

1 - The Forgotten Realm

A massive doorway slid into existence out of nowhere, erupting its light into the empty darkness. Two figures stepped out of it, their silhouettes leading them to an open area. Beyond their doorway's illumination there was a great plain of short grey grass stretching far into a heavy gloom. Hundreds of giant glowing seeds shaped like wings floated above them, giving off a weak blue hue that hardly pierced the blackness around them. Each seed danced through the sky, spinning and descending gradually as though they were moving through water. The newcomers stood by their door, waiting.

A few minutes later, their ShiftDoor vanished.

Kane the Basilisk gulped as his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the Forgotten Realm. The dark was terrible and cruel, feeling as though it were sapping the very warmth from his body. Still, he could sense an overwhelming amount of life around him. True, it was a different sort of life, but life nonetheless.

“And here they come,” said King Seltios next to him, breaking the silence.

The ground shook beneath Kane as he squinted his eyes, focusing on the darkness ahead. With only the weak lantern glow of the floating seeds, he could only make out a mass of darker black moving below the slightly less black. His master had warned him, but it hardly could have prepared him. A giant tidal wave of dark, shadowed men, women, and children moved toward

them, making it hard for Kane to fight his impulse to immediately open a new ShiftDoor and flee.

“Void Wildlings,” Kane mouthed. Though he knew their proper name, it was hard to think of them as anything other than solidified shadows. Each of them looked like they had been thoroughly drenched in suits of darkness, encasing them from head to toes in a jet black. Only their eyes, which reflected the pathetic tinge of blue from the glowing seeds above them, were different. They were human, though. Humans who had been cursed with the bad luck of being born of men and women who had been banished into the Forgotten Realm. How many of them were just descendants of the actual offender? *All of them, maybe.* It seemed likely. There were simply too many. He looked them over, thinking deeply about the utter unfairness of generations of innocents who were condemned to this life through no fault of their own. This must have been why Seltios had brought him. To see them and solidify his resolve.

The horde of them edged forward, getting closer to the master and student. Kane looked at Seltios, unsure of what to do. Every now and then, a void wildling would tilt their head in his direction, staring curiously at Kane before getting lost again in the large crowd. There were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands.

“You should not fear them, young one,” said Seltios. He spoke softly, but his voice might as well have been a foghorn.

“I don’t,” Kane said. It was true, but he had said it too quickly making it sound more strained than it should have.

Seltios chuckled. “Really? I thought you might have a problem with them. They’ve always reminded me of ghost.”

“I’ve outgrown that fear, Master.” Kane put effort into sounding more convincing this time, but it was difficult to concentrate with void wildlings watching him.

“Outgrow the fear of ghost?” Seltios white eyes brows were raised, contrasting against his skin like a lit match. “Impossible! Ghosts are terrifying. Those who linger after death—the thought still makes my bones shiver.”

“You don’t fear anything, Master.”

“Untrue.” Seltios said, though he did so with a smile that didn’t completely reach his eyes. “Completely untrue. Now come. I believe they know we’ve arrived.”

Seltios took a step forward and, as soon as he did, there was a loud *THOOMP* as a great white flare was shot into the air two hundred yards ahead of them. Like the giant seeds, the flare stayed in the sky longer than it should have, floating with no hint of coming down anytime soon. It lit up the area, giving them a clear view of his surroundings for the first time.

Kane had been right about the number of void wildlings. There were thousands in the crowd surrounding them. Each time one of them moved it was like a splash in an ocean, breaking free for just a moment before joining with the mass of darkness again. Kane felt a sudden pinch in his stomach as he watched them. Against this many, it would have been hard to for he and his master to escape. The void wildlings didn’t seem all that interested in the two of them, anymore. They were more interested in the light, their glossy eyes reflecting it like mirrors. If Kane could have somehow stood above them, he guessed that it would have looked like he was standing above a sea of stars. Stars didn’t long for light this way, though. He could feel their yearning like a crushing flood. The void wildlings wanted light like the starving wanted food.

As Kane followed Seltios, the crowd split, clearing a path that led to a large structure ahead in the distance. They weren’t far from it, but there was an unnatural haze surrounding it

making it less distinct than it should have been. Still, Kane could tell by its size that it was a castle. Master Seltios hummed a playful tune and stroked his grey beard as though this were a leisure walk on a sunny day. It helped loosen the knot in Kane's stomach considerably, but it was hard to feel completely calm.

As they walked further another flare shot into the air with another loud *THOOMP*. The sound itself seemed to act like a catalyst for the entire area. All around them, the void wildlings, which until now had been entirely silent, began hissing and moaning as the second flare brightened the area even more. The light was making them livelier—more human.

THOOMP! A third flare launched into the air. It now looked like a clear night, being lit by three small, bright moons. Sudden laughter broke out to Kyle's right, making him jump. *What is going on?*

"Look at what light can do to the darkness," said Seltios suddenly. A great smile stretched across his face, his white teeth gleaming. "It amazes me every time."

A new fit of giggles erupted to their left. A group of void wildling children skipped across the path, chasing each other. An older looking one, perhaps teenage girl, followed them looking frustrated. "Get back here," she said. Her voice sounded so normal that Kane stopped in his tracks. He saw her move into the crowd; only the crowd wasn't like it had been earlier. There was a loud buzzing of laughter and happiness around them now.

Some of them sat in groups, as though they were around a bonfire. Others danced and hollered in joy. There were groups of couples lying together; holding hands as they watched flares like it was a firework show. Children chased each other, playing tag and diving in between the groups of adults like it was all just a giant picnic. Kane found the teenage girl who had crossed their path a moment before. She was looking straight at him and, though it was hard to

tell, she was smiling at him. She then turned from him, resuming her pursuit of the small children from earlier.

“Shall I leave you to chase after her?” Seltios asked, sounding highly amused. “However, you should know that this type of long distance relationship would strain even the best of lovers.”

Kane turned away from the girl abruptly, his face growing hot. “Very funny, Master.”

Seltios grinned, waving at Kane to continue following him. “I would let you, you know? You don’t have to follow an old fool, like me.”

“I know,” said Kane, fondly.

“You never used to be this calm when you were in the middle of a crowd,” said Seltios, changing the subject. “You’ve grown in the past two years. Though you try your best to deny it, Soul Gate Academy was good for you.”

Kane knew his master was right, but that didn’t mean he liked to admit it. He’d grown too attached to his life at Soul Gate Academy. He’d even made friends. That had never been part of his mission and he knew now that, even though he regretted leaving the way he did, he had needed to break his ties with them. *Friends*, he thought miserably. *They’re not my friends anymore...* There would be no doubt that he’d broken any bond they might have had with him. Hurting them, feigning cruelty that had teetered on the edge of insanity, and leaving them for dead. Kross the Monk, Kevin the Bison, Garnet the Scarlet Needle, and Kyle the Static would hate him now. *It was for the best...* He did his best trying to convince himself that he didn’t miss them. *It would have been harder if I had waited...* “If you say so, Master. I think I would have always been more useful to you in Dawn.”

“Nonsense. You’ve done more than I could ever have expected of you. You have no idea how grateful I am for what you did.”

Kane swelled with pride, “Thank you, Master.”

Seltios nodded. “Speaking of Soul Gate Academy—look.” He pointed at the structure ahead. They were now barely fifty yards away.

The haze surrounding it earlier had dispersed, giving Kane clear view of a castle bathing in the twilight. In fact, it looked like *the* castle he had spent most of the past two years living in. Stone for stone, the great wide keep looked identical. Even the two towers on each side, which had always looked odd since they were much taller than the rest of the castle, loomed over with the same impressiveness that he had always known.

“Wha—” Kane began, but he became distracted.

The castle’s grand entrance doors suddenly swung open. A middle-aged woman walked out, gliding toward them with quick, graceful steps. She was wearing a bright orange dress that was short in the front exposing her pale legs, but stretched out behind her to follow on the grass. A light blue shawl hung over her shoulders and her long silver hair swung behind her as though it were dancing. Every part of her seemed to glow as she smiled to expose her perfect white teeth.

“Seltios the Reaper!” Her smile grew wider as she reached them. “You’re on time! How completely unlike you.”

“I try my best to surprise you, Isabelle the Angelseer,” Seltios said smoothly. She offered him her hand and he bent down to plant a kiss on it.

“Oh please,” she took back her hand. “You know better than to call me by my full name. Belle, as always. And who do you have with you?” Her eyes twinkled in Kane’s direction.

He felt his face go red immediately. He had been expecting the void wildlings, though they were much more unusual than they had been described. Master Seltios hadn't warned him about meeting with a beautiful woman. A slight twitch of annoyance for his master found the corner of his eye. He'd only told them that they were going to meet the King of the Void Wildlings. His own imagination had given him the idea that they were going to meet man covered in his own shadow like the rest of them, but perhaps with a crown. Isabelle the Angelseer was so unlike the void wildlings that it made him feel question everything he'd just seen. *What exactly is this place?* He turned to his master in hope of some sort of answer, but was only given an almost devious type of smirk. He'd forgotten that Master Seltios was always deeply amused when it came to teasing him.

"This is Kane the Basilisk," said Seltios. "I believe I've mentioned him before."

"Ah yes. The adopted son."

Kane felt himself go redder, as the annoyance disappeared. Seltios had taken him in as a child, but he'd never really thought that he saw him as a son. Though, he certainly saw him as his father. His heart felt lighter than air when Isabelle offered him her hand. He awkwardly shook it, too embarrassed to kiss it.

"Your name will change twice more, Kane the Basilisk," she said as-a-matter-of-factly.

"Oh," Kane dropped her hand, unsure if she was being serious. How could she possibly know? "I—thanks?"

"Leave him out of your fortunes, Belle." Seltios said sharply. "He has enough to be worried about without you feeding him bits of the future."

"Very well." She scrunched up her lips, pouting as though she'd been denied a new toy.

"Is he ready to talk yet?"

“Of course, he’s ready,” Belle answered. “He acts as though he is reluctant, but you know he listens to you. He loves you like a brother.”

“And I him. We’ve been through a lot these past fifty years.”

Kane wished he knew more about his master’s history in the Forgotten Realm, but Seltios had never spoken of it before recently. In fact, Seltios had never even mentioned the existence of this realm. To suddenly find out that there was fifty years of history between Seltios and the other king nearly made Kane gasp in surprise.

“He still thinks you’re being hasty,” she added.

Seltios laughed. “Everything I do seems hasty to him.”

“True,” she signaled them to follow her. “Let me not delay your meeting any longer.”

Kane followed Belle and Seltios in, expecting to see the entrance hall of his former school, but the similarities stopped with outer appearance. The interior had no fountain with its floating water. Nor did it have a crystal chandelier that hung above numerous cozy couches. There were no tyros to give the place its normal lively buzz either. Kane let out a silent sigh.

This isn’t the same castle.

Unlike the outside, the vast room was brightly lit with hundreds of glowing tree roots that stretched across the walls and ceiling. They twisted into a thick, magnificent trunk that acted as the room’s centerpiece and main lighting. Isabelle placed a hand on the trunk. It began to untwist itself, quickly forming into the shape of a doorway. Through it, Kane could see a hallway lined with the same kind of lit roots. Neither Isabelle nor Seltios were fazed by this. As soon as the roots stopped moving, they walked through the doorway. Kane followed.

They did this three more times. Each time walking to a room with a bundle of roots that would then untwist themselves and form a doorway. Kyle became lost in thought. Though the

interior was completely different, he couldn't help but feel an odd sense of nostalgia come over him. It took strong self-control to stop himself from looking around for students. Specifically, his mind turned to Kyle. True, he'd be around Kevin and Kross longer, but they hadn't ever been as easy to be around as the boy from the other realm. This place seemed to just remind him that he had turned on the best friend he'd ever had.

I should have tried harder to convince him...

I should have been more patient... then I could have explained it to him...

I should have—

He stopped himself. It was too late now. He'd left them all for dead. *And Kyle the Static won't forget that anytime soon, will he, you idiot?*

“Lost in thought, young one?” Seltios asked.

“I—yes,” said Kane. “Even though this place is different, it brings back memories.”

“I expect that it does,” Seltios nodded. He did not press into the matter further.

They walked through the last root doorway and it took them to a grand set of doors large enough to fit two elephants side by side. Kane's eyes shot wide open when Belle pulled the door open with ease.

“Please wait here a moment,” said Belle, sounding amused. “Would you like water or wine afterwards?”

“Some of the thornefyre wine would be excellent,” Seltios answered. “Are Jade and Leo around?”

“They're out on a search, but they should be returning soon.”

“I see. I hope they do. Ice always makes it better.”

Belle nodded. “What would you like, Kane?”

Kane looked at his master, wondering if it was okay to try the thornefyre wine. He'd never had it before. *Why not?* "Uh... I'll have the same."

Belle smiled and without another word, she disappeared behind the door.

When the door shut, Seltios turned to him, frowning. "Wine?"

"Well..." Kane shrugged. He had drank occasionally since he'd turned sixteen, but it had mostly ever been a glass with meals. "Is it okay that I asked for it?"

"I—" Seltios cut himself off. "It is just that I'm still not entirely used to seeing that you've grown up. Half the time, I still see the child you once were. But you're of age now." He sighed. "A drink is fine, of course." Silence followed.

Kane changed the subject. "Why does this place look like Soul Gate Academy? And what is with all the roots everywhere?"

"Think of this place as the second side to a coin," Seltios stroked his beard as he often did while in thought. "Same coin, different engravings. The castle is just the outer ridges of the coin while the insides are free to be changed as seen fit by their caretakers. The biggest difference between the two sides of the Soul Gate is the fact that this side of the gate is held in one place by the roots. The roots are part of the Ending Tree, making sure that this place never leaves this exact spot. In Endera, the Soul Gate is free to move."

"Ending Tree?" Kane asked.

"Another lesson for another day, Kane the Basilisk."

Kane knew that Master Seltios only used his full name when it came to important things. Using it now meant that the Ending Tree was not something he wanted to discuss. This didn't bother Kane. Focusing on the Soul Gate was more than enough to hold his interest. After all, his mission to infiltrate Soul Gate Academy had been for the sole purpose of finding out all he could

about the ancient gate. He'd never found out much, though. Only some of the Eternal Title tyros and masters were allowed access to its secrets. If he'd gotten that far, he would have likely known all of this already.

“Why didn't you tell me anything about the Soul Gate on this side before I left?” Kane was careful to make sure he didn't sound like he was angry. “I mean, it sounds like there wasn't really much for me to learn.”

“There is always plenty for you to learn, Kane.” Seltios answered. “Your mission was to infiltrate and learn *all* that you could. The Soul Gate was your ultimate goal, but not your only one. I wanted you going into the situation with a clear, unsullied mind. It was the best way to verify a theory of ours.”

“What theory? And who is ‘ours’?”

“Mine and Albion's.” He ignored Kane's first question. “That is who we are here to meet. The King of the Void Wildlings.”

Kane decided to let it go. “And he's your friend.”

“Like you heard earlier, he's more like a brother. And you just met his wife.”

“So, she is the queen?” Kane certainly thought that she carried herself like someone important, but he wouldn't have guessed she was queen.

“That's how these royal marriages usually work,” King Seltios smiled.

“Why have you never mentioned them before?” Kane couldn't help but feel hurt by this. If Albion was a brother to Seltios, then surely, he must have merited some sort of comment during the last ten years.

Seltios opened his mouth to speak, but stopped for a moment. It was an odd thing for Kane to see the closest thing to a father he'd ever known, the Master who'd taught him most of what he knew, and the king who had saved him, struggling to answer him.

"This realm is a damned realm, Kane," said Seltios finally. "Most of the people who know that it exists never speak of it and that's because there are consequences to doing so. I've seen a man forget who he was over and over again, others go mad, and, as you can see, most stay completely chained here forever. All for just coming into contact with this place. The darkness here works like a curse. It seeps into your bones, engulfing you, grabbing at your insides with an unforgiving, cold grip. I didn't tell you of Albion and the Forgotten Realm, not because I didn't want to, but because I feared the consequences of doing so. I still do, but to leave you ignorant of this place any further would be stupidity on my part. If we are to succeed, you must know what this place is. You must know about the Titans."

"Titans?" Kane said. "You don't mean—"

"*The* Titans." Seltios nodded. "You just met one."

Kane could hardly believe it. Belle had seemed so normal and Titans were supposed to have been legendary men and woman, created by the King Forgers, just as the Kota had been. And even less believed them to have existed at all.

"How could they still be alive?"

"They're descendants, Kane."

"Right," said Kane, nodding. It had been a dumb question. The legends dated the original Titans fighting in the Alter War, which had taken place thousands of years ago and had literally altered the entire planet. It had only ended when the King Forgers had been wiped out and the

Titans banished—to the Forgotten Realm. It made sense. *Sort of.* “Isabelle seemed normal, though. How do you know she’s a Titan?”

“She is. I’m sure she’ll prove it to you over the course of your acquaintance with each other. If things go as planned, you will both get to know each other well over then next year. And beyond that I hope.”

Kane looked at him, perplexed. “Would you mind telling me your plan before then?”

“My plan?” Seltios smiled. “You make it sound like I’m some sort of evil mastermind.”

“That’s what most of Endera thinks, isn’t it?”

“Something along those lines,” Seltios laughed. “My current plan is to meet with Albion and discuss the plan. You can wait till then, can’t you?”

“If I have to,” Kane sighed. “Why are we waiting, anyways? Your like brothers, aren’t you? Can’t you just walk in?”

“I could,” Seltios began rolling his shoulders and stretching, like he was about to go on a run. “But that would be rude. It’s likely that he is just preparing the room.”

“Preparing it for what?”

“Our fight.”

Kane’s heart began to beat faster. “Fight? But I thought—”

“It’ll just be a spar, Kane. We like to have a friendly match if it has been a long time since we’ve seen each other. And it has been ages.”

“I see,” Kane gulped. “Is he strong?”

“Very,” answered Seltios. “We go back and forth with the victories.”

If that was true, Kane knew that castle was at risk of being completely destroyed around them. It would have been different if Seltios was sparring someone weak by comparison, like

Kane himself, but he had seen his master fight with strong opponents before and he knew from experience that it would have been wiser to invite a hurricane into the castle. A douse of fresh memories from the King's Temple reminded him that a building crumbling around him was not something he was in a hurry to experience again. If Kyle's lightning power hadn't opened up a hole in the side of the temple, he wasn't sure he would have been able to get out. The thought made him shiver. It'd been a close call. *Too close.*

"No need to worry," Seltios grinned deviously—almost childlike. "The room will be able to withstand our fight."

Kane doubted it.

Suddenly, the large doors both swung open, allowing a strong gust of wind to flow through as though a storm had begun. It pressed against Kane hard, making him adjust his stance to ensure he wouldn't be pushed back. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. Warm where it should have been cold; constant where it should have wavered and pleasant even with the weight of it nudging against him. As one might have guessed from looking at the elephant sized doors, the room was giant enough to fit in an entire herd. Another memory flashed in his mind. He'd seen a herd of elepalmaes before. They were summon beasts, but cousins to regular elephants. He remembered the day clearly. *An elephant-palm tree hybrid.* He could picture Kross the Monk scribbling his mad notes about them. *What grade had he given it—gatekeepers, I'm a drag.*

Like the rest of the castle, the throne room was brightly lit. Glowing roots filled the walls from floor to ceiling, except for the few gaps where there were doors. A long blue rug led the way to a throne big enough to fit three grown men and made from smooth wood that was a deep sepia color. Behind the throne were a fair number of coffee tables and comfortable looking seats

that bore the marks of regular use. The greater part of the room was otherwise empty, making it, except for its size, look quite unimpressive to Kane.

The wind stopped abruptly before being followed by a deep, gruff voice, “Is he strong enough, Seltios?”

Kane looked for the source of the voice only to see a swish of color move across the room and on to the throne so fast his eyes could barely keep up. A giant of man now sat on the throne, nearly filling it completely. He was close to ten feet tall, wearing light armor that was black and specked with gold as though it was a stolen piece of the night sky. His shoulders were broad and his legs were as thick as tree stumps. His face bore no particularly memorable features, being clean and handsome, but there was something oddly powerful about it, as though it had been carved out of marble. What really made the King of Void Wildlings look extraordinary was the way his long auburn hair floated in the air above him like crimson smoke from a chimney.

“He won’t die, if that’s what you mean,” Seltios laughed. “I’d rather you didn’t test it, though, Albion.”

“That won’t do, Seltios,” Albion smiled widely. “You’ve got me intrigued now.” He disappeared again.

Kane lost him, searching the room for where he might reappear.

“Come on, Kane,” Seltios walked forward with little concern. “You are free to take out your Key of Throne Arms.”

“Uh—okay,” Kane followed, sensing that the titan king was targeting him. He couldn’t pinpoint where he was going to come from, but he’d been trained well enough to know when he

should be on alert. He opened his palms, calling forth both halves of his Kota dagger. The two blades, which he'd only had for a few weeks, appeared in his hands instantly.

“Daggers?” Albion laughed. His voice all around them and above them. “I’ll use a gladius, then. A favorite of mine, young one.”

“Here you are,” Isabelle said all of a sudden. She appeared with a sword about the length of her arm. It was grey from hilt to tip as though the color of it had been completely drained. She threw with a bored flick of her wrist and it arched in the air directly over Kane. “Call me back when you boys are done. I’ll leave your other sword next to the door.”

In the blink of an eye, Kane felt a presence above him. He looked up to see Albion grabbing the gladius and immediately disappearing. Seltios vanished at the same moment, reappearing to the side of the throne to lean against it with a gleeful smile. Kane now stood in the middle of the throne room, realizing that he was about to spar with a titan. He gulped. *And he happens to be a king, too.*

He felt Albion’s presence pop into existence behind him, making him pivot around. Kane saw only barest shadow of the king as he disappeared again. Kane was reminded of how Master Logan had moved. Always disappearing and reappearing due to his immense speed. Few people could move like that.

Kane was one of them.

He amplified his leg muscles with a twist of his Kota. Albion reappeared to his left and Kane launched himself that way with as much speed as he could, but it wasn’t enough. Albion vanished again, reappearing behind him. Kane turned just in time to see Albion’s gladius coming at him from an underhanded swing aimed directly for his chin. Out of pure instinct, Kane lifted

his daggers to defend the blow. The blades clashed with such force that Kane lost his stance, doing a complete backflip.

It was thanks to Kane's training that he landed on his feet, but he lost track of Albion in the process. *He's fast—faster than Master Seltios—maybe even faster than Master Log—*

“Don't get lost in thought, Basilisk,” Albion came from directly above Kane. His sword leading his fall toward Kane's head.

Kane dodge rolled out of the way just in time, only to hear the titan king slam into the ground with the force of a falling boulder. He whipped himself around, his daggers ready to defend against another attack, but Kane was caught off guard. Albion was smaller than he had been when he was on the throne. Much smaller. Kane guessed that he was probably only a couple inches taller than him now. *What the—*

Albion charged, his hair trailing behind him like a red ghost. He held the gladius in his right hand, swinging it mightily at Kane's side. He blocked with both daggers, knowing that the strength of the swing could have crushed a pillar. It slammed into him, but Kane was ready for the force with a stance that held true. Albion followed up with a barrage of sword swings that took all of Kane's concentration and strength to block.

Kane tried to back away, but Albion followed with quick powerful swordplay. There was little else to do, but try his hardest to make an impression. In between parries, Kane turned his Kota to unlock the best of his abilities. The first amplified his entire body, making him faster and stronger. The second unlocked his PsyBending ability which would make Albion believe he was seeing a large basilisk before him. The last turn was to unlock his MemoryBending technique that would lock any part of Albion that he could touch.

Now!

Kane launched his counter attack, only to feel his legs kicked out beneath him. He was then punched in the stomach so hard that he instantly dropped his Kota as the wind was knocked out of him. He flew backwards with such speed that he was sure that whatever he was going to crash into would break him upon impact. Fortunately, a strong gust of warm wind pressed into his back, slowing him down before that happened. He felt arms wrap around him gently before being placed on the ground. Master Seltios had caught him.

Kane blinked as his eyes watered from the pain. He gasped for breath, attempting to stand up, but Seltios sat him on the floor to lean his back against the throne.

“That’s enough, Kane,” Seltios smiled. “You did well. I think it’s my turn now.”

“He did very well,” Albion said from behind his master. “The snake was frighteningly real. And that unexpected gaze almost froze me. You trained him admirably, Seltios.”

Kane couldn’t help but feel good about the compliment. He knew it had been an impossible fight to begin with. Anyone who sparred on equal terms with Seltios was someone who was way out of Kane’s league. Still, the good feeling didn’t last long. Not with the mighty bruise that felt like it was about to start replacing his stomach.

“Here you are,” Seltios turned his hand, unlocking a medications technique that instantly made Kane sigh in relief. There was still some soreness, but he’d be able to watch Seltios’ match with Albion with little discomfort.

“Ready,” asked Albion.

Seltios stood straight. “Of course. Want to see the new scythe?”

Albion nodded, moving toward the door that Isabelle had used to exit. The sword next to the door had a hilt that was longer than entire gladius, but still just as grey. The blade was massive, wide as Kane and taller by a foot. Albion gave the sword a few wild practice swings,

causing chunks of the floor to spray around the room with as much ease as someone might roll their shoulders. *Well Kevin, I think I found someone who has more brute strength than you.* He could almost hear, the nonchalant, “Ah!” Kevin would have surely replied to that with. He let out a silent sigh.

Albion began to grow—literally. Kane blinked, unsure if his eyes were working correctly. Albion grew, becoming the giant he had seen when they first entered. He blinked again, rubbing his eyes just to be sure. *He's taller than Master now. How?* It hit him. This was part of Titan’s power. He guessed that modifications were being used without a key. Like a Kota, but internally. *The King Forgers were something else.*

Seltios turned his hand to call forth his Kota scythe. It formed, looking just as it had a few weeks earlier when they had found it. The long golden shaft extended until it met the silver curved blade of the scythe. Connected just above the curved blade was a small double-edged spearhead, making it look all the more formidable. Like Kane’s own Kota, it looked like it had been fused together with a large key, which Kane knew, was sort of the point.

Albion’s eyes grew bright, “The new weapon suits you. I doubt it will help—”

Seltios twisted the large scythe only once, before launching himself at Albion with a smile on his face. He was met with a parry and a good natured laughed. It became obvious to Kane how good of friends Albion and Seltios were. As their weapons met in the air with quick, powerful clangs, their smiles grew wider. This clicked in Kane unconsciously, shifting his thoughts to his friend, Kyle.

Kyle was one to smile in a fight. They had practiced together often, helping each other become better with their weapons which were vastly different. He could clearly remember the

edge of Kyle's Nodachi as it had often been aimed at his head. *Another useless memory.* He would have to work on making sure his thoughts didn't wander.

BOOM!

Albion collided into the wall with such force that the whole castle shook. Segments of the wall fell, crumbling into a pile. A rhinoceros couldn't have done a better job. It didn't take him long to jump out from the rubble, smiling wider than ever as he charged at his master.

Seltios edged back, defending each slash from the gigantic sword. The sword could have split anyone in half just by falling. The way Albion swung it, made Kane think he could slice through a mountain if he wanted to. He didn't know how his master kept blocking the blows.

It was during this thought that Kane noticed it. Each swing was now paired with a blast of wind. Too forceful to be natural; too direct to be coincidental. *Synchroneity!* The realization made Albion appear all the more dangerous. The use of the elements was not something to be taken lightly. Kane had learned that recently as well. *Back to Kyle, again.* His eye almost twitched. He refocused on the fight.

Seltios left no openings in his defense, seemingly unaffected by the wind. They slammed their weapons together, causing the air itself to vibrate. Sparks flew, then disappeared like tired fireflies. Each move became a blur, melting into their surroundings. Kane did his best not to blink, but it didn't matter. They were moving so fast that it looked like they were teleporting every few feet only to bash their weapons into each other.

Albion suddenly jumped back, nearing the pile of rubble. He paused for a moment before the wind began building up, swirling the dust around him as his clothes began to flutter. The wind moved faster and faster, forming a small tornado which soon enshrouded the titan king. He hurled himself forward and his whole body rotated wildly fast sideways. The tornado followed,

carrying him forward. He and his sword spun toward Seltios, leaving the floor carved out along the way.

Kane held his breath. One wrong move and his master could easily lose a limb. Seltios, however, stood his ground. He twisted his scythe weapon once, before throwing it at the oncoming Albion. Instead of the scythe spinning like windmill, it spun like an arrow. This was odd, but it mattered little to the oncoming attacker. It was knocked down, tumbling across the room violently like paper in a storm. Seltios then stepped forward, his arms crossed in front of him to form an 'X'. His arms suddenly became enveloped in a magenta smoke. It was his aura.

Kane did not have an affinity with AuraBending, but he knew enough about it to know that it was normally invisible, only manifesting itself in the physical realm when it needed to take on physical properties. To see it otherwise, one usually needed to use AuraBending to unlock their own eyes. Controlling aura was definitely a useful technique, but Kane had other strengths. His mind reached to another memory of Kyle. He had used his own AuraBending to give himself a tortoise shell-like defense. *His had been a dark orange.* The move had birthed his friend's first title: *The Tortoise. Better than my first title, The Mouse.* Kane almost smiled. *Well, not by—what in the name of the gatekeepers is wrong with me?* In truth, he knew the answer. They were the first real friends he'd ever had. He just didn't want to admit that to himself.

A moment later, Albion's attack connected, slamming into Seltios's defensive aura which cushioned the attack from slicing him in half. Rather than bowling over his master, Albion continued to spin in place, hitting Seltios in between the crevice of his 'X' arms again and again. Every hit shook the room, pressing into Seltios and causing him to fall to his knees. He kept his arms up, though his aura began to diminish. Kane fought the impulse to rush forward, reminding himself that this was just a friendly spar. There was little he could do, anyways.

Seltios suddenly jumped back, snapping his arms behind him so hard that his elbows almost connected behind his back. Magenta colored vines popped into existence all around the titan king, flailing in his wind as though they were wild tentacles. They tangled around Albion before he realized what was happening. Seltios summoned his Kota back into his hand, twisting it with practiced speed. His aura sprang into action, tightening around Albion and putting a stop to his movement.

Kane stared at his master transfixed. Seltios had secretly laid it around the titan king during their fight, only manifesting it physically when the trap had thoroughly been set. It was AuraBending genius, pure and simple. Doing that level of fighting while setting a trap was practically impossible. Kane couldn't even remember seeing Master Seltios turn his Kota enough times to lay his aura out in such fashion.

Albion grunted, struggling with effort to free himself. "Damn!" He laughed, taking his predicament with such good nature that Kane thought he might have just been told a particularly funny joke. "Gatekeepers damn this aura of yours!" He laughed again. "Let me down, you old fool."

"I should leave you there," Seltios said with a boyish grin. "Belle is always saying she'd like a nice centerpiece for this room." He twisted his Kota and his magenta aura disappeared.

"She'd take me down right away, you know." Albion tossed the sword to side, discarding it with ease. "She'd miss me too much."

"Somehow I doubt that." Seltios walked up to him, dismissing his weapon as well. They grabbed each other's arms, in a firm handshake. "I hope I find you well, my friend."

“I have recently suffered an embarrassing loss in front of an old friend’s son, but, other than that, I am well!” He nodded to Kane. “And the son had some fight in him too. You will be a force in the future, Basilisk.”

“No doubt.” Seltios smiled, the pride clearly reaching his eyes.

“Thanks,” Kane said, his face growing warm.

“Well then,” said Albion, changing the subject. “Let’s move this to a less destroyed room and we can discuss the reasons you’re here. I’m sure Kane would like to be included for once.”

“Yes,” Seltios said, hesitantly. They moved toward Kane beckoning him to follow. “It’s high time he heard the plan or at least part of it.”

Yes. Kane moved to follow. *Something to take my mind off of them would be great.*

The door they were walking toward burst open and a slight chill came into the room.

“Uncle Seltios!” A woman barged in, rushing to hug Kane’s master. “Mother just told us you were here. It’s been too long. I feel like you’ve planned your visits every time we’re out.”

Kane’s jaw dropped open. Before him was Garnet—no, not Garnet. An older version of her. His mind seemed to close off all the sound around him as he watched Seltios and the woman exchange greetings. There were some differences now that Kane looked at her closer, but it was far too little to be coincidence. It was nearly the same face, but with extra lines to them. Her thick red hair floated above her the way Albion’s did, but it was just like Garnet’s. She turned to him and Kane saw her blue eyes full of curiosity and then sudden understanding.

“Kane!” She said, excitement lining her voice as though she’d been given a gift. “*The Kane.*” She rushed ahead and hugged him tighter than Kane could ever remember being hugged.

“Uh-I,” Kane stuttered. *Who is this woman?*

“Let him go, Jade,” said Albion, sighing. “You’re squeezing the life out of him.”

She backed off, but held on to his shoulders and locked her eyes with his. “You are playing a key role in helping free us, Kane. The Titans will forever be indebted to you.”

Kane swallowed, feeling a strange lump fall into his stomach. *Me?*

“My daughter is correct, of course.” Albion agreed. “Though she is somewhat lacking in manners. She gets that from her mother.”

Kane saw it now. The slight likeness to Albion and Belle.

“What’s taking so long?” A smooth voice came from the open doorway, followed by a tall man. He had shoulder-length hair, jet black except for the single grey streak running to his left side like a river past his ear. His face bore scar from an ugly burn on its left side, stretching down his neck. He was dressed similarly to Albion, but Kane guessed that he wasn’t a Titan.

“Seltios, it is good to see you.”

“Look, Leo,” said Jade before Seltios could respond. “This is Kane!”

Kane was instantly reminded of another person: Grandmaster Dante. *No way. That’s—no way.* Seltios offered no help. He watched Kane, grinning with obvious amusement.

“Nice to meet you, Kane.” Leo nodded to him. “I hope spending nearly two years in my father’s presence wasn’t too hard.”

“You’re Grandmaster Dante’s and Master Yvette’s son.”

“It is my curse,” he said, searching Kane up and down. “Are you all right?”

Kane’s mouth felt dry. *What is going on?* “I—“

“He is unsure how to react,” said Seltios, cutting him off. “You see, I never told him about you, Leo. Forgive me for that.”

“Not surprising,” Leo shrugged.

“And Jade, Kane is very understandably confused by you.” Seltios continued. “There is a young woman he just spent most of this past year befriending who looks very much like you.”

“What!” Albion, Jade, and Leo’s voices boomed together. Their confusion and absolute shock mixed with air making it icy as their gazes fixed on to Kane, obviously hungry for answers. He shivered. Was the air actually icy? *I was almost the cause of her death.*

“This—how can that be?” Albion’s voice had become soft.

“I don’t know,” answered Seltios. “I only saw her for a moment outside Dilu Village.”

“So, we have more to discuss than I thought,” said Albion. “Come. Isabelle will want to know and you must tell us everything.”

“We will,” said Seltios. “Kane and I will tell you all that we know. Admittedly, he probably knows more than I do.”

Kane tilted his head, trying to nod. His master dropped his hand onto his shoulder, guiding him toward the door after Albion. It was meant to be a comforting gesture, but it felt hollow in this moment. He didn’t know where to begin—how to begin. He was the one with questions. More than he could count. They were piling up in him, making him wonder whether this was all just a dream. This was too many coincidences, wasn’t it? *So what!* He nearly shouted it at himself. *Once they explain things, it’ll make sense.*

It just seemed that no matter how much he wanted to stop thinking about his friends, everything seemed to bring his thoughts back to them. *Get a hold of yourself, Kane!* He gritted his teeth. *If this is the weight I must carry, then so be it. I chose what I chose and I’ll keep going down this path.*

Even if it kills me.

2 – The Prison Tree

Melissa the Rose arrived at her destination with an edge of annoyance working up her face as she walked toward the ruin. The King's Temple, a building which had survived hundreds of years and more, was now a large pile of grey rubble laying under the cloudy sky. The large crown encrusted with jewels that had once sat atop its peak was nowhere to be seen, but she saw where it must have rolled off into the Mirror Forest. A straight line of trees lay broken and bent. Other trees had been sliced straight through as though an axe had fell them with a single swing. There were also ones that looked like a sledgehammer had tried to pulverize them into splinters and, for the most part, succeeded. These were spread out with little pattern. *The results of a fight?* It was hard to be certain with the thawing ice and snow mudding up the place before spring would make it bleed green.

But why would anyone fight here? Probably Seltios' doing. Idiot. Neither here nor there, she told herself. Her own internal voice sounded as quick and sharp as a needle. That annoyed her, too. It shouldn't have surprised her to find the place like this. It had been months since she'd last been here. A lot could happen in that time. *Great. Just great.*

Now she would have to dig. It was true that it wouldn't exactly be hard for her to do, but Melissa couldn't help but grit her teeth as the growing list of things that she had to do kept growing.

"This is for Kyros," She said it aloud. Mostly to make sure her voice still worked, but she also liked hearing the name Kyros. She only did it when other people weren't around her. Which

was often. "For Kyros," she repeated. It also helped lessen the annoyance she felt about the rubble in front of her. A little.

I didn't rush all the way here from the Old World just to just stop here. I've got to find the entrance. This was the real reason she was annoyed. There was supposed to be a secret door on the side of the King's Temple that led to a secret tunnel which would then lead to a secret door. And this was just one of the many secrets she'd found over the years, but this might have been the most helpful one. This would lead her to Elias the Timekeeper. She walked to where the north corner of the temple use to stand. The door should have been just to side of it, hidden in the stone. It'd been swallowed by the rubble. She took three side steps to the right and tapped her foot. *Here*, she guessed. She hoped Kyros would appreciate all the trouble she'd gone through once she found him.

Melissa reached below her dirt caked shirt, pulling out a necklace with a key on the end of it. The shirt had been cloud white just a few weeks ago. Now it was a gross mixture of sweat, filth, and dirt that had turned it so brown it now matched her pants. The pants had started brown and had continued being brown no matter what she had walked through. She guessed she looked like a walking pile of mud. It was certainly how she felt. She'd gotten used to the wet dog smell that clung to her like an aura. *Ugh. This better be worth it.*

Normally, there would have been time to change out of her soiled clothes, but there had hardly been enough time to make it all the way here from the Old World. The Old Worlders had locked the stupid continent, making it impossible to open a ShiftDoor. She'd barely had enough time to sleep. With no money, she had to work the ship while traveling the old way across the ocean. It had taken weeks. An annoying trip in itself, made more annoying with the constant reminders to hurry before the Timekeeper's ShiftDoor disappeared from the King's Temple.

And so here she was. *He could have mentioned that the whole place had been destroyed.* She knew it was unreasonable to be angry with him about that. He probably didn't even know. The fact that he could contact her outside his prison wasn't even supposed to be possible. The little messages he did send were usually helpful, but they weren't much more than three or four words.

"Come. To. Me. Hurry." That's what the message had been this time. The messages tended to be clues which were meant to help find Kyros. Things like, "Spiral. Island. Stormcastle. Merchant," or "Krees. Capital. Farmer." She still didn't understand how Elias found the information to pass along to her, but that wasn't something she questioned because of how helpful it usually was. If Elias was asking her to visit, it must have meant the information on Kyros was too complicated to say in a mere three or four words. She hoped there was something concrete this time. Her last lead had proved to be a giant waste of time. Not to mention, she was quite certain that she was a wanted fugitive in the country of Krees now. The very idea of it made her eye twitch. It wasn't her fault the bastard nobleman had gotten touchy.

She took a deep breath. Elias didn't have to help her. She knew that. This was just a kindness and she vowed to repay him for it someday. And once she and Kyros were reunited, she knew Kyros would want to do the same.

The key had a thick layer of grime that matched the rest of her outfit. It served to freshly remind her of how disgusting she felt. She turned it a few times before returning it behind her shirt. Unlocking her BioDimension was simple for her, but it did leave a tingling exhaustion as the energy for it was sapped from her. Green vines with large thorns began sprouting out of the ground, twisting together and forming into a drill head which stood a foot taller than Melissa and triple her width. She tapped it twice with her knuckles, confirming that it had modified to be as

hard as steel. A third tap began the spinning and it started drilling into the ground where she guessed the tunnel would be. It picked up speed, spinning like a green tornado as it sank. She didn't use this technique often, but it had proved useful on more than one occasion. Especially where digging was concerned. Loud squishes and then steady grinding came from the hole as the drill dug deeper.

“Come. To. Me. Hurry.”

“Really?” Melissa rolled her eyes. “Why didn't you say so before? Wait a second—you did! Only once or twice every ten seconds for the last month.” Elias had never been this repetitive with his messages before. Usually, they only repeated a handful of times. She honestly felt like she'd heard the message a million times over the last few weeks.

The grinding of the drill suddenly died out and the hole which it had dug, gasped for air.

“Good,” she said stepping toward the hole. She peered down, her eyes widening as she saw how deep the hole went. *Looks like the secret entrance was much more of a ShiftDoor than I thought.* Not a single wink of light reached lower than ten feet. There was no way to tell how deep the hole went or whether the drill had stopped. She guessed that it had by the lack of drilling sounds, but she wasn't entirely certain. *Maybe it's too deep to hear?*

Melissa brought her key out again. She twisted it a few more times and returned it to its place under her shirt. She huffed for air. The energy used for this small task was getting to be too much. She'd need to sleep soon. Vines grew from the ground again, forming into three green sticks that were roughly the length and width of her forearms. The top of them weaved into thick stringy bunches that would light easily. They wouldn't burn long, but they'd be bright and one would be plenty enough for the trip. She had made three just to be safe.

She took out a lighter from one of her pockets, giving it a fond look as she did. It had been a gift from her father. The only memento of him she had left. *You would have loved Kyros, Daddy.* She wiped off some of the dirt from its smooth metal side. Under the soot, there was a black keyhole that looked like it had been painted on to it. Melissa knew better. A Keyhole Disruptor had been carefully engraved and locked with fire. With a practiced hand, she flicked it open and pressed a tiny key down like a button. A small flame instantly sprang to life.

Holding her torches away from her, she lit them all at once. The fire let out a small pleasant heat along with their lively light. She closed the lighter's lid, snuffing out the lighter's fire before sliding it back into her pocket. *This should do it.* She threw one of her torches into the hole, being careful to make sure it wouldn't hit the sides of it on its descent. It fell forty-five feet and landed with an audible thud. Surprisingly, it did not shatter on impact.

"Good torch," she cringed, realizing it sounded more like she was talking to a dog. *I must be going crazy.*

The fire at the bottom lit a small orb in the darkness, but Melissa was now reasonably certain it was the right tunnel. She jumped down without giving it another look. It wasn't so far that she would hurt herself so long as she landed on her feet. She did, landing like a cat next to the burning torch. Not liking the darkness that now surrounded her on both sides, she immediately threw the second torch down the tunnel in front of her and the third in the other direction. The whole area of grey stone became dyed in a dim orange glow. It all looked mostly unremarkable. Except, along the walls, the floors, and even the ceilings there were engravings that read, *Time Is Immortal* over and over again.

Seeing a door just past the third torch, she knew that was the direction to go. She passed the now motionless drill that laid on its side, giving it a passing glance as it withered to dust now that it had completed its task. She wished it didn't have to wither to dust. The tunnel had plenty of that already.

"Oh, so you want to make a wish for no dust!" a voice suddenly exploded from ahead.

Melissa almost jumped back. *Damn, I forgot about this idiot.*

"I'm the idiot?" asked the voice. His voice was a low, gruff snarl, like the inside of an earthquake had learned to talk. "Me? The one not going to see the sick bastard named Elias."

Melissa was now near the torch she'd thrown that way. She kicked it past the door and it stopped when it hit the wall. The light revealed a black marble statue halfway sticking out of grey wall. It was in the shape of a dumpy man, bald with a thin slit that was only half a nose. Melissa guessed that part of it must have broken off many years ago. He, like the rest of the place, was decorated with countless *Time Is Immortal* etched onto his black stone skin. They were painted white, which made it look like he was covered in tattoos. His name was Wishbringer the Statue.

"You don't see anyone," Melissa said. "You stay here attached to your wall, never moving, never *doing* anything."

"I see you," said Wishbringer. It wasn't exactly true that he didn't move. His mouth moved when he spoke and he liked using his hands for rude gestures sometimes. "I see you for the idiot you are. You dumb goat. You smelly old bat. You...horse!" His mouth curved up at the corners as though he'd won some competition they'd been having.

“Name calling, that’s a new one,” Melissa rolled her eyes. “Can we just get his part over with? I’m in a hurry.”

“Yes, I know.” Wishbringer’s eyes glowed a disturbing yellow, like a predator staring at prey through the sinking darkness. “Come. To. Me. Hurry.”

Melissa tensed. She hated that her mind was completely exposed to him while she stood in this tunnel. Something about this hallway was a part of Wishbringer, giving him the power to use a high level MemoryBending on anyone inside. For all intent and purpose, it was as though this was his domain. Where her thoughts were concerned at least. As far as Melissa knew, there wasn’t much he was able to do beyond that which meant he wasn’t much of a threat. He did, however, control the door that led to the room she was trying to enter.

“Can’t you just open the door?”

“Melissa the Rose,” he smirked. “You wound me. You know it doesn’t work that way.”

“Why do we always have to go through this?” she grit her teeth. There was the one other special thing about Wishbringer. He could grant ‘wishes’...to an extent. And that was only if they followed certain rules.

“Rules are rules,” he answered with all the humor of a wall.

“I wish for you to open this door now, allowing me enough time to walk into the room beyond it without harming me in any way.” *There you go, you bastard. One wish just the way you like it.* The first rule: The wish had to be clearly stated, always using the words ‘I wish’ to begin it.

Wishbringer's black teeth were exposed as he smiled from ear to ear. "I *wish*," he always relished using the word, "for you to open your shirt now, allowing me enough time to properly gaze at the goods beyond it without you harming me in any way before hand, such as covering my eyes in dust." The second rule: Wishbringer was allowed his own 'wish', which had to be of similar value.

Every. Freaking. Time. How can a statue be such a weird, little, gross, perverted, disg—

"Deal?" he asked, speaking louder in attempt to cut off her thoughts.

Disgusting. Pig! She finished, before saying, "Deal." The third rule: Each party had to agree to the exchange of wishes.

The fourth and final rule was why this whole exchange could be dangerous. Once wishes were agreed upon, both had to fulfill their half of the bargain. If they did not, there would be consequences. Melissa still had no clue what those consequences might be. Wishbringer had never properly explained that part. She guessed that he didn't have to. There was no doubt in her mind that it would be dangerous to her. She was sure it had something to do with the missing part of his nose, but any mention of his nose always led him to respond the same way, "He is unable to answer an impossible question." There was never any bother to explain who "he" was, but she'd given up trying to figure it out. The important part of the rule was that she had to fulfill her part of the bargain. Once she agreed to it, there could be no backing out.

Wishbringer pointed a stubby finger at the door and it flew open. Melissa sighed, unbuttoning her mud caked shirt and ripping it open. Luckily, she wore a bra on this time. Unluckily, the bra was made of fabric was so worn and faded that it was hardly better than spider web. She should have caked mud over her chest beforehand, but the destroyed temple had

distracted her. She stood there for half a minute feeling awkward as the statue gawked at her breast. *For Kyros.*

“It’s not fair, you know,” Wishbringer said. “You didn’t wear a bra last time.”

“Tsk,” Melissa closed her shirt, glaring daggers at the statue. “It’s too bad this whole temple couldn’t have fallen on your head.” She turned on her heels and walked straight for the door.”

“Gatekeepers, Melissa,” his words had all the satisfied jovialness of a laughing child. “When will you leave that meat bag, Kyros, for a real man like me? I’ll never leave you like he did, you know? I’ll just stay right here, always.” Wishbringer started laughing at his own joke. Melissa bit her lips, wanting nothing more than to turn around and stab him. It wouldn’t work, though. When anything solid got near him, Wishbringer’s stony exterior became like water, allowing things to simply sink into him. She’d lost a perfectly good blade that way. *I really do wonder how he lost half of his nose. And who he lost it to...* Melissa entered the room and the door slid closed behind her.

The room had a terribly bleak simplicity. That wasn’t surprising considering how long it’d been empty of any life. A long desk stretched from one wall to the other. Opposite of that was a pitifully flat bed with a blanket of dust on it. It was all lit by the light shining in through an open ShiftDoor. Melissa stopped when she saw the inside of a solid wooden door engraved with an encircled tree. *Locked Forever* was engraved just below it. She had expected to see that exact same engravings on the outside *before* she opened it. It wasn’t supposed to be opened now. How could it have been? It had to be opened from this side and so far as she knew, she was the only one that had ever been able to find this place. *Except for Elias.* It couldn’t have been him.

“Come. To. Me. Hurry.”

She took a deep breath. “For Kyros.” It saddened her to think about how much those words meant to her. How much braver they made her. What wouldn’t she do for him?

Nothing.

Melissa walked through the door, stepping out into the most beautiful place she’d ever been. Fields of soft blue grass spread around her for miles. Hundreds of different flowers decorated the plains. Their pedals, loosened by gentle apple-scented wind, took to the sky, gliding through the air like soaring birds. The sky was dressed in floating clouds and yellow light that dove between them. A giant weeping willow tree known as Athena the Willow Keeper, towered over everything like a keep over its castle. Her trunk stayed hidden behind a curtain of bright green low-hanging leaves that danced like a long skirt. Around the tree was a wide moat with sparkling blue water. Different types of trees, much smaller than the willow, were spread across the grounds. A lone simple wooden house stood near the moat. Melissa was sure Elias was in there tinkering with some new tool or invention or plan. And the whole area was enclosed by a giant transparent aura that rippled with every breath. Melissa stood just outside of it, not daring to enter past Athena’s aura.

Athena the Willow Keeper was more than just a tree. She was the ruler of this dimension. She stood unmoving, watching over the whole realm and the person inside her aura. She, along with the rest of this dimension, had been created for the sole purpose of keeping one individual imprisoned. Only one. Currently, it was Elias the Timekeeper. And that was how it had always been since this place had come into existence. Yet, all it would take for him to be free, was for

another person to willingly trade places with him. He'd then be able to walk out, a free man. The other would stay. Maybe forever.

This, Melissa had been told, was all a part of his punishment. She pitied him. Not enough to grant him his freedom, but she *did* pity him. He had been trapped here for thousands of years. This place had somehow kept him alive or perhaps that was Elias' doing. After all, he was the Timekeeper. It didn't matter. He could live forever and it wouldn't change that he was trapped. Not one single person had ever bothered to look for him, let alone give up their freedom in exchange for his. *What did he do to deserve this?* Melissa had only found him by chance and *she* had been looking for someone else. *And why would anyone give him Athena in a prison?*

Athena had the power to control and create anything within this dimension. Nothing was beyond her ability. Except granting their freedom. That, Athena would never do. *Still, she puts Wishbringer to absolute shame. But they are similar.* Melissa had often wondered about that. It was almost as though Wishbringer was the first version, the prototype. Athena was the perfected, intended outcome.

Athena could and had made this place to be a paradise. And that made no absolutely no sense. *A paradise and a prison?* According to Elias, it was all just meant to be more insult to injury. The logic being, that even in exchange for paradise, no one would help him. Maybe it was true. Melissa didn't know. She'd never been given many answers here. Only clues.

Melissa didn't mind. She didn't care that a tree had somehow become a fully sentient creature. *More like a goddess!* Athena had a talent at making earlier annoyances fade away like bad dreams. In fact, her goddess-like hospitality would make the rushed trip worth it. Information on Kyros would just be the icing on the cake.

“I will need a warm closed room,” she said loudly even though she knew Athena could have heard her whisper. “I will also need a large warm bath with flowing water, warm plush towels, warm clean clothes, and a meal large enough for three people. All outside the dome, please.” Melissa shook with anticipation. She’d be clean soon. And fed. *When was the last time I had a decent meal?* Elias could wait a little longer.

“Of course, Rose,” Athena replied. She only addressed Melissa and Elias by their titles. First names, even though she had one, seemed foreign when it came to things as small as humans. “Would you like the meal warm as well?”

Melissa smiled. Athena’s voice sounded young, song-like even. “Yes, please.”

A moment later, a giant roofless room popped in to existence around her. Melissa smiled, appreciating that the bright sunlight wouldn’t be blocked out. Lush fur carpet laid under foot. Intricate tapestries covered the newly formed stone walls. An enormous pool full of violet water took up half the room and filled the space with the heavy scent of lavender. Plump white towels sat near the edge of the pool along with different types of soaps and oils. At the opposite end of the room was a wooden table with every inch filled enough fruits, meats, breads, and rice to feed an entire squad of men. *Rice!* Melissa’s mouth watered. Next to the table was a large bed that looked indescribably comfy with its heavy blankets and plush pillows.

A stunning blue silk dress was in the corner of the room well away from the food and the bed. It was displayed on a wooden mannequin that Melissa knew was an exact copy of her figure. It hugged every curve, leaving a generous view of the chest with its low cutting top. The left leg was just as exposed with a slit that traveled nearly to her hip. It also had beautiful tail that would drag behind when walking. It was an outfit for a noblewoman. A rich one.

Athena had outdone herself as usual. Melissa appreciated it, but the dress was too much. No one, not even the gatekeepers themselves couldn't make her wear that. *Well, maybe Kyros could.* She nearly blushed at the thought, making her feel childish. They'd had a child together. There was no reason to be getting red in the face over wearing something sexy. She sighed. *It's just been so long since I've seen him.* She shook herself out of it.

“Appreciate the dress, Athena, but could you just get me some travel clothes?”

“Of course, Rose,” she sounded disappointed. “It will be done.” In a blink, the dress disappeared. In its place was an outfit similar to what she was wearing now, though green and much cleaner. There was also a matching green cloak made from a very durable material.

Melissa then decided three things in an instance. *Bath, food, then sleep.* Everything else could wait for a while.

Several hours later, Melissa lay fully dressed in her new clothes on the bed staring up at the clear night sky. She was rested, full, and blissfully clean. And if she was honest, she didn't want to leave her roofless room. *Maybe this is paradise.* The night stars glittered, spread throughout the sky like they'd each been put there by some heavenly brush. Maybe they had. The same constellations she saw in the Endera sky were floating above her. There was Dolores the Cyclops, the ferocious titan who had lost her left eye. Then there was Luisa the Undone with three daggers in her back and her wicked grin. Sono the Song played his guitar for the hundreds of others. It was odd. Did it mean that this was part of Endera? Or did Athena just make it that way?

Her thoughts shifted to Kyros. They often did when looking at stars. He had taught her the constellations. She could never see them as clearly as he had, but then again, he was a Cosmic. A descendent of those who could read the stars like books. *It's more like they tell us what they've seen and lived and died for*, she remembered him saying. *Most of it is lies—just stories—but there is truth there, too.* Many thought that the Cosmics were born with the gift of knowing the stars, but he had told her the truth. It was taught. Most of his life had been dedicated to learning all about the stars. That is what his life had been like on the secluded islands of the Galax Sea. Before he'd run away.

And met Melissa.

This was not paradise. It couldn't be, not without Kyros. She had to find him. And until she did, no place would ever be good enough. And with him, it wouldn't matter where they were, it would be perfect. It had been like that before and it would be again. *I just have to find him.*

“Athena,” Melissa stood up. “I’m ready to talk to him. Is he ready?”

“The Timekeeper is sitting at the edge of my aura waiting for you,” Athena answered.

“Good.” The room vanished as though it had never been there. “Thank you.” It almost seemed like a crime for such a place to just cease existing.

“Did you sleep well, Melissa?” Three lamps were set up against the aura, giving plenty of light to see a man with a wolfish grin. He sat cross legged on a comfy black leather couch sipping on a cup of something steaming. His hair was short on the sides, but long on the top where a mop of brown curls hung over his left ear. He had pale skin, oval eyes that were so dark brown they looked black, and strong cheek bones that outlined a wide jaw. The red pajamas

made him look childish and small, but Melissa knew he was taller than she was. “I do hope that you did.”

Melissa rolled her eyes. “Don’t act like you’ve been waiting forever.”

“It certainly feels like I have been.” He had a deep, sweet voice. Like honey. “I hate to ask, but would like to join me? In the dome?”

“No,” Melissa answered. “As always, no.”

“Can’t fault me for trying,” Elias shrugged. “So, why are you here?”

The color drained from Melissa’s face. *Had this all been for nothing?* “You told me to come here. Come. To. Me. Hurry. You’ve been saying that to me non-stop for the last month and a half. Haven’t you?” She almost pleaded. She needed a clue—something, anything—to point her in the right direction.

“I didn’t,” Elias frowned, frustration building in his eyes as he thought out loud. “I’m very limited by what I can do here. You know that. Spending the energy to send you a message for a month and half. Even for me, that’s too much. If I was outside the aura, it’d be a different story, but...hmm. Who would be contacting you? Are they acting like they’re supposed to be me? They would have had to open the door from the other side. The door can only be opened by people with a spiral key or access to the temple. It’s possible something happened, that could have activated Wishbringer’s back up. Then without finding me in Endera, it contacted the only other person who has consistently been in the temple? That would take something quite destructive and the keys would have had to fuse with—impossible. My own backup key would have prevented—unless...”

Elias did this often. He talked and talked, having full conversations with himself. It was understandable considering how many years he'd lived with only a tree to talk to. Athena probably wasn't the most interesting partner for conversations. Even if she was, they'd been together for hundreds of years. They'd likely run out of things to talk about by now. Melissa was his only visitor. And an infrequent one at best.

Melissa wanted to scream, "So you don't have any help for me? Nothing?"

Elias gave her a toothy grin, "Well, I didn't say that." He stood up, tossing the cup behind him without a care for what would happen to it. It disappeared before it got too far. "I actually was going to call upon you very soon. Probably within the week actually."

"You were?" Melissa didn't believe it. "That's seems awfully convenient."

"You can think I'm the greatest conspirator that's ever lived if you like," Elias pulled out a pipe. "Athena, would you mind?" The pipe was lit a moment later and he happily began inhaling the smoke from it. "I've never cared if you trust me or not, Melissa. You're free to believe what you'd like. I know you're only here for you and I also know that I could continue my life of solitude never having said a thing that might help you in your search."

Melissa grit her teeth. He was right. "Sorry," she muttered. "I'm just frustrated. I've been searching so long and I still haven't found him."

"And I've been living here so long and no one has ever come found me...except you: a woman willing to burn the world, Old and the New, to find someone else. The irony there is disturbingly sad." He exhaled a long stretch of grey smoke. It traveled straight through the aura without a hint of resistance.

“I know,” the smoke passed Melissa, leaving a tart sweetness in the air. “Sorry, okay. Athena, can I get couch like his?” A couch appeared just behind her and she sat down, hoping she might be swallowed by the cushions. “Will you tell me what you know?”

“I will,” he sat back down on his own couch. “I have questions, though.”

“You always do.”

This was true. Elias had a habit of interrogating Melissa in hopes of learning about the current news in Endera. The problem with this was that Melissa usually knew very little. She didn't like paying attention to any of the politics or wars. She avoided those deadly topics at all cost, since they put her mission to find Kyros at risk. She couldn't look for him if she was dead.

“Yes, and you always have very poor answers,” he said smugly. “Even though, I live in a prison, I tend to know more than you do.”

Melissa sighed. “I know and I'll read up on all the gossip you want, once I find Kyros.”

Elias let out another long breath of smoke. “Everything for Kyros.” He said it with no contempt. It was more like he was stating a fact.

Melissa nodded.

“I should know better,” he threw his pipe over his shoulder. “Let's get to the questions then.”

Athena, dutiful as ever, made it disappear before it ever touched the ground. “I wish you'd stop doing that.”

“Of course, you do,” Elias took out a notebook and pen. He flipped through it until he landed on a blank page. “That's why I keep doing it.”

Athena didn't reply. Melissa waited for Elias to continue. He began scribbling and Melissa knew he wasn't likely to stop until after they were done talking.

"Did you open the ShiftDoor to come here?" he asked.

"No." Melissa liked keeping her answers quick and to the point.

"Did you ask Wishbringer to?"

"No."

"Good, good. What state was the King's Temple in when you entered it?"

"Destroyed." Melissa hated this. It felt like she was talking to a doctor.

Elias' eyebrows shot up, "Completely? Describe it to me, please."

Melissa did her best to describe exactly how it looked and how she'd gotten there. She left out the part about having to open her shirt for Wishbringer, but she thought Elias probably knew about it anyways.

"I see." Elias took time, writing notes in a blur before continuing. "I take it you have no clue how it happened?"

"None whatsoever. It was just like that when I got there. I'm guessing Seltios probably had something to do with it. It's on his land."

"Seltios the King?"

"Yeah, we've talked about him before."

"The one who led you to the Forgotten Realm."

“Yes. He helped me find Kyros that time.”

“After putting him there in the first place, no?”

“Tha—that wasn’t—well, technically yes, but we didn’t know him then. I trust Seltios now.”

“Right. Well spending time in the Forgotten Realm is dangerous—especially dangerous for the mind. You must know that. It’s part of the reason I gave—”

“—I *do* know that,” Melissa hissed. “You’ve told me a million times.”

Elias rolled his eyes. “Let’s move on. Any big world events I should know about?”

“Not rea—” Melissa stopped. “There is actually. There is supposed to be a big tournament this year. Between the best academies of Dawn and Dusk. It’s a reintroduction of an old tournament. Everyone is talking about it. Old and New World, both.” She didn’t actively search for any news, but she wasn’t deaf. Nearly every person she’d come across had mentioned the tournament.

“The Lunar Tournament?” Elias raised a hand to his chin, running a finger along it thoughtfully.

“That’s the one,” Melissa wasn’t surprised he knew the name. *He probably invented it or something.*

“Dawn and Dusk,” Elias took pleasure in saying the names of the two major kingdoms of the New World. “Still struggling to play nice after all these years.” He shook his head. “I’m guessing they’re using this as a ploy to outmaneuver each other in some convoluted political move?”

“Who knows,” Melissa shrugged. “They’re getting kids to play in some events. I doubt it will do much politically.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Elias shook his head, again. “There’s more to it than that. Much more.”

“Well, I don’t really care,” Melissa said, firmly. “I just want the information you have to find Kyros. I think this is it. I think I’ll finally catch up to him.”

“Hmm, well I do hope you’re right,” Elias shut his notebook. “One last thing before we get to that.”

“Fire away.”

“I need your best guess,” his eyes showed no hint of playfulness. “What schools will be involved.”

“I don’t—”

He held up a hand to stop her, “It’s important.”

Melissa sighed, “There’s supposed to be three schools from each nation, right?”

Elias nodded.

“Then the Dawn and Dusk Academies will obviously be in,” Melissa rubbed her temples. She was trying to hold her annoyance at bay. “All the nobles will be dying for the chance to show off. Seltios will likely call for the Immortal Bridge Islands and Red Tusk Schools to join him on the Dawn side. I’ve heard they’re both good, but I don’t really know enough about them to be sure. For Dusk, Dragon Eye Academy is likely the best bet if they’ve kept their standards up over the years. They’ve never been much for fighting, but they use keys so well it might as

well be magic. And then SoGA is the other obvious choice for Dusk. They've always been known as the best."

"Soul Gate Academy," Elias let the words roll out of him. "You and Kyros went there?"

"You know that we did," Melissa crossed her arms, glaring hard enough at him that she hoped he would flinch. "Enough stalling. I answered your question. Your turn."

"Of course," Elias smiled. "I have good news."

When Melissa didn't react, he went on.

"I've finally learned to efficiently read time."

"What?" Melissa eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever wondered how I was able to help you those times? Those were all my first attempts at reading. Well, they weren't my *first* attempts. They were more like my first successes." Elias stood from the couch, moving in a fluid motion to begin pacing around it with his hands crossed behind his back.

Melissa *had* wondered how Elias had helped her many times. Now, however, didn't feel like the best time to quell her curiosity. "Does reading time," Melissa didn't even understand what that meant, "have anything to do with what you're going to tell me this time? Because I honestly could care less about how you find the information you hand me. I only care that the information is accurate and helps me get closer to Kyros. It has in the past, so if you've got something I can use, you better stop trying to play up the drama of this little act and just tell me."

"No appreciation for genius," Elias huffed, indignation bleeding from his pores. "To make things simple enough for you, I've been reading time. It's been incredibly difficult and for

the most part impossible to clearly read with any real accuracy. Time is just so vast. Zeroing down to any specific moment isn't even possible when looking at stream which stretches from before the beginning and goes on into infinity. It's hard enough finding the correct century, let alone the decade. That's why I've only been able to pass along small glimpses from what was supposed to be Kyros in this decade or perhaps the decade before that."

Melissa still had no idea how any of this was even remotely possible, but she could follow the explanation. If Elias could only get little glances, it made sense that she was never there at the right time. She was arriving too late or too early. "And now what?" She tried her best to not sound so impatient.

"And now, I figured out how to read within a year. This year as a matter of fact."

"So you know where he'll be this year?" Melissa's heart wanted to jump in joy.

"Really?"

"Not exactly," He grinned. "But I know *who* he'll be with."

"Who?" Melissa asked, desperately hoping it would be her.

"He will meet a young man in a fight or battle or perhaps even a spar."

Melissa gulped, hanging on to his every word. "Who is he?" *I'll find him. This year.*

"What's his name?"

"He was dressed in a uniform that was adorned with a Soul Gate Academy sigil."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do," Elias smiled. "But there is something more, Melissa."

“What?” Melissa hissed. She could barely hold herself from jumping past the aura to beat the name out of him.

“I figured it out, Melissa,” Elias’ voice fell to just above a whisper. “I finally figured out how to go back.”

“Go back?” A chill ran down Melissa’s spine. She’d never seen Elias with such serious look behind his eyes. He’d shown it just for a moment, but there been absolute desire there.

“What are you talking about?”

“I can turn back time,” he said slowly. “If I just get out of this place, I can do it. I know I can.”

Melissa’s mouth dropped open. She was stunned. There were things that were just supposed to be impossible. Turning back time was one of them. *Does he really think he can do this?* She stared into his eyes, looking for the hint of a joke, but it wasn’t there. Elias the Timekeeper was truly living up to his name and claiming without a shred of doubt that he could turn back time.

“No,” Melissa said after a tense moment at looking at him. “I don’t think you’re lying. In fact, I’m almost sure that you’re not. But I won’t risk anything that might prevent me from being with him. Turning back time would be a risk. I’m not saying I believe you can do it, but I won’t do or help you do anything that would risk me ending up with him. You must know that by now.”

“Well reasoned,” Elias nodded, his face falling. “Time is a finicky thing. It would be a risk. I don’t deny that. Still, won’t you reconsider?”

“No,” Melissa said. “I’m sorry.”

Elias shrugged, looking hurt, but trying not to show it, “I guessed as much.”

Melissa turned around, fully expecting that Elias would no longer want to give her the information on the young man. She would have like to have known his name. That would have helped narrowing the search, but knowing that he was a tyro at Soul Gate Academy. That could be worked with. It wouldn’t be impossible to surveil the academy and be there for the moment Kyros showed up. She could do this and there was no time to waste. She took a few steps, intending to open a ShiftDoor and leave.

“Don’t you want to know about the boy?” Elias asked. “I know a little more about him.”

Melissa stopped, her heart catching in her throat. “Please.”

“I’ve always been a sucker for beautiful women,” Elias sighed. “I get nothing in return for all my generosity, you know?”

“I—” Melissa shut her eyes. It was true, but she didn’t want to hear it. “I will pay you back for your help one day. I promise.”

“I believe you,” Elias whispered before turning back to his more jovial self. “That is why I will tell you more.”

Melissa turned around, letting her heart thump in her chest with all the fury of a hurricane. She’d find this kid and stay near him. Whatever it took, she’d be there for when Kyros would come.

“He has jet black hair, pale skin, and orange eyes,” Elias said. “Crimson orange, really. He’s got the look of someone who’s grown a lot in a short time. If I’m honest, he sort of looks like Kyros. Though, younger. Obviously. ”

Melissa’s mouth went dry. *Black hair? Pale skin? Crimson orange eyes? Like Kyros?* She’d known someone who looked like that. *That’s impossible, unless Procu went and—but it hasn’t been that many years, has it?* She blinked eyes stinging. *It has.* She suddenly realized what Elias was going to say before he said it.

“And here’s the best part,” Elias smiled wider than he ever had before as though none of what had passed between them earlier had happened. *He knew.* “His name is Kyle. Your—”

My son.

3 – New Beginning

Kyle the Static ducked below Garnet the Needle's practice spear. He dove, rolling back to his feet as sand sprayed around him. Garnet followed him, aiming a precise jab to his ribs. He lifted his practice sword, blocking her attack with the flat of his blade. The power of it made him slide back, but he kept his knees bent to ensure he didn't fall. Garnet pressed forward with determination, giving him little time to think. He smiled and charged to meet her.

This had quickly become Kyle's favorite place to spar in all of Soul Gate Academy. Or SoGA, as everyone liked to call it. With winter having turned quickly to spring, he and Garnet had made a habit of crawling out of their beds and meeting on the beach when the sun was just starting to bleed over the horizon. The footing was poor, but he loved the cool smoothness of the sand between his toes and the salty sea breeze. Most importantly, Kyle liked that it brought him out of his room which now served as a constant reminder for Kane, his friend, whom had tried to kill him a few weeks ago.

And Kane the *Basilisk* had almost succeeded.

Kyle had gotten lucky. He'd envisioned that fight over a hundred times and always came to the same conclusion. He was weak. Kane, on the other hand, was strong and could have killed him if he had really wanted to. Kyle guessed that the traitor was stronger than Kross, Kevin, and Garnet. Maybe combined. And the three of his friends still with him at SoGA were stronger, smarter, and more talented than Kyle. *I need to catch up to all of them. Kane included.*

Garnet twirled her spear with blinding speed. Kyle's eyes struggled to follow as he stepped back. She ended the twirl, gripping the spear like a baseball bat. Kyle saw what she was

going to do, but had no time to react. She swung, twisting her whole body to drive the spear in to his left side. If the spar had happened anywhere other than Soul Gate Academy, he was sure Garnet would have just broken a rib or two of his. As it was, SoGA locked all weapons while they were on its land. This meant that weapons, whether real or the heavier practice ones, were no more dangerous than cushioned sticks. It also helped that he was an Enderian. Kyle had come to realize that compared to the regular humans from the realm of Earth, where he'd grown up, he was practically supernatural. He and anyone else from Endera could move faster, jump higher, fall from incredible heights, and take much more damage than normal Earth people. Kyle would still have a hard time believing it, if he hadn't spent most of the last year testing the limits of his body. Of course, that didn't mean hits like this were painless.

Kyle grunted, moving with the hit. He wrapped his arm around the staff, taking a firm grip to it. He pulled, meaning to throw her off balance and bring down his sword on her unguarded side. Instead, his legs slipped out from underneath him, getting entangled with Garnet's. He fell on his back and Garnet fell on to him smacking her forehead on his chest. The breath shot out from his lungs and his eyes instantly began to water.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Garnet sat up, breathing hard.

"It—it's okay," Kyle gasped, catching his breath. Garnet stared at him, concern behind her gem blue eyes. *She's beautiful.* Kyle had never been blind to her looks, but there was something about the way the sun hit her pale skin speckled with sand and cute freckles and her burning auburn hair that stuck to her sweat covered face that made him—*warm. She's warm.* Kyle's face began to burn. Garnet the Needle was sitting on him. He'd never felt someone so warm. He never even thought someone could be *that* warm. And she sat on the one place that probably would start reacting to her warmth any second if she didn't get off. "Uh-Garnet."

Garnet seemed to finally notice their position. “Sorry!” she squeaked. She rolled off him, landing next to him on the sand with a face as red as her hair. She covered her face with both her hands before falling on to the sand. “That’s completely embarrassing.”

They lay on their backs for a moment, both cooling down in more than one way. Kyle threw the weapons to his side guessing they were done for the morning.

“I guess it’s a little embarrassing,” Kyle smiled. “Not that I’m really complaining.”

She gave him a half-hearted punch to the shoulder and whispered, “Me either.”

There was a long moment of silence where they lay next to each other. They’d regret it later. Laying on the beach always allowed sand to find ways to annoying places on their bodies. Still, a peace fell over Kyle as he lay next to her, silent. They had unspoken things to say to each other. He knew it, but how could he put it into words?

Their hands had landed inches from each other’s. Kyle tried to keep his eyes away from her hand but there was a twitch in her fingers that beckoned his own hand closer. He moved it closer and it only took the barest touch for them to come together and lock fingers. His hand seemed to do what neither of them could do. *I suppose words aren’t always needed.*

“Ya know?” Garnet said still holding his hand. “It’s been a pretty crazy year.”

“Yeah,” Kyle agreed.

“That’s an understatement, I guess.” She fidgeted. “Kyle?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t ever forget me, okay?” Garnet squeezed his fingers tight.

Kyle turned his head and looked her directly in the eyes, “Who are you?”

“I’m serious,” She punched him a little harder this time, but with a grin on her face.

“I know,” he smiled. “I’ll never forget you, Garnet. Promise. How could I ever forget the only person I’m sure is real in all of Endera?” He’d meant it more as a joke, but it felt true to him as he said it. He knew this was all real, but sometimes things just felt so unbelievable that he didn’t take it for granted having someone like Garnet—someone from his past—here with him. *Man, I hope that didn’t sound stupid.*

She suddenly moved in closer and kissed Kyle. He almost yelled in surprised. But Garnet’s lips on his took hold of him completely. If he’d felt her warmness earlier, now he knew what it was like to feel her fire. And it made his heart spin. Their lips moved a part a little while later and Kyle almost wanted to protest, but when she placed her head on his shoulder all his complaints evaporated.

She sighed. *I think that’s a cue of some sort, right? Right?*

“Everything okay?” Kyle asked hoping his intuition wasn’t leading him astray in an attempt to ruin this moment. *Did I kiss her badly?*

“Everything’s fine,” Garnet said. “It’s just that the school year is done and I’m just not sure what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” her face scrunched up in a pout. *Cute.* “Don’t you think about what we’re supposed to do over this break we have? Like almost everyone is going to leave tomorrow morning after this pool party thing tonight that the Grandmaster likes to throw every year. Except

for everyone like us who has to stay for the ShiftDoor test. Rayne has asked me to go spend the break with her and I want to, but I don't know. And then what happens after we complete our courses here at Soul Gate Academy? Should we stay here as Eternal Title Tyros? You know, they explain it as though it's the last title we'll ever receive, but it's really more like we've earned a high school diploma and we're being allowed to stay on to get a bachelor degree with our Eternal Title acting as a sort of official identification. Then we would receive more hands-on training. Kind of like what we did in the Forger's Tavern, but a lot less messy. It's not a bad system, but it weird to me that people were just fine with earning their final title while they're teenagers. As though nothing interesting is supposed to happen in your adult years. And then there's the fact that we're sort of alone in this world. We don't know much about our parents. I know you have some information on them, but I'm more of a mystery and it doesn't help that I was a reader who everyone was supposed to forget. There's just so much. Don't you think about all that?" *She has all this on her mind?*

"I—" Kyle's mouth hung wide open. He was unsure how to respond to any of that. He had been so focused on training and what had happened a few weeks ago with Kane. In fact, he'd been doing his best to not think about anything. "That doesn't sound like everything's fine?"

"I guess not," Garnet admitted. "I'm just sort of worried, you know?"

Kyle nodded, "Yeah, I get that. I can't say I'm entirely on the same page, but I guess I just haven't thought about it as deeply as you have. Maybe I'm just dumb?"

"Probably," Garnet teased. "That makes the most sense. So, you think it's a good idea for me to go stay with Rayne?"

"Yeah, why not?" Kyle said. "She seemed cool."

“Just cool?” Garnet raised her eyebrows.

“If you’re trying to get me to say something about her looks, don’t. Even I’m not *that* dumb. Plus, I’m actually kind of a fan of this whole us thing that happened today.”

“Coward,” she laughed. “But a smart coward. And I sort of like it too.”

Kyle leaned in, kissing her, “I’m guessing you’ve already decided to go?”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling. “I just thought I’d see what you said about it. What do you think you’ll do?”

Kyle wondered about that himself. If he was completely honest, he wanted to visit his home in Grayling. It’d almost been a year since he’d last seen Nana and Paps and he missed them. It’d been longer for Garnet, who’d missed them an extra two years while she trained to be a reader. But it didn’t matter. Seeing them wasn’t a possibility. *Not yet.*

“It’d be nice to go home for some of Pap’s cooking.” Kyle said, hoping that didn’t make him sound childish.

“Nana would fuss over how tall you’ve gotten,” Garnet smirked. “Then she’d attack the Grandmaster Dante and Master Proculus if she ever saw that scar on your chest. That’d be a battle for the ages.”

Kyle moved his free hand over his chest. Even with his shirt on, it felt like lightning zapped his fingers as he trailed the scar beneath. “It wouldn’t be too bad to hear her fuss.”

“You were always her favorite.”

Kyle shrugged. “I think she just felt sorry for me. No one other than you liked paying attention to me.”

“And now I’m paying extra special attention to you,” she sat up, separating from him.
“It’s good to see you’ve stopped weirding everyone else out, though.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Kyle sat up, too. “Mostly everyone here still thinks I’m a weirdo because ‘I’m the boy from the other realm,’ remember? It seems like some kind of sick joke. First, I’m weird because of my key unlocking things like it has a mind of its own. Now, I’m weird because I lived in a place where keys aren’t so magical. Little does everyone know that you were there with me, too.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you sound a little jealous.”

“Nah, I get why they all love you.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Garnet’s eyebrows rose.

“Well, you’re a little pretty. And smart too, I guess.”

“Only a little pretty?” She crossed her arms, feigning anger.

“Only a little,” Kyle grinned.

“I think you need to work on your complimenting skills, Kyle the Static.”

“Are you sure? I said you were smart, didn’t I?”

Garnet kissed him and it filled Kyle with warmth again. It just felt so right.

“Thanks,” Garnet said as she pulled away. “For not telling anyone that I’m from the same realm. I know it’d probably be easier for us both to be the weirdos, but—well thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kyle smiled. “It’s really not something that bothers me. Although...”

“Although?”

“Well, I was just wondering. When we were in Grayling. Why weren’t you accidentally unlocking stuff like me?”

“I don’t know,” Garnet frowned, taking a handful of sand and letting it spill between her fingers. “I’ve been thinking about that lately. It might mean that I’m just a late bloomer or maybe there’s something different about me. It might even have something to do with my parents, whoever they are. Enderians are the only ones that can be readers, so it shouldn’t have anything to do with that, but maybe there’s something I’m missing.”

Garnet fell silent, but it didn’t seem like her mind had stopped talking. She scrunched up her nose, deep in thought like she was focused on an invisible book. Kyle knew that look well now. Garnet spent most of her free time buried in books she’d borrowed from the personal library of their history teacher, Master Oisin. There was something she was looking for and he guessed it might have to do with her parents. He wanted to ask her about it, but he knew she would bring it up when she was ready to talk about it. It was an unspoken understanding between them—*finding out who our parents were, that was something we needed to do on our own.*

There was a part of Kyle that thought he should dedicate some time searching for his own answers. It would be easier for him, considering his parents had both been at Soul Gate Academy. He knew Grandmaster Dante and Proculus would be more than happy to share what they knew should he ever decide to ask about them. But he didn’t know if he ever would. *Why should I dedicate any brain power to finding out about them when they obviously left me?* He shook his head. He was dedicating brain power to them right now. *I’ve got more important things to worry about.*

“Garnet?” Kyle could tell she was thinking hard. “You still with me?”

“It’s nice that we can talk to each other easier now,” she said, abruptly. “You know? It wasn’t like this before I was in the coma.” This was true. The year had given them both plenty to focus on, but furthering their personal relationship had never really been a part of it. There was no denying that they’d always been attracted to each other, but it’d become much solidified these past few weeks. *I guess almost dying really helps get rid of the awkwardness.*

“And the kissing thing is new, too,” he tried to say this confidently, but his face turned warm. *Well, not all the awkwardness.* “I guess we’ve grown up a little.”

“Yeah,” Garnet kissed him, again. “That’s nice, too, but maybe it’s a little overdue.”

“We have been dealing with all this,” Kyle spread out his arms, presenting everything around them. “Being brought to a whole new realm has a way of keeping a person occupied. I think I’ll cut us some slack for not moving quicker.”

“Thanks,” she rolled her eyes. “Glad to see one of us is okay with procrastinating.” She stood up. “But the shower is calling my name and I can’t procrastinate that anymore. Sand is going to permanently lock to my skin if I don’t wash it off now. You coming?” Her face reddened. “I mean—not with me—but—like your shower—um—you know what I mean.”

“I think I’ll stay behind,” Kyle laughed, trying to hide his desire. He knew she hadn’t meant it that way, but part of him, a very large part of him, did want to go with her to the shower. He needed to change the subject. “It’d be good for me to practice my lightning mediation while no one else is around.”

“You don’t have to push yourself so hard, Kyle,” Garnet kneeled down back to his level, the red in her cheeks disappearing as her blue eyes stared into his.

He gave her a peck before she could say anything else, “I know.” *But I do. I have to get stronger.* His desire seemed to disperse. The warmth still filled him, but there was a coldness lingering in him and it became hard as steel.

He *needed* to be stronger.

Garnet sighed, knowing there wasn’t anything else to say. She stood up, “Make sure you leave yourself enough time to shower. If you show up to breakfast and get sand all over me, I’ll have to pin you to the ground again.”

“Was that what that was?” Kyle mused. “I think you head butted me first. Going to do that again, too.”

“Obviously,” she smiled and turned away. “And don’t think I’ll be giving kisses to make you feel better afterwards?”

“But it worked so well,” he said, grinning.

“I’m talented like that. See you later.” Without another word, she took off at a jog toward the castle.

“Later,” Kyle watched her go, enjoying the view of her bouncing red hair and her good-looking backside. He smiled. *She’s so awesome.* Determination began to swell in him. *She almost died because I was weak. Because I am weak. I won’t let that ever happen again.*

Kyle crossed his legs, resting his hands on his knees. He steadied his breath with practiced calmness and then closed his eyes to shut the world out. The moment took hold of him.

Nothing else mattered other than the motions of taking in a breath and exhaling it. The world became still, so that even the sound of the ocean's waves fell away to nothingness. He moved his hand in front of him, turning it as though he had a key in it. He used to actually need a key in his hands to do this, but this like so many things had changed at the King's Temple. He and all his friends had found Key of Throne Arms. Or Kota as they were more commonly referred to. They were special key weapons that acted as both a key and weapon. This gave them the obvious advantage of only needing one thing in your hands to unlock powers and use as a weapon, but there was more to it. Kotas were connected to their users somehow even when they weren't physically together. It was like an invisible line of aura kept him and his Kota always within reach. If Kyle wanted to, he could summon it instantly to his side. That, however, wasn't necessary now. Even without it in his hands, he could use the Kota to unlock his powers. It just required a little focus.

He flicked his eyes open and lightning sprang to life around him forming an electric halo which danced around him like a zapping, yellow hula hoop. A year ago, he might have jumped out of his own skin if he saw lightning circling around. He'd grown used to it now. In fact, unlocking lightning to control and do his bidding had become as much a part of him as breathing.

Well, control is a strong word.

He turned his hand again, giving life to a second halo. This one, however, was neon blue. It orbited around him at an angle, hovering above his left shoulder and almost touching the ground near his right knee. Energy drained from him at a steady pace. It wasn't ideal to use his lightning like this. He was more accustomed to releasing it in wild burst. Which meant little control and it was dangerous to those around him when he used it. Both friend, foe, and anyone else.

It fought against Kyle like a wild dog on a leash, pushing when he pulled and pulling when he pushed. When he relaxed his concentration, even momentarily, the different halos would hit each other and green sparks would erupt from where they touched. Letting go for a second more than that would allow both halos of lightning to shoot into the air to splinter in a sudden flash of power. It wouldn't hurt him—he was immune—but anyone hit by this kind of power would have a hard time walking away from it unharmed. If he ever wanted to be more than a dangerous lightning rod, he'd have to learn to control it.

And to do that, he meditated. *I will get stronger.*

A couple hours later, Kyle sat in the Dining Hall enjoying breakfast with his friends. Kross the Monk sat directly across from him, working his way through a bowl of cold cereal. He was slightly taller than Kyle and a year older. He had short buzzed hair and wore his student uniform of a black shirt paired with an ocean blue vest and matching pants with a certain professionalism that might only be seen in courtrooms. His eyebrows were pressed together as he looked over his notebook that lay next to his cereal bowl. Kyle had never seen him go anywhere without the notebook. It listed the various grades Kross liked to bestow on summons. And people. The grades represented Kross' opinion on how useful and skilled they were. As far as Kyle knew, he was barely a C, but grades could go up to A-plus-plus. So, there was still a lot of room for improvement where Kyle was concerned.

Well, I haven't been graded after the incident at King's Temple. I've probably gone up since then...I think.

He had seen little of Kross during the last few weeks. Their mission to save Garnet had led them to find a book filled with information regarding Kotas. Kane, knowing its value, had stolen it and taken it to the King of Dawn, Seltios. Fortunately, all had not been lost. Kross had seen some of its contents before it was taken. So, he'd been working with the masters in an effort to remember what he saw. Skilled work with MemoryBending and Kross' quick reading skills had given them much to process.

Sitting next to Kross was his roommate, Kevin the Bison. He was tall, muscular, and strikingly good looking with his long coal-black hair that he almost always tied back in a ponytail. He was also the only person Kyle knew who was deaf. This was always a source of awe to Kyle who couldn't imagine being without his hearing. Kevin never seemed to let his disability sadden him, though. He smiled more than anyone Kyle knew and it tended to be infectious. Even more impressive was that Kevin could talk and hear in his own way. His eyes, which glowed yellow and had cat-like black slits, had been specially locked to pick up speech visually. To talk, he used small notepad that always hung around his neck. He could write on it and the notepad would speak for him in a computer-like voice. Without the notepad, he was limited to saying, "Ah," in a child-like voice. He did this often.

"Ah," Kevin piled eggs and bacon on to his plate as though it was to be his last meal, before writing on his notepad. "Can you pass the bread please, Kyle?"

Kyle, unable to answer because he was chewing on a sausage he'd just stuffed into his mouth, nodded.

"Ah," Kevin said in thanks as Kyle handed him the steaming loaf of bread. There was some mind reading that usually needed to be done if you were Kevin's friends, but it was never

for anything complicated. He sliced off a thick slab of bread and began inhaling his meal like vacuum picking up crumbs. Kevin, like all of them, had been training harder ever since they'd returned from the King's Temple. For him, that meant less time dedicated to wooing the many SoGA boys and girls who were his admirers. And more time spent with a large battle axe in his hands.

The last in their group was Garnet, now clean of sand and sweat. She sat next to Kyle, topping her plate of pancakes with a dozen plump strawberries and syrup. She dove right in to her meal, not caring that there were lots of eyes glancing her way. *The do love her*, Kyle smiled as he thought about earlier this morning. No one could deny that Garnet was popular. The simple fact was that there weren't many girls, or boys, who were as talented and as stunning as her. On top of that, the secret that she had once been a reader had come to light. This only made seemed to make her more admirable in the eyes of the students.

Kyle received glances, too. *More like glares*. Too often, other students aimed looks of disdain his way. It made sense. He was the outsider. *Why would someone like Garnet spend so much time with the boy from the other realm? Unthinkable!* Kyle took one last bite of his breakfast. *They'd probably all have a heart attack if they knew we'd kissed. Maybe I should tell them.*

"So, what's the pool party supposed to be all about?" Kyle said trying to get his mind on a different topic. Thinking about kissing Garnet again made his cheeks warm. "You said it happens every year, right?"

"Yes," Kross let dropped his spoon into his empty bowl. "Every year since Grandmaster Dante became the Grandmaster. And there's nothing to tell. It's a pool party."

“We don’t have a pool, though,” Garnet pointed out the obvious. “Unless there is one in the Master’s facility? Will we get to visit that maybe?”

“No,” Kross answered. “Well, maybe there is one there, but we won’t be getting to see it. Instead, we’ll be getting our own pool. It’ll be made by the Masters. It is kind of like a show they put on.”

“They’ll make it?” Kyle asked. *Modifications, maybe?* “How?”

“You’ll see.” Kross said, simply.

Kyle and Garnet shared a glance and shrugged. There was no point in knowing beforehand.

“You both shouldn’t worry about the pool party tonight.” Kross went back to looking over his notebook. “It’s tomorrow you should worry about.”

“The ShiftDoor test?” Garnet said.

“No need to worry about it as much as Kross,” Kevin said with his notepad. “He’s been prepping for it all year.”

“Of course, I have,” Kross said with no hint of embarrassment. “I failed it last year. It’s perfectly normal that I would make sure I’m prepared this year.”

“Being prepared is one thing,” Kevin smiled as he wrote. “Overkill is the word I would use for you.”

“I think Kevin is probably right, Kross,” Kyle stretched his arms over his head. “No use in thinking about it too much.” They’d gone over how to open a ShiftDoor in a few of his classes. It didn’t sound all that challenging. *Well, compared to all the other stuff we do.*

“Ah,” Kevin agreed.

“Easy for you to say,” Kross snapped at Kevin. “You passed it on your first try. As for you, Kyle. I don’t know how you can be so relaxed. It’s easy to mess up on your first try. I think I was too distracted last year. It likely played a major role in my failure. This year, I’ll be focused. Very focused.”

“You’ll pass,” Garnet assured him. “And at least you don’t have Kyle’s problem. He’s hardly got enough places to travel to for a test.”

This was true. The test required that he open three different ShiftDoors. Kyle’s limited traveling in Endera made this a problem. ShiftDoors could only open if he had been there before. Of the places he had been to, the King’s Temple and the Forger’s Cavern were too dangerous. *Something or someone would probably try to kill me if I tried opening doors there, anyways.* He’d also been to the Mirror Forest, but that was too close to the King’s Temple making it a useless option. That left Dilu Village and the first place he’d ever been to in Endera, Arragin Mountain. Luckily, he’d been granted permission to open two doors to Dilu Village. One would open outside the village and the other would open inside Mayor Nova’s house.

Just like Soul Gate Academy, opening a ShiftDoor inside Dilu Village was not normally possible. Locks prevented such easy access to towns and their people’s homes. The exception had been made when Garnet asked Rayne the Floret, Nova’s daughter, if this could be allowed to help Kyle. Mayor Nova had been more than happy to say yes. Or so Kyle was told. It was Garnet who had received the letter in reply, after all. Kyle had grown curious about all the letters. The two girls had been writing letters to each other ever since they’d met. He guessed that he was often a topic of their letters and this had helped into pushing Garnet and his relationship forward.

Which was good, because of the kissing. He liked the kissing. *But what else do they talk about?* He sighed silently. It was none of his business. It had helped with the ShiftDoor test and he was grateful for that. And he was grateful for the kissing, too.

Now I just have to make sure I don't fail the test. Or the kissing. Kissing's not a test, though, so I should be good there. Unless it was a test this morning. I don't think I failed if it was. Right? Probably not. She seemed like she like it. Maybe I'll get another one later...

“Kyle?”

“Huh,” Kyle realized he'd been staring right at Garnet, running a hand through his hair.

“Something on my face?” Garnet wiped her mouth. “And you're doing your thing.”

“Um, no,” Kyle's stopped. It was getting too long for that, anyways.

“I think I'll have to get going soon,” Kross stretched his arms amusement filling his brown eyes. “The masters wanted to see me one last time to make sure we didn't miss anything.”

“Haven't they checked a hundred times already?” Garnet asked.

“Feels like it,” Kross agreed. “But I don't blame them. This could really change things if it gets into the wrong hands. And to be honest, I think there is more to the Kotas than they've let us know.”

“Like what?” Kyle felt the sudden urge to bring his Kota out right there, but he stopped himself.

“I'm not sure. They haven't exactly told me. It's just a feeling I have. There's something else to them. Something more than just being a key and a weapon.”

“Ah,” Kevin started writing. “I think you’re right. And I think that’s why it is good for us to focus on our training.”

Kross nodded. “Things do feel like they’re getting more dangerous all the time.”

Curiosity began to stir in Kyle. *Was there really something else to the Kota?* Maybe it was something that could make him stronger. Then again, maybe it was something that would get him killed. If he had to guess, it was probably the latter.

Excited conversation suddenly erupted near the doorway to the Dining Hall. Nova, Mayor of Dilu Village, walked into the room wearing a light traveling cloak. She wasn’t tall, but she carried herself in a way that seem to tower over everyone anyways. Her stern pink eyes pressed into the room looking determined if not intimidating.

To her right was a young woman Kyle had never seen before. She had short bronze hair spiked up and held back by a wide blue bandanna with two white eyes crudely painted on to it. Her own eyes were big and pale grey. *She’s blind*, Kyle realized. He could hardly believe by the way she walked. Each of her steps fell with such poise that it was like she had spent hours planning each step before taking it.

To Mayor Nova left was her daughter, Rayne the Floret. Her bright blonde hair fell to the sides of her rosy cheeks. She had a heart shaped face and the same pink eyes as her mother that seemed to draw in looks. She was beautiful. Not even Kyle could deny that. *But I would if Garnet asked me.*

“Rayne,” Garnet stood up rushing to greet them.

“Garnet!” The two girls hugged.

Kyle scratched his head in wonderment. If he didn't know differently, he would have guess Rayne and Garnet had been friends for years. *I guess writing letters to each other must have made them closer.*

The room returned to its normal level of chatter quickly. Many tyros knew who the Mayor of Dilu Village was on sight. They had likely seen her one time or another since her village was so close to the academy. Garnet, Rayne, and the blind woman moved toward their table, sitting down. Mayor Nova strode on by, giving Kyle, Kross, and Kevin a kind nod and smile before climbing the stairs to meet with the masters.

"I'm Terra," said the woman as she sat. "And I like you!" She pointed directly to Kevin without a single hint of embarrassment.

Kyle's mouth dropped open and he noticed Kross reacting similarly. Garnet tried to hold a giggle back, but it escaped muffled into her hand.

"Ah," Kevin said, grinning. He was as unembarrassed as Terra.

"Terra!" squealed Rayne. "Can't you act normal for a single moment?"

"That'd be boring," Terra said. "So, what's your name, handsome?"

"Stop acting like you don't know me, Terra," Kevin wrote. Before he could write more, Terra leaned in and grabbed on to Kevin's face to tug it down to plant a kiss fully on his lips. Kevin, Kyle noticed, was happy to return the kiss in full. *Looks like I'm not the only one to get a kiss today.* The thought made his cheeks warm.

Rayne gasped and so did many others around them. Others cheered. People seemed to always be watching Kyle and his friends. Everything they did always merited an immediate

reaction from everyone around them. It didn't bother Kyle, but it did sometimes leave him scratching his head. *Don't they have better things to do than watch other people kissing.* Of course, at that moment he was also one of the people watching, but that was different. The two of them were sitting right in front of him. Plus, Kevin was his friend.

Kevin pulled out of the kiss and began writing, "We've known each other forever." His finger continued scribbling across the notepad as though the kiss had never interrupted his writing. "Through my grandmother actually. And we are kind of dating and not dating."

Those who had gasped now looked horrified. One girl with curly black hair looked like she was on the verge of throwing her cup at Terra.

"Dating and not dating?" Kyle asked.

"It depends on my mood," Terra said. "And I'm in the *mood* now." She moved closer to Kevin, snuggling in so close beside him that they might have been sewn together now.

"Terra!" Rayne said, her cheeks going red. "Seriously."

"You're just like Rayne said," Garnet giggled. "Completely and utterly unembarrassed."

"And blind," Terra smiled. "I'm sure she mentioned I was blind."

"Blind enough to walk through a Gatekeeper's funeral laughing the whole while," Rayne muttered.

"That I am," Terra's smile grew even wider.

"You're strong," Kross said flatly. If he'd been shocked by Terra earlier, he was composed now. There was a light of amusement hiding in his eyes, though. "I think I'd grade you at an A just based on how you walked."

“Are you hitting on me?” Terra tilted her head in his direction. She could tell right where Kross was just by where his voice had come from.

“No,” Kross laughed. “Just acknowledging that you are more than you seem.”

“I am,” Terra agreed. “Smart friend you have, Bison.”

“Ah,” Kevin nodded.

“I've missed that,” Terra ran a finger across Kevin's cheek. She cleared her throat, pulling her hand away and seeming abashed for the first time since she walked into the Dining Hall. It was as though she finally realized that she wasn't alone with him. “It's very nice to finally get to meet you, Kross the Monk.”

“It's nice to meet you, too, Terra the Gargoyle.”

“You know me,” Terra's eyebrows shot up. “Kevin wouldn't have told you, so how? No, wait. Don't answer that. Not here.”

Kross nodded. He had called her Gargoyle. Nothing seemed obviously remarkable about the title, but there had to be something.

“And you are Garnet,” Terra said, shifting focus. “Rayne has told me about you. I hear you used to be a reader?”

“I am and I was,” Garnet answered.

“And you are the boy from the other realm,” Terra said moving on to Kyle before Garnet could say anything else. “Kyle the Static. You're practically famous in Dilu Village. Well the four of you are. But you, they've got this story about how you're a hero who's destined to m—”

“I think that covers the introduction,” Rayne interjected, red faced. “Don’t you think we should probably get out of the Dining Hall? Maybe we can all go for a walk?”

A hero? He had helped in saving Garnet, but calling him a hero was going overboard. He’d gotten lucky more than anything else. *That doesn’t make me a hero.*

“Shouldn’t you at least tell us why you’re here before that,” Kross said bluntly. “It seems odd for you two and the mayor to show up today.”

“Mother wanted a private word with the Grandmaster,” Rayne sighed. “She didn’t tell us why, but I’m pretty sure it has to do with the Lunar Tournament. I think the Grandmaster wants to push for Dilu Village Academy to be included as the third school, but my mother is against it.”

The Lunar Tournament was a common topic nowadays. Nearly everyone spent time speculating about which three schools would participate for the Kingdom of Dusk. Dusk Academia was certainty. That apparently was the capital’s academy where lots of noble teenagers attended. Soul Gate Academy was expected to be second of the schools representing Dusk. It was the third school that seemed to spark debate. Nobody had the faintest idea on who would be the third.

“Wouldn’t she want Dilu Village to be involved?” Garnet asked. “It’s supposed to be a big deal, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Rayne said. “But it’s not exactly a popular idea politically. Especially in Dilu Village. Dawn and Dusk have never gotten along and the last few years have been especially tense. My father’s death is almost certainly linked to that tension and buddying up with them for some tournament isn’t what most people have in mind as an acceptable response.”

“I see,” Garnet said solemnly. “It must be really difficult for you and your mom. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to dampen the mood,” Rayne said, shrugging. “Plus, that’s not the only reason we’re here. I’m officially reentering Soul Gate Academy.”

“You’re allowed?” Garnet squealed.

Rayne nodded, beaming. The two of them burst into fits of incoherent happy babble. At least, that is what it sounded like to Kyle. *How did her father die?* That certainly wasn’t a question he’d ask, but he couldn’t help but be curious. Maybe Garnet knew?

Hearing that she was going to attend Soul Gate Academy was great news though. He liked Rayne and it would make Garnet happy. It did, however, raise a question.

“I thought people had to be chosen to join Soul Gate Academy,” Kyle whispered to Kross. “Is it different because she’s the mayor’s daughter?”

“Oh,” Kross said. “I guess no one ever told you. Rayne was here the year before this one. That’s why she’s *re*-entering. She missed this year because of what happened to her father. It has nothing to do with her being the mayor’s daughter. She was already—”

“You really did live in another world, didn’t you?” Terra said suddenly. “That makes sense.”

“I did,” Kyle said, slowly. “I—why does that make sense?”

“You’re different,” Terra studied him, looking him up and down with eyes that didn’t work. “You smell different and sound different. And...your *aura* feel’s different, too.”

Smell? I don't smell. Right? Of course, not. Kyle became a little warm around the neck. *Why is she smelling me anyways?* He inhaled a little deeper than normal just to make sure. He was certain he was clean. *What was that she said about my aura?* He thought it might have been the light but he could have sworn her eyes glowed when she mentioned it. *Or maybe I really do smell and her eyes were tearing up?* His neck grew warmer.

“Don’t take it the wrong way,” Terra rolled her eyes. A weird expression from a blind person, but it looked natural. “You don’t smell bad. Just different. Everyone has a smell. I can just tell better than most people. Call it a talent. I’m super impressive that way.”

“Oh—well, I don’t know,” Kyle said, relieved. “You’re hardly the first person to notice I’m different.” If she had told him that he was perfectly normal, now *that* would be different.

“Of course,” Terra said. “Still, it is interesting. Did you know that I’ve probably only met a little more than a dozen people with as distinct auras as yours?”

“Really?” It was definitely more about the auras than the smell. *That’s good.* “Is that—”

“And five of them are sitting at this table,” Terra drummed her fingers softly on the table. Garnet and Rayne stopped talking, turning their focus to Terra. “Garnet’s I understand. She was a reader. I’ve met two readers and I see the similarities. Though I’d say Garnet’s is the most impressive. Kross here, might seem modest, but his parents are two of the most famous key sages to ever unlock Medications. The whole country knows who they are even if Kross seems to think he can hide the fact. Either way, the son of two masters like them having a distinct aura is hardly surprising. But who knows, maybe there is something more to it.”

It *was* surprising to Kyle. He eyed his friend curiously, but Kross wouldn’t look his way. He looked uncomfortable, like he was trapped and trying to find a way out of the conversation.

He'd hardly talked about his parents, so Kyle didn't know much about them. The way Terra talked made them sound like celebrities.

"Kevin is a genius," Terra continued. "Plain and simple, but so is his grandmother so there might be the connection there. The rest of his family has auras that are normal as they come, though."

Kevin nodded, affirming Terra's words. He had mentioned his grandmother earlier. That was how he and Terra knew each other. *And his grandmother is a genius? Like Kevin?* Kyle was really starting to feel like he barely knew his friends at all. It made sense. They had never really talked about their life outside of Soul Gate Academy. That was, in some ways, why Kyle liked Kevin and Kross. They never pestered him with questions about the world he'd left behind. *Kane had, now that he thought about it. Not really pestered, but he had talked about it with him, hadn't he?*

"As for Rayne...everyone on Endera knows about Rayne," She smiled. "That is, unless you lived under a rock or in another realm. "I doubt they've gone over it in your history class since it's relatively recent, so I'll explain it to you if Rayne doesn't mind?" Rayne gave a quick, silent nod that Terra was somehow able to pick up. More and more, Kyle was feeling like she wasn't blind at all. "To make a long story short, Diego the Moonrider—that was his official title, but people often referred to him as Gatefinder—along with Nova the Windrider and two others, Leonardo the Sunrider and Jade the Moonrider, made the biggest find of the century. They found one of the Lost Gates."

Lost Gates? It sounded familiar somehow. Maybe, Kyle had heard someone talking about it before. "So, does that mean Rayne's parents passed on their special aura to her?"

“Not at all,” Terra said. “Nova’s aura is normal and so was Diego’s from what I can remember. I only met him a few times before his untimely death, though. May the sun set kindly so the moon can follow. May the winds flow tenderly to lead the clouds on. Over mountains and ocean do riders ride. Let the rider ride one last time. From this dream until the next dream. Continue on, Diego.”

Rayne smiled sadly, looking grateful. Kyle would have to ask about it later. *What exactly are riders?*

“Rayne was born at the Lost Gate. Mayor Nova has never known how to take time off, so she was pregnant when they found it. My theory, and I’m pretty sure I’m right, is that having a baby next to that gate affected her in unforeseen ways. Probably why she likes drinking so much. But from what I hear, the four of you know all about that.”

“Ha ha ha,” Rayne said sardonically. Her cheeks were red again. “Very funny.”

“But what are the Lost Gates?” Kyle asked.

They all looked at him like he’d lost his mind. Even Garnet had her eyebrows raised. Not for the first time, he envied her. Even though they’d been together before coming to Endera, she knew so much more than him. The two years of reader training had apparently been spent filling her head with everything she needed to know about being a proper Enderian. Kyle had no such luck.

“Boy from another realm,” Terra nodded, understanding coming over her. “Children probably know more than you.”

“Yeah, well,” Kyle muttered. “Bet you guys would lose your mind if you saw a car or something.” *Proculus didn't seem to think much of them, though. But he'd been there for whole month, before he met me, so who knows.*

“There are four Lost Gates,” Garnet supplied, kindly. “At least, that is what most scholars believe. The Mind Gate, Body Gate, Soul Gate, and the Balance Gate. Each of them are supposed to be able to open the realms to one another. But they are said to have been lost during the Titan War hundreds of years ago. When Rayne's parents found one it was a remarkable discovery.”

“Soul Gate?” Kyle said. “Does that mean—”

“The academy's name pre-dates the find,” Rayne was obviously familiar with the question he'd almost just asked. “It is a rumor that the lost gate is located within the school. Personally, I wouldn't be surprised if that were true, but I think it's probably a little too obvious.”

“You don't know where it is? Or which one for that matter? You guys only keep referring to it as a lost gate. I'm guessing that means nobody knows which one it is.”

“It's a guarded secret,” Rayne whispered. “That's probably why they—” She coughed, trying to stop her eyes from getting watery. It worked, but only just. Kyle wished he could take his questions back. He hadn't meant to sadden her, but it was obvious the answers to those questions had something to do with the death of her father. She regained her composure a heartbeat later. “Anyways, my aura might be a little different because I was born near the gate. It's not really a big deal.”

“Well it’s not when you two try to take over my story,” Terra sniffed. “I was doing just fine without you two teaming up to school the new kid.”

“I’m not exactly new, you know?” Kyle said.

“You’re new to this world,” Terra insisted. “Not even a year old. Just a baby, really.” His friends grinned, trying not to grin too obviously. Even Rayne seemed to cheer up. Kyle sighed.

“So,” Terra continued. “You’ve all got weird, distinct, and obviously different auras to anyone who knows their auras like I do. And like I said, I’ve barely ever met people with these kinds of auras. It’s rare.”

“What’s your point?” Kross said.

“Haven’t you been listening? With Kyle’s other-worldly aura, that means together there are five of you. And you just so happen to be friends. Sitting at this table. Coincidence? I doubt it. There’s something more going on. Like wicked destiny fate heroes at the end of times kind of thing.”

And what about Kane? The thought came to Kyle before he could stop himself, but somehow, he knew that if Kane were with them he’d have an aura that was different, too.

“I doubt that,” Kross said. “Coincidences do happen.”

“That’s the problem with all you normals with your working eyes and such,” Terra sighed. “You have eyes, but you don’t use them to see anything. I felt it as soon as I walked in this room. This means something. Things are going to change. New doors will begin opening. And you five will be involved somehow. Obviously.”

“Ah,” Kevin nodded. This was one of the times where Kyle had no idea what he meant by it. And it didn’t seem like Kevin was going to bother clarifying himself with his notepad.

“Obviously,” Kross said sarcastically. “I hope this isn’t a rude question, but how is it you can *see* an aura?”

“Not rude at all,” Terra smiled. “Ask me later, though. I’ve just noticed I’ve been talking so much that I’m starting to sound like a master.”

“I see,” Kross said, thoughtfully. “I’ll ask you at another time, then.”

Kyle’s thoughts lingered on what she had said. *Was there something important about their auras?* It sounded almost as vague and prophetic as Gatekeeper October. But he was known as the Oracle. He was supposed to give you vague prophecies. Terra the Gargoyle could just see that their auras were *different*. That hardly seemed like something to base predictions on. *Then again, what do I know?*

“You haven’t told us what your aura is like,” Kross looked up from his notepad. “Perhaps there are six at this table instead of five?”

“You’re definitely hitting on me now, aren’t you, Monk?” Terra said. “That’s like asking me what my underwear looks like? As luck would have it, I’m not wearing any so I won’t answer.”

“Ah, ah, ha,” Kevin burst out into a raspy laughter that was completely unique to him. He usually only smiled when he thought something was funny. Garnet and Kyle both followed suit once they got a look at Kross and Rayne, who had both went completely scarlet in the face.

“Seriously, Terra,” Rayne muttered. “It’s not...lady like.”

“Sort of the point, my dear,” Terra sighed. “In all seriousness, Kross. Including me, there are six. That’s what makes me even more certain.”

“I see,” Kross said, his face returning to its normal stoic calm. “I suppose that’s worth keeping in mind.”

“I think so,” Terra agreed.

“Ah,” Kevin nudged Kross in the ribs, then wrote on his notepad. “Master Logan has asked me to inform you that the Masters have decided that it is no longer necessary for you to make a visit today. They feel confident that the information they have retrieved is all that there is to retrieve. Please enjoy the rest of your day. And have fun tonight. Meet a girl or a guy or both and ask them about their underwear. Also grade your friends higher. They’re the best of the best.”

“Well, there goes the rest of my day,” Kross said. “And if Master Logan said that last part I’ll eat your socks after a climb.”

“Ah,” Kevin said before writing. “I climb barefoot.”

Kyle laughed. It might have seemed odd for Kevin to tell them a message he’d received from a Master that wasn’t near them, but Master Logan sat on second level looking down at them. He must have worded the message to Kevin knowing his eyes could pick the words and as they came from his mouth. His eyes were much better than a normal person’s. He could read a whisper from a mile away.

“Well, if your all free,” Rayne said standing up. “Let’s go do something. We’re allowed to stay for the party tonight. We might as well spend the day together, too.”

The rest of the group stood making their way toward the door. He had planned to do some more training before the night, but hanging out with his friends wouldn't be a bad way to spend his time. It was just then that Kyle thought of something.

“Wait a second,” Kyle said to Terra. “Neither of you have mentioned why you're here with Rayne?”

“Ah,” Kevin nodded in agreement.

“Oh, that,” Rayne blushed. “Well, she's my...guardian.”

“That I am,” Terra said cheerfully. “That I am.”

4 – The Work of Masters

A few hours later, Kyle, along with most of the tyros of Soul Gate Academy, were on the practice grounds waiting for the night's events to begin in their swimming wear. They sat around an area the size of two soccer fields, filling the hundreds of large towels that had been laid out for them. It was a warm cloudless night and the first stars began filling the sky as though being spread by a paintbrush. Kyle had never noticed before how they seemed to pop into view with all the effort of a flick of wrist. He laid back on his towel, ignoring the chaotic symphony of hundreds of teenagers talking to each other. He even blocked out his friends, who seemed to be in a conversation about the classes Rayne would be taking.

Something about looking at the stars just *felt* different than usual. It was like he was floating amongst clouds and drifting higher by the moment. Each star drew in his focus, vying for his attention with their luminescent posturing against the subtle cosmic vastness. His gaze never stayed on one star for very long. *It's beautiful.* His eyes wandered as it solidified into a fuller image. He could tell that this was not the sky of his childhood, but when he tried to remember the sight of that distant sky, nothing came to mind except for an empty blackness. That felt wrong, but perhaps he'd just never paid that much attention to it before. That was likely. He wasn't even sure why he looked at the stars so intently now. Shouldn't he have been talking to his friends?

A loud sudden beep went off right next to Kyle's ear.

“What the—” Kyle sat up so hard he almost lifted off the ground. He scanned everyone in sight. Had someone played a prank on him? No one else seemed to be reacting to it. They were all still locked in conversations. *BEEP!*

“Gggrrr—brz brz,” A sound like a static radio echoed directly in Kyle’s ears. “—ber—sszz—you can find—ggrzz—”

“You can find?” Kyle said, quietly. “What?” He narrowed his eyes, continue his search for he would be pranker. *How were they doing it?* But no matter how hard he looked, he only saw a crowd full of people who were thoroughly ignoring him. That was odd in its own way. He could usually expect to find a glare or two in a crowd this big. *Am I’m hearing things?*

Another loud buzz, “Brzz—last—doh—rzz.” It was followed by a tiny *pop!* Then complete silence. And then the noise of talking teenagers, again.

Kyle kept looking around. Someone was obviously poking fun at him, snickering at his obvious confusion. *Who the hell is doing that? I—*

“Kyle?” Terra sat next to him. “You feel like you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

“I feel?” Kyle asked.

“Well, I would have said ‘you look’, but I don’t think you would have believed me.” She waved a hand in front of her eyes, smirking.

“Right,” Kyle smiled. “Sorry, I’m just—well I thought I heard something.”

“You heard something?”

Kyle hesitated. He didn’t exactly think his little episode—or whatever it really was—should be kept it secret, but he didn’t know Terra very well. What if this made her think less of

him somehow? He found that he didn't want that. But if there was anyone that might have heard what he just had, it was probably Terra.

"It sounded like someone was trying to talk to me with a broken walkie talkie or maybe they were using one that was too far away to work."

"A walkie talkie?" Terra tilted her head in a very dog-like fashion.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, realizing that she probably had no idea what a walkie talkie was. "It's a device that people from my realm can use to communicate over far distances. I don't really know if there is anything like it in this realm."

"And they decided to call it a walkie talkie?"

"Yeah—I'm not actually sure if that's its official name. It's just what people call them."

"I see," Terra pursed her lips. "Kevin's notepad can be used over distances. Is it like that?"

"Sort of," Kyle said. "So, one person talks into this little box device and the other person can hear them talk out of a matching device somewhere else."

"I see," Terra nodded. "And someone used this walkie talkie to talk to you now?"

"Well, no," Kyle said.

"Then—"

"I heard a voice that sounded *like* it was coming from one, but I don't have one of those devices on me." Kyle had never actually even held a walkie talkie before, but making that point

now seemed like it would be anything but helpful. “I’m probably just going crazy.” He tried to sound like he was making a joke.

“Maybe,” Terra said without a hint of amusement. “I didn’t hear anything, though. Is your hearing particularly good?”

“I think it’s okay,” Kyle answered.

“Helpful,” Terra rolled her eyes. “Can you hear what those two over there are talking about?” She pointed at a couple of young men sitting opposite of them on the other side of the large opening. The pair looked like they were whispering to each other.

Kyle shook his head.

“Did you just shake your head?”

Kyle almost nodded, “Yeah—sorry.”

“I *can* hear them,” Terra said. “I think I would have noticed something like a voice coming out of nowhere near you. Maybe it was a Thoughtbend? That would at least explain why I couldn’t hear it.”

“You think that’s possible?”

“No, actually. I mean it’s possible, but without directly touching you it’d be one of the most difficult things a person could try doing with a key. Not to mention dangerous. All the mind unlocks are like that. Aurabending is somewhat different but—damn it!”

Kyle jumped! “What’s wrong?”

“I sound like a Master,” Terra hissed. “Ugh.”

“That’s bad?” Kyle said, instantly regretting it.

“Yes, it’s bad,” She said, running her hands through her hair. “It’s—ah! Forget it. Don’t worry about the details. You’re probably just crazy. Not that you should worry about it.”

“Right,” Kyle sighed. “Any reasoning for that?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s not a little crazy. But for your case specifically, I think it’s likely you’re stressed and imagining voices. You’d be surprised just how many people start hearing voices when life becomes stressful. Just try to relax and not worry about it too much. If things persist, ask the Grandmaster about it. He’ll help.”

Kyle didn’t really have a response for that. He was hearing things that no one else could. That wasn’t normal, even in Endera. He was, however, oddly comforted after having talked to Terra. She listened in a way that *was* like a master, but friendlier. More familiar. *Kind of like an older sister*. It felt odd to admit that, but it felt right. Somehow. *Maybe I am just a little stressed out*. He let out a deep breath. “So, what were they talking about?” he asked.

“Oh them,” Terra grinned impishly. “They’re planning some trip over break. Going to the Old World or something, I don’t know. I stopped listening.” Her grin grew wider. “Now the couple a few rows behind us, they’ve got this steamy plan to sneak away and partake in some adventurous activities in their dorm room. Too bad they’ll never get away with it.”

“How do you know?” Kyle asked trying to sound nonchalant, even though he could feel his cheeks warm up. He immediately imagined sneaking off somewhere with Garnet and deemed this information too vital not to gather.

“The Masters have this place locked down. Three of them are hanging back near the castle for the exclusive purpose of catching the naughties. And the rest of them are prowling around us. I'd be surprised if a mouse could get in or out of this place.”

“You certainly see a lot,” Kross said, suddenly. It looked like he'd only been paying attention to the most recent bit of their conversation. “Are you sure you're really a blind girl?” To anyone else, it might have seemed like a rude comment, but knowing Kross, he was just being blunt. Kyle suspected that it might even be a joke.

“Girl?!” Terra's eyebrows angled, but the anger never fully reached her eyes. She must have known what Kross was about. “I'm a woman, thank you very much. Kevin defend my honor.”

“Ah,” Kevin wrote on his notepad. “You'd have to come for me to defend.”

They burst out into laughter, but Kevin didn't escape a perfectly well thrown towel to his head from Terra.

“How do you do it,” Kross pressed her.

“Mostly, it's vibrations,” Terra pressed her hands to ground and was silent for a moment before continuing. “Each person's aura emits a near constant and unique vibration. Those special vibrations cover the world, mixing and shifting as we live. I'm able to unlock a mixture of modifications, amplifications, and aurabending that give me the ability to feel auras as unique sensations. It makes things easy to distinguish and I'm able to navigate the world because of it.

“To put it simply, I feel auras rather than see them. Most people think of auras like colored smoke that bubbles around an individual, unique to each person. To me, they are more like textures and patterns that send me barrage of different sensations.”

“That’s fascinating,” Kross took out his notebooks and began writing in his notebook that he always carried with him. “Is it something you learned or was it inherent?”

“Some of both actually. Mostly learned, though. I wasn’t born blind.”

“What happens if you’re alone in an area with little life?” He could write faster than some people could read.

“If I lose the auras, I can get around with my own, but it isn’t as effective. It’s—” Terra squealed. “I did it again! Damn it, I really do sound like a master.”

“Right,” Kross finished scribbling in his notebook. “You explained it well enough. I’m not sure why you dislike sounding like a master.”

Terra answered by wadding up another towel and throwing it at Kross this time. He caught it without much effort.

A giant fireball flew across the sky to land in the center of the gathering of tyros. In its center was Grandmaster Dante, leaning on his cane. The fire was draped over him in a translucent form that made him glow rather than appear to be made of fire. Kyle had seen the Grandmaster work his fire on numerous occasions during training, but this was stunning. His beard and hair glowed like heated iron. His eyes were embers and even his clothes took on the golden brilliances of flame.

“My tyros,” Dante bellowed to a now silent crowd. “You’ve worked hard this year. And you’ve made me proud to be Grandmaster of Soul Gate Academy.” His flames slowly began expanding around him. “There can be no denying that you’ve all grown stronger, smarter, and...hungrier. The food bill alone this year was nearly twice what it was last—”

“—Ahem,” Master Yvette coughed loudly from behind a group of students. She could be seen with her arms crossed, staring daggers at her husband.

“My point,” Dante smiled, “is that you’ve all grown into fine young men and women. Despite each of you having your own personal battles and difficulties throughout the year, each of you have brought focus and determination into your lessons. The Masters and I cannot thank you enough for all the effort you’ve given us, but allow us to try.”

Dante raised a hand and the fire that’d been surrounding him gathered into it. He twisted his cane with his other hand and it all formed into a sphere. The sphere then floated high into the sky, giving a bright light to the entire area. In that instance, every Master of Soul Gate Academy was now in a line with the Grandmaster.

Each of them dressed in their white uniforms. In total, there were more than two dozen masters. Kyle knew most of them by appearance, but there were few that he was sure he’d never seen before. That didn't seem right. How could he have missed seeing a master throughout the whole year? He should have at least seen them during a meal time. The bigger mystery was finding out what they taught. Since he’d never seen them, he guessed it had to do with the Eternal Title tyros. *Advanced classes, probably.*

The masters, along with the Grandmaster, suddenly bowed to the students. Kyle might have thought it an odd gesture before coming to Endera, but with this year of learning, fighting,

and working harder than he ever had in his life, he understood the weight of those bows. These men and women before him were more than just teachers. They were leaders in their knowledge. Proficient enough and talented enough to earn recognition outside of Soul Gate Academy. And yet, they stayed to pass on what they knew. For them to acknowledge tyros even with something as small as a bow was recognition worth having. It was a treasure.

Kyle, and he was sure the entire school felt the same way, swelled with pride.

“Now enough of the serious stuff,” the Grandmaster said standing straight with all the masters following suit. In another breath, they all disappeared again. “Please enjoy tonight. Have fun. No fights. And of course, eat your fill! This may be the last night we have together this year, but let’s make it one to remember until we see each other again.”

As soon as the Grandmaster stopped talking, two masters jumped high into the air. Master Proculus long blonde hair and scar across his cheek and Master Julius with his distinctive sideburns were floating in the air reaching into their own MicroDimensions. From them, they each pulled large wooden poles. They threw them like javelins the moment they were free of the MicroDimensions, sticking them in the ground around the students to stand like pillars. *They’re torches*, Kyle realized.

“They’ve got muscle,” Terra said approvingly. “A girl can appreciate that.”

Kyle noticed that Rayne and Garnet both nodded their approval. He’d have to work on some strength training.

Grandmaster Dante sent the fireball moving in a giant circle, lighting the torches along the way. They worked unbelievably well, lighting the area as though they were stadium lights and changing the temperature from pleasantly warm to a downright toasty. *How do they do that?*

Master Theodosia stepped into the spotlight next. She had long black hair tucked behind her ears and three beastly scars that ran the length of her face. Kyle saw little of her since he didn't take her class, but Garnet and Kross spoke highly of her. Theodosia smiled as she twisted her key. The air next to her immediately distorted as she opened a BioDimension. The giant snout of a lizard popped out of it. It was followed by the body of an enormous lutumdragon, dragon-like lizard that looked like it was entirely made from mud. Kyle was familiar with the creature since Kross regularly liked to summon one that was a much smaller version of it.

"I didn't know they could get this big," Kyle said, his eyes widening.

"They can get bigger," Kross said. "Master Theodosia likely didn't summon forth an adult because it would probably accidentally step on us."

Kyle gulped. This lutumdragon was easily bigger than any elephant he'd ever seen in a zoo. Each step it took sent a little shockwave through the ground and left imprints. He felt the familiar pang of jealousy course through him as he looked at the giant creature. He didn't have the talent to unlock BioDimensions, but the idea of having a companion or two to summon at will greatly appealed to him.

Master Theodosia whispered a command and the lutumdragon tilted his head back, letting out a thunderous roar. Then it jumped, tilting itself as it came back down to nose dive into the ground as though it were water. It disappeared for a moment, reappearing when its monstrous jaw protruded from the dirt and chomped down to engulf it. *It's eating*, Kyle realized. He'd seen Kross' lutumdragon do a similar thing in the King's Temple. This was on a larger scale, each bite leaving a refrigerator sized chunk of dirt missing. It also didn't magically reappear seconds later like the platform in the temple had. Before long, the entire area before the tyros was a

rectangle hole with walls and floor that looked remarkably smooth. The lutumdragon, finished its task, let out another loud roar before lumbering back to Master Theodosia and disappearing back into the BioDimension.

Five other master jumped down into the hole with giant spatula like shovels. They each took off in different directions, using the spatulas to spread a light-colored clay all along the walls and on the floor of the pool. They moved, aided by unlocking Amplifications, like whirlwinds. Whenever they came close to each other they would tumble, doing wild flips and pushing each other off into other directions. The walls and floor of their pool in progress were covered in the clay in less than five minutes.

One of the Masters Kyle had never seen appeared next to Theodosia. He was a head shorter than her and had short mossy green hair. Two gold loop earrings hung from each ear.

“Master Uru,” Garnet supplied before Kyle could even ask. “He doesn’t come down from the Master’s Facility often. Rumor is that he is too dedicated to his dimension research, but no one ever seems to have specifics on it.”

“The more I learn about this place, the more it seems I don’t know,” Kyle said.

“Pretty much that way with everything,” Terra said. “Take it from a genius like me. That’s life.”

Kyle didn’t have much time to reflect on that, for Uru opened a BioDimension. Hundreds of tiny squirrel-like creatures began pouring out of it. Their bodies and limbs were wooden and their tails were thick green bushes, which made them look like bonsai trees that could move on all fours. They horded into the middle of the giant pool. When they were all finally massed together, they reached into their mouths. Their cheeks were bulging to twice the size of their

heads. From their cheek pouches, they each pulled a single sparkling gem that ranged from every imaginable shade of blue or green. If it made a difference in the size of their cheeks, Kyle couldn't see it.

They took off, moving together in a giant circle that made them look like a short rotating forest. It slowly became wider as they spread out and, as it did, the little creatures could be seen laying down their gems only to stick their little hands into their mouths and pull out another one. They pressed gem after gem into the clay, setting them with such precision that they had selected lighter colored gems to form into the letters *S O G A* across the bottom of the pool. The artistry was impressive enough to make many tyros gasp in delight. Kyle grinned in appreciation. *Cool.*

It didn't take the bonsai-squirrels long to finish the rest of the pool. This included a surrounding rim that consisted of smooth grey pebbles.

"Tyros," Uru bellowed. His voice was a deep rasp that carried well, but sounded like he didn't use his voice often. "Hold out a hand with it palm open to the sky." Every single tyro obeyed with little hesitation.

The bonsai-squirrels suddenly rushed into the crowd of tyros. Screams of jovial excitement and surprise followed. The little creatures were climbing each tyro and onto their hands to leave something in their hands. The one that found Kyle zoomed on to his arm in a single breath. The touch of it was so light that it felt like someone had just run a feather across him leading to his hand. It dropped a sky blue gem the size of a golf ball into his palm before scurrying away. Once everyone had been given one they lost no time in finding their way back to their dimension.

"What is this?" Kyle asked, holding the ball up close to his eye.

“They’re aura gems,” Kross answered. “Just hold on to them and they start glowing the same color as your aura.”

“Ah,” Kevin nodded, writing on his pad. “My brothers and I used to sleep with buckets of these next to us. The next night we’d go into the woods and throw them at each other for hours.”

“Seems like that would hurt,” Rayne pressed her own aura gem to her cheek. It was beginning to have a deep rouge glow. “Especially if it hit you in the face.”

“We modified our skin,” Kevin said with his notepad. “Hardly felt a thing.” He smiled baring his teeth. His own aura gem started to glow fluorescent green. “I think these are probably just for finding underwater, though. My brothers and I used to do that, too.”

“Sounds childish,” Garnet grinned, eyeing her own gem that glowed blue. “That being said, I’m sure I’ll find mine before any of you. Well, probably not you, Terra.”

Before anyone could answer her challenge, Grandmaster Dante rained fire into the pool. It spread out covering the bottom before climbing up the walls. It reached the top, only to completely dissipate. Steam rose from the gems which had grown to fill the gaps. Kyle guessed that the fire had somehow caused a reaction that effectively sealed pool to prevent leaks. He again found himself impressed with the gems. Were they capable of this type of manipulation naturally or had they been created?

His attention was drawn to the beach when a giant ruby red wall of aura was erected to tower over them. Master Helen stood beneath it, turning her key in rapid succession. The wall grew wider and taller becoming the most massive use of aura Kyle had ever witnessed. Helen bent the wall in, aiming the point of it directly at the pool. With another turn it stretched, morphing into a giant tube that reached the pool. Kyle eyes widen in surprise. *Isn't that water*

too cold? Three other masters stood nearby, each creating fine nets out of aura of their own. They worked on placing those nets in front of the of the funnel that Master Helen had created.

BOOM! A bright light erupted over the dark ocean, but beyond that nothing could be seen. It shook the ground, like dynamite had been set off. *BOOM!* Another light and another shake. *BOOM!* This explosion was followed by a sudden burst of air that came from behind the tyros, like it was being sucked toward the ocean. It was followed by the water, which although dark could clearly be seen receding from the beach.

Everyone stared in silence, waiting for what they knew would come. Kyle could barely keep himself from dropping his jaw wide open. *The masters created a tidal wave?* This wasn't just a simple show of strength. If the aura wall wasn't there, it was enough to destroy all of Soul Gate Academy. It was enough to kill scores of people and level towns. A sudden vision of Dilu Village being hit by a crushing wave entered Kyle's mind. *Would they be okay?* The town wasn't so far from them. His eyes fell on Rayne. She was grinning, looking awestruck. *Of course, they would be okay.* He almost wanted to chastise himself for even questioning it. *Grandmaster Dante wouldn't allow harm to come to a town just for some pool party.*

A loud hiss broke the silence as a dark swollen mass of water moved toward them. Moments later, it crashed into the aura wall with a loud smack to announce its arrival. The walls funneled the Cold Ocean water into the pool while the nets worked as filters. It gushed through the tunnel to blast into the pool. Splashes of icy cold water hit some students, but it all stayed surpassingly contained. Unsurprisingly, the tidal wave's thousands of gallons filled up the pool almost instantly. Master Helen sealed the tunnel at a wave from one of the other masters. Her aura wall bowed in the middle as it took on the added pressure of the whole wave, but it was short lived as the wave began receding back to rejoin the ocean and it was calm once again.

Kyle let out a breath, he hadn't known he'd been holding. He felt smaller than he'd ever had before. There would have been no fight for him to win against that wave. It could have come beyond the wall of aura and he would've been trapped, tumbling underneath water with hundreds of others not knowing which way was up or down. The very real possibility of made him shiver. He was not living in a world of games. Endera was home to things and people that could kill him in less time than he could hold his breath. Perhaps it was one last lesson the masters were trying to instill in them before they left for break.

"It's turning to ice," Garnet pointed to the top layer of water which had started to form a white sheet of ice.

"How?" Kyle asked. She shrugged.

"That's what happens if the water gets separated from the Cold Ocean for too long," Rayne answered. "It's likely the result of some ancient lock placed on it."

"Crazy," Kyle muttered.

"Woah," Garnet pointed up. Other tyros were doing the same.

Above them, Grandmaster Dante was on one of the giant torches they'd placed earlier. He stood within its flames without so much as a bead of sweat falling down his forehead. In front of him over the pool was an orb of white fire the size of a beach ball that grew, becoming more translucent as it did. Grandmaster Dante often liked to use this fire while meditating. Its nature was different. It could touch anyone without burning them, but this, Kyle knew, was a fine line. If Dante wanted, he could change its nature with a simple twist of his wrist. And that white fire would turn black. Kyle had never been shown black fire, but he'd been told that it could burn anything it touched to ashes and was next to impossible to extinguish. This level of control was

the true mark of mastery over Synchronicity Fire. Kyle hoped that he would one day master lightning half that well.

When the orb was the size of a bus, Dante lowered it into the pool creating a hole in the top layer of ice. It didn't fizzle out when it was lowered, but instead allowed water to flow into its center. Dante put it to spinning as he submerged it completely into the pool. It took to creating a whirlpool quickly, breaking up the remaining ice. When the ice also began melting it was evident the water was getting warmer.

"Throw those gems in, tyros!" Dante shouted.

The aura gems flew from the students' hands before the words had entirely left Dante's mouth. It looked like dozens of colored comets flying into the pool with little splashes. The whirlpool grabbed them, throwing them in a swift tumble that ensured they'd be nowhere close to where they'd all thrown them in. Garnet might have a harder time at finding it than she thought. Kyle smiled as the pool stilled. Through the crystal-clear water was a sparkling array of hundreds of different colored gems. If the masters had wanted to impress them with fine workmanship, they'd done it.

A few masters walked around the pool inspecting it and turning a key every so often. Kyle guessed they were doing some final touches.

"Tyros," Dante dropped from his standing place on the torch. He went over a quick set of rules that amounted to no fighting and keep it safe. Some students were shifting closer to the pool with each word. "And lastly, but not least...think fast."

What? Some half-screams erupted from everywhere around him.

“Make sure you keep your lightning locked up tight,” the familiar voice of Proculus said from behind him.

Kyle was grabbed in a wrestler’s hug and unceremoniously catapulted into the pool. He managed to get his head around just in time to see his friends laughing as he flailed about in the air. There were others who’d come to the same fate and were falling toward the pool. Together, they landed with wild splashes.

When his head popped above the perfectly warm water, Kyle saw his friends and what appeared to be the rest of the academy jumping in of their own volition. It then proceeded to be one of the most enjoyable nights of his life.

Chapter 5 – Titans Enter

It was after lunch when Kevin surprised Kyle with the news that he was welcome to spend break staying at his grandmother's home with him and his family. Kross, Kevin, and Kyle walked behind the Garnet, Rayne, and Terra as they all made their way outside to take the ShiftDoor test. The masters had scheduled it for the afternoon, knowing everyone was likely to sleep in after a late night.

“I can stay with you?” Kyle wasn't sure he'd heard his speech pad correctly.

“Ah,” Kevin began writing. “And Kross has given me his word that he will be there after a short visit to his parents.”

Kross nodded, but didn't elaborate. He'd been quiet all morning. His focus was fine-tuned to the point of insanity. Kyle was certain that if there was only one person that passed today, it would be Kross the Monk.

“But is it okay?” Kyle tried not to sound too hopeful. He'd been trying to avoid facing the dread he felt all morning when he noticed that many of the tyros had left SoGA as of this morning. “I don't have any money.”

“Money?” Kevin's notepad said. “What would you need that for?”

“Ya know,” Kyle's face went warm. “To pay for food and stuff.”

“You needn't worry,” Kevin smiled. “Everything will be taken care of. My grandmother is very generous. I have told her about you and she has assured me that you will be taken care of. Plus,” he added, with a boyish grin. “I'm sort of her favorite. After I told her about you, she

made it clear that she wouldn't take no for an answer. I must warn you, though. I think she believes she is getting a new grandson to add to her collection."

Kyle was taken aback, but he wanted to smile at the last part. It sounded like something Nana would have said. "You sure? I don't want to impose."

"Ah," Kevin waved the idea away, not even bothering to write out a reply.

"Thanks, Kevin," Kyle said, quietly. He'd been ready for a break with only the masters as company, convincing himself that it would be a good time to focus on his training. Now, given the chance to spend the time with friends, it somehow made him feel lighter.

Kevin placed his hand on his pad to write a reply, but at the last second decided against it. Instead, he slapped Kyle's shoulder. "Ah," he said fondly. There was much Kyle felt in that unsaid moment, but mostly, it was affection. He was fortunate to know and call Kevin the Bison his friend. Kevin left them to join Rayne and Terra who parted from Garnet. They'd be watching them to take the test from afar.

Garnet, Kross, and Kyle joined the tyros waiting near where the pool had been last night. It'd been emptied of water and filled with dirt while they slept. Now, it could have just been an area waiting for the grass to grow back. More joined them as they waited. When it was time, they'd be sorted into small groups and then attempt to open three doors under the supervision of a master.

"There are a lot of people here," Kross said. It was the first full sentence he'd said all day. "I'm not even sure if there were half this many last year."

“Probably has to do with the rumor about having to be able to open ShiftDoors to enter the Lunar Tournament.” Garnet said.

“Nonsense,” Kross muttered before falling back into his determined concentration.

“What if it is required to enter?” Kyle asked Garnet.

“It won’t be,” Garnet sighed. “A person’s abilities are what is going to matter. Opening a ShiftDoor isn’t a true indication of anything. It ends up having to do more with imagining something to be real. It’s a little harder to grasp for some people and there have been plenty with great skill who have trouble with ShiftDoors.” She directed this last statement at Kross, who pointedly ignored her. She sighed, again.

“Well regardless of the tournament, I’m sure we’ll all pass,” Kyle tried to sound more confident than he felt. Garnet just nodded.

A few minutes later, the masters showed up to separate the tyros into groups. Kyle, Kross, and Garnet were all placed with Master Helen who helped with sorting, which meant they’d have to wait even longer to start. Kyle had been hoping to be placed with Master Proculus, but he was absent this morning. Something about that seemed off to Kyle. Proculus was always one to partake in these types of duties.

He was surprised to see Elleneya the Gatekeeper July heading their way. She was dressed in a grey skirt and green top. She also wore her white witch’s hat with its dozens of dangling keys. It hid most of her bushy brow hair. She’d been popular the night before dressed in a scantily clad bikini that most agreed might not exactly be the best for swimming. Her real scandal, according to the gossip, was the very public attention she bestowed upon Master Proculus. From what Kyle could tell, the two got along well and he didn’t see why it seemed to

peak so many people's interest. *Well, she is nice-looking, I suppose.* Her current presence did interest Kyle since it made Proculus' absence even more odd. Since coming to Soul Gate Academy, Elleneya was hardly ever seen without him.

"You," she pointed at Kyle as she moved closer.

"Yes, Gatekeeper?" Kyle still wasn't sure what the protocol was with addressing the Gatekeepers.

"Call me Ellen," she hissed. "Gatekeeper is what you call old geezers like October. Beautiful ladies like Garnet and I are to be called by our first names." She winked at Garnet, who smiled, but looked as confused as Kyle felt.

"Okay, Ellen," Kyle said slowly. "Is there something you need me for?"

"Yes," Ellen grabbed one of her keys, smiling from ear to ear. "You're the reason for our first fight." Everyone around them, Kyle finally noticed, was watching. He, he realized just then, was used to it.

"Uh," he took a step back. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't be! I won the fight." She pointed the key at Kyle and turned it.

Kyle felt a sudden click in his head that sounded off like a gong, shaking him entirely. Then the world tilted on its side. There was a shout, but it was unintelligible. He blinked and everything went dark. He hadn't lost consciousness, though. Of that, he was certain. Instead, it felt like he'd been transported to a different place where the light was just gone. *But I haven't moved.* His heart pounded in his ears as the minutes passed. Or was it hours? He tried to move, but his arms didn't work, nor did his legs. He couldn't even tell if he was breathing. In the

distance, a soft blue light floated, slowly falling from high in the sky. *Why does it look so familiar?*

He blinked again and the world came back into view with Garnet standing over him.

“Kyle,” her voice sounded frantic. “Kyle, are you okay?”

He was flat on the ground, looking at her with dizzy eyes. He stood, wobbling slightly before straightening up. The pounding in his head was still there, but beyond that he felt fine.

“Kyle,” Garnet grabbed him by the shoulders.

“I’m fine,” he said. “What happened?”

Behind Garnet, Master Helen was yelling at Elleneya the Gatekeeper July, who was muttering apologies and nodding her head. The rest of the tyros had backed away, forming a semi-circle around them. Terra, Rayne, and Kevin were moving toward them.

“You three will stay put,” Master Helen, said crossly. “Go back to sitting down.”

The three of them stopped in their tracks, then obeyed.

“How long was I out?” Kyle found it surprising that the three of them had waited till now to move.

“Only a few seconds,” she answered him. Her big blue eyes were staring into his like they were searching for something. “You pretty much just fell and got back up. They started yelling at her as soon as you were on the ground. *A few seconds...but it had felt longer than that. Much longer.*”

“I didn’t hurt him,” Ellen insisted pointed at Kyle. “Look!”

Helen turned to find Kyle standing. He tried to reassure her with a grin, but this just seemed to increase the worry lined in her face.

“How do you feel?” She asked.

“Fine?” Kyle answered. Helen raised her eyebrows, obviously doubting him. “Really, I’m fine, Master. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Nothing came over you,” Ellen explained. “I just unlocked a lock in your head. It’s been there since I first met you. I told Procu that I had to open it or it could kill you. I think.”

“What?” Kyle said. Master Helen, Kross, and Garnet all said it with him.

“That’s enough,” Grandmaster Dante walked into the circle tyros. Kross trailed behind him. “This is not the place to go into the details.”

“I am a Gatekeeper,” Elleneya pursed her lips together. “I thought it best to act promptly.”

“Promptness is fine,” Dante nodded. “Your choice of location is what is dubious here.”

Elleneya didn’t seem to realize that people were watching them until that moment. She sighed, conceding. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Perhaps,” Dante said in an obvious effort to move the conversation elsewhere, “you would be so kind as to check in on Master Proculus? He went to meet the King at one of the Shift Door points. I had expected him to return by now. I doubt there is anything to worry about, but it’d be best to be sure.”

“Say no more,” Ellen turned to Kyle. “Sorry for the...lack of manners. My parents must’ve forgot a few lessons with me.”

“More than a few,” Master Helen huffed, heatedly.

“It *was* a few hundred years ago,” Elleneya shrugged. “So, you’re probably right.”

Kyle’s mouth flew open. *Hundreds?* She hardly looked like she could pass for thirty. No one else seemed even faintly surprised by this.

“Forgive me,” Master Helen who always looked stern, dropped her gaze. “I know you’ve given up much. You deserve my respect and you have it.”

“No forgiving necessary,” Ellen said, wistfully. “I know it probably looked more nefarious than it should have. That was part of the fun, after all.” She made as if it to go, but then turned back to Kyle, edging closer to whisper into his ear. “Boy from the other realm, Kyle the Static. I think you are important, somehow. Everything seems to have you near it in one way or another. Stay safe.” She backed away, but Kyle grabbed her arm.

“I’m not,” he said, letting her go abruptly. “Can’t you tell by just looking at me? I’m nobody.”

“Nobody, huh?” Her eyes lit up. “He said the same thing.” She didn’t say another word, striding to the academy’s exit to disappear into the forest. Everyone watched her go. She was, after all, a gatekeeper.

“Time for the test!” Grandmaster Dante shouted, making everyone jump. He turned and whispered something to Kyle. “If you really do feel fine, I see no reason why you shouldn’t continue. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Kyle nodded, “I’m fine, Grandmaster.”

“Very well. Come see me when this is all done, okay?” He took off before Kyle could reply, shouting other commands for Masters to begin the ShiftDoor test.

“Line up!” Master Helen shouted at a nearby group of tyros. “You three, back of the line.”

Kross, Garnet, and Kyle gather with the group of tyros, forming at the back of the group that was muttering quite lively about Kyle as he walked by. Kyle opted automatically to be last in line and neither Garnet nor Kross objected. Master Helen began calling tyros up one at a time to unlock ShiftDoors.

“I have a lock *in* my head?” Kyle said. The words felt hollow to say aloud and even worse to contemplate. *Who put it there and why?*

“It’s not as uncommon as you’d think,” Garnet said. “I believe when I became a reader, I was told they removed two locks from mine.”

“Really?” Kyle’s eyes widened. “What about you, Kross?”

“None,” Kross rubbed his hands together nervously. He was studying every person as they did their test. Two had failed already. “Not to my knowledge, at least. Now really isn’t the time to discuss this, though. We should focus.”

“You’re focused enough for the three of us,” Kyle sighed.

“He’s right, Kyle,” Garnet put a hand on his shoulder. Her hand felt warm. “Try not to think about it too much, right now. Just concentrate on the ShiftDoor test.” It looked like she was about to lean in to kiss him, but she didn’t. He wanted her to, but there was enough going on without the added drama of people freaking out that the boy from the other realm was being

kissed by one of the most well-liked girls in the academy. People just might try to kill him if they knew. *That's the last thing I need.*

“All right,” Kyle agreed.

They waited in silence, watching the rest of the group take their test one by one. Many were passing, opening three ShiftDoors, but almost just as many failed to. Master Helen watched closely, marking a notepad and saying very little except for “Next,” or “Good job,” or “Don’t worry, you can try again next year.” Kross cringed every time she said that last one to disheartened students. Dread began to set in as Kyle’s turn came closer.

“Next,” Master Helen said to Kross. He was the first of the three of them.

Master Helen had barely given him the nod to begin, when three doors popped into existence. They were approved almost just as quickly. He had passed.

“That was quick,” Garnet said.

Kross’ face went red, but it was easy to see that he was pleased. “Guess I didn’t have to worry, too much.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” Master Helen shooed him away. “But discuss it later. We’re the last group and Grandmaster Dante would like to lock the school from ShiftDoors as soon as possible, so hurry up out of the way. Come on, Scarlet Needle. You’re next.”

Garnet passed with little issue, but she opened the doors one at a time like she was supposed to. *I knew she would pass.* Kyle smiled, feeling proud of her. She offered him an encouraging grin as he stepped up to do his test.

“You sure you’re feeling fine, Static?” Master Helen asked. “You can always wait to take the test next year.”

“I’m fine, Master,” Kyle let out a long breath. “Can I start?”

She nodded and he held his hand as though he had a key in it. He turned it, concentrating on the Rayne’s home first. He figured this would be the hardest one because it was technically the furthest. There was a slight pressure on his on the back of his eyes as a crème colored ShiftDoor slid into existence in front of him. It hadn’t felt bad or even uncomfortable, but more like he was trying to look up and down at the same time. No one had warned him that it would feel like that.

Master Helen inspected it, “Good.”

He let out a long breath. *Two more to go.* He began picturing a second ShiftDoor that would lead to outside of Dilu Village. He turned his hand. This time a lime green door formed. The same pressure pressed on his eyes. *Weird.*

Master Helen inspected the new door. “Good,” she said with an approving nod.

One more. Kyle felt his chest swelling as the nervousness subsided. The next ShiftDoor would lead to Arragin Mountain. This was the first place he’d ever seen in Endera and he remembered it well. And so again, he concentrated, picturing the mountainside and its wild beauty of greens and trickling streams. He turned his hand, and as he did, the memory of a soft blue light floating high in a dark sky entered his mind. *That’s not right.*

A large black door appeared and the slight pressure he’d expected to affect his eyes came in sudden intense jolt. It still didn’t hurt, but he was sure he’d ever get used to it. The door was

twelve feet high and looked like it'd been smear with charcoal. In its center was large white circle with a triangle drawn in red with two lines that ran through it as though to cross it out. It looked like it'd been drawn in blood.

“I don't think this is right,” he muttered, trying not to sound too disappointed with himself. He hoped that since it was a ShiftDoor, it would count anyways, though. He just needed to find out where it led to because he was certain that it didn't lead to Arragin Mountain.

“Kyle,” Master Helen said in a tight, nervous whisper. It was so unlike her, Kyle would have thought someone else had spoken if he hadn't seen her lips move. “Why did you summon this ShiftDoor?” She took a careful step back. That was when it finally dawned on Kyle that something was very wrong.

She was scared.

“I just,” he immediately wanted to apologize, but wasn't sure why. “I was trying to open a door to Arragin Mountain.”

“This does *not* go to Arragin Mountain,” she took another step back. “Get back. Away from the door, now!” Kyle backed away. He was the only nearby since he was the last to take the test. He still wasn't sure what exactly he'd done, but his heart raced.

Suddenly, a loud *BANG* came from the other side of the door. There were no hinges that it could shake, but Kyle felt it in the ground. Behind Kyle, there were sudden shouts. He kept his eyes on the door. *BANG!*

“Everyone back away! Logan gather all the nearby masters. Helen throw up your wall. Helen!”

BANG! BANG! BANG! Something is trying to get through. Is that even possible?

A pair of hands grabbed Kyle and hauled him back. Kevin and Kross each had one of his arms and were dragging him back toward the castle. They stopped a moment later, while they still were all within earshot of the door. If the masters had wanted them further away, they didn't bother to say so.

Nearly all of them were focused on the door.

Master Helen appeared in front of Kyle, turning her key so quickly that Kyle couldn't catch every turn. "Stay behind this point," she threw her key into the ground so hard that it stuck up. A transparent red aura blossomed from the key, forming into a wall. "No one other than Masters are to pass. Terra take lead, here. Do not get involved."

Kyle had not even seen Terra until that point.

"Yeah, of course," Terra said with none of her usual mirth. "I'll put up another wall so you can don't have to concentrate on it."

"Thank you," Master Helen moved away, joining the Masters gathered near the door. Most of them held weapons. Grandmaster Dante stood at their head staring intently into the doorway, his cane firmly in his hands.

"You two can let him go now," Terra said to Kross and Kevin, who let him go immediately.

"What is going on?" Kyle asked. *BANG!*

Terra pressed her own key into the ground and Kyle saw another wall go up effectively doubling it with her own aura. A shiver ran down his spine. This kind of defensive precautions seemed like overkill. *And what is going to come out of that door way?*

“You opened a ShiftDoor to one of the places you’re not supposed to,” Garnet stood to his left. *BANG!* Her face was ghost pale. “The Forgotten Realm.”

“And what exactly lives in the Forgotten Realm?” Kyle couldn’t take his eyes off the doorway. *BANG!* Something about the door felt familiar. Something almost comforting. But he had never even heard of the Forgotten Realm, so it seemed like his mind was just playing tricks on him.

“Titans,” Rayne said softly, also to his left. “The name given to those who broke the world.”

Titans? Plural. Like a lot of them? The word filled him with ice. In some way or form, Endera had been connected to the place he’d known as Earth. It was now his understanding that every mythological or legendary figure from Earth had just been an Enderan with a tendency to make sure their exploits had been known in some form or another. And what he knew about titans meant that they’d likely be big, mean, and powerful.

BANG! The door finally gave way, falling flat onto the ground to expose a pitch-black doorway. Complete silence followed. Kyle kept his eyes focused on the doorway. Something had forced it open and that was not supposed to happen.

“The king was right,” a voice boomed from the darkness in the doorway. “The doors are getting weaker. Look at that light! We’re the first to see it in a millennium.”

“Should we go out?” said another voice.

“Of course!” answered the first one. “The first to feel the sun light in a millennium!”

“Yes, you mentioned the millennium already. I don’t think saying it continuously will make it any truer.”

“Hah! My point still stands.”

“I’m not sure, Dorion. It’s probably dangerous.”

“Dangerous? Ixion what did we break the door down for if not to go through?”

“To see if it could be done, mainly.”

“Bah! You worry too much. We’ll simply fade back here when the door fades. The locks will make certain of that. It’s completely risk free.”

“Unless someone kills you while you’re out there.”

“Okay, so not *completely* risk-free. Live a little.”

“Wait—ah damn it, you’ll be the death of me, Dorion.”

“I’m coming out,” shouted Dorion. “Don’t—umm—be afraid?”

An impressively large man emerged from the doorway stepping into the sunlight with an audible gasp of delight and a wide smile. Dorion had pale grey skin and a wide nose. His blonde hair trailed from his head, floating above him like yellow smoke. Behind him was another who matched him in height at about ten feet tall. Ixion scowled as he followed, a trail of black hair floating above him in the same way. They both wore simple tunics and trousers that were a dull

grey, completely void of any color. Their skin, however, gained color with every passing moment.

“Ixion,” Dorion pointed. “Look, humans! Hah! And the castle. What are the chances?!”

“I can see that,” Ixion said narrowing his eyes. “Quite a lot of them, if you count the smaller ones over there. The castle is not such a surprise.”

“Why not?”

“Because we were nearby on our side. It makes sense that it reflects a similar location on in relation to the castle on each side. That’s my theory anyways.”

“Hmm,” Dorion rubbed his chin. “Sounds right.”

“Titans!” Grandmaster stood in front of the group of Masters twenty paces from where the doorway. “You are not welcome here.”

The Grandmaster’s clear hostility shocked Kyle. The titans didn’t exactly give off the vibe that they’d like to cause any harm. They didn’t seem like they wanted to do anything. By their own admission, it just sounded like they wanted to feel the sunlight.

“My *name* is Dorion, *human*,” the titan sighed. “How is it the prejudice against our kind still has such hold in Endera. What has it been, three, four hundred years?”

“According to the Accords, it’s been six hundred and fifty-seven years,” Ixion said. “I do hope that there are some who can be reasoned with.”

“You were responsible for breaking the world,” Grandmaster Dante said. “You—”

“I broke nothing,” snapped Ixion. “What our ancestors did has nothing to do with us.”

Kyle could hardly believe what he was hearing. Were these titans being punished for something their ancestors did? He knew he was likely missing some vital piece of information, but something about it didn't sit well with him.

"Why are you here," Dante asked. "The locks should hold you to your realm."

"We are here because we saw a door and walked through it," Dorian rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "There's really no other reason needed. Now if you don't mind, I would like to stop talking and go see that water over there. It looks fantastic."

"It's an ocean," Ixion said. "Do not drink from it."

"I know to not drink from an ocean! I'm not a fool."

"Enough!" Dante stepped forward. "You will return to your realm so that I may seal this door."

"We'll do so when we're good and ready," snarled Ixion. He spread his stance a little wider. "Until then, we expect your finest hospitality."

"I concur!" Dorian smirked, rolling his shoulder. "That sounded much more dignified than usual, right?"

"Like a proper Titan," Ixion cracked his knuckles.

The world fell silent yet again as the two groups stared at each other. Neither would back down. A moment passed and then another. And then the moment broke like it'd been cracked in half by a whip.

Dante moved in a blur with Logan following him like a shadow. Each threw punches that could have crumbled a castle wall. The titans both blocked the punches, immediately proving they would not be easy foes.

Dorion jumped high into the air, casting a great shadow over the group of masters below. He fell feet first, coming down like a boulder. The masters scattered out of the way, dodging as the force of it made an impact crater the stretched all the way to the wall of aura.

Kyle gulped. That kind of strength was beyond anything he'd ever seen. One hit and even a master would be in trouble. Many of the tyros who had gathered along the aura wall even took a step backwards when they reached the same conclusion.

Ixion focused his attack on the Grandmaster, sweeping his foot along the ground. Dirt and stones flew at Grandmatster Dante who didn't even flinch. Another wall of aura from Master Helen formed in front of him and the projectiles all slowed down to look like they were traveling through jelly. The debris dropped harmlessly to the ground as it exited.

The fight turned chaotic. The masters jumped around the titans, attacking with vicious slashes, punches, and kicks, but the titans, although nearly the size of any two masters together, were agile. They dodged and countered with swings from arms that acted like giant hammers. More than once, the ground was hit causing rock fragments to fly toward the tyros. None of it ever made it pass the walls of aura.

Kyle's mouth went dry as he watched. He'd meant to open a door Arragin Mountain. *Everything seems to have you near it in one way or another.* Elleneya's voice replayed in his head. *She's wrong, isn't she?* He took a step forward, feeling a sudden urge to do something, anything, to help. *What if someone gets hurt? Maybe there's something I can do.*

“Kyle the Static,” Terra hissed instantly. “Stay where you are.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” Terra stepped toward him. “Those Masters are literally some of the strongest people in all of Endera. You are a barely nothing teenager who still hasn’t fully mastered his voice box let alone your abilities. You will stay exactly where you are or I’ll break bones until you think it sounds like a good idea. Am I clear?” She was almost a different person.

Kyle hesitated before backing down, but he couldn’t argue with Terra. She was right. He’d likely be more of a liability if he tried helping. Knowing that did nothing to calm his nerves. “I’ll stay put.”

“Damn right you will,” Terra nodded.

“You there,” A deeply tanned woman with long black hair moved toward Terra. She wore battered leather armor with ragged cloth hanging from it. Her hand rested on the hilt of a sheathed sword at her hip as her chilling bright green eyes took in the fight. “What’s going on here? Why are there Titans?”

“Lady, if you take another step, I will end you,” Terra widened her stance and readied herself by putting both her fist together near her waist like she was going to pull a sword out of her hip bones. The lady halted, obeying. The loud tumbles of a Titan rolling on the ground and throwing another wild punch crunched the ground behind them. “Who are you?”

“No one,” the woman shrugged. “Just a former tyro who was passing by—” She stopped talking. Her eyes grew wide at the site of Kyle standing nearby. He was certain he’d never seen her before, but there was no questioning that her reaction was one of recognition.

“Sounds convenient,” Terra said, unconvinced. “Or is it just coincidence?”

The crowd gasped in horror excusing the woman from having to answer. One of the masters was soaring toward the Cold Ocean as though they’d been shot out of a cannon. As the figure flew over the freezing water, the first wall of aura disappeared. That could only mean it was Master Helen.

Kyle moved before he could think, but only made it a step when Terra’s hand closed around his arm in an iron grip. *What the?* He realized then that he’d taken more than just a step. Behind him was the aura wall with his friends on the other side, while he stood on the side where his masters were brawling with titans. At least he wasn’t alone.

“Having to pay attention to you let that woman through, you idiot!” Terra grumbled.
“Looks like she’s going to help, though. And she’s skilled. Very.”

They watched from where they stood the woman sprint toward the beach, twisting a key that was now in her hand.

“I’ve got her!” she shouted at two masters who’d broken away from the fight. The two of them nodded, seemingly recognizing who the woman was and returned to join the others. The air next to the woman distorted as she ran. Out of it shot a thick green vine that moved blindingly fast toward Master Helen. It caught her, wrapping around to secure her more tightly. The woman tugged on the vine and it pulled the master to safety, taking care not to let her touch the water.

“Bring her back behind the aura,” Terra shouted to the woman. She tugged on Kyle’s arm, pulling him back to where they’d stood earlier. The battle between the masters and titans still raged and every so often there was another crunch of dirt and stone, but the masters were keeping them contained. Kyle realized then that that was the point. The masters weren’t actively

trying to hurt the titans. They were just trying to force them back into the door, which apparently was a very difficult thing to do.

The woman set Master Helen down in front of Terra gently. Helen was unconscious and looked mostly the same except for the green vine which was tied around one of her legs. Kyle's heart fell into his stomach when he saw why. She was missing her right foot. Amidst the shouts of shock, Garnet and a few older tyros started treatment on the master without hesitation. Medications with keys could heal great wounds, but Kyle had never seen an injury like this. *What if it isn't enough?* She could be missing her foot for the rest of her life. All because he'd summoned a ShiftDoor. By accident, yes, but still he'd been the one to do it.

This is my fault.

Before he could give it further thought, there was a loud crack behind him. Kyle turned around, feeling his heart drop a second time as Master Logan rolled across the ground toward them. He righted himself just before hitting the aura, but the effort caused him to grit his teeth so loud Kyle could hear it. That didn't surprise Kyle given then state of Logan's tattered right arm. It looked like it had exploded from the inside and freely bled as Logan clutched it with his other hand.

"Enough!" Dante shot a giant wave of flames at both the Titans. The heat was intense enough that Kyle felt it where he stood. It flew into Ixion with a force that threw the massive titan off balance. Dante let loose another wave aimed at Dorion. It slammed into him, lifting him off his feet and blasting him into Ixion. They recovered easily, but it must have been too much even for them. They both took off at a sprint and dove back into the Forgotten Realm.

Grandmaster Dante let them.

Kyle felt himself let out a long sigh of relief as the Grandmaster Dante and couple of the masters reset the door. With a few turns of the Grandmaster's wrist, it disappeared as though it had never been there. The surrounding area of destroyed land told another story.

“The King!” Whispers hissed behind Kyle in a frenzy. *What is it now?* Kyle turned to the gate, looking for the cause of the commotion. For the second time that day Kross and Kevin grabbed him. Instead of dragging him away, they forced him to kneel. Kyle had never kneeled for a king before, but he had tried once for a Gatekeeper. He couldn't bring himself to bow his head, though. Not when he'd never actually seen a king before either.

It was obvious who the king was. He walked in surrounded by a group of a dozen well armored men and women. His tan skin and dark long hair had a shine to it that matched with his small silver crown. He was a handsome man with large eyes and a strong jaw and dressed in a fine black suit that he wore well. If not for the crown, Kyle might have guessed that he was just a Master from another school.

“Was that a Titan?!” asked the king. His voice was smooth, elegant. “Who did this? How?”

Kyle felt hundreds of eyes bounce back and forth between the king and him. It was enough to make him gulp.

Afterword – Not Quite the End

Readers,

It is easy enough to see that this is not a finished novel. These first five chapters in what might have been the last and final book to a duology is being called *Kyle Demore and the Falling Moons*. This is, of course, a working title. I hadn't committed to it quite yet. That matters little now, but still it is something I thought I should mention. Either way, this is mostly the beginning of what I had planned to be a bigger, meatier, second part of Kyle's adventure. And as I've mentioned before, it still might end up being that way someday. Just not now.

Either way. Here's a little overview of what might have come if I had gotten to writing it now.

After the visit from Titans, King Zephyr is introduced. Kyle is basically accused of working with the Titans and breaking the law. His arrest is called for. Luckily, Grandmaster Dante steps in to calm the king down. It works, but Kyle is called to the capital to answer to the King there. Along with the mystery woman who helped saved Master Helen. We find out that this woman is Kyle's Mother, Melissa.

Grandmaster Dante, Proculus, and Melissa take Kyle to capital where Kyle formally meets the king. The King although first angry with Kyle, warms up to him rather quickly and finds the fact that he is from another realm interesting. By the end of it, he commands that Kyle stay at the capital and enroll in their academy. Having no choice in the matter, Kyle must immediately transfer and is now enrolled in class with no break to spend with his friends. Melissa, for past crimes, is given a lenient sentence thanks to Grandmaster Dante. However, this sentence requires her to stay at Soul Gate Academy which she is adamantly against, but with a choice between that or prison, she goes with Grandmaster Dante to stay under his watchful eye. Proculus transfers to teach at the King's Academy, not wanting Kyle to be alone.

Life in the Academy begins and Kyle finds that this is less friendly of a school. Doubly rejected for having once been at Soul Gate Academy and the boy from the other realm, he is friendless. Time goes by and the time for the tournament is nearing. Soul Gate Academy arrives as a flying castle and the schools are effectively combined which gives Kyle back his friends, but conflict arises as the two schools butt heads. Kyle's relationship with Garnet is something that freshens hate. More time goes by.

Halfway through the year, it's announced that tournament will begin with the first event will happen at Dragon's Eye Academy, a school further to the north and the last of Dusk's three academies. Soul Gate Academy and Dusk Academy make their way there on the flying castle and huge parade/party event preludes the first event which is a race.

Kane is a contestant in the race and comes close to winning, but loses to an older SoGA tyro. Kyle suspects that Kane lost on purpose, which makes celebrating difficult for him even though the rest of his side is enjoying the victory. Later that night, a battle breaks out and hell breaks out as Titans join the fight against them.

A friend of Kyle's dies and it's because he chose not to kill an enemy combatant. Later, Kyle gets a chance at revenge and achieves it. It's bittersweet because he's captured as a result. He also witnesses Titans capturing Garnet and can do nothing to help.

And then... BOOOM! Lots of other things, but I fear to tell more should I ever come back to this adventure. And there definitely is more to this story! I just think that giving it away now would not be the best idea. Let's just say that if it ever should come to pass that I write the rest of this adventure, I hope I do not disappoint.

I can and will say that these two books were just meant as a beginning for Kyle Demore. There is more to this universe and at the end this particular adventure, he gets put in a position where it becomes his duty to look for something. Vague, I know, but I can't spell out everything.

Either way, if you've read this far, you have my eternal appreciation. I hope I can one day give you a more satisfying ending, but I hope you respect my decision to step away from this for now. Hopefully, in following the traditional publishing path I can make a name for myself and get back to it in a few years. It is possible, I suppose.

Sincerely,

Sam