

DREAM WEAVER

THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMSARA TULA

COLIN FENWICK

Pragassam  Farm

Dream Weaver
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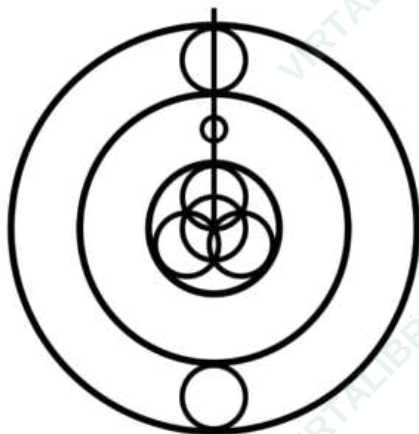
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For Indiana, Ilya, Ionna and Isaac.
May you always see the magic that surrounds you.

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all the feedback and support.



The rakshasa had several names for it, but the most common was the shortest: Samsara Tula—the Harmony of Worlds. To them, the world was one of balance, and when it falls out of balance, it must be brought back into balance. This view of the three worlds reflected the fundamental ideology of the rakshasa: life must remain in harmony. Always.

Ariadne Constantine, **Separation of Worlds**

THE RED DOOR

Five Years Ago

The door was red and old, the paint cracking to reveal a dull ancient grey underneath. The bedside lamp—its threadbare shade as ancient as the door—lit up the room just enough for Ruby to trace each crack and crevasse in the thick layer of aged paint. She looked around the sparsely furnished room—the bedside table, the wardrobe, the school desk and chair—but her gaze always came back to the door. The red door. A constant reminder of how life would never be the way she wanted it to be. The way it used to be.

Everything in the room looked old, with a worn, faded colour palette. The curtains were beige with red roses. They must have looked pretty when they were new and bright with colour. Now, they looked muted and sad. The wooden floor had a rug that was equally subdued, and she couldn't quite make out the pattern. It looked like flowers, but everything merged with everything else, so she couldn't really tell.

She bounced up and down on the mattress. The metal bedframe squeaked and creaked, crying out for oil, but at least the mattress was comfortable.

She took a deep breath through her nose. It smelled like her grandma's place used to smell. Old and dusty with the weight of memories and endless stories. There were no stories for her though—only

the look and smell of stories that belonged to other people. Stories she would never hear.

Ruby became still as she sat on the edge of her new, old bed. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't. She couldn't. She had cried all her tears three years earlier at her father's funeral. When her mother disappeared, leaving her at the mercy of the foster care system, her well of tears had run bone dry. She'd become a desert, harsh and empty.

She had to admit she was lucky. Her new foster family seemed nice. Her hand brushed over the soft, fuzzy wool of the doll's hair on the bed next to her. They had bought it for her as a welcome gift, accompanied with lots of hugs and smiles. She'd remained stiff and silent all through the ordeal. She knew she wasn't a warm girl. They would soon realise that. Maybe they would want to replace her for someone more friendly. Someone easier to love.

She looked down at the doll. The hair was a woven mess of red and orange and yellow, but it looked pretty enough. The cloth face was embroidered with a warm smile and friendly eyes. She liked the face and the corner of Ruby's mouth curved upwards ever so slightly. It wore a dress of soft rainbow coloured felt. The doll was obviously designed to hug while she slept. Maybe the doll could be her friend.

She just wanted a friend. More than anything she wanted a friend, but she didn't know how to be one herself, and no one wanted to hang around with the quiet girl who never smiled and never spoke. They could never understand what she was feeling, and she didn't have the words to explain it.

They really were a nice family.

But she still wanted to cry.

She picked up the doll and hugged it tight, smelling the fresh fabric smell. The brightly dressed moppet was a stark contrast to her black hoody and faded blue jeans. She laid down, feeling lost and weary. Her eyes closed and she drifted away into the darkness of her dreams. Beside her, a small presence grew—a girl of eight years with wild auburn hair and a bright yellow summer dress. She slipped off the bed and as her toes touched the wooden floor, the room shifted and changed. The floor grew thick with a bright mist and the rug came alive with flowers that glowed like fairy lights in the misty carpet. The walls warped into thick tree trunks that bent and twisted around each other, branches spreading out to provide a thick canopy of leaves. Blossoms of pale blue and yellow and white sprouted, glowing faintly to light the forest roof.

The girl's hair was tied back into a ponytail, but several locks had broken free and swashed around her head as if caught by the waves of the sea. In her hands was the doll, but now the hair glittered like the stars were caught on the woollen strands. The multicoloured dress now shone with shifting, glittering colours.

The mist gathered around her ankles, and up ahead, she could see small clouds of light—like balls of cotton wool filled with Christmas tree lights—bouncing around the forest floor. She skipped away, following the bright cotton wool clouds into the forest, never looking back.

Behind her, surrounded by mist, Ruby's sleeping form faded away. Only the old red door with cracking paint remained. The cracks grew, ripping through the coat of red and contorting themselves into a new

shape. The grey paint underneath began to shine for a moment to reveal a new pattern. A circular pattern of three concentric rings and in the centre, three smaller rings overlapped by a fourth. In the middle ring, a small circle emerged and glowed a bright gold before waning to flat grey.

As Ruby danced her way out of sight, the door remained. A silent sentinel watching. Waiting. Ready to welcome her back to the drab, old, musty room.



CHAPTER 1: THE EVENT

Little Rock, Arkansas

Darkness came early that evening, accompanied by a deep chill and thick cloud—harbingers of snow to come. A rising urgency filled the city as rush hour traffic spilled from office parking lots and clogged the arterial roads of Little Rock.

Plumes of exhaust fumes hung momentarily between cars before being snuffed out by the bitter cold. Commuters became bored and impatient, driven to the edge of anger. They became agitated and anxious, eager to reach the safety of home before the snow began to fall. Frustrations grew. Tempers frayed. Traffic slowed to an inch-by-inch crawl along the main thoroughfare of South University Avenue.

Nobody noticed the eight-year-old girl skipping merrily along the sidewalk. She wore a bright yellow summer dress, and her scruffy tail of auburn hair flapped back and forth and side to side as she went. The cold didn't seem to impact her at all, even though she looked pale and ghostly. If anyone had given her a second glance, they would have been surprised at how she faded in and out, becoming translucent at times. They would also have noticed the lights shining in her hair.

Despite being so out of place, no one even gave her a first, let alone a second glance. She skipped and danced her way down University, oblivious to

everything and everyone around her. She looked as if she was playing in a field somewhere on a warm summer's day, not wandering alone in the middle of a freezing winter cityscape.

As University intersected with 12th, the girl stopped suddenly. Her body, once relaxed and full of childlike wonder, became stiff and straight. Her arms and legs became tense, the muscles bunching under the ethereal skin.

Before her stood University tower, the squat concrete and glass building looked unremarkable, but jutting out from the base was the bank with its dark glass fronted facade. She remembered this place. How could she ever forget it?

As her mind recalled the memory, the world around her changed. She slipped from the winter scene, returning to a warm summer morning. The choking fumes of barely moving traffic were replaced by the sounds of cars drifting swiftly along the roads and music blasting from open windows.

She looked up to see her mother and reached up to hold her hand. Her mother looked down and smiled. She couldn't help but smile back. Her mother was always so beautiful, her hazel eyes were so full of joy and love. Her red hair captured the light of the sun. She looked like an angel.

Her mother called out and waved at someone emerging from the bank. A man in a denim jacket and well-groomed brown hair. Her father. He noticed them both and waved, his smile warm and full of love.

The girl let her hand drop, and the tension returned to her frail body.

The drivers noticed the girl then, though not at first. It was only when the memory began to leak into

the stark reality of the winter's evening that people noticed the ghostly little girl. The dark sky, thick with tarnished silver cloud, appeared to shift as patches of summer sky appeared and disappeared.

Drivers looked in awe and wonder. Others wound down windows and began to film on their phones. Some got out of their cars and gathered in groups, trying to decipher the signs in the sky. The first person to notice the girl was a woman in one of the groups. She noticed how strange the girl looked and began to film her. Others wanted to speak to her. Ask her if she was okay. Ask where her mother was. When the girl began to glow, they stepped back.

But they kept filming.

For the girl, everything in her memory froze. She didn't want to see what came next. Didn't want to hear the shouts. The screams. The gunfire. The shattered windows of the bank. The sirens. She didn't want to see her father fall to the ground or the blood pooling around his chest. She chased away the memory, and the summer morning returned to the reality of the winter evening.

Her skin began to sparkle, and she clenched her fingers tight into a fist, trying to hold onto the light. As her fear and pain grew, the more her skin began to brighten as the light danced along her skin, surrounding her in a protective sphere of pure, bright, white light. It caught her hair, whipping it up into a wild fan above her head. Her heart beat pounded in her ears as the light continued to grow around her. The light was warm. The light was safe. The light calmed the thunder in her head and the stabbing in her chest.

The spectators stepped back, sensing danger. Some started to run. Others climbed back into their cars, hoping the thin metal bodies would keep them safe. Others took no chances and mounted the sidewalk in an attempt to get away. Most were captivated, held prisoner by what they were seeing.

The light grew until it had completely engulfed the girl. Her breath slowed and her limbs relaxed.

Time stopped.

Her eyes opened and she threw back her head and let go of the light, pushing it away with all the force she could muster.

University Tower vanished as the light swallowed it whole. The spectators and cars disappeared in the brightness. It spread out from 12th and University, consuming everything in its path. It swallowed cars and people. It swallowed sound and shape. It swallowed the night and the cold. Everything was absorbed as the light spread out across the city. People could only stop and stare as it devoured them.

When the light faded, the girl was gone.

So was 12th and University.



Special Agent Marcus Farrow pulled up beside the many rows of vehicles at the edge of the devastation. Fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, pickups, trucks and vans were all lined up in an orderly fashion. It impressed him.

He stepped out of the black SUV and into the cold night, pulled a hat out of his winter parka and slipped it over his bald head as quickly as he could. The hastily erected lights reflected off his dark skin, and

he stood watching everyone move to and fro with an air of authority and experience.

"Ave María llena eres de gracia!" Came a voice on the passenger side as Special Agent Manny Luna took in the scene.

"Got that right," Farrow replied. He looked around and noticed a large warehouse building that seemed to have a lot of people going in and out. He pointed towards it. "Why don't you see what's going on over there. I'm gonna see if I can find someone in charge."

"Okay boss," Luna replied and jogged over to the building.

Farrow wandered through lines of people flowing in and out of the destruction. They seemed to be finding plenty of survivors, and triage was working okay. Someone by a fire truck spotted him and waved him over. The man was dressed in a chunky high vis jacket and fire fighter's helmet.

"Can I help you?" The man called out.

Farrow extended a hand.

"Special Agent Marcus Farrow, FBI. Memphis field office."

"Chief Bill Smith, Little Rock Fire Department."

"You co-ordinating things?" Farrow asked.

"For my sins. I was first on the scene, so got the job. What can I do for you Special Agent Farrow?"

"Nothing," Farrow answered. "It's more what I can do for you."

"We can do with more manpower. It's gonna be getting colder and we got a lot of ground to cover. We're gonna start losing people to hypothermia if we can't get to them soon."

"Has anyone spoken to the Governor about activating the National Guard?"

"Already done, but they won't show for a while yet."

"What about FEMA?"

"Nothing yet," the chief snorted.

"Anything else you need other than people?" Farrow asked.

"Just the usual. Water, food, blankets, generators. That kind of thing. Any Ground Penetrating Radar you can get your hands on would be useful too."

"I'll see what I can do," Farrow said. He looked out into the disaster area. "Anyone been into the middle of it?"

Chief Smith led Farrow over to his truck and spread a map of the city out on the hood. A large ring had been hastily drawn over the map.

"This is how wide an area we're dealing with," he said and pointed a little bit inside the circle. "About a half mile in it's mostly walking wounded. We made pretty quick work through that."

He pulled out a sharpie and drew a second, smaller ring.

"This is how far we've gotten. We're looking at about a mile from there to the middle, and we've maybe worked about thirty feet inside that line. I'm not worrying about what's in the middle of this just yet."

He folded the map up hastily and threw it onto the driver's seat.

"I ain't got the first idea what caused it, if that's what you're asking."

"Best guess?"

Chief Smith chuckled and gave a wry smile. "I don't guess. Neither do my guys."

"Radiation?"

The chief waved the question off. "If there were radiation we wouldn't be standing around talking like it's Sunday after church."

"Point taken. Mind if I take a look?"

"I got enough on my plate with the rescue efforts," the chief said. He noticed Agent Luna waiting at the SUV, the dark blue parka with yellow FBI logo stuck out in a sea of high visibility work jackets. "Y'all want to go in there, I ain't gonna stop you."

"I don't want to tread on your toes."

"If you were gonna tread on toes you would have done that already."

"Understood."

"Just remember, I ain't got anyone to go fetch you if y'all get stuck in there."

Farrow thanked the chief and wandered back to where Agent Luna was standing.

"It's crazy in there boss," Luna said.

"Crazy all around Manny," Farrow replied. He looked behind him back into the disaster area.

"You going in?" Luna asked.

"Yep," Farrow answered.

"Not sure that's a good idea boss," Luna said, reservation in his voice.

"I need you to call the office," Farrow responded, ignoring Luna's concerns. "The Governor has activated the national guard, but they're gonna be a while. They need manpower, they need food and water, blankets, generators, and they need it all as soon as possible. Oh, and any gear they can find to look under the rubble for survivors."

"I'll see if we can get any of those new handheld GPR kits. Easier to use in all that," Luna suggested, pointing into the wasteland.

“Contact me if anyone from FEMA decides to show up.”

Farrow grabbed a satellite phone from the truck. Luna grabbed the other one and started dialling.

“Be careful boss,” Luna said, giving Farrow a quick salute.

Farrow returned the gesture before stepping into the disaster area.

He wound his way carefully through groups of rescue workers. A handful of them were quietly searching using large ground penetrating radar which they’d manhandled onto the rubble. Others were sifting through blocks of concrete by hand, calling out and listening. A couple of chains had been established to shift rubble out of the destruction zone, and several mounds of wreckage were piled neatly at various points. Other chains were helping survivors make their way out to triage stations and rows of ambulances that would cart them away.

The bright lights of emergency vehicles faded into the distance, and the hustle and bustle of rescue parties gave way to silence and darkness.

Buildings that stood defiantly at the edge of the destruction gradually grew shorter and more dilapidated the further in he went. Broken walls vanished, overcome by a sea of concrete and shivered rebar. The wreckage was littered with shattered glass and splintered timber. An occasional stubborn pillar of stone and steel jutted out of the landscape, defiant markers in a barren wasteland.

Farrow paused and shone his flashlight across the eerie landscape. The rubble lay in large ridges, like sand ripples on a beach. He squatted down to examine the remains of the city. A thin layer of ash

covered everything, and the chunks of concrete were scorched. Whatever had happened here, it was a lot of force. A lot of heat. The thought of a terrorist attack with this much firepower was a frightening one.

He trudged on, carefully making his way over the wreckage, climbing and sliding down waves of detritus. He crested the last ripple and onto a smooth, flat plain and almost lost his footing as he slid through a thick layer of ash. He knelt down and swept away the ash, and his flashlight blossomed over a dark, shiny, slippery surface. He tapped it with his fist. Whatever this was, it was hard. He took a multitool from his pocket to smack the ground, and cracks appeared. Glass. The heat here turned the ground to glass.

He shone the flashlight around the landscape. The ripples arced around the area in a wide circle. It was like a rock had been dropped into a pond, and the moment frozen in time. He paused to listen. Nothing. There was no sound here at all.

He'd never been anywhere that felt so other-worldly.

He carried on, the sound of his feet sliding through ash the only thing to penetrate the silence. It felt like an age as he traversed the smooth landscape, the whole time wondering what could possibly have done this. He couldn't think of anything that would create a landscape like this.

Perhaps one thing.

His flashlight caught a dip in the ground ahead. As he began to step closer, he felt his skin began to prickle with pins and needles. His face began to flush with waves of hot and cold. There was a force in the air that was almost tangible.

Eventually, the torchlight revealed a curved basin in the earth. It was large and perfectly circular. The closer he got, the more static he felt on his skin. He made it to the edge, and patches of his skin began to burn while other patches froze and chapped. He backed away; whatever this basin was, it was reacting to his presence. He was now far enough away that his skin only tingled, but still close enough to see into the basin. It was smooth—as smooth as the landscape surrounding it—but there was no ash. Something was glowing slightly in it. He turned off his flashlight, and then he saw a large mark that hummed with a low frequency, and a haze vibrated in the air over it. Without his torch, he could now make out the design. A symbol. Three concentric rings, and in the centre ring, there were four circles. Three overlapped each other while one was laid over the other three, holding them in place.

He recognised it.

He slid away from the basin until the pins and needles faded. He pulled the satellite phone from his coat pocket and dialled the Deputy Director. He got through immediately.

“Yes sir, Agent Luna has already called through a list of needs.”

“It doesn’t look good, but they’re organised and working through it.”

“Yes sir. I’ll be staying on site.”

“I need you to bring someone in.”

“Yes sir. That one.”

“We’re gonna need her here as soon as possible.”

“Honestly, right now I don’t know, but I think we can rule out a terrorist attack.”

“Yes sir. She can help us.”

“Thank you sir. I’ll keep you updated through the night.”

He slid the phone back into his pocket and looked up at the night sky. He closed his eyes as the first flakes of snow landed softly on his face. They gathered on his eyelashes and began to melt, forming a cold layer of water on his skin. The air soon grew thick with flakes of snow, floating downward and settling in a thick blanket on the ground.

Things were about to get worse.



As the snow began to fall, a grim resolution spread throughout the rescue crews. Rivers of cables and lighting wound their way through the wrecked city as crews gradually inched their way nearer to the epicentre. The number of people saved from the wrecked landscape decreased as the number of bodies began to steadily increase.

The last survivor—though the rescue workers wouldn’t know it—was a nine-year-old girl. She was pulled gently from the rubble by a slender man in a long black coat, his hair a thick matt of dark copper that seemed to glisten whenever the snow fell on it. She shivered as the cold night air touched her, but she was delirious and frozen—so stunned she couldn’t even cry. He checked her quickly and smoothly for any broken bones or open wounds, but miraculously, she suffered only cuts and bruises. He pulled her up into his arms and began to carry her out of the destruction. He walked quietly past groups of rescue crews digging through the rubble. Everyone ignored him as he stepped carefully through the landscape towards the triage tents. The warmth of his chest

seeped into the girl's aching body, and in a moment of clarity, the girl began to sob. He held her close to him, letting her cry until the tears stopped and her breathing began to shunt in ragged breaths.

He stroked her tangled, dirty hair, and his hands gained a dim glow about them. Tiny lights danced up and down his fingers, bouncing onto her hair, and the dirty brown strands began to glow. The lights crowned around her head then slowly slipped beneath her scalp, and the girl fell into a sound, deep sleep.

He carried her up a small levee at the edge of the destruction zone and walked past the triage tents, depositing her smoothly in the back of an ambulance. He stepped gracefully out of the way so the paramedics could work around the girl. The driver closed the ambulance doors, and the man stood like a dark statue, watching as the engine turned over and the lights began to flash, reflecting on the sharp features of his ghostly pale face. His deep copper eyes glimmered the same colour as his hair when the lights caught them. He watched until the ambulance was out of sight and turned to look back over the wasteland. He looked out over the devastation, deep beneath the wreckage for signs of life, but there were none. The girl had been the last. From now on, only the dead would be pulled from the ruins, and he had no desire to linger among the dead.

Vermilion turned west and slipped silently away.



CHAPTER 2: CHIASMA

Little Rock, The Event + 1

The sun rose on Little Rock, bringing with it clear skies of the palest blue. A thick blanket of snow covered the ground, and the city was quiet. Rescue crews and volunteers had worked through the night, replaced by fresh crews that had come from all over Arkansas and neighbouring states. By now, it was obvious that only the dead remained, and a sombre mood had fallen on the city.

Over in the western suburbs, the dream weaver Vermilion sat on a wall, watching the sun creep over the horizon, casting a cool glow over the white carpet of a small park. The apartment towers blocking the horizon created bright fingers of morning sunlight reaching out for him. He waited until they were nearly at his feet and then slid from the wall. The snow lay undisturbed, leaving no sign he'd ever sat there.

He walked along the park and through urban streets, sensing the hopes and fears of the people living here. Once upon a time, he would have spent the night weaving dreams, leaving him weak and tired by the time dawn crept around. Mornings used to be a time of resting and recharging for another night of weaving, but not any more. It had been several years since he last wove a dream, and he didn't miss it one bit.

He thought by now he would have found a new direction, but with every day, he felt more and more lost. He was starting to feel as if he had no place in this world anymore. Perhaps it was time for him to fade and let his magic float away with the sunset.

A dark ball of shadow bounced along the snow, out of one home and into another. A second soon followed. Then a third, and soon small blobs of shadow were bouncing in and out of buildings everywhere. Khadema. Small creatures evolved from wild, dark magic, feeding on the light magical energy in humans. The explosion had doused the city in magic and seeped into the marrow of every living soul here. For a moment, it had infused everyone with determination and—albeit grim—hope. For the khadema, it was paradise as they came to feed. For humans, it was a dangerous state to find themselves in. Soon, hope and determination would fade as the lighter magical energy was consumed, leaving them to darker inclinations.

Humans were oblivious to magic, even though it impacted every aspect of their lives. Some humans were inclined more to the lighter energy, absorbing it from around them without realising, manifesting fortune and confidence. Others were drawn subconsciously to the darker magics, leaving them victims to their own fears and frustrations.

Magical creatures had maintained a delicate equilibrium between the light and dark since the very beginning, but humans, blind to the ebb and flow of the magic surrounding them, were both slaves to it, and disrupted it at every opportunity. Magic was balance. It was order. Humans, by nature, seemed incapable of such things.

Usually, wherever the khadema roamed, the bright yothada—the counter-balance to their darker siblings—would be found, feeding wherever the darker magics were dominating. It was a wild, untempered dance that kept stability in the world. There was a time when their absence would have concerned Vermilion, but not today. The world was falling further and further out of alignment, and there was little he could do about it. After thousands upon thousands of years, he finally felt tired. Not physically, but in the core of his being, he felt so very tired. Thousands of years. Millions of dreams. Yet what difference had it made? Humanity seemed destined to destroy itself in the pursuit of things that, ultimately, mattered not a whit. After last night, perhaps magic was finally ready to give them a push towards oblivion.

Whatever had happened last night was most definitely magical in nature, but Vermilion couldn't imagine what kind of creature was capable of such power. Not even the dream weavers, who were considered some of the more powerful of magical creatures, had achieved such potency. This was a tipping point. Perhaps the world really was ready to rid itself of the last mortal race.

Vermilion turned a corner into a small estate of brick duplexes arranged in a U-shape. Houses lay silent, and there was nothing of interest. He was about to walk past when something pulled at him. A tug of magic. A magical presence. Dozens of tiny khadema skittered over the snow, scattering in every direction. Whatever was here was scaring them away. A strong presence. Something familiar, yet at the same time strange and alien.

He wandered into the U-shaped street crossing the road into a field in the centre. Swings and monkey bars stood like silent wrecks at one end, rising from a sea of white. Underneath the snow, he could discern the faint outline of a small soccer pitch and judging by the way the grass had worn, children played often here.

There was a strangeness in the air, and it made him anxious. It was familiar, yet unknowable. Comforting, yet unsettling. He contemplated following the khadema. They knew enough to get far away from whatever magical presence was here, and that seemed like wisdom to him. Perhaps he should show the same wisdom and walk away. Find some quiet, isolated wilderness and finally lay his magic to rest.

A metal squeak rang out across the snowy field. Vermilion turned, and his mood darkened instantly. A playful voice sang out as a young woman played on the swing.

“Hello Vermilion. You haven’t changed at all!”

Chiasma.

The thief of harmony.

Destroyer of his peace.

The one who took away everything.



Scarborough, Five Years Before The Event.

The moon lit up the thin patchwork layer of clouds from above, casting a threadbare blanket of silver in the dark blue sky. Stars glistened between the broken formations of clouds as they swept over the town underneath. The air was crisp and fresh and cold enough to chill anyone venturing outside to the bones. A thin film of frost was beginning to form on the

ground, and puddles began to freeze on the pavements. Steam rose from vents in manhole covers, releasing the smell of sewage and stagnant water into the streets.

Cars drifted along silent roads. Some travelling home from completed late shifts. Some carrying revellers from pubs across the town. On the corners of run-down streets, a handful of prostitutes gathered, shivering as they watched the cars drive by, wishing that one would stop just so they could get out of the cold, but the cars were few and far between. One by one, they gave up and found whatever shelter they could find.

Three young prostitutes pushed their way into a large derelict house, the windows boarded up long ago and decorated with graffiti. A host of cats patrolled the abandoned building, feasting on smaller animals dug out of the overgrown garden. The smell of dead animals and excrement filled the place. Undaunted, the three slid open the rotting board that acted as a makeshift door. A rogue nail scratched one of them, but she didn't notice; anticipation of the drugs that awaited them was all she was thinking about. They stepped over two homeless men who were sleeping, not noticing a third man with glittering ginger hair and long black coat. They found an unoccupied room upstairs and prepared for a night of highs and visions.

Vermilion ignored the girls. They were not his concern. He was here for the two men that lay dying in the hallway. His hand glistened as it caressed the man's skull with a strange silver light, like moonlight reflected on a wind swept lake. The dying man's hair remained untouched as the fingers travelled across

the man's scalp and penetrated his skull. Vermilion closed his eyes, sifting through what remained of the man's memories, shaping and twisting them, then returning them reshaped. He flooded the man's fraying mind with images of love and friendship. Fields of wildflowers under warm summer days. Fragrant pine forests and the sound of fallen needles crunching under foot. Childlike wonder and the thrills of discovery. He painted every image the man longed to experience once again. Images the man would carry into the twilight as his body turned cold. Vermilion kept his hand there, even when the body became cold in death, icy teardrops in the corners of frozen eyes.

He turned to the second homeless man, but he had already died, and there were no dreams he could give. Vermilion walked out of the house and into the night. The dream weaver walked on, his heart full of sorrow, and wandered the frosted streets in search of other dreams to weave.



It was not that Chiasma was invisible; it was just that everybody she passed in the town centre ignored her. She didn't mind. There was too much going on for Chiasma to be bothered by something so trivial. The bright lights of the pubs and the noise of taxis eager for business held her fascination. The hustle and bustle of people huddling together, waiting for a ride home. The drunken laughter and antics of lads and lasses who had spent a good night out but would most likely not remember it in the morning. It was all far too exciting for Chiasma. Everything and everyone fascinated her. She longed to mingle with them, to

listen closely to their whispered conversations, to peer into their souls and experience what they experienced. It was so alien to her, but as a sylph, she was so alien to them. It was why she was able to pass through the crowds without anyone noticing her.

Chiasma ran away from the busy town centre and headed into quieter streets, her feet flitting through the air, never touching the frosty pavement. The sylph drifted through the town like the clouds in the sky, layers of diaphanous silk fluttering behind her, shimmering in silver and blue. Her hair floated around her head as if she were under water, the strands awash with waves of pale green and soft gold. She bathed in the night air. The night was a time of adventures and dreams and secrets. The night made her feel free and made her footsteps lighter and faster.

She wished she could enjoy it. Wished she could linger among the dreams and whispers of the humans who lived and slept in this place, but she couldn't stop and enjoy it as she wanted. She had purpose and it drove her on.

She entered a large park with hedgerows and paths and benches. Late autumn flowers were gathered in large patches of withering colours, and in the centre sat a large lake, now still and silent, nothing more than a dark mirror reflecting the backlit clouds. She slowed and looked around. There was a man wearing a long dark coat, his hair shining like copper under the moonlight, his hands weaving dreams for a woman laid out under a filthy, frosted blanket, cuddling a scruffy dog for warmth. Chiasma watched him work and felt the sadness permeating from him. She was only young, even for a sylph. She knew only excitement and discovery and the usual playful nature

of her kind. Such sadness was an unknown thing to her. The feelings emanating from the interaction were terrible to witness, cutting her deeply as she felt them for the very first time.

Chiasma watched him work until she saw the life pass away from the woman. The dog stirred and whimpered as it looked up into the eyes of the weaver. The weaver scratched behind the dog's ear, and Chiasma watched as lights danced along his fingers and below the dog's fur. The dog nuzzled the weaver's hand as it lay down, and she felt the dog's life pass from the world. The dream weaver lingered over the bodies, gathering himself as if offering a prayer. She suddenly felt a sense of reverence. Something sacred had taken place, though she didn't quite understand it. The weaver brushed down his coat as he stood, and their eyes met. He was astonished to see her watching him, which didn't surprise her. Dream weavers went unnoticed, and sylphs rarely wandered where the weavers worked. He held her gaze, staring into her emerald eyes as she stepped slowly towards him. She reached up and touched him softly on the forehead. A sharp sting of electricity shot through his body, knocking him to the floor. He writhed on the frosty ground from the pain, and when it subsided, he opened his eyes, annoyed at the intrusion, only to find that the sylph had vanished.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, his head swimming, and looked around the park for the sylph. She was nowhere to be seen. He brushed her out of his thoughts and went back to his work, but his legs were unsteady and his head faint. He grasped hold of a nearby bench for support, becoming still to balance his energy.

His attention was drawn to a figure shrouded in black as it moved stealthily in the shadows of a clump of trees. It drifted as gracefully as a sylph, yet it lacked the colourful wrappings sylphs tended to wear. It wore a dark cloak with a large hood covering its head, and it was hunched over. The hood hung so low Vermilion wondered how it could see where it was going. It must surely have blocked its view, yet the figure drifted in and out of trees as if it knew every facet and imperfection of the park.

Captivated by the interloper, Vermilion followed. He was sure it was a magical creature. Its very movements—its swiftness and grace—betrayed it as such. He followed it from the park towards one of the run-down housing estates filled with boarded-up homes and overgrown weeds. Small courtyards and pathways filled with abandoned cars, broken TVs and discarded shopping trolleys. Here, youths were free to roam as long as they roamed in force, while young families and the elderly lived in a prison of fear.

Vermilion rarely came here. This place was filled with a despair not even he could endure, but tonight he followed the shadow along pathways that wound through overgrown bushes, between terraced houses and blocks of flats. The figure led him to a courtyard surrounded by gutted homes with condemned notices stuck to boarded-up windows. Glass shards were scattered across the great concrete plaza that was once a car park. Only two cars were parked here, and they were devoid of wheels, one having been torched a few days before. Three teenage boys on the edge of consciousness slouched in the burned-out wreck, but the shadow passed them by.

The figure floated over the scattered debris field to the second car, where a girl lay sleeping next to her boyfriend. The boy blew pillars of smoke into the frosty night air through the driver's window, reminiscing over his deeds so far tonight. He did not see the shadow approach. He did not see the figure silently climb onto the roof of the car. Did not see the long, shrouded arm slip inside, thin ethereal fingers stretching out towards his skull. He did not feel the slender fingers wrap around his head, one over each temple and one pressing against his forehead. He did feel the surge of pain as every memory, every dream, every wish was sucked from his mind in tiny electrical sparks absorbed by the creature's skin. He didn't make a sound as the last of his mind fell away from him and into the creature. His body shuddered in one gentle convulsion, passing away with a wilted sigh. The creature then turned its attention to the girl, and Vermilion could only watch in horror as it drained her as it had the boy.

The creature hovered over the bodies and then reared up to its full height, the hood falling back from its smooth head, the cloak slipping off its shoulders, revealing the shining, armoured skin. Vermilion shuffled back in horror. The wraith from his past. Never had he expected to see it again. It couldn't be. Not here. Not after all this time. A sudden sense of panic seized him. He moved to run, but the wraith turned its smooth, bony head towards Vermilion, casting a single, oval, pearl-like eye at the weaver.

It jumped from the roof of the car and lurched towards Vermilion, a slender, smooth grey arm reaching out for him. Vermilion could not move, his body held by a powerful force, a magic too strong to

resist. He was sure this was his last moment. The thin fingers reached out for him but then lowered to the creature's side as it pushed its cold skull against Vermilion's head. A bright flash of light blinded him, and he could feel himself fall back.

The light faded. Vermilion blinked while his eyes focused. He became aware of ragged breathing and realised it was him. He reminded himself he didn't need to breathe and held his chest still to recompose himself. He noticed he was back by the lake, laying on the path, the sylph twirling in front of him, her hair glistening in silver and gold as it caught the moonlight.

Vermilion's head felt light, and he reached out a hand to steady himself, but instead of cold concrete, his hand touched soft, cool flesh. The sylph was stronger than he'd expected, and as her hand pulled him up, she twisted, curling her other arm around him. He stumbled back, but she held him and led him to a nearby bench.

"Lean against me. Be calm and still. Let the magic flow," she said softly, her voice light and wistful.

"Who are you?" Vermilion asked, regaining himself.

"I am Chiasma. And you are Vermilion."

"What just happened?"

"You had a dream."

He may have been weak and confused, but he had the wherewithal to be incensed at the remark. "Nonsense. I am a weaver of dreams, not a dreamer of dreams."

"But you did," She said with glee, which only served to irritate him further.

"It is not possible." The memory of the wraith flashed in his mind, and he shuddered. "How can it be possible?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," he answered sourly.

"No," she laughed. "It doesn't matter at all." She leaped from the seat and spun on the frosted path, her arms reaching out for the moon. She stopped, skipped towards him, and cupped his face in her hands. She looked so young, so fragile, so innocent.

"What was it like?" she asked with a childlike smile.

Vermilion shook his head free of her hands. "Unpleasant." Vermilion rose to his feet. "You did this. Why did you do this?"

"Because," she answered and spun under the moonlight again.

"I should have known better than to expect a simple answer from a sylph," he muttered.

She stopped and reached for his hand. She turned solemn as she held it and planted a gentle kiss on the open palm. Her kiss was like ice and sent a chill along his spine.

"Because you are the one who has been touched," she whispered.

"You still answer without answering."

"Not all questions need an answer Vermilion. Some you discover for yourself. That is part of the journey."

"What journey?"

"You will see."

Chiasma giggled, stepped back and jumped upward, spinning, her robes whipping around. Her being, her robes, everything glowed as if stealing all

the moonlight, washing her in silvers and blues and greens. It was beautiful. Her hands reached up as far as she could stretch, and as she spun, she faded, her glistening hair the last thing Vermilion saw



Little Rock, The Event + 1

Vermilion's insides twisted into a knot of anger and contempt. Sylphs were trouble, and Chiasma was, without doubt, the most troublesome. The last five years had not improved his impression nor his feelings.

She leaped from the swing and flew across the snow as though she was a feather. She landed lightly, skipped across the snow, and with a final spin, faced Vermilion. She seemed taller, older perhaps, as if he were seeing a young woman instead of the girl he remembered. She reached up to touch his face, and instinctively, he grabbed her wrist, holding it tight.

"Do not touch me," Vermilion growled.

Chiasma withdrew her hand, breaking free of Vermilion's grip easily.

"So you have changed," she said, washing the area in a sadness that overwhelmed Vermilion.

She appeared to shrink; the glow surrounding her faded, and her lustre became dull. Her hair fell flat and lifeless. Her skin became translucent and ghostlike.

"You are fading," he said softly.

"Yes," she replied, her voice distant and quiet.

"A fate well-earned," he said coldly.

She fell to the snow, but there was no sympathy for her.

"You should stop interfering in the world," he said, chastising her.

"I do what I am called to do," she answered. "But you do not."

Vermilion turned and stepped away.

"You know nothing," he said.

"I see you," she said as light sparked and flashed from her whole body. Her aura grew dull again, and she sagged, crumpling into a heap on the snow. "I see everything. You no longer weave."

Vermilion stopped and stormed back towards the fallen sylph.

"You took everything from me," Vermilion said with sorrow. "I wish you had never found me."

Chiasma looked up, her face sad, like a child who couldn't understand what she'd done wrong.

"I did only what I needed to do. I put you on the path. You were the one who chose not to follow it."

"You had no right."

She pushed herself back to her feet and skipped along the surface of the snow. She reached out to touch him again. He tried to stop her, but she batted his hand away as if it were a light breeze. He winced as her hand pressed flat against his cheek. It felt like ice against his skin. He felt all the emotions of the last five years seep out of him. The loss, the loneliness, the anger and despondency. Her hand began to glow, and he felt the icy chill turn warm and then burning hot. He tried to step away, but an unseen force held him fast. The snow beneath their feet began to melt, and columns of steam wrapped around their legs.

Her eyes reflected the pain of recent years, and then they began to burn bright, and Vermilion began to see a different past. The past that could have been. He saw the lives touched. The people saved. The inspiration gifted. The small, insignificant changes

people made in their lives as a result of dreams he could have weaved. He saw the effects snowball, and each tiny change grew and spread like ripples across a pond.

Finally, she took away her hand, and he stumbled back. She grew brighter, and her whole body was bathed in fire. Her dress danced with red and orange flames, and her hair bathed in waves of gold and copper.

"I took nothing from you Weaver," she said, her voice shaking the ground and echoing between the houses. "You, and you alone, stole your purpose and your future."

She seemed to shrink again as the light faded, then the mighty, powerful being returned to the playful creature he remembered. She giggled childishly as she twirled and jumped, circling him in a wild dance. When she finally stopped, she stood before him, a glint in her eyes.

"Your future waits for you. If you want it," she said.

Vermilion couldn't speak, so he nodded, a yearning rising in his chest that he couldn't explain.

"You were chosen Vermilion weaver. You were chosen to walk this path. You tried to walk another, yet it still brought you here. You cannot escape your destiny."

"What is my path?" He whispered, desperate to know.

Chiasma placed her hands on his chest and giggled. The gesture infuriated him.

"If you cannot answer, then leave me be," he said in frustration. It was as if she dangled a bright future ahead of him but kept it tantalisingly out of reach. She was just teasing and tormenting him.

Chiasma leapt up, pushing Vermilion to the frozen ground. Snow sprayed upward, surrounding her. By the time it had settled back to the ground, she was gone. Vermilion felt relieved to be alone again. He brushed the snow off his long coat and prepared to stand, but a shadow covered the ground in front of him. He looked up and froze. A pale figure with long silver hair looked down with friendly eyes. Vermilion was surely hallucinating.

“Argentis?” He whispered. “It cannot be.”

“I was lost, but now am found,” the figure said quietly. “Or maybe that’s you. I dunno. It’s all a bit confusing.”

“I watched you die.”

“I know,” Argentis whispered, then he grinned and shrugged his shoulders. “Well. Mostly die.”



Scarborough, Five Years Before The Event.

“So you had a dream?”

Vermilion said nothing and drank his hot chocolate.

“Like a proper dream?”

“How many times must I repeat myself?”

“Probably a few more times. You know me. I’m a bit slow first thing in the morning.”

They didn’t need to eat, but one of the human habits Argentis liked to indulge in was breakfast. He found it helped restore the loss of energy after a night of weaving. He also enjoyed the interactions and conversations with the café staff. He liked allowing the humans to see him, only to be forgotten once he walked out of the door. He liked the transient nature of the interaction. A way of playing in the mortal

world. Vermilion suspected Argentis got more out of the interaction than he did from the food. It had taken some convincing, but eventually, Vermilion joined in, and each morning, the pair would engage in the breakfast ritual.

But not this morning. Vermilion did not feel like eating and simply cradled his drink, the warmth seeping into his hands. He stared out of the café window, watching the tide slowly roll out while Argentis took a deep bite out of a thick bacon sandwich.

Argentis wore his long silver hair woven into a single plait and a long dark grey coat that was similar in style to the one Vermilion wore. His language and demeanour were more relaxed than other weavers, and he'd picked up other human habits, but Vermilion knew it was just a way of deflecting what they had both experienced in Germany decades ago. He couldn't remember exactly how long the two of them had travelled and worked together, but it had been several hundred years at least. Argentis was, by the human definition, his friend. His only friend.

"You know, this town may be a bit of a dump, but it doesn't half do a good bacon butty," Argentis said and then took another giant bite from his sandwich.

Vermilion kept his gaze on the waves crashing against the remains of the broken sea front. "The people of this town are going through hard times. The town reflects those who live in it. It will not always be so. That is why we are here."

"So what was this dream about then?" Argentis asked, still chewing his food.

Vermilion said nothing, his eyes focused on something beyond the horizon.

Argentis took the last bite from his sandwich and looked longingly at the untouched plate in front of Vermilion.

"You going to eat that?" he asked, his mouth still full.

Vermilion shook his head. "Take it if you wish."

"Come on. It was a dream. Not the end of the world." Argentis swallowed a mouthful of the sequestered sandwich. "Unless you dreamed about the end of the world, then I guess it would be the end of the world." He took another bite out of Vermilion's breakfast. "Wonder what that would look like. You ever wonder that? Like, what would happen to us and all that if the world actually ended?"

Argentis waited for a response, but Vermilion kept staring out of the window. He peeled a crust off the sandwich and flicked it at Vermilion.

"It was something from the past. Come back to haunt us," Vermilion said quietly.

Argentis paused and let the sandwich fall to the plate. His countenance darkened, a tarnish streaking across his bright silver eyes.

"Please don't say what I think you're going to say."

Vermilion faced his friend and placed his drink gently onto the table.

"I saw the wraith."

The two sat in silence for a moment.

"I said don't tell me," Argentis said, his voice low and growling.

"It was here. It attacked two children and then confronted me."

"But you kicked it into the middle of next week, right?"

Vermilion ignored him. "It was just a dream."

Argentis studied his friend. "Yeh. Just a dream."

Vermilion said nothing. Argentis sat back and looked around.

"I will miss this little café."

"Why?"

Argentis leaned across the table. "Because I know you Vermilion. You don't believe it was just a dream. You believe it's really here, and if that is the case, no matter how remotely true it may be, I don't want to be here if that thing is running around. I think it's time we left."

Vermilion turned to look at the sea again.

"You know what this thing is capable of doing," Argentis said, his voice soft and serious. "We can't stay here."

Vermilion stood and walked out of the Café to the painted metal barrier overlooking the crumbling promenade. Argentis followed, mumbling to himself, though relieved that his friend had listened to him. The sea front was quiet. A few brave dog owners wrapped up against the bone-chilling winds were the sole, solitary people on the beach. A couple of cafés were the only shops open along the promenade. The rest were shuttered until the summer, if they re-opened at all. Vermilion skirted along the edge of closed shops and arcades, darting up a path leading into town. Argentis followed without a sound, but the deeper into the town they went, the darker his mood became.

Eventually, the pair came to the estate Vermilion had seen in his dream. He knew instantly which courtyard was the one from his dream. Police cars blocked the road and tape cordoned off the area. It was then that Argentis realised they were not leaving.

He had known Vermilion long enough to know what he was thinking most of the time. Their friendship had lasted this long because they understood each other. They complimented each other in personality, disposition and approach to their work, though Vermilion had always been the leader and Argentis had always followed.

Argentis shook his head and brushed past Vermilion. "Good grief. If we're really going to do this, we may as well get in there."

The two walked past the cordon and wandered around the courtyard. A group of police officers wrapped in white coveralls were meticulously cataloguing and sampling everything around a pair of wrecked cars. Vermilion walked slowly to the shell where he knew would be a teenage boy and girl. He wandered to the front of the car and studied the scene. Streams of frozen, dried blood hung from their eyes. Burn marks stained the forehead and temples where the wraith's fingers had absorbed the magical energy from its victims. Vermilion couldn't move. It had been here. Not a dream after all. A vision of what had been.

"It was really here," Argentis said. His voice laced with dread. "I can't believe it's really here. We need to get out of here."

Vermilion didn't move. He was too focused on the scene before him, trying desperately to understand everything that was happening and what it all meant. Argentis grabbed his arm, startling him.

"Vermilion."

Vermilion shook off his stupor. "Of course."

The two made their way from the scene, but as they were leaving, Vermilion noticed a woman

wearing a smart suit and a serious expression watching them. He looked around, trying to see what it was she was looking at, but there was nothing, then he realised that she was actually watching them. He stopped dead and stared at the woman.

"I thought we were..." Argentis noticed what Vermilion was looking at. "Wait. Can she see us?"

The woman raised her fingers to her eyes and swivelled them round to point at the two dream weavers.

"Dream weavers dreaming, a wraith on the loose, and now a human who can see us. This is getting out of hand." Argentis remarked, pulling Vermilion from the scene and away from the estate.

Without realising it, Argentis led the way back through the town and towards the seafront. He grabbed hold of the promenade barrier looking out at the choppy waters of the North Sea. He felt dizzy and weak. So much that had been buried inside for so long began to bubble to the surface. Fear, anger, hatred. He let them rise. Sparks began to skitter along the metal railing. A woman walking her dog saw the metal suddenly spark. Unable to see their source, she turned and dragged her dog away.

Vermilion watched in silence until he felt Argentis grow calm and focused again, then joined him at the barrier.

"How long has it been? Sixty. Seventy years?" Argentis asked.

"I am not sure. I stopped tracking time after..." Vermilion faded off.

"Cerulean," Argentis finished.

The tide had pulled back enough that the beach was revealed. To the north, the remains of the

harbour jutted out above the sand, and a group of teenagers were exploring the freshly exposed landscape. The sounds of the sea crashing against sand and stone swept over them both, filling the silence between them.

"We should seek counsel," Vermilion suggested.

"We don't need counsel," Argentis replied, his sour mood dismissing any and all suggestions.

The sea swept over the remains of the harbour, spraying water over the front.

"We should visit Illuminel," Vermilion pressed.

Argentis winced at the suggestion. "Not Illuminel. You know she doesn't like me."

"That is not true, she...'

"She hates that I weave nightmares for kids. She was very clear she didn't want us anywhere near where she works."

A seagull landed on the fence next to them, squawking loudly. Argentis sent a couple of rogue sparks along the railing, and the gull flew away.

"These are extenuating circumstances," Vermilion said, his head bowed. "If we are leaving, then we should at least warn her."

"I don't want to leave," Argentis replied.

"But you said you wished...'

"I know what I said," Argentis replied, cutting off his friend.

The sea rushed back and forth, frothing and crashing over the debris jutting out of the sand. Argentis closed his eyes, listening to the rhythm of it. He felt his power surge with each wave as it broke against the land.

Argentis turned to face his friend. "I want to end it."



Night had fallen again. The two had discussed and debated all day, but Argentis reluctantly agreed to seek out Illuminel, the solitary dream weaver who often spent her time in the most run-down part of the town.

A crisp, icy breeze swept through the streets, penetrating even the thickest of winter coats. The first flakes of snow fell to be trampled underfoot, but the snow was not to be deterred, and soon the air was full of thick flakes that settled on everything in a pure white blanket.

The pair wandered all around the area but found no sign of Illuminel. Vermilion paused, feeling out the magic that should have emanated from her. Eventually, he found the faintest trace, and they followed it. They came to a patch of scorched ground, the snow melted away and the earth underneath charred and steaming. Vermilion knelt to touch the scene. It prickled with energy, like pins and needles on his skin.

Vermilion looked up at Argentis just as a shrouded figure knocked the silver-haired weaver flying. Vermilion fell back as the wraith swept past him, carrying Argentis out of the garden. The two slammed onto the snowy path and rolled in the snow until the wraith had Argentis pinned. Vermilion rolled onto his knees to see the wraith poised over Argentis, the smooth fingers reaching out for the weaver's skull. He cried out, but the wraith ignored him. The first finger touched the silvery mane just as Argentis kicked up and turned, dislodging the wraith. He scrambled on his hands and knees, trying to get a purchase on the path, but the wraith lashed out, swatting at his feet.

The wraith leaped upon Argentis' back, the fingers snapping tightly around his skull. Argentis began to groan as his power began to slowly drain.

Vermilion pounced, wrapping his arms around the beast, but the wraith kept its grip on Argentis, and Vermilion was shrugged off, rolling onto his back, his head crashing against the icy ground.

He pushed himself to his feet and lunged at the wraith. It kept a lock on Argentis while its other arm swung out and slapped Vermilion aside with a flash of energy that stunned the weaver.

The wraith turned its full attention back to its quarry.

Argentis struggled under the grip, kicking and flailing his arms, but the wraith was too strong and its reach too long. Argentis could already feel his magic fading, could feel it draining out of him and into the wraith.

"One dream weaver not enough for you?" he grunted.

The wraith replied, not with a voice, but with a pulse of energy that echoed in the depths of Argentis' mind.

Your essence will make me more powerful than any other.

Argentis continued to resist, but he was growing ever weaker. Deep down, he knew it was over. His body began to fade, growing thin and spectral.

"Up yours," he spat before his body faded into millions of tiny stars. They swirled along the wraith's arms, sinking into the thick strands of muscle showing through breaks in the ceramic-like skin.

The wraith sank to its knees, a dark, oozing liquid spilling out of its arms and legs. It sizzled, melting the

snow. Small fires skittered along the ground before being snuffed out by the cold air.

Lurching to its feet, it pitched forward and then fell, spilling more of the oozing magic onto the ground. It rose and stumbled. Rose and stumbled again and again, the grace and speed replaced by an ungainly stagger. Blobs of magic dribbled from its body as it moved slowly and awkwardly towards Vermilion.

Vermilion couldn't move or speak. He froze, staring at where Argentis had been. He was gone, just like Cerulean. The shock left him hollowed out, not knowing what to think or what to feel. He wished it were just a dream. It couldn't be real. He couldn't have witnessed the death of another weaver. Another friend. The truth was crawling and pitching right towards him, but he couldn't accept it. It couldn't be real.

Despite the obvious struggle to contain the magic the wraith had absorbed, Vermilion could discern a sense of joy and pleasure from the thing. Sensing the sheer delight of its actions, Vermilion began to feel something rise from the pit of his stomach. There was fear, but there was something greater overtaking it. There was anger. Anger like he'd never felt before.

The wraith rose to its full height, casting out more blobs of magic. Its armoured skin looked even more pallid than before, covered in a liquid sheen of magical energy that was fighting for release while the wraith fought to contain it. The snow melted under its feet, and Vermilion suddenly became aware of the snow as it froze his cheeks and brushed his eyelashes. He began to notice each flake as it fell to the earth. It

was as if time slowed, and the world was rendered in perfect detail.

The wraith was struggling but kept lurching slowly towards Vermilion. Vermilion didn't move. He focused his magic, pushing aside the fear and giving more space for his anger. The wraith crouched down, lowering its bony head until the single eye was opposite Vermilion's nose. Vermilion stared right into it, the rising tide of rage burning in his eyes. He crashed his forehead into the wraith's single eye, and it stumbled back in pain.

Vermilion leapt up, crashing his knee into the wraith's belly, knocking it to the ground. He quickly came to his feet and grabbed the wraith's head, wrenching it back, then instinctively placed his hand over the oily shell. His ethereal fingers reached into the skull.

"Now, I have a dream for you," he whispered venomously.

He closed his eyes and let all his rage and hate flow from him and into the wraith's mind. He could feel the beast writhe under his grasp, but he tightened his grip so the wraith couldn't shake itself free. He could see all of the wraith's victims. All of the lives it had taken. Vermilion found them all and wove his dream.

He focused his magic, and two ghostly figures formed beside him—the weavers Illuminel and Argentis. They stood either side of Vermilion, reaching out to place their hands alongside Vermilion's on the wraith's skull. The magic of the three combined, and a light grew around them and then flashed outward, knocking the weaver and the wraith to the ground. He looked for the figure of

Argentis, but it had already faded, burned away by the light.

Vermilion was now drained of magic. He could do no more. He watched as the wraith fought to regain its footing. Vermilion sighed, crumbling to his knees. He watched the wraith fight its own mind, then he noticed a new presence. Chiasma emerged from the night and stepped between Vermilion and the wraith. She was calm, and a stillness surrounded her. For the first time, he noticed her fragile beauty as the snow fell gently around her pale skin. He could see the flakes reflected in her ever-changing eyes, now a blazing blue, flaring like a cold flame in the dark. He looked over at the wraith. It was struggling, writhing in agony, but the agony was fading, and soon it would pounce.

“What must I do?” Vermilion asked.

“You have done what was needed,” she answered. “Now it is time for me to play my part.”

Vermilion didn’t understand.

“You have done well Vermilion weaver. Be at peace.”

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. As she pulled away, he could see tears welling up in her eyes. Then she turned away and danced across the snow to the wraith. She watched it for a while until it stopped squirming and then raised the bony face until it stared at her. The two remained locked in each other’s gaze, and Vermilion stared in fascination at the pair, not noticing Chiasma’s legs were fading in the snow.

A chill wind struck up, blowing flurries of snow across the grass. A tiny blizzard swept over the sylph and the wraith, circling around them in a bright funnel. The circling blizzard exploded, scattering light

like glittering snow that fell over everything. Wherever it fell, the snow-covered ground glowed in small patches of copper and gold. The wind died down, and Vermilion looked up. Chiasma and the wraith were gone, and the snow continued to drift lazily down into the void.

Vermilion sat himself down in the snow, staring into the empty space where the two ethereal creatures had been. Only then did he realise there had only been two, not three weavers consumed by the wraith. Cerulean had not been part of the creature's memories. His magic had not been held captive by the wraith. It hit him like a hammer to his chest. There was more than one of them. The realisation left him empty. Left him alone.

He sat in the darkness and let the snow bury him.

"Argentis," he whispered into the silence of the night.



Little Rock, The Event + 1

Argentis reached down to pull Vermilion to his feet.

"Hungry? I know a place that does something called biscuits and gravy. Not quite sure what it is, but really want to try it."

Vermilion didn't know what to say.

"Yeah, I know. I know," Argentis began. "But I need to eat before I explain anything."

Vermilion grasped the hand of his old friend, and Argentis pulled him to his feet.

"Hell of a night, wouldn't you say?"

"How?" It was all Vermilion could think to say.

"Breakfast first. Answers second."

Argentis marched on, turning eastward. Vermilion returned to his senses and slowly, unsurely, followed.



Argentis slid the plate loaded with bacon, biscuits and peppered white gravy towards Vermilion, then placed a mug of warm hot chocolate into his hands. Vermilion watched as tiny marshmallows began to melt into the hot liquid. Steam rose in a thick funnel from the mug. The café sat on the very edge of the zone of destruction, the large windows shattered and now covered in sheets of thin plastic hastily cemented in place. It was one of the few places catering to first responders and volunteers throughout the night. They had no intention of closing today and would feed anyone that came through the doors.

The two friends sat at a table overlooking what the news channels were now calling *The Event* through the makeshift windows.

“One heck of an event I’d say,” Argentis opened with his characteristic lack of subtlety.

Vermilion put down his mug.

Argentis continued, “But you don’t want to talk about that, do you?”

“How are you here?” Vermilion asked. “I saw you die.”

“Chiasma is how I’m here.”

“She freed you?”

“Yes.” Argentis waded into his breakfast in the usual aplomb Vermilion remembered. “And no.”

He put down his fork as if he needed to concentrate in order to say what he needed to say.

“Apparently, my magic was all tangled up with the wraith’s. And Illuminel’s. Chiasma used some of her

own magic to separate us out and put us back together. It's like she had to imprint a bit of her magic onto mine to hold it all in place. Or something like that."

"So you..."

"You don't have to say it. My father would be so proud, my boy is part sylph!" Argentis said sarcastically. "I try not to think about it."

"We don't have fathers"

"I know we don't have fathers, it's just a saying."

"Well, I do not know what..."

"Why don't you just shut up and let me finish?"

Vermilion sat quietly and cradled his hot chocolate again.

"You could drive an angel to drink, you could," Argentis said, rubbing his eyebrows. "Where was I?"

"Chiasma."

"Right. I had no memory of what happened before. I just was. I wasn't even a whisp. Just straight back to being a dream weaver again. Only I was part Argentis and part Chiasma, and not really me. I was like a shadow of myself. Took me a while to find my way, but I got there eventually. Started weaving dreams again. Wandering from place to place but always feeling that something wasn't quite right. You know?"

"I know," Vermilion answered quietly.

"Eventually, Chiasma found me. She did her making-you-dream thing and gave me back my memories from before."

"You began to dream?"

"I don't know. Could have. Maybe. I can't explain it even if I wanted to, and I don't, so don't ask." He piled a forkful of biscuit and gravy into his mouth.

"After dreaming, or whatever it was, I remembered every last detail about what happened. Then she said I would need you and that you would need me. Then I came here, found you sitting on your backside, and now you're all caught up."

Argentis skewered a forkful of biscuit and bacon, swirling it around in the creamy sauce and stuffed it into his mouth.

"So what you been up to?" he asked, his mouth full of food.

Vermilion ignored the question. "I have no desire to dream again."

Argentis chewed and swallowed, and his face grew serious. "No dreaming necessary. Okay? I know how much it rattled you last time. But you've met Chiasma right?"

"You know I have," Vermilion answered dryly.

"Then you know something has got her scared. Something bad."

"Her magic is fading," Vermilion mentioned.

"She's protecting something from something. I don't know what either thing is, but it's got her worried."

"This event. It was magic. A powerful magic. Like nothing I have ever experienced."

"So you know that when she says we're needed, she means it. It's like really important." Argentis sat back and took a deep draft of his hot chocolate. "Have you tried dreaming again?"

"No," Vermilion answered bluntly.

Argentis pointed at his friend with a greasy fork. "I told her you wouldn't have."

Vermilion ignored his friend and sipped at his drink, the warmth spreading through his body. All he

could think about were the two Vermilions. The one he was and the one he could have been.

"So how are we gonna figure out what to do?" Argentis asked. "Chiasma was a bit vague. As usual. She maybe scared, but she's still a sylph."

"Do what?" Vermilion answered absently.

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?"

"You know I have."

"She asked for our help, but I don't know what we're supposed to do. Do you?"

"I do not," Vermilion answered softly.

"Then we're stuffed."

Argentis took another drink from his hot chocolate.

"You know," Argentis began hesitantly. "There is one person we could ask." Argentis looked up shrewdly.

"No."

"You know I'm right."

"We can find another way. We don't need her help."

"This event has scared away every other magical creature, so we don't have a lot of options here. Sylph. Or her." Argentis mopped up the last of the gravy with a clump of biscuit and stuffed it into his mouth. "Or you can try dreaming again."

"We will find another way."

"There is no other way," Argentis countered.

"My answer will not change," Vermilion said defiantly.

"Heard that before."

Vermilion ignored the jibe. "She is far away. There is no point considering it."

"We'll see," Argentis said.

Argentis grinned in a way Vermilion had never seen before.

“You know something,” Vermilion accused.

The grin was playful, cheeky, and a wave of rainbow colours washed over his eyes. The part of Argentis that was Chiasma. He remembered how frail she had seemed in the snow this morning. Sylphs were playful and frivolous creatures. He had never known one to be so serious and focused. That spoke volumes about the trouble they now found themselves in.

“I have no desire to speak with her again,” Vermilion said, remembering the events of Scarborough as if they were yesterday.

“You know,” Argentis said. “She probably feels the same way about you.”



CHAPTER 3: DI PEARSON

Little Rock, The Event + 2

Turbulence rocked the helicopter as it started to descend, jolting her awake. Detective Inspector Emily Pearson rubbed her eyes and sat up. It had been a long journey, and she'd only been able to catch short naps along the way. There had been no time to pack, which was fine as she always had a bag packed for occasions such as this. There'd been no time for anything, really. From Manchester to Memphis, with several stops along the way, she'd been rushed through every transfer without a break. The final leg to Little Rock—made by military helicopter—was rough and uncomfortable, but her exhaustion was overpowering, and she'd slept solidly during the short flight.

She felt a bump as the helicopter touched down. The door to the main cabin opened, and a blast of freezing cold air stole the breath from her lungs. She pulled her jacket tight around her and thanked the Army sergeant who'd been kind enough to make space for her to lie down.

Hopping onto the tarmac, she was taken aback by the large military presence. Helicopters, trucks and a wide assortment of other vehicles lined the assembly area. The nearby buildings looked battered and bruised. Broken windows and broken pipes. Missing roof tiles and cracked bricks.

The helicopter began to ascend, and the downwash almost knocked her to the ground. She brushed her mousy blonde hair out of her face and threw the helicopter a dirty look as it climbed away.

“Detective Inspector Pearson?”

She snapped back to reality and faced a tall black official wearing a dark blue parka with an FBI patch velcroed onto the chest pocket. He took her bag and handed her a similar coat, which she gratefully put on.

“Cheers. Could do without the cold,” she said.

“Be thankful it stopped snowing.” He held out a hand, which Pearson shook. “Special Agent Marcus Farrow, FBI.”

“Pleasure. What’s with all this?” she asked, looking around the complex.

“What have you been told?” he asked, smiling. He was athletically built, and his head bald. When he smiled, he was at once affable and genuine. Pearson decided she liked him, though she didn’t really know why. There was just something about him.

“Not much. Big explosion. You’re going to the States. The end. Didn’t even have a chance to say no.”

Farrow handed Pearson’s bag to a nearby agent. Either they were telepathic or had already discussed what to do with any bags she brought with her beforehand. She was pretty certain they were going to rifle through it before it got back into her possession. She stuffed her hands into the deep pockets to keep them warm and was surprised to find gloves deposited into each one. She pulled them out and slipped them on.

“You think of everything round here, don’t you.”

“Only the best service at our five-star resort.”

Pearson laughed. "You aren't getting this coat back you know."

Farrow's turn to laugh. "You're welcome. Come on. I'll bring you up to speed."

He led her to a nearby Humvee and stepped into the driving seat. "Hop in. I'll show you why you're here."

Pearson climbed into the passenger seat. "I was wondering when you'd get to that."

"You're here because I asked for you," Farrow stated casually.

"This is what, a major accident or terrorist attack? Not really my area of expertise. I think you asked for the wrong Pearson."

"Detective Inspector Emily Pearson. Thirty eight years old. Five foot eight. Blonde hair, grey-green eyes. Joined the West Yorkshire Police after completing a master's in criminology. Impressed your superiors so much, you became Detective Sergeant after only four years. You were responsible for tracking down Charlie Spate and then the Bradford Pollock. That earned you a promotion to Detective Inspector. Five years ago, you linked a series of murders across northern England that turned cold. Then you dropped off the map, got yourself a reprimand and spent the last five years co-ordinating drunk patrols in Leeds. Sound like you?"

"Yeh. Sounds like me," Pearson said, trying to shrink into her coat. "Like I said, I don't do anti-terrorism. You're barking up the wrong tree."

"You heard of Merrit Arnold?" Farrow asked. Pearson looked out at the landscape. It grew gradually more and more like a warzone, the Humvee moving down a track cleared through the rubble.

"Isn't he the one who called himself Doctor Wizard?"

"Uh huh."

"I heard of him. Killed nine people across Washington State. The victims were drained of blood, and each had puncture marks on their necks. State police suspected the killer had a history of mental illness who thought he was a vampire or something. Understandable, given the state of the victims. It was the FBI that brought him in."

Pearson stared at Farrow. "You were the one that brought Arnold in?"

"Guilty as charged."

"Trying to establish a bond, are we?" Pearson said sarcastically. "I caught nut jobs? You caught nut jobs?"

"Something like that," Farrow said smiling. "Arnold was into some freaky stuff. All kinds of weird books on magic and stuff like that. Very similar to Spate and Williamson. It was actually your work on those guys that helped me hook onto him."

"Still doesn't answer my question."

"Which one?" Farrow grinned.

A helicopter passed overhead, flying just above the ruins and heading eastward. Pearson peered out of the window, following its path. The landscape was becoming more and more broken, resembling less a war zone and more like something from a big budget disaster movie.

"When I first started with the Bureau, I got into the profiling side heavy. Then I came across your work—how you profiled Spate and Williamson."

"You really did your homework. Not many people know the Pollock's real name."

"I read up on you 'cos you knew your stuff. I started seeing parallels with what you'd seen and what was happening around Seattle. You're drawn to that magic BS, aren't you?"

"Was. Not any more."

"Fine, was."

"There's a logic to their crimes, to the way they think. Most tended to dismiss it. They weren't motivated by greed, or jealousy or trauma. They were motivated by a belief system most people didn't understand."

Pearson kept looking out of the window, wondering what could have caused such devastation. She suddenly realised she'd stopped talking.

"The occult may be barking to everyone else, but it wasn't to them. Others dismissed it. I didn't. That was all. I was able to get under their skin when others wouldn't."

"That's why I asked for you. Because you understand that magic stuff. You know they just believed different. But damn, they really do believe."

"To them, it makes total sense," she added.

There were no buildings now. Just rubble. Here and there, a steel beam would poke feebly from the broken concrete. The charred remains of broken wooden beams and shattered glass filled the gaps between piles of bricks and heaps of iced-up snow mixed with ash. They stood like frozen monsters overlooking no-mans land.

Farrow brought the Humvee to a stop. "We walk from here."

They stepped out onto the haunting scenery, and the first thing Pearson noticed was the stillness. There wasn't even a breeze over the ruined landscape.

There were no birds. Nothing made a sound. There was just nothing.

“Welcome to The Event,” Farrow said. Pearson noted that his voice had lost the earlier lightness.

Farrow led the way through a rough path laid out with sand and grit. Metal poles had been driven into the ground, and tapes of LED lights were strung between them. She could see where the snow and ash had been scraped aside. She crouched down to look more closely, rubbing her gloved fingers over something dark and smooth.

“Glass,” Farrow remarked.

“What could do this?”

Farrow nodded in the direction of the path.

“Let me show you.”

They continued in silence, making their way along the path. The crunching of their boots over grit became a rhythm—a steady beat to pass the journey. As she listened to the sound of their steps, she began to feel uneasy, as if a presence surrounded her. There was an energy here, and it felt heavy and tangible. It soaked through her clothes and made her skin prickle. The further along the path she walked, the more claustrophobic she felt.

Farrow stopped, and Pearson nearly walked into him. She stepped around him and froze. Before them was a basin carved out of the ground, smooth, shiny and perfect, about six meters across. There was a pattern on the concave surface—lines of obsidian that glimmered in the sunlight—and she held her breath as she followed the lines of the pattern. Three concentric circles rippling outward from the centre. Two smaller circles filled the outer ring, one at the north and one at the south. The inner ring held three

interlocking circles while a fourth of the same size cut across them all in the centre.

She recognised the symbol instantly. She'd grown up with it. It had also been prominent in books owned by Spate and Williamson.

"Damn." It was all Pearson could muster.

"Now you know."

Pearson took a couple of steps back. "You definitely got the wrong Pearson."

"I don't think so."

"Yeh, you do," she said, turning to walk back to the Humvee.

"I'm not going back just yet, and it's a long walk back," Farrow shouted out.

Pearson stopped, and her head dropped. This was the last place she wanted to be. She spun on her heels and marched back to face Farrow.

"I'll only get in your way."

Farrow smiled, and for a reason she couldn't fathom, it made her relax. She looked out at the basin carved into the earth. There was a slight haze hovering about six inches over the symbol as if the air were vibrating.

"What's causing the haze?"

"We don't know. We can't get close enough to get any solid readings. We don't know what it's made of, what formed it, what makes it do that," he said, pointing at the symbol. "All we know right now is the temperature range goes anywhere from ninety degrees Celsius to minus sixty, minute to minute."

"Why don't you have it cordoned off?"

"No need. The rescue crews won't come anywhere near it. We're the only ones dumb enough. Nobody's gonna walk onto it."

"Radiation?" Pearson asked.

"That was the first thing we tested. Nothing over and above background radiation. It is kicking out some serious energy, just we don't know what it is."

Pearson said nothing.

"I thought you might have some ideas. Or we could just ask those two guys," Farrow said, pointing across the basin.

Pearson looked up at where Farrow was pointing. Two figures stood in long, dark coats, one with copper hair, the other with silver.

"Damn it," she mumbled.

Argentis grinned. "She remembers us."



Scarborough, Five Years Before The Event

Detective Inspector Pearson slid quietly into the briefing room and found a discreet spot at the back. The Detective Inspector in front was an altogether unimpressive middle-aged man who was going to fat and wearing an ill-fitting grey suit. He stood by a large TV screen, cycling through pictures of bodies. Close-ups revealed blood around their eyes and ears. Burn marks around the temples and forehead. She was all too familiar with the images. She had tracked similar cases across Yorkshire, leading her here. It made sense. The deaths followed a path of deprivation. After last year's coastal storms had shredded a good chunk of the seafront, followed closely by a government blessed with too little empathy and too much incompetence, the town was left with nothing. The harbour and part of the beautiful seaside town was now an unsightly gash that was sealed off, the remains left to crumble as the North Sea claimed the

area as its own. She had fond memories of the town as a child, and it was sad to see it abandoned like this. Then again, it had always been towns like this, forgotten and left behind as more affluent places soaked up all the attention and money.

The D.I.—Pearson searched a folded piece of paper for the name—Gibson, made his concluding remarks, but she wasn't listening. They would be the same conclusions made in all the other places, and they were all wrong. They were always wrong. Pearson was scanning the room, looking for those who might be willing to listen to something slightly off the wall. Something slightly stranger. Something far more sinister.

D.I. Gibson opened the room up for questions. Pearson held her hand up. *Here we go*, she thought.

"Yes?" Gibson barked, his accent about as gruff and Yorkshire as it could be without being straight out of a TV show.

"It's not drugs," she said flatly.

Stifled laughter. A few groans.

"And you are?" Gibson unleashed his annoyance for the entire room.

"Detective Inspector Pearson, sir. Seconded from West Yorkshire Police." She buried the smile that was desperately trying to crawl across her face. They all recognised the name. Oh, they all knew her. For all the pressure she put herself through to close her breakthrough cases, she was now afforded a lot of respect. The tone of the room shifted at the mention of her name.

"I wasn't told you'd be joining us Detective Inspector," Gibson responded, half annoyed and half confused.

She shuffled to the front of the room and handed Gibson a piece of paper. "I can't answer to that."

Gibson appeared taken aback as he read the secondment order.

"I'm here to help, not take over, Detective Inspector Gibson," Pearson said as genially and respectfully as she could. "May I continue?"

"Be my guest," Gibson said, wafting the paper at the room.

"The deaths are identical to deaths I've been following across Yorkshire. Burn marks on the temples and over the bridge of the nose. Blood effusing from the eyes and ears. No traces of substances in the mouth or the nose."

"We're working on the assumption the drug is absorbed via the skin," Gibson said with as much authority as he could muster.

"No traces of substances on the skin either," she continued. "Nothing in the toxicology apart from the usual suspects. Nothing that would cause the effects we're seeing. No new uber substances, and most importantly, nothing in the burn marks to indicate a foreign substance."

The mood in the room turned sombre as the penny dropped. The UK's most notorious copper could only be here for one reason.

"Oh no. No, no, no, no," Gibson stammered. "This is not some serial killer. These deaths are all young people with known substance misuse problems."

"Sorry. But yes."

Every eye in the room was focused squarely on her. A mixture of dread and excitement at what this could mean.

"I've been tracking deaths like these from Huddersfield to Bradford. Morley. Castleford. Doncaster. Scunthorpe. Hull. Now here. As soon as the deaths begin in a new place, they stop in the previous one."

"How many are we talking about, Ma'am?" The question came from a gangly young detective constable in the back corner of the room.

"Including these?" She glanced quickly at the file in her hands and then up at the TV. "Thirty seven."

There were gasps. Swearing. Mutterings. What little colour was left on Gibson's face drained completely. The tension in the room was broken by a young uniformed constable who knocked and entered, handing Gibson a piece of paper. He looked at it, then handed the paper to Pearson.

"Make that thirty nine," Gibson said sourly.



The processing of the crime scene was well underway by the time she got there. She drifted off by herself, analysing the scene from a corner of the courtyard. Enclosed by houses on all sides with only one entry point for cars, the courtyard also had footpaths shooting off the two corners opposite the entrance. By the looks of things, no one used them. The footpath behind her was overgrown with no disturbance of the foliage. The path opposite had been barricaded by shopping trolleys and littered with broken bottles and takeaway boxes.

Pearson tried to imagine the scene from the night before. Tried to imagine how the killer found his, or her, way into the courtyard. How they were able to sneak up on the kids in the run-down car. How they

had killed them. As usual, her imagination failed her. Even after two dozen crime scenes, she just couldn't figure it out. Every theory, every approach—every wild idea—had yielded nothing. After thirty nine deaths, she was no closer to understanding this particular spree than she was at the first scene. There was just no logic to it. No pattern. Just a string of random killings.

Movement on the opposite end of the courtyard caught her attention. Two men in long coats, obviously not police, had breached the cordon. She was about to ask someone to remove them when a slight shimmer ran across their hair, like strings of miniature fairy lights surfing along the strands. Dream weavers. The last thing she needed were magical creatures getting involved. One of them, his hair a dark copper, caught her looking at them, and he froze.

That's right, she thought. I can see you.

She pointed at her eyes and then swivelled her fingers to point back at him. By now, the silver-haired character had noticed her too. They both looked startled, which was good. It was always useful to keep magical creatures on their toes. The silver-haired figure grabbed his copper-haired companion, and they left the scene, unnoticed by anyone else.

A thought germinated, followed by a rising sensation of dread. She had always assumed it was a regular human killer. Had her assumptions been wrong? Spate and Williamson had both deep dived into the arcane. They knew the magical world through studying. Their homes were full of magical texts, some complete nonsense of course, but some she had recognised. Some were the real deal. Those collections had pointed her in the right direction. It

gave her the why, highlighting motives and patterns that ultimately led to their arrest. They weren't magical, but they believed in it. Believed enough that it defined their actions. But they were ultimately regular, common or garden human beings, albeit with very dark aspirations.

All this time, she had been chasing a human killer. She had always suspected a magical connection, even though it hung tantalisingly outside of her vision. But what if it wasn't human? If two dream weavers were investigating, could it have been a magical creature doing the killing? Even as she gave the idea shape, she questioned it. She had to question it because if it was true, she was in way over her head.



Pearson walked bleary-eyed into the office. Unable to sleep, fed up of tossing and turning, she had given up on rest and decided to put her sleeplessness to good use. The lights of the office flickered to life with a low electric hum as she walked across the open floor and entered the kitchen.

She made herself a coffee and wandered into the briefing room to stare at the crime board. Two more boards had been wheeled in to extend the original, and the combined boards now showed details of all the deaths encountered so far. The coffee gradually cooled in her hands. She could stare at these boards all day, but she wouldn't find any answers. She was as mystified now as she had been on day one.

She was convinced by now that the killer was a magical creature, not a magic obsessed human. If that was indeed true, she didn't see how she could bring this case to a close. More importantly, she didn't know

how to stop the killing. If she was going to achieve that, she knew—and it pained her to admit it—she would need a special kind of help. It was a source of pride that she'd never needed that kind of help before.

There was a reason she was the only detective able to stop Spate and Williamson. Humans had relegated magic to the pages of myths and fairy tales thousands of years ago. Not all humans were closed off to it though. Some were still susceptible to the magical energy that surrounded them. Some, though there hadn't been any for a couple of hundred years, were actual mages who were able to feel and manipulate the energy. Others, not so adept, were able to see and understand the magical world. Pearson was the latter. They were called librarians. Keepers of all the magical knowledge ever acquired through the ages.

Her childhood and teenage years had been spent immersed in magical histories and tomes, but towards the end of her schooling, she had decided there was more to life than keeping and studying books and joined the police. Her parents were furious. Even now, the rift hadn't healed. Not even after her notorious twin cases.

Her librarian knowledge had helped her to recognise the pattern in Spate's killings and anticipate his next murder. The trickiest part was explaining how she knew. She had been ignored initially, but after the sixth murder and no better ideas, she was able to push her theories and identify Spate. Spate's arrest led to his personal library, a treasure trove of magical and occult texts. Strange though he was, she grudgingly had a bit of respect for him. Never once did he try to justify his crimes. Never once tried to weasel

out of what he did. He admitted everything, confirming the further eight killings he was planning.

Williamson's murder spree was not so easy to crack. The investigation focused on the racial aspect—the victims all Asian—but after hours of studying crime scene photos, she saw patterns hidden in the blood spatter. They were not as random as the lead investigators had initially thought. Spate's library had several occult volumes she knew well, but there were a couple she had only heard stories of. They were rare, and more importantly, they were accurate. Only die-hard fans of the occult even knew about them, but to own a copy—that meant a deep-rooted interest in the magical world. Ellis Lythe's *True History of Magic* and Ariadne Constantine's *Separation of Worlds*. Those were two volumes closely guarded by the librarians, and not every librarian even had access to a copy. She pored over the pages. Had them converted into electronic copies and made copious notes. They confirmed she was on the right track, but the track didn't lead to the killer.

It had been Spate who led her to Williamson. Handing over his secret journals. Once she had those, she had Williamson. After Spate, she never had a problem convincing the lead Detective. Her only regret was not getting to Williamson before he killed himself, but it was a small regret. Another eight lives were saved, and the back-to-back cases earned Pearson a certain national notoriety.

That hadn't been the end of it though. There had been an unexpected surprise waiting for her in Williamson's book collection. Among his library were a collection of letters from Spate and another man, a third potential killer. There was enough information

in the letters for an arrest, and Mason Tilburn would find a prison cell with little to no fanfare.

Pearson was showered in awards, promotion and more accolades than she could cope with. She hated the attention, but she would be lying if she didn't enjoy the freedom it bought.

If only it hadn't landed her in this mess.

Humans trying to bring the magical world into the physical world was one thing. She could tackle that. She was trained for that. Magical creatures crossing the line between their purpose and murder was something she couldn't report. Something she couldn't crack. No one she could watch. No one she could arrest. No one she could discuss it with. No way to bring it all to an end and stop the killing.

Frustrated, Pearson turned off the lights in the briefing room and wandered over to the small corner room that now served as her office. For all his faults, at least Gibson had made an effort to make her feel welcome, finding her some space to work from, small though it was. She turned on the lights and slumped into the chair. Delving into her bag, she produced a battered old laptop. Running her finger over the fingerprint sensor, it came to life. She opened the only application left on it, and the library of every magical book available to her emerged at her fingertips. The database was crude, and it needed updating, but it worked, and she was able to dredge up any scrap of magical information stored in the database. Most of the time. She entered a search query, and the screen flashed empty, returning no results.

"Damn it," she muttered and closed her eyes, resting her head against the top of the chair. She

sighed. "Are you two going to say anything or just stand there in silence like a couple of muppets?"

Argentis grinned. "I like her."

Pearson opened her eyes. Both dream weavers stood awkwardly in the doorway.

"I'd ask you to sit down, but as you can see, there isn't room."

"We do not need to sit," Vermilion replied.

"So you're the one in charge," she said to Vermilion, then swivelled to look at Argentis. "And you're the gobby one."

Argentis grinned even wider. "I really do like her."

Pearson pointed to the laptop. "I hope you have answers because I don't. It isn't human, is it?"

"Your supposition is correct. It is a magical creature."

Pearson leaned forward. "You see, this is what gets me. There isn't anything in my database that matches these deaths."

"You are a librarian?" Vermilion asked.

"No."

"It is a new creature," Vermilion offered.

"Newish," Argentis added.

Vermilion ignored him. "We first encountered it in Europe. Several decades ago," Vermilion clarified.

"That's new?"

"In the realm of magic, that is considerably new." Vermilion waited for a response, but Pearson gave none. "Are you a mage?"

"No."

"What are you then?" Argentis cut in. His playful tone, combined with her lack of sleep, was starting to grate on her.

"I'm a copper with diminishing patience."

"You must be..."

Vermilion cut his friend off. "It is a dream wraith."

Pearson leaned forward. "And this is where I come back to my problem." She tapped the laptop screen. "I have never seen a reference to a dream wraith before, and I've looked through every record I have access to. And I have access to a lot."

Vermilion said nothing.

"You didn't come here just to drop a fancy new name and clear off. So, you have my attention. I'm listening."

Argentis and Vermilion looked at each other. Argentis' face grew sullen.

"I'll be outside," he muttered and left the room, the door whispering shut.

"He cannot listen to this. He carries the scars far deeper than I do."

"What is this thing?" she asked with a slight tinge of fear.

"You should be familiar with dream thieves. They were originally dream weavers who sought to balance the magic. Just as we weave the magic, they steal it."

"I'm familiar. When I have a really good kip but wake up groggy for no good reason, that's why. That much I know, but this thing. This isn't that."

"I believe it is an evolution of the dream thief. Its form has evolved to make it more efficient, allowing it to absorb all the magic within a human. All the life energy."

"It's evolved to kill."

"Yes."

"Why don't the librarians know about this thing?"

"It is known only to a few of us. To my knowledge, only three of us."

Pearson ran her fingers through her hair. "You and your skittish little friend are two. Who's the third?"

"A sylph," Vermilion admitted wearily.

Pearson sighed. "Enough said."

Pearson stood, stepped behind her chair and stretched her back. She felt a lead weight drop in the pit of her stomach. Human beings were just not equipped to survive magical creatures who had evolved with the motivation to kill. She turned to face the weaver.

"So how do you know about this thing?"



Lower Saxony, April 1945

Cerulean finished weaving a dream for a young corporal who would never walk again, expending the last of his magic to spin visions of home and the young man's sweetheart. The soldier slept peacefully, and Cerulean lazily shuffled out of the field hospital to join his friends. He had fallen into the habit of using up all his magic during long sessions, leaving him tired and sullen and needing periods of intense rest. Vermilion and Argentis had learned to ration their magic in spurts, recharging in short runs so they were always ready to weave, whereas Cerulean was still weaving until his magic was spent.

The forest was unusually quiet, but Vermilion was grateful for it. He couldn't remember a time when he had ever felt this drained. He was thankful the humans had arranged a ceasefire and given them the chance to fully recover their magic before continuing to the next inevitable battlefield.

Cerulean sat down with his back against a tree. He was the youngest of the three weavers and the most

idealistic of the group. He had been keen to follow the war, diving straight into the heat of the battle. He had argued that was where they were most needed, and his arguments had been forceful enough that Argentis and Vermilion found themselves dragged along. The three had followed the allied advance from the beaches of Normandy to the forests of Germany. Cerulean's features, once sharp and smooth and bright, were now dull and grey, his skin lacking the lustre it once had. The short crop of cornflower sapphire hair no longer sparkled like it used to. To his credit, Cerulean hadn't wavered in his determination, but the oldest weaver could see the price he was paying.

Of course, where Cerulean led, Argentis followed. Usually playful and jovial, Argentis had lost those qualities in recent weeks. Vermilion wondered if he would ever regain them. He had known Argentis for a long time, and Vermilion had enjoyed the company, though they had never bonded with Argentis in quite the same way Argentis had with Cerulean. Since the youngest weaver had joined them, Vermilion had noticed the sobering influence on his silver-haired companion and appreciated what the young weaver had brought to their small group.

As for Vermilion, he had grown to value Cerulean's company as much as he had the company of Argentis. Usually taking the lead in where they went, Vermilion had taken a back seat to Cerulean on this adventure, following wherever the young weaver led them. Recently, though, Vermilion had started to have reservations. The kind that came with age and experience. There were always consequences when magical creatures involved themselves in mortal wars,

yet even he could not guess what those consequences might be. He dismissed the quiet anxiety that followed him across beaches and towns, fields and forests, bearing the burden silently.

Age and experience.

In times such as these, it was a curse rather than a blessing.

He was the oldest of the three by several millennia, and during that time, he had learned to remain aloof from humanity, remaining only close enough to perform his task. Truthfully, it was mainly to protect himself from them. He knew of other weavers who had grown too attached to the mortal races and lost themselves little by little. Eventually, they gave up their magic and disappeared from the world or became twisted versions of themselves—apparitions skirting the border between mortal and magical worlds. Since travelling with Argentis and Cerulean, he had allowed himself to grow closer to humans. It was a fine line he was treading, but he found himself growing more compassionate, gaining more understanding. He recognised the follies and the foibles, but he also admired the strengths and the beauty within them. He had learned much from his friends, and he did consider them his friends, feeling a deep gratitude for their companionship. He was a better weaver because of them.

Suddenly, in the shared silence, Vermilion felt a disquiet, an unsettling disruption to the magic around them.

“Did you feel that?” Cerulean asked.

“Yes,” Vermilion replied, looking west.

Cerulean stood. “It’s coming from that direction.”

Argentis was laid down looking up through the trees, the toll of the war starting to wear him down.

"We should take a look," Cerulean suggested.

"I am not going anywhere," Argentis grumbled.

"We need to rest, Cerulean," Vermilion advised, but Cerulean was already taking steps eastward.

"Argentis," Vermilion pleaded.

"Vermilion is right. We need to rest. We all need to rest. Our magic is thin, and we can't do any more today. Sit down. Regain your strength. We can look tomorrow." Argentis knew Cerulean wasn't listening.

"I'm going to see what is happening. Come on," Cerulean beckoned.

"Cerulean..." Vermilion began.

"We're not going," snapped Argentis. "So just sit down and rest. This isn't some stupid adventure story for kids. This is a mess. A nightmare they were never prepared for, and neither were we. Now sit down!"

"And what if we are needed? What if we are here for a reason? What if we are..."

"That is exactly what I'm talking about!" Argentis dragged himself to his feet, his patience at the point of snapping. "You have limits. We... have limits. You cannot fix everything just because you want to. That is a fantasist's daydream that none of us would weave, not even you. I swear, sometimes you just stop thinking altogether."

"You didn't have to come," Cerulean responded softly.

Argentis felt the words like a blow to the chest. "Of course we did," he said quietly. "You're not immortal. Do you think you would have survived a month without us?"

Cerulean marched up to Argentis, poking him squarely in the chest. "I am not a child! You know we are needed here. Do you see any other weavers around? No. So if not us, then who?"

Argentis pushed the hand away. "Then go. Go thundering in there without your strength and see how much of a Saviour you are. I tell you right now. You'll save no one."

Argentis walked away, his head hanging low, leaving his two friends to stand in silence, anger gleaming in Cerulean's deep blue eyes. Vermilion had been helpless, able only to stand and watch. He needed to speak up, to support Argentis.

"You need to rest Cerulean." It was a weak response, but it was all Vermilion could think to say. Cerulean shook his head and left the clearing, disappearing into the trees. Vermilion trudged off in search of Argentis.

The woods seemed calm and serene after the brutal battles that had echoed across the landscape. It seemed unreal. The act of killing was familiar enough to Vermilion, but he still didn't understand it. He would never truly fathom how humans could invest so much time and energy into killing each other. He remembered the many conflicts and wars he had seen over the millennia and felt old.

Another distortion pulsed from the east. It pulled the magical energy towards it, distending it, stretching it. Snapping back into place like elastic. He had never felt such a thing before.

He wandered unseen through the encamped troops, choosing to hide his presence. He found Argentis slumped behind a broken tank, the stink of

cordite and charred flesh still hovering around the steel carcass. He sank down beside him.

"He is wrong," Vermilion said calmly. "And he is weak."

"And stupid." Argentis flicked at a piece of shrapnel, sending it flying. It landed a few feet away with a soft thud against the bare earth.

"You know if he goes alone, he will be in danger."

"Serves him right then," Argentis responded, still not looking up from playing in the dirt.

"You are picking up these human colloquialisms well," Vermilion said, trying to lighten the mood.

"What can I say? I like them," he replied sullenly.

"I am not judging Argentis."

The two sat in silence. Vermilion looked over at his friend and noticed his gaze was fixed on the horizon. Vermilion looked up towards the west. He could sense the landscape, pounded and scarred. Far beyond the forest, in the battered towns, people were burying their dead and sweeping rubble into neat piles. The work of destruction had finished, and the work of clearing and rebuilding was beginning. Hope was gaining its first tentative hold.

"That's where we should be," Argentis said, the exhaustion coming out. "Over in those towns. I'm tired of living around war and death. We should be there, working with those who remain. While they rebuild."

"I agree," Vermilion said, letting his own weariness out.

"But?"

"But what?"

"There is a but. I know you Vermilion. There is always a but."

Vermilion smiled and he realised it was the first time he had smiled since they began following Cerulean on this brutal crusade.

"But he is not wrong," Vermilion added. "We are needed here."

"Is there anywhere we are not needed?" Argentis asked, and Vermilion could feel the mental exhaustion.

Another distortion rippled through the woods and across the camp, closely followed by a rush of shadows heading east. Both weavers watched as hundreds of khadema came rushing towards them. Many paused as they sensed the dream weavers before merging with the crowd rushing past on either side. Abandoning the rich feeding grounds of the west, they were heading to the source of the energy distortions. The three had rarely seen a khadema since landing in France, so the sight was unusual. Vermilion couldn't imagine what could possibly be attracting them.

Argentis looked up at his friend, stood and walked around the tank. "Don't say anything."

Vermilion followed.

"I wasn't going to."

"Yes you were."

The two followed the path of the khadema into the forest.

"Now we're all stupid," Argentis grunted.

They walked without speaking, Vermilion not really knowing what to say and Argentis still in an angry funk. Every so often, the magic around them would distort, as if folding in on itself. Occasionally, they would see khadema darting through the undergrowth, skittering madly forward, expectant

and excited. Wherever there were khadema, there were usually yothada, but they were conspicuously absent. Vermilion wondered where they were.

Wherever khadema fed, humans felt a darkness. Fear, loss, anger and depression were the companions of khadema, but the yothada brought with them hope, happiness, luck and light. Humans never saw this. They never realised how delicate the dance of magic was. Never understood how significant a part it played every day in every aspect of their lives.

Argentis stopped. Vermilion, broken from his thoughts, drew up beside him. Before them was a camp. Wire fences and guard towers surrounded a couple of wooden barracks, and a road vanished into a wooded area. It looked almost like any other military camp except dark energy hung over it like a cloud. From where they stood, they could see nothing more, but they could sense it. An intense darkness on a level neither of them had experienced before.

Vermilion moved forward slowly, slipping through the gate like it wasn't there. Argentis followed hesitantly. They followed the road into the camp, walking in silence as they passed mounds of corpses stacked neatly under the scattered canopy of woodland. They looked like piles of felled trees. Paths veered off on either side, covered in mounds of discarded clothing. They had both seen war. They had both seen death. Neither had seen anything like this.

"What is this place?" Argentis asked, his voice barely audible.

Vermilion couldn't answer. He saw the skittering of khadema moving deeper into the camp, and so he followed, pulling his companion with him. They didn't

get far before Vermilion stopped suddenly. Argentis bumped into him and then froze in horror. The camp opened up into rows of long cabins, and surrounding them were the dead and dying.

At the entrance to the nearest cabin lay several emaciated bodies. Their expressions blank, their skin a sickly pallor, except for burn marks on their temples and forehead. Argentis was looking beyond the bodies. Standing over them was a creature. Its skin as pale as the scattered dead, smooth and shiny like fresh porcelain, except for patches on the arms where the armoured skin was broken to reveal raw fibrous flesh. Lights skittered from the victim along the arms to be absorbed by the bare muscular flesh. Vermilion was staring at the creature. Argentis was focused on the victim.

“Cerulean!” Argentis called out.

Cerulean knelt, the long fingers of the creature holding him fast. It seemed to last an eternity, and yet at the same time was over in seconds. Cerulean’s magic danced along the arms of the creature until he became transparent and then faded into nothing. The creature turned its smooth elongated head, casting its single pearlescent eye upon the new arrivals. The creature emitted a pulse of energy that knocked the pair of weavers to the ground. Then it rose, arching its back and craning its head skyward, sniffing at the air for something. It gave the pair one last look and then raced away into the camp. Argentis swore that for a brief moment, the pale white eye flashed mostly black, leaving only a thin sliver of light.

Time lost all meaning at that moment. Whether they sat there staring into space for minutes or hours, neither could answer. Eventually, like ghosts

emerging from the darkness, humans began to stumble aimlessly from the buildings. Gormless, hollowed out and dressed in shabby clothes that looked several sizes too big. Shadows crept in from the outskirts as the khadema—usually cautious around dream weavers—could contain their hunger no longer. They swarmed over the scene, spilling into buildings, hunting for the last remnants of light magic that lingered.

Argentis felt a burning rage rise up in his stomach and roared. Smacking his hands together, he unleashed a wave of magic that burned the khadema. They sizzled and disintegrated as the magic consumed them. Those on the periphery scattered, retreating in the same direction the creature had fled. With his magic discharged, Argentis slumped to the ground and hung his head, the silvery hair now bereft of light.

Vermilion walked to the nearest of the prisoners, a spindly young woman nothing more than a collection of bones held in skin. She collapsed into his arms, and he gently lowered her to the ground. Instinctively, he stroked her shaved head, letting the fingers dip into her mind. What he saw there made him flinch, but he held his hands in place, diving past the horrors he saw. He pushed past the memories of loss and pain and torture until he could find happy memories. Memories of innocence and youth. He brought the memories to the foreground, pushing back the darker ones. He weaved a feeling of peace and then stopped as the woman slipped away, the smile of release on her face.

From the beginning of time, dream weavers had imitated the mortal races in order to better fulfil their chosen role. Vermilion had resisted taking on the

human traits other weavers had embraced, but now, the influence of his friends and the lifeless woman in his arms broke the final barrier of his reticence. As the last light of life left the woman, Vermilion closed his eyes. Tears formed, trickling down his cheeks, falling to the ground in tiny pools of light. He withdrew his hand and lowered her reverently to the ground. Beside her head, the magical tears soaked into the earth and small shoots sprang from the ground, the heads bursting open with thin white petals. The little daisies bowed over toward the dead woman, the petals brushing against her skin.

Argentis could only sit and watch helplessly as Vermilion used what was left of his magic to ease the suffering of as many as he could. He moved through the camp, from person to person, weaving the brightest images he could imagine. Within the hour, his magic was spent.

The next night and day were spent labouring through the camp, offering consoling dreams to any they found. Many died as they dreamed their last—a final blessing of memories made bright by the two weavers.

Two days after stepping into the camp, the weavers were joined by British armed forces. They marched into the camp at Bergen-Belsen in hallowed silence, stunned by what they saw. The two weavers stayed for four more weeks to help both the captives and the liberators. Gradually, the little bright yothada came back, consuming the dark energy around the camp, and hope began to take root again. Vermilion and Argentis worked their way through the entirety of the camp and the surrounding area, but they never found the creature.

Nor any trace of Cerulean.

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CHAPTER 4: CHARLES SPATE

Scarborough, Five Years Before The Event

The air was crisp, as was the snow underfoot. The sun peeked through the clouds, but it wasn't enough to tame the early morning chill. A house was cordoned off as crime scene investigators photographed and catalogued everything. A crowd was gathering around the tape, whispering in hushed conversations while inwardly hoping for something grim to talk about for years to come. Pearson hated them. Hanging around as if they had a right to peer into the lives of victims they didn't really care about.

Someone in a boiler suit and shoe covers waved over at Pearson, and she entered the tent connecting to the front door. She slipped on a disposable coverall and a pair of blue plastic shoe covers and passed the threshold into the hallway. Another officer led her upstairs.

In the master bedroom lay a woman, her face frozen in fear, her eyes wide open, staring into the distance. The tell-tale signs of burned skin at the temples and forehead. Streaks of blood from her eyes. Someone was talking to Pearson, but she wasn't really listening. Eventually, someone nudged her arm, and she followed them out of the bedroom and into a smaller room. There was a single, small bed, the duvet decorated with some colourful characters from a children's television show. On the bed, curled up into

a ball, hands covering his face, was a little boy. He couldn't have been more than two years old. His short hair had singed where the wraith had obviously drained the poor child of everything. Streaks of blood were smudged under his hands and spotted the bedsheet around his face. From the smell, the little one must have messed himself out of sheer terror. Pearson couldn't take her eyes from the boy's face, the little hands wrapped tightly over his eyes. What must have gone through the kid's mind in those last moments? How alone must he have felt?

How could any creature do such a thing?

She stormed out of the room and ran down the stairs and out of the tent. She ducked under the tape and barged through the crowd, who hurled angry questions at her, but she was soon out of earshot and locked in her car.

Rage burned inside her, churning with fear and sorrow and helplessness. She screamed and smashed her fists against the dash. Flexing her hands, she lowered her head to the steering wheel. She sighed deeply. She wanted to cry, but nothing would come. The rage gathered like a ball in her chest, and all she could do was sit and wait until everything inside her seeped out until she was empty.

Helpless.

How could she possibly stop what was happening?

There was a knock on the window. Looking up, she saw a very young constable, looking very nervous about disturbing her. She lowered the window.

"Are you alright ma'am?" He asked.

"No. No, I'm not," she answered.

The poor constable didn't know what to say.

"Have you been in there?" She asked.

"No ma'am."

"Don't. Stay outside."

"Yes ma'am."

"Tell D.C. Tindall I've gone back to the office."

"Yes ma'am," he replied and walked reluctantly back to the cordon.

Pearson turned the ignition and sped away as fast as she could. Once back at the office, she locked her door and sat down with her eyes closed.

"He was just a baby," she whispered. "How can I stop this?"

She already knew the answer.

She was standing alone on a beach, staring down the tide. Eventually, it was just going to wash her away with everything else.

She wished she knew nothing about magic. Nothing at all.

She stood up to grab her water bottle and knocked her bag over. A hardback book slipped free, thumping onto the hardwood floor.

She bent over and picked up her copy of Ariadne Constantine's *Separation of Worlds*. There were scraps of paper tucked into the book at various locations, so much so that it looked more like a scrapbook than a published volume. The cover was plain and worn, the lettering mostly faded.

Not her book.

His book.

How quickly things change. Only three years ago, she was riding the crest of a wave. Now, she was chained to the bottom of the ocean.

It was her own fault, of course. After Spate and Williamson and Tilburn, she thought she could do anything. When these deaths started appearing in one

place, and then the next, she thought she could crack it in a couple of weeks. How arrogant had she become?

She heard a voice in her mind. A memory of three years ago.

When one falls, the first misstep is always pride.

The voice in her head was refined and educated and sweet as golden syrup.

The voice of a killer.

Charles Spate.



Sheppard's Hollow Prison, Eight Years Before The Event

They called it the goldfish bowl.

Four walls in the middle of a large room and windows on all four sides. Whatever was said within was broadcast for those watching without. It was used for a certain breed of prisoner.

Charles Spate sat blank-faced in the room, his eyes boring deep into Pearson's soul as she stood by the glass door. He wore a bright green and yellow jumpsuit that was hideous but made him instantly observable should he, by some miracle, escape. If he even made it out of the room.

Deep breath.

Pearson unlocked the glass door and swung it open, striding confidently into the room. She placed her notebook on the table, out of his reach, and stared at him. She was followed by a large, burly, uniformed constable, who placed a storage box on the table before leaving the room.

Spate looked up slowly, casually and smiled as if seeing an old friend. His narrow face and hawkish

features were growing more distinguished with age. His eyes were like crystals, shining blue and clear. His short brown hair was grey at the temples, and she noticed there was a lot more grey than the last time she'd seen him.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Mr Spate," Pearson said, her voice formal to hide the tension.

"Always a pleasure, Detective Sergeant Pearson," Spate said, his voice soft and refined. Ever the gentlemen. Sometimes, it was still hard to equate the bookish man with the killer he was.

Pearson sat down and opened her notebook.

"As per the agreement, this interview will not be recorded."

"And as per your request, I have allowed two observers," Spate said, twisting his neck like a clockwork toy to stare out at the two figures watching through the glass wall. "Detective Inspector Barrow, I recognise. The woman stood next to him; I do not."

"Detective Inspector Barrow is accompanied by Detective Inspector Michaelson," Pearson stated.

"Now that introductions are out of the way," Spate said with an air of calmness that emanated from a person who felt in full control. "I feel it only fair to lay down some rules."

Pearson was prepared for this. She had to admit, there was a small, very tiny bit of admiration for him. Upon his arrest, he cooperated fully with the police, but he didn't confess. Not at first. Charles Spate had been a puzzle to be pieced together. A riddle to be solved. He just had to be asked the right questions. Her interviews with him had been challenging but always interesting. They were some of her favourite moments as a police officer.

He was articulate, polite, engaging, and always honest.

But he was still a killer. An intelligent killer whose charm was overpowering if you weren't prepared for it. Spate recognised early on that Pearson was not as susceptible to his charm as the other officers were, so he began to request her presence more and more, becoming somewhat enamoured of her. It could also have been the simple fact that she and Spate shared a background of knowledge that the vast majority of people didn't know anything about, and she never once treated him like a lunatic, as others were tempted to do.

So there would be rules—that was the way of the man—but she had rules too.

“That works both ways Charles. Quid pro quo, as you were fond of saying.”

A wide smile grew across Spate's face. “I am comforted that you remember so much of our time together, Detective Sergeant. I, myself, often remember our conversations.”

“Glad to know I made such an impression. What are your rules?”

“The same as yours, Detective Sergeant. Quid pro quo. Truth for truth. I still have unanswered questions.”

“As long as we keep our relationship professional Charles,” Pearson responded.

Charles smiled, but this time, it wasn't a warm, friendly uncle smile. It was a knowing smile. The smile of someone who held the all winning cards.

“I'm afraid, Detective Sergeant, that won't do. Not this time. I have questions about you. Questions that need to be answered.”

"This isn't a social call Charles."

"Oh, I know why you are here. You want help finding your Bradford Pollock. The media have such limited imaginations, don't they?"

"That's right. And for your help, we will be speaking to the Crown Prosecution Service to reduce your sentence."

"How disappointing that you would offer such a beggarly inducement," he said, leaning in. "I committed the crimes, and I will serve my time, every minute of every day. I have no desire to reduce the time of my incarceration. This is something you should have known."

Pearson couldn't help herself, but the corner of her mouth crept up. She'd said as much to D.I. Michaelson when the suggestion was made. She squashed the grin from spreading any further and looked up at Michaelson. She nodded through the glass, and Pearson continued.

"Very well. Truth for truth, but that works both ways Charles, and I get to decide when you cross the line. When personal becomes too personal."

Charles bowed across the table.

"When have I ever been anything but respectful of you, Detective Sergeant?"

"Always."

"And always shall be. Now," he said, clapping the table with his hands. "Let us talk as friends do."

"We're not friends Charles. I'm a police officer, and you're a murderer."

"Very good, Detective Sergeant. Truth for truth, indeed. Then let us talk not as friends, but as respected adversaries. I believe you have earned the first question."

She opened her notebook to a fresh, blank page, a forest green fine felt-tipped pen laid ready in the crease. She fished a file from the box beside her and laid it out to her left. Opening up the folder, she slid a piece of paper across the table. There were two heptagram symbols on the page. One a fat, broad shape and the other a thin, pointed star shape. She pointed at the broad symbol.

"Your plan was to kill your victims at certain locations in order to create this symbol."

"An oversimplification, but yes. That is correct."

"Your goal was, in your words, to pierce the veil between the mortal world and the magical realm."

"Word for word."

"Why this one? Why not this?" Pearson said, laying her finger above the slender heptagram.

"I merely desired to open humanity's eyes to the world of magic that surrounds them. This is emblematic of the divide between mortal and magic. This," he said, tracing a finger over the thinner symbol. "Is symbolic of the divide between Earth and Heaven."

"Why a heptagram and not a pentagram?"

"You should have spent more time reading Constantine's work, Detective Sergeant. Then you would know not to waste time on such pointless questions."

"I have an idea, but I want your opinion. Why this symbol?"

"It's a question of power. Five being a number of lesser significance than seven. A pentagram is useful for a variety of indulgent and self-serving practices, but ultimately, a pentagram has no real power. A heptagram. Now that is an icon of true power."

“Powerful enough to split the veil between earth and heaven?”

“Indeed,” Spate said as a smile crept over his face. “Now I believe I have earned my first question.”

Pearson leaned back in her chair and waved her hand.

“Tell me, Detective Sergeant. Why come to me for answers instead of your father?”

Pearson’s heart stopped. She’d been expecting him to dig deeper into her life, but she hadn’t been expecting him to hit quite so close to home.

And yet?

How could she not have expected that? All the hours spent interviewing Spate, talking about magic as if it were real. It was what earned her a commendation. Empathy with the suspect. Validating his belief system in order to get the truth. Now she wondered. Had she gone too far? Revealed too much?

Her heart drummed harder and louder and faster.

“What makes you think my father knows anything about the things you believe in?”

Spate sat back, the warm smile sinking into a stony frown.

“Not once did you ever insult my intelligence during our prior conversations. I’m disappointed you choose to do so now.”

“My father is not a subject for...”

“Truth for truth, Detective Sergeant!” Spate shouted.

Pearson was shocked, fear creeping in. This was a side of Spate she’d never seen before. She’d expected the same genial man she’d questioned before, not this.

Spate relaxed, his frown returning to his warm, enigmatic smile as he looked up into the cold eyes of

the sturdy constable who had entered the room the instant Spate's voice had raised.

Pearson locked eyes with Spate, determined not to let her fear show. She waved the constable off below the table.

"Thank you Bartosik."

Constable Bartosik didn't budge. Pearson looked up at him.

"Constable. It's fine."

Bartosik nodded and slowly retreated, his eyes fixed on Spate.

"Thank you," she whispered as Bartosik shut the door, though he stood a little closer to it than he had before.

"Such a well trained animal," Spate said sarcastically.

"That well trained animal is Constable Bartosik, and he is a mixed martial artist and built like a brick privy. As you've just witnessed, if he so much as doesn't like the look on your face, he's authorised to lay hands on you in ways not even your imagination has dreamed of."

"You cannot comprehend the depth of my imagination, Detective Sergeant. I have dreamed things that would no doubt make your skin crawl."

"I'm sure you have," Pearson said, as she tried to gather her thoughts.

She opened the file and flicked through the papers, looking for the crime scene photographs.

"Truth for truth, Detective Sergeant. You haven't answered my question, and so I am not at liberty to answer any more of yours."

"My father and I are not on speaking terms, that is why," she said as calmly as she could, pressing the folder shut.

She looked at him, staring him in the eyes, daring him to challenge her again. She pushed all of her suspicion and rage to the front of her mind as she tried to reassert control over her fears and worries. Spate had rattled her, probably deliberately. Perhaps to test how quickly Constable Bartosik would respond to any outbursts. He was letting her know he still had a modicum of control, and she'd fallen for it. She'd let him charm her, let him creep under her skin. Let her believe in the false facade. He was no scholar. No historian. No keeper of secrets. He was a murderer. A cold, calculated murderer.

She smiled back at him, just enough to let him know she was aware of his games.

"And there she is," Spate said. "It is good to see you again, Detective Sergeant Pearson. Now we can truly begin."

He sat back and waited.

"My father and I haven't spoken since I joined the Police," she stated bluntly.

"Such a noble occupation."

"Not noble enough for him."

"Ah, yes. I suppose not. Such a sacred trust to be a keeper of knowledge considered worthless by society at large. Such a thankless task. It must add insult to injury when the daughter decides not to follow in the footsteps of the father. How injured must he be to remain so calcitrant of his worthy and noble daughter."

It was like a needle slowly puncturing her chest, pushing agonisingly close to her heart. She bit it down.

“What makes you think my father knows anything about magic or Heaven?” She asked as casually as she could.

“Well, you certainly didn’t receive your education at school, unless the curriculum has broadened considerably of late?”

“My father is an academic. European mythology mostly.”

“Your understanding goes beyond mythology. There is more to this, I am sure.”

“There is always more to a story Charles. Sometimes everything is plain to see. Sometimes it’s hidden from sight, like a mystery you have to unravel piece by piece,” she said and leaned forward. “And sometimes you see only what you want to see.”

Spate leaned in, though not too much, so as to avoid the reflexes of Constable Bartosik.

“We shall see,” he whispered. “You had a question for me, I believe.”

“You attempted to create the heptagram geographically.”

“Correct.”

“Is there any other way you could create it?”

Spate stroked his chin and looked up at the ceiling.

“Something of that nature must be centred on lines of power.”

“Ley lines?”

“Yes, though I preferred the Chinese term. They called them lung mei.”

“That was in Lythe’s book. Something to do with dragons.”

“Dragon paths is a simplistic translation. The idea that dragons flew on currents of magical power is wonderfully poetic.”

“You were trying to create ley lines?”

“I was trying to redirect them in order to direct the flow of magic along the lines of the symbol. You see lung mei move and shift over time. There was an atlas in my collection.”

Pearson reached into the storage box and pulled out a large and heavy-looking leather-bound book. She placed it on the table. It had a beautiful patina to the leather, and the debossed lettering was still bright with copper leaf.

“I’m glad to see it has been well cared for. This volume is extremely rare,” he said, reaching over and opening it up to reveal a series of carefully drawn maps. “And sadly utterly useless.”

He closed the book roughly, slamming the cover down.

“I’m sure the book is worth a considerable sum to a collector, but it was a volume created in the eighteen hundreds, and through the years, the lung mei have drifted into a very different network.”

“How can someone know where the lung mei are now?” Pearson asked.

“The knowledge to map the lung mei are lost to us. I made an attempt to research it myself, but I soon reached the conclusion that it would take more years than I have left to me. That is why I decided upon creating points of power to force the lung mei along the lines I wished to create.”

“Into a heptagram?”

“Correct.”

He leaned back and smiled at her again. Pearson readied herself for the next question. He clasped his hands and pointed his fingers, resting them on his chin, moving them back and forth, back and forth.

"I am wondering why an academic of mythology would be so stung by your joining the police."

"You would have to ask him."

"Perhaps I shall. A fellow believer in the realm of magic would surely be an engaging correspondent."

"What makes you think he's a believer?"

"Because my dear Detective Sergeant Pearson," Spate said, emphasizing each word of her name. "A father does not cut off contact with his daughter unless there is an almost religious zeal to the road he travels, and a powerful sense of betrayal when she travels a different road."

"His beliefs were something of a barrier between us at times," she admitted, though she was trying her best to obfuscate. Trying not to reveal too much.

"Belief is the curse of the librarian," Spate said quietly. "Wouldn't you agree, Detective Sergeant?"

Pearson felt a lump rise in her throat. It raised questions she wanted to ask but couldn't. Not here. Not with ears listening in.

"Belief isn't a luxury I can afford."

"And still you gathered up a basketful of knowledge and left with your arms fully laden, unable to bless him with your faith."

"They were interesting stories when I was a child. Nothing more."

She waited for him to follow up, but he sat in silence, looking at the closed atlas on the table. He reached out to stroke the cover, rolling his finger reverently over the lettering.

"Perhaps, when all this is done, your father would appreciate the books of my library. I would hate for them to gather dust in a museum as curios."

"That's not up to me, but I'm sure D.I. Michaelson and D.I. Barrow can put in a request if that's your wish, should the help you give us lead to an arrest."

"This knowledge is alive," he said wistfully. "It should be kept alive for future generations."

Something about him had changed. She couldn't put her finger on it, but this was a different Charles Spate. This wasn't the killer she'd interviewed before. Nor the esoteric intellectual who filled his mind with magical knowledge. This was a man remembering something, a trigger from his past. A man filled with melancholy all of a sudden.

In the back of her mind, she knew this was her moment. Her one chance.

She pulled out a photograph of a crime scene photo with two transparencies taped to the top. She slid it forward, then without a word, turned over the first transparency. Then the second. Each image showed a wall spattered in blood, and with the transparencies overlaid, the blood spatter didn't seem so random any more. They were making an image. A narrow pointed heptagram. Spate's eyes widened.

"What is this?" Spate asked, his voice filled with worry.

"These are from three crime scenes. The ones we know about. We don't know if there are more."

"How recent?" Spate asked absently, his mind drifting elsewhere.

"The oldest is three months old. The most recent one was found last week. We found them all by chance."

Charles studied the images carefully, saying nothing.

"Our killer is trying to re-create this symbol using blood spatter. The locations appear to be random. Could creating a heptagram like this work?" Pearson asked.

"Possibly," he mumbled, his mind visiting places only he could see.

"Charles!" Pearson said, louder than she'd expected. Her voice echoed a little in the bowl.

"The crime scenes would need to be located at points of magical power."

"You said no one knew how to map the ley lines."

"Improbable, but not impossible. As you well know, there are collections on magic that are spread about. I have heard rumours of an ancient Hebraic text that instructs the reader how to discern the ley of the land, though I do not know if it truly exists. It is possible."

There was something he wasn't saying, she could tell. She kept pressing.

"You're concerned by this," she stated.

"As should you be," he responded, turning the image about to different angles.

"I am. That's why I'm trying to stop him."

"Your concern comes from your humanity. Your sense of justice. Mine is rooted in a much deeper fear."

"What? What is so important about this symbol?" Pearson asked, prodding the thin heptagram.

"Do you think creating this symbol, through the shedding of blood, would open the doorway to Heaven and all the angels?"

"I don't know. I've never met one."

"Then I shall educate you. It would not. Remember, the abode of angels is not the only

residence in the heavenly realm. This symbol, created in this manner, if successful, would unleash Hell on Earth. Quite literally. Blood and fire has been the fuel of many a revolution, but this is one that I would never wish to see become real.”

“How do we find him Charles? How do we stop him?” Pearson said, placing her hand over his. “How would you stop him?”

“Tell me more about the locations.”

Pearson pulled a map out of the box and spread it out on the table. There were three red dots around Bradford, but in random places. There were lines drawn between all three, but nothing that matched any symbol of magic.

“Random, as far as we know. One was a school about to be demolished. One was a home being renovated. The other an old office building.”

He sat back and closed his eyes.

“Tell me more about the scenes of each crime.”

“Each scene is different. The murder weapon in each case was a knife, but each knife left at the scene was a different size, style and shape. The victims are all Asian, but different ages, genders and occupations. The only thing the killer did consistently was paint the walls before spraying the blood. We caught one of the scenes quite fresh. The paint was tacky when they sprayed the blood, so it wouldn’t run.”

Spate’s eyes opened and narrowed.

“Paint?”

“Yes. Just emulsion paint you can buy at any DIY store. Different brands. Different shades.”

“Did they use a roller or a brush?” Spate asked.

Pearson thumbed through the file, tracing her finger over the crime scene reports, one after the other.

“Brush, each time.”

Spate nodded to himself and stared at the blood spatter. He picked up the heptagram symbol.

“I should thank you, Detective Sergeant. Being incarcerated here has given me many hours to contemplate my life and the crimes of which I am guilty. I have learned much about myself. My actions were misguided and dictated by pride. No matter how noble my intentions, pride was my undoing. A hard-won lesson that I owe to you.”

He smiled again. Warm and gentle and sincere.

“May I borrow your notebook and pen?”

She slid the notebook over and handed him the felt tip pen. He wrote something down in a neat cursive that looked like it was from another age.

“I corresponded with a man who shared a deep interest in the realms of magic and Heaven. He was an interior decorator by trade, but his passion was very much of the mystical. I asked him for some advice about decorating my home, in which he stated his preference for always using a brush when painting walls. I believe there is a possibility this man may be your killer.”

He tapped the notebook page.

“This is an address for a storage location which holds my personal journals. You will also find correspondence from the man I suspect, I hope, is the one you are looking for.”

Pearson looked at the notebook, then began to pack everything away. She waved Constable Bartosik into the room and stood up.

"Thank you Charles," she said sincerely.

"Detective Sergeant," Spate said softly and with concern. "I do not know if your killer is the man I suspect. He impressed me greatly with his knowledge of the mystical worlds, but there was a darkness lingering between the lines. He is a dangerous man, and you must tread carefully."

"He's the one that will have to be careful."

"You have grown, Detective Sergeant. Grown in confidence. Be careful not to let confidence grow into pride."

"Pride isn't something I'm worried about," she said, tidying everything away.

"When one falls, the first misstep is always pride," he said. She stopped what she was doing and looked at him. He was smiling his usual charming smile, but his eyes were sad and troubled.

Constable Bartosik carried the file box and led her out of the goldfish bowl. Pearson glanced over her shoulder as they left the room. Spate sat calmly watching them leave, his smile slowly fading and his shoulders sagging. Yet another side of him she'd never seen before. She shrugged off the sympathy it engendered in her.

It was surely just another one of his tricks.



Scarborough, Five Years Before The Event

Pearson stared at the book, rubbing her hand over the cover. This had been his copy. She opened the cover. Tucked underneath was a piece of cotton paper. She unfolded it, revealing the crisp and evenly spaced script of Charles Spate.

She had visited him one last time, about a year later, to thank him for his help in stopping the infamous Bradford Pollock.

With no one observing, Pearson finally asked him the question she'd been longing to ask the year before.

"Were you ever a librarian?"

He had simply smiled, and his eyes welled up ever so slightly. He looked up into her eyes, the first time she had ever seen sadness in him.

"If only that were so."

He wiped his eyes, and the familiar smile of a friendly uncle returned to his face.

"Tell me, Detective Sergeant. Are you a believer now?"

She leaned in and whispered. "I was always a believer."

And that was that.

Or so she'd thought.

She read the letter.

Dear Emily,

If I may be so bold as to discard your title and address you as a fellow believer.

You and I have trodden very different paths from such similar beginnings. Oh, that I had the benefit of your upbringing and the values your parents instilled in you. You do them proud, and I am grateful to have been so thoroughly defeated by one such as you. There are, I believe, more noble ways to open the eyes of the world to the realm and wonder of magic. I trust that you will be an instrument of great measure in this most important regard.

As such, I no longer wish my library to go to your father but to you, and have made arrangements as necessary to ensure it. I am

*sure that in your hands, it will do far more
good in the world and perhaps be a
contribution in righting my many wrongs.*

Believe, and the rest will follow.

With the most sincerest regards,

Charles Spate.

She closed her eyes, and the image of the terrified little boy curled up in a foetal ball appeared again.

"I don't want to believe," she whispered into the dark of her office. "It's not worth it anymore."

She placed the letter back under the cover and tossed the book onto the desk.

Magic was no use to her anymore.

Magic was just a cruel master playing with human lives as if they meant nothing. Without an army of magical creatures to fight alongside her, how could she possibly win? There had been a small glimmer of hope when the dream weavers visited her yesterday, but they'd vanished as quickly as they'd arrived.

Really, what use was magic or belief in situations like this?

What was the point of knowing so much if you couldn't protect a two-year-old boy?

How could she fight this war on her own?

And where were those dream weavers when you needed them?



CHAPTER 5: STARLA

Little Rock, The Event + 2

If Scarborough had taught Pearson anything, it was that everyone had their breaking point. Hers came when she saw a two-year-old boy curled up in a ball, killed mercilessly by a power neither he or she could understand.

Two weeks of no deaths and no leads and two missing dream weavers gave Pearson the opportunity to bow out of Scarborough and head back to Leeds. She packed away all her magical books and the laptop with the library database on it. She grew sullen and withdrawn and fell far short of the expectations placed on her by senior officers. Her attitude deteriorated so much that she was transferred out of serious crimes to manage the drunk patrols in Leeds. It was supposed to have been a punishment, but it gave her space to forget that there was ever a thing called magic.

If she never encountered anything magical again, she would have been quite content.

Now she was here, standing over this pit and the two weavers standing opposite. Standing there as if nothing had happened five years ago.

A knot in her chest was spinning and growing. She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets and clenched them tightly. Part of her wanted to walk away. Another part wanted to release all her frustration and

rage on them. The last part of her was frozen to the spot, not knowing what to do, feeling helpless yet again.

The four of them stood around the basin in a silent standoff. Pearson glared at the two weavers. Farrow stood without moving and without expression. Argentis looked back and forth, sensing the silent accusations and suspicions hanging in the air. Vermilion, however, was studying the symbol.

He knew this symbol, or at least he knew how it was supposed to look. This was different. It was subtle but significant. Representing the relationship between the heavenly and the magical and the mortal planes of existence, it displayed the balance between everything in creation. But there was something new. A line connecting everything from the mortal to beyond the heavenly. It was also giving off an energy he had never felt before. It vibrated, pulling the magic towards it.

Invisible strings tugged at Vermilion, drawing him in. His attention was focused on a small circle in the middle ring, the one that represented the magical world. It resonated with him like music that lifted the soul above the noise of the ordinary. He knew the magic emerging from the symbol was too strong for him, but he couldn't resist. He heard voices, but they sounded so far away he couldn't make out what they were saying. No longer in control of his actions, Vermilion stepped into the basin.

Energy coursed through his body, flashing brightly, creeping slowly to the edge of the basin, but as soon as it reached the edge, it stopped. Everything became calm and silent, and the light faded like a fog clearing under the summer sun.

Vermilion crouched down to touch the small circle in the middle ring.

"This symbol appears differently to ones I have seen before," he said.

"You talk funny," replied a young voice, startling him. He looked up to see a skinny girl in a bright yellow summer dress. She had long auburn hair that tied back into a loose ponytail, and a wave of strands had broken free, drifting around her head with a life of their own.

He looked around, but Pearson, Farrow and Argentis were gone. Flecks of snow drifted lazily down from a dull, colourless sky, fading into nothing as they approached the ground.

The girl sat down at the edge of the basin, tucking her knees under her arms and pulling the dress over them towards her ankles.

"I ain't seen you here before. What's your name?" the girl asked.

"My name is Vermilion." He walked across the basin to sit beside the girl.

"That ain't a real name," she replied critically. "But I like your hair."

She reached up and touched his hair. As her fingers tousled the unkempt copper locks, her dark auburn hair became washed over with waves of bright copper, and thousands of tiny lights danced along the strands before drifting off into the night sky.

Vermilion was taken aback. "Are you a sylph?"

"I ain't ever heard of a sylph." She rested her head on her knees. "I'm just Starla."

Starla's voice grew sad, and Vermilion felt a gnawing emptiness spread out from her. There was magic intertwined with the loss, and the symbol began

to vibrate in response. Instinctively, Vermilion reached out and stroked her hair. Lights glittered around his fingers and sensing the magic gathering there, pulled his hand away, but Starla reached up and held his hand by the wrist. She was such a fragile looking child, but she was strong enough to hold his hand in place. Slowly, she pulled it back until it skimmed over the auburn strands. He was hesitant. It had been so long since he'd woven a dream. He flexed his fingers away from her hair.

"It's okay," she whispered.

He felt something pull his fingers down, and once again, the magic gathered around his hand, and his fingers slipped beneath her hair and into her mind. She didn't flinch. Didn't close off her memories. Everything lay open as wave after wave of images washed over him. He saw Starla, standing with her mother, watching her father get caught in the crossfire of a robbery. Watched her mother drift away into a world of alcohol and forgetfulness. He felt the loss and loneliness. The desperate need for connection. The acceptance that she was alone and always would be. He witnessed foster parents struggle to understand and cope with her as she became more insular. He watched a power take root within. He saw her disappear into her imagination, retreating from the real world into the only world where she felt safe. Retreating until...

Vermilion withdrew his hand, but Starla calmly reached up and held it with her deceptively strong grip. Once again, she guided his hand back to her memories. He closed his eyes as he delved deeper into her memories, watching as Starla was born, as she discovered the magic around her. He watched her

accept it, embrace it, gather it as a shield to protect her. But she didn't understand it. It frightened her. Overpowered her. He watched as she panicked, flinging the magic far away from her. He felt her fear. He felt the freedom of release.

He slowly withdrew his hand and held it against her back.

"I did this," she whispered.

His recent years around humans had shaped Vermilion's behaviour more than he would ever realise or admit. He slid his arm around her and pulled her towards him. She surrendered, resting her head against his chest, and the tears followed.

"It is all right," he uttered softly. "It is all right."

He repeated the mantra over and over as he stroked her hair. Without thinking, his fingers slipped back beneath the hair and into her mind, sifting through her memories. Like before, Starla held nothing back, allowing him to navigate the images. He delved deeper this time, beyond the surface recollections, beyond the emotions, until he found a long-forgotten reminiscence. It was a summer vacation on the beaches of Southern California. She was four years old, and it would be the last time she would see her grandparents. The joy was as overpowering as was her previous grief. He weaved the memory for her, bringing it back to the surface of her mind, presenting it in a purer, unblemished form. He withdrew his hand and rested it back on her shoulder. Her breathing settled back into a normal rhythm. She rubbed her face against his shirt, drying the tears.

They sat like that, in silence, for a time, until Starla pulled away from his hug. She stared at him and placed a hand on his face.

"She needs to talk to you," Starla announced, her voice calm and innocent.

"Who?" Vermilion asked.

Starla stood and giggled. "She said not to tell you." She turned and ran away into the distance. Vermilion felt lost.

"Do you hate her?" Chiasma said from behind him.

His back stiffened, and his arms went rigid. He didn't turn around or face her. He felt her sashay past him, her layered silks brushing against his face. She twirled beside him, her robes crashing into him, then slowly sat beside him.

"Do you?" Chiasma repeated softly.

"Of course not!" His voice sounded harsher than he meant it to.

He regretted raising his voice. Letting him be ruled by the anger of his past. He relaxed his body, breathing out the tension. He remembered the road not taken. The path that anger led him down. What was and what could have been. What could still be. With a deep sigh, the last of his anger drifted away on the air.

"Good," she answered, ignoring the sharpness of his tone.

He looked at her and noticed the light that had previously beamed from inside her was no longer there. The changes in colour that used to flash through her eyes or her hair were noticeably dulled and almost lifeless.

"You are growing weaker," he observed.

"It is a necessary sacrifice."

"Chiasma," he began, but could not find the words. She reached up to hold his face with both her hands.

"I need you to do what I can't do any more. I need you to protect Starla."

"Protect her?"

"You have seen her memories. You know who she is. What she is."

"It does not seem possible. How can she wield such power? How has this happened?"

"I don't know the answers, Vermilion. I only know that she is becoming less human and more magical."

"I do not understand how this is possible," he repeated, struggling to grasp this new reality.

"It doesn't matter if it is possible or not. It simply is."

"How can it be?"

Chiasma placed a hand on his. Her magic was so thin, he barely felt it.

"It simply is," she stated slowly. "She found the magic, and it grew in her presence. It grows even now. It is taking everything I have to prevent it from overpowering her. If she cannot learn to control it, she will destroy more than this city."

Vermilion felt that power while diving through Starla's memories. He knew what Starla was capable of.

"I am not sure what I can do," he said and looked deeply into Chiasma's eyes. "But I will do what I can."



Argentis sat down calmly at the edge of the basin.

"Where did he go?" Pearson asked Argentis.

Argentis shrugged his shoulders. "He'll be back."

No sooner had he spoken than Vermilion reappeared. There was no light show this time. No flashes or noise. One moment, the basin was empty. The next, Vermilion stood there as if he'd never left. Whatever energy was coursing through the basin was now calm and quiet.

"You see," Argentis said.

Pearson noticed that Argentis seemed very different than five years ago. Back then, he seemed like he was constantly fighting some inner demons, masked by a playful façade. She could almost warm to him now.

Vermilion stepped out of the basin towards Pearson and Farrow. Pearson, he knew, was a librarian, whether she considered herself one or not. Farrow was an enigma. There was a power about him, but Vermilion couldn't pin it down. Whenever he focused on the energy emanating from him, it slipped away, blurring any attempt to sift through the detail. He was a wild variable, and that was not a good thing in the current situation.

"Who are you?" The words were soft, but even Pearson felt the power underlying them. Farrow didn't even flinch. He just stared back at Vermilion.

"Special Agent Marcus Farrow of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"Who are you really, Agent Farrow? You have power. Are you a mage?"

"I'm just an FBI agent," Farrow said dismissively.

"No. You are not," Vermilion pressed.

"What I am doesn't concern you," Farrow responded sharply.

"What are you two doing here?" Pearson cut in.

"There is a power unlike any magical creature that has existed before. A power that is growing and dangerous."

"Ahh, okay. So you're going to cut and run again?" She asked as five years of frustration began to leak out.

Vermilion glared at Pearson, his eyes like fire, and she shuffled back.

"You know what caused this?" Farrow asked Vermilion, his voice still flat and measured.

"Yes," Vermilion answered flatly, his eyes now fixed on Farrow, burrowing into him.

"Want something?" Farrow asked, stepping closer to Vermilion.

"There is a power about you that I cannot discern. So tell me, Agent Farrow. Are you here to protect, or are you here to harm?"

"You don't need to worry about me," Farrow answered, squaring off with the weaver. "Do I need to worry about you?"

"That is not an answer," Vermilion said. The pair were only a few inches apart now.

"Drop it dream boy," Pearson said, stepping between them and pushing Vermilion back. "We need solutions. We need magical help. So why don't you go off and find someone that will stick around?"

"We didn't leave?"

All eyes turned to Argentis, sat by the basin like he was in a different world to the others.

"What?" Pearson asked.

"We didn't leave. Five years ago. That's what you believe, isn't it?"

"Well, didn't you?"

"No," he said softly. "We sacrificed more than you will ever know to kill that monster you were chasing. What did you sacrifice, Emily?"

The way he said her name, it sounded just like Charles Spate. The tone, the inflection, the sadness.

"I..." she started, but the words fell away.

"You sacrificed the very thing that made you who you were."

"You don't know anything," she spat across the basin, pointing at Argentis. Her hand started to shake, and she quickly thrust it into her coat pocket.

Argentis rose to his feet, calmly walked over to Pearson, and leaned in. She edged away, worried he was going to kiss her, but his face brushed her cheek, and his lips came to rest against her ear.

"Nothing you do can ever bring him back," he whispered. "But you can save others from the same fate."

He moved away from her and stepped between Vermilion and Farrow, coming face to face with the agent. He smiled at Farrow, but his eyes reflected the sadness of centuries.

"We were not responsible," He said softly. Farrow felt a burning in his chest, and his eyes went wide, as if every secret were about to be unravelled. Then, Argentis placed a hand on Farrow's shoulder. "Everything will be fine if only we trust each other. And ourselves."

Argentis stepped away and sat himself back down to his previous position as if waiting for a play to continue. A rainbow shimmered across his hair for the briefest moment before returning to a bright, shimmering silver.

Vermilion bowed his head.

"I am here because Chiasma asked me to be here," Farrow said quietly. "She trusts me, and I trust her, but I don't know you. So why are you here?"

"Because Chiasma asked me, as she did you."

"I hope she told you more than she told me," Farrow said, his voice returning to normal.

"There is a young girl," Vermilion began to explain. "A human girl who has tapped into magical power."

"That isn't possible," Argentis chimed in.

"Let him talk," Farrow said, and Argentis fell quiet.

"The power is too much for her. She cannot control it. It is consuming her."

"That ain't possible," Farrow interjected, holding a finger up to silence Argentis, who was about to protest.

"Nevertheless," Vermilion continued. "We stand in the aftermath of her power. This is merely the start. If she cannot learn to master the magic inside her, she will destroy more than a city."

"She could destroy everything," Pearson mumbled to herself.

Vermilion nodded. No one else spoke. The world had never faced such a phenomenon.

"Unless," Farrow began.

"Unless she can transform from mortal to magical," Vermilion completed.

"Has that ever happened before?" Farrow asked Pearson. She shook her head.

"Nevertheless," Vermilion said, looking at Farrow. "Chiasma said it must be done. Argentis and I can guide her and protect her magical self, but her power will attract others."

"Pretty sure of that," Farrow added.

"She will need you both to protect her mortal form."

"We can do that," Farrow responded.

"Excuse me," Pearson chipped in, finding her voice again. "Protect her from what?"



Saint Petersburg, The Event + 2

A thick blanket of snow reflected both the moonlight and the glow of the ornate streetlights. Palace Square lay still and silent under the night sky. Clouds thinned out as they drifted across the heavens. Across from the square sat the Hermitage, basking in the reflected glow of moonlit snow and hazy lamplight.

Two figures walked alone. One, who was less than half the height of the other, was speaking in quiet fretful tones. The taller of the two seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, staring at the façade of the Hermitage, transfixed by the building, not listening to what the other was saying.

The shorter figure stopped talking and waited quietly for a response. It was clad in a heavy fur coat and a dark ushanka, both of which were several sizes too big and obscured its features, but as it looked up, the lamplight caught the greyish green skin and noseless face of a goblin. The hat slipped, covering the goblin's dark, glassy eyes. The effect was comical, but the short, skittish goblin didn't care. It pushed up the ushanka and looked up at the taller one waiting patiently for a response.

The second figure, a tall, slender, graceful man dressed in a long, black fur-backed leather coat, had the impression of being clothed in darkness. His skin

was pale, his head crowned with a thick mane of black hair, highlighted with a thin bright line of white hair running from front to back.

He finally acknowledged the short figure beside him and waved him off without speaking a word. The goblin bowed and then retreated, the coat pulled behind it like a wedding train, brushing the top of the snow. Once the goblin had vanished, the taller man returned to staring at the Hermitage.

Unseen, where the street lights were out, a dark presence slipped along the Palace Square, clinging to the shadows. Briefly, the moonlight caught it, reflected in the smooth, armour-like skin with a silver sheen. Its head smooth and featureless, except for one large pearl-like eye lodged in the centre of its skull. Its long, slender arms ended in long, wiry fingers. The armoured skin broken only above the wrists, where muscular fibres were laid bare, ready to absorb any magic captured from its victims.

The dream wraith slid back into the shadows and waited. The lights of the Palace Square flickered and died, leaving only the silver moonlight reflecting from the snowy ground. The tall figure remained transfixed by the Hermitage, ignoring the darkened streetlights.

The wraith hovered for a second and then began to slink forward on all fours, drifting over the snow. It seemed to slide across the square like a ghost sailing past the Alexander Column. It came to a sharp stop as it reached the tall figure who was completely spellbound by the Hermitage, ignoring everything else around him. The wraith raised itself to tower over the figure and then lowered its head. The man twisted on his feet and began to morph, the heavy leather coat fading, the muscles bunching and growing, the skin

hardening. The features of his face fell into the skin, and a single oval eye emerged. The two figures stood facing each other.

It is good to see you, Shiroikumo. The shape shifter pulsed. The ethereal voice seemed to linger in the air.

Penumbra, Shiroikumo pulsed in reply. *I came as you requested.*

Thank you, my friend, Penumbra replied. *Walk with me.*

The two began to walk towards the Hermitage. Penumbra's form shifted back into human form with Shiroikumo morphing beside him. Shiroikumo was a shorter and stockier form, his bulk emphasised by a brown kimono jacket over flowing white hakama. The jacket was decorated with white herons in a variety of poses. His eyes were a deep brown flecked with white splinters, and his head crowned with smooth white hair tied back into a single braid. He was a stark contrast to Penumbra.

Penumbra spoke, his voice rich and deep. "No doubt you felt the burst of power coming from America."

"I did indeed," Shiroikumo replied, his voice light and thoughtful.

"I need you to go there and return with the source. You are looking for a human. Most likely a child."

"A human? A mage?"

"I do not believe so. The intelligence is scant, but it appears that the power this human wields is raw and unshaped."

Shiroikumo mulled the idea. "Most unusual."

"Interesting, isn't it?"

"Is it wise to pursue such a power? A human harnessing such magic would be dangerous to mortal and magical worlds, would it not?"

"It would indeed."

"Then would it not be better to destroy it?"

"Perhaps. But consider for a moment, what a being with such power could mean for us."

Shiroikumo reflected on the subject as they walked under the silver moonlight.

"If they learned to harness and control the magic, they would become extremely powerful. They could even perhaps threaten the boundary between mortal and magic. Perhaps even shed their mortal being, becoming magic in nature. That would be most valuable to creatures who have learned to change their being already."

"Precisely," Penumbra said, smiling.

"We would, in theory, be able to consume and hold more power than at present. Our potential could be limitless," Shiroikumo pondered.

"More than you realise, my friend. It would usher a new evolution for us with the potential to crack open the boundaries of the magical world itself. What might we become if we could learn such a thing?"

"Surely Heaven would never allow it."

"I assure you, Heaven cares nothing for the magical world," Penumbra said, his voice full of scorn. "We are insignificant to them, and that is to our advantage."

Penumbra glided over the snow of the Hermitage gardens, Shiroikumo keeping pace at his side seamlessly. The pair moved as if they were completely synchronised. They stopped at a large pool, the fountains quiet, the water smooth and

frosted over. The moon was almost directly above, and their hair caught the light, causing the strands to glow.

“This human is the key we have been waiting for, Shiroikumo,” Penumbra indicated.

A wave of energy flashed down Penumbra’s hair, down his body and pooling around his feet, melting the snow around him.

“Bring me the human.”

“It will be done.”

Shiroikumo stepped back and nodded with respect, then transformed back into his wraith form. He sped across the gardens, disappearing into the Hermitage. Penumbra was left alone once more.

Taking one last look around him, he ran out of the garden, shifting as Shiroikumo had done and sprinted southward towards Kupchino. Behind him, waves of small, shadowy khadema appeared, following him like a wake of shadow.

Tonight, he would feed like never before.



CHAPTER 6: FARROW

Lower Saxony, April 1945

He had used many names over the centuries, but on this day, he bore the name of Doctor William Washburn, part of a Canadian medical detachment to the 11th Armoured Division of the British army. His dark skin had been no impediment to his achievements or his influence, but that was the kind of power he had. The kind of power he had always possessed.

Born between two opposing forces, yet never belonging to either one. His mother had given him a name that in the Heavenly tongue meant *Bridge between enemies*, but neither Heaven nor Hell could tolerate a bridge between them. He was an abomination, and his name would be twisted into a word humanity would use to exclude those they despised.

Pariah.

Half angel. Half demon. The bridge that became an outcast. A story that would echo throughout Heaven and Hell as a warning. It was the only thing Angels and Demons had ever agreed on.

For thousands of years, he hid his true self, silently travelling the world as a farmer, a builder, a teacher, a warrior and a slave. He helped build one of the first great human civilisations, and he had watched it burn. He created roads of diplomacy and trade between

neighbouring tribes, and he had watched them splinter and break. He had fought in vast wars, won brutal victories and suffered terrible losses.

He could still remember days when the world was new. When all the mortal races were spread out across the earth. He watched each race diminish over time, leaving only humanity to fill the void. Tribes becoming nations, and kingdoms becoming empires. He watched them rise, and he watched them fall.

He had spent time among the elves and the rakshasa. Waged holy war against the vampyres. Yet the strongest kinship had always been with those spread out around the birthplace of humanity. He had followed them from Africa to America and through slavery and prejudice, and that kinship had only become stronger.

He had wandered from place to place and from time to time. Eventually, those wanderings led him to Canada and medical school and the war in Europe.

He arrived at the Bergen-Belsen camp the day after it had been discovered. He couldn't use the word liberated, because they would be stuck here for many more weeks to come. People were still dying at the rate of hundreds each day. Starvation, Typhoid and Tuberculosis were the enemy now, as ruthless and unforgiving as the guards who had once run the camp.

For many, the sights were too much. It was a kind of horror they could never have imagined. But he was ancient and had become hardened to such things. He did his best to spread calm in the camp, not just with the prisoners but also the liberators.

On the fifth day, he noticed two people that didn't belong. The pair slinked through the camp, in and out of the huts, where people were dying. They looked

exhausted, and yet they continued to move around the camp where the weakest and sickest were being housed. One had a dull clump of silver hair, the other a matted nest of muted copper. The way they held themselves betrayed them as not human.

The copper-haired being came out of a hut and sat on the ground next to his companion. They both looked physically, mentally and emotionally spent. He had no idea what the pair were or what they were doing here. He had no insight into their purpose or their motivation, so he made a mental note to watch them closely.

Two soldiers entered the hut the red-haired being came out of and quickly exited. Both of them ripped off their makeshift masks to vomit as they leaned against the fragile wall. Washburn picked up his medical bag and walked calmly to the soldiers, making sure they were all right before entering the hut. The long room stank of death and excreta, the air stale and heavy. A cursory glance of those closest to the door revealed that they were dead.

He called some soldiers over to remove the bodies while he went from bed to bed to see who was still alive and what treatment he could offer. They were all dead. Each body filled him with sorrow and anger. He marched outside to confront the two strangers, but they were nowhere to be seen. He made a mental note to search them out and make them regret the day they were born.

That was a task for another day, however. He returned inside the hut to organise the removal of the bodies. It took nearly three hours to clear the hut and clean it. When he emerged into daylight again, he decided to search the camp for the two interlopers,

but someone shouted for him at another hut, and he gathered his things and continued the work of trying to save as many as he could.



Little Rock, The Event + 2

Arkansas Children's Hospital blossomed with sound and energy as doctors, nurses, and volunteers hurried from room to room and floor to floor.

Except for a corner room on the fifth floor.

Farrow and Pearson followed the nurse in silence. The noise from other wards and rooms gradually fell away the further they walked along the dimly lit corridor. It felt like a different world. It was dark outside, and the lighting along the corridor was dim. Pearson couldn't shake the sense of being constantly on the cusp of darkness. The time difference was starting to grab hold of her, and the dim lighting made her feel more tired than she already was.

The nurse opened the door and led them into the corner room. She performed some cursory checks of the monitors and updated the charts hanging from the end of the bed. She waited patiently for them to take in the scene and waited for the inevitable round of questions.

"Thank you, that's all," Farrow announced.

The nurse was surprised but secretly pleased. There was too much work to do today to be answering unnecessary questions. She nodded and quietly closed the door behind her.

Pearson slouched down into a soft chair facing the bed, her body now surrendering to the weariness she'd been ignoring. She laid her head back on the

fake leather cushioned back, as Farrow leafed through the chart.

"Ruby Tennison, fifteen years old."

Pearson's interest was piqued. "Fifteen? The way Vermilion talked about her, I pictured a little kid, not a teenager."

"I don't think he knows the difference."

"What was that thing between you two earlier?" Pearson asked.

Farrow ignored her.

"She's been in a coma for six months now. Vitals look stable," he mumbled to himself. "Multiple contusions to her head and body. Fractured ribs. Girl took a beating."

Pearson watched him as he finished leafing through the charts and sat down beside Ruby's bed. He seemed unusually transfixed by the girl.

"So what's your story Farrow?"

"Everyone so damn keen on knowing my story today."

"Fine. Tell me. Don't tell me. I'm going to get some kip while you stare at a fifteen-year-old girl in a coma."

Pearson slumped back into the big chair in the corner of the room and closed her eyes.

"Mom was an angel."

Pearson didn't move. "They do birthday cards for that?"

"Funny," Farrow replied dryly. He brushed some loose strands of hair from Ruby's pallid face. "She's fading."

"She'll lose her body when she turns to magic. If she can turn," Pearson mumbled.

Farrow's concern hung in the air, the significance of it echoing around the myriad possible futures threading from this small hospital room.

"Until she does, she will stay this way. Both magic and human. And neither at the same time," he said quietly.

"Why are we here?" Pearson asked. Farrow could tell by her tone of voice that there was a serious conversation coming.

"You mean existentially or in this room?" Farrow countered.

"Funny. You know what I mean. And don't give me that sylph told me nonsense."

"Happens to be true," Farrow said, staring at the girl. "Caught wind of a case six months ago. Girl got put in a coma. I think this is her."

"Poor kid," Pearson whispered.

"The other kids said they saw a little girl appear out of nowhere. Then something knocked them out. An invisible force."

"You think it's her?"

"Could be," Farrow mumbled.

Pearson could tell there was more to it. Something Farrow was holding back.

"You know there's nothing either of us can do if a magical creature comes through that door," she pressed.

He didn't reply for a while. He was looking at Ruby and stroking her face, lost in some private world.

"We're the failsafe," he answered, and Pearson detected the sorrow in his voice.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we're not really here to protect her." Farrow looked up, his eyes piercing right into her soul. She was trying to figure out what he meant, and then it clicked.

She pushed herself up from the chair.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Maybe."

Pearson walked to the bed and looked at Ruby's sleeping form. She looked peaceful. Blissfully unaware of everything going on around her. The eye of the storm she'd created.

"Do you think you could do it?" she asked.

Farrow looked at her with tears welling up in his eyes.

Pearson ran her fingers through her hair, walked back to the chair and collapsed into it again, feeling weighed down.

"It makes sense. If she can't learn to control the magic, then she's a threat to everyone on the planet," she speculated. Farrow acted as if he wasn't listening. "Could you do it?" she asked again.

Farrow didn't answer. He was staring at Ruby's peaceful face, lost in his own thoughts.

"Hope it doesn't come to that," Pearson mumbled, closing her eyes. "Because if something does come through that door, we might not have a choice."

The room fell quiet, the silence punctuated by the beeps and hums of the machines connected to Ruby.

"Your mum was an angel," she whispered to herself, half asleep. Her eyes pinged open, and she sat upright as if a bolt of electricity had shunted through her spine. "Your mum was an angel. Literally an angel."

Farrow looked at his watch. "You're ten minutes behind, Pearson."

Pearson almost leapt out of the chair, looking at her hands and gesturing furiously at Farrow like she had just discovered the secret of the universe. Then she froze, staring at Farrow.

"You're him," she said quietly. Reverently. "Pariah."

Farrow didn't respond.

"You're him," she repeated.

Farrow stroked Ruby's hair, ignoring Pearson.

Pearson huffed and shook her head. "Fine. But you started this, mister, *my mom was an angel.*"

She slumped back in her chair, her mood souring.

"Mom was an angel. Pops was a demon." Farrow chuckled. "Then I came along. If you know anything about Heaven and Hell, you'll know they were never gonna let that slide."

Pearson sat upright, ready to listen, daring not to interrupt.

"Everyone thinks Angels are these benevolent beings watching over and protecting them and demons are these devilish creatures torturing and tormenting people. It's all propaganda. Both sides follow orders and never turn to the left or the right. And they sure don't give a damn about anyone who gets in the way. It's all about keeping the status quo."

Pearson could hear the anger rising in his voice.

"What happened?"

"Orders went out. They got pops first. Wasn't long after they got mom. Only a matter of time before they caught up with me too. Figured if I didn't do anything heavenly, then I could hide out and disappear. They'd never know I was still alive. I was hiding out

somewhere in Africa, close to a tribe of humans. Looked enough like them to blend in. So I cut off my wings. I learned. I grew. I became one of them. Heaven and Hell gave up on me. I don't know, maybe they think I'm dead or something."

He looked up at Pearson for the first time since he started his confession.

"They did leave me one parting gift at least. A warning to everyone everywhere to toe the line. They took my name and twisted it into a hiss and a byword."

"I'm sorry," Pearson responded. "There is only a little information in the Library about you. To be honest, most librarians don't even think you're real."

"I was never supposed to be. Mom and pop were never supposed to fall in love. Never supposed to have a kid. Guess everyone forgot that demons were just angels that fell. People don't understand; Angels ain't all good, and demons ain't all evil. No different to humans. Good and bad both."

Pearson was speechless, taking in the fact she was in a room with a literal living legend.

"I'm surprised there is anything in the Library about me," Farrow said, smiling.

"There's a bit. Maybe a couple of lines," Pearson quipped. "None of what you just told me."

Farrow chuckled.

"Why are you so fascinated with her?" Pearson asked, pointing at Ruby's still form.

"Cos she's changing. She's gonna stop being human and be something else. I remember what it was like to be something else."

"But you didn't really change into a human, though."

Farrow shook his head. "For sure, I still have my powers. But mentally, I had to change from being this heavenly creature," he said with a cheeky grin. "To being a regular guy."

Pearson had so many questions and thoughts racing around her head that they kept crashing into each other, but there was one that kept rushing to the front of her mind.

"Why me?"

"Honestly? I had a feeling you'd be helpful."

"It's more than that," she pressed.

"Fine, a sylph told me you would be needed," he replied sarcastically.

"You're taking career advice from a sylph?" Pearson responded with an equal amount of sarcasm.

"Chiasma ain't that bad," Farrow said with a wry smile.

Pearson saw the expression on Farrow's face. His lips frowned with frustration, and his eyes were full of melancholy.

"You're serious?" Pearson questioned.

Farrow shrugged his shoulders. "Yep."

"This the same sylph that said we would have to, you know?" she said, slicing her throat with her thumb.

Farrow didn't answer, which was all the answer she needed.

Pearson grew solemn again. "If you are him, then you can protect her. I don't doubt that. But can you kill her? If the time comes?"

"I've been around some," Farrow said with a smile, though his eyes wore a sadness Pearson had never seen in anyone else.

"You didn't answer the question."

"And I won't. When the time comes, then I'll know the answer."

Pearson shuffled back to her chair.

"Could you do it?" Farrow asked. She stopped in her tracks.

"I don't know," she replied. "I got into this game to protect people like her, not kill them in their sleep."

Pearson slumped back into the chair, and the two sat in silence for a few minutes.

"So... your mum was an angel," Pearson said after a while. "Does the FBI give you a bonus for that?"

Farrow laughed, followed by Pearson. A relief valve letting out the pressure of everything that had built up since she set foot on The Event.

The laughter settled into quiet again, and the mood shifted back from light-hearted to tense. The air grew heavy and electric. Static prickled all over Pearson's skin. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Farrow shot to his feet so quickly Pearson didn't even see him move. Then the lights went out.



CHAPTER 7: RUBY

The Half-Light, The Event +2

The Arkansas Children's Hospital lay still, empty and muted, like a tomb lost in time. Starla danced through the empty corridors, her bare feet silent and graceful, floating over the floor like a feather caught on a breeze. She drifted into an empty reception area and stopped. A sudden sense of loneliness overtook her. Usually, Chiasma would be waiting for her. She missed her smile and her laugh and the way she would swing Starla around like a little doll. Dancing alone wasn't as much fun. She missed Chiasma. She didn't come to play as much as she used to, and when she did, she looked tired.

She would have to make a new game.

She skipped to one of the chairs and jumped into it, swinging her legs up high so her back lay on the seat with her head hanging off the edge. She looked at the space, taking in the world from a different angle. It looked strange upside down.

She imagined walking along the ceiling or on the walls. Played with gravity so she could jump and dance along any surface she wanted. She let loose her imagination and followed each corridor and stairway, travelling up and down and sideways. She stopped. Her imagination retreated. Something was coming.

The presence felt familiar, yet unfamiliar. It wasn't Chiasma. She pushed her hands onto the floor and

flipped over, somersaulting to her feet, twisting into a crouch as she landed. She scurried into the corner on her hands and feet and curled into a ball behind a chair.

Anxiety started to build, churning in her stomach, balling into a knot. No one but Chiasma ever came here. Only Chiasma knew she was here. Her hands began to sparkle, and she tucked them under her arms to hide the light, but it spread along her arms. She curled her arms around her as tightly as she could, but it was no use. There was no way for her to hide. Her anxiety grew. Her fear grew. Her power grew.

Lost in a vicious cycle of her worst thoughts, she gathered the magic to protect her. The only place she could hide was inside the light. Millions of tiny flecks of light formed on her hair, skin and dress. The lights reached out to each other, converging, forming a ball of light, flaring and flashing like a small sun. A part of her tried to stop it from spreading, but the larger part—the part that was afraid and craved protection—called more magic to her. She knew it was happening again. She wanted to stop it. She didn't want to stop it. She went round and round in circles, and the confusion just pulled in more light. The magic was her only protection. The energy crackled in her ears while her fear roared like a train bearing down on her. It began to feel heavy, crushing her. The energy pushed her from her toes and onto her knees, her head resting on the floor. She knew what would happen. She didn't want it to happen. It was too heavy, but she couldn't let go. She was safe here, where the light was.

In the midst of her growing fear, she felt a calm presence. A gentle breeze where there had been heavy winds and stinging rain. A soothing warmth

where there had been biting, icy cold. She felt her fear and anxiety ease as the magic surrounding her shifted, like a cloud being parted. She felt a hand on her back and recognised the touch. The thunder in her ears faded. The swirling, shifting mass of energy thinned and dissipated. Unfolding herself, she jumped up, wrapping her arms around Vermilion's waist. Vermilion stroked her hair and glared at Argentis.

"What?" Argentis protested. "I wasn't going to say anything."



Starla held Vermilion's hand as she led her new friends along silent corridors. Argentis lingered at the back, his mind wandering. He glanced back and forth at the messages, posters and artwork on the walls and noticed how everything appeared faded and dulled. Occasionally, he would cast a cautious glance towards the girl. Even now, after Vermilion had absorbed the excess magic, she still emanated a level of power that frightened him. He looked from Starla to Vermilion and studied how the wild magic swirled and crashed around his friend. Argentis wondered how Vermilion had managed to draw and hold onto so much extra power, but the stiffness in his limbs and the forced gait of his walk betrayed the truth. Occasionally, small sparks of magic would flash from his hair. Vermilion was struggling to contain it, and Argentis knew that like a dying sun, the energy would eventually collapse under its own power, crushing Vermilion in the process.

Argentis reached out, placing his hand on Vermilion's shoulder, and a jolt of wild magic surged through him. He tried to pull his arm away, but the

magic held it fast. Vermilion halted, the energy slowly syphoning from him to his friend. He felt relief where previously there had been tension. His body relaxing where before it was tight. Returning to himself after drowning under Starla's power. He was free, but it was now overwhelming Argentis.

This magic was different. It was a feral force, an untamed energy more powerful than any magic the weavers had encountered before. It had a life of its own. Argentis only meant to share the load—lift the burden from his friend—but it overpowered him so quickly he lost sight of where he ended and this new magic began. Soon, he would be lost to it forever. Everything he sensed seemed far away and separate. He could hear voices like whispers in the distance. Felt the feather-like touch of Vermilion's hand on his shoulder.

The magic ebbed and flowed between the two dream weavers now. It was dizzying. Argentis felt himself returning only to be washed away as the tidal push of magic broke over him again. He found himself caught in a cycle, snapping back and forth as Vermilion pulled the magic from him, only to have it splash back.

With each surge back and forth, the power stripped more and more of Vermilion and Argentis away. It was growing. Feeding. Consuming. The magic enlarging, thinning out the essence of the weavers. It pulsed and thrummed, trying to merge the two weavers into itself, twisting the personalities into a new creature of incredible power. It convulsed, trying to take shape, trying to create a form for itself.

Argentis heard something, but it was so quiet he couldn't discern it. A second time—a whisper on the wind. A voice.

“Let go.”

A third time. Soft. Calm. The lightest touch against the cheek.

“Let go.”

They fought against the new entity, separating their magic and gathering it back into themselves. Again the voice sounded, this time piercing and sharp, cutting deeper as it searched for the essence of Argentis and Vermilion.

Ice on sunburned skin.

“Let go.”

The shock of her words shook Argentis, and his hand pulled away.

It took several minutes for Argentis to regain a sense of self enough to remember where and who he was. He realised his eyes were closed and opened them to look on Vermilion, his face a mask of exhaustion. Neither of them spoke. Neither of them understood what had happened. Chiasma's ghostly voice whispered beside them.

“You have so much to learn.”



Chiasma was smiling, but it was a thin, forced smile. Her visage, once bright and saturated, appeared dull and muted, like shadows falling into dusk. She looked weighed down by some unimaginably great burden.

Starla ran to her and hugged her tightly. Chiasma's essence seemed to be so slight that Vermilion expected the child to pass right through her. Chiasma

hugged her back and then lowered herself to the floor. She hunched over. Even holding up her head took great effort. Starla sat down beside her, chatting away absently while the two dream weavers listened and watched the sylph. She appeared pale and, at times, translucent, drifting in and out of existence.

Halfway through Starla's chittering, Chiasma placed a hand gently on her lap and smiled.

"Starla, honey, why don't you show Argentis where Ruby sleeps."

"Ok," she replied with excitement, seemingly oblivious to what had just happened.

She grabbed Argentis, pulling him to his feet with deceptive strength, and began skipping, dragging Argentis behind her.

"It was foolish of Argentis," Vermilion remonstrated.

"No," Chiasma replied. Her voice frail and light. "You could not have contained it. It would have destroyed you were it not for Argentis."

"It almost destroyed both of us."

"And now you know," she said wearily.

Vermilion had no response.

"I have absorbed as much of her magic as I can. I can do no more. If I do...'

"Argentis and I can learn to master it," he said, but he didn't believe the words coming from his mouth.

Chiasma shuffled across the floor towards the weaver. She reached up to touch his face, but he hardly felt anything.

"Oh, Vermilion. How much you see. How little you understand."

She held his face in both her hands now.

"You must teach her to become what she must become."

"If I cannot?"

Chiasma's hands fell to her lap.

"She will grow in power until she destroys the world. She must become a creature of magic. Or she must be destroyed."

Vermilion recoiled at the suggestion. "I will not do that."

"Then show her the way," she whispered as her form began to fade.

"How?" Vermilion asked.

She came back in a flash of brightness, and her voice echoed around the empty corridors.

"Show her the way."

She began to fade again. Vermilion expected her to come back again, but she continued thinning into a ghostly apparition. "Before the darkness comes."



Mountain View, Six Months Before The Event

Ruby stood surveying the hallway, past the lockers, to the exit. It was filled with the usual crowd of kids, hanging around in their little groups and gangs, laughing and joking. She scanned the faces for the dangerous ones—the ones who went beyond words and pointing fingers—but they weren't there.

It was safe.

She walked slowly, her head down, trying to remain as invisible as possible. She could feel eyes burrowing into her. A trio of boys saw her and whispered something quietly to each other. One of them made a lewd gesture, and the trio burst into

raucous laughter. Laughter was fine. Words were fine. Gestures were fine. They couldn't hurt her.

A small, waiflike girl with neatly plaited black hair emerged from a classroom. Donna. Ruby sat next to Donna for English. She was a bright and friendly girl, though painfully shy. Given how quiet Ruby was, the pair had never been able to form a friendship, but Donna always greeted her with a smile. That counted for a lot with Ruby.

A tall, pretty girl stepped out from behind a large gang of athletic boys. Three more followed. Ruby froze in her tracks. These were dangerous girls. Most of the girls whispered behind her back, but these girls hunted the school halls like a wolf pack, cornering their prey. They handed out way more than harsh words and pointing fingers. The wolf pack got physical. Always.

The alpha wolf reached out and pushed Donna so hard she almost fell. If it wasn't for one of the pack that grabbed Donna's backpack and lifted her off the floor, Donna would have surely crashed into the lockers. Donna's feet dangled in the air as she stretched her toes to try and touch the floor, much to the amusement of everyone else. The hallway filled with laughter and cheers, and Donna stopped reaching for the floor, dangling like a rag doll in humiliation.

But it wouldn't end there.

Ruby knew what was coming next.

Every day was like this. Every day a living hell. Never knowing from minute to minute if you were the one to be singled out. The one to be hunted down.

Something grew inside her. A ball of hot rage and cold anger churning around in her chest. Her fists

clenched, the nails digging into the skin of her palms. Her head rocked from side to side and then looked up to stare down the wolf pack gathered around Donna. All the anger in her chest rushed out, erupting from her mouth.

“Let her go!”

The words hung in the air, echoing around the halls.

Ruby stood defiant. The anger was gone, but there was still a fire burning inside her. She wanted to hide. She wanted to run. She didn't. She stood firm. Ruby wasn't in control of herself anymore. Something much more powerful had taken over.

The girl holding up Donna let go, and Donna crumbled into a heap. The wolf pack crept forward, feral eyes hungry and wild. Donna looked up from the floor with astonishment and pleading. Two more members of the pack came from behind, announcing themselves with a jackal-like laugh, shoving her forward. The last spark in Ruby's chest snuffed itself out, but there was no more fear. There was only peace. She smiled at Donna as something swiped at her legs. Ruby dropped, hitting the floor hard. A kick landed in her stomach, and a second swiftly followed, colliding with her back. Punches and kicks came in swift succession. There were cheers and shouts. Ruby thought some of the boys tried to intervene, but everything was cacophony and confusion. A kick to her head was the last thing she felt.

Three of the athletic boys moved in, pulling the wolf pack away. It didn't stop one of them trying to get a last kick in, but a boy dragged her back, and the kick swung wildly in the air. The hallway was filled with whispers and awe. One of the athletes kneeled

down to check on Ruby, but Ruby was out cold. He looked up at his friends and shook his head.

Then, everyone fell silent as a breeze swept down the hall. A little girl stood there, her auburn hair gathered into a ponytail whipping around her head. She wore a simple yellow summer dress, and it sparkled in the afternoon light.

Everyone froze.

Apart from the alpha wolf.

“Are you lost little girl?” She said condescendingly.

The little girl ignored her and walked towards Donna. She smiled and touched her gently on the shoulder. Donna thought she recognised the smile. Or was it something in her eyes? She heard a voice in her head whisper softly.

Time to go home.

Donna grabbed her backpack and scrambled on her hands and feet until she could stand and run, leaving the school behind.

The little girl looked at Ruby with sadness.

“Is that your sister little girl?” One of the wolf pack said with contempt.

A bright light flashed out and knocked everyone back. They fell to the floor, unconscious.

Starla skipped towards Ruby and laid down, curling up beside her, holding Ruby’s hand tight in her own.

She started singing. A quiet song only she and Ruby could hear. As she reached the end, she closed her eyes and pulled Ruby’s arm tight over her chest.

“And if that horse and cart fall down, well you’ll still be the sweetest little baby in town.”

The hallway grew dim, and a blanket of silence fell.

"I won't ever leave you," Starla whispered.



The Half-Light, The Event + 2

Argentis watched the still form of Ruby, not listening to Starla as she babbled away. In the mortal world, there would be tubes and wires joining her body to a variety of machines and monitors. In the half-light, she was simply a ghostly apparition—cold, grey, and still. He placed a hand on her head, surprised that there was any physicality to her sleeping form. He stroked her hair, wondering who this girl was and why she was so important to Starla. It was then he noticed Starla had stopped speaking and was staring intently at him.

"It's okay," she said calmly, yet Argentis could hear a little apprehension in her voice.

He gave Starla a quizzical look, but she simply tilted her head and smiled angelically. In the mortal world, she would have been described as adorable. Argentis knew better. Starla was at the centre of a magical hurricane, and it made him cautious, yet Starla simply stood there smiling.

He looked at Ruby again, holding his hand over her forehead, trying to gain a sense of the girl's energy. She seemed so peaceful but so empty. No. Not empty. There was something there, but it was faint. Distant. Like she was hiding. His hand began to glow with thousands of tiny lights, and his fingers slipped beneath her skin and into her mind. An icy chill shot through his arm and into his body. His shoulders shuddered. She was trying to push him out of her mind. He persisted, hunting for the threads that made up her mind, her personality and self.

Her mind was an empty, barren darkness, and then he found something hiding in the darkest corner of Ruby's mind. A gossamer-thin thread that seemed so delicate one touch would destroy it. He followed the thread and found a single, solitary memory. It was encased in a hard shell, but he found his way into the memory easily enough.

The memory was bright and full of colour. A cityscape with bright cars and joyful music. A young Ruby stood holding her mother's hand, waiting for someone. A concrete tower painted in pastel pink and white and blue. A parking lot lined with trugs of daisies in pinks and purples and yellows and blues and whites. It was beautiful. Idyllic.

It was a lie.

The scene was more like a painting than a memory. The brush strokes deliberately covering over the reality underneath. Argentis watched, waiting for the scene to play itself out, but everything remained stationary, held in place. The young Ruby flicked her hand and pushed him out of the memory, and he found himself looking at the dark shell attached to the thin thread.

Argentis knew there was only one thing for him to do.

The other weavers didn't understand, with the exception of Vermilion. Dreams were supposed to inspire and lift and enlighten. They were supposed to channel the best thoughts and impressions in the mortal minds. Argentis had followed this unwritten rule for centuries. Until Europe. After the brutality of war, the horrors of the camp, and the death of Cerulean, Argentis no longer saw the point in weaving pleasantries. So he began to weave nightmares for

children. It earned him a reputation, and most other weavers shunned him, but Argentis knew there was power in nightmares. There was purpose in making children face their fears. Preparing them for the reality of a world designed to crush them.

Ruby was protecting the girl in the memory, but that would never serve her. She needed to see the truth. Needed to accept the reality. Only then could she steel herself against the real nightmares of her life. Argentis needed to see Ruby's truth, but it was hidden, even from him. An idea formed, but he hesitated. Always, his nightmares had been tailored for the child. Without seeing Ruby's mind clearly mapped out, how could he weave a nightmare?

Something tugged away at him. Something from the recesses of his own memories.

There had, in essence, been three versions of Argentis. The first was the carefree weaver who knew very little of the darker side of human experience, no matter what he thought he knew. The second version of Argentis had received a brutal education in that regard. Following Cerulean across Europe had battered his ego and his perception of the world. That version of Argentis hid behind the mask of the first version. To everyone else, he still appeared to be the playful, cheeky and irreverent weaver, but behind the mask was a lonely, lost and confused Argentis who relied far too much on the strength of Vermilion. He'd never said anything to his friend, but there had been times he wanted to let his magic fade away and never return. The third version was the Argentis that didn't know who he was. The one who was truly lost and adrift, desperately searching for meaning and finding

none, until Chiasma showed him the way back. Now, he was all three versions combined.

Surely that would be enough to draw from. Surely there were things both he and Ruby were afraid of.

Argentis drew from the depths of his own experiences and laced together the most potent nightmare he'd ever woven. He gathered the magic into a thick silver cloud and pushed it towards the dark shell. It wrapped itself around the orb and seeped inside. It gathered around the scene, eating away at the bright elements, revealing the truth. The girl inside the memory fought back, waving her arms around, trying to chase away the fog, but it was relentless. The scenery changed, revealing images of violence, death, suffering, anger, fear and loss. The young Ruby started to panic. She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to see. She wanted to forget. She had to forget.

The young Ruby curled up and screamed. The protective shell around the memory cracked and shattered. A thick bundle of dark memories exploded, wrapping themselves around the gossamer thread in her mind, and Argentis was overwhelmed as all of Ruby's memories were opened up to him. Instead of the wide-eyed innocence of childhood, he saw only loss, loneliness and isolation. Light turned to dark. Peace turned to pain. Finally, there was darkness and nothingness.

In the half-light, Ruby's body split in two. Her unconscious self remained, held fast by Argentis. The other Ruby sat upright, her eyes wide open, her mouth gasping for breath. Then she fell back to the bed, rejoining the sleeping half.

Back in the memory, the young girl surrendered to the nightmare. She curled into a ball as the fog melted away, fading from fog to light mist to a single wispy silver light. It drifted down to the girl, and she looked up, holding out her hands. She pulled it towards her and pushed it into her chest. The light exploded, and the young Ruby learned the truth that lay at the heart of the nightmare.

This was the secret only he knew. With each child, he dug deep to find the fears they had, the struggles they faced, and then shaped them into nightmares. Each nightmare caused the child to face their darkest moments as they slept, but Argentis always left behind a gift. Not hope, but strength. Not idle fantasy, but truth. A way to stand up and face the world. Something that would awaken within them when they needed it most.

The young Ruby accepted the light because she wanted the nightmare to end, but instead, she found knowledge and power. Not a dream that life would change, but the realisation that she could rise to meet it. That she could face a world bereft of hope and absent of light.

She didn't need light. She was light.

The memory began to change. It began to reshape itself into a true recollection. The tower stood without the soft colours. Gone were the flowers. Gone were the bright, colourful cars and cheery music. At the foot of the tower emerged a dark glass fronted building. The girl stood facing the bank, holding her mother's hand. Argentis waited to see what the memory would reveal, but the young Ruby turned and pushed him away. This memory was not for him.

As the memory faded, he saw Ruby's face. The fire in her eyes and the smile on her face.

The smile.

How had he not noticed it before?

Back in the stillness of the hospital room, Argentis' hand slipped from Ruby's head, and he fell to his knees. He looked up at Starla. It was uncanny. She smiled the exact same smile the young Ruby had given him before she pushed him out of the memory. He held out his arms, and Starla ran into them, hugging him tightly. She was no longer a powerful and mysterious creature of magic. She was just a little girl, frightened and alone.

"Should I call you Starla or Ruby?"



Little Rock, The Event +2

Emergency lighting flickered to life, casting the room in a dull silver-blue glow. The air was oppressive and dense. Pearson felt a tension through her muscles, and her breathing became laboured. She looked over at Ruby's still form and screamed as Ruby sat bolt upright, her eyes wide open. A few heartbeats later and Ruby was slumped back on the bed as if nothing had happened. Pearson took a series of deep breaths, clenching and unclenching her fists. She felt her body relax.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Farrow didn't respond. He was in his own little world, like a tiger staring down its prey. Ruby's machines beeped in the background. Everything else was quiet. Farrow was now standing over the bed and facing the door. She noticed the look on his face. She felt her stomach churn as she slowly turned to look at

the door. Electricity prickled down the back of her neck and crawled down her spine. She stepped away from the chair as something started to slip through the wall. She was expecting something dark and nightmarish, but what emerged was elegant and graceful. She would even describe him as beautiful. He looked as if he'd stepped straight out of a Samurai movie, his clothes pristine and his white hair neatly tied back.

Once in the room, the figure stood silently taking in the scene. Pearson looked over at Farrow, who was staring at the new arrival. His face locked in a glower, as if he could see what was under the facade.

Shiroikumo bowed his head and smiled. He let the brown kimono slide from his shoulders, and as it fell, he began to transform. The fabric dissolved as Shiroikumo grew and stretched, his form elongating, the clothes melting into the skin, which hardened and shone like freshly glazed ceramic. The face fell into itself until it was smooth and glistening under the emergency lighting. The armoured shell cracked on his forearms to reveal dark, palpitating muscle. The fingers became slender and longer, uncurling like leaves of a fern, stretching, sniffing at the air in the room, searching for something. It was at least a foot taller than Farrow, making it seem even more menacing.

A single pearlescent beige eye filled the smooth face, and Pearson could feel its gaze bear down on her, then Farrow, and then the girl. Instinctively, Pearson slowly moved across to stand beside Ruby, ready to protect her. Farrow stepped forward to the end of the bed.

Shiroikumo studied the adult humans, but it could sense nothing in them. The girl, however. The girl was strange. There was magic emanating from her, but it was faint, threaded to something somewhere else. The body seemed to be nothing but an empty shell. Shiroikumo pulled himself upright and stepped towards the bed.



The Half-Light, The Event +2

Starla held on tight to Argentis as she saw the wraith appear in the room. Startled by her sudden fear, he looked up to see the wraith and jumped with surprise. So many memories re-surfaced that he struggled to contain himself. He picked up Starla and carried her to the corner of the room, shielding her from the wraith.

“Relax.” Vermilion’s familiar voice felt like a blanket of calm. He walked over to the wraith and swatted at it, his arm going right through it. It didn’t react.

“We are in the world of half-light. It cannot see us. It cannot sense us.”

He knelt down beside Starla and placed a hand on her shoulder. “There is only one gateway into this world, and it does not know the way.” He turned to Argentis. “Otherwise, it would already be here.”

Vermilion waved his hand over Ruby’s bed, and the dim figures of Farrow and Pearson emerged like ghosts.

“Let us watch what happens.”



Little Rock, The Event +2

Pearson was so fixated on the creature in the room that she didn't notice that Farrow had changed. It was almost imperceptible. Physically, he looked the same, but he seemed larger and more powerful. She remembered as a child, reading the story of Hercules and imagining how the Gods would have looked stepping down from Olympus. Farrow looked just like her childhood fantasies. She rubbed her eyes. He looked as if he was glowing.

The wraith lunged at Farrow, but he'd already reached for the nearest chair and swung it around. The movement was swift, catching the wraith by surprise. The chair passed straight through the creature as it faded into an ethereal form before solidifying again. The chair crashed against the wall as Shiroikumo continued forward, slamming a wide-handed smack against Farrow's head. It made a sickening sound as the armoured skin hammered against flesh. Farrow stumbled and dropped to his knees.

All that lay between it and the girl was Pearson. She looked around for anything that could double up as a weapon. Before she could find anything, Farrow was back on his feet, and his rippling arms fastened around the wraith's neck and shoulder from behind. The wraith faltered. It tried to break free, but Farrow's muscles tightened and held the wraith fast. It tried to fade from physical to ethereal form but couldn't.

There was no expression on the wraith's face, but Pearson could tell from the way it writhed that it was confused and a little afraid. It was acting like a trapped animal. It couldn't understand how a mortal could

hold it like this and stop it from shifting between physical and ethereal states.

While the pair grappled, Pearson saw her chance and ran past them, reaching for a piece of the broken chair. Shiroikumo lashed out wildly, catching Pearson and knocking her aside. She slid across the floor, and her head smashed against the wall with a thump. She tried to get back to her feet, but her legs folded beneath her, and she fell back down. Dazed, she fought to stay conscious and clear-headed.

The wraith swung around, spinning on its heels, slamming Farrow into the foot of the bed. Farrow managed to hold on, but the force was enough that Farrow loosened his grip, and Shiroikumo thrust an elbow into his face. There was a cracking sound, and a fog of bright lights hovered around Farrow's head.

Pearson managed to sit up, leaning against the wall for support. Farrow was shaking his head, clearing the fog from his eyes. Shiroikumo glided to Ruby's side, unopposed. He paused, weighing up the girl on the bed. Thin fingers caressed her hair, sliding around her head until they cradled her neck. He lifted Ruby's head, but it slipped from his fingers and onto the pillow as a searing pain flashed through his chest. He looked down to see the splintered end of a chair leg emerging out of his torso. He shuddered. Stumbled. Turned. Pearson was barely able to stand, a look of defiance and rage on her face, but the rage had only taken her this far, and she had no idea what to do.

She hadn't expected it to work. She only hoped to distract it. She expected the chair leg to deflect off the armoured skin, but it sank straight through. It had surprised her, but her adrenaline was in command, and she'd pushed it all the way through. Now, with the

wraith's single eye looking down on her, she wished she'd thought a bit further ahead.

Shiroikumo grabbed hold of Pearson by the throat, the long fingers reaching all the way around her neck, lifting her off the floor. Pearson reached up, gasping for breath, scrabbling and scratching desperately. The wraith swung her around and launched her across the room. She was flung through the air with such force that she crashed into the false ceiling and clattered to the floor, where she laid in a heap.

Shiroikumo extracted the chair leg and paused as the wound slowly healed. There was no blood. No sign of any injury, but he was weaker now. Robbed of energy, Shiroikumo would need to feed, but that would have to wait. He had to complete his mission. He had to take the girl, but first, he would need to find her soul.

He lingered over the bed, a hand hovering over the girl's body, sensing the channels of energy, trying to discern where they led, where the girl was hiding. He rested one hand over the girl's crown and one over her belly, his head twisting, following the magic. Homing in on the source of the girl's spirit.

Shiroikumo's hands were ripped away as Farrow's arms wrapped around the creature's neck once more. Farrow held the thing fast, dragging the wraith away from Ruby. He could feel the wraith shift, trying to twist and gain the advantage over Farrow, but it was weaker. It lacked the power it needed.

The fear and shock returned as Shiroikumo struggled under the chokehold of the human. He couldn't understand it. No human had that kind of

power. It had to be a creature of some kind, but no magical creature could overpower him like this.

He would never know who it was that held him.

Farrow flexed his arms, and the strength and tension snapped Shiroikumo's neck with a sharp crunch. Farrow relaxed his grip, letting the wraith slip and fall to the floor. It landed without a sound and lay there for a moment before the physical form melted into a mist, gathering itself into a ball. It hovered in the room and then slowly slipped below the floor.

Farrow gave a quick check on Ruby and then rushed to Pearson. She was bruised and bleeding, but nothing major, and nothing was broken. She was lucky. She would be okay. Eventually.



The Half-Light, The Event +2

Starla sat frozen, breathing in rapid, sharp, ragged breaths. Argentis sat in shock. He shook himself back to reality and watched Starla carefully. She was still, and her eyes wide, but there was no build up of magic. He slid over to Starla, wrapping his arm around her, then glared at Vermilion.

"Let's see what happens!" He said scornfully. "Nice one!"

He scooped Starla into his arms and carried her out of the room.

"Come on. It'll be okay," he comforted. "Now let's get out of here before Uncle Vermilion comes up with any more stupid ideas."



CHAPTER 8: LESSONS

Saint Petersburg, The Event +3

The air was crisp and sharp and thick with snow. Penumbra stood in an empty park in Kupchino looking up at the sky, just a blanket of white cloud hovering in the air. He let the snow fall onto his face, gathering in patches on his icy skin until a pulse of magic melted the snow. Small waves of steam disappeared into the air. He watched as the snow stopped and the clouds dissipated, revealing the last few moments of the day. The sky grew darker as blue passed into black, and the city came to life under a haze of street lights. The air turned bitter as the temperature dropped rapidly. He smiled to himself. It would be a very cold night. People would huddle together for comfort and protection, seeking the company of others to chase away the fear and the danger. It was a psychological inevitability built into humans. Something primordial.

It would do them no good.

He looked down at his hands, the skin ghostly pale. His mortal facsimile fascinated him. He couldn't remember when he first started to experiment with his body, but it was a recent thing considering he had lived for many thousands of years. His weaver form was so frail in comparison to his wraith form. You couldn't tell the weavers that, of course. One of them had decided on that form, and the rest had simply

followed. There was so much more a weaver could do with a more efficient body.

Still, there was something comforting about returning to his old weaving body, though for the life of him, he couldn't say why.

He'd made the shift from weaving to stealing dreams a long time ago, but even then, he clung to the same body shape. How had it taken him so long to realise that a new form would be better? Why did he return to his weaver body so often? Why the reticence to fully live in the new body he had crafted? Old habits, he supposed. He wondered if he would ever shed the weaver mentality and fully relax into his wraith form.

For all their rhetoric about balancing the magical energy around humans, the weavers were plagued with arrogance, assuming they were the most powerful and dominant of all magical creatures. They were aloof and zealous—theirs a divine right in shaping the destiny of humanity. His quest to build a following of dream thieves had been slow, but there'd been some who listened. He had convinced them that they were more powerful than the dogmatic weavers. That stealing magical energy was what really kept the balance among humans. After discovering a more efficient form, he taught them to change their bodies, and though some had been more adept than others, each one of them had grown in power. Eventually, they fell to the curse of the weavers, becoming just as arrogant as they ever were. He smiled at the irony.

He looked around him, watching the khadema scuttle on the fringe of his influence. They were getting brave of late. Wild and feral, they only wanted to feed on the morsels of lighter magics that spilled

over from humans. At the start, they had been an annoyance, but after decades of patience and manipulation, they were now an army, ready to follow, ready to feast on any and all magic humans carried within. They had been equally as patient. Always eager, Penumbra often had to hold them back. Give them a taste, but never let them gorge the way they desired. It had taken a long time to build up that level of desire and then control it, but now they were ready, and tonight, Penumbra would know if his patience and effort were truly worth it.

The feeding in Kupchino yesterday had been a small taste of what tonight would bring, though enough to have alerted government authorities. The military had been sent in. Martial Law and quarantine had been instituted. Soldiers and armoured cars patrolled the streets, keeping people prisoners in their homes. Humans were nothing if not predictable. Let them do what they will, it would not prevent what was coming. In fact, it would only make it easier to create more chaos. Tonight, the whole of Saint Petersburg would be at his mercy.

He walked through the park, the bare trees casting eerie figures over the frozen ground. Barely audible were the cracks and creaks of ice forming over the lake. A peaceful place, though the energy was no match for the gardens of the Hermitage.

He stumbled as something pierced his chest. A pain. No. Not a pain. An emptiness. A sudden sense of loss. He closed his eyes and reached out, sinking his magic deep into the ground. Threads rooted through the earth connecting with each of his wraiths. Each thread connected, bar one.

“Shiroikumo,” he whispered.

He pulled the other threads back to himself and dug deeper, searching for the root of Shiroikumo's magic, but it was absent. Penumbra was confused. Shiroikumo would never have ignored the silent call. Something was wrong. Was he weakened somehow? His magic so depleted it couldn't retake its form? Shiroikumo's magic was powerful, almost as powerful as his own. There should be some trace of it, even in a weakened state.

Penumbra reached out deeper, searching not for the wraith, but for the whisp of his magic, but still he couldn't reach his friend. Perhaps Shiroikumo's whisp had been masked, hidden from Penumbra's reach.

Shiroikumo had been one of his most trusted lieutenants, taking quickly to Penumbra's teachings. Over the centuries, he'd become a loyal ally and companion. He grew pensive and worried.

"Where are you, my friend?"



Southern Korean Coast, 1106 CE

Penumbra walked listlessly along the highway, his thoughts wandering as aimlessly as he was. He was capable of travelling the lung mei, but he had stopped using them, travelling as a mere mortal. If anyone had asked, he couldn't have explained why.

He had lost his way over the last couple of centuries. He couldn't remember the last time he had woven a dream, let alone stolen one. There was simply no excitement or discovery any more. When he first began stealing dreams, his path had been so clear. He had travelled, searching for other weavers to teach, but they each rejected his theories and rejected him.

He had gone back to weaving dreams for a few decades, but humans lived such mundane, uninspiring lives. He wove for them dreams of wonder and vision, but the inspiration never lifted them to greater things. The gifts and power he gave them were dismissed and forgotten, and humanity continued on in the drudgery of their lives. It was almost as if they were programmed to it.

Disheartened, he started drifting, giving up his work, wandering the world alone and isolated, unable to find a direction or purpose for his existence, searching for that spark that would break the mental slump. He wandered east and then south, but everything seemed the same. The road brought him to a coastal village, and he found a seat overlooking the small dock.

As the warm sun began to slowly creep overhead, a small boat appeared, and a regal looking figure stepped off. There was something about the man that was different, but Penumbra couldn't quite pin it down. He appeared so vastly different from the locals. His hair was almost pure white, tied up into a perfect topknot, held in place with a black ribbon. He wore a flowing brown jacket with embroidered white birds and flowing white trousers that remained spotlessly clean despite the dust and grime all around. He moved gracefully, never looking to the left or the right, and everyone seemed to move out of the way for him without ever acknowledging him. A man like that would surely warrant some bowing and scraping from the locals but walked as if invisible to the natives.

The figure stopped in the market, where three men were napping during a break after a hard morning's work. He approached them, holding his

hand over the head of the first. Penumbra watched with expectation, intrigued to see if the newcomer was a weaver, but his hand simply hovered over the man, and then he moved to the second. Again, the hand hovered over the man's head, as if trying to discern something, but he stepped away without doing anything more. He didn't even bother with the third man, returning to his elegant walk out of the village. Penumbra decided to follow, but when he stepped onto the northward track leading out of the market, the stranger was nowhere to be seen.

The road meandered through rice fields on either side while the sun baked the landscape. The dregs of the coastal breeze drifted lazily over the scenery. Having lost its cooling power, it just made everything hotter, drier and dustier. The track came to a fork, and Penumbra stood there for a moment, feeling lost both physically and metaphorically.

The last time he felt any sense of dedication and focus was among the Tang. The fall of the Tang and the city of Chang'an had been a greater loss than he cared to admit, not because of the centuries spent there but because of a lost friendship that had lasted for as long as he could remember. The last years among the Tang had seen him work alone for the first time in millennia, but he'd never felt alone. Even though they had stopped talking to each other towards the end, his friend had always been there, had Penumbra needed him.

He looked up and down the tracks ahead of him. There was no motivation or drive for him anymore. His years of drifting had led him here, and now he didn't want to go any further. He was ready to sit

down on this spot until the whole mortal world came to an end.

"You are not sure which way to go?"

Penumbra turned to face the stranger with white hair, noticing for the first time the man's imposing build. He was shorter than Penumbra but wider. His body looked as solid as a wall of stone.

"I don't think it really matters," Penumbra replied dryly. "Neither road leads to anywhere of importance."

He waited for some retort or wisdom from the stranger, but there was only silence as the two figures stood staring down the empty tracks.

"You are not human, are you?" Penumbra speculated, breaking the silence.

"No," The stranger replied. "Neither are you."

The two faced each other, and Penumbra could see that the stranger carried as many burdens as he did.

"My name is Penumbra."

"Shiroikumo," he responded.

"You are a weaver?" Penumbra asked.

"I was," Shiroikumo answered. He looked out over the rolling hills in the distance. The bright midday sun blanketed everything with a dazzling, shimmering heat. The scenery before them appeared with intense, saturated colours.

"I saw you in the village with the sleeping men. I thought you were going to weave, but you refrained," Penumbra recalled.

"I have not woven a dream for many, many years."

Penumbra nodded. "It has been the same for me."

Again, the pair stood in silence for a while, and then Penumbra moved onto the track to their left.

"Come," he beckoned.

"How do you know that is the right way?" Shiroikumo asked.

"I do not," he responded with a smile. No longer feeling lost, he felt a spark of purpose and enthusiasm. "But perhaps it is enough to know where one's journey begins in order to gain the right direction."

Shiroikumo nodded and followed.

"Tell me, Shiroikumo. Why did you stop weaving dreams?"

Shiroikumo paused for a moment while he assembled his thoughts into a narrative.

"In my early years, I happened upon a small community of rakshasa, of the samuth of Centaurs. I found their thoughts and memories vivid and intense, the animal thoughts were so primal, so different. The rakshasa thoughts so intricate and delicate. Both aspects of the mind came together into a most wonderful tapestry. Weaving dreams was a complex but beautiful act. I learned many things from them."

His words drifted off slightly as his memories of that time came to mind, as well as the memories of what followed.

"They were hunted. Exterminated by a community of nearby humans."

"Humans," Penumbra snorted in disgust.

"Indeed," Shiroikumo remarked. "I travelled east, searching for other samuth of rakshasa, eventually finding a colony of Garuda. Again, their memories were beautifully complex, the mixture of mortal and animal thoughts intertwining in such a wondrous way."

Shiroikumo fell quiet at the memory.

"I understand," Penumbra said softly. He understood perfectly why his companion had fallen silent. After the exile of vampyres and elves, humans had waged a bloodthirsty genocide of the rakshasa.

"There are times when I hope that some of them escaped extinction, though I am sure my wishes are in vain."

"Where did you go from there?" Penumbra asked.

"I wandered for many decades, searching for another tribe of rakshasa, but I eventually came to accept that they were no more," Shiroikumo said, and Penumbra felt the sadness in his voice. "I drifted for many seasons after that, weaving only occasionally for human minds. I found the experience disappointing. Human memories were flat and barren in comparison. Their aspirations small and monotonous. Yet I still hoped to find a community of humans with something greater in their minds."

Penumbra held his tongue this time and let Shiroikumo continue his story.

"For a season, I did indeed find a community of humans that seemed to desire greater, worthier things. There was simplicity in their thoughts and desires but also a brightness to their minds. There was one among them, a noble warrior who had once sheltered and protected the rakshasa. His mind was complex, bright and vivid, powerful and violent, yet also full of poetry, artistry and great depth. I found fulfilment in weaving dreams once again."

Shiroikumo nudged a small stone loose from the track with his foot and crouched to pick it up. Rising, he rolled the black stone around in his hand as the light reflected a series of thin, sandy brown veins.

"But it was short-lived. The warrior met his fate on the battlefield, betrayed by those who were supposed to be his allies. The community fell into a state of selfishness and arrogance. Where once I had found purpose in weaving dreams, I now found only the prosaic and the petty. I questioned my purpose and stopped the work to which I was called."

He tossed the stone far across the fields, watching it disappear among the stalks of rice.

"They do not aspire to greater things," Shiroikumo stated flatly. "I could not, cannot, find meaning in the mundane."

Penumbra walked in silence as he processed the story, noticing the similarities to his own.

"I understand," he said in response.

"And what of you?" Shiroikumo asked.

Penumbra thought for a moment. His past was complex and not easy to recount. Cautionary memories of times when he had tried to tell his story came to mind. He was reluctant to repeat the experience.

And yet.

There was something different about this weaver. Perhaps now was the time. Or perhaps it was time for a different approach.

"Let me show you."



The pair stopped at a small village nestled in the lee of a large hillside, watching silently as a weaver went about her business. She emerged from a small dwelling, and once she was safely engaged in the next house, the two weavers slipped inside.

Shiroikumo watched in fascination as Penumbra slipped his hand below the scalp of the old man, searching for the newly placed dream. Finding it, he isolated the magical energy surrounding it and pulled on the strands. As he withdrew his fingers, threads of glowing golden light followed. He held his hand up to show his companion and then pulled the golden threads into himself. He felt the sting of new power as it became one with his own magic.

“As we search through memories and weave them into dreams, we leave an imprint, a new pattern over the original. You can search for these new patterns in the same way as you would search for memories. Once found, you can extract the magic surrounding them,” Penumbra whispered.

“Intriguing. Are there any side effects?” Shiroikumo asked.

“There is one notable effect. You will not feel a drain of energy afterwards. Do you wish to try?” Penumbra asked.

Shiroikumo nodded and placed his hand over the head of the old woman. He let it hover over her head for a moment, sampling her thoughts and memories and character. Slowly, he let his hand fall. It drifted down gracefully through her skull and into her mind. He sifted through the memories, gleaning the pattern of lights that fired through the mind.

Penumbra’s voice sounded out quietly in the background. “Fight the urge to follow the natural patterns as you would usually do. The new dream will reveal itself.”

Shiroikumo withdrew a little from the flow of memories. His old habits had taken over and pulled him into the mixing pot of the old woman’s past. He

pulled away slightly, then noticed a new image, wrapped in a bright golden mist. He gathered it together, stopping it from unravelling into the woman's mind. The woman moaned in her sleep as he tugged at the newly formed dream. His hand drifted out of the woman's mind, pulling with it the fragile golden threads of magic.

He held it up to his face, rolling his hand around, the golden light flowing and following.

"Now, pull the energy into your body," Penumbra said softly.

Shiroikumo twisted his hand around once more to watch the light dance. He closed his eyes and concentrated as the light slowly slipped under his skin. His hand glowed as the final filaments were absorbed. He winced slightly as the energy fought against his own, stinging him like razor blades slashing inside his hand. His fingers clenched from the pain.

"You must overpower it. Command it to be yours," Penumbra urged.

Shiroikumo tried to surround the new energy with his own, but the newly absorbed magic fought back. He felt pins and needles in his hand, the fist glowing brighter as the two magics battled for dominance. He enclosed the foreign energy, suffocating it with his own, crushing it into submission. His fist began to dim as the new magic surrendered, and his chest shuddered from the boost. He opened his eyes wide and stared at Penumbra.

"Intriguing."

Penumbra led him out of the dwelling and into the clear night. The air was hot and gathering humidity, growing stifling and heavy.

“Magic requires balance. The weavers give magic and humans take it without payment or gratitude,” Penumbra said with an edge of bitterness. “We must become the balance.”

Shiroikumo reflected on the words and on the experience of the evening. For so long, he had felt empty and without purpose or meaning. Tonight, he felt renewed, as if a long hidden truth was finally revealed.

There was only one thing left untold.

“And what of your story?” Shiroikumo asked.

Penumbra looked up at the moon shining brightly above. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to tell his story; he just didn’t think the time was right.

“Perhaps that should wait for the journey tomorrow. For tonight, let us discuss balancing the magic.”



Saint Petersburg, The Event +3

He closed his eyes and looked up into the dark sky, feeling the icy sting of the air bite his skin. How many nights had he and Shiroikumo spent working, reflecting, refining and perfecting the art of stealing dreams? The white haired weaver had been more than a follower, but a partner in the learning process. A partner and a friend.

Penumbra felt the wound of Shiroikumo’s loss fester and grow inside him. He felt the anger rise, filling his chest. He let it build as he transformed from his weaving form to his wraith form. Stretching to his full height, a flash of darkness swept across his eye. He lifted his arms and bathed in the expectancy building around him. The excitement grew around the

city as thousands upon thousands of khadema waited on edge. It was like a piece of music steadily building from adagio to allegro. He lowered his arms, and a pulse of dark energy crackled and burned the ground. The smoke hadn't even dissipated before a flood of dark, shapeless forms swept across the landscape to begin their assault.

The first screams came quickly, slicing through the stillness of the late evening. They were only the first. Before the night was done, there would be many, many more.



The Half-light, The Event +3

By the time Vermilion caught up with Argentis and Starla, they were sat opposite each other, playing a game. Argentis sat cross-legged, his hands held in front of him, facing her while she clapped her hands in rhythm to a nursery rhyme. Argentis would then attempt to repeat it, failing dramatically. Vermilion knew he was pretending to fail, but his clowning behaviour had certainly improved Starla's mood. She felt more relaxed. Her magic was in check. In a state of balance.

Starla noticed him and patted the floor beside her. Vermilion obeyed and sat.

"I'm glad you finally came to rescue me. She's been beating me every time," Argentis joked, though it was enough to cause a smile to stretch across Starla's face.

"Starla." Vermilion paused, not sure of what to say, but Starla knew. She placed her hand gently on his knee.

"I know," she replied, and Vermilion felt the wisdom of millennia hanging off the words.

"Do you have to do this now?" Argentis chided Vermilion, then turned back to Starla. "You don't have to talk about it now."

"It's okay," Starla said. She paused, thinking of how to describe what was happening to her. "When I get scared, I feel, I don't know, all sparky and such. It keeps me safe, so I hold onto it real tight. I try to hold it, but it gets away from me, and I break things. Chiasma said you can teach me to keep it inside? You can teach me not to break things?"

"We will do our best," Argentis assured.

"We are not sure how to..."

"We will do our best," Argentis emphasised, cutting off his friend and throwing him a look. Vermilion got the message.

"It is not about keeping it in," Vermilion said, changing tack. "It is about accepting it."

Argentis nudged Starla playfully. "He's going to bore us now."

Starla giggled.

Vermilion ignored him and continued.

"The sparky feeling you describe, that is magic. There are things you need to understand about magic. It exists everywhere, holding the world together. Some magic is concentrated together, and when that happens, it forms what we call a whisp. A ball of magical energy. It has no real form; it is just magic, but it has the beginning of thought."

"If you have any questions," Argentis Interrupted. "Just ask. If you don't understand something, tell us, and we can try to make it easier to understand."

"I ain't that dumb," Starla joked. She turned back to Vermilion. "So you're saying the ball of magic, the whip, it's alive? It can think and stuff?"

"Almost. It knows it should do something, but it doesn't know what. It knows the magic needs to be tended. It needs to be cared for. But the whip, that magic, it grows in power, and if it doesn't have a purpose, it can..."

"Get out?" Starla offered.

"Yes," Vermilion replied.

"Like me."

"Yes. But. If the whip makes a choice—to act, to perform a duty—then the magic is given purpose and is contained. The magic stays in."

Starla looked thoughtful, but Argentis could see she was struggling to understand.

"So one time, Vermilion was just a ball of magic that chose to be a dream weaver, and that's when he became boring." Starla giggled. Argentis winked at her. "And Chiasma, her magic chose to be a sylph, and so she became Chiasma. That's how magical creatures are born. Does that make sense?"

"Uh-huh," she answered, nodding her head.

Argentis continued. "You have all this magic inside you, but it doesn't know what to do."

"But I'm already me. Ain't I?"

Argentis picked up her hands and held them gently.

"You're a little bit Starla, but you're still a little bit Ruby. Your choice is harder than mine or Vermilion's or Chiasma's. You have to choose what your magic will be, just like us, but you also have to let go of Ruby."

"But..."

"I know. It's not easy Starla. You need to be brave. I don't think I could do it, but I know one thing for sure. You're a lot braver than me," Argentis admitted.

"And I," Vermilion added.

"You don't talk funny like him," she said to Argentis..

Argentis smiled and leaned closer to whisper. "That's because he's a lot older than you and me."

She giggled again and then fell serious.

"I don't know what to be. How can I choose when I don't know what I should be?"



Little Rock, The Event +3

The fifth floor of the hospital was calm considering the circumstances. The wraith had slipped past the humans without anybody knowing. The world outside of Ruby's room carried on, blissfully unaware of what had transpired. The nurses didn't even ask any questions when they saw the mess in the room. They had simply replaced the broken chair, made a note of the broken ceiling, patched up Pearson and then left. As if they couldn't compute what they were seeing. The reality sliding off into the periphery and then out of mind. It was as if nothing had happened. Perhaps it was the lingering effect of the spilled-over magic. Perhaps everyone was too busy to worry about it. Perhaps they didn't really want to know. Farrow could understand that. They'd been through enough over the last few days.

Pearson was still unconscious. Bruising had spread across the left side of her face and shoulders. She would be stiff and sore when she woke, but at least her recovery would be okay, relatively speaking.

Apart from the sudden lurch, Ruby looked as she had before. The monitors beeped away in a monotonous concerto. Farrow kept studying her face, wondering what was playing out in her mind. Wondering if the two weavers could really do what they needed to do. Wondering if he had the strength to do what he would need to do if the time came. Knowing full well that he didn't.

Her face was hard. Cold. Distant. It was the face of loneliness. He'd worn that face a few times in his past.

A soft, dream-like voice sounded out behind him.

"She will recover."

Farrow turned to see Chiasma knelt beside Pearson, stroking her face and shoulder, dragging stars along her fingers. As the lights bathed Pearson's face, the cuts and bruises faded.

"I didn't know sylphs were healers?" Farrow observed.

"Sylphs are many things," she replied dryly.

"You look tired."

"It is the way of things."

She drifted across the room until she was level with Ruby's head. Then she floated onto the bed and sat down to speak with Farrow. He pulled up the chair to listen.

"Pariah." She whispered. Farrow flinched. Even now, after thousands of years, he still hated the name. A name that carried with it too many memories. A name that came with a curse and a death sentence.

"One day," she continued. "You will have to embrace your birthright."

"I have no birthright Chiasma. Considering you know so much, you should know that, at least."

"You will not be able to hide forever."

"I'll give it a damn good try, let me tell you."

Chiasma seemed to almost vanish and then re-appear, like a ghost trying to hold its form together.

"You don't look so good," Farrow said gravely.

"A flame turned to ember. Then to ash."

Farrow's life had been filled with sorrow for as long as he could remember. He'd felt sorrow more deeply than any mortal being. Thousands of years of loss. Countless atrocities and failures. Centuries of isolation and loneliness. Chiasma's voice held such grief it made his seem trivial. A knowingness that could break worlds. She looked up and smiled. Not forced, but genuine and warm. An acceptance of what was to come.

"I understand," Farrow answered to the unspoken question. "She will need you."

"Yes, but not yet. First, I must give you a warning."

"I'm listening."

"The wraith was just one. Others will come, including the master. You must be prepared."

"I'll be ready."

Chiasma slipped off the bed and drifted towards him until she was right in his face.

"Farrow will never be ready. Only Pariah."

"Chiasma. If I wield that power, it will bring down the kind of destruction folks haven't seen for a very, very long time."

"You will have to choose," she said and then vanished instantly.

He waited, expecting her to come back.

"They do that," Pearson mumbled, trying to sit up.



The Half-light, The Event +3

“What do you want to be?” Argentis asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, the sadness in her voice effusing from her in waves. Her head dropped, and her hair started to flutter. Argentis lifted her head.

“Hey,” he said softly. “You don’t have to choose right now, but think about who you know. You know Chiasma, and me and mister boring there.”

Starla smiled, and Argentis could tell it was forced. The humour wasn’t cutting through the weight of her fears and doubts any more.

Vermilion placed a hand on her head.

“We are here to help.”

“I don’t really understand,” Starla whispered.

“It’s not easy to explain, is it?” Argentis said, sitting back against a wall.

“Perhaps if I show you,” Vermilion offered.

“How?” she asked.

“I can show you,” he said apprehensively. “In a dream.”

Argentis looked at him with a cautious look, but Vermilion ignored him.

Vermilion chose an empty space and sat cross-legged. He held out a hand towards Starla. Starla jumped up and skipped over to him, dropping into a sitting position with her legs crossed. He looked over at Argentis with a silent invitation.

“Are you sure about this?” Argentis asked.

“Come on,” Vermilion ordered.

Argentis dragged himself across the floor and held Starla’s outstretched hand. The three forming a semi-circle. Vermilion closed his eyes and twitched a little as he entered a dream-like state.

In a heartbeat, the scenery around them shifted, becoming a forest, old and quiet. A thin layer of mist hung over the floor. The leafy canopy blocked almost all the morning sunlight above, but blossoms opened, casting their pastel light on the scene, and flowers of light littered the forest floor, swaying gently in the mist. They looked as if they were dancing.

Starla gasped. She had always imagined a place like this, for as far back as she could remember. A place of pure magic. This had been her place of escape. Her place of solitude and safety. No matter what happened in the real world, when she closed her eyes, she could find her way to this place. She had imagined forests like this her whole childhood, playing and dancing and hiding.

“Is...” she struggled to articulate what she wanted to say. What she hoped to be true. “Is this really real?”

“This is just a dream,” Vermilion answered, opening his eyes. He rose to his feet and led Starla into the heart of the forest. “A memory. But the place is real. This is a place where magic gathers and magical creatures are born.”

Argentis rose and followed.

“You’ve seen this place, haven’t you?” Argentis asked. Starla just nodded, overcome with awe.

“This is why you have such a strong connection to magic. It brought you here. You did not imagine it,” Vermilion explained, anticipating her unspoken query. “You reached out to the magic—with your heart, with your mind—and it brought you here. When you were younger.”

Argentis gave his friend another disdainful look.

“What he means is you wished for somewhere safe, and the magic made your wish come true.

Because you believed,” Argentis clarified, but Starla was only half listening.

Something had caught Starla’s attention—a light that was different to the others. Larger. Brighter. Denser. It drifted through the forest mist like a large cotton ball cloud filled with tiny white Christmas lights.

Starla pulled free of the two dream weavers and moved towards the little ball of cloud and light. The mist parted around her ankles and reformed behind her. Argentis followed, curious about her reaction. Vermilion simply stood, concentrating on holding the vision together. In the back of his mind, the memories were shifting, evolving.

Starla knelt, and the mist surrounded her, soup up to her chest. The cloud drifted towards her and stopped, hovering in front of her just out of arms reach. The stars drifted and danced within the cloud, casting waves of light on her face.

“This is what we call a whisp. This is us, before we’re...” Argentis paused to find the right word. “Well, before we’re born.”

Starla wasn’t listening at all now. She was elsewhere. Argentis was a distant, far-away whisper. She reached out to hold the whisp, and it responded, obeyed, came to her hesitantly, slowly, but it moved to her, let her cup her hands under it and pick it up out of the mist.

Argentis was shocked. He turned to look at Vermilion, but he looked stone-faced, focused and faraway. Argentis was on his own.

“We are born like this, and then we choose what we want to be. What we want to do with our magic. And that’s when we are born.” Argentis said,

ploughing on. He was struggling. It was something he had never had to explain before. "I mean, born again. For real. Changed." He looked at Vermilion for help, but Vermilion looked catatonic. "Some help here?"

Vermilion said nothing, his gaze held fast, looking at Starla who was now holding the whisp in her hands. The lights, which had been pinpricks of white, slowly turned bright copper with a deep scarlet wake as they shifted within the cloud.

"This is you," she said, her voice like an echo across time.

"Yes," Vermilion's voice echoed around the vision, though his mouth wasn't moving. "As a whisp, I moved through the magic, wanting a purpose. To know what I should do. The magic speaks to me. I don't understand what it is saying, but I feel what it tells me."

"What did it tell you?" she asked.

"It told me what the world needed."

She lowered the whisp gently to the ground and watched in reverence as it convulsed and grew bright. Then, in a vivid explosion of maroon and red and orange, the whisp was gone, and Vermilion stood. He looked young, not yet weighed down by experience. Argentis looked behind him to say something sarcastic, but Vermilion was no longer there. Only the apparition before Starla was visible.

"And I chose to fill that need," the newly born Vermilion said. "That was my true birth. I became Vermilion, the dream weaver. Giving shape to my magic. My power. My purpose."

"What is my purpose?" she asked. Her voice sounded ancient and timeless, like it was carved from

stone and carried through the centuries from the beginning of creation.

“Listen to the magic. What does it tell you?”

Starla dipped her hands into the mist until it souped up around her shoulders, her head hovering just over the surface. She closed her eyes and listened. There were no voices, just whispers she couldn't understand, but she understood their meaning. Like images floating in and out of her mind. She saw the world in new colours. Like threads of light reaching all around the world, connecting every living thing. She could see every life and every death. Could see a tapestry of colour telling the story of the world. There were patches of brilliance where the colours were saturated and vivid. They filled her with such joy that she wanted to dance.

As she followed random threads, she also came across random patches that were less saturated and darker. Sometimes, they would lose all colour, but they still created a pattern in shades of grey. Some creatures she saw lived in the darker places. They consumed the edges of light and colour, bleeding them into the darkness, but now she understood the symmetry. How too much light burned the world and how too much darkness froze it. So some creatures painted with the light and some painted with the darkness, so neither light nor dark would overtake the other. Everything in harmony. The dark and the light holding the world together, and all over the world, magical creatures kept the magic balanced.

As she explored the tapestry of the world, she noticed there were patches that were undefined. There was no colour, nor any light or shadow. It was just empty. These were the needs Vermilion spoke of.

The needs the magic needed to fill, but couldn't, because there were no creatures to heal the emptiness and pull the magic into a pattern of life.

She found a desolate place that wasn't like any of the others. It was pitch black, and although she could sense the creatures all around trying to bring the light into it, the spot consumed everything, and it was growing, eating into the borders. She went in closer until she was in the middle of it, searching for the cause, and then she found it. A presence. A creature consumed by loss and anger and greed. It no longer cared about balance. It only cared about power. It wanted power more than anything else in the world. It wanted as much magic as it could consume, and she knew it was a threat to the magical balance. Without that balance, the world would be thrown into chaos, but it couldn't see beyond its own need. She moved closer, driven to find the cause. Driven to know. She wasn't afraid. She pulled at the darkness to see what was in there.

Then she saw him.

He looked like a dream weaver. Like Vermilion and Argentis, though his hair was black, with a bright streak that shimmered and glowed and then faded. His eyes were flecked with silver stars born with bright fire only to die in the darkness. He looked up, and his eyes fixed on her. She felt a sudden curiosity, as if the figure didn't understand and wanted to know what this new thing was that encroached on his corner of the universe. She felt many things that confused her. Things she did not understand. Behind it all, though, was hunger. A hunger so powerful it overcame her. Hunger for more. Hunger to control. Hunger to dominate. It was the strongest emotion she had ever

felt, and she was not prepared for it. The figure reached out to pull her into the darkness, but she stood her ground, defiant and stubborn in the face of what she instinctively knew was wrong. Soon, she felt the darkness close in, like a balloon of night pushing against her. She tried to push it back with her hands, but it wrapped around her arms. She twisted and scratched until she saw the light in the distance and clawed her way back to safety.

As Starla fought to survive the things she saw in her mind, her body curled up into a ball. The trees of the forest began to fade as she pulled the mist of magic towards her for protection. It swept across the ghostly forest floor, pulling with it the dancing lights, forming a cocoon that grew and began to glow hot and bright. It swallowed Vermilion and continued to grow until it threatened to consume Argentis. He flinched, but the light suddenly stopped just in front of him. The energy singed his skin, the rising heat probing beneath, pricking the pathways of magic throughout his body. He tried to reach into the light, but a jolt of energy propelled his hand back.

He felt a soft touch on his arm and turned to see Chiasma. She looked frail and ghostly, yet she smiled, and it settled his fear. Her hand slid away as she walked, unhindered, into the light.

Argentis could see nothing, but there was a voice. A thin whisper of a voice.

“Starla.”

He listened more intently.

“It’s okay honey. I’m here. Come here.”

The light began to dim, the energy cooling a little. He could just make out Chiasma’s form hovering over Starla. She wrapped herself around the little girl and

the light began to thin a little more. He could see Chiasma now. She looked like she was being torn to shreds. Sometimes Chiasma was there. Sometimes, she was pulled apart with licks of fire. She looked up at him, and he could see the pain on her face. There was anguish in her eyes as her body was pulled apart and then dragged back together over and over and over.

A bright flash knocked Argentis to the floor, and when he looked up, Starla was curled up in a foetal ball. Starla looked as if she was wearing the sun. Her dress was covered with layers of light. Thin layers of shimmering gold. Flames of burnished orange and waves of deep red. Slowly, the magic dissipated, the colours burning away, leaving her in the simple yellow summer dress. Light spilled from her hair like star dust until only the dark auburn colour remained.

Argentis rolled Starla to her side. She looked as if she were sleeping. He stroked her hair, and strands fell away between his fingers. Her skin felt icy cold. Her breathing was shallow and ragged. Argentis scooped her up and carried her back to Ruby's room. He didn't know why. He just knew that was where she needed to be.

As for Vermilion, he was nowhere to be seen.



CHAPTER 9: MALACHITE

Saint Petersburg, The Event +4

The first slice of sunlight crept into the small apartment through a crack in the curtains, revealing the shapes of the family huddled together under a blanket in the parents' bed. They'd sought comfort and protection and found neither. The father's helpless arms were wrapped around his wife and children. Their bodies now frozen in eternal sleep, blissfully unaware of how their lives ended.

Penumbra sat in the shaded corner, unable to move, watching the sliver of bright sunlight move across the floor, creeping slowly towards him. His chest rose and fell in heaves as he tried to hold in the magic. Each time he exhaled, sparks flew from his lips. The expelling of energy in order to keep most of the excess. It was the cycle of his existence and one he was determined to master. He refused to accept that he would forever be bound by the limitations of his being.

It was only human energy after all. How powerful could it really be?

He could still taste the fear that flavoured the magic. He had started to weave nightmares just to elicit the fear and anxiety in their minds, to give the magic an extra sharpness. He was addicted to it now. A lack of control that he needed to reign in before it overcame him completely.

The feast was enlivening, but always there followed the fight to contain what he'd ingested. The battle to stop it from seeping from his limbs. The war for control between his own magic and the foreign energies. It was always thus. More so in recent years. He had lost control—lost it long ago, he suspected. In the beginning, he only would steal the magic every once in a while, but over the centuries, those small morsels no longer sated him. Now, once he started, he couldn't stop until the magic oozed out of his limbs and pain wracked his body. He was sure that one day he would lose himself completely. Unless he could master it, and master it he would.

Still in his pure wraith form, the magic oozed from the broken skin of his arms, dripping onto the floor to be swiftly gobbled up by brave and fast khadema. They hovered on the edges, hiding behind furniture and boxes and piles of clothes, but every now and then one was daring enough to venture towards him. Some had learned that he would not hurt them in this state, though it wouldn't last for long.

Sure enough, two khadema crept forward to eat the dripping magic only to be torched out of existence. Penumbra was finally regaining himself.

His body began to morph into its mortal simile. The single, large, shimmering eye separated, forming two dark, nebulous eyes under the growing dark hair. A streak of light shimmered from the back of his hair, surging to the front, and exploded in his eyes for the briefest moment before fading into a thin grey line in his hair and circling the rim of his pupils. Recognising the danger, the remaining khadema scattered. They followed him, but they knew when to keep their distance.

Before the light could touch his form, he pulled himself to his feet, using the wall to steady his climb and hold his balance. He looked down on the family with his cold, impassive eyes. He felt nothing as he stared at the scene. He supposed, for a moment, that he should feel something. Dream weavers often did—a tainted result of their interactions with mortals—and he was, at his core, a dream weaver. Used to be. Perhaps, finally, that part of him had been purged. He checked himself. He felt nothing at all. They were, after all, only human.

He shuffled to the window, his left leg dragging behind him, leaving a trail of dark, glittering slime in its wake. Intending to open the curtains, his hands clenched on the fabric, and the clumsy attempt to pull them open ripped the fabric from the pole. It tumbled to the floor, the fabric still held in the clubbed fist, the fingers stubbornly fixed and rigid.

He looked down onto the courtyards and tower blocks of Kupchino. He could see the khadema scurrying in and out of buildings and could hear the occasional scream. Thousands lay dead in their homes from the night of feasting, but this was only a beginning. He pulsed a silent order across the city, and the dark shapeless forms stopped, listened and then scattered. They would go far and wide to spread the word, and soon the numbers of khadema would swell into an innumerable, unstoppable force. By the end of the day, it would be something all of humanity would never forget.

He felt a tug on his mind. A force. Powerful and raw. Unbound and wild. There was a familiarity to it. Could it be? The human he sent Shiroikumo to find? Surely it couldn't have grown so much in so short a

space of time? He wondered just how strong it had become. Strong enough to destroy the strongest of his disciples? A shiver ran down his spine as the presence probed the darkness Penumbra kept around himself as a protective shield

He felt the presence probe into the darkness again. It was searching for something. He could sense it getting closer, and he had to admit, he was intrigued by it. He wanted to know what or who it was. Who would be so brash and foolish to dig into the dark? He was impressed by the determination and curiosity. He thinned the dark just enough to let the presence in and studied what emerged.

A light began to appear, and he began to get a feel for what lay in the heart of it. It was something new and powerful but wild and unshaped. It was something strange yet familiar. Something. He caught a glimpse of a child bathed in sunlight, and he recoiled, pulling the darkness back to protect him from the burning light. He thrashed out wildly with a pulse of darkness, and the presence retreated. He lingered, listening, sensing, waiting. It was gone.

He held onto the window frame, feeling sick and dizzy. Whatever the new presence was, whatever it was becoming, it had burned away some of his magic. This new presence was dangerous. How could a human be so powerful? Not just a human, but a child—and he was sure now it was a child.

It both amazed and irritated him that a human could have tapped into such immense magical power. They were a pitiful race that sold their potential for nought. The fact that a human could have done this aggravated his every sensibility, and yet there was also admiration that such a fragile being could have

developed such a power. It showed incredible potential, but there wasn't a modicum of control.

Time was short.

The child was in danger and also a danger to everything in the world. The magic would surely consume the child. It would grow, unbound, unfettered, until it overcame them and destroyed them. It was inevitable. What else would it destroy in the process? How much of this world would be left?

The child was a threat, but if the child could learn to control the magic. To harness the potential and give it shape and purpose, then that gave hope that he too could control the excess energy he consumed. If a human child could evolve, crossing the threshold between mortal and magical, then what boundaries could Penumbra overcome? If a human could learn, then so could he.

The next step on his evolutionary road.

Yes. Time was short. It would not be long before the child was completely overwhelmed. He would not be the only magical being aware of the situation either. Some would flock to nurture and protect, while others would flock to destroy. There would be opposition to battle before he could face the child. He would need magic. More magic than he had ever consumed before.

A gnawing at the back of his consciousness began to rise. Normally, he would keep it caged, but in this state, Penumbra couldn't stop it from leaking out. A whispered accusation cutting into the core of his being.

You are the architect of your own demise.

He felt a sudden heat on his skin, stinging and uncomfortable. The heat prodded him. Stabbed him

in his side, his back, his legs, stomach and head. A consciousness yearning to be freed. He buried his instinct to swat at the invisible barbs and stood still, summoning his magic around him in a protective coat of shadow. His mind settled, sweeping the hidden personality back into its prison.

He looked out of the window, enjoying the morning light chase away the shadows of dawn. The long line of apartment buildings shook off the dusky grey to display their soft pastel cladding, surrounding the communal park with pale blues and greens and beige. Snow still covered most of the park in the middle of the complex. Benches and play equipment glittered as the light caught the frost, and apart from the pathways where the snow had been shovelled aside, the rest of the park still lay under a blanket of snow topped with a crust of ice.

There was not a soul around to disturb the peace.

A movement caught his eye through the window. A green mist flowing out of one of the buildings. He watched it until the mist focused in on itself to form a human shape, clad in green. His silver hair was cropped short but glimmered with a green lustre. He felt a slight punch in his chest. A moment of shock and loss and hurt. His hands clenched tightly, and he scowled. Of all the times and of all the places, it had to be here? It had to be now?



Malachite wandered wearily through the empty park between the rows of apartment buildings. He walked over the ground, his feet barely touching the crispy ice-topped snow, enjoying the sun against his face as the slow recharging began.

The night had been a constant battle between weaving dreams for frightened humans and combat against the ravaging khadema that swept over Kupchino. He had tried his best to fend them off, but in the end, with the last of his energy spent, all he could do was watch the khadema run amok. They had never been so active and brazen. He'd expected there to be other dream weavers, but there was no one else to share the load. No one else to help stem the tide. He'd never felt so helpless.

His destination was a group of benches in the eastern end of the park. They overlooked the main entrance to the complex. The sun always hit this spot in the morning, making it feel warm, even in the winter. Here, he would usually watch and listen as people left for work or children walked to school. A good place to listen in on everyday life while shielded from the hustle and bustle of the city beyond.

He sat down on a concrete bench and closed his eyes, bathing in the sun's rays. Three large military trucks pulled into the parking bays near the entrance, depositing soldiers in hazmat suits who warily split off to enter nearby apartments. They didn't speak. They wouldn't have the words to articulate what they were experiencing.

A large number of soldiers had arrived in the night to reinforce the quarantine of Saint Petersburg, placing the city under martial law. They didn't really know why they were here, and Malachite suspected they never would. Whatever was happening here, they couldn't let it spread beyond Saint Petersburg, and that was the limit of their understanding.

Malachite ignored them. They would never know what transpired here. They would never see the truth,

and they would soon learn there was nothing they could do. Of that, he was sure.

He was old for a dream weaver. One of the oldest, he suspected. He had seen many things inflicted on humans over the centuries, though most of it upon themselves. Despite humanity's best efforts to disrupt the fabric of the world they lived in, the magic had stubbornly held everything together. Until now. For the first time he could recall, the magic was slipping towards the darkness, and if it continued, humanity's days would surely be numbered.

There had been tipping points before. Empires. Wars. Pandemics. Famines. Natural disasters. Some had wiped out cities and nations. Others had caused a great shift in influence or power. In every instance, the magic had shifted slightly to the dark or the light, but magical creatures had always come together to tilt the world back to a point of balance. It had always been that way. The rakshasa had coined a beautiful phrase to describe the dance of magic to balance the mortal: the sigh of the world in equilibrium. A very beautiful phrase. Malachite had always liked it.

The world was definitely sighing, but there was no equilibrium. The magical creatures who would usually be found stitching the magic back together were missing. There should have been considerable numbers of magical creatures pulling the world back into a state of equilibrium, but they were nowhere to be seen. Where were they all?

And what of the khadema? These small puffs of dark magic usually fed only on light magic found in humans, taking a little here and a little there. They were born wild but never out of control. Not like this. He'd never known them to be so voracious. Never

before had he witnessed them dig so deep for every scrap of energy. He'd never known them to kill. It wasn't in their nature. The more he pondered on the situation, the more uneasy he became.

Dream weavers were naturally solitary, but right now, he felt like the last magical creature in the world and completely out of his depth. A tsunami was about to crash down on him while he stood alone, building the sea wall with a spoon.

He was disturbed by a commotion at the entrance of an apartment building opposite him. Some of the soldiers tumbled out of the entrance, supporting each other. One broke protocol and removed his helmet so he could vomit on the ground. An officer barked at him, and two others grabbed him and carried him away, presumably to a quarantine centre. It would do no good. They were wholly unprepared for this. Eventually, they too, would be consumed. Kupchino was the start, but it would not be the end.

A small shadowy shape scurried across the park. He pushed a small pulse of magic towards it, and it dissolved in a puff. They were getting bold to approach a weaver in daylight like that, even one in a weakened state.

He looked around him at the buildings of Kupchino. He took in every building, every soul, every heart, and he was filled with sadness. This city had been his base for so many years. He had seen it through revolution and war and countless changes. His fate had become intertwined with that of every soul living here. This was his home.

He twinged as he felt a freezing chill in one of the buildings. He probed it and felt the chasm at its heart. He rose to his feet as the darkness revealed itself. A

familiar pattern he had not encountered since the last time he'd felt so isolated. After all this time, as the world was being unzipped, it would have to be him. Of course, he would be here. After all the passing centuries, it would be him who would tear the world apart once again.



The Half-light, The Event +3

Argentis laid Starla on the bed next to Ruby. The room was once again emptied of everything apart from Ruby's bed. He felt relieved that Farrow and Pearson were no longer visible. He didn't want to see them again. His sole concern was this little girl—this strange, miraculous girl who held the fate of the world in her hands. Poor thing didn't have a clue what was happening to her, and somehow, somehow, Argentis had to teach her things he barely understood himself.

For a creature of magic, it was instinctive. Magical creatures didn't tend to dwell on the metaphysical aspects of their existence. They simply were. Now, he had to reflect and codify and explain something that he'd never thought about before.

And where was Vermilion?

"How is she?"

Argentis jumped and twisted with fright.

"Don't," he stammered. "Do that. Where have you been?"

"I was." Vermilion paused to think. "I don't know."

"You were there in the forest with us, and then you weren't," Argentis said.

Vermilion frowned, pondering.

"For me, it felt as though I were here and there at the same time, and then elsewhere," Vermilion replied.

"Elsewhere?"

"From the beginning to the end. I think," Vermilion said as he tried to gather his thoughts.

Argentis placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You okay? I know that wasn't easy for you."

"I am fine," he replied. "Disoriented. That is all."

Argentis looked down at Starla, there was no change in her. "What happened in there? That was supposed to be just a projection of your dream. She was interacting with it like it was real."

"I think for her, it was. There was something familiar about it. As if." Vermilion paused. As if the realisation was not something he wanted to admit. "As if she had been there, in the beginning."

"What you're saying is impossible."

"There are a great many impossible things about our current circumstances. Starla's very existence is impossible. Interacting with the forest dream in that way is impossible. And yet..." Vermilion drifted as if completing his thoughts would bring about terrible things.

"You're saying she was actually there at your birth. That she entered the dream and became a part of the memory. Then and now becoming the same thing?" He was waving his arms around as if he were pulling random threads of thought into some kind of sense. "And despite your perception, one minute you were beside me, and the next you were there in the vision, and then you were poof. Gone."

"I do not know. I only know that when she touched the whisp, she became a part of my memory. At that moment, I remembered her being there."

"You're talking about reshaping reality. Entering a dream and being a part of it. Making it real. Bending time and space around herself." Argentis grew serious. "She's getting scary powerful." He looked down on Starla's resting form. "She's just a kid. She doesn't deserve this."

"I know."

Argentis pondered. "What next?"

"Her powers will continue to reshape the world around her. Bending it to her will. Unless we can help her choose a path."

"You know what?" Argentis mused. "After this, I'm going to retire. Become one of those dragon lion spirit guardian things. What are they called again?"

"Pixiu."

"Yeh. One of them. Quite fancy that. And they get wings, so I can fly away from crap like this."

A tiny voice murmured from the bed.

"Aww. You said a bad word."

Argentis smiled and helped Starla sit up. She gave Argentis a stern look.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "Are you okay?"

"Little bit dizzy, but I'm okay." She stood, holding onto the bed for support. "I saw something. It was dark like. Sucking in all the light. It tried to hurt me."

"You chased it away," Vermilion added quickly.

"Vermilion," she said, her voice wavering a little. "Can you die?"

The question came so unexpectedly that it stunned them both.

"What do you mean?" Argentis responded.

"Well. Chiasma. She saved me, but I think she died. Maybe. I think she died when she saved me."

"Well, I wouldn't..." Argentis began, only to be interrupted by Vermilion.

"Yes," He said flatly. "Chiasma gave all of her magic to save you because she loved you. And yet she is not completely gone. Part of her lives in you and will stay with you forever."

"Can you die?" she asked again.

"Yes, we can. Though it is not what humans think death is."

"Tell me?" she pleaded quietly.

"Very well," Vermilion began. "You have seen our birth. We begin life as a whisp. Our first birth. We choose our purpose, and then we are born again. Our second birth. I was born a dream weaver. Eventually, there came a time when my magical energy was empty. Then my magical body was broken, and I became a whisp again and was reborn a dream weaver."

"So you don't die?"

"In a way. I lived again, but all my memories from my first life were lost and forgotten. When I was born to my second life, the old Vermilion was lost, and I was a new Vermilion. A different Vermilion. My magic lived on, but all that I was. That was no more. The old Vermilion was dead."

"How do you know that?" Argentis whispered.

"I didn't, until the dream," Vermilion mumbled back.

"Will Chiasma be born again? Like that?"

Vermilion looked up at Argentis, who shook his head in warning. Vermilion continued anyway. "No. Just as we have two births, we also have two deaths.

We have a death from which we are reborn, and we have a death from which we cannot be reborn. A true ending. Chiasma's magic is gone. Forever. Only the part she gave to you remains. She will live in you now, but she will never be Chiasma again."

Starla's eyes began to well up. "She was my friend."

Argentis stepped in. "Hey," he said calmly. "It's okay. Like Vermilion said, she is a part of you now. She'll always be with you, so she's not really dead."

"It's all my fault."

Tears began to stream down her cheeks. Argentis pulled Starla into his arms and held her tight as she knelt on the bed.

"It is not your fault. None of this is your fault. Chiasma didn't think this was your fault, and neither do we. You are very special Starla. Never forget that."

She hugged him back as tears rolled onto his shoulder. For a moment, he was worried that her magic would grow and lose control, but the energy around her remained stable. This wasn't the magical Starla, this was the confused little girl who had lost her best friend.

Vermilion placed a hand on her back. "Look deep inside yourself, Starla, and you will find her," he suggested.

The tears continued as Starla looked within, travelling a river of memories and thoughts. There were hundreds of moments, some dark, some light, some loud and some quiet. There were so many, but there was one that was brighter than all the others. She swept it out of the river and held it in front of her, and Chiasma materialised with her signature smile and hugged Starla tightly. Warmth filled her, and

Chiasma stepped back and twirled. Tiny lights spread out from her dress like dandelion seeds drifting on the air. When she stopped, she smiled in the way that Starla always remembered. Chiasma stepped forward and touched Starla's chest.

"I will always be here. When you need me. Just find me."

She twirled and laughed and faded, returning to a small light in the river of Starla's memories.

Argentis felt Starla's breathing steady and settle. He looked up at Vermilion. It felt like a lucky escape, by chance rather than design. By the look on Vermilion's face, they both knew how precarious their situation was becoming. Starla was growing too powerful, and at the centre of all that power was a little girl who was facing things a little girl should never have to face.

Starla had to make a choice, and she had to make it soon.



Saint Petersburg, The Event +3

Penumbra felt such hunger that he could barely contain his eagerness. Only once had he drained the magic from another magical creature, and it was the most invigorating thing he'd ever experienced. Still, he hesitated, pausing to watch Malachite rest.

It had been a powerful experience absorbing Cerulean's magic, but there had been a cost he'd not expected—the constant drain on his energy in silencing the magic of another creature. Magical creatures were not designed to absorb the magic of one another. It was not like stealing the magic from a human, which was nothing more than draining

batteries. Feeding on a magical creature's energy came with side effects. Cerulean's magic brought with it his consciousness, his memories and his voice.

It had taken Penumbra many years to silence Cerulean and detach the weaver's memories from his own. Though he was sure he could do it again, he didn't want to risk the expected turmoil, and there would be turmoil with Malachite.

He stepped out into the morning light, and the green-clad weaver looked up and smiled at the figure. After all these years, Malachite remembered him.

"It has been a while!" Malachite whispered.

"Indeed!" Penumbra replied.

Malachite waved his arm, taking in the surrounding apartments. "This is your handiwork?"

"Of course. Would you expect anything less of me?"

"I warned you before, but you wouldn't listen. I would warn you again, but you will not heed me. Nevertheless, for our friendship, that was. No good will come of this."

"So you say. So you said before. You have not changed. Still convinced these humans can amount to something more than the dross existence they have carved out for themselves."

Malachite shook his head. "And you still see them as nothing more than what they are. Never for what they can become."

"True. Some things remain constant. But not everything," Penumbra said with a wry smile.

From out of nearby buildings came four dream wraiths in their wraith form. Grotesque shapes lurching out of walls to gather behind their leader.

Malachite had never seen these creatures before, but they lined up behind Penumbra like obedient soldiers.

“I see you have been busy,” Malachite surmised. He felt the threat and prepared to defend himself.

Penumbra motioned to his soldiers, and they scattered, clumps of dark shadows following after them. It was just the two of them, and Penumbra could sense Malachite wasn’t strong enough for a fight. He also knew he wasn’t in any condition to fight Malachite either. It took all of his effort to stand upright and firm and calm. His body still suffered minor convulsions trying to hold onto the excess energy. His mind not yet focused while trying to keep Cerulean silent.

Then again, he didn’t have to fight. The khadema were back and in greater numbers. He knew the risks of draining the magic from Malachite would outweigh the benefits, but what would happen if the khadema did it for him? They were being wary and rightly so—Malachite was powerful, even when recuperating—but in these numbers, and in his weakened state, surely they could overpower him?

With just a thought, he gave them the command, and they surged forward from their hiding places. Malachite was ready, and the first ranks flashed into dust. Soon, sparks began to fly as Malachite used what little energy he possessed.

The sparks were growing in intensity, seeping out into the mortal world. They caught the attention of some of the soldiers still lingering in the park. Every now and then, a patch of shadow would become visible over the courtyard. The occasional spark of lightning emerging from mid-air, bouncing off the ground, erupting into tiny explosions of fireworks and

smoke. They began to congregate to watch and discuss the spectacle. Some grabbed for phones to start recording the phenomenon. All of them oblivious to the unseen figures doing battle.

Pulse after pulse of magic was keeping the khadema at bay, but there were so many of them. Too many of them. The tsunami looming overhead, waiting to crash down on him.

He was weakening. The night had drained him too much, and the morning hadn't given him enough time to recharge. He mustered all the magic he could, trying to find a path for his escape. He sent a massive surge of magic outward, dissolving the khadema in droves, but more and more flowed into the breach. His steps backward became shorter and faster. His magic flashing left and right. From the corner of his eye, he saw a swarm of khadema sweep in from the city behind him, and he knew he was doomed. He dropped to one knee and smashed his hand on the courtyard, sending out a ripple of power that shredded every khadema caught in its wake. It was the last of his magic. There wasn't any left to call upon. It was over. Malachite gave in to his last and only option. He closed his eyes and gave up his magical form.

He began to fade slowly, and then his form collapsed into a ball of mist and stars. The whip began to slip beneath the ground, but it was too slow. A wave of shadows tumbled out of the buildings, and the khadema swept in, pulling the whip out of the ground.

Penumbra tried to stop the khadema, to allow Malachite's whip to retreat, but his body seized. A violent spasm ran along his right side, and his leg

buckled from under him. He fought against it, grunting to regain control and then issued the command. The khadema ignored it. Hunger thundered, drowning out everything else. They began to pick at the whip like a carcass. Tearing into it. Ripping it apart. Shreds of magic flew outward to be consumed by the khadema, climbing and tumbling over each other for every little scrap.

Penumbra let out his magic in a surge, dissolving any khadema in the way. Those on the fringes escaped being extinguished, retreating swiftly out of the area. He crawled slowly, awkwardly towards what was left of the whip—a single, solitary light drifting lost over the ground. Penumbra scooped it up in his hand and looked intently into it. It was just a green glowing light. A piece of magic with no identity.

He cradled it in his hand; the temptation to absorb it came and went. Gently, he lowered it to the ground. A handful of brave khadema edged forward from the surrounding buildings, but Penumbra snuffed them out. He stood watch over the light, watching it drift like a leaf over the ground. He knelt down beside it, watching it in silent reverence. He slid his palm under the light and suddenly noticed how warm it was. There was a pull in the back of his mind. A sadness. A conversation. A recollection of past glories. A remembrance of his first days with Malachite.

He placed his other hand on the ground, melting the snow and warming the ground underneath, then gently lowered the light. It hovered over the surface, and Penumbra placed his hands over it, pushing it into the earth. The ground ruptured and crumbled as a small fissure opened up, and a green shoot pushed through the soil. It climbed towards the sky, spreading

out new branches until it had formed a young sapling. The soft green leaves fluttered in the cold breeze, and a single bud grew from the top, unfurling into a pale green flower with slender streaks of white along the length of the petals. Penumbra watched as the flower opened up to receive the morning light.

The noise of the soldiers interrupted his focus. He scowled and changed from his human body to his wraith form, revealing himself to them as he transformed. The soldiers shouted. Some tried to back away. They dropped their phones apart from one who doggedly kept filming, but even he started to run when the khadema were revealed—a mass of darkness smothering everything.

Penumbra stepped towards them as a plucky few with a sense of awareness began to fire their rifles at him. The bullets passed through, striking the buildings beyond. He came at them in a run, and the khadema followed. They swept over the soldiers, burrowing into their hazmat suits to feed on the marrow, tearing apart the organs, extracting every ounce of life they could find.

Penumbra fed first on an officer radioing for support. He never finished his message as long fingers ripped the helmet away and began to draw out the magical energy within him. Penumbra was still struggling to regain mastery over his body, still struggling to keep Cerulean silent, but his anger exploded. It took less than five minutes for the soldiers to be drained of life, but it wasn't enough; the anger still burned inside him. A storm he couldn't quiet, but why should he? Why should he not rage?

In the back of his mind came a whisper. There was no anger or contempt in the soft voice, only pity.

You will lose yourself.

It only added fuel to the fire. He silenced Cerulean, slamming the voice into the darkest hole he could conjure. He looked down at the corpses at his feet. Gazed upon the buildings and looked beyond over the city. His enmity towards humanity was never greater than it was in this moment. Today, he would suffocate Saint Petersburg with his hatred.

He pulsed a command that drifted over the entire city. A command to his followers and to the khadema. His original plan had been to take his time here, to learn and grow, to master the feeding process. To feast and to gorge on as much magic as he could hold. That plan was no more. There was a hesitation from his followers. He pulsed the order again, this time unleashing the full force of his rage. This time, they obeyed.

Consume the city. Consume everything.



CHAPTER 10: PENUMBRA

Chang'an, 630 CE

“But why steal the magic? I do not understand the reasoning.”

Malachite sipped from his small bowl of tea as the noise of merchants rang out across the growing city. He knew it was pointless arguing with his friend, but it had become a habit to challenge each other during the morning recharge. Tea and deep discussion had become a hallmark of their friendship. It was a strange friendship. They often disagreed with each other, something they had done since they first met, yet somehow, it had been the cement of what was a good friendship. One that had lasted for many thousands of years.

Penumbra laughed. “Of course you don’t. You’ve become humanised.”

“So you keep saying,” Malachite responded.

“I mean, just look at you. You look ridiculous in those robes.”

It was the usual put-down Penumbra resorted to when he was losing the argument. Malachite placed his bowl down and brushed the robes as if they were sacred. They were a light green, decorated with splendid silver embroidery. They were lavish, admittedly more lavish than anything he had worn before, but he had grown to appreciate the aesthetics.

"Say's the one who still dresses like a vampyric general," Malachite pushed back.

Penumbra's robes, though of a simpler and more functional design, were still designed to intimidate and invoke respect. More form-fitting and jet black with a single silver line down the left side. It was similar to the ceremonial dress of the vampyric military, albeit evolved by Penumbra. They were so impressive that some of the Tang's senior officers had started to copy the design.

"I appreciate the style," Malachite explained. "It has an artistry to it. It reminds me of the elves."

Penumbra snorted. "I remember those times as well, my friend. There is nothing elvish about those robes." He sipped from his tea and sighed as he looked around. "There was real beauty in the world back then."

"I know," Malachite responded. "But those days are gone, my friend."

"The world is a pale shadow of what it once was. What it could have been."

The two sat in silent reverie as they finished their drinks.

"You still didn't answer my..."

"Balance," Penumbra blurted out. "It's all about balance. The whole point of magic is to keep everything in balance. We spend all of our time giving dreams, depositing magic. Are we not in danger of tipping the balance?"

"This tea has gone to your head," Malachite joked. He stood and handed a few coins to the shop owner.

"Xie xie," the shop owner returned in thanks, bowing to Malachite.

Penumbra shook his head. Malachite was enjoying his pretend station, but he also felt sad for his friend. Malachite had loved socialising and mixing with the mortal races, perhaps more than any other dream weaver he knew. Penumbra had too, admittedly, but Penumbra had preferred the analytical and science led minds of the vampyres, whereas Malachite had preferred the philosophy and artistry of the elves. Both races had been close geographically, which led to a close kinship. Ties which stretched, strained and eventually broke thanks to humans. They brought about the end of the vampyres and eventually the elves—and if the rumours were true, the extinction of the rakshasa—yet here was Malachite, pretending to be human. Using humanity as a surrogate for a race that was long gone.

He could understand why Malachite appreciated this kingdom. They were as close to being elvish as humans were ever likely to be. Penumbra could even see some vampyric traits in their approach to logic, but they were a pale shadow compared to those brighter races. Races that were now misremembered in stories.

The two wandered through dusty streets towards the palace. Today, the sun shone, and the last warmth of summer made everything seem bright and cheerful. There was an atmosphere of hope and good fortune. Every now and then, the occasional yothada would scurry between buildings, absorbing the darker energies. There were enough to keep balance with the khadema, and it only served to improve the mood across the city. If Humans were capable of creating a paradise, then surely this would be it.

“Why balance?” Malachite asked as they entered a lush park, the trees providing background accompaniment as they swayed in the breeze.

“Why not? Look at this place. Look at this kingdom. This wasn’t built by humans, this was built by us. We have given inspiration and power to the rulers here.”

“And look at what they have created.”

“But they haven’t. If left to their own devices, would they have created such a society? They are human. They are purely physical beings with no conscious connection to the ethereal. It surrounds them every day, and yet they are blind to it. And to us, if we did not let them see us.”

Malachite shook his head. “Not so. We do not plant ideas, Penumbra. We simply illuminate ideas that have already taken seed. We can only shape what is already in the mind.”

“We use a power that they ignore, and we give it to them without price. They do not earn what they are given.”

“The work we do is no different than the work we performed among the elves and vampyres.”

“It feels different.”

“How so?” Malachite asked.

Penumbra reached up to the branches of a tree hanging low over some wealthy official’s wall. He pulled off a leaf and rolled his thumb over it.

“Do you remember the gateway at Hel Enrhys?”

Malachite nodded. The elven city of Hel Enrhys was their most eastern settlement, bordering on the lands of vampyres, who built the city of Kor’Timmihl alongside it. The two cities blended elven and vampyric styles, becoming a vitally important city for

both races, serving as a diplomatic, education and trade hub between them. The gateway was built on the border between the two empires and appeared woven rather than built, as if it had grown out of the mountains. An organic and intricate design was carved into brilliant white stone which was so slim, when the sun hit it at the right angle, it seemed to glow from within. It was breathtaking. Neither of them had witnessed anything like it since.

“They had that lane of trees leading up to it, the leaves so fine and smooth they felt like a fine silk. And the blossoms, a delicate subtle blend of white and green that glowed in the moonlight,” Penumbra recalled. “I remember you had a hand in crafting those trees. Simplistic yet utterly majestic. A true partnership between mortal and magic.”

Malachite smiled at the memory. “We spent many hours under their shade.”

Penumbra held up the leaf and let the breeze carry it away behind them.

“Those trees are gone forever,” Penumbra said as he watched the leaf disappear into the distance. “Only the elves could cultivate such things because they understood the magic of the natural world. They understood how to shape the landscape into something harmonious. I’m not saying this city is not beautiful, nor the many gardens, but you have to admit, it is not nearly as beautiful as the world that was.”

“Humans just need to be taught,” Malachite argued. “Who knows what they may accomplish given time. Perhaps they may even come to know the magic. Perhaps even use it.”

"They have had time enough, and no matter what we do, they do not learn."

They walked in silence, the breeze whistling through the trees in the park.

"I'm sorry, old friend. I do miss the friendship and closeness we once had with the other races. I suppose that is why I dress in these robes and even appear to humans."

"And yet they see us as human and forget us soon enough," Penumbra responded, his voice edged with bitterness.

"But they have the potential to become more than they are. Imagine what they could become if their minds were awakened to the world that surrounded them?"

"Thousands of years have proved they are running away from that. They will never walk towards it."

"That does not mean we should stop trying."

"Perhaps we should not coddle them by gifting them so much magic. Even you have to admit we have weaved more dreams here than in other places. And we have not gifted as much power elsewhere as we have here."

"That is true," Malachite admitted. "But I am still determined to try."

"If we hold back the magic from time to time, perhaps they would come to that realisation sooner."

"You really think so?"

"I do," Penumbra confided. "I have reflected on this for some time. If we take away a sliver of magic, then maybe they will look for inspiration within themselves instead of relying on their dreams. Perhaps then they will see the energy that surrounds them."

Malachite's voice grew concerned. "That is the peak of a slippery slope. Once we start down that path, then we become the arbiters of dreams. That is not our purpose."

"We are already the arbiters of dreams. Regardless of purpose. We give and we shape and we are the ones who decide. We decide what memories or thoughts to brighten. We decide whether to soothe or shock. We decide, and we give, and we give, and we give. There is no balance. No equilibrium."

More silence. Malachite considered what his friend was suggesting, but there was something in what Penumbra said that worried him. Or was it the way he was saying it?

"We should be very careful about this Penumbra. Perhaps we should discuss it in more depth tomorrow."

Penumbra nodded, but the pair never spoke again as they walked. As they exited the park, Penumbra took his leave and wandered to a nearby barracks while Malachite continued on towards the palace.

They had been friends as far back as Penumbra could remember. They had seen the world change in incredible ways. They had lived among two of the greatest civilisations the world had ever known. Had seen vast wars followed by the fall of the vampyres, and unimaginably, the fall of the elves. Through it all, the pair had maintained their friendship and supported each other through their losses. They had shared and discussed every subject imaginable, but on this subject, Penumbra was sure he was right, and Malachite was wrong. The balance of magic was tipping too far towards the light, and to his surprise and disappointment, Malachite didn't see it. Without

the darkness, how would humans ever cherish the light?

If only Malachite could see, then he would realise Penumbra was right. It required action, not more discussion. Time for an experiment. Only then would Malachite's eyes be opened.

It started that night. He crept into the Emperor's chamber after Malachite had weaved his vision and carefully extracted the dream. It took him some time to find it, but eventually, he was able to extract the magic and withdraw it. As it danced around his fingers, an idea began to form. He drew the magic into his hand, absorbing the energy. He felt a surge of power, like the sharp sting of a wasp, followed by a tingle of electricity along his arms. The sensation was invigorating. As he started to revel in the sensation, there came a sharp stabbing pain in his arm. The magic was fighting back. It felt a change to the natural order. The magic was not where it was supposed to be. It was fighting him, trying to escape. Penumbra pulled at the thread again, but the pain became too much, and he cast the magic aside. It flew from his fingers and skittered along the floor, looking for its place. Eventually, a rogue khadema darted across the floor and snatched the magic, carrying it away to be consumed.

Penumbra flexed his fingers. It was such a shame to waste the magic. Merging the energy with his own was a challenge he needed to master, but there would be time enough for that. He reminded himself of his purpose and then moved on through the palace, carefully selecting the dreams his friend was weaving and stealing the magic. He was sure Malachite would not take long to realise the truth and change the way

they worked, and hopefully, he would realise how much it would actually benefit humans.

He finished just as the dawn broke over the horizon. Usually he would need to rest and recharge his energy, but as the sun began to paint the city in light, he felt bright and sharp. Once he mastered absorbing the magic, then he could feel even more powerful each morning. His mind played out the possibilities and future pathways that lay before him and his friend.

He couldn't wait to share what he had learned with Malachite.



Saint Petersburg, The Event +4

Khadema and wraiths ploughed through the city. Half the population gave in to panic, while the other half gave into despair. The mood in the city merely attracted more khadema. They were feeding more voraciously than ever, burrowing deep, devouring every scrap of magical energy they could find. It was a painful way to die.

Dusk fell over the city. Tens of thousands had died so far that day. By dawn, it would be millions.

Penumbra oozed his way out of a building and slithered along the frozen ground, weaving his way aimlessly. His physical form had almost dissolved under the excess magic. The armoured shell had cracked and crumbled, the thick muscular fibres of his body stretched and split, his body overtaken by the thick tar-like mass of magic. Pulsating and undulating around his collapsing form, it struggled to find a new shape. A new identity. He was still in there, underneath the dark, but only just.

A military checkpoint stood to the north of the open courtyard, an officer ushering his troops into a couple of armoured vehicles. He turned and stood frozen for a moment, watching the black slime lurch between the magical and mortal domains. He shook his head and climbed inside the lead vehicle, slamming the hatch shut as tightly as he could. Tyres crunched through layers of ice as they rushed away. Penumbra wasn't interested in them. He had his own battle to fight.

Exerting all his strength, he focused on his physical body, commanding the energy to reshape itself to his command. Blobs of dark matter congealed and twisted, solidifying into thin muscular fibres. He pulled them together, channelled more of the excess energy to thicken them into tighter bundles. Legs took shape and emerged under the mass. They pushed against the ground and deliquesced, assimilating back into the mass.

He had to focus, but his focus was drowning under the dark. The magic he'd stolen from humans today had finally outweighed his own, and it was slowly crushing his essence.

He collapsed to the ground, the frozen earth burning wherever the magic touched. No matter how hard he tried, the excess energy overpowered him every time. He was starting to panic. Fear building up. He tried again to force the magic sludge into some shape or form that would give him the beginning of control, but it continued to resist. All that was left was surrender. Resting on the icy ground, he calmed his mind and relaxed his being, yielding to the end.

I told you no good would come of this, Cerulean's voice whispered in his mind, but in his current state,

he could have sworn it sounded like Malachite. A voice from centuries past.



Chang'an, 880 CE

Malachite sat down on the hills overlooking Chang'an, watching his beloved city burn in the distance.

He had seen the rise of the greatest elven cities. He had even explored equally magnificent vampyre cities. Though very different in their outlooks and how they interacted with the world, both cultures had complemented each other perfectly. They had forged bonds that everyone thought unbreakable, coming together to build the twin cities of Hel Enrhys and Kor'Timmihr. He considered Hel Enrhys to be the most beautiful city ever to grace the mortal world.

It was at Hel Enrhys that he had met Penumbra, and the pair had found they worked as well together as the elves and vampyres did. Those were halcyon days when he never felt tired or low. Everything seemed to be charged with magic. It had been woven into the fabric of their societies and their homes. It was the most energising time of his existence.

The greatest shame was how short-lived those days had been. War had led to the forced exile of the vampyres into a half-light world. The threat of a second great war led to the self-imposed exile of the elves into another half-light world. He remembered how alone he felt watching the last of the elves cross the threshold into their half-light, never to return.

He felt a hundred times worse today.

Perhaps he had been foolish to think he could possibly inspire humans to recreate the greatness of

the other mortal races. Perhaps Penumbra was right. They had overindulged the Tang with magic, and the Tang had come to rely on it too much.

"I am sorry, my friend," Penumbra whispered. The voice was like a knife in Malachite's back.

"If you had stayed, perhaps we could have prevented this," Malachite replied without turning around. There was no bitterness in his voice, only sadness for the distance that had crept into their friendship in recent decades.

Chang'an was too far away to see the details of what was going on, but the pair could sense everything that was happening. Fires started, spreading throughout the city. Walls crumbling. Materials and people carted away. Some resisting. Some dying.

"I never left," Penumbra stated.

Malachite twisted to look at his friend, but it was not the same Penumbra he had known. There was something different. Shadows surrounded him like a grey haze clouding over his aura. His eyes were no longer clear like before but appeared slightly crazed and wild.

Malachite knew now. He knew it as well as if Penumbra had confessed to everything.

"What have you done?"

"I needed you to see the truth," Penumbra answered defensively.

"The truth? You call this truth?" Malachite shouted, standing as anger built within him.

"I told you humans could not, nor never would embrace magic. They cannot. They will not."

"If you had helped, then together we could have guided them to see."

"We gave them dreams of everything they needed, including magic. We gave them dreams about magic, hoping they would finally believe, but did they?" Penumbra argued back.

"Given time..."

"You do not believe that any more than I do." Penumbra stood and waved at the smoking city. "Look at what they have done when left to themselves."

"No Penumbra. Look at what you have done." He rose purposefully and pointed at his friend. "Look at what you have become."

"I have become the balance."

"You do not even see it, do you? What you are turning into? You do not see the irony of what you have done. To yourself!"

"You know nothing," Penumbra said, dismissing the accusation.

"You of all people should know the dangers of what you have done. You have stolen that which was not yours to take." Malachite was calming down now, concern for his friend over-riding any betrayal.

"We weave these dreams. We gift them a magic they do not deserve," Penumbra justified. "I have stolen nothing."

"You have stolen, and from humans. Humans Penumbra! You know what that did to the vampires!" Malachite shouted, hoping his friend would see reason.

"They were mortal. I am not. I am a creature of magic, reclaiming magic. It is not the same."

"To take from humanity is to place a curse upon oneself. It has always been thus," Malachite reiterated.

Penumbra didn't respond. Malachite stood in silence, looking deep into his friend's being. His friend was closed to him now. All he could see was a wall of darkness. His friend of thousands of years was no more, and the loss stung him. Of all the wounds suffered today, this cut the deepest.

"Penumbra. I am still your friend. Please. Please, listen to me," he pleaded one last time. "You have started on a path that will destroy you as surely as it destroyed the vampyres. Please turn back. Let us work together to build these people up again."

Penumbra laughed and pointed down the hillside towards the chaos below.

"You can never rebuild the elves. Not with them. Just as I cannot rebuild the vampyres. They are human. They will always be human. They will never amount to anything more than what they are. The race that destroys everything they touch."

Malachite stared at Penumbra. His friend. No. Not his friend. Not anymore. Whatever Penumbra had become, he was no longer who he had once been. The being before him was a stranger.

Malachite turned away and began to walk westward. He took several steps and then stopped. Half turning, he spoke.

"No good will come of this."

He continued walking while Penumbra stood frozen, watching his friend walk away beyond sight.



Saint Petersburg, The Event +4

Penumbra felt Cerulean goading him in the back of his consciousness. A self-satisfying gloat, trying to provoke Penumbra into submission. The eagerness of

Cerulean to finally be freed from the prison of Penumbra's control irked him. Made him angry, snapping Penumbra from his funk.

He dragged the magic together with any strength he could muster, shaping it into a physical form. Two arms formed in the black treacle, pushing the mass up. The arms buckled, and he fell to the ground. Again he tried, focusing as hard as he could, reforming his body. It was painful, but he pushed through it, forcing the tar-like mass into a figure. It was slow, but he kept fighting. Parts of his wraith form appeared as the mass retreated into itself, revealing a head, a single, shining eye held in place by pulsating strings of muscle. A slender arm reached out to claw at the ground. Thin tendrils uncurled, thickening into fingers. They stretched and dug through the ice and into the frozen sod. Not far from him was the patch of earth where Malachite had died, and out of it, the sapling with its single flower swaying in the breeze. His head fell to the ground. A moment of melancholy, followed sharply by sadness mixed with anger and frustration.

He let out an unholy scream—the low, rumbling growl of a tornado mixed with a high-pitched whistle. The wraiths in the city froze in place. The khadema stopped their feeding frenzy and scattered, heading out of the city. People were filled with fear. The last drips of hope were carried away with the scream as it raked through Saint Petersburg.

In a courtyard in Kupchino, Penumbra wailed. He pulled the energy around himself, reshaping it, rebuilding his body and the armour around it. His head stopped convulsing and reformed, healed and became smooth and solid. The skin thickened, hardening into the shining shell it had once been.

Once his body had reshaped itself, he expelled the excess energy. It crowned around him, burning away in an aurora of silver, blues and greens. It fell to the ground, dissolving the icy snow and scorching the earth. Small fires raged and danced for brief seconds before being snuffed out. Walls of smoke circled him and faded into the crisp winter air, leaving only Penumbra.

Just as his scream had filled the city, the silence that followed was just as startling. Saint Petersburg seemed frozen in time. Everything stopped, waiting for what would come next. Nothing moved, except for a small pale blossom dancing on a breath of air.

His body transformed again, shrinking from his wraith form into his humanoid form. His anger and rage gave way to the returning melancholy. He looked up to see the young tree. A light frost had settled on the petals of the flower, and it sparkled like a star in the darkening night. He felt the weight of loneliness he had carried with him ever since Chang'an. Just as the humans of the Tang dynasty had been a substitute for his days spent in the glorious vampyre cities, his friendship with Shiroikumo had been a shadowy facsimile of his bond with Malachite. His closest friend. A friend he had killed as if with his own hands.

Malachite. His companion for thousands of years. It was a rare thing for dream weavers to forge a friendship like that. A friendship that saw empires rise and fall and dynasties come and go. His mind wandered beyond Chang'an and to better times when all the mortal races lived and worked together. When creatures of magic could be seen walking among mortals and be welcomed as mentors and teachers. When the world was truly in balance.

He dragged himself across the ice until his head rested on the patch of sacred ground at the foot of the sapling and felt all the weight of his loss.

“Malachite,” he whispered to the earth. Then he wept, his magic spilling out into the ground. The soil churned as the slender tree grew, springing upwards, the trunk thickening. Branches unfurled and stretched outward and upward. From the branches sprang leaves of fine silk to form a canopy above the smooth silvery trunk. Buds sprang forth along every branch, opening to reveal an awning of fine pale green flowers, with thin white striations that shone as they caught the moonlight.

“May no human hand ever touch your brilliance in envy or anger,” he whispered. “Until the world draws its final, feeble breath, may you stand, arrayed in the beauty you once admired.”

He turned and sat, leaning his back against the smooth bark and closed his eyes.

“My friend,” he whispered. “If only we had not abandoned one another. What might have been?”



CHAPTER II: MIA CHEN

Manchester, Six Years Before The Event

Pearson brushed down her jacket and breathed deeply. She'd been sitting in the car for long enough. It was time to face the music.

She stepped out of the car and opened the rear door to grab a bouquet of yellow roses and a book-shaped present. Both were nicely finished with white ribbons tied into neat bows.

She took another deep breath and opened the gate to her childhood home. The garden looked well-tended. The grass neat and recently cut. The flower bed in front of the bay window bloomed with red and yellow roses and a row of pansies that were all the colours of the rainbow.

Another deep breath. She knocked on the door and waited. The door was old and wooden and painted a deep red. No aluminium covered plastic double glazed, high security stuff, no not for this house. The original door was the original Edwardian door with glass inlaid in a semi-circular pattern, a single red rose with plenty of greenery on either side. She always liked the stained glass of the front door, and seeing it again made her feel like a kid.

She heard mumblings inside. Footsteps. Keys jangling in the door. The door swung open to reveal her mother. If Emily was twenty years older, her

blonde hair turning white and creases around her eyes and mouth, then they would look like sisters.

"Hi mum," Pearson said with the best smile she could muster.

"Oh love," her mother whispered. "Come in."

She stepped aside to let her daughter enter.

"I don't know how happy your father will be to see you love," her mother said, locking the door. "Come on in then."

Her mother strode into the kitchen, a little too quickly, Emily thought. She hadn't even noticed the flowers. Hadn't even given her the chance to hand them over. It had been almost ten years since she joined the police. Ten years since the argument. Ten years, yet it may as well have been yesterday.

She took a deep breath again and stepped into the kitchen.

Her mother was fussing, talking over everything she did. Filling the kettle. Reaching for mugs. Searching in the cupboards for the tea she liked, then realising they didn't buy it any more after she left.

Emily reached over and touched her mother's arm.

"Mum, Water's fine. Here," she said, handing her mother the flowers. "These are for you."

"Oh love, you needn't have. I've got roses out front."

You're welcome, Emily said in her head, biting down the rejection.

Her mother continued to ramble and placed a glass of water on the table.

"Sit down, love. Sit down," she said as she dropped the bouquet into the sink. The kettle on the stove began to whistle, and her mother popped two teabags

into a pot, followed by steaming hot water from the kettle. She placed some mugs on the table, then gently placed an old porcelain teapot on a round raffia placemat. She sat down at the end of the table and smiled at her daughter.

Emily looked at her mother and waited for her to say something, anything, but her mother simply sat smiling and poured herself a cup of tea.

She may as well have been a stranger.

"How have you been?" Emily asked.

"Oh, you know," her mother answered. Emily waited for the rest of the sentence, but her mother sipped her tea and went back to smiling.

"Where's dad?"

"Oh," her mother began, and Emily knew that she was trying to decide how to answer the question.

"He's in the study, isn't he?"

Her mother shrugged and shook her head at the same time.

Another deep breath.

Emily pushed the chair back and stood up. Suddenly, her mother looked worried.

"He won't want to see you, love," her mother called out, but Emily was already out of the kitchen and standing at the door to the study.

They called it a study, but it was so much more than that. It was really a library, but her father had refused to call it that, given the sacred nature of studying, collating and sharing every scrap of magical knowledge on earth. The real library—the only library—was the one they were called upon to safeguard.

She knocked on the door. It was solid wood, stained and polished, as befitting the special status of

the room. There was no voice from the other side, so Emily tentatively reached for the round handle and pushed the door open. There wasn't even the slightest squeak in the hinges.

The room still had that slightly musty smell that she still remembered. It was the smell that only existed in old wooden rooms full of old books. The walls were lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, with only the door and window free of shelves. They were the solid, stained oak kind that would probably outlive the rest of the house. There was something eternal about these kinds of shelves. In the corner, next to the large writing desk, was the glass-fronted bookcase that contained the rare volumes. Each branch of the Library was only allowed to keep a certain number of the rare volumes. Spreading them out among the librarians across the planet was another layer of safety. Her father had never revealed where the other branches were, but she suspected her father was the only keeper of rare tomes in the country. She knew there were some in Aksum in Ethiopia, some in Cairo and Nanjing, but they were just assumptions from conversations she wasn't supposed to have eavesdropped on.

Her father was hunched over the large desk, his back to the door, a pile of books to his left. He was scribbling feverishly with a large fountain pen on a hard-backed journal, transcribing his opinions on the voracity of whatever new book he was reviewing.

She froze, watching him, as if she were twelve years old and it was her first time in the room.

"Hi dad," she whispered.

He kept scribbling as if he hadn't heard her.

"Hi dad," she repeated, this time loud enough for him to hear.

He folded over a page in the journal and continued writing.

She looked down at the present in her hand and stepped forward, placing it gently on the desk by the pile of books. He stopped writing and looked over at the present.

"What is it?" He asked. The once rich and full voice now sounded sanded down.

"It's a copy of Charles Spate's journals. I thought they might be a useful addition to the Library."

"I will be the judge of that," he responded dismissively and returned to writing.

He may as well have slapped her across the face.

"Really? That's all you've got to say. I stopped two sadistic killers who were using books in this library to murder innocent people, and all you've got to say is I'll be the judge of that?"

"Not from this library they didn't," he replied, keeping his back to her.

"You're still angry at me for joining the force? After all the good I've done?"

"You turned your back on a sacred calling."

"I saved a dozen lives. Maybe more. And what have you done? Sat in here hiding away."

He put down the pen and swivelled in the chair to face her. His face was blank, impassive, not angry, not disappointed, not anything.

"A sacred calling. That's what it is," he said calmly.

"That's what you walked away from. This isn't just a collection of books. This is all we have left of a world we don't remember. We keep it for when a mage rises up again, so we can guide them and nurture them."

"I chose a different calling, and no less sacred. I used what I learned to catch two vicious psychopaths."

"You stole. From this library. That's what you did. As if walking away wasn't enough."

He rose from the chair and faced her. He was still tall and stocky, even if he looked older and greyer. Still looked as mighty and strong as he had when she was a kid.

"You can't absolve yourself of betraying that kind of sacred trust with a book."

He picked up the present and placed it in her hand, closing her fingers tight on it. He sat back down and swung round to his desk. He picked up his pen and paused.

"You don't belong in here," he said, and the silence was broken by the scratching of his fountain pen on paper.

Emily was fixed to the spot, staring at him, waiting for him to speak. She looked down at the present in her hand. At the ribbon. It had taken her half an hour to tie the ribbon in a perfect bow.

She opened her hand and let the present drop. She heard the thump as it hit the wooden floor and closed the door behind her. Her mother was still sat at the table sipping her tea. She didn't even look up as Emily walked past.

Without a word, Pearson walked out of the house and back to her car. She sat there as tears welled up in her eyes. She had hoped that the years away and her success in the police would have smoothed over the hurt, but it had only made things worse. She felt a crushing pain in her chest. She felt dejected. She felt angry. Her hands curled into fists, and she quickly

wiped her eyes with her sleeves and took a final deep breath.

Now Pearson knew where she belonged, and it wasn't here.

She turned the keys, and the engine purred to life. She pushed it into gear and drove away.

She never once looked in the rearview mirror.



Little Rock, The Event +4

"They want us back," Farrow said sourly as he re-entered Ruby's hospital room. He wanted to throw his phone down in frustration.

Pearson didn't respond, lost in the past.

"Pearson?" Farrow said, crouching down beside her, his eyes darting all over her face, checking for bruising.

"What?" Pearson asked, returning from her own little world.

"You okay? You need the nurse?"

Pearson shook her head. "Just daydreaming. I'm fine."

"You sure you're okay?"

Pearson nodded and pushed him away. She craned her neck to look out of the window.

"What was your dad like?" Pearson asked.

"Pops? The demon?"

"Yes. What was he like?"

"Strong. Fast. Thing I remember most was his laugh. I really wanted to be like him when I grew up," Farrow answered, smiling at the memory.

"And your mum?"

The smile left his face as he remembered his mother. "Picture the perfect guardian angel. That was her. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Just wondering."

"What about your folks?" Farrow asked.

"Let's just say I never want to be like my parents. Ever. Suppose I wasn't as lucky as you."

"My folks were killed by their own kind. I wouldn't exactly call that lucky."

"Sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. Just messing with you. You're right, I guess I was luckier than most. They gave me the best start they could in a world that was all out to get them."

Pearson retreated back to her thoughts.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeh. This Event is dredging up a lot of old stuff, that's all," she said and pushed the reminiscences back onto the shelves. "What were you saying?"

"They want us to head back," Farrow repeated.

"Did you tell them I'm injured?"

"I did. They still want us back," he replied. She could hear the defeat in his voice.

"We can't just leave the girl," Pearson pointed out.

"I can try and stall a little, but I'm running out of excuses." Farrow looked over at Ruby. "We ain't prepared for this."

"You are. I mean, you're an angel. I'm the one that isn't any use here."

"I wouldn't say that."

"I would. Why did you even drag me into this?" Pearson's frustrations began to simmer again.

"Contrary to what you may think, angels and demons don't know jack about the magical world. I

know more than most, and that ain't saying much. I needed a second opinion. An expert." Farrow threw Pearson a wry smile. "You were all I got."

"Then we really are in trouble," Pearson grumbled.

The news was playing quietly on the TV. The Event had been overtaken by the plague sweeping through Saint Petersburg, yet it didn't stop the talking heads from making outlandish connections between the two episodes. It all felt like a badly scripted TV movie.

Pearson had no doubts that magic was behind both events, but she couldn't see what anyone could do about it. The little they could do was to sit and watch over the body of a sleeping Ruby, and now the rug was being pulled out from their feet on that little task. The more things developed, the more she felt as if she were treading water in rough seas.

"Come on. We should make a move," Farrow said reluctantly.

"What about the girl? We can't just leave her unprotected."

"I will watch over her," Vermilion said, appearing in the room.

"Good grief," Pearson said, clutching her chest. "Will you not do that!"

"Apologies," Vermilion said dismissively.

"Where's your friend?" Farrow asked.

"He is with Starla."

"Is that a good idea?" Pearson asked.

"She responds well to him. He is helping her more than I can," Vermilion admitted.

"Figures," she muttered.

"And what if there's trouble?" Farrow enquired.

“She will be protected.”

“Make sure of that,” Farrow responded dryly.

Pearson raised her eyes.

“Belt up the pair of you,” she mumbled under her breath as she left the room.

“I heard that you know,” Farrow said as he followed.

Vermilion watched them leave and stood over Ruby’s bed. The sounds of the machinery surrounding Ruby mixed together to form a quiet melody, the steady monotonous rhythm never changing. He placed his hand over the bed, and a faint red light began to spread from his fingers. It climbed up in a dome and curled over and under the bed, splashing over the floor. This would hide her from any magical creatures that may come looking.

For a moment, he looked at Ruby’s pale, sunken face. It was hard to reconcile the young woman’s harsh features with the sweet girl she had nurtured inside. The inner child that had protected her from the world.

He closed his eyes, searching and sensing for anything untoward nearby. Satisfied there was no danger, he took one last look at Ruby and then left the room.



The operations centre was a whirlwind of movement and noise. In one corner, fire and police were arguing with someone from FEMA about relief efforts. In another corner, police, FBI and National Guard were discussing maintaining order. One corner was dedicated to the FBI, where every scrap of data and intelligence wrestled for attention. Analysts sifted

through everything, trying to glean patterns and connections. Although the focus had shifted towards Russia, the FBI contingent were trying to rule out any possible connections between what was happening there and what had happened here. Everyone in the room had an eye on Russia, wondering what it meant for them.

In a corner room, away from the noise, sat Mia Chen. The small room was a stark contrast to the chaos of the operations centre. The walls had been painted white and recently enough that a slight fresh paint smell still lingered. A group of chairs were stored haphazardly in one corner, and two electric heaters sat at opposite corners, keeping the room warm. The desk at which she sat was a basic kitchen worktop, which was a little too low for others to work from, but perfect for her, so she'd claimed the space as her own.

Classical music was playing from one of her two laptops while data cycled repeatedly on her main laptop screen. An additional two monitors were attached to her laptop—the left monitor displayed some old case notes while the right played out a simulation on a city map. Three TV screens had been hastily installed on the wall and were playing different news channels. Every so often, something would pique her interest, and she would add the new data and watch the simulations play out.

Even as a child, Mia had found she could follow multiple threads simultaneously while comprehending each one. It was a skill that helped her all the way through her education and employment. She could have gone into medicine and made breakthroughs that saved lives. She could have gone into finance and made the big bucks. Neither

path had seemed interesting enough to her, but a chance encounter led to the doors of the FBI and the role of analyst. At first, it had seemed like the wrong choice, but then she met Special Agent Farrow. She instantly liked him. He lacked the swagger and arrogance of most other agents. He treated her with respect, always trusting her to do her best, and her best was always good enough for him. She worked exclusively for Farrow now. Together, they had done an awful lot of good in the world.

Of course, her parents wanted her to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or a pharmaceutical engineer. Anything but an analyst. After announcing her decision, her parents had grieved as if she were dead. It had been a few years now, but Mia had learned to live with the perpetual disappointment of her parents by simply staying away. Her Grandfather, however, had been the one bright star in her universe. He took her aside as her parents wailed at each other and quietly congratulated her and smiled at her with that knowing look in his eyes. The look he always gave her when she needed reassurance.

“Forget everyone else and stay true to yourself,” he had said.

Not a day went by that she didn’t miss him. Her parents hadn’t even told her he’d passed away until six months after the funeral. She hadn’t even tried to speak to them since, but she’d give anything to be able to speak to her gong gong again.

The reaction of her parents drove her deeper into herself, and the loss of her grandfather had cemented the attitude.

Even before then, she’d never been the friendliest child, and she knew she wasn’t the easiest person to

get along with. She wasn't a talker, unless it was with someone she really trusted, and those people were very few and far between. Five foot tall and skinny as a rake. Intelligent, multi-lingual, pianist and gamer with a penchant for as much sci-fi as she could consume. She was a stereotypical Asian geek, and she didn't care. She was who she was, and she was happy with who she was. She figured that set her apart from the majority of people on the planet, and if her parents—or anyone else, for that matter—couldn't accept her for who she was, then so be it. It had taken a long time, but she'd found the courage to live life on her own terms, and she wasn't about to surrender that for anyone.

A factoid scrolled across one of the news channels—an updated death toll from Saint Petersburg. She cross-checked that against the figures coming through alternative sources and added both sets of numbers to her calculations, then sat back and watched the results play out.

It took her a while to notice that someone else was in the room, watching her TV screens.

"They have more news channels in the main room," Mia said flatly, trying not to sound annoyed by the intrusion.

"I know, but the noise was giving me a headache," the woman replied. She was English, which meant it could only be one person.

"You're Detective Inspector Pearson," she stated.

"I am," Pearson confirmed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Actually, it would be helpful if I can talk to you," Mia said, a little excitement creeping in.

Before Pearson could respond, Mia got up and dragged a chair over from the corner and placed it beside her desk. Pearson sat down and noticed the case file showing on her monitor.

"That's a Joint Yorkshire and Humberside Task Force report. How did you get that?"

"Special Agent Farrow got them for me. They've been very useful, but there are pieces missing."

Again, Pearson was about to respond when Mia changed tack and connected her second laptop to one of the TV screens. The news feed vanished, to be replaced by pictures of bodies. Each victim had the same marks she remembered from five years ago.

"Where are these from?" Pearson asked. A tightness started to rise from her diaphragm.

"This is what is happening in Saint Petersburg," Mia replied. "They are similar to images from your case files."

"Yes," Pearson responded with grim acceptance. The events of the past—events she had put behind her—were finally catching up with her.

"I have questions. If you have time."

Pearson looked at Mia. Her face was blank, and she couldn't get a read on her.

"If you've read the reports..."

"I have, but I still have questions," Mia pushed.

Pearson was looking at the images cycling on the screen.

"I can't believe there are so many."

A map of Saint Petersburg appeared on her right hand monitor with casualty figures along the side. Most of the city was covered in red. Pearson noticed the total number of deaths.

"That can't be right. The news is saying six thousand."

"The media are getting officially released figures. No one thought to question why the Russian government was suddenly being so open and transparent about the numbers. We are getting the same, more accurate figures the Kremlin are getting."

"Six million dead," she whispered. "In two days."

"Almost three days," Mia corrected.

The screen showed a close-up of one of the victims. The burn marks on the forehead and temples. Streaks of dried blood from the eyes indicated how painful their end was. The last five years of her life felt like a dream. Suddenly, she was back in Scarborough, chasing ghosts.

"They haven't released much information about the marks," Mia said. "And your reports only mention what you didn't find."

"That's right. We started out on the assumption that it was a new drug. Victims were mostly kids in deprived areas, so it was a valid starting point. We tested for everything, but there were no signs of anything we didn't already know about. They were sniffing and snorting whatever cheap rubbish they could get their hands on, but nothing that would kill them or leave marks like these."

"You tested for other things?" Mia continued.

"If you read the reports, then you know we did," Pearson replied, starting to resent the grilling.

"I know, but when you talk about it, you say things you might not include in an official report. I don't want the official answers. I want your suspicions. The ideas you would never write down. Things like that."

Clever, Pearson thought. She liked Mia's thinking and was starting to warm to the woman, but her defences were also rising. Mia was too clever, and the more Pearson talked, the more likely she was to slip up and mention something she shouldn't. For as long as she could remember, the magical part of her life was one she'd kept secret, then she'd buried it completely. It was a necessity of her life and one she was very keen to protect. She started to skirt around the facts, like she had many times before in her career.

"Well, you know we tested for biological agents, chemical agents. Any test we could think of."

"You tested for radiation as well. Why?" Mia asked.

"It was just another test," she said, being careful with her words. "Everything else had given us nothing useful. Testing for radiation was me grasping at straws."

"Interesting," Mia said to herself.

"What?"

"The first autopsies performed in Saint Petersburg looked at radiation as a possible factor."

"Did they find anything?" Pearson asked hopefully.

"No. Their results matched yours."

"Oh," Pearson said, deflated.

"But it's interesting they tested for radiation before anything else," Mia said to herself.

Pearson was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. Mia was digging, but digging in the right areas. Of course, the burns gave off an energy signature, but they were caused by magical energy. To anyone else, it would have seemed like radiation, just nothing they could identify. There was some research in the library

about magical energy and radiation, but it hadn't been useful to the investigation. Pearson got the sense that if Mia kept asking these kinds of questions, she was going to stumble onto an answer that had eluded everyone else. That both excited and terrified her.

The image on the screen changed again; this time, there were dark marks all over the body. They were jet black, bigger, scabby and charred at the edges.

"What are these?" Pearson asked.

"The majority of victims have these marks. I couldn't see any equivalent in your files. Have you seen anything like these before?"

Pearson didn't answer. She rose to her feet and stepped towards the screen. Mia cycled through similar images. The first few were close-ups of the burns on the skin. Then they started to show the victims in their rooms. One photo showed nearly a hundred bodies strewn around a school hall, their faces and arms covered in the black splotches.

"So many," Pearson whispered.

"Detective Inspe..."

"No," Pearson said, unable to turn away from the screen. "I haven't seen wounds like these before."

Mia became quiet. Things were falling into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but she still couldn't make out the bigger picture. There were connections, she knew, but what they were still eluded her, laying just outside her vision. She changed the images on the screen again. This time, black and white images showing bodies laid out in lines under a woodland canopy. The images changed from wide shots to close-up detail of the bodies. Even in black and white, the tell-tale scorch marks and trickles of blood looked as familiar to her as the images from five years ago.

"What are these?" Pearson asked, dreading the answer.

"These are the only other instances of these types of wounds on record. They were classified. Special Agent Farrow obtained them for me."

"Where were they taken?"

Pearson closed her eyes to steal herself against an answer she already knew.

"The Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, April 1945."

"I hope you two are playing nice," Farrow said, leaning on the door frame.

"I was just reviewing Detective Inspector Pearson's case. I think information coming out of Russia can help us to understand what is going on here," Mia said. "And Detective Inspector..."

"Have you seen these?" Pearson asked, her tone more accusatory than she intended.

"Yes I have," he replied. He walked to the screen, touching the edge.

"You were there?" she whispered.

Farrow nodded.

"We need to evacuate the city," she said. "Now."

"I can't authorise that," Farrow replied.

"But you can swing it with the people who can."

"I need a good reason to start an evacuation," Farrow pushed back.

"Look. This is coming here," Pearson said, pointing at the screen. "I know it, and you know it. Ruby is going to attract all kinds of badness, and we can't protect her and everyone else. We need to evacuate."

"The National Guard are already in place to help with relief efforts," Mia said. Pearson had forgotten

she was there. "They could easily be tasked with evacuating the city."

"What do you think, Mia?" Farrow asked.

"I don't know yet," she replied bluntly. "I'm still collating data."

Farrow dragged Pearson out of the room and closed the door.

"I'll start the conversation about evacuating," Farrow agreed. "But I need you to do something."

"What?" Pearson asked.

"Talk to Mia. About everything."

"Everything?" she replied, resisting out of habit.

"Mia is wired a little different. It's what makes her a great analyst, but she can't do her job without all the information. You need to tell her everything. Magic. Starla. The Wraith. The Library. Everything."

"I'm not sure that's such a good..."

"Everything Emily. Trust me. Mia can handle it."

Pearson sighed. "She may be able to, but it's my career on the line. I know that's selfish, but I've put too much effort into building a wall around that part of my life."

Farrow put a hand on her shoulder.

"Emily," he said softly. Even though the noise of the room should have drowned out his voice, it pierced her mind like a wind chasing away the fog. "Trust Mia. She needs to know what you know, and you need to let this part of your life out for some air."

"That's such a bad metaphor," Pearson said, grumpily.

"I know," Farrow said, smiling.

"Get the evacuation started," Pearson urged.

He stepped away, but as Pearson was about to go back into Mia's room, he turned.

"This is why you're here, Emily," he said before wandering off.

Mia watched Pearson return to her seat but said nothing and just waited. The two sat staring at each other for a moment while Pearson thought over the ramifications of what Farrow was asking her to do. It was Mia who eventually broke the tension.

"You can tell me what you haven't told me."

"What makes you think there are things I haven't told you?" Pearson countered out of habit.

Mia shrugged and smiled. "I can just tell."

Pearson couldn't unravel the mystery that was Mia. At times, she was cold, insightful and logical. Almost like a computer. Other times, she was like a little kid with a wild, excited mind. She reminded Pearson of a sylph—a chaotic, many-faceted collection of random energies. Anyone else behaving like this would have made Pearson uncomfortable. It wasn't like that with Mia. There was something about the woman that was actually quite affable, but Pearson's instincts had always been to tread carefully and reveal nothing. Her police training had only amplified that. She was fighting herself. She wanted to be cautious, but she also wanted to open up and tell Mia everything.

She'd wanted to open up to Charles Spate, but even then, she'd been able to build a firewall between what she knew and what she pretended to know. With Charles, she'd always held back, giving away just enough to get what she needed from him. Now she finally had the chance to bring someone into the fold, but the firewall had become a concrete bunker. She didn't know how to break through it. Part of her told her she shouldn't be so trusting of a woman she'd only

just met. The other part, the part that came to trust Farrow, wanted to spill everything. It would mean undoing every attitude she'd cultivated since Scarborough. Undoing a lifetime of secrecy before that. Did she really have the courage to smash open the vault and let everything out?

She blamed Farrow for this. It had to be an Angel thing, some Heavenly spell disarming her defences.

Who was she to argue with Heaven?

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Pearson warned.

"Yes," Mia replied flatly, her fingers hovering over the keyboard.

"Do you have the images from my investigation five years ago?"

Mia tapped on her keyboard, and the black and white images were replaced by ones from Scarborough. The bodies of two teenagers sat in a car, the burn marks on their heads and dried blood from their eyes.

"Let's talk about these," she began. "Do you believe in magic?"



Pearson lost track of time. She'd been hesitant to start with, but after seeing how open Mia was to this new world, she just opened up. She described the realms mapped out by the librarians and the relationships between the mortal, the magical and the heavenly worlds. She explained how the magical world surrounded the mortal world and how it influenced the lives of humanity without them realising it. How magical creatures kept the magical energy in a state of balance between light and dark.

How the wraiths had evolved, breaking away from their chosen roles and how she'd discovered their existence five years ago.

Mia soaked up every word and began connecting the information together. Random, disparate pieces of data that, when connected, formed a new image of the world and what was happening in it. The bunker built to hide away the librarian part of her life exploded as her fettered past came out for fresh air and sunlight. It felt good to find someone who could accept a radical new vision of the world and integrate it into her view of reality so easily. Someone who didn't judge her. Someone who wasn't trying to trick her or test her. Someone who shared in the wonder she'd felt as a child, discovering the magical world for the first time. Pearson felt liberated from the prison of her own making.

For Mia, it was like someone had opened the curtains. Her life had been one footstep in front of the other, always waiting for the path to reveal itself, the destination always hidden in the dark. For the first time, she was seeing the world on a bright summer morning and hearing the birdsong and feeling the wind on her face. Life had never made much sense to Mia growing up. It was a complex equation with no solution, just endless working out that led nowhere. Now it was a solvable riddle, revealing secrets that were no longer just out of reach but there for her to grasp.

And grasp them she did.

She extrapolated everything from the Bergen-Belsen reports, Pearson's investigation and Saint Petersburg, combining it with the new knowledge Pearson had bestowed, creating fresh data points for

her simulations. Her map of Saint Petersburg lost all the data and shading from the previous run and started again. The pair watched as the city slowly grew red.

"This is the first day," Mia said.

A small spot of red appeared in the south of the map. Mia pressed a key.

"This is the second day."

Almost instantly, the spot spread out to cover most of the southern part of the map. Small patches appeared in other parts.

"This is happening now," Mia said as the red covered most of the city. Pearson was watching the numbers climb to astronomical levels. Then, the simulation stopped.

"This is six hours from now."

"It stopped."

"Factoring in what you've told me, the wraith, though the evidence points to multiple wraiths, who are killing in Russia, will be done there and will move somewhere else."

"You mean here."

"Yes," Mia said flatly. "This would be the most logical place."

"How do you know?"

Mia looked confused.

"I mean I have a gut feeling, but how can you know from all the data and stuff?" Pearson clarified.

"Magic is just energy, isn't it?"

"Essentially."

"And these creatures are harvesting energy. They could have killed one here and one there, and no one would have noticed. This is an escalation. This is the opening strike of a war, and in war, you always secure

the most significant energy sources. Starla is the most powerful source of energy in the world right now. They will try to control it.”

“But we can’t use Starla as an argument,” Pearson said.

“No, but taking Starla out of the equation, The Event is the second most potent single source of energy. It will attract everything. I can make a sanitised case for you. Remove any mention of magic and magical creatures. Energy attracting energy.”

“Good enough. That’s an argument we can use. I’m going to find Farrow,” Pearson said.

“I will stay here and monitor the data coming out of Russia. I will let you know if the timeline changes,” Mia responded.

“I’ll get you an extra pair of eyes.”

“It’s not necessary,” Mia said. “But it will be helpful.”

Pearson started to leave the room.

“Detective Inspector Pearson?” Mia called after her.

“Please, call me Emily.”

“Thank you,” Mia said, smiling. “Very much.”

“You too.”

Pearson got up to leave the room and bumped straight into Farrow.

“Woah. Everything okay?” he asked.

“No,” Pearson replied. “What about the evacuation?”

“The evacuation is on.”

“Good,” Pearson sighed with relief. “Mia has an update for you.”

Mia swung her monitor around so Farrow could see. “The killing in Saint Petersburg will end in just

over six hours from now. The wraith who are currently there will come here.”

“We need to get the evacuation done by then,” Pearson added.

“Okay. I’m heading out to coordinate with the National Guard. I need you to run the war room here.”

“Wait. What?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m not sure that’s...”

“We don’t have time to argue.” Farrow opened the door and led Pearson into the main ops room. He shouted for everyone’s attention, and everyone in the room froze. “As of now, we are evacuating the city. Everything else stops. This is Detective Inspector Pearson. Whatever she says is gospel. Understood?”

A general agreement echoed across the operations centre, and people stood still, waiting for Pearson’s orders.

“I hate you,” Pearson mumbled through gritted teeth.

“Don’t I know it,” Farrow replied, grinning. “Remember...”

“Yeh, yeh. This is why I’m here.”

His smile mirrored the one he wore on their first meeting. It had only been days, but felt like weeks. She faced the room with all eyes watching her expectantly.

“Okay! We need to find clear routes out of the city to pass onto the National Guard. We need to find ways of reaching everybody at home, work, shops, anywhere, and we need to do it now!” She shouted.

The room returned to its frenzied state as members of every local and federal agency picked up phones and started discussing options.

She turned to Farrow.

“See,” he said.

“I still hate you,” she said smiling.

Farrow turned to leave.

“Farrow,” she shouted after him. “You know where you need to be.”

He nodded. “As soon as I can.”

Farrow left, leaving Pearson surveying the room. An analyst approached her, an older man with unkempt hair and rumpled shirt who looked as if the last time he’d slept was a distant memory.

“Detective Inspector Pearson,” he began. She cut him off and shouted over the noise in the room.

“Okay everyone, just to make things easier. Call me Pearson, it will make everything run a lot quicker. And who’s keeping an eye on Saint Petersburg?”



CHAPTER 12: REQUIEM

Saint Petersburg, The Event +4

Chief Warrant Officer Mikhail Idrisov looked intently over the barricades into the distant suburbs of Saint Petersburg. It was quiet here. Not like in the city. From here, they could no longer hear the screams. Night had fallen like a heavy blanket, smothering everything, but it couldn't cover over the memories Mikhail would carry with him for the rest of his life.

His first steps in the city had been accompanied by an unholy baying. The howling lament of the dying and the left behind echoed through the empty streets. Then it stopped, replaced by silence. Honestly, he wasn't sure which had been worse.

The soldiers were out of their depth within minutes of their arrival. Mikhail, like many others, had served long enough to remain calm and clear. He kept his troops in order, kept them alive. Others—naive or simply arrogant—gave in to the fear and panic and fell victim to the plague.

A plague!

This was no plague, despite what the officials may say. He had seen the small shadows drifting in and out of sight. He thought he was hallucinating. For a moment, he thought perhaps he had succumbed to whatever was sweeping through the city, but the shadows kept moving from building to building, and he remained alive and well.

Then there was the figure. Even now, he wasn't sure he'd really seen it, but the dark shape skulking out of the doorway had left a lingering impression. It could simply have been the dusky shadows playing tricks with his mind. Or stress. It could definitely have been stress.

The moment had only lasted a few seconds, but it replayed in slow motion over and over in his head. Just a blur of shadow, a cloud of darkness oozing out of the building. He would have usually dismissed it, but the eye, the large empty eye looking out from the mass, it looked all the way through him.

Just the thought of it caused a shiver to run across his shoulders and down his spine. Mikhail pulled his uniform tighter around himself and shrank into it.

So yes, he was glad when the order came to leave. Leaving the people to whatever moved through the city. Leaving them to their fate. The people had pleaded and tried to clamber onto the trucks and armoured vehicles. Warning shots had been fired, but the crowds remained undaunted until shots were fired into the crowd, and then the people scattered, retreating back to their homes. It was a selfish, cowardly withdrawal, but his boys—and they were only boys—were safe. He was safe. He hoped. Behind corrugated steel, concrete, mud, and wire felt safe enough for the moment. It would probably not offer safety from whatever he thought he'd seen, but it offered some comfort, and that was enough for the moment.

"Mika," a grizzled soldier said quietly. He looked about the same age as Mikhail, and his bearing showed the same burden of experience. The soldier pointed to their right, where fire was now taking hold

of distant buildings, fingers of flame reaching out to catch hold of anything nearby. It didn't take long before the flames spread out across the city, casting an orange haze into the dark sky.

The grumbling of engines sang out behind them, and the two turned to see six old Smerch rocket launchers pull into the back of the camp. As they split off, four BTR armoured personnel carriers with 30mm machine guns drove into the makeshift compound. Infantry moved aside to allow the vehicles to creep steadily to the barricade. They climbed packed mud ramps to sit slightly overlooking the corrugated barrier, their guns pointing in admonition at anyone or anything that was foolish enough to approach.

Mikhail shivered again. The soldier beside him raised a quizzical eyebrow. Mikhail shook his head and nodded back towards the city, and the pair wordlessly returned to their watch, trying to ignore the metal beasts that flanked them on either side. Nothing more had to be said.

What could they really do but watch a city burn?



Before the military retreated, Saint Petersburg had been sectioned off. Bridges had been raised and roadblocks put in place to isolate districts as much as possible. North of the Neva River, people sat in their homes and waited for death while wishing and praying for the nightmare to end. South of the Neva, people had reached their breaking point. While Mikhail stood on his wall, small groups began to emerge in the streets, pensively waiting for soldiers to challenge them. It didn't take long for them to realise

the army had abandoned them. Emboldened, small groups became big groups, and big groups became crowds, swelling the roads and flowing towards the outskirts and freedom.

The khadema sat and waited.

The soldiers stood and watched.

Word spread across the city, and people flooded out of their homes, leaving the southern half of the city in the hands of the criminals. Looting, violence and fire were left in the wake of the retreating crowds.

Soon, the whole southeastern part of the city was ablaze, an eerie backdrop to the exodus.

The crowds marched ever closer to the barricades.

By the time the throng came into view, Mikhail and his companion were no longer alone. The barricade was now overflowing with soldiers. Some of the younger officers looked hollowed out by what they'd experienced, worried and afraid of what was yet to come. Then there were the cowards—officers who had used their rank and connections to stay out of the city. They were so puffed up in their own sense of power and status that even from the hastily constructed barricades, they acted like lords over all they surveyed. These officers hadn't experienced what everyone else had experienced. They were just bullies with guns and a steadfast belief in their own superiority.

Mikhail groaned inwardly.

The crowd continued forward. One of the more egotistical officers looked over at the crowd with a microphone, barking orders that emerged from loudspeakers on either side. The crowd ignored him and continued marching closer. Warning shots rang

out into the night sky, and the front ranks tried to back away, but the rear of the throng was still surging forward, pushing the front towards the barricade wall. Another warning. Again, they ignored it. Mikhail looked out and swore they were moving faster.

The mass pushed forward. People at the front began to see the danger and, in their hesitation, tried to slow down, turn around, back away, but the crowd behind them was pushing with greater urgency. Some were trampled underfoot, while others surrendered and tried to keep up. Mikhail's heart twisted as he realised what was about to happen.

A distant order was given, then from a flimsy-looking tower, shots rang out. Along the wall, other soldiers joined in. Mikhail shouted out to those nearest to him, ordering them to cease fire, but he was drowned out.

Confusion took over.

The crowd splintered, some trying to back away, others continuing forward. An officer with a radio headset gave an order, and the heavy machine guns of the BTRs opened fire. The crowd were torn to shreds. Soldiers on the barricade began to fire on the crowd as they retreated, running back to the city.

Mikhail smacked the soldier next to him and signalled with his hands to stop firing. The anger in Mikhail's eyes was enough to get the message across. Without prompting, the soldier passed the message along the line. Eventually, the shooting stopped, and the soldiers on the wall went back to watching as the crowd retreated out of view.

What was left of the mob retreated back towards Saint Petersburg while the khadema, lying in wait, struck. They swarmed to intercept the retreating

mass. Over one hundred thousand people had taken to the streets in an effort to escape. Now they were falling to the plague, and the air filled with screaming.

The pompous officer in charge barked another order, and a bright flash lit up the sky behind them. Mikhail's ears were filled with a whooshing howl as rockets screamed overhead, aiming for the outskirts of the city and the retreating crowd. The landscape burned bright, flaring upwards in bursts of fire and white hot shrapnel. As the explosions died out, the only sound remaining was the crackle and fizz of burning bodies.

From the barricade, there was only silence and bowed heads.

From the moment the mob first rushed the barricade to the moment the last person flinched under the feeding of the khadema took eleven minutes.

As the sun began to creep over the horizon, Mikhail stepped carefully through the bodies littering the roads and streets at the edge of the city. Together with the rest of the troops, they gathered the bodies that remained into piles and then stood back in hushed reverence as gasoline and flame cremated what was left. Mikhail knew he would never forget this experience. An old training officer had once told him that everyone had their breaking point. He had always assumed he was tougher than most, but today, watching the flames send up a thick wall of smoke, he knew he had finally reached his.

He walked back to the barricade, his head and his heart empty. There, overseeing his handiwork, was the officer who had ordered the attack on the crowd. He was laughing with sickening pride, boasting with

his friends. Something inside Mikhail snapped. He raised his rifle and took the shot. Blood sprayed from the officer's head, and he toppled from the barricade to the bloody ground below. Mikhail slung his rifle and continued walking. Nobody challenged him. Some of the other bullies pretending to be officers shouted with rage, barking like dogs. As Mikhail walked deeper into the camp, he heard more shots ring out, and the barking fell silent.

He wandered until he found his billet. He let the tent flap close and laid down on the nearest cot. He closed his eyes and tried to forget all about Saint Petersburg.



News of the night spread swiftly through the city. Some watched from their rooms in morbid fascination, waiting silently and solemnly for the inevitable, filled with the knowledge that they were utterly alone.

As the night sky began to brighten, ninety percent of Saint Petersburg's population south of the river Neva was dead. The wraiths were full, their magic spilling out, and they rested. Penumbra had gradually made his way back to the Hermitage. It sat empty and silent like the city surrounding it. He watched the sun rise, the light warming his face. He sent a silent pulse across the city—amplified by the other wraiths—and the khadema stopped their feeding frenzy. Penumbra had achieved what he wanted to. It was enough.

Magic flopped and oozed out of him as he wandered the empty halls. The floors charred and warped wherever it landed in tiny pools of magic that glistened black and dark, light spinning around the

edges like a painterly event horizon. Magic dripped from exposed tissue in his arms, and small streams of dark pitch slipped from his long fingers. It gathered on his thighs or back until a volcanic splutter erupted to land on the floor.

He moved slowly, dragging his left leg as if weighed down. He shuffled to the wall and changed to his weaver form as he slid to the floor. His wraith form was much more dynamic and far more efficient at absorbing magic, but his old, weaver shape was better at holding it. As usual, he'd absorbed too much, so all he could do was sit, endure the pain and wait until the excess spilled over.

Pain was the price he could never get used to. The foreign magic longed to be free, and the effort of holding onto it, forcing it to become a part of his own, caused knots in his extremities and a vice squeezing across his torso. He was becoming more adept at merging the alien energy with his own, but he was far from perfecting the process. It was a battle, a burning in his body, dulling his mind and allowing Cerulean's consciousness freedom to speak and exert influence. He could feel Cerulean creeping out of the corners again.

At the back of his mind, the weaver's voice tugged away at the edges. There were times that Cerulean's mutterings did actually affect him, made him question the path he had set himself on, but not today. Since Malachite's death, he had become resolute and angry.

Angry at who? Cerulean whispered.

Penumbra ignored the words as he focused on mopping up the surplus energy.

Angry at yourself, Cerulean answered.

The accusation stung a little because, deep down, Penumbra knew it was true. He could be angry at humans all he wanted. He could blame them for the loss of the vampyres when he was still young. He could blame them for the state of the world and their failure to use the magic that flowed in their veins and sparked with every neuron. Yes, it angered him that they would reject such a gift, and he would vent and rage against humanity all he wanted for that, but he couldn't be angry at them for recent events. He knew Cerulean spoke the truth.

You created the root of your anger.

The words drifted off as Penumbra pushed back, annoyed now at Cerulean's goading. Cerulean retreated back into the depths as Penumbra locked the weaver's consciousness back into his cage.

He may have created the root of his own anger, but he was not going to shrink from it. He was responsible for Malachite's death. He couldn't, wouldn't, shy away from that. It had been a brutal end to a long friendship. The connecting threads of their relationship had still been there, despite the years apart, and he'd treated that relationship with disdain at the very end. No matter how much he would want to, he couldn't change the outcome. It was done, and he was responsible. Accepting that truth made him free. He would not be enslaved by his past. It was enough to be centred in the present, with the pain. With his anger.

Yes, he was angry over the loss of Malachite and Shiroikumo. Yes, those were losses that came because of his choices, but this path was one of his design. He accepted that, and he would not prostrate himself on

the altar of his failings. He would gather together his failures, knot them into his anger and feed off the rage.

He rested his head against the wall, the morning light now starting to creep through the opposite windows, the light spreading across the floor towards him. He closed his eyes against the discomfort pulsing across his body.

The magic spilled out in smaller and smaller beads as his control began to dominate and the pain began to subside. The final beads of magic dripped onto the floor, burning away in puffs of mist. The battle was over. He was himself again.

He stayed there for an hour, like one of the many statues that filled the Hermitage. He felt the warmth of the sun climb over his naked body, and when it reached his face, he opened his eyes and let the warmth seep into him. He probed his mind, waking it up, engaging his thinking. He felt the power inside him, felt the strength in his extremities. He was at his peak now. At his most powerful. He was ready. He stood, clothing himself in black trousers and a soft woollen shirt of brilliant white. From thin air, heavy black boots built themselves around his feet, and over the shirt, he weaved a smooth black jacket. He flexed his fingers and stretched his neck and then walked casually towards a large hall.

There was a reason he was fixated on this place. There were places scattered all over the world where the magic coalesced. It flowed in highways across the mortal world, and where they collided, the magic pooled together, forming a junction to other pathways. The Hermitage was one such place. From here, he could travel anywhere he wanted. He traced the flow of energy with his hands and followed it until

he found the hub. The magic flowed in and out in dozens of directions. He stepped into the eddy and vanished into thin air, leaving Saint Petersburg behind.



CHAPTER 13: VERMILION

Little Rock, The Event +5

Live surveillance footage of Little Rock was showing on a multitude of screens in the makeshift control centre. Nobody really knew, except for Pearson and Mia, why they were evacuating the city. Pearson wasn't even sure if the Deputy Director fully understood it. He was trusting Farrow, who was trusting her. They could be evacuating the city for no good reason, but Pearson trusted her gut.

Something gnawed away at the back of her mind. A nagging feeling that wouldn't go away. It was part of the librarian's toolkit. Pearson was blessed—though often it felt like a curse—with an intuitive perception of the flow of magic. The sense of where the dark energies flowed or where the light energies gathered and where the two clashed. It was something that had been dulled over the last few years but now was back with an unsettling strength. Something was coming. It wasn't something she could explain; she just knew it.

Anyway, she thought. Mia thinks something's coming, so that makes two of us.

She scanned screens of empty streets. A ghost town mostly. Except for north eastern Little Rock where traffic was still gridlocked. Pearson made a quiet request to one of the technical analysts, and the screens of empty streets switched over to streets crammed with cars, trucks and people. She could see

a few people stood beside their cars. She could make out their faces. They were confused. Afraid. Angry.

"They're not getting out in time, are they?" Mia asked, her hands stuffed in her pockets to keep them still.

"Not like this," Pearson answered, transfixed by the gridlock.

"I have a suggestion," Mia said, grabbing Pearson by the arm and dragging her over to a nearby desk with a large map on it. She pointed to an open space in the city close to where the evacuation had stopped.

"It's Clinton National Airport. There have been no flights in or out since The Event."

"That does us no good moving everyone there. It would just become an empty parking lot," Pearson explained.

"Unless there happened to be an Air Force base close by that happened to have a lot of transport aircraft available," Mia outlined. She grabbed a pen and circled another open space north of the river. "Little Rock Air Force Base in Jacksonville."

Pearson nodded her approval. "Good work, Mia. I'll pay the Deputy Director a visit. In the meantime, start moving people to the airport. At the very least, we might be able to clear some traffic out of the way."

Pearson rushed over to a small corner doubling as a conference space where the Deputy Director was taking calls. Mia allowed herself a small congratulatory smile before calling Farrow. It was short and succinct, but it was enough. She pocketed her phone and returned her attention to the screens.



Central Little Rock lay silent, a gentle breeze drifting off the icy cold Arkansas River. The sun was shining in a clear sky, and the mounds of snow were starting to thaw. Penumbra emerged on top of a tower block by the riverside, breathing in the air. He reached out to get a taste of the magical energy in the city, but there was nothing apart from what remained behind after The Event. He pushed his senses deeper, thinking perhaps The Event was masking the human energy, but there was nothing. The city was empty.

He let his senses wander. To the west, the south. Still nothing. To the East. Ahh, there they were. Trapped, fearful and on the verge of panic. Their energies mixed together in a soup, steadily simmering over as they surrendered to the darker emotions. Humans. They never fail to make things worse for themselves.

A whisper sounded in the back of his mind, a voice struggling to push through the prison walls. He was in a good mood, so he let Cerulean out of his cage. It was Penumbra's turn to gloat.

This will be your end, Cerulean whispered softly. There was no malice in the voice, the words gentle and warm.

Is this concern? For me? Penumbra retorted.

It is never too late to turn back from this path you are on.

Ahh, my friend, you cannot comprehend the path I have set myself on.

More than you realise, Cerulean replied, and Penumbra felt the sadness in each word. For a moment, he questioned if Cerulean could be right, but quickly pushed the thought aside and then stuffed Cerulean back into his prison.

No. His path was set, and there was no turning back.

He turned his attention to the swirling vortices of energy. The main source of power was in the heart of The Event. That would be his destination. The humans in the east were nothing, and north of the river had become crowded, as if that offered any safety. Humanity would learn soon enough that there was no escaping the world of magic.

He closed his eyes and sent a pulse of energy across the city. It spread out beyond the streets and buildings and into fields and forests. It raced over the landscape into Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Missouri. In all of those states, the khadema stopped and listened.

It had taken Penumbra decades to convert the khadema from their natural state into his twisted army. There had been many failures in that time, but eventually, he was able to train them, to reshape their purpose from nibbling away at the lighter magics to feasting on every scrap of magic they could find within a human body. Now the process was perfected, and he could do in an instant what had previously taken him decades.

In the wave that spread out across the deep south was hidden a call. A desire. This was no ordinary desire though, this was an intense need, a hunger and lust for something they had never tasted before. Slowly, they started to answer the call, gathering in numbers. They would flash out of the mortal world, travelling the roads of energy, flashing back much closer to the source of the call. The closer they got to Little Rock, the more intense the need within them became. They were born wild, they lived wild, never

realising there was more to their existence. The call changed all of that. More and more heeded the call, from the south and the north and the west they came, but not the east. Something was blocking his pulse.

Penumbra explored the energies to the east and could see nothing but a maelstrom of humanity. He picked at the magic, unthreading, pushing apart at the edges to peer inside and found something unusual. Something he recognised. Something ancient. He'd first sensed this energy millennia ago. At the close of the first war between the mortal races, when the races were gathered to witness the vampyres' exile from the mortal world, Penumbra had been there, with Malachite, to bid them farewell. He'd noticed it there, a powerful presence on the mountains overlooking the scene, but whenever he'd tried to fixate on it, it slipped into the periphery, so he hadn't been able to focus on it. The power was unique, even though it was diminished so it could hide among humans. Nevertheless, it was unmistakable.

Whatever it was, something so ancient and so powerful could be a problem.

Cerulean's warning returned to his mind.

It is never too late to turn back.

He shook the thought away. He wouldn't turn back. He would march onward. Whatever power that was in the east could be dealt with. At least it could be occupied, distracted.

He sent out another pulse and waited. A figure appeared beside him, followed by another, and another, until nine wraiths stood with him on the rooftop.

There is a power here that must not be allowed to interfere, his voice echoed in their minds. *Occupy it,*

but be careful; this power is ancient and will not be easy to defeat.

Without sound or ceremony, they vanished from the rooftop. Then Penumbra was gone too.



The Half-Light, The Event +5

Argentis felt the rise of dark energy in the city, even from within the half-light. Each burst of darkness tightened the stranglehold on the light magics a little more. Heavy, suffocating, oppressive. He glanced at Vermilion. There was a look of sadness in his eyes. The weight of the world on his shoulders. Argentis shook his head, silently pleading for his friend to stay, but he knew Vermilion. There was nothing Argentis could say to change his mind.

Starla was dancing along the corridor, oblivious to what was happening in the mortal world. Argentis realised they'd both been shielding her from what was happening outside the half-light.

"Keep her here," Vermilion whispered. "As long as she remains in the half-light, the wraith will not be able to sense her."

"I can't do this on my own Vermilion."

Vermilion placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Yes, you can. There is only one more step on this journey, and you are better placed to guide her than I."

Argentis sighed. "I know. I just..."

"I know," Vermilion replied. He reached out his hand, and Argentis took it. They shook firmly but briefly. A very human gesture, but it felt appropriate. Vermilion stepped back. The two held each other's

gaze without expression, then Vermilion walked away.



Little Rock, The Event +5

Traffic was flowing once more over the bridges over the Arkansas River into North Little Rock while the backlog had been moved over to the airport. A few helicopters were ferrying people north, and the mood had changed from one of anger and frustration to one of hope and eagerness. Farrow was actually feeling positive about things.

When the wraith arrived, he felt them like a knife in his chest, each one pushing a new blade into his lungs. Magical energy didn't affect him much, it was like part of the weather. He could feel ripples in the air, and whatever had arrived in the city, it was powerful. Whatever was coming for Ruby was here. His time had run out.

He searched out Special Agent Luna and called him over.

"Hey boss. Finally got everyone moving again," Luna remarked.

"Listen Manny, I need you to take over here. Make sure everyone gets out of the city."

Luna gave him a stern look. Farrow was used to it by now. Luna's eyes were sharp and his instincts on the money. He didn't miss much. Sometimes, Farrow wondered how much Manny really understood about what was going on around him.

"I need to be somewhere. No questions. Okay," Farrow added.

Luna nodded. "Okay boss. I got your back."

Luna made his way back towards the crowd and began talking to a National Guard Captain. A roaring sounded out in the distance, and Farrow looked heavenward as a line of transport aircraft came into view, heading for the airport. He allowed himself a smile.

“That’s fine work Pearson,” he muttered to himself.

He waved at Luna and gave him a thumbs up. Luna saluted back, and Farrow left the fate of the evacuees in Luna’s hands. He made his way through the empty streets, enjoying the emptiness and quiet. His pace was steady but soon picked up as his eagerness to be back beside Ruby took over. He felt positive about everything for the first time in days. The citizens of Little Rock were out of harms way—or would be soon. He had a feeling that Ruby would be able to complete her journey. Everything was going to be okay.

Maybe things would work out after all.



Vermilion stood at the lip of the basin. He touched the ground and let his magic wander, invisible roots digging into the earth, spreading out across the city, searching out any traces of magic. They touched the pockets of humans crossing the river. Fewer and fewer now. Towards the north and east, the roots twisted into thick intertwining cords where people were waiting at the airport for evacuation flights.

He sensed Farrow moving towards the hospital. He sensed the wraith—pillars of deep-rooted, dark magic—moving through the city, hunting for something. Outward, beyond the city, his magic

spread out until it hit a thick mass of energy driving forward with a sense of urgency. Streams of dark magic driving north and south and west, rolling over the landscape towards the east of the city where several thousand people gathered, awaiting their passage to safety.

They came faster. A shifting storm of shadows, driven, eager and desperate. Khadema. Like a sea whipped up by violent winds, the khadema would smash into the evacuees. They would devour everyone huddled together in the east and everyone watching north of the river. There was only one thing that could stop them. He hung his head as he reflected on the path before him.

He hesitated.

He felt a presence arrive and closed his eyes.



The Half-Light, The Event +5

With Vermilion gone, Starla began to see through Argentis' shielding. As the dark energy swept closer, something emerged within her. A whisper. A feeling. A knowing. She couldn't describe it or understand it. It was just something there, growing, just as the darkness grew out there. It called out to her and filled her mind with a single vision. A need. A need only she could fill. She kept telling herself that she was just a child who knew nothing, but no matter how much she tried to dissuade herself, the feeling wouldn't go away. She had to go and face the future. She had to go to Vermilion.

Argentis was doing his best to look calm, but she could see in his eyes that he was worried. He couldn't hide his feelings from her now. Whatever was inside

her was getting bigger and stronger, only now it didn't scare her. It felt warm and comforting, like she was wrapped in a blanket by the fire. She was filled with knowledge and understanding. It felt like she was growing up, and it felt okay to let go of the past and face the unknown.

Starla tugged at his sleeve and grabbed his hand tightly. She looked up and smiled.

Argentis sighed.

"Vermilion told us to stay here, where it's safe. I need to keep you safe."

"You don't need to keep me safe," she said and squeezed his hand.

"Yes I do."

"Argentis," she said, and Argentis felt an ancient power in her voice. "Y'all said I had to choose. So I'm choosing." Starla squeezed his hand again. "It's time to go."

Argentis looked down into her eyes, and she let him see the power inside her. She wasn't the frightened little girl she'd been when they first met. She was fierce and brave. She could see every path laid out in front of her. She could see every splintered possibility and the impact it would have on the world. She'd chosen her path, and there was no stopping her. She showed him all of this, letting the vision in her mind unravel for him.

Argentis smiled and nodded. Starla led him to the stairwell, climbing up and exiting onto the quiet corridor where Ruby's room waited. Argentis opened the door, and there in the centre of the room stood an old wooden door painted in dull red paint. The paint had cracked in a specific way, revealing a layer of dark grey underneath, forming the symbol that portrayed

the mortal, magical and heavenly realms—the same symbol that vibrated in the heart of the basin. As Starla approached, the dark grey glowed white with heat for a moment before cooling into a shimmering golden orange. Starla looked up and smiled at Argentis. He smiled back.

She reached for the tarnished brass handle and pushed the door open, stepping into the light behind it.



Little Rock, The Event +5

Argentis stepped out of the basin and looked up. Then his feet stopped working. He pulled Starla back, holding her at his side. She was confused for a moment and then saw what Argentis was seeing. Vermilion was knelt just ahead of them, his hands stretched out on the ground. Standing over him was a figure dressed in black.

Vermilion kept his head down, ignoring everything happening around him. The dark-eyed stranger took in the scene, not with anger or malice but with empathy and respect. He squatted down and placed an arm on Vermilion's shoulder. Still, Vermilion ignored him.

Argentis was surprised. He was expecting a cruel and vicious monster, not a creature like this. He emanated an energy that drew things to him. This was a creature he could follow and serve. Argentis felt a pull, a call that vibrated deep in his magic. It called for his surrender and subservience. His foot shuffled towards the stranger, letting go of Starla's hand. He shook his head, but the call urged him to follow.

Starla touched his arm, and the sensation of submission faded. He looked down at her, and she smiled again. This was definitely not the same Starla. When Argentis next looked at the wraith, he saw more clearly. Gone was the seductive call, replaced by a nebulous cloud of lightning and explosions, as if life and death danced together. He pulled energy towards him but also repelled it.

Vermilion finally looked up and then looked behind him. His eyes locked onto Argentis and then Starla. Argentis could only watch as his friend began to fade. The stranger withdrew his hand, at first confused and then shocked as Vermilion's body began to glow and split, his mortal shape dissolving into clouds of light. The clouds split and split again, breaking apart until there was only a faint mist that glowed with a soft red sheen. A breeze swept over the broken landscape, sweeping the mist away towards the east.

Argentis watched it disappear and bid a silent farewell to his friend.



The mist drifted through the empty city, growing as it moved. Occasionally, small sparks of scarlet lightning flashed within. It slithered over roads and slipped between buildings, working its way to the airport, gathering pace and volume, absorbing whatever stray magic it found along the journey.

By the time it reached the airport, the mist was large enough to create a ring around the evacuees. They stared in awe at the red mist rising and falling, growing to form a wall around them. Too fascinated to be afraid, they watched, captivated by the sight.

The wall amplified the presence of the humans, and the khadema felt it. The hunger they felt grew more intense, overcoming the last specks of reason, and it drove them harder and faster. Those that were heading to North Little Rock altered course, driven to the airport. They were packed so tightly together that it looked like a ghostly river of shadows over the landscape.

Faster and more dense, piling on top of each other, the khadema swept in, rushing with all their speed at the wall of red mist. The first few flashed out of existence as they smashed into Vermilion's magic, but it didn't deter the ones behind. They swept in, crashing against the mist. The explosions spread excess magic over the surface of the misty barrier, and the magical wall absorbed the surplus energy, making it stronger, bigger, denser. The call became more intense, and the khadema became frenzied as they spread around the barrier, trying to punch their way through to the humans gathered within.

The awe of the evacuees was quickly replaced by panic as the gentle ethereal mist became a furnace filled with bright, violent flashes. The air was filled with the pop, pop, pop of explosions. Still, the khadema came, undaunted, their hunger and desire so intense, it overrode every other instinct. The explosions came faster, more intense, more frenzied. At times bright, at others dark, the explosive flashes grew more numerous, and with each one, the mist grew thicker and taller. The wall of red cloud climbed and then lingered for a while before rolling back on itself towards the ground with incredible speed, sweeping outward. The khadema tried to retreat, but their momentum carried them towards the

approaching mist and their destruction. It consumed them, wiping the city clean.

A hush filled the airport as people tried to comprehend what they'd just seen.



Penumbra sensed the destruction of the khadema, but he wasn't angry about it. Vermilion had offered a noble sacrifice, and he respected him for it. It wouldn't change anything anyway, and he took solace in the fact that the weaver was now out of the picture. One less threat. One less obstacle between him and the girl. She was all that mattered now.

The girl stepped forward, focused on one tiny light that hovered over the ground where Vermilion had been. She knelt down, cupping the light carefully in her hands as if it were the most delicate and fragile thing in the world. The light was so small, not even the size of her smallest fingernail, but she stared at it intently, as if the secret of the universe was contained inside. It hovered in her cupped hands, not moving, waiting for her to act on something that only she knew.

"Never mind, little one," Penumbra said softly, his beguiling voice full of compassion. "He is gone now. You know that, don't you child? He is gone forever. But you are not alone."

"Oh, shut up!" Argentis hissed back.

Penumbra felt a blow smack against his face. He'd been so fixated on the girl that he'd forgotten about Argentis. The blow spun Penumbra around and knocked him to the floor. He pushed himself up, leaning on his elbow, and grinned as he stroked his jaw.

“You will regret that, my friend.”



Farrow ran westward through the empty streets of Little Rock. The city felt so different without people in it. It felt serene, though a little odd not to be surrounded by the noise of humanity. He let his mind wander as he moved through the city, then realised that his pace had slackened. He brought his focus back to Ruby and started to feel eager to be at the hospital. Eagerness turned to urgency. He needed to be at Ruby's side, and he could feel the urgency nudging his thoughts and scratching his brain. He needed to be there and soon. There was no time for a meandering mind.

His pace picked up, and soon he was in an all-out sprint towards the hospital.

A pulse of energy discharged ahead of him. He ignored it and kept on his path. There was another, and another, like a steel string snapping under pressure. Each pulse was in his path, so he diverted, hoping to get around the disturbances, and found himself cutting across the lawns of the State Capitol. The large white limestone edifice seemed to glow in the morning light, and the bare trees cast shadows across the grass.

Waiting for him in a line, blocking his path, were nine wraith. He smiled to himself. They had deflected their magic to misdirect him. They'd set a trap, and he'd stumbled right into it. There were times he really hated magical creatures.

He watched them edge around him to form a wide circle. He eyed each of them, weighing them up to discern the strongest and the weakest. Two were

slender and smaller, the power emanating from them weaker. Three of them were taller than the others by about a foot. They were strong and powerful, their skin a thick, scarred armour. The others looked similar in size and strength to the wraith he'd fought at the Hospital.

His enemies were measured and assessed, but he had no clear strategy for fighting them.

Menace emanated from them, seeping out in a haze across the lawns, searing the tips of the grass. Pulses of dark magic whipped towards him as the wraiths tried to unsettle him. It was possible they knew what they were facing, but he doubted it. Even if they did know what he was, they could never know the true power angels and demons had. He could end this swiftly if he could dig into his heavenly powers, but he couldn't risk it. Revealing his existence would open the gates of Heaven and Hell. This generation of humanity had never seen retribution like that. They would come for him, but they wouldn't care about anyone caught in the way. The collateral damage would be immense.

There had been many times in his life that he'd felt alone and adrift in the mortal world, but for the first time since he cut off his wings, he felt weak and vulnerable. For the first time in his life, he really felt this could be his ending.

Far away and from a distant past, he heard the sound of waves rolling over a foreign shore. The sound of gulls like a whisper on the air. Memories of a place and time long forgotten.



CHAPTER 14: PARIAH

Eritrean Coast, 25,860 BCE

Pariah sat on the beach, watching the waves roll over the ashen sand. Alone in his thoughts. Alone in his life.

Two globs of plasma congealing on his back were all that remained of his wings. They glittered as they caught the moonlight. He missed the feeling of the feathers brushing against his back, but he would never feel them again. There were still moments when he could almost feel them, a trick of neural memory. He held one of the feathers in his hand—a last connection to his mother.

He missed his mother.

After the death of his father, he'd sheltered in the strength of his mother. The two of them had moved swiftly and often, but the angels hunting them had anticipated their movements and lay waiting. His mother led them along the coastline until they discovered a human settlement, then she led them south, setting up a makeshift shelter in the shadow and safety of a volcano. Humans would never venture there, but humans were not the only beings to fear. His mother gave him her last words of counsel, warning him to stay put and stay quiet. He obeyed, at least for a few weeks.

Eventually, he ventured out to look for her, but all he found was her sword, discarded in the ashen earth.

Her sword meant nothing to them. They had their own. Her body was all that mattered. The demons had done the same with his father.

Smoke rose lazily from the caldera of the volcano. Despite the clouds hovering above it, the volcano was dying and soon would lay dormant, silently sleeping until the world passed away. It posed no danger to the humans in the north, but their boats only ever sailed until they could see the smoking mountain. They never sailed any closer.

The boats had been what piqued his curiosity, eventually driving him from his isolation to watch the settlement. A great city had grown up from the landscape, extending out over the water. Small boats sailed in and out of the harbour, travelling north with full loads and returning home with different loads. He was surprised to see that the colour of their skin was similar to his own, and he realised there was a chance he could pass as one of them.

If it were not for his wings.

It had taken him a week to come to the decision. A life alone or risk a life with humans, without his wings and without his power. In the end, there really was only one choice.

He had everything planned out, but he hadn't been prepared for the pain. His hands fumbled, and his mother's sword slipped and sliced through the wings further from his back than he'd planned. A pale blue plasma speckled with bright golden light seeped from the stubs, sizzling as it hit the ashen earth. The pain had surged through his back and into his chest. His hands shook from the shock, but he'd known it hadn't been enough, and he would have to try again.

He'd waited another hour before making the second attempt, regaining his strength and building up to the inevitable pain that would follow. He took his father's sword this time, slowly carving through the stubs, keeping the blade as close to his skin as he could. After the first stub fell away, he dropped the sword and fell to the ground. He crawled from his shelter to the sea and collapsed into the water. Waves washed over his back, soothing the wound.

He laid there for an hour as the waters swayed over his body. The night was clear, and he looked up at the thick milky belt of stars. His mind wandered away from the pain and soaked up the beauty of the firmament. He had never seen Heaven, and his mother had never told him of it, but when he saw the stars, he often wondered if the skies of Heaven were decorated in a similar way.

A third attempt took care of the second stub, and again, he'd crawled to the sea to let the water soothe the wound.

It had been enough. The scabs would heal and leave behind only scars that he could pass off with any story he could concoct. He looked up again at the sky thick with stars and watched the moon slowly creep toward the horizon. The sky began to brighten, and the first rays of sunlight began to creep across the empty landscape.

He walked slowly back to his camp, second-guessing his choice and wondering if he was making the right one. He dismissed the thoughts. It was done. There was no going back.

He took the blanket his mother left for him—a thick fabric of deep red—and tore a wide strip from it. He placed both of his parent's swords reverently on

the torn piece and wrapped them carefully, tying it with a second, thinner strip. The rest of the blanket he threw over a shoulder, tying it at his waist. He looked up at the volcano towering above and then out to the sea. Turning his back on the cove, he walked north along the coast and into the human city of Ekulteref.



They greeted him warmly on his arrival. They were kind and accepting, welcoming him as one of their own. It was a large tribe of several thousand, and he integrated into a small community in the southern quarter of the city. He laboured alongside his new family while remaining guarded and careful. He would reveal nothing of his past, claiming to have no memory of it, and so they called him Demsas, a word they used to describe something lost. They teased him with the name, but he grew to like it and answered to the appellation as if he'd carried it all his life.

He loved the people, and the people loved him. His interest and wonder at everything endeared him to everyone, especially the children who would drag him into their play at every opportunity. He was happy here, but his eyes were always watching and waiting, a string of tension always present along his spine.

And then she came to him.



Pariah first noticed Khyasaya from his early days of watching the city. She was easy to spot, even from a distance. Her bronzed, olive skin was lighter than the rest of the tribe, and it glowed under the bright sunlight. Her hair was jet black and long and straight compared to the braids and tight curls of everyone

else. There was something about her demeanour that was different, too. She moved like silk on the air, graceful and energetic, but also soft and delicate.

She came to him a month after his arrival, though he had noticed her watching him. He didn't know how to approach her, so in the end, it was she who came to him. She spoke to him after a large community meal, a festivity to celebrate the completion of a new grain store. Dragging him away from the celebration, she led him out of the city and along the coast, walking south where the humans never went.

They walked for several hours, talking about the city and its people. As they came within sight of the volcano, and without hesitation, she revealed that she wasn't human but rakshasa, the mortal race that lived far to the east. He had never heard of them, and so he listened as she spoke about her life and her people. The more she opened up to him, the more he came to trust her, and it wasn't long before Pariah was revealing his own secrets. By the time they returned to Ekulteref, the pair had cemented a friendship that would last for centuries.

They walked together every evening while Khyasaya wove tales of the mortal races, reminiscing about her days among the elves far to the north and west and the vampires in the north that she cared little for. Mostly, she spoke about her own race.

The rakshasa had learned of magic very quickly and had such an affinity with the animal kingdom that they'd developed a symbiosis with them, using magical power to transform into animal hybrids. Khyasaya was unusual in that she was one of the Asura, a samuth—her people's name for tribe—that was more interested in the harmony of the mortal

ances and able to use their magical energy to help the four races bond together.

Pariah, like most angels or demons, knew very little about either the mortal or magical world, so their walks had become an education for him. He also learned that the relationships between the mortal races were very complicated, but she wanted him to discover them in his own way and in his own time, so she didn't dwell on them too much. Ekulteref was his home, and he couldn't imagine ever leaving. He enjoyed the stories of the other races, but he had no desire to visit them.

The evening walks broadened his understanding and helped him think more deeply about the world and everything in it. He began to see how he could help shape it. He began to see a clear path for his life, and for a moment, the loss of his parents didn't cut so deeply.

Khyasaya, in turn, enjoyed learning about the heavenly realm as much as Pariah enjoyed learning about the magical and mortal realms, expanding her understanding of the universe. New pieces that helped to complete the great puzzle of existence.



The evening air was warm with a slight breeze drifting over the sea. The sound of the waves provided a gentle accompaniment to their conversation. He couldn't remember how they had drifted onto the topic, but this evening he had talked about his parents more than usual.

"You miss them," Khyasaya said, her voice musical and full of light.

"Yes," he replied flatly. "But there are times when the loss is more acute."

"I understand," she said, and tucked her arm under his elbow and drew herself close to him.

"Loss is part of life. It reminds us of what has been," she said, resting her head against his shoulder. "But if we are not careful, the past can hold us prisoner."

The bundle of swords slipped and bumped Khyasaya on the head. She playfully pushed him away in mock anger. "Why do you insist on carrying those things everywhere you go?"

"Because," he replied defensively. "These are all I have left of them."

Khyasaya grabbed his arm and stopped. She looked into his eyes and placed the palm of her hand on his cheek. It felt like the warmth of a fire on a cold night, and the longer her hand was pressed against his skin, the more the hurt melted away.

She hooked her arm under his, and they walked in silence, listening to the sound of the sea as it washed over the sand. The further they walked, the heavier his footsteps felt. Demsas stopped to look up at the night sky, thick with stars. He slid the bundle from his shoulders and unrolled it on the sand to reveal two swords, one with a blade as dark as night, the other as bright as a full moon.

"My father's sword burned with a blue flame. It growled like a wild beast." He wielded the dark blade in an arc around him, the movement swift and graceful. "It frightened me when I first saw it."

"You cannot make it flame?" Khyasaya asked.

"I can, but if I do, it will reveal my presence to Hell and bring the demons upon me," he said. His voice grew quiet. "And upon everyone else."

He plunged the blade's chiselled tip into the ground and lifted up his mother's blade. Slimmer and more delicate, the edges tapered into a sharp needle-like point; it seemed to sing as it sliced through the air.

"My mother's blade burned with the brightest gold. It was as if she danced with the sun in her hand."

He picked up his father's sword and wrapped it reverently with his Mother's.

"They are important to you," she said softly, but he didn't respond, slinging the bundle back over his shoulder. "That is why you keep them with you?"

"Always."

"Will that not increase the temptation to use them?"

"Life is peaceful here. There will be no need. Heaven and Hell will never know I am here."

"Oh, Demsas. You will never die of old age, and I myself will live to be many thousands of years old," Khyasaya stated. "But these humans, they will have short lives in comparison. They will grow, spread and change with each generation, and the rate of change will seem rapid to our eyes. They will not always be peaceful, as our family is now, and there will be other tribes who see the things we have built here and will want to claim them as their own. Wherever humans are, violence often follows."

Khyasaya stopped and picked up a flat stone from the beach. She weighed it in her hand. "What would you do if another tribe, or another race, comes to Ekluteref driven by conquest or violence? Would you take up your swords?"

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

She threw the stone over the calm sea. It skipped several times before sinking below the surface. “And in the heat of battle, can you resist the temptation to ignite your swords and save your friends?”

He didn’t respond. They both knew the answer.

“I can teach you a way to keep your swords close by but out of reach. Out of temptation.” She picked up a second stone, this time a smooth round stone about the size of her fist. Holding it out between them, the air rippled around the stone, and then it vanished.

She swished at the air where the stone had been, then held out her hand to grasp at nothing, then the stone appeared between her fingers. She held it out and dropped it into Pariah’s open palm. He hefted the stone and then threw it into the sea. It splashed into the water, disappearing under the surface.

“The magical realm surrounds the mortal, but it is not a physical space. The meridian between the two is multi-faceted, with many layers in between. These layers are neither physical nor magical, and yet both. A place without place.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Not many do, and it is not easy to explain to one who has not seen it or felt it. It is like two pages of a book. When folded together, the words are hidden, yet they still exist. It is possible, with magic, to fold the physical world upon itself. It exists, but only within the fold and hidden from the world. Like part of a story that is forgotten unless the fold is re-opened.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder and then his head and smiled.

“The mechanics are not important. Only the possibility.”

"How does it work?" Pariah asked.

"Your swords would no longer exist as physical objects in the mortal world but exist as entities within the fold. They will be bound to you and only you, so while hidden from all others, they will always remain with you. Always within reach, but out of sight, and in time, out of thought. Only in the most extreme need will you think of them again, and in that moment, all you need do is reach out for them, and they will be there."

There was a moment of silence between them.

"Do you trust me, Pariah?"

It was the first time Khyasaya had ever spoken his true name. Her voice gave it reverence and honour and warmth. She reached out to touch his face again—her hand like cool cotton in the afternoon heat—and the last of his doubts slipped away. Without replying, he slid the bundle off his shoulder.

He handed the bundle to her, and she carefully unwrapped the swords. She gave him back the wrapping and balanced the two swords on her hands.

"Place your hands on the hilts," she said gently.

As he rested his hands on the swords, fingertips touching hers, he felt the blades sing. Felt an electric energy over his fingers. The air shimmered around the weapons, consuming them until they vanished. His palms slipped through the air where the hilts had been and rested on hers.

"The time will come for weapons made by mortal hands. There are those in the city with the skills to create them. Use them when the time comes. Think no more about the blades of your parents until you have no other choice. Then reach out for them with your mind and with your heart, and they will return."

Pariah nodded, but Khyasaya could feel the loss he felt. She lifted his chin with her finger and smiled.

“Do not dwell on what was. There is much light in the world, Demsas.”

“It is hard to see the light sometimes,” he remarked.

Khyasaya smiled and kissed his cheek. It was the lightest touch, but there followed a sense of warmth and peace.

“Look up, Demsas,” she said, lifting his chin up to the heavens. The sky was thick with stars. “Now take the light as your own.”

Demsas laughed and nodded. Khyasaya curled her hand under his arm and turned him about.

“Now walk me home, and tell me again how your parents met.”

They walked back to the great city of Ekulteref, the buildings rising in the distance from the edge of the sea. The waves came crashing over the shore, and in the distance, a dozen gulls sang as they dived for fish. Khyasaya rested her head on his shoulder again, pulling him close for warmth against the cool night breeze. He almost didn't want to return to his home. He wanted to keep walking. He wanted to hold onto this feeling of peace for the rest of his life.



Little Rock, The Event +5

The memory of that walk along the beach burned bright in his mind. Khyasaya had been right, of course. Had he not given up his parent's swords, the temptation to use them would have been too great, but over the centuries, they passed from his mind and when the need for them arose, there was never a

desire to call upon their power. There were always other solutions.

The emotions the imagery conjured were so fresh it could have been yesterday. He felt the stresses of the last few days burn away as a renewed feeling of peace began to spread from his mind and into his torso and extremities.

The physiology of angels and demons were similar in many ways to mortal bodies. They had all the major organs that a human body had, but instead of blood and hormones, an angelic body coursed with energy and light. Angelic energy glowed a bright golden white while demonic energy burned a fiery blue. Pariah had a mixture of Heavenly and Hellish light flowing through his veins. Most of the time, the two lights flowed around each other harmoniously, but sometimes those energies clashed, causing fatigue and heaviness in his limbs. There were also moments when the lights merged, and when they did, the world was rendered in sharp focus and blessed him with increased strength and awareness.

He could feel the lights dancing around each other, combining and mingling as they coursed through his veins and into his muscles. His mind became clear and focused, and he felt the renewing power spread from his heart all the way to his fingertips.

He could sense the wraith standing around him, waiting to pounce. There was eagerness, but hesitation as well. He played out every possibility, every way the fight could go in just a few seconds and knew there was only one way in which he would win. Other solutions were not an option.

He opened his eyes and flexed his arms, focusing his mind and his heart. The air in front of him shimmered, and the swords of his parents emerged from the fold. Fingers curled around the hilts. They felt so familiar, as if they'd never left his hands.

He looked squarely at the largest wraith to his left, then lunged with great speed towards the weakest wraith to his right. He brought the swords up together, and they sliced through the thin armour with ease. The wraith melted into a mist, gathering itself into a ball. It hovered over the ground for a moment before it slipped into the earth.

The two wraiths closest to him edged forward. Farrow—though in this moment he was once again Pariah, born with the power of Heaven and Hell—dodged the talons of one as he struck out with his father's blade to slice through the other attacker. The armour was thicker, so it didn't cut all the way through, but his mother's blade traced the original cut carving through the more vulnerable, magical flesh underneath. It faded into its whisp form like the first and disappeared.

The other wraith lunged again, the talons aiming squarely for Farrow's chest, but he spun out of the way, bringing both swords to bear. The points dug into the wraith's armour-like skin, sliding into the flesh underneath. He withdrew them, widening his arms, slicing through the chest. He smashed into the wraith, knocking it back, and stood over it as it crashed to the ground. It evaporated, surrendering its life to whisp form.

Six remained. He noticed that the bigger three were waiting. Watching. Learning. The other three circled him, slowly, cautiously, then rushed in, talons

extended. The first lost a hand as his father's blade sliced clean through, but a second talon struck his head, knocking him back into the path of the third wraith, who wrapped its arms around Farrow's chest, holding his arms fast. He tried to arc his blades around, but he couldn't get enough motion. The second wraith wrapped its thin talons around Farrow's skull, and there was a slight burning sensation on his temples.

The wraith felt the immense power as it probed Farrow's mind, and he could tell the creature was filled with glee at the prospect of feeding on him. Farrow groaned silently as the energy flowing in his veins started to drain out of him and into the wraith. He closed his eyes, focused his mind, twisted the swords in his wrists and reversed the blades, slicing through the wraith's thighs. It didn't let go, but it loosened its grip enough that he could swing the swords up and cut into the wrist of the wraith feeding on him. It stepped back, and Pariah shook off the loss of energy.

The first of the three, eager for revenge, burst forward. Farrow, pushed up, using the strength of the wraith holding him and kicked out with his feet. There was a cracking sound as the hard shell of the first wraith's head shattered. A thick, dark substance oozed from the skull, flowing over its single eye, blinding it.

Farrow headbutted the wraith behind him, and the wraith finally loosened its grip. Pariah swung his mother's blade in an arc, aiming the point over his shoulder. The blade bit deep through the wraith's eye and into its skull. He felt the arms around him fall away as the wraith evaporated, then he plunged the

blades into the neck of the second wraith, which followed its companions back to the magical realm.

The first wraith, filled with fear, tried to scramble away from Farrow, but the black sword struck the ghostly shape, and the wraith's body reformed. Farrow thrust his mother's sword deep into its skull, and it melted before him.

Three left. He turned to face the most formidable of the group, but a force smashed into the side of his head and knocked him to the ground. Dazed, but still conscious, he looked up to see the hulking monsters lurching towards him. The swords vanished, returning to the fold the moment they fell from his hands. A kick railed against Farrow's stomach, tossing him like a rag doll across the grass. He rolled several times until he smashed against the trunk of a tree, knocking the wind out of him. The wraiths lurched slowly forward to finish the job.



CHAPTER 15: EVOLUTION

Little Rock, The Event +5

Argentis looked down at his fist. Something within him had just snapped, and the rage was now replaced by shock. Penumbra wiped his face—a dark slick had seeped through the skin where the punch had connected. He flicked it to the ground, and the smooth dark glass cracked, and a small plume of steam broke through the gaps.

Springing to his feet, he launched himself at Argentis. Argentis tried to back away, but Penumbra was so swift, he knocked Argentis to the floor.

Argentis berated himself. He had acted without thinking. If Vermilion were here, he would have scolded him for behaving rashly. That had always been his weakness, though. He had picked up far too many human habits, most of them bad.

He looked over at Starla, lost in her own world, cradling the last of Vermilion's magic in her hands. Penumbra loomed over Argentis, gloating.

"There is nothing you can do now," he hissed. "You failed."

He stepped towards Argentis, his physical form transforming from his human, dream weaver form into his wraith form. He seemed to grow taller, the clothes falling away as skin grew dense and shiny, cracking on the arms to reveal the muscular tissue underneath. The features falling into the oval head as

the single, pearlescent eye formed. A voice rang in Argentis' mind, resonating with depth and clarity.

Failed, just as you failed your friend.

A shadow swept across the eye, leaving a thin sliver of light. It hung there for a moment before flashing back to bright white. Argentis' eyes went wide with understanding as he remembered their first encounter. The rage returned.

"You," he hissed in accusation.

Penumbra reached down, talons extended. Argentis batted the arm away and propelled himself up and into Penumbra's torso, wrapping his arms around him. He tried to lift Penumbra from his feet, but Penumbra shifted his weight to stabilise himself, and Argentis was only able to shuffle the pair back a few inches across the smooth surface.

Penumbra reached around Argentis, grabbing him around the waist and lifted him from his feet and over his shoulder. Argentis tried to hold onto the wraith, but the power of Penumbra's lift forced his arms apart, and his body crashed to the ground, followed by a series of loud cracks.

Penumbra spun on his heels, jumping forward, his foot landing hard on Argentis' leg. There were no bones to break, but the damage was significant, causing a great deal of pain. The bruising robbed Argentis of magical power as his body rushed to repair itself.

He could imagine Vermilion berating him.

You never think things through.

Maybe, he thought. But at least I try.

He was going to lose. He was sure of it, but at least he could give Starla time to follow her path to whatever end she chose. In the meantime, he would

give everything to stop Penumbra. If all he could do was try, then he would try.

He turned over, kicking out with his undamaged leg. He caught Penumbra by surprise again, knocking him off balance. He climbed to his knees and then to his feet, the pain in his damaged leg almost caused him to stumble, but he was able to right himself. He was too slow. By the time he regained his footing, Penumbra had already recovered, swinging out. Talons smacked against Argentis' skull. For a moment, he worried the wraith would drain him like he did Cerulean, but the momentum pushed Penumbra's hand onward, spinning Argentis around. As he twisted, the weight shifted onto his bad leg, and it gave way under him. His body crunched against the ground. He pushed himself up onto his hands, trying to find any purchase to make another attack, but another blow fell against his back. Then another. And another. Blow followed blow. Penumbra's forearms crashed against his back and head and shoulders. Argentis felt the energy drain from him with every strike. He tried to push himself up again but collapsed.

Penumbra stepped away, transforming back into his human form. He shrugged his shoulders as a long, black coat formed around him. A fine white thread grew along the shoulder and sleeves, glowing brightly.

Argentis had nothing left. He was done. One more strike and his magic would be drained. He laughed—a low chuckle—the humour of the situation lost to all but himself. Argentis turned his head, the pain lancing through his shoulders. He looked up at Penumbra with all the contempt he could muster, but Penumbra looked calm, his face full of sympathy.

“There is no shame.” He said, kneeling beside him. “I am more powerful. You could never have won, but you fought with courage, and you have my respect. You have my blessing to depart this life and to live again.”

Argentis lashed out with the last of his strength, swinging his arm up, but Penumbra caught the wrist and held it fast, pulling Argentis upwards and twisting him before lowering him gently onto his back.

“Go now. Go back to the mists. I give you your life. Be reborn.”

He let go of Argentis’ wrist, and it hit the ground with a whump. Penumbra paused, and Argentis looked up at him. He swore there was the slightest hint of blue in Penumbra’s eyes. He was delirious. He looked up at the sky—an icy blue haze with scattered clouds. The sun was almost at its peak, and the tops of the clouds were glowing white with edges of gold, while underneath was a tarnished silver. It was beautiful. His eyes shifted to Penumbra, trying to show defiance, but he couldn’t hide the exhaustion he felt. Penumbra placed a hand gently on his chest to comfort him.

“I’m sorry, my friend, but it must be.”

Argentis felt the warmth in the wraith’s voice.

Penumbra raised his hand and, forming a fist, smashed it through Argentis’ chest. Argentis opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He took one last look at Penumbra, and his lips curled into a smile as his body became a silvery mist. It hovered over the ground as if trying to figure out where it was and what to do. It started to gather together into a small cloud full of tiny, bright, silver lights. As if mirroring the clouds above, the whisp was edged with a golden

glow. It bounced around a few times, drifting towards Starla, and then it paused. It held itself there, completely still, as if watching her. She was still on her knees, hunched over the small glowing ember of Vermilion's magic. It refused to move. Refused to leave, but the whisp couldn't resist the call home and slowly, it faded from the mortal world.

"I am sure we will meet again," Penumbra whispered. He sincerely hoped they would. Perhaps next time, they would meet as allies. "Choose your next life wisely," he added as a warning.



The wraiths were hovering, goading, circling Pariah like some downed prey. Taunting and teasing their victim. He had never encountered creatures this strong before. Individually, he could have beaten them, but combined, they were a close match in strength. This was the moment he had dreaded for thousands of years. His moment of truth. A choice between his demise or to call upon his full power, alerting Heaven and Hell to his existence. This was his death, either way. Now, or later.

He channelled what strength he could muster and pushed himself to his feet. The wraiths hovered around him, just out of reach. He thrust himself forward, pile-driving into the midriff of the closest wraith. The pair slid back a couple of feet before the weight of the wraith shifted, digging into the ground and bringing the pair to a standstill. The wraith brought both its arms down square on Pariah's back, but he bore it. He bunched his thighs and tried to lift the heavy wraith off its feet. A second wraith, one of its arms bearing an armoured half claw with serrated

edges, slashed it across Pariah's back. The claw slid away slightly but bit deep enough that the serrated edge sawed into his flesh. Pariah felt his grip loosen when a third blow smashed into his back, and he dropped to the ground. A slight trickle of light—a reflection of the pale blue sky speckled with sunlight—seeped from his skin.

The three wraith gathered around him, gearing up for the final assault.

Angels—and demons—cannot die of natural causes, but they are not immortal. Wounds that would kill a mortal being cannot end the life of a Heavenly being, but sustain enough constant damage and even an angel will die. It was a rare occurrence, even during the conflicts between Heaven and Hell, but it had happened. Pariah's parents were two examples of the few.

The first crash came hard on his back, followed closely by one on the side of his skull. The claw came down after that, the tip piercing his back. He groaned in agony as a trickle of the dark, tar-like magic seeped out of the wraith's claw and dripped into the wound. It burned his lungs, spreading into his veins. It felt like a raging fire as the magic corrupted the light flowing throughout his body.

Again and again, the blows came while his chest tightened against the poisonous energy slowly spreading through his system. This would not be a quick death. He would weaken gradually as his body expended more and more precious energy trying to repair itself. The light in his veins would dim, and then the inevitable would happen.

His mind went back to his parents. His father—like all the demons after their exile to Hell—had

blackened his skin in order to protect it from the brimstone fires. He remembered how the jet black glowed with a golden sheen as the sunrise hit it. He remembered learning to fly, wishing his wings were more leathery like his father's instead of feathered like his mother's. He remembered his smile, his strength, and most of all, his laugh.

He could understand why his mother had fallen in love with him. He didn't fit the propaganda of Heaven. He wasn't what she'd expected.

Thoughts of his mother were always the same. Beautiful, gentle, fiercely protective of him and his father. There was more nobility about them both than any other beings he had encountered in his entire existence.

But here, at the end, the thought that struck him most was how they never gave up. Enduring to the very end was at the heart of both their characters. His parents had been mirror images, reflecting the same qualities back at each other.

Though hunted and outnumbered. Though they would run and hide whenever they could. Though, in the end, they would be defeated and killed. The one thing they never did was surrender. They fought only when they had to, and then they fought to the bitter end.

He screamed. It was a guttural sound birthed from the pit of his stomach, rising through his lungs. He reached out and called back his swords. They appeared in his hands, flashing to life. The black blade of his father crackled with an intense blue flame. The low, rumbling growl of the fire that had once frightened him now felt invigorating. The silver sword of his mother flared with bright golden fire, the gentle

humming harmonising perfectly with the primordial sound of his father's blade.

The blades filled him with energy and power. His body spewed out the magic infecting his veins and healed his wounds. He rose to his feet and slashed both blades in front of him, slicing through the wraith. It fell back, trying to fade into its wisp form, but it couldn't. The swords drained the magic from it, and it crashed to the ground, exploding into ash.

The two other wraith stepped back in shock as Pariah brought both swords to bear on the claw-armed wraith. His father's sword sliced through the wraith's arm, while his mother's sword severed the wraith's head. Before it hit the ground, Pariah had pierced the chest of the final wraith with both swords. He held them firmly, the fires merging and dancing, the song of the blades filling the air of the state capital's grounds. He shouted, all of his power funnelling into the blades. The fires rose, expanded outward, consuming the wraith until there was nothing left but a pillar of thinning smoke. A breeze caught the smoke and carried it away, ending the last of the wraiths.

Pariah stood there in silence for a moment, allowing the renewing energy of the swords to fill him. He had never felt this power before. It had always been denied him. Until now.

He waited. He listened. Nothing happened.

He looked around to check, but there were no other beings in sight. He wasn't sure what to expect, but he had expected something. At least a demon or an angel materializing to investigate or challenge him. Perhaps they could no longer sense him. Perhaps they no longer cared.

He waited for a few more minutes before relaxing the tight grip on the swords. The fires dissipated, and the blades fell silent. He closed his eyes and listened. A breeze brushing against the cold grass. A robin chittering in one of the trees. Nothing else. He opened his eyes and looked around, waiting. How long could he wait though? He needed to be elsewhere.

In the moment of feeling safe, he heard a rumbling from under the ground. The muscles in his arms tensed, and his fingers tightened against the hilts, unwilling to let them return to the fold just yet.

The rumbling grew louder. Just ahead of him, a large circle of concrete was melting, charring. Smoke rose into the air, forming a dark chimney. The molten ground spat and sputtered, pulling ash up into the funnel of smoke. A figure began to rise from the circle, the molten earth sliding off the jet black figure. Its skin was smooth and slick, like thick plate armour, and as the molten sludge slipped off the figure, the armour seemed to glisten in a golden hue as it caught the sun. The head twisted and turned, thick bony protrusions cracked echoing around the empty grounds. Large, leathery wings stretched out and flexed before folding back on themselves.

The demon stepped forward, and the armour seemed to be absorbed into the skin. The wings shrank and disappeared, and a midnight blue robe covered the figure. It looked like a man now, though the skin was still jet black and had too much of a golden shimmer for it to pass as human. He was as tall as Pariah, though stockier and no doubt stronger.

The demon looked at Farrow, weighing him up, and Farrow readied himself for the fight of his life.

There was no more fear. No more worry. There was only the determination to fight and win.

“Put down your swords, Pariah,” the demon said, his voice deep, like a rumbling volcano.

The demon formed a fist with his right hand, and a pale blue glow shone between the fingers. He opened the fist and released a ball of blue flame. It splintered and spread out over the scene like fiery butterflies. As they fell to the ground, they dissolved in a tiny display of fireworks.

“That will mask your power from Heaven,” he said and lowered himself slowly to the ground, perching on a curb and stretching his legs. “It has been so long since I have walked the mortal world.”

Pariah didn’t move. He stood ready, never flinching, waiting for whatever trick Hell would unleash.

“I am no threat to you, Pariah. Put away your swords.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t trust you,” Farrow replied.

“Do as you wish. I need not your trust.”

The demon stared out over the landscape, examining the grounds and the buildings. The roads and signs and lights. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, savouring the smells on the air. It confused Farrow, but still wary, he held onto his swords.

“I didn’t know you could do that with your wings,” Farrow said.

“We can do many things to blend in with mortals. It is a shame your father didn’t teach you that, or you wouldn’t be left with those scars on your back.”

“How...’

“I can sense them,” the demon snapped back.

"You knew my father?" Farrow asked.

"Your father was a friend. During the war with Heaven, I was overpowered and weak. Your father saved my life."

"A shame you didn't return the favour," Farrow spat.

"I was not involved. If I had been, he would still be alive."

Farrow heard the regret in the demon's voice.

"I owed a debt to your father that I could not repay. Now, it is paid on your behalf. Watch carefully Pariah. There are still those in Heaven who would gladly see you dead. What I have done will mask you for a season, but not forever."

"And what of Hell?"

"Hell is occupied with other matters. You are of no concern to them." The demon stood and stretched again. "You have somewhere you need to be."

"How do you know about that?"

"I am aware of a great many things."

Farrow nodded and backed away, still cautious. Careful.

"You wear the bearing of your father. He would be proud of you, Pariah."

The comment caught him off guard. This demon wasn't at all what he expected.

"Why did you do this?" Farrow asked.

"Because a debt must be paid. Because the universe demands it. Because there will come a time when you must live up to the promise of your name."

"I don't care about my name. I don't care about Heaven or Hell," Farrow replied angrily.

"The time for words is over. The time now is for you to go."

“No tricks?”

The demon looked around at the empty city as if Farrow wasn't there.

Farrow stepped back, swords still in his hands, his eyes fixed on the creature. The demon seemed to ignore Farrow, standing and walking casually away in the opposite direction.

Run, came a deep, rumbling voice in his head.

Farrow relaxed the tension in his arms and let go of the swords. They vanished back into the magical fold, leaving behind a shimmer in the air. He turned and ran away from the scene. Now and then, he would flick a glance behind him, but nothing was following. Satisfied he was safe, he increased his speed and sprinted to the Children's Hospital.



Starla knelt, cupping the last of Vermilion's light, watching it dance in her hands. She didn't know why, but she was fascinated by it. It was so tiny, but it made her hands feel so warm.

“I am sorry, child,” Penumbra said softly. “I truly am. But I am with you now. You never have to be alone again.”

Starla ignored the voice. She was focused only on the light in her hands.

She couldn't remember ever having friends until Chiasma. Chiasma had been fun and played with her every day. When Chiasma started to get tired, she brought new friends into her life, and even though she hadn't known them for long, she trusted them. She felt they knew her better than anyone else in the whole world, and they didn't judge her. She never had to hide who she was from them. She never had to hide

at all. Now Vermilion was gone, and the only friend left to her was Argentis. She looked around her, but she couldn't see him. So, Argentis was gone too.

She was alone again.

No. Not alone.

She looked at the light dancing in her hand, and she thought of Chiasma and all the times they danced together. She smiled at the memories. She looked at the light, remembering Vermilion and how afraid she'd been to reveal her secrets, but he'd accepted her for who she was. She remembered Argentis and his funny jokes that made her laugh. Her friends.

As she reflected on those she had lost, something rose up from deep inside herself. Not a voice. Not a memory. A feeling. A small flicker of peace hidden away. A spark of joy. No. Not joy. Not hope. Just a feeling that everything was going to be all right. She looked at the light dancing in her hand, and she remembered. A dream. A promise.

She was light.

A slight smile spread across her face. She understood.

"I have to choose," she said softly but firmly.

"Yes, you do," Penumbra responded.

She noticed a figure kneeling beside her. He was dressed in black and had dark hair and dark eyes. He looked like darkness. She looked into his eyes, boring deep into his essence, into the very core of his identity. His whole history was laid out for her to see. She saw everything from beginning to end. Then she withdrew.

"You're the dark," she stated calmly, without a single trace of fear.

"What?"

Starla didn't acknowledge him but returned to look at the light in her hands. From the back of her mind, like waves rolling against a distant shore, came a quiet whisper carried on the wind. She didn't recognise the voice or understand the words. It was too far away. Then another whisper. This time quiet, but clear. It was filled with power, but not just power. There was also love.

Take the light as your own.

The voice was warm and bright. It reminded her of memories from her childhood summers. Playing in tall grass. Running through forests, the air fresh and clean. The sound of the ocean sweeping over the sand as seagulls screeched in the distance. Of warm sun and wind swept apple blossoms dancing around her hair.

She brought her hands to her chest and absorbed the last of Vermilion's magic.

"This is what I choose," she whispered.

Her whole frame glowed bright. It started as a red light and then shifted through all the colours of the rainbow until it settled in a golden shimmer. Energy danced around her in an aurora of bright shifting hues of gold and orange. Then it exploded in a light so bright Penumbra had to shield his eyes.

Starla felt the world change around her. Where before she had been unable to express her thoughts and give voice to her imagination, now her thoughts flowed swift and clear. She understood all the moments of her life, how each moment and experience, light and dark, joy and pain, had all been part of the tapestry of her life. Everything had guided her along the road to reach this point, and now, finally, she was where she had always longed to be. She felt the threads connecting her to Ruby, and she

severed each one, letting her mortal self go as she became a new magical self.

She felt the magic swirl and churn all around her. She felt it burn bright and pure. She felt it now as a part of herself rather than something outside of her. She was no longer afraid of the power. It was hers. She heard the words reverberate in her head.

I am light.

She felt a presence—a darkness nearby—and remembered Penumbra. She let the light fade and looked out with new eyes. He knelt back, shielding his eyes from the energy emanating from her. She rose to her feet and reached out to grab his wrist. He resisted. She could feel him trying to pull away, but she was stronger than him now. She was more powerful than he was. She may have looked like a child, but she was a child no longer.



The hospital was completely silent. Everyone—including the most critical children—had been moved to other hospitals. He ran up stairs and down corridors, cursing his situation, fearing that Ruby was moved somewhere else and gone forever.

He found her where she had always been, hooked up to the monitors in her room, forgotten, alone and left behind. It seemed fitting, but then with all the magic set to protect her, the medical staff had probably either forgotten she existed or were tricked into thinking she had already been evacuated.

He stood by her bedside and picked up her hand, holding it softly. He'd put so much effort into being here, but now that he was by Ruby's side, he didn't know what to do or how to help. Considering his age

and heritage and the time spent with Khyasaya, he still understood very little about the magical realm. All he knew was that he should be here, at this moment.

He felt he should say something, though he didn't know what he could possibly say to someone in her situation. Still, the sensation pressed at him. He leaned in close to her ear, but no words would come. The part of his character that had grown from living with humans for so long was in control.

"Everything will be okay," he said and berated himself almost immediately.

He was about to step back when a thought formed in his mind. The sound of waves rolling across a timeless shore. A sky full of stars. A voice full of music.

"Take the light as your own," he whispered.

He stepped back, surprised by the power of the words.

A faint glow began to emanate from her body, illuminating the room. Her hand felt icy cold in his. The light grew, and then he couldn't feel her hand anymore. It was still there, but there was no physicality to it. The light withdrew back into itself and then became duller and fainter until the bed lay empty. The monitors switched off, falling silent as wires fell to the floor.

Pariah smiled. She had done it. He hoped she would finally find the peace that had eluded her in her mortal life. He hoped one day he would meet whatever she'd become.



Starla stepped out from the light as it began to fade. Her skin glowed, and in her eyes swirled two tiny galaxies. Her hair was brighter now, like copper,

and a shimmer of golden light danced up and down the strands. Her silken robes glowed with waves of gold, copper and dark fiery red, the colours shifting and twisting through the layers, as if she was clothed in the sun.

She pulled down on Penumbra's wrist, not forcefully, but he was unable to resist.

Starla looked him over, turning her head from side to side, examining something only she could see.

"You got another inside you. That ain't right."

Penumbra spurted out a laugh; the child had a power greater even than his own, but she still spoke like a human. Immature. Uncouth. She could tell he was angry. He was angry that she had power over him, but it was just a mask. What he really felt was fear. An incredible fear.

"There is no other," he retorted childishly.

She stared into his eyes and saw the lie. Saw him trying to protect himself, but it would do no good. He tried to wrestle free of her, but she held him fast in a vice-like grip.

"There is only me. I do not need any other. I am more powerful than all others," he responded indignantly.

"No," she said calmly. "You're using him, but you can't control him. It ain't right."

"What do you know, child?" he spat.

"Y'all need to be right again."

She held up her finger and touched his forehead.

"NO!" he screamed.

A burning sensation spread from his head across his body. As if he was being undone particle by particle. Starla nudged his core, lifting the shroud over the darkest corner of his mind. She saw the prison

created there and unlocked it, setting Cerulean free. A deep blue haze seeped from Penumbra's skin, gathering behind him, hovering as a personage for a brief moment before folding into itself and fading away.

Starla looked deep into Penumbra's eyes and watched as his body started to lose cohesion. He tried to wriggle free, but there was no escaping her grasp. His power was draining, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. His hand started to fade. His body became translucent and intangible as it began to dissolve. Soon, only a mist was left, still in the shape of his weaving form, held prisoner in her grip. She let go of the ghostly hand, and it drifted away. The fog flowed around, twisting and convulsing, trying to reform itself, but it couldn't hold any shape except for one.

It gathered itself into a ball, small flashes of light and shadow fighting each other within a light grey cloud. She reached down and touched the whisp with her fingertip, and a clear shell formed around it, trapping it inside.

"Now it's right," she said, nodding to herself.

The orb stayed for a moment as if in defiance, and then it darted to the left and stopped. It flashed in every direction, bouncing along the ground as if lost and confused. It jumped up and down trying to break the shell, but the smooth prison remained stubbornly intact. Slowly, it hovered towards her, like a lost animal waiting for direction. Starla simply tilted her head and skipped away. The whisp tried to follow, but it was rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but watch her leave.



CHAPTER 16: DAWN

Little Rock, The Event +6

Night came and went without incident. Absent of its population, Little Rock slept in peaceful stillness. The morning arrived with clear skies and dotted clouds. The sun peeked over the horizon with the promise of spring—a promise that winter was not the end but a time to rest before the world came back to life again. The world would go back to its everyday worries soon enough, but today was a time to take stock and count the scars of the last week.

Saint Petersburg would carry those same scars, though both cities would remain blissfully unaware of how much the magical world had intruded upon their everyday lives. There would be recoveries of a sort, but neither city would truly heal from the wounds they sustained. They would never really be the same again. In Saint Petersburg, people were already waiting for the military quarantine to be lifted so they could move away. No one wanted to stay there. No one wanted to be reminded of recent events.

In Arkansas, plans were already in place to get people home. The Governor was planning the charm offensive, which would entice people back to their homes. There were promises of federal aid and a city rebuilt with a spectacular vision for the future. Whether people would return or not was anyone's guess. For the moment, no one was thinking about

going back. They just wanted to sleep and forget for a couple of days.

Farrow sat quietly at the Clinton National airport terminal looking out at the eastern horizon as the night sky began to lighten. His mind kept reflecting over the possible consequences of his actions. How long would it take for Heaven to respond? Or Hell, for that matter. What would he do when finally confronted by those who killed his parents? Would they even come? Only time would tell. In the meantime, life would go on.

“Cheer up. It might never happen.”

Startled, Farrow looked up to see Pearson handing him a bottle of water.

“Where’s your new sidekick?” Farrow asked with a grin.

“She’s sleeping somewhere over there.” Pearson pointed over at a small group of people sleeping on rows of seats. Farrow picked out Mia, who had pulled two sets of seats together to form a makeshift bed.

“I honestly didn’t think she’d ever sleep,” Pearson remarked. “She’s got a lot of energy once she gets going.”

“Did you get any sleep?” Farrow asked.

Pearson shook her head. “Still trying to process everything.”

“You did good, Detective Inspector.”

Pearson chuckled. “Who thought shepherding drunk students would ever be useful?”

“Life has a funny way of teaching us what we need.”

Pearson sat down next to him and stared at the view. The sky was starting to brighten a little over the horizon.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "I never thought I'd ever find my place in the world. Trying to bury who I really was. That was just killing me slowly. You were right, I needed to let it out for some air."

Farrow chuckled. "It's still a bad analogy."

The two laughed.

"And you know, we saved the world," she said.

"Yes, we did," he replied quietly.

"And what about you? Looks like you got something on your mind," she noted.

"Could say that," he replied, but didn't elaborate. Pearson left it alone, and the two sat silently looking out of the window.

Farrow reached into his jacket and pulled out a letter, handing it to Pearson.

"Speaking of finding your place."

Pearson opened the unsealed envelope and read through the letter. She looked up at Farrow in surprise, then back at the letter.

"Serious?"

"Serious," Farrow replied.

"How?" Pearson asked, confused.

"I got some sway," he bragged. "Deputy Director didn't take much convincing. I get my own team, and I get to pick who I want on it, and I want you. If you're interested?"

"Can you give me some time to think about it?"

"Sure, just not too long."

"Thanks," she said and paused. One. Two. "Yes, I'm interested."

"Good." Farrow extended his hand.

"Thanks," she said, still poring over the letter. "I have one condition though. I want Mia. She's brilliant. Got a head for this magical stuff way better than me."

“Deal.”

Pearson looked at the letter again and smiled, then shook Farrows hand.

“Welcome aboard,” he said, the warm smile she remembered from their first meeting returning to his face

The two sat back and watched the colours dance across the sky as the sun slowly climbed over the horizon. Reds and pinks became orange, and finally, a bright and brilliant flash of gold brushed the clouds before fading to a crystal clear blue.



Starla stood on a bridge looking eastward over Little Rock, watching the sun rise slowly into a peaceful sky. She was as calm as the morning, despite a sadness that lingered like the scattered candy cotton clouds in the sky. Chiasma, Vermilion, and Argentis had all been her friends, but now they were gone, and she was alone again. She'd made her choice, and she was happy with it. She was no longer human and no longer Ruby. She didn't yet know her place in this world, but she was sure she would find her way. She just needed time, so she stood alone on a bridge, looking out over the city, waiting for the sun to take its place in the sky.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't hear the soft footfalls approaching from the south onto the bridge, but she felt a presence. She didn't look. She didn't need to. She listened and felt and sensed. She smiled, spun around and swept her arms around the neck of the beast as it drew up beside her.

A slender grey lion with soft silvery wings at its shoulders, the fine silver fur lightening along the neck

where a white dragon's head emerged. The head was marbled like granite and crowned with two stubs just behind its ears. On the right was a stub of deep sapphire that twinkled in the fading moonlight. On the left a stub of Jasper with flecks of copper that sparkled with the rising sun.

"Argentis," Starla whispered and cried for joy.

Argentis rubbed his head, nuzzling her face, the scales surprisingly soft and warm.

She held the beast's head in her hands and stared into its bright moonlight eyes. It wasn't totally Argentis. It had his magic and essence, but his memories were gone. She delved deeper. No. Not all. The important memories remained. The ones that ran the deepest. So this was a new Argentis, but enough remained to still be the old him. Enough that they were still friends.

She returned to staring out at the horizon, watching the sun crawl slowly into view. Argentis stood beside her, and she rested her hand on his shoulder, stroking his back.

The sun crested the horizon in a shower of icy pink and gold, burning away the darkness. Fingers of light poked through shaded buildings and stretched across the empty city.

Starla still didn't know where she would go. The whole world lay before her. So many roads. So many choices.

Argentis purred softly beside her.

Ahead lay the unknown, but at least she wouldn't have to travel alone.

THE END

EPILOGUE

Little Rock, Six Months After The Event

Life was slowly returning to Little Rock. The damage had been cleared, and already, new building projects were starting. An air of excitement bounced around the population. The promise of a rebirth and a new direction for the city.

Apart from 12th and University.

The area had been left in a state of devastation, and a six-hundred-yard cordon had been erected. The energy around the epicentre of The Event was still highly charged and likely still dangerous in ways yet to be known. Farrow had pulled strings and arranged for it to be blocked off. It was hardly necessary as no one wanted to venture there. At least no one sensible. Pearson had warned him there would be certain kinds of people who would try to reach the basin.

Tonight was one of those nights.

Outside the barriers, the city basked in a hot and humid night, but within the barrier, a light snow materialised out of thin air, drifting lazily to the earth as if time had slowed. As it reached about six feet from the ground, it melted, boiling into a fog. Strange plants had grown up, smashing through the glass and ash, basking in the humidity and shifting temperatures. It was a lush garden now, well on its way to being a jungle.

A figure clad in black approached the concrete barriers and climbed over, unseen by anyone, but then no one was really looking. There were no police standing watch. No private security. No CCTV. No one wanted to go near it, so it was easy enough to sneak inside.

He crept silently through the mist, his footfalls making no sound. In his hands was a small device with a screen about the size of a smartphone. It was pinging, directing the interloper through the foliage. He scanned the screen after several steps and adjusted his course, weaving his way towards something. The greenery thinned as he approached the basin. The energy bristling around the area prickled against his hands. Static sparked in tiny filaments throughout his lungs when he breathed in. The plants that had tried to grow here had been burned, the remnants now just stubs of charcoal. He held his hand out to the basin, and the energy sizzled along his skin.

The screen in his hands pinged, and the screen pointed to his right. He adjusted his position, and after several more steps, he stopped and knelt, sliding a pack from his back. Unzipping the pack revealed a metal lid, and it hissed slightly as it lifted up. He set the pack on the floor with the opening in the direction of the ping. He squinted with dark eyes, trying to see what he knew was here.

And there it was.

Just visible in the darkness was a ball of dark energy. Occasionally, it would flash with white lightning. It was moving in small circles, as if trapped. As if bound to this place.

The visitor pulled back his hood to reveal jet black hair pulled back into a single braid. His skin was

deathly pale, almost grey, and the features sharp and angular.

“Come,” he whispered softly, the accent foreign and unplaceable.

He gestured with a gloved hand, inviting the ball towards him. It moved forward, then hesitated, not knowing what to make of this, sensing something that it couldn't quite remember. Forward again. Slowly, cautiously.

The figure gestured again and said something not heard for many thousands of years. An ancient and lost language. A promise. An invitation. It stirred ancient memories in the orb. It stopped, pondering and considering the significance of the words and then acted. It moved forward, but not hesitant any more. It moved straight towards the figure, moving faster and with intent.

The ball pounced at the figure, but he shifted aside with such speed and grace it appeared as if he were in both places at the same time. He swept the pack up and round, snatching the whisp inside. He closed the lid so quickly the whisp didn't realise it had been captured.

Small noises—muted bangs—came from the pack as the whisp tried to escape. The figure pressed a small button on the container lid, and it fell silent. He smiled into the night, looking around at the strange landscape.

“Now. Now we can begin.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

