies and ran Agathion themselves. Turned it from a boarding-house for unwanted teens into an elite school for problem rich kids, giving them unfettered access to the bodies of the wealthy and powerful.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Ren insists.

Cyrus shrugs. ‘You have no idea how good you have it,’ he says, casually tossing the sword from one hand to another. ‘When we first came here, it wasn’t a school. It was a *prison*. We were worked to the bone. Beaten. Abused. The cultists who ran the place pretended to be good people, charitable people, but they were beyond cruel. They worshipped the demon. Fed it students to eat. *Regularly*.’

‘And now you do the exact same thing,’ Gideon says quietly.

Cyrus barks out a short laugh. 'We do what has to be done to keep control. Before we came along, a student was dying every full moon. Now we only lose one every few years.'

'That's one too many,' Ren says, her fists clenched. 'You're still murdering innocent people.'

'And stealing their bodies,' Gideon adds. 'Which you then get to play with out in the world before coming back to teach here.'

Cyrus spreads his hands with a grin. 'You can't blame us for having a little fun,' he says. 'After all, you all have so much *stuff*. None of you appreciate it. You're too busy feeling sorry for yourselves.'

*it's true you do spend a lot of time feeling sorry for yourself*, the demon observes dryly.

'You should be grateful,' Cyrus continues. 'For what we've done for you.'

'Grateful?' Ren almost shrieks. 'You *murdered our friend*. You lied to us *while wearing his face*.'

She leaps at him, trying to wrest Snàthad White-Hilt from his grasp. Lacey and Gideon move in as well, but Cyrus bobs and twists with unexpected speed and grace, ducking out of the way and lashing out with the sword. The flat of the blade smacks Ren across the face. A warning. It leaves a thick red mark, and Ren staggers, her hand going to her cheek. Lacey and Gideon fall back, their eyes on the sword.

'Grateful,' Cyrus insists, glancing over at me as I struggle against the red thread. 'You know it's true. You felt it when you came here. We made a *paradise* for people like you. All of you. Smart, curious young people. Do you think there are other schools that pack you a gourmet picnic and let you spend your afternoons making paper planes while discussing the finer points of metaphysical philosophy? Agathion is a nerd's wet dream. It was perfect, until you came along and ruined everything.'

'Except it wasn't a school for people like *me*,' I tell him. 'Because people like me have nothing to offer people like you. You don't want to steal my body and live in Lakeland, Florida, for forty years. You don't want to live ordinary lives. You want Cyrus's private plane. Lacey's luxury mansions. Oak's castle. You want *money*, so you only accept the students who have it.'

'Except for you,' Cyrus says quietly.

'Except for me,' I confirm. 'But I have something that money can't buy.' I lift my chin. 'I have your ticket out of here.'

Cyrus's face spreads in a cold smile. 'It's true,' he says. 'We're sick of this place. It's cold and damp, and the students are all ungrateful little shits. But we have to stay here, because this is where the demon lives. Or at least it was, until you helpfully moved it into your head for us. Now we can go wherever we like, as long as you're with us.'

'Not gonna happen,' I tell him. 'I'd rather die than let you have access to it again.'

Cyrus shrugs. 'That can be arranged.'

'Enough,' the Archon says, making his way towards the altar, the red thread in his capelet a shimmering haze. 'Give me the sword, Clarence.'

Cyrus passes Snàthad White-Hilt over my head to Archon Leek, who wraps his hand around the hilt.

Ren's breath hisses in as Cyrus moves again, so fast he's almost a blur. He grabs Gideon, twisting his arms backward and pulling him in close. I see the flash of silver. A small, sharp knife at Gideon's throat.

'No funny business,' Cyrus warns. 'Or he dies.'

Lacey and Ren both raise their hands in surrender.

The Archon points the sword at me. 'We can do this the easy way,' he says, 'or the painful way.'

'How about the *fuck you* way?' I suggest, straining against the red thread. 'There's nothing you can possibly say that will make me hand over the demon.'

'I know,' Archon Leek says. 'You're like us, Miss Whittaker. Experience has taught you control over your feelings. You, more than anyone, understand the vital importance of holding your mind apart from the base needs of the body. From the pitiful urgings of the heart. *Animus supra corpus*. Mind over body. Always. By divorcing our minds from our bodies, we are the true philosophers, stepping out of Plato's cave. We understand the true secrets of the universe.'

'Yeah, but you like those bodies, don't you?' Lacey says. 'Those fresh, young, rich bodies.'

The Archon sneers at her. 'The pleasures of the flesh are not forbidden to us,' he says. 'But we are never *controlled* by our bodies. We use them, and then they are discarded. They are ... disposable. Unimportant.'

I remember the way my soul almost tore loose from my body to join the flowing tide of sparks, rising up to be reabsorbed into the fabric of the

universe. I remember the feeling of my friends' hands on my body. The feeling of mud and grass between my fingers.

The Archon turns back to me. 'You know this to be true,' he says. 'You know that you are not your body. Not your feelings. That's why you came here. To live a life of the mind. I'm here to make all your wishes come true.'

'I'll never let you have the demon,' I tell him.

'I know.' The Archon nods. 'Which is why I must cut your soul from your mortal flesh.'

*now we're talking*, the demon says.

'The demon will remain in your body,' Archon Leek says. 'Our gift to it – a permanent vessel to enjoy the world. In return, it will remain with us and facilitate the transfer of our minds to new bodies as needed.'

He makes it sound so transactional.

*he is so confident*, the demon says smugly. *I will let him carry out his plan. then I will eat him.*

'This is what you wanted,' the Archon tells me. 'Soon after you arrived here, you told me that you wished you didn't have a body.'

I glance over at my friends. Ren has tears in her eyes. Gideon pulls away from Cyrus ever so slightly, and the knife bites deeper into the skin of his throat. A red drop of blood appears.

Lacey's gaze is on Cyrus. She's been silent for this whole exchange, but there's a glint in her eyes.

We need a plan.

We have a little time, don't we? The Archon hasn't even started the ritual.

But he doesn't draw occult symbols in chalk or pour rings of salt around the people to be protected.

He doesn't chant.

He just grips the sword hilt with both hands and swings it at me.

The sword doesn't shimmer. It doesn't cease to be a sword, yet simultaneously becomes *more* than a sword.

It slices right through the red thread and scrapes along the dark stone of the altar.

At first it feels like I've been punched in the gut – the blunt feeling of impact, but no actual pain. For a moment I wonder if he hit me with the flat of the sword and not the edge. Then a tingling starts in my side and spreads quickly all over my body, like pins and needles, or a mild electric shock.

My soul remains very firmly in place.

I feel a wetness running down my leg, and wonder absently if I've urinated out of fear.

I glance down and am surprised to see the sword still there, buried in my side, and blood soaking my filthy shirt.

My Agathion shirt. The white cotton smeared with mud and who knows what else.

Now it has a big hole in it, and there is quite a lot of blood.

The Archon is still holding the sword, a frown on his face as though he doesn't understand what's happened. But with a grunt of effort, he tugs the blade out of me.

It didn't hurt going in, but it sure does on the way out.

Like, a lot.

Ren rushes forward and grabs me as I slump onto the altar. A low moan escapes my lips as a throbbing heat spreads out from the wound. I put my hand over it and press to staunch the flow of blood.

That also hurts.

'You're okay,' Ren says in a low, urgent voice. 'You're going to be okay.'

The demon thrashes angrily. *I need this body*, it says. *don't let it die*.

I close my eyes and search for Oak's candle, burning deep within me. I inhale the scent of rosemary and juniper, and feel my racing heartbeat slow.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I know about pain. I can use it.

I take a slow, deep breath, then straighten up to look at the Archon.

'It's nothing compared to a bad period,' I comment, offhand.

The Archon is staring down at the distinctly unmagical sword in his hand. 'It's a fake,' he snarls, and tosses it aside.

Cyrus lets Gideon go and turns to Lacey, an outraged expression on his face. 'You *lied* to me?'

Lacey reaches out and brushes Cyrus's cheek with trembling fingers. 'I loved you so much,' she says, a little tremble in her voice. 'But you have to understand. I've been surrounded by actors and celebrities my whole life. I've watched directors tell my mother that her singing voice is so good, it doesn't need autotune. That she doesn't look a day over twenty-five. That *Variety* didn't publish a review of *The Chevalier's Daughter*. That she was guaranteed an Oscar. I can spot a liar from a mile off.'

'When did you figure it out?' He sounds amused. Almost impressed.



‘The second I saw you,’ she says. ‘The real Cyrus would never wear off-brand sneakers.’

‘And the fake sword? Where did you get it?’

‘The Agathion dining room,’ she says with a casual shrug. ‘Figured a spare might come in handy.’

‘I *knew* it looked too clean,’ Ren murmurs.

‘So clever,’ Cyrus says, then grabs Lacey by the hair, yanking viciously so they are nose-to-nose. ‘Now tell me where the real one is.’

‘How about you let me go and I show you?’

The Archon sighs impatiently. ‘Just kill her,’ he says. ‘We’ll find the sword.’

Cyrus leans forward and kisses Lacey, long and hard. ‘*Tell me.*’

Lacey wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘The real Cyrus was a better kisser.’

‘Ouch.’

He releases her roughly, and she takes a moment to straighten her skirt and smooth her hair. Then she walks over to the pink suitcase and unzips it, reaching in and withdrawing Snàthad White-Hilt, the pitted ancient blade glowing gently.

‘Now kill her,’ the Archon instructs. ‘Or I will.’

Cyrus glares at the Archon. ‘I’m taking care of it,’ he says, then turns back to Lacey. ‘You *will* give it to me.’

Lacey snorts. ‘The fuck I will.’

Cyrus glances around for Gideon, to regain his hostage, but Gideon has scurried away and is well out of reach.

‘I would have made you my queen,’ Cyrus says to Lacey, shaking his head.

‘Sounds unbelievably tedious,’ Lacey replies, and brandishes the ancient blade.

Cyrus snatches up the replica sword from the ground and leaps forward, bringing it down in a swift arc. Lacey has just enough time to bring the real Snàthad White-Hilt up to protect herself, and the sound of the ringing metal sings through the stone circle like a bell.

‘We have to do something,’ Ren whispers to me. ‘Can’t you pull their souls out?’

It’s hard to think through the web of scarlet pain, but I try to focus on the Archon and Cyrus. To see their candles. But they are locked deep inside

them, and I know that it's impossible. Not without Snàthad White-Hilt to sever the connection between body and soul.

'I – I can't,' I say, the words thick like molasses in my mouth. 'Their souls are too closely tied to their bodies. I can only take a soul if that connection is weakened.'

'If they're dying,' Ren says, understanding. 'What about Oak, then? Can you put him into one of these bodies?'

I glance down at Magistra Hewitt's vacant body, then turn within to examine the little spark of Oak. I shake my head. 'He's so weak,' I tell Gideon. 'He won't survive in a new body.'

The Archon has taken a few steps backward, away from the fighting, and has his head bent over his hands as he furiously weaves red thread into a complex pattern between his fingers.

'You have no idea what you're doing,' Cyrus says, circling Lacey, his sword light in his hand.

'Nope,' she agrees readily, and her eyes dart over to me and Ren. I have no idea what's going on, but Ren makes a small noise of realisation and stands.

'I have been a magister at Agathion College for two hundred years,' Cyrus reminds Lacey. 'I know a thing or two about swords.'

'I bet you do,' Lacey says almost cheerfully. 'This is probably going to be over very quickly. I guess I should give up, huh? Throw this sword away. Because I know nothing about swords or sword fighting.'

With a grunt and a heave, she hurls Snàthad White-Hilt high into the air. Cyrus's head tilts as his eyes follow it, and Lacey ducks and wheels away to where Gideon stands at the edge of the stone circle.

The blade descends, and Ren reaches out a hand. The sword hilt smacks into her palm, and she closes her fingers around it.

'But I do.'

Cyrus doesn't hesitate. He surges forward, the fake sword snaking out to slash at Ren, who parries him, almost casually. Cyrus attacks again, a hard, sweeping blow.

This time, Ren holds her ground, bracing herself against the jarring impact. The clashing ring of steel on steel is so close to my head that I see stars, and I gather what strength I have and slide off the altar, one eye on the Archon, who is still muttering over his red thread cat's cradle.

Ren steps neatly out of Cyrus's range to avoid another swipe, before darting forward, whipping her sword out.

Cyrus lunges out of the way, and I see a flash of fear in his eyes.

He didn't expect her to be this good.

Gideon and Lacey come scurrying over, grabbing me under my arms as my body slumps.

'What do we do?' Lacey asks, her eyes wild.

'I won't leave Ren,' Gideon replies firmly.

My mind is moving sluggishly, distracted by the not-insignificant amount of blood oozing between my fingers. I glance down, and my stomach heaves to see so much blood. But the cut is clean, and it's not actually that deep.

It still hurts, though.

Ren and Cyrus circle each other for a moment. Physically, they're well-matched. Ren is slightly taller than Cyrus, and her shoulders are as broad as his. I know he has more experience – he's probably been sword fighting for a hundred years, if not more. But when was the last time he sparred with someone?

'Come on, then,' Cyrus says, his bravado *almost* convincing. 'Show me what you can do.'

Ren raises her sword. 'If you insist,' she says, and attacks, sweeping her blade up in an arc that comes slicing down onto Cyrus, who isn't fast enough to stop her.

She twists at the last moment, so instead of slicing him open the flat of her blade smacks him hard on the shoulder, sending him staggering backward. 'Don't do this,' Ren says, shaking her head slightly but not taking her eyes off his sword. 'You'll lose.'

Cyrus snarls at her and lurches forward, swinging the sword in a savage sweep. Ren ducks easily and dances out of the way, before darting forward to attack once more.

She's magnificent, feinting and slashing as if Snàthad White-Hilt weighs nothing at all. Her movements are smooth and practised as she attacks over and over again – I can tell she's done this a thousand times. I know nothing about sword fighting, but it's clear to me that she is the more skilled with a sword. Cyrus is forced to defend himself – Ren doesn't give him the opportunity to strike back. She's wearing him out, his movements becoming sloppy, his breathing heavy from exertion.

Ren has barely broken a sweat, but the confidence I see in her body is missing from her expression. Emotionally, she seems all over the place as she fights someone who, until minutes ago, was one of her best friends.

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ she says as she strikes his blade.

‘Great.’ Cyrus’s hair is wet with sweat, dripping into his eyes. ‘Then give me the sword.’

‘I can’t do that.’

‘Then I guess you’ll have to kill me.’

Ren bites her lip, a frown creasing her brow. Beside me, Gideon is holding his breath. Cyrus takes advantage of her momentary hesitation, slashing his blade around in an arc. Ren blocks him hurriedly, then disengages. She’s rattled, but she fights on, surging forward with another attack.

But the mood of the fight has shifted. Ren’s movements look a little less smooth, and sweat beads on her brow.

‘You know,’ says Cyrus almost conversationally, although his face is beet-red, ‘you’re really rather good at this. I’d love to get you into bed sometime. You can find out what it’s like to be with a real man.’

Ren lets out a raw, throaty growl and comes at Cyrus like a whirlwind, chopping and slashing.

Cyrus’s feet go out from under him, and he ends up on his back, the tip of Ren’s sword pointed at his throat.

She’s breathing heavily, her stance wide and shoulders squared. The sword trembles in her grasp.

‘Go on, then,’ Cyrus says, smirking up at her. ‘Kill me. Like you killed your little boyfriend.’

Ren winces visibly, and her eyes dart to Gideon.

Cyrus takes the opening and thrusts his blade in and up, snaking it around Ren’s sword. With a sharp twist, the true Snàthad White-Hilt goes flying from Ren’s grasp and clatters to the ground. Ren, wild-eyed and furious, reaches down to wrap her hand around Cyrus’s grip on the hilt of the fake sword. For a moment they struggle to gain control of the blade before it goes flying from both of them, clattering against the first sword in the dirt.

Cyrus hooks his leg around Ren’s ankle, knocking her to the ground as he scrambles to his feet, kicking Ren sharply in the ribs.

She grunts, curling in on herself.

Gideon lets out a yell of rage and hurls himself at Cyrus, catching him by surprise and knocking him off his feet. Cyrus's head cracks against the stone corner of the altar, and he slumps to the ground, unconscious.

'Did I kill him?' Gideon asks, horrified.

'Enough.' The red thread between the Archon's fingers is shimmering in the half-light. With a smooth, practised gesture, he casts it out, and it lashes through the air like a whip, knocking Lacey and Gideon to the ground. It tangles around my ankles, and I struggle to free myself, the gossamer-thin thread slipping between my fingers.

With everyone else temporarily disabled, the Archon walks calmly forward and picks up one of the swords. I can't tell if it's the real one or the replica, but he advances on me grimly, only to stop short when a roll of thunder sounds, shaking the ground beneath us.

No.

Not thunder.

It's the sound of hooves.

# TWENTY-FOUR

3 November

An enormous pig comes hurtling into the stone circle from the main building, all tusks and bristles and thick, knotted muscles.

Old Toby.

Lacey lets out a tiny scream and redoubles her efforts to free herself from the red thread.

The great boar's tiny black eyes are fixed on the Archon. It takes a step forward, its head lowered, as if ready to charge.

'Old friend,' the Archon warns the pig. 'Stay out of this.'

*Old friend?*

I stare at the great bristling mass of flesh, mud-spattered and scarred. What did Mr MacCrimmon say? That Old Toby had been here for at least forty years? Much longer than a pig should live.

Old Toby. I turn the name over in my mind once more. *Old Toby.*

'Is that ... Otobore?' I say out loud. 'Otobore Aiello?'

The sixth member of the original Knights of Empedocles.

The beast lets out a screaming, grunting cry, like metal scraping on stone.

The Archon glances at me and shrugs, a careless gesture.

'He didn't like our plan,' he says. 'Didn't want to get a new body. Didn't want to trade souls with a demon. Thought it was ... *unethical.*'

'So you turned him into a pig?'

*actually I turned him into a pig, the demon comments. but it was their idea.*

Why didn't you tell me? I ask it.

*you didn't ask.*

How has he stayed alive this long?

*he is very stubborn.*

The demon says this as if it explains everything.

I shake my head. 'Why not just kill him?' I say out loud.

The Archon pretends to look offended. 'Otobore's a Knight of Empedocles. He's our friend.'

Old Toby lets out another furious squeal, his flesh shuddering with rage.

'No?' the Archon says. 'After all we've done for you, Otobore?'

He raises the sword, eyes on Otobore, and I manage to slip the last loop of red thread from my ankles.

Old Toby is maybe three times the Archon's weight. His tusks are at least twelve inches long. He's terrifying.

'Well, old friend,' the Archon says. 'What will it be? Would you like to be the Calydonian boar, slain by Atalanta? The Crommyonian sow, slain by Theseus? Or will you choose life? You could be the Erymanthian boar. Heracles captured him alive. It doesn't have to end here, Otobore.'

The beast holds its ground. A low noise emerges from its throat, almost like a growl.

The Archon sighs. 'Very well. I am sorry.'

His sword flashes, and the pig lets out an almighty squeal, blood spurting from his throat and steaming in the night air. He staggers forward a few steps, then collapses, twitching.

Gideon yells to me from across the stone circle. 'Page, his soul!'

I have to move fast. I stumble from the altar to where Old Toby is lying, blood still gushing, hot and metallic from his slit throat. His soul is fading fast. I snatch it from his body, and with it in my hands I feel how old he is. How tired. Two hundred and fifty years trapped in the body of a pig has turned him strange and bestial.

I'm about to take his soul inside me – what's one more? – but Oak has other ideas. I feel him battering at me, trying to get my attention. With a great deal of effort, he manages to turn my head to the altar, where my eyes fall on the body of Magistra Hewitt.

Her body is unharmed. No injuries. And her soul has gone forever – I released it along with the others.

Are you sure? I ask Oak silently.

His candle flares in response.

I don't have time to think through the consequences.

I slip Old Toby's soul inside her body.

Magistra Hewitt's lips part, and her eyes flicker. The Archon glances at me and at the magistra.

Ren, Gideon and Lacey have escaped the Archon's red thread and are crouched together on the other side of the altar, away from the confrontation. A bruise is blooming under Ren's left eye, and Gideon looks a little dazed, but otherwise everyone seems okay. Ren suddenly strains forward, as if to attack the Archon, but the others hold her back, whispering urgently.

Otobore in Magistra Hewitt's body is struggling to sit up. He rolls over and ends up on all fours, working his jaw, clumsy in a human body again after so long. He lets out a noise that is clearly an attempt at speech, but it comes out as a mangled, weary groan.

'Old friend,' the Archon says, the sword still gripped in his fist. 'Rejoin me. Together we can rule the world.'

With a great deal of effort, Hewitt-Otobore manages to stand, but he is clearly unsteady on two feet. He takes a step forward and stumbles, almost falling but somehow managing to collect the fallen sword in one hand and holding it out in front of him. There is no skill in this motion, no control. Yet his trajectory continues towards the Archon, who starts to bring up the other sword hastily.

But Hewitt-Otobore has his weight behind him. He's not trying to fight the Archon. He doesn't attempt to defend himself. He keeps moving forward.

In the end, the Archon isn't fast enough.

It happens so quickly.

The blade sinks into the Archon's chest, and Hewitt-Otobore releases his grip on it and sprawls in the dirt, panting.

I see a flash of genuine emotion on the Archon's face – shock and betrayal. He drops to his knees with a grunt of pain, staring down at the sword, as blood starts to soak through his robes.

Hewitt-Otobore is shaking with sobs.



‘Fine,’ spits the Archon, tugging the sword free and letting it fall to the ground. ‘If that’s the way you want it.’

He reaches out a hand to grab the other sword.

The true sword. Snàthad White-Hilt.

‘Drop it,’ I tell him. ‘It’s over.’

He coughs, and blood sprays from his lips. ‘It *is* over,’ he agrees, his face grey and damp with sweat. ‘For us all.’

He staggers to his feet and advances on me.

‘The demon won’t do it,’ I tell him. ‘You can take out my soul, but it will never serve you. It’s a *demon*. You can’t bribe it. You’re going to die.’

His body slams into mine, and I smell sour sweat and the metallic heat of blood as my legs go out from under me, my head hitting the ground so hard that I see stars.

‘You ruined *everything*,’ the Archon hisses, grabbing me by the collar. ‘Now I ruin it *more*.’

He starts to drag me towards the looming stones, his breath ragged. I hear the others shouting my name, but I can’t concentrate through the pain and the ringing in my ears. Dimly, I’m aware that we’re passing Anail, the breath stone. Then we’re inside Agathion, the parquet floor cool and smooth under my back.

There is so much blood. I don’t know what is mine, what is the Archon’s, and what is Old Toby’s.

A wave of dizziness engulfs me as we pass the great staircase.

The Archon grunts and I don’t understand how he is even still conscious, let alone able to drag my weight. We pass through the great doorway where I first entered Agathion, and with one final heave from the Archon, I tumble down the steps to lie on the gravel driveway outside.

Oak’s candle flares inside me, and I finally realise what the Archon is planning.

I’m outside.

Outside of Agathion.

Outside the protection of the ring of stones.

The scent of earth and heather fills my senses.

‘Don’t do this,’ I beg as I struggle to my feet. ‘You know the consequences.’

The Archon grins at me, all blood-flecked spittle and stained yellow teeth. ‘Yes,’ he hisses. ‘I do.’

And then he swings the blade, which shimmers in the air, becoming both a sword and not-a-sword when it touches the red thread that still drapes around my neck.

It doesn't bite into my flesh, the way the replica did. Instead it passes smoothly through me like a nightmare shiver, and I feel the cut like a tiny electric jolt.

I expect losing the demon to feel good – after all, it's not as though I *want* to be a vessel for a demon. But as it leaves I feel a sudden wrench of emotion. Of grief and sorrow. I'm not sure if it's my feeling or the demon's.

Its soul doesn't look like a candle or a spark flying upward. It looks like a star, intense as the sun but the colour of old blood. It doesn't move with the floating grace of a human soul. It is ripped from my body like a week-old Band-Aid and hovers before me, pulsing darkly, then rises into the sky.

Wind whips my hair around my face as I stare at it, and the Archon begins to laugh, a wet, gurgling laugh as bloody foam spills from his lips.

The demon's soul doesn't get absorbed into the fabric of the universe.

I feel the universe *bend* to try to accommodate it, but it is too much.

Thunder rolls and lightning illuminates the clouds overhead, which have turned a sickly pinkish-grey, staining the night-washed moor.

A raindrop spatters onto my head. It feels unnervingly warm and smells like overripe fruit, or flowers that have been left in a vase for too long.

A noise sounds, the voice of the earth itself, deep and violent, the ground reverberating under my feet. It disrupts the air around me and makes my every molecule vibrate. It sounds a bit like tearing paper, but also like a primal, inhuman scream.

And a rip appears around the demon's soul, which still floats above the gravel drive of Agathion.

It's small at first.

The rip is not exactly in the sky or in the bleak expanse of the moor. It's in reality itself, the very fabric of the universe sundered. When I look too hard at it, my mind rebels, as if there's too much information to process. My vision swims, and my stomach heaves with nausea.

It's *wrong*.

Beyond the tear, I glimpse the formless void. The place between worlds that I travelled through to get from one ring of stones to the other. But the void is not empty. There are writhing shapes there, amid a billowing sickly vapour.

The others appear behind me in the doorway to the entrance hall.

‘What’s happening?’ Lacey cries, her hands clapped over her ears. Bafflingly, she has dragged the pink suitcase with her.

‘He let the demon’s soul out,’ I reply over the howling of the wind.

Snàthad White-Hilt slides from the Archon’s grasp as he gazes, transfixed, at an ... entity trying to climb through the rift. It’s as large as a house, covered in folded layers of waxy pale skin, with a head that is either one large mouth or several hundred smaller ones, or perhaps not mouths at all. They vomit forth a constant stream of tar-like ichor that stinks of violets and rotting flesh.

The Archon’s expression is simultaneously enraptured and horrified, like an ensnared fly staring in wonder at the spider about to devour it. He falls to his knees, the bloody foam on his lips mingling with the strange rain.

A tentacle-like appendage emerges from the rift – monstrously huge and rubbery, glistening like sea-drenched kelp. It whips out and wraps itself around the Archon, squeezing tight. The Archon’s eyes meet mine, and I see no fear in them, only madness. His mouth gapes in a gruesome smile, and I hear the sound of crunching bone. Then the tentacle withdraws, dragging the Archon into the void beyond the rift.

‘How do we close it?’ Ren asks, the replica sword in her hand.

Otobore in Magistra Hewitt’s body appears from the entrance hall. His movements are still ungainly, but he has a little more control now. He stares grimly at the tear in the universe, then bends to retrieve Snàthad White-Hilt.

There’s no way that tentacled creature is going to be satisfied with just the Archon. It will be back. And it will bring friends.

I don’t know what to do.

‘Take your shirt off!’ Lacey yells at me.

I blink at her, uncomprehending. She gestures towards the wound in my side. I’d forgotten it was there, but now she’s reminded me, I feel suddenly weak at the knees. Lacey unzips the giant suitcase and pulls out a crisp white T-shirt, a pink sweater and a silk scarf that looks like it cost thousands of dollars. With quick, businesslike motions, she rips my shirt away from the wound, tossing it aside.

I’m now standing in my bra in front of my friends and a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old boy who thinks like a pig but is in the body of one of my teachers. In a raging, otherworldly storm caused by a hole in the universe.

‘I’m having a weird day,’ I tell Lacey as she presses the folded T-shirt against the wound, staunching the flow of blood.

‘Tell me about it.’ She wraps the silk scarf tightly around my waist, and I grunt in pain.

Gideon calls out something, but the snarling cries of the wind snatch his words away.

‘Um,’ I say to Lacey as she works, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘About what?’

‘It’s my fault. That everyone trusted Cyrus-Kovacevic, Clarence. I was the first one he came to. I should have been more suspicious. Asked more questions. If I’d been more careful, then maybe ...’

Lacey makes a dismissive noise. ‘He did us a favour. He got the gang back together. Gave us something to hope for.’

She helps me pull the pink sweater on. It’s very soft and has the word PRINCESS bejewelled across the front in rhinestones, and within seconds it is filthy with blood and soaking wet from the storm. I feel ridiculous, but I guess now isn’t the time to point that out.

‘I ... I’m sorry if ...’ I’m not good at feelings at the best of times, and this is a long way from being the best of times. ‘I know how much you cared about Cyrus, and I’m sorry.’

‘I always knew it wasn’t him,’ she says quietly, barely audible above the storm. ‘And to be honest, it was pretty satisfying seeing the expression on that asshole’s face when he realised the sword was fake.’

Shadows are gathering on the other side of the rift. It’s only a matter of time before they break through.

‘We have to close the hole,’ Gideon says, leaning close to us so we can hear him over the furious wind. Rain is streaming down his dirt-smeared face, and his eyes keep returning to Ren, who is standing side by side with Hewitt-Otobore before the rift, waiting for whatever comes next with the fake sword in her hand.

‘How?’ Lacey asks.

‘I don’t know.’ Gideon spreads his hands. ‘It needs really big magic.’

I remember Oak telling me about magic.

*Humans aren’t innately very magical. We can’t make anything happen on our own.*

‘We need a demon,’ I say.

Gideon waves an arm at the vortex. ‘I think our demon ship has sailed.’

‘A new demon. A bigger one.’

‘Can you find one?’ Ren yells over her shoulder as a monstrous appendage snakes through the rift, and she slashes at it with her sword. ‘You did it before. At your old school.’

‘I can try,’ I say.

I cast my consciousness out, searching for power, but the horrors that are attempting to break through the rift suck all my attention and fill my mouth with foul-tasting bile. So I turn my mind downward, to the calm quiet of the grotto under the ring of stones, then deeper into the cool, silent earth.

That presence.

It’s been there the whole time. A vast, cold blueness, deep beneath Agathion.

‘There’s something down there,’ I say. ‘But ... I don’t think it’s a demon.’

It’s too big to be a demon.

‘What is it?’ Gideon asks.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers,’ Lacey yells. ‘Get it up here.’

‘I – I can’t,’ I say. ‘It’s nothing like a demon. It would tear me apart. I think maybe it’s ...’ I shake my head. ‘I wish I could talk to Oak.’

‘Well, bloody *talk to him*, then!’ Lacey screams.

Ren slices a tentacle in half, ducking to avoid the spatter of glittering dark ooze.

‘Do it,’ Gideon urges.

I close my eyes again and turn my attention inward. I let the screeching, grinding sounds of monsters and the howling of the storm fade. I focus on my breath.

I can smell rosemary.

He’s there, deep within my consciousness. His presence makes me want to weep with relief. But his candle is faint, weakened from existing without a vessel in the in-between place of the ring.

‘Talk to me,’ I say. ‘Oak. I need you.’

He doesn’t speak to me in words, the way the demon did. I’m not sure he can. But I feel a kind of gentle attention. Can smell his crushed-greenery scent.

Oak is *inside* of me. I can *feel* him, and he can feel me.

He exists in the inhale and exhale of my breath, the beating of my heart.

I put a hand to my cheek, and he feels my caress, and I feel him in it.  
It's unbelievably intimate.

I want to stay in here, in this cosy internal world where he and I are entwined, away from monsters and death and betrayal.

But our friends need us.

'Oak, how do we close the rift?'

A glimpse of something, a memory. Me in my bed upstairs, scratchy wool blankets pulled up to my chin, my head on a smooth, cool pillow. The taste of clean grassy meadows and summer sun on my tongue.

*No living body could contain the soul of a god.*

And through the fetid stench that is emanating from the rift, I can smell the fresh, clean scent of snow.

Another image emerges. A dream of my mother sitting at the kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee.

*Maybe they're drawn to you because they know you can help them.*

I open my eyes and look down at my fist, which is clutching a sprig of heather.

Hewitt-Otobore and Ren are standing a few feet away on Agathion's gravel driveway, beating back monstrous appendages as more creatures attempt to squeeze through the hole in space and time. Magistra Hewitt's hair has come loose, flying in grey whips around her face. Otobore, in her body, looks wild and magnificent.

Lacey and Gideon are crouched by my side. In Gideon's wide eyes, I see the reflection of a bulbous thorax, from which a mass of twisted limbs sprout, each covered in pale, translucent skin that reveals pulsing dark veins and muscles.

'This one's mine!' Ren roars.

The creature lets out a howl that seems to shake the entire earth.

I can still see the demon's soul in the rift, a glittering bloody star, surrounded by an unravelling universe.

And I understand.

'It wasn't a demon,' I tell Gideon. 'Trapped in the ring of stones. In my head. It was her. It was Cailleach.'

He stares at me. 'The goddess?'

I nod.

'Impossible,' Gideon says. 'No offence, Page, but even you aren't powerful enough to contain the soul of a goddess.'

‘It wasn’t all of her,’ I explain. ‘Just a tiny piece. An aspect of her that broke away from the rest.’

‘So where is the rest?’ Lacey asks.

I point past the entrance hall, back to the ring of stones, then down at the ground. ‘Down there. I think maybe she can close the rift.’

‘But how? We can’t let her soul out too. If a little wisp of her did this’ – she gestures at a creature approaching from the other side of the void, made entirely of row upon row of needlelike teeth – ‘then surely the whole thing would rip the universe apart.’

‘It would,’ I agree. ‘We need a vessel for her.’

Gideon shakes his head, and, for the first time ever, I see him nearly lose his patience. ‘How?’ he asks. ‘No living thing, remember?’

‘Gideon,’ I say. ‘Tell me about the golem that you and Oak made.’

‘Um,’ he says, ‘we made it from local mud, peat from the moor. Twigs and leaves. Oak said it would be more powerful if everything we used came from the local land. And anything that’s naturally imbued with magic.’

‘But it wasn’t alive, was it? *No living thing.*’

Gideon frowns. ‘You want to make a golem for a goddess? It’d have to be big. *Really* big.’

I can smell crushed rosemary in the air.

I dig in my pocket and pull out a bent rectangle of paper. A hand-drawn tarot card, scribbled in black ink.

A bolt of lightning striking a tall stone structure, blowing its golden crown right off.

Flames and smoke billowing from the windows.

People falling or jumping to their deaths on sharp rocks below.

‘Big ... like this?’ I say, showing him.

Gideon looks at the card, then turns to gaze at the shadowy walls of Agathion, looming above us, vast and sombre and sullen. The unnatural storm beats against lichen-powdered walls and spiked gables, but the building barely seems to notice. It is used to wild weather.

‘Maybe?’ he says doubtfully.

‘Oh *hell* yes,’ says Lacey, and her eyes are alight with a fire that I find more terrifying than any of the horrors emerging from the rift.

# TWENTY-FIVE

3 November

Ren taps Hewitt-Otobore on the shoulder. ‘Fall back!’ she yells, pointing into the building.

Hewitt-Otobore glances up at the latest interdimensional horrors – several huge, gnawing, crawling things, and a swarm of smaller creatures that are like what might happen if a bee mated with a feral scream. He gives one last thrust of his sword, then joins us as we head inside.

For a moment, we are sheltered from the storm, our footsteps ringing loudly on the wooden floors of the Agathion entrance hall. Everything seems dark, cold and silent, the air heavy with the weight of history. When I first came here, it felt so romantic. Such crumbling beauty. But now all I feel is sad. I’m vividly aware of the lives that were snuffed out in this place, firstly by the Agathion cultists, and then by the original Knights of Empedocles, driven to terrible things by their own greed and arrogance. Well, no more. Today, Agathion is going to end, one way or another.

Creatures are trying to follow us into the building from the rift; I spot a thing with bulging, lidless eyes that weep a viscous, iridescent ooze. Its membranous wings beat soundlessly as Ren swings her sword and hits a red-plated creature with several sets of articulated limbs. The carapace of the thing bursts open, and glittering pale goo spatters over the wood-panelled walls of the Agathion entrance hall. Together, Hewitt-Otobore and Ren heave the massive wooden door closed, dropping the heavy iron latch



in place, then begin dragging side tables and glass cabinets to barricade the door. They are both clearly exhausted, dripping with slime and sweat and blood. Ren has a weeping gash across her brow, and she wipes a filthy sleeve across her forehead, wincing.

‘It’s time,’ I tell her. ‘You need Snàthad White-Hilt.’

Ren swaps swords with Hewitt-Otobore, who stations himself by the barricade. I have a sudden flash of memory. The same body, but with Magistra Hewitt’s soul inside, ushering me across this threshold, only to be interrupted by Old Toby. Now they stand combined.

Full circle.

We pass through the entrance hall and return to the central courtyard, into the ring of stones. Immediately, everything goes quiet. The storm ceases its raging howl, but the strange rain continues to patter gently around us, and onto the bodies of the students who lie, peaceful and still, in a ring around the altar. The shifting light of the storm outside the ring emphasises their stillness. Old Toby’s mountainous corpse is there, too, and Zhang’s.

There has been so much death today.

Cyrus-Kovacevic is still alive, though. Struggling to his feet, a cut on his brow weeping thick blood. He’s dazed, ignoring us all, and heads to the door to the main entrance hall.

‘Wait!’ Ren yells as he staggers past a looming stone.

I hear a sharp scream, which cuts off suddenly with a snapping, crunching noise as the monsters claim him. Lacey makes a small, satisfied sound.

Overhead, the pinkish-grey storm clouds boil and glow, bathing everything in a kind of sickly pale light, the elegant spires of Agathion appearing warped and sinister.

Lacey shakes her head. ‘It is a *vibe* out there.’

Ren slumps against one of the huge stones. ‘Stick a fork in me,’ she pants. ‘I’m done.’

Everyone turns to me, expectant.

I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing.

I close my eyes and find Oak. ‘Help me,’ I whisper.

He shows me a glimpse of blue skies and a serene glade, soft grass underfoot and towering ancient trees overhead, and my lips curve in his gentle smile.

‘Show me what to do.’

And he does. Snatches of memory, scents, whispers of a long-forgotten song.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I think I get it.’

I open my eyes and turn to Ren, who is still holding Snàthad White-Hilt. Here in the ring of stones, it shimmers with a glow that makes it look almost alive.

‘I need you to break open the altar,’ I tell Ren. ‘With the sword.’

To her credit, Ren doesn’t tell me it’s impossible to break open a bed-sized slab of volcanic rock with a relatively narrow metal blade. She just nods, wipes sweat and blood from her brow, then strides across the ring of stones to the altar, the sword high above her head.

She hesitates for a moment before plunging it downward into the black basalt, her shoulders braced for an impact that doesn’t come.

The sword slides into the stone as smooth as butter, right up to the hilt.

A great, booming crack sounds, and the earth vibrates beneath my feet. Ren snatches the sword back as the altar splits open, and we all stagger, struggling to remain upright. Lacey clutches the pink suitcase to stop it from rolling away. The space between the two halves of the altar widens, and a cloud of dry earth rises, rich with the scent of ancient stone. As the dust clears, I can see into the cellars of Agathion and, below them, the dark gaping hole of the grotto.

Lacey digs in the suitcase and produces a flashlight.

‘Come on,’ I say, and we start to climb down, slipping and sliding on the newly uncovered earth that is rapidly becoming mud under the strange warm rain.

There’s no grate anymore. No dark passage. The grotto is directly underneath us, just as I knew it would be, the rubble and collapsed earth creating a makeshift path down.

We follow it, helping each other where needed, but it’s almost as if the earth has settled in such a way as to help us descend, and it doesn’t take long to reach the entrance to the grotto, where the real stairs begin.

Dirty pink light filters in from the hole overhead, painting the grotto a sickly dark colour, like dried blood.

We don’t speak. Just keep heading down, down, down.

Into the very heart of Agathion.

Oak’s body lies on the altar at the bottom of the stairs, limp and lifeless, placed there by Lacey and Gideon.

The sight of him makes me want to weep. His skin is still waxy-pale, his fingers black with frostbite, his lips blue and blistered.

Oak's candle inside me flares, as if to remind me that he is still here, that it isn't over yet.

We clamber down the rubble into the burial chamber, and I lean forward to gently touch Oak's cheek.

'Can you put his soul back in?' Lacey asks in a small voice.

I shake my head. 'He's not strong enough. But ... can you and Gideon take him back up to the surface? I think he'd like to be outside when he finally ...'

I can't finish that sentence.

Lacey nods and passes me the flashlight, and slides her hands under Oak's shoulders. Gideon takes his feet, and they start to make their way back up the spiral staircase.

I turn to Ren.

'Again,' I tell her.

Once more, she raises the sword.

Once more, she buries it in the stone altar.

Once more, the altar splits in two.

Stone cracks and booms, spitting pebbles and dust into the air. The scent that emerges this time is different – a cold, damp smell with a faint touch of incense to it, which makes me think of long-abandoned temples and grave dirt.

When the dust clears, I see a dark hole where the altar used to be and a staircase made of rough stone, leading deeper into the darkness.

A shiver runs through me. What am I going to find down there?

'What now?' Ren asks. 'Do we both go?'

I want to say yes. But I shake my head. 'Go back and help Otobore,' I tell her.

Ren frowns. 'Are you sure? I don't like the thought of you going down there alone.'

'I have Oak with me,' I remind her.

I tap my forehead, and Ren smiles. 'Tell him hi for me.'

I turn and head down the stairs. The air grows close, cold and damp. I'm profoundly aware that no living creature has been down here for thousands of years.

The stairs wind down, and down, and down.

The flashlight reveals walls hewn from the earth, damp and glistening with moisture. The steps grow slippery, and I concentrate on setting one foot in front of the other. Falling and breaking my neck wouldn't be a great ending to my story.

I spent so much of my life longing for something indefinable. Was this what I wanted, all along? To be the one to venture deep beneath Rannoch Moor to free a goddess from her prison, in an effort to save the universe from being torn apart?

Now that I'm actually here, all I want is to scamper back up the stairs and be with my friends.

Maybe I'm not the right person to be doing this.

But who else is there?

Oak's spark flares inside me, and I can smell sage and rosemary. I breathe deeply, the scent calming my racing heart.

'Thank you,' I whisper as we continue into the depths.

The air grows colder, my breath coming in white clouds. My fingers are turning numb, and I shove them in my pockets. The wound in my side is still hot, though, throbbing and pulsing with my elevated heart rate.

Eventually, the staircase ends, and I emerge into a cavern of ice, lit by subtle blue phosphorescence.

The cave is beyond any human understanding of physical space. Huge shards of ice rise from the floor like crystallised trees, glittering cold and beautiful. Stalactites descend from a vaulted ceiling, wound about the top with ancient tree roots, the last remains of a forest that once covered the land above.

Water drips all around, the sound of it forming shimmering echoes that dance about me.

Oak's candle inside me trembles, and tears slip from my cheeks at the enormity of it all.

This is where Cailleach was laid to rest – a boundless, primal space outside of the mortal world. A fitting place for a goddess.

There's no obvious path between the shards of ice, but in the distance I glimpse a fleck of green, so I head towards it, gazing all around in wonder at the luminous blue and white columns and pillars and shards.

I can feel Oak's own awe and reverence as we make our way through the cave.

'Did you know this was here?' I murmur to him. 'Was it in the stories?'

The crushed ice and snow underfoot turns soft and spongy, and I see a vibrant green carpet of moss. Oak's spark shimmers, and acting on his impulse, I reach down to touch it.

It smells green and earthy and *alive*, and I know we're close.

A wall of ice rises before us, curving around to form a ring. Much like the ring of stones, high above us. Dimly, through the ice, I can make out green, and in the centre of the green, black.

She's in there.

'How do I get in?' I murmur, reaching out to lay a hand on the ice wall.

A sudden wave of pain hits me. But it isn't physical pain. It all comes from within. My own doubts and fear and self-loathing, rising in me like a bitter, unstoppable tide.

*You don't belong here.*

*You're nothing.*

*Everyone you care about suffers.*

*You are poison.*

I try to fight it, to picture my friends waiting for me up on the surface. I close my eyes and see Lacey, radiating haughty disdain.

*She doesn't belong here.*

Cassidy, screaming at the very sight of me.

What about Ren? Loyal Ren. She likes me. She came to me in the Desmoterion.

She didn't let me out, though.

Cyrus did, and he was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Would any of them really fight for me?

I'm worthless.

Unlovable.

I sink to my knees, curling into a ball. The crushed snow and ice turns me numb, leaching all my feelings away.

I welcome it.

Better to feel nothing at all.

Oak's spark flares inside me again, urgent and demanding.

Oak.

His lopsided smile and messy hair. A sprig of greenery always pinned to his lapel.

His silver acorn earring.

His sparkly black nails.

His bare shins beneath the Agathion school kilt.

Oak.

Showing me around Agathion on my first day.

*Because he felt sorry for you*, a poisonous voice reminds me.

Oak, glaring suspiciously at me after I pulled the Tower from his tarot deck.

Oak, refusing to tell me the truth. Lying to my face, again and again.

Oak, in Magistra Hewitt's body, muttering *Oh my god* when I confessed my crush.

I feel bruised and humiliated, lowly and wretched.

Incapable of love.

Unworthy of love.

Let it all freeze solid so I don't have to think about it anymore.

My fingertips are turning white and waxy, and I think of Oak, his body lying vacant and helpless.

But no – he's not gone, not entirely. I saved him. His soul. And the souls of all the others.

I helped them find peace. The spark inside me glows warm for a moment, as if Oak is pouring every ounce of his energy into getting my attention.

Sunbaked stones. The fresh tumble of a rushing brook. Meadow flowers.

'Okay, okay,' I say. 'I get it.'

And I do. The spell dissolves around me, and I can think clearly again.

The doubts are still there, but the clamouring intensity has gone. I'm no longer disgusted by myself, by my body and mind and feelings. I feel wrung out and bruised, the wound in my side still throbbing. But I'm okay.

Climbing to my feet, I notice a gap in the wall.

Was it there before? Or did it open when I broke the warding spell?

I glimpse greenery through the gap, and can hear ...

Not the formless whispers of the stone circle.

But a kind of reverberation, like the shimmering memory of a bell that was rung several thousand years ago. It echoes through the enormous cavern, making the ice columns and stalactites vibrate in response, a sound so pure and perfect that tears slip down my cheeks.

I step through the gap and find myself in a small clearing. In the centre of it all is a shallow pond, no more than a foot deep. Around it grow little feathery ferns and purple heather, which fills the icy air with its distinctive floral-honey scent.

I'm surprised to discover the smell of it doesn't fill me with dread anymore. It's become familiar, like a part of myself I didn't know was missing.

I reach out a hand to brush it with my fingers, and I feel Oak's pleasure. The jangling aftereffects of the warding spell lessen, and the last of the bitterness drains from me as my heart starts to sing along with the shimmering bell-echoes.

In the centre of the pond is a cauldron. It's an ugly thing, squat and sooty black, its clawed feet splaying awkward and heavy in the water. In the sparkling natural glory of the cave, it stands out like a sore thumb, clumsy iron wrought by men.

'Right,' I murmur to Oak. 'I guess this is it.'

I step into the pond, my feet and ankles submerged in icy water that sucks the breath from me.

There's a chip missing from the edge of the cauldron, and I realise the druids who first trapped Cailleach here broke off a piece and reforged it into the Anam Cuach. A little piece of the cauldron.

Did a piece of Cailleach break off with it and travel up to the surface too?

A little piece of a goddess, imprisoned in the ring of stones and forced to submit to the will of selfish humans for centuries. Until the Knights of Empedocles came along. They offered freedom, though temporary, and for a price. The little sliver of Cailleach could escape the stones in a human body, but only for a single day. Then back to her prison. Her anger and sadness grew, and she forgot who she really was. What she had once been. She became so twisted and lonely that she seemed like a demon.

I step up to the cauldron. It's nearly as tall as I am – a huge, dark lurking beast of a thing. I rise on tiptoes to peer inside.

Cailleach's soul is no stubby candle. It's a blue spark, a moment of creation – of ignition – captured and preserved, like the centre of infinity itself. A pocket-sized galaxy, a small thing of vast greatness, breathtaking in its elemental simplicity.

My awe and wonder mingle with Oak's as together we gaze, transfixed, at the tiny glittering nebula that is simultaneously something, and nothing, and everything. I am suddenly, intensely aware of my own mortality. Of the fragility of my skin, binding my body together. Of how easily each of my bones could be crushed. Of how soft and wet and temporary I am.

But also how miraculous. How extraordinary it is that a lump of meat and bone can work like a machine. Can breathe and think and feel. And want.

And bleed. The wound in my side throbs, spreading sickly heat through my body. Adrenaline and Lacey's makeshift bandage are all that's keeping me from passing out.

'Okay,' I whisper to Cailleach. 'Time to wake up.'

I reach into the cauldron and take the blue spark in my hands. It tingles against the scars on my palms, like pins and needles as frozen skin thaws. The glow of it is cool on my face, and I can taste the bite of snow and the honey sweetness of heather.

Bitterness.

Hatred.

Rage.

'No,' I tell the blue spark firmly. 'No more of that.'

It pulses at me, sullen and resentful. But I carried a sliver of Cailleach in my mind. I know how to deal with her.

'I'm sorry,' I tell her. 'I'm sorry that you've been trapped here. You must have been so lonely.'

The cold rage dims a little, and her fingers lessen their grip on my mind.

The shimmering bell-like echoes build in intensity as I withdraw my hands from the cauldron, a resonating chorus singing out as one, shaking fragments of ice and snow from the roof of the cavern.

A crack sounds overhead as one of the vibrating stalactites detaches from the ceiling, plunging down into the ground like a colossal spear, not ten feet from where I stand. Stinging shards of ice fly out and lash at my cheeks, and I turn my head to protect myself.

Time to go.

It's not easy, holding a goddess.

My mind starts to spiral out of control, unravelling like a spool of thread. Oak pulls me tight, and I hold on to him, because holding on to him means holding on to myself.

We make our way back through the ice cavern. I'm careful not to trip – I have no idea what happens if you drop a goddess's soul, but I can't imagine it's good.

I can feel Oak's faith in me. His hope. His pain, too. He tries to hide that part from me, but we have no secrets from each other. Not anymore.



Without his body, Oak isn't whole. He's not truly *Oak*. A soul shouldn't exist without a body.

And yes, Oak is sharing my body, but it's not the same as him being inside *his* body.

No wonder the original Knights of Empedocles grew so twisted, leaping from body to body as if that original connection meant nothing.

'I'm going to get you back,' I tell Oak. 'I swear it.'

I feel the swell of his emotions. The glimmer of hope. The great sadness.

The goddess latches onto it. Feeds on it, and Oak's candle grows alarmingly dim.

'Stop that,' I tell her.

She lashes out at me, seething with fury and spite.

Another spear of ice thunders into the ground, and the whole cavern trembles.

'Don't give up on me,' I tell the tiny Oak-spark. 'I need you.'

The scent of forest glades and fresh herbs fills me. A smile comes to my lips, and I'm not sure if it's me smiling or Oak. Or both of us.

The goddess's contempt washes over me, but we keep smiling.

I reach the stairs and start to climb again. This time the pain in my side is welcome. It reminds me who I am and stops me from spiralling away from myself, from losing myself in Cailleach and her rage and misery.

I have a body.

I have a soul.

Both of them together make *me*.

I am not wretched.

I am capable of love.

And of being loved.

'See?' I tell the goddess in my hands. 'It's not that hard.'

The blue light pulses with loathing.

What if she refuses to help us?

Eventually, I step into the half-light of the grotto, then up through the rubble, until I reemerge in the ring of stones.

The sky is still boiling pinkish-grey clouds, and everything is quiet. But I know there are still monsters outside the ring, jostling to climb through the hole in space and time. My friends are inside the stones, waiting for me. Questions rise on their lips, but they fall silent as they gaze upon the

glowing blue orb in my hands. I can smell the fear on them, the awe. They don't want to approach me, and who can blame them?

But I need them.

'Help me,' I say.

Ren steps forward instantly, a hand on my shoulder. Gideon shakes his head as if to clear it and joins Ren, his hand on my opposite shoulder.

Lacey's eyes are shining brightly with tears as she lays a hand on the small of my back.

The goddess lashes out at them, and I feel them falter.

'Stay with me,' I tell them. 'She's going to try to hurt you. Don't let her.'

'We're with you,' Gideon murmurs, and I believe him.

I steel myself, and we step out of the ring into the main building of Agathion.

Hewitt-Otobore is on his knees – one arm hanging limply at his side. But the other hand still grips the replica sword. He hasn't given up. He will fight until his last breath.

The great wooden front door bursts open, the makeshift barricade pushed aside by its force. Something looms there, a neon, protoplasmic mass, throbbing with an elemental pulse that threatens to overwhelm my senses.

But it shrinks back from the blue light in my cupped hands. The relentless, bone-shaking pulse of energy dims and slows, and it retreats back towards the rift in the sky, watching me.

It seems almost reverent.

Hewitt-Otobore turns his head to look at me, eyes growing wide as he sees Cailleach's soul. Tears trickle down his cheeks, and the sword slips from his fingers.

'Come on,' I tell him. 'It's time.'

Ren helps him to his feet, and together we cross the entrance hall to the threshold of Agathion.

It's like a pilgrimage, our steps slow and solemn. We don't talk. It doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel respectful.

I don't look down at my feet. I don't have to. I know my friends are guiding my steps. That they'll catch me if I stumble.

See? I tell the goddess. This is kindness. This is family.

The universe roils in my hands. Her fury nearly drives me to my knees. Lacey whimpers.

‘Jeez,’ Ren says loudly, her voice bold with forced cheer. ‘This goddess really does carry on like a pork chop, doesn’t she?’

Despite everything, I feel laughter bubbling up inside me.

This is belonging, I tell Cailleach. You belong somewhere, too.

I glimpse wrathful storms, frozen earth. An endless, bitter winter.

I’m here, I tell her. I’m listening.

And the goddess shows me where she belongs.

She shows me life, green growing things springing from her fingertips. Hills and valleys formed by a swing of her great hammer. Rivers growing from strands of her long white hair.

This land as it once was, thick ancient forests teeming with life and magic. Enormous oak trees, and firs, and wych elms. Waterfalls tumble down mountains, forming rivers and lakes where bears wade, swiping fat paws into the water to snatch shimmering fish. Giant deer with antlers that rise above the tree canopy.

I see wolves and foxes and otters ... and other, stranger creatures. Blue-skinned things leaping out of the waves like dolphins. Brown-eyed pixies laughing around thimbles of mead. The sinuous curves of an enormous snakelike beast, plunging into the black depths of a lake.

And Cailleach shows me love and joy. Her children, playing around her. Warm sunlight and the fresh tang of sea air. Little feet splashing, kicking water into the sky like glittering diamonds.

Young voices squealing in delight. Laughing as gulls wheel overhead.

And then ...

Ravens, croaking in storm-disrupted air.

Boiling clouds above, and a raging ocean below, the roar of it greater than any sound I’ve ever heard. Water rushing, seething, whirling.

Devouring.

A little hand slipping beneath the foaming brine.

Black feathers fluttering from the sky.

Sorrow.

Grief.

Ice.

Winter.

I hear Otobore let out a little sob, and I know that the others have seen it, too.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say out loud. ‘I’m so sorry that happened to you.’

The blue orb hisses and spits at me.

‘We’re here,’ I assure her. ‘We’re listening. We will remember what you lost, and honour it.’

I can *feel* the others around me. They nod and agree. We show the goddess kindness and empathy and understanding, and she trembles in my hands.

We step outside, onto the gravel driveway, and more monsters shrink away from us. I look back at Agathion, rising up behind me.

It now reminds me of the squat cauldron in the glittering ice cave. Something ugly and alien embedded in sweeping beauty, like a sharp thorn in the paw of a great and powerful beast.

I bend down and gently place the blue spark of Cailleach’s soul on the threshold of Agathion.

‘They left you alone with your sorrow, when they should have shown you kindness and love,’ I tell her. ‘They put you in a prison, alone with your grief. They stole a part of you and used it for their own selfish ends.’

The blue orb pulses with fury.

‘You *should* be angry,’ I tell her. ‘I’m angry too.’

‘I sure hope you know what you’re doing,’ Lacey murmurs behind me. Ren shushes her.

‘If you lose yourself in anger, then they win,’ I say.

The pulsing, surging wrath of her seems to hesitate. She’s listening.

‘Use it,’ I tell her. ‘*Use* your anger. Take back what they took from you. Take back the stones they used to build their great halls. Take back the trees they cut down in your name. Take it all back, and *make* something. Something new.’

The spark seems to sink into the stone threshold, and for a moment I think it’s sputtered and gone out. That all is lost. That Cailleach is too far gone, that she has retreated too far into grief and cannot return.

The great looming, sullen mass of Agathion seems to breathe in, the bristling spires and towers trembling, ever so slightly.

I can sense my friends behind me. Their anticipation. Their faith in me.

I hope I deserve it.

And then, as I watch, the front step starts to glow faintly.

The glow spreads along the floor, up the walls, and across the rafters of Agathion, until the whole building is washed with an otherworldly light.

Something rumbles, deep within the earth, a sound that is echoed overhead as a roll of thunder vibrates through the air.

The huge front door slams closed, making us all startle backward. I stare at the great wooden shield on the door. At Agathion's crest. The bowl. The sword. The red ribbon.

ANIMUS SUPRA CORPUS

Mind over body.

The door seems to tremble for a moment, and then it explodes outward, showering us with splinters.

I throw my hands up to protect myself. 'Get back!' I yell to the others.

The ground heaves beneath us, scrambling and slipping, as we race away from the rift and the monsters, down the hill to stand by the wych elm, watching as the towers of Agathion sway and teeter.

It happens exactly as the tarot card predicted it would.

A bolt of lightning forks down from the heavens and strikes the highest tower of Agathion, right where the Sanctuary is. The top of the tower explodes in a shower of sparks and rubble, and I feel a pang of grief as I imagine that cosy little space being torn asunder, the teacups and turntable and chessboard shattering on impact.

It was the only place where I ever truly felt like I belonged.

Oak's candle flares inside me, and I smile. I know that's not really true.

'Yes,' I hear Lacey hiss behind me. 'Fuck it all the way up, goddess.'

The stones of Agathion tremble, and then the entire building caves in on itself, the sounds of cracking stone, breaking glass and splintering wood filling the air. I glimpse tattered velvet curtains and broken crockery and books – so many books.

I'm genuinely sad for the books.

The destruction continues, cracking and booming and tearing, until there's nothing left but a mountain-sized ring of stone and wood and debris, around the forum and the ring of stones, which remain standing tall and solemn, ancient guardians of the moor.

The rubble doesn't settle. It's still moving, rocks rolling and wood splintering. Making new connections. Forming new shapes, awkwardly at first, but growing smoother and more elegant as stone knits together into enormous feet, ankles, legs. A huge, powerful torso, an elegant curve of neck. The broken tower itself – our Sanctuary – re-forms itself into a great head with a strong brow and sharp jaw.

The ratty red velvet curtains that hang in nearly every Agathion window transform into soft, draping folds of crimson, elegant raiment fit for a queen. Stone arms lengthen and stretch. Fingers unfurl in a shower of dust. Broad shoulders straighten, and she rises, an enormous and magnificent being made of stone and rock and wood and earth.

The blue slate of Agathion's walls becomes the blue of her skin. The wooden doors become her rust-coloured teeth, which she gnashes together, working her new jaw.

Her eyes open.

They are twin galaxies, blue as a glacier, or a nebula, or the sky above the moor on a cloudless day.

In her eyes I see sadness. Grief. Betrayal. But also love. And determination.

She reaches up a giant hand to touch the bare stone of her head. Then she bends, slowly, the stone of her back curving as she leans down to the bare earth. Water wells up around her feet, foaming and bubbling, like river rapids. She shakes her head, and the water streams up to her skull, forming long, tangled ropes of white hair.

She straightens once more, and now she is as tall as a mountain, and a million times more glorious. She is stone, but she is also more than stone. More than living. Veins of silver run through her blue skin, pulsing with life. She reaches towards us with an enormous hand, and we shrink away, stumbling and sliding in the mud. Her fingers wrap around the trunk of the wych elm and pull, uprooting it in a shower of richly scented earth and rubble.

The roots of the tree are wrapped tightly around a huge granite boulder, almost as big as one of the standing stones.

I remember Oak telling me about how Cailleach formed the mountains and valleys of Scotland with a great hammer.

She hefts it in her hand and gives it an experimental swing. It makes a whooshing noise, a bit like a low-flying plane. My ears pop as dirt showers down around us.

Her great eyes gaze at the rift. Her face turns up to the skies, taking in the boiling reddish clouds.

Then she turns and looks directly at me.

It's too much.

She is beautiful and terrible and unthinkably powerful.

She is a goddess.

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# TWENTY-SIX

3 November

The rift is in the sky, about fifty feet above the ground, between us and the goddess. It's bigger than before. A wormlike creature is emerging, its orange-pinkish flesh pulsing angrily. It opens a tooth-lined maw and vomits forth a sudden stream of teeth, bones and chunks of flesh, which spatter steaming onto the ground. The foul piles twitch and move, reassembling themselves into smaller versions of the worm.

Hewitt-Otobore staggers back up the hill towards the rift. His face is slick with blood and ooze and the slime of a hundred monsters. His left arm is useless. But he still fights, every movement an exhausted, superhuman effort.

Cailleach swings her great glowing blue hammer at the rift, and it flashes blue as it strikes the wormlike creatures, which explode into vapour at her touch.

Hewitt-Otobore looks up at her, and I see hope and wonder on his weary face. He could step back now, but he doesn't. His shoulders square, and he lifts the sword once more.

A new creature begins to emerge through the void – a humanoid thing with impossibly long, thin limbs, and a head that is nothing but shadowy tentacles. It reaches out, wrapping shadows around the hammer itself, trying to wrest it from Cailleach's grasp.



Hewitt-Otobore slices at the tentacles with the sword, severing them completely, but the black appendages still cling to the hammer, eating up the blue glow of it.

Cailleach shakes them away as if she's shooing flies from a picnic plate, then swings the hammer again, dissolving the monster into shadowy wisps.

A screeching sound comes from deep within the rip in the universe, and I see something with batlike wings and eyes that wrap all the way around its head.

Another swing of the hammer and it is gone.

Cailleach's expression is calm, each movement as relentless and inevitable as a glacier.

Mandibles and entrails and knot-like horns explode under her hammer.

Hewitt-Otobore looks exultant as he swings and slices with Snàthad White-Hilt.

And then there are no more monsters.

Ren lets out a whoop of triumph, but Gideon shakes his head.

'It's not over,' he says. 'More will come. She has to seal the rift.'

Lacey and I exchange a worried glance. *Can* Cailleach seal it? I don't know about goddesses. What they're capable of.

Hewitt-Otobore falls to his knees in front of the goddess, his bruised and broken face shining with awe and wonder. He offers the ancient sword to her, and she reaches down to pluck it from his hand.

In the goddess's grasp, the sword looks no bigger than a pin.

Or a needle.

Reaching up, Cailleach pulls a long strand of white-water hair from her head, poking it through the hole at the end of the sword's hilt, as placidly as if she's threading a needle.

Which she is.

Smoothly, calmly, she faces the rift, inserting the needle into the very fabric of the universe and drawing the white thread through.

Her stitches are neat, almost invisible. Her expression is serene as she works. It's such an ordinary task, repairing a hole in a bit of old fabric. But here, on the moor, the ordinary is made extraordinary.

I think back to my early days at Agathion. How determined I was to repress all my feelings. How I worshipped the magisters, and their rigid boundaries between mind and body, real and unreal.

It all seems so petty now.

I remember Oak, sewing up the rip in my pyjamas while I lay in bed, the needle flashing as his quick fingers worked over the fabric.

I remember the lopsided smile on his face. The cosy intimacy of that moment.

I feel him, now, a little spark of Oak. In many ways, this is more intimate – he can feel my feelings, and I feel his. But I miss talking to him. Feelings are good – important. But talking is good too. And holding hands and kissing and everything else.

I want the whole package. The whole entire experience of being alive. Thinking. Feeling. Talking. Touching.

And I want it with Oak.

The rift is almost closed, with only a few stitches left to go. But Cailleach pauses, her head tilted to one side, as if she's listening. Then she reaches a colossal hand into the rift, pulling out something that looks like a blood-red star.

The demon.

The lost fragment of her soul, trapped by the Anam Cuach, enslaved by cultists and the Knights of Empedocles.

Cailleach places it on her tongue, and it shimmers and vanishes as it is reabsorbed. The goddess seems to glow a little more brightly, and the stench of splattered monster-parts is suddenly drowned out by the fresh, clean honey scent of heather, which blooms bright and new at her feet.

I hear a rumbling noise that I think might be contented humming as Cailleach completes her last few stitches, looping her needle around and through the last one to secure it.

The sickly pinkish clouds overhead boil away into nothingness, and stars appear, glittering like a million tiny souls, singing and dancing for joy. In the east, a faint pinkish light is starting to stain the horizon.

It's nearly dawn.

Cailleach looks down at the needle in her hand. The sky-iron sword, given to humans by her own children. The sword that severed her soul from her body. I expect her to crush it in her hands. To turn it to dust. To hurl it so high into the sky that it becomes a star.

But she doesn't. She just absently reaches behind her head and uses the sword to pin back her waterfall hair, as though it's nothing more than a simple accessory.

Hewitt-Otobore still kneels on the turf before her, head bowed, stringy steel hair hanging limp and blood-streaked. The goddess gazes down at him, her expression serene. It's clear that he doesn't have a lot of time left. The fight has taken everything out of him.

He is old and tired. Although he cannot speak, it's clear to us all what he wants. Peace, after all this time.

The goddess reaches out and gently picks him up, cupping him in her hands, just as I cupped her soul. She stands and lifts him to her lips, whispering something that I cannot hear. Then she opens her cupped hands, and Magistra Hewitt's body isn't there anymore. Instead, perched on her hand, there is an owl.

It's a long-eared owl, although I'm not sure how I know that. It's a lanky bird, with fluffy ear tufts rising from its head. It ruffles its feathers – tawny, mottled with dusky grey – then blinks luminous amber eyes. Then it spreads its wings, wide and pale, and launches itself from the goddess's hand, gliding silently off into the moor.

The goddess watches it go, then turns to the bodies of the Agathion students, resting silent and still in the stone circle, their souls hovering nearby. I watch, stunned, as the goddess makes a shooping motion at the glowing blue orbs, ushering them back towards their bodies. With evident relief, the souls dive back inside, connections restored.

A few of them start to stir, but most sleep on.

The goddess turns away, looking out over the moor, and I get the sense she's going to leave before everyone wakes up.

'Wait,' I say, not quite able to believe I'm holding up an actual goddess from whatever it is she intends to do.

I step forward, hoping that I'm not going to get smited.

Hands slip into mine. Lacey on one side. Gideon on the other. Ren on the other side of him. We face the goddess Cailleach together, humble and awed but also strong.

'We need your help,' I tell her. 'Our friend ...' I gesture at Oak's body, motionless on the grass, his face swollen and blistering from frostbite. The nasturtium withered and dead on his lapel. 'Can you heal him?'

The goddess gazes at us, implacable. Almost absently, she reaches an enormous finger towards me, touching the wound in my side. I feel the sudden burn of ice, then a gentle coolness spreading throughout my body,

extinguishing the sickening throb of pain. I look down, pulling up Lacey's blood-soaked pink sweater, and see that the wound has gone.

'Thank you,' I tell Cailleach. 'But ... we just really want our friend back.'

The goddess peers down at Oak, then back up at me. Sadly, she shakes her head. Little droplets fly free from her white-water hair, pattering down to the ground like a summer shower. She seems ... confused. As if she doesn't know exactly what I'm asking for.

'She thinks he has no soul,' Gideon says in a low voice.

'Oh!' I cry. 'He does!' I look back up at the goddess and place my hands over my heart. 'I have it,' I tell her. 'It's in here. I carry him with me. If I put his soul back now, he'll die, because his body is ... damaged. If you could heal his body, then I can put his soul back. I know it's what he wants ... what he needs. But ...' I swallow. 'I also want it for me. Because I think I might be in love with him, and I can't really find out until he's all in one place again.'

I feel a little fluttering inside, and I'm not sure if it's Oak's candle responding to what I said, or the fact that I just told all my friends plus an actual literal goddess about my feelings for Oak.

The goddess gazes at me again, her galaxy eyes going right through me, focusing on the little Oak-spark that resides deep within.

Does she recognise that dark inner space? She lived there for a while too.

Her enormous head tilts to the side as she considers. Her hair cascades from one shoulder like a waterfall.

I realise I'm holding my breath.

'We *did* save you from a life of imprisonment,' Lacey reminds her, evidently quite aware she is being a bit cheeky. 'You owe us.'

The goddess turns her luminous galaxy eyes to Lacey.

To her credit, Lacey doesn't flinch. She just gazes back at Cailleach, one queen to another.

'And *technically*,' she continues, 'it was having you – or a bit of you – inside his body that gave him all the frostbite.'

I don't think I've ever met anyone as brave as Lacey.

A rumbling sounds from deep within the goddess's stone body, and I'm not sure if it's a growl of anger or a chuckle.

Then the goddess stretches out and gently scoops up Oak's body.

Gideon squeezes my hand.

I wonder for a moment if she's going to give him a new body, the way she did for Otobore. Something entirely different.

Would you like to be an owl? I ask Oak. Or a fox or a squirrel?

Then I remember the fond hand he laid on the wych elm the very first day we met. I remember feeling his joy as I ran my hands through the little ferns in the ice cave.

The botanical sketches in his room.

The plants pinned to his lapel.

Oh, I tell him. Of course. I understand.

The tiny spark shimmers in response.

Cailleach cradles Oak to her, like a child rocking a small doll. I hear the deep rumbling humming noise again and remember the glimpse of her memory – the child's hand slipping under raging waves.

The little Oak-spark inside me flares blue for a moment, then grows small once more.

Cailleach lifts Oak to her lips and kisses him softly, then lays him back down on the grass again.

Lacey lets out a little cry of wonder.

Oak's body is pink and new again. All signs of frostbite are gone, and he looks peaceful, as if he's merely sleeping. Even his school uniform is clean and crisp, his tie straight and his blazer free from scuffs and stains.

The safety pin is still there on his lapel. The nasturtium whole and green once more, the orange flower unfurling.

A faint blue glow surrounds him.

'Thank you,' I say, my voice choked with emotion.

The goddess doesn't acknowledge me. She just turns, as slow and magnificent as the rosy dawn beginning to break behind the eastern mountains. Then she strides off across the moor. I expect the earth to tremble under her steps, but she moves silently, her feet sinking gently into the spongy peat, leaving fresh green grass and blooming heather in her wake.

Trees spring up around her, young and whiplike, frothing with new green growth. They spread and grow right before us, developing great boughs and branches, crusted with moss and lichen and ferns.

An explosion of wood grouse erupts from the forest, flapping and fluttering around Cailleach's hips. Little yellow siskins dart in and out of her waterfall hair, and high above, a golden eagle wheels in celebration.

A new forest to replace the one that once grew here.

Animals emerge from the new woodland, hares and deer and foxes at first, but followed by bears and wolves and elk. Then other creatures emerge, which I know instinctively have not been seen in this land for many hundreds of years. Great horned aurochs like majestic oxen. Tuft-eared lynx. The giant deer Megaloceros with its magnificent spreading antlers. And strange creatures, too. Blue-skinned heather pixies, cù-sìth hounds, ghostly glowing will-o'-the-wisps, and horned urisk men.

Their names rise to my lips, strange yet familiar. A gift from a goddess, I suppose.

We stand and watch her leave, the forest spreading out around her like a growing green tide. Wild horses thunder in her wake, their hooves kicking up the fresh, soft turf.

I feel my own candle burning brighter from having known her.

‘Well,’ murmurs Ren. ‘There’s something you don’t see every day.’

Cailleach doesn’t vanish, but she becomes harder to make out, blurring and blending with the landscape until I can’t quite tell what is her and what is the great craggy peak of Ben Nevis in the distance.

I blink, and she comes back into focus for a brief moment, and I see other creatures, too. Vast and unknowable beings, made of stone and moss and wisps of cloud. They have come to welcome Cailleach and celebrate her return.

I turn back to the others, and already I feel the memory of her slipping away, as if she was too great and magnificent for my little human brain to hold on to. But the wonder is still there. The awe. I see it in their faces, too.

Around us, a few Agathion students are starting to wake, sitting up and looking around, confused. They’re silent, though, as if they’ve absorbed some of the awe the rest of us felt in the presence of the goddess.

I kneel down next to Oak. His chest rises and falls with his breath, but he is otherwise still and lifeless.

How do I do this? His spark is tiny – it isn’t the candle-soul that a living human has. What if it doesn’t work? What if the spark floats away, out of my hands and is absorbed back into the fabric of the universe? What if it takes, but Oak comes back ... somehow different or wrong?

I hesitate.

‘What is it?’ Gideon asks.

How can I explain it to them? The hope on their faces ... how can I take that away from them?

I swallow, trying to formulate an answer.

‘We trust you,’ Ren says. ‘Whether it works or not, we know you did absolutely everything you could.’

Lacey nods. ‘You resurrected a *goddess*,’ she says with a faint laugh. ‘When Oak wakes up from this, he’d better be grateful, or else I’ll kill him again.’

There’s no deception on their faces. They understand the risks. I believe them. They believe in me.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Here we go.’

I reach inside me for Oak’s spark. It dims as I take it in my hands, until I can barely see it.

‘Hang in there,’ I whisper.

I set the spark in Oak’s chest. It sinks in and vanishes.

And we wait.

I don’t look back at the others. I don’t move.

I barely breathe.

I’m hunched over Oak’s body, my feet cramping.

Waiting.

For a breath.

A flutter.

Anything.

Is that a faint echo of bruised rosemary? Or is it just the scent of the new forest?

The sky is pink and violet above us, the stars fading as the sun rises, bathing the hill in warm gold.

I blink.

Oak is ... glowing. A faint blue nimbus surrounds him.

His lashes tremble, and his lips part with a sigh.

I bend forward and lay a finger on his cheek. His skin is cold to the touch, but he feels *alive* in a way he wasn’t before. I put a light hand to his chest, and feel his heart beating there, steady.

The scent of rosemary and juniper is suddenly strong in the air, and I feel a gentle brush as the nasturtium unfurls a spiralling new sprout and twines around my wrist.

My heart is too big for my chest.

My body is too small to contain all these feelings.

I'm going to burst into tears.

Or just burst.

Then Oak opens his eyes.

Hazel, flecked with green. A spray of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

He gazes at me for a long moment, and I feel like the entire world is holding its breath. Does he recognise me? Is he still Oak?

His face breaks into a smile. That gentle, crooked Oak-smile. Mouth wide and lopsided. Eyes crinkled at the edges.

It's really him.

'Hi,' he whispers.

'Hi,' I say back, but it comes out more like a sob.

'Why the February face?' he asks, his forehead creasing in a puzzled frown. "'So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?'"

'What can I say?' I ask, hiccuping a little. "'I am sick when I do look on thee.'"

"'Away, thou rag,'" he says, raising himself on his elbows to gaze properly at me. "'Thou quantity, thou remnant.'"

I'm not certain my face can contain a grin this big. "'Thou crusty batch of nature.'"

'What's going on?' Ren whispers loudly to Gideon. 'Why are they insulting each other?'

'I think it's their love language,' Gideon murmurs, a smile in his voice.

I help Oak to his feet, his cool fingers on mine sending little electric shivers through me. He sways a little as he stands, and I help him balance.

'Have to get used to having a body again,' he remarks. 'After being a ...' He trails off, making sparkly finger gestures.

I wonder how much he remembers, of when he was just a little spark floating around inside me. How much of memory is soul, and how much is body? Can he remember having the demon inside him? The pain of the frostbite?

'Thank you,' he says to me. 'For ... keeping me safe.'

He remembers it all. I feel suddenly vulnerable as I realise that this Oak *knows* me, in a way nobody has ever known me. He's been on the inside. He's felt my feelings.

The moment stretches between us. I'm unable to look away.



‘Kiss her, you drongo,’ Ren says.

There’s an unspoken question in Oak’s eyes. I lean in towards him, and our lips touch.

The world stills for a moment, and we just *are*.

Oak and me.

Separate, but together.

Holding a goddess in my hands was *nothing* compared to this.

When I return to earth, I can hear whoops and cheering behind us, and feel Oak’s lips under mine curve into a grin. We break away, and the others rush in, throwing their arms around us, hugging and shouting and dancing and laughing. We talk over each other, giddy with relief and joy, now we’re all, finally, back together.

The other students have broken into little groups, gazing around in wonder at the forest which spreads out before us. I can’t be sure, but I think they’ve all woken up now.

We saved them all.

Agathion is no more. The hill is smothered in wildflowers, crowned with the ring of stones, watching ancient and silent over all.

Together, we walk down the hill into the cool embrace of the forest, our steps releasing the scent of wild thyme and eglantine.

Oak wraps his arms around a rowan tree, its boughs heavy with clusters of bright red berries.

‘I love being alive!’ he yells up into the branches, startling a redwing thrush from its perch.

A burbling brook runs by us, the water crystal clear, glittering in the early morning sunshine. Ren and Gideon sit among nodding violets and woodbine to take their shoes off, bathing aching feet in the water and washing away the remnants of interdimensional horror-goo.

It’s been a long night.

Lacey is standing alone, her face turned away from us, but I can see wetness on her cheeks.

I guess we’re not all back together.

I feel an invisible touch on my cheek, and look around to see something glimmering before me.

A tiny spark. A lost soul, still drifting in the air.

Is there one student who hasn’t gotten their soul back? I glance back up at the hill.

The spark is hanging right before me. Like it's trying to tell me something.

I close my eyes, and smell sandalwood and rosewater.

Oh.

'Lacey,' I say. 'There's someone here who wants to talk to you.'

She brushes the tears from her cheeks and turns to me, looking around to see who I could possibly be talking about. I tap my forehead, and her eyes widen, her lips parting in surprise.

'Really?' she says.

'Really.'

I open myself up, and the spark enters me.

Hi, I tell it. We missed you.

Then I retreat into a corner of my mind, because some moments deserve a little privacy.

Cyrus moves awkwardly in my body, which I find both sad and funny, given how graceful he was.

He touches Lacey gently on the cheek, and she closes her eyes, her lips parting a little as she lets out a shaking breath.

'I can't believe it's really you,' she whispers.

'I had to see you,' he tells her. 'One last time.'

'I missed you.'

'Oh, Lace,' he says, his voice hoarse. 'You have no idea.'

She reaches out and puts a hand on his cheek. 'Did it hurt?' she asks.

Cyrus hesitates. 'No,' he says at last. 'It was like falling asleep.'

'Liar.'

Cyrus lets out a shaking breath. 'I'm so sorry, Lace,' he says. 'I was cocky, and we all paid the price. I should have listened to you.'

'Yeah,' Lacey says with a shaking laugh. 'You should have. I was right all along.'

'You're always right.'

'I know.'

He winds his hands into her hair, cupping her head. She braces her hands on his shoulders, clinging to him.

'I have to go,' he tells her softly. 'I don't belong here anymore.'

She nods. 'I know.'

'Don't forget about me.'

Tears slip from Lacey's cheeks. 'Never,' she promises.

Cyrus leans forward and kisses her gently, then tilts his head so their brows touch.

*Okay, he says to me, on the inside. I'm ready.*

I let him go, and he drifts upward through branches and leaves, melting into the rosy glow of the sky.

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# TWENTY-SEVEN

4 November

The train rushes across the moor, leaving the new forest – or the reawakened ancient forest, depending on how you look at it – far behind us.

The carriage is quite crowded with people clutching cameras, their eyes wide.

Occasionally, a helicopter buzzes overhead.

I guess word has gotten out about the new forest.

Most of the other Agathion students caught the previous train, dirt-smudged and dazed in still-damp pyjamas.

We waited until they had all gone. To make sure everyone got out okay.

Plus, I needed to make a phone call.

Mom hadn't heard about the school closure – the supposed gas leak. I didn't tell her what had happened – there was too much.

'I had a dream about you,' she told me. 'We were in the kitchen. You were so sad. I never wanted you to be sad. I tried to tell you that ...' The line crackles. '... that I've always believed that you have a gift. Not a curse.'

I told her I was okay. That I was safe, but I wasn't coming home for a while.

I told her I loved her, and couldn't remember ever saying it before.

I wondered how different things would have been if I'd been more willing to talk to her. To actually feel my feelings instead of bottling them

all up inside.

I half expect to see the girls from my journey to Agathion with their crop tops and thick makeup and zero-fucks-given attitudes. Would they recognise me?

I remember what the bold girl said as I struggled with my suitcase.

*Loosen up a bit. Let your freak flag fly.*

It was pretty good advice, in retrospect.

Sunshine streams in through the windows, and the moor outside is beautiful – spreading green and brown and glorious all around us, dotted here and there with boulders and lone trees.

I wonder what people will make of the new forest. How they will try to justify its existence using human logic and rationality.

Maybe they won't.

Maybe they'll acknowledge there are some things that can't be explained.

They just *are*.

I think of Descartes, so desperate to know what's real and what isn't. I lean my head against Oak's shoulder. This is real. His fingers entwined in mine.

This is real. This moment, right here.

I don't really care about the rest of it.

Gideon and Ren sit across the aisle, talking quietly in low, fond voices. Lacey is in the seat opposite us, critically examining a broken fingernail.

The pink suitcase is one of the few things that emerged unscathed from the great upheaval of Agathion. It turns out Lacey *did* pack plenty of shoes and accessories, in addition to the true Snàthad White-Hilt, so she looks gorgeous as always, in a cream cashmere sweater and short houndstooth skirt.

Oak is clean as well, thanks to Cailleach, still in his Agathion uniform. In contrast, Ren, Gideon and I look as if we've been dragged through hell and back. Which I guess is not that far from the truth.

'I could murder a sandwich,' Oak murmurs, and I nod. It turns out that freeing lost souls and raising goddesses is hungry work.

'Not long till we get to Glasgow,' Lacey says. 'We can go out for brunch.'

'I want something fried,' Oak says longingly. 'Deep-fried.'

'A lot of somethings deep-fried,' Ren agrees. 'Like, *a lot*.'

The nasturtium is still pinned to Oak's blazer, as fresh and vibrant as ever. I can smell its peppery scent.

I look up into his eyes, hazel flecked with green, and feel something huge and beautiful swelling inside me.

I can't stop smiling.

Neither can he.

'You're doing it again,' Gideon observes to Oak.

Oak doesn't look away from me. 'Doing what?'

'Glowing.'

He is. A faint blue nimbus surrounds him.

I glance at the other passengers around us, but they don't seem to have noticed.

It seems that the goddess left a bit of ... something behind when she healed his body. I don't know what it means, but I guess we'll find out at some point. I wonder what Oak's mother will make of it all. Whether she'll believe that he was touched by a goddess. Whether that will change her mind about him.

'What happens now?' Ren asks.

It's a question I think we've all been avoiding. Me especially. I feel like I've only just started to figure out who I really am. Like I've finally found the place where I belong. I'm not ready to give it up.

'I don't want to go home,' Gideon blurts out.

'Neither do I,' Oak says.

'It doesn't feel like home anyway,' Lacey agrees.

'*You lot* are my home,' Ren says, and Gideon nods.

'So what do we do?' I ask.

Gideon smiles gently. 'What do you want to do?' he asks me.

The question hangs there for a long moment as we all consider it.

'I – I don't know,' I admit.

'I think we should open a school,' Gideon says seriously. 'For kids like us. Smart kids who don't fit in. We could encourage them to turn away from temptation and excess, and live a life of the mind.'

We stare at him.

'He's taking the piss,' Ren says, although she doesn't sound entirely sure. 'Aren't you?'

Gideon manages to hold out for a good ten seconds before letting out a snorting laugh.

‘I want a manicure,’ Lacey says. ‘And maybe to go to Paris? Or Singapore. Or Fiji.’

‘Fiji sounds nice,’ Ren agrees. ‘I’ve had a gutful of being cold.’

‘I know what I want,’ Oak says quietly, gazing around at us all. ‘I want a hot cup of tea and a banging game of chess.’

Gideon smiles. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘Me too.’

‘Okay,’ Lacey says. ‘Tea and chess feels like a good first step. Then we’ll look into Fiji.’

‘And then what?’ Ren asks.

She shrugs. ‘I guess we take it from there.’

We fall silent again, and my gaze returns to the window and the moor rushing by.

Oak leans into me, and the feeling of him pressed to my side makes my heart sing.

‘What are you thinking?’ he murmurs, and it still feels like a miracle that he’s in his own body, not mine, and needs to ask what I’m thinking instead of simply knowing it.

‘I’m thinking about how I’m going to kick your ass at chess,’ I tell him.

He chuckles. ‘Disassembling harlot.’

‘Cream-faced loon,’ I reply.

‘Rotten apple.’

‘Thrice-double ass.’

‘Bottled spider.’

‘Ratsbane.’

I silence his next insult with a kiss and feel his smile against mine.

‘Get a room,’ says Lacey with fond disgust.

‘That’s the plan,’ Oak replies with a cheeky grin.

‘I wish you had your tarot cards,’ Ren says suddenly to Oak. ‘I feel like we could use a little direction.’

‘I can make more,’ Oak says, then frowns, patting the breast of his blazer. ‘I had them with me,’ he says slowly. ‘When we did the soul swap ...’ He reaches into the inner pocket, and pulls out the deck of cards. ‘Well, would you look at that.’

‘Pull us a card, witch-boy,’ Lacey says.

Oak shuffles the cards. They look a little straighter than when I last saw them. Less creased around the edges.

‘Here,’ he says to me, fanning the cards out with expert flair. ‘You pick.’

I hesitate, my eyes darting up to his. What if I choose the wrong one?

He smiles reassuringly, and I reach forward and slide a card from the deck, flipping it over to reveal Oak's hand-drawn illustration.

It shows a figure – a young person – a feather in their cap. They have a knapsack over one shoulder, and hold a flower in their opposite hand. The sun shines above them, and they have a cheerful expression as they stroll along, totally unaware that they are about to step off the edge of a cliff.

'The Fool,' I say, reading the name at the bottom of the card. 'That doesn't seem terribly auspicious.'

'What does it mean?' Ren asks Oak.

'It's the zero card in the deck,' Oak explains. 'Which means it can come either at the beginning or the end. The Fool is innocent, an optimist, stepping blindly into the unknown. There are dangers ahead, challenges to face. But none of it matters. The Fool joyfully embraces the future, whatever it might bring.'

A smile creeps over Lacey's face. 'It's *perfect*,' she says.

Oak reaches up and opens the carriage window by our seats, letting in a brisk gust of air, scented with rain-soaked earth and sweet heather.

He looks over his shoulder at us, then throws the cards out of the window.

Ren gasps.

The cards flutter out in a great cloud, then are whisked away, whirling and spinning on the air like little paper birds.

I look around at my friends. 'To stepping into the unknown.'



## Acknowledgements

(Stick around to the end – there's a post-credits Easter egg.)

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Here's a tasty little extra. As a treat.

Waves lap gently at the shore, depositing a curving line of foam upon white sand. The color of the ocean seems unreal, vibrant cerulean. My eyes keep being drawn back to it, its gentle undulation, stretching before me to an unbroken horizon. I've barely read any of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, even though I've been lounging in this hammock for over an hour.

Lacey and Gideon are sitting outside our beach hut in cane chairs, bent over a heated game of chaos chess.

'Where did that knight come from?' Gideon splutters.

Lacey cackles as she reaches for her iced tea and leans back, propping her bare feet up on the arm of Gideon's chair.

Ren's head rises from the water and she cries out something that is muffled by her snorkel but could be sea turtle. She waves excitedly at us and then dives under again.

Oak is wandering along the beach, dressed in a floaty green caftan. He occasionally puts his hand to the trunk of a palm tree or bends to inspect a rock pool. As if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns to look over his shoulder at me, and every single part of me feels warm in response to his smile.

We don't belong here. We all know it.

We belong on bleak moors and in dark, tangled forests. Under heavy gray skies, or cold glittering stars. Clean and bright beach huts are nothing compared to the crumbling grandeur of gloomy mansions.

But it sure is nice to take a vacation, once in a while.

## About the Author

Lili Wilkinson is the award-winning author of more than twenty books for children and teenagers, including *Deep is the Fen*, *A Hunger of Thorns*, *After the Lights Go Out*, *The Erasure Initiative* and *Bravepaw*. Lili established the Inky Awards at the Centre for Youth Literature, State Library of Victoria. She has a PhD in Creative Writing, and lives in Melbourne with her partner, child, dog and three chickens.

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