

THE ALLIANCE

Scrolls of Mankind

Aarika Rao



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Stories Matter

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Prologue

Terrified. That was the word, wasn't it? Jade shook behind the bushes, begging the magic to work. "Please, please," she mumbled under her breath. The glowing orb...morphed into a little girl elf. She gasped and blinked back tears. Close to passing out, she stumbled over to her. The girl was already dressed in leaves. Her pale skin glowed in the moonlight. Gorgeous dark red hair cascaded down her shoulders. She looked two or three. She would have to make do with that. She picked her up and cradled her head gently. Her eyes fluttered and opened to reveal big green irises. "Hello, little one," Jade said. She studied her thoughtfully.

Her stubby little arms stuck out, and she yelled, "Mama!" Jade's eyes widened. "Shhh!" She told her. "He can't hear you, okay? Or he'll take you too."

"I'll call you...Helix."

She looked up innocently, which prompted her to think *I will never let anybody hurt you. Ever. Not even the Arcane.*

Years later...

On Earth, a young girl and her friends trekked through the cave they had just entered. "This is creepy" her friend, Penny noted. "Really, Penny? You just noticed?" April shot back. She frowned into the darkness ahead

and noticed a wall. "Looks like a dead end," she told her friends. "You're kidding," Jacob whined. "We came all this way for nothing."

"Wait, the wall has something inscribed on it," Adam said, squinting at the wall. April frowned. He was right. "It says 'say something,'" April muttered.

Penny immediately yelled, "NEVER GONNA GIVE YOU UP, NEVER GOING TO LET YOU DOWN!"

April laughed. Jacob pressed a palm to his face, smirking. "Really, Penny?" Adam asked, grinning. "Nobody else came up with anything," she said. April's smile melted when she turned back to the wall. Scrawled on the stone in place of 'say something' was 'Never going to give you up, never going to let you down.'

Chills ran down April's spine. She couldn't appreciate the joke anymore. It was getting way too creepy. "Guys?" She called out, voice shaking. "The wall."

They turned. "I think we need to get out of here," Adam said.

"Agreed," April replied.

And they ran back the way they came.

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Chapter 1

My parents send me on a death mission

I had been minding my own business, in my own house (aggressively trying to finish homework) when, of course, the guards decided to slam the door open, startling me hard enough to fall off of my desk. I couldn't catch a break from these guys. I stood and frowned, walking into the corridor to find them awkwardly fiddling in the hallway outside my apartment. "Yes?" I asked. "Zel, your parents are asking for you," Guard No. 1 said. "And why couldn't they get me themselves?" I asked.

Guard Two scratched their head nervously. "Well..."

"Never mind," I said. I walked outside and mounted Lunaris, my phoenix. She squawked, looking at me with a hungry expression. "Treats later, alright?"

She didn't seem happy about it, but she spread her two pairs of wings and took off. I looked around at my home, Bunker Nine. We flew amongst tamed dragons. Tall buildings towered over us. Hovercrafts rode along beneath us, right above complex, interlocking roads, disappearing into the urban landscape as quickly as they had appeared. I caught sight of a pale hand waving vigorously at me near the dragon center, who turned out

to be my sister. I waved back. My sister was the only decent person in my family. She turned back to face the dragon pen. A massive black dragon, barely large enough to fit in the bunker stood behind her, who we all happened to know. Tor looked down at the dragonets and frowned. They were all trying to bite his massive talons. I called his name. He looked up and grinned, which made me grimace. Tor was really awesome but considering that he was a massive dragon that was about two hundred feet tall—he literally had to bend to fit in the bunker—and nine centuries old, his smiles usually made him look terrifying and slightly psychotic. The dragon king made his way over to Lunariss and me. “Hello there,” he rumbled. “Hi, Tor. I’ve been summoned,” I joked.

“I can see that. What have you done now?”

“I haven’t done anything!” I argued. Lunariss squawked in protest. “I haven’t, seriously!” I argued. Tor chuckled, shaking the entire ground of the massive bunker. He lowered his snout to look directly at me with his massive yellow eyes surrounded by pitch-black scales. “You, child, are an idiot. Can you name one thing that you haven’t done wrong?”

“Well...” I started then faltered, remembering. Let’s take a look at it, shall we? Riding Lunariss out of the bunker hatch and getting attacked by whisps. Almost killed Octavia. And the best one of all, nearly let Lunariss eat a

crab morphos. Tor was right. I couldn't think of a single thing I hadn't done wrong. "Well, no," I replied. "I can't think of any."

"There you go," he boomed.

I sighed. Lunaris landed, and I looked up at the palace. Gold hung from a few places, but otherwise, it was pretty humble on the outside. It was built of plain whitewashed concrete covered in vines and a wooden drawbridge that began to lower. I dismounted Lunaris and walked in, unsurprised by the number of guards waiting to escort me. "Let's get this over with, then," I mumbled to myself. I walked down the unnecessarily long corridors and entered the blue-tinted glass elevator. To no surprise, the guards stood behind me as it shot up. We passed about five floors when it gradually halted to a stop. I walked into the crystal-filled, dimly lit room and raised an eyebrow at my parents standing on the other end. My mother frowned. "There he is," mother said. "Late. As always."

"I was talking to Tor."

I regarded my parents. I looked pretty much like them. White hair and pale skin. Personality? I tried so hard not to be like them, but I was heading in that direction.

"Take a seat, son," my dad said. I obliged reluctantly and sat down at the large table. I considered making a joke, but considering the tension, I decided not to, which was smart enough.

I compared myself with them for a moment, just for the sake of it. I dressed kind of normally for an elf—shirt, pants, jacket, and weapon at the ready just in case. They dressed in heavy white armor atop battle-regulated clothes like high-tech flexible jumpsuits. When it came to looks, I took after my mother. She had short, straight, white, chin-length hair. Her bright purple eyes bore into mine, as if she was staring into my soul and finding it incredibly pathetic. My father had a white beard and ice-blue eyes which appeared hard, cold, and emotionless. I was taught that being hard and cold was what you needed when it came to ruling over an entire bunker. “We’ve called you here to address your er...what do you say? Ah yes, recklessness,” my father said.

“What recklessness?” I protested.

“Well, you’re fourteen, four years underage, yet you insist on leaving the bunker even though that was not authorized and it’s against the law.” My mother said. “so, we’ve decided that you spend the rest of the year on the surface.”

My eyes widened, and I jumped up. I hadn’t expected my parents to be this nice. “Seriously? By the Great Star, this is amazing. When do I leave?”

My father stared at me for a few moments and burst out laughing. “Boy, you won’t last a day out there. We’re sending you on an important mission to find the sacred scrolls of the early days of the Terris-Whisp war.”

My heart sank. He was right. I wouldn't last a day. "We're sending you with someone we've recently found. You leave next week."

My heart pounded hard in my chest. "R-recently? What do you mean *recently*? You don't know them?"

"No, but she's very well known by others and quite experienced when it comes to the surface. She's your age, fourteen, but she has spent her entire life on the surface. Nice girl, though a bit um, well, you'll see."

My eyes widened. The elevator dinged behind me. "And here she is."

I swiveled around as the elevator doors whooshed open. Behind them was a girl my age with pale skin and thick, curly dark red hair, only two or three shades lighter than black, cascading down her shoulders, curling around her intense green eyes to fold behind her pointy ears, which carried a pair of golden stud earrings and ending at her waist. She was thin and wiry—most likely agile. A small golden jewel was embedded in her skin in the position of a necklace right between her sharp collarbones. She wore a red shirt embroidered with white patterns, black slacks, and black gloves. She walked out into the dim light, and I studied her facial features. She was pretty in a tough kind of way. Something about her made warning bells begin to ring in my chest like, *run, get out of the building!* I felt uneasy standing in the same room as her, as if she was going to try and murder me any second. I

gulped. She smiled at me, and the warning bells smacked around my chest, sending my lungs into a panic. I couldn't fathom why I was so nervous. She seemed nice, nothing like a psychopath. At least, I hoped so. "I'm Helix," she said and reached her hand out for a handshake. I obliged and shook her gloved hands, which emitted a strong, searing heat, making me feel like my hand was set on fire. I withdrew my hand as quickly as possible. Thankfully, Helix didn't think too much of it. "Zel," I introduced myself gruffly. She grinned, and I shifted uneasily.

"Well then, Zel, show Helix around the bunker. And I want you two to get used to the fighting techniques you each use so after the little tour, you will spend the daylight hours in combat in the arena."

"Sounds fun," Helix said.

We walked out of the elevator in awkward silence. "Nice place you got here," Helix said, breaking the silence. "Trust me, it's not that great," I replied.

"What do you do for fun around here?" She asked, peering at the city covered in crystals, stones, and diamonds. Waterfalls crashed against the ground in ponds. Large animals like Scallan wolves wandered around the waterfalls, not going too deep into the city. The roads were all piled up on top of each other. It wasn't messy, though. Actually, the system worked pretty

well. Tamed dragons soared over us, their beating wings echoing across the bunker.

“Generally, I talk to Tor. He’s a decent guy—an old family friend. Really old,” I answered. ‘Really old’ was a bit of an understatement. He’d been around way before the whip war had even started. “My sister helps with the dragons, so I spend a lot of my time there, too. Sometimes, I explore a few of the caverns.”

“Okay, so show me around. What I’ve learned from your parents is that you’re kind of miserable down here. Plus, you don’t look like heaps of joy right now.”

I laughed and then faltered. I made a lot of people laugh. It was kind of automatic. Of course, these are only the people I’ve known for a long time. I come off as a little rude at first, and normally, people don’t choose to be friends with an elf like me. But only a few people made *me* laugh. How come this stranger made the list?

“I’m not *that* miserable,” I argued.

“Agree to disagree.”

We left the palace, and Lunaris bounded over and landed right in front of Helix. She wasn’t even fazed. “Aw,” she cooed and began to scratch the massive phoenix’s head. My eyes widened. Usually, Lunaris didn’t like newcomers, and they didn’t like her either. They found her chaotic, terrifying, and generally has the ability to bite their head off. To me, though, and

apparently Helix, Lunarix was a purple fuzz monster with wings. Lunarix's left ear perked up, and the other one drooped. This usually meant she was happy.

"She likes you," I stated.

"You think?" Helix asked, grinning.

I rolled my eyes, suppressing a smile for reasons I didn't really know. "It's probably because I'm carrying fish in my pocket." She said.

She dug out a zip lock pouch out of her pocket filled with what seemed like red water out of which she produced a red wriggling fish which Lunarix snatched from her hand and swallowed whole. The fish reminded me of the surface and my impending mission. "I want to go to the surface," I sighed. "But not this way."

"It's only a few weeks, right?"

I nodded. She looked away, facing the phoenix. Thundering steps echoed next to us. I turned, followed by Helix, at the sight of a massive black snout. "Hello, there," Tor greeted. I glanced at Helix. Her eyes widened in awe. "Hello," she said as soon as she regained her confidence. I knew how she felt. Just standing next to the massive dragon, you felt tiny and insignificant. "You're the dragon king, aren't you?" She asked.

Tor rumbled, "Well yes, and usually regular elves bow when they meet me for the first time."

“I’m not regular,” she joked.

Well, I mean she had a point. Who carries around fish in a zip-lock bag?

Amused, Tor snorted a puff of smoke into our faces. Coughing, I blew it away from my face. “Interesting friend you’ve acquired here, Zel,” he said.

“Not a friend,” I coughed.

“Yeah, I’m just a guide,” she said, though I found a hint of offence in the tone of her voice. I didn’t care that much about it, though. Tor chuckled for some reason, which made my eyebrows arch. Tor didn’t find many things amusing. He only laughed at the prospect of stupidity and dark humor in ways that I didn’t understand. I’d have to ask about it later.

I led Helix down the stairs since Lunar is wasn’t big enough for two people to ride her. One flight down, Helix bombarded me with questions. “Are you like a prince around here since your parents rule this place? Or is it more of a formal thing? Are you like, next in line to rule or something? And if so, what would you rule? It’s a freaking bunker full of elves who are too scared to go fight in the war—”

“Let me just stop you there,” I said. “This—” I gestured at us, and her expression shifted to a scowl. “Is not a friendship. It’s professional, okay?”

Thanks to my parents, I thought but didn’t say.

She stood there for a few minutes, practically staring into my soul with green eyes that somehow reminded me of fire, and the alarm bells in my chest went off once more, and I wished I hadn't said anything.

"Understood," she said gruffly through gritted teeth like she was restraining herself from punching me in the face, which was understandable. We walked the rest of the way in silence. Guilt began to settle upon me for being so rude, and I probably should have apologized, but you know, my annoyingly massive ego got in the way.

I showed her the entire place, but it was more of me talking and her scowling at me. Overall, there were the dungeons for whisps where they shrieked and made attempts to grab us with smokey black claws. Their red beady eyes watched us as we left. There were the dragon pens, which were filled with elves running around trying to take care of baby dragons that were half their size. One of those elves was my sister, Zaira. There was a massive mess hall where everybody met for announcements and if we got lucky, celebrations. And of course, the dark magic chambers. I shuddered when we got there. I hated that place. I watched as an elf crushed a butterfly and placed its broken remnants gently into a jar, which upon closing, began to glow a sharp retina-burning purple. I winced and looked away. Helix was still staring at it. "You can't tell me you like this kind of stuff," I said.

“I don’t,” she confessed. She touched the jewel embedded in her skin. “I don’t think anyone does.”

I hung around Logan’s house that night. Pacing, I told him about the entire day. “You’re an idiot,” he said.

I froze in my place, which was right in the center of his room. I turned to face my best friend. He was laying upside down on his bed, fiddling with a candy wrapper. He had light brown skin, and his curly blonde hair was slicked back with gel except for one coiled strand that hung around the bridge of his nose. He wore golden glasses, a blue shirt, and shorts. I frowned at him. “Elaborate, please.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Okay, I see the issue,” I said, scratching the back of my head.

“Look, your survival for the rest of the year depends on whether she hates you or not. You’ve already gotten yourself on her bad side, so congrats. You’re a dead elf.”

I frowned. “This isn’t helping,” I told him.

“You know I’m coming anyway, right?”

“What? No, you’re not.”

“Yeah, I already talked to your parents. They thought it was a fantastic idea. Your parents have weird versions of ‘fantastic’. Anyway, I’m coming.”

“I hate you.”

“I know. Plus, Helix is going to kick your butt tomorrow.”

I waited for Helix in the arena. Tor’s snout hung over my head. He was laughing heavily. Logan raised an eyebrow at me, which probably meant, *why is he laughing?*

I shrugged at him. Tor mumbled, “Stupid, stupid,” and chuckled.

I wondered what that was about. A few minutes later, Helix walked in. I attempted to gulp down my fear. I failed successfully. She was wearing another embroidered red shirt with a different design and pants with black gloves instead of armor, which confused me. Did people just not wear armor on the surface? Helix drew two swords from a scabbard on her back. I hadn’t noticed that yesterday. Her swords were thin and lean-gripped with diamond and vine engravings. I drew my own sword and waited. She walked over, and her eyes widened when she saw Logan, but she shook it off and waved. He waved back enthusiastically. “Um, that’s Logan. He’ll be coming with us on the mission.”

“He already seems nicer than you,” she said, smirking. I winced. I knew she was smiling, but she clearly meant business. Especially after yesterday. “Look, about yesterday—” I began but was immediately cut off.

“Don’t,” she interrupted. “It’ll rob me of the joy of pulverizing you. Strictly professional, remember?”

I was getting annoyed. "Let's just get this over with," I mumbled.

She won. Again. And again. And again. I bent over, trying to catch my breath. "You still don't win," I said. She snorted. Tor laughed hard enough to bring down the entire bunker. My eyes widened as he stomped a massive talon against the ground so hard it felt like a quake. Helix grinned. "Best two out of three?"

It was the best deal I was getting, so I nodded.

We left on the First Day of the next week. "Be safe," my mother told me. "And get the scrolls." She patted my arm and left. "Nice family dynamic you've got here," Helix said. I laughed, and my eyes widened again. Twice a month. What was happening? A ghost of a smile fell across my lips. Logan was saying goodbye to his mom, who was fussing over him. "It's nice that Logan has a good family," Helix pointed out. I agreed, then raised an eyebrow at her. "You don't have a good family?" I asked. She smiled and said, "I have an amazing family. They're just not related to me."

I wanted to ask her what she meant but I was interrupted by my phoenix licking my face, coating it in saliva. She then sniffed around Helix's pockets, probably looking for fish. *Maybe it won't be so bad*, I thought, wiping the saliva off my face.

I could practically hear future Zel laughing.

Chapter 2

The Death mission is deadly.

Whoopee.

I didn't like the Great Star. I mean sure, it kept life on Terris alive, but it *burned my eyes*. I winced, looking away. When I got used to the light, I looked around and inhaled deeply. Ah yes, real oxygen how bunker elves have missed thee. Helix was grinning at the environment around us. "It's awesome, isn't it?" She asked. "It is," Logan agreed. I squinted at the sky. It really was awesome. Trees towered over us. Birds flapped around in V-shaped formations that I'd only read about in school. Logan dug around in his backpack. "Well, my mom packed us everything from extra underwear to food to medical supplies, and there's a *lot* in here, so this should be fine for even more than just three weeks." Lunar is squawked and tried to steal something from Logan's backpack till he smacked her beak away.

"Great. So, Logan, what's your power?" Helix asked.

He looked up, startled. "Well, nobody asks that directly, but I'm an Elementalist. Zel over here is an ice elf or a snow elf if you prefer."

Helix's eyes widened, and she swiveled to look at me. "Makes sense," she said. "Considering your personality."

I frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I think she means that you're cold and rude and generally—ooh, look, kiope gum!"

"I am *not* rude and generally whatever Logan was about to say!" I said.

Helix raised an eyebrow. "Whatever," she said, taking a step forward. Her green eyes were somehow fiery, which I didn't understand. They were at the same level as mine, so they stared right into my soul. "We're not friends anyway, right?"

Helix walked away. Lunar is looked at me like she was judging. I scratched her head, and the judgmental expression changed to content. I made her go back into the bunker after a lot of complaints. I hated saying goodbye to her, but I doubted my fuzz monster, no matter how adorable, was actually going to help with the mission.

Logan got up and hurried after Helix. I walked after them. "It's been like two seconds since we've been on the surface, and you two are already arguing," Logan mumbled.

"We're not arguing," I hissed at him. "She's just being annoying."

He held his arms up like *don't shoot!* I rolled my eyes. "I can hear you," Helix called out, turning slightly. Logan burst out laughing, and I elbowed him.

Suddenly, Helix stopped. I raised an eyebrow. “What happened, you found another random person to annoy—”

She shushed me harshly. “Get down,” she whispered.

“What, why—” I began but was cut off by Helix tackling us both. The three of us rolled into an incredibly poky bush. “What in the name of...” Logan started, but Helix’s hand clamped over his mouth.

“Please don’t blaspheme,” Helix told him. “We need to stay quiet.”

Logan and I obliged reluctantly. Suddenly, thousands of whisps whooshed past the trees. I inhaled sharply. The shrieking got louder and louder to the point that I had to cover my ears. Helix stood and drew her swords. She moved right to the center of the crowd and attached her swords together. The whisps shrieked even louder, though she didn’t seem fazed. They barreled toward her, but she held them at the center and spun them. The whisps crashed into her and were all chopped into bits. Logan and I emerged from the bushes, and I looked at her in a mix of awe and surprise.

She laughed and held her swords. “My family taught me,” she said.

“Of course they did,” Logan mumbled. “You know, I’m beginning to find your family terrifying.”

Helix shrugged and said, “They are.”

I grinned at Logan's expression. "Come on," she said, and we followed her.

After a while, it began to rain. I looked up at the sky. Thunder crashed, and I jumped. Rain poured down on my face, and I grinned from ear-to-ear. Logan laughed. "Rain!" He exclaimed, making me jump again. "I freaking love it!"

I looked at Helix, who was backed up into a tree, frowning at the sky. "What's wrong? You scared?" I teased.

"I'm not," she snapped. "I just don't like water."

"Just try it," I said and reached my hand out. She stared at me like I was joking. Once she realized I wasn't, she shook her head vigorously. I grabbed her hand. It was moderately warm this time. I pulled her out into the open and her eyes widened as the rain poured down on her face. All of a sudden, her skin began to steam. "What in Terris?" Logan asked. "Your skin!"

She looked at her arms, which were releasing steam quickly. Orange lines erupted on her arms like veins. "Told you," she mumbled. I grabbed her arm again and led her toward the nearest cave. Her skin was still steaming. Logan hurried after us, sopping wet. "Does it hurt?" I asked her.

She shook her head, not meeting my gaze. “Just drains me a little. Lucky for me, you didn’t push me into a river.”

I scratched the back of my head guiltily. “Sorry,” I told her. To my surprise, she grinned. “Let’s wait out the rain,” Logan suggested. Helix nodded and stood. “I’ll make a fire,” she said. Helix ran back out into the rain and grabbed a few sticks. Her skin began to steam even worse. I winced. “That’s insane,” Logan mumbled. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“I don’t think anybody has.”

Helix ran back and immediately began rubbing the sticks vigorously until it produced a flame.

We heated up a can of beans over the fire, and I grimaced. “Out of all the things your mother could pack, she chose beans,” I said. Logan grinned sheepishly. “I like them. They’re a comfort food.”

“Beans? Really?” Helix asked.

“Oh, shut up.”

Helix and I looked at each other simultaneously, and she burst out laughing. I grinned. Her dark red hair was soaking wet. The orange lines on her skin had disappeared. My white hair fell around my eyes, hanging around my peripheral vision and a little bit in the center. My parents had made me grow out my buzz cut, which

had apparently looked stupid. Logan had, unfortunately, agreed.

My dreams were awful. They always were, and I never understood them. In this one, a woman stood in front of me with a staff and frowned down upon me like, *I have to terrorize THIS guy? Really?* She had an oblong face, dark hair, large doe eyes, a hooked nose, and thin lips. She wore a simple shirt and pants. She looked normal but something in her dark eyes made me want to run.

“Are you a witch?” I asked, without waiting for her to say anything. I’m charming like that.

“I—yes, I am, now down to business, young man—”

“Eh, you don’t really look like one.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t witches wear creepy robes or something, plus a pointy hat?”

She scoffed. “Elven stereotypes. No, we don’t. You all found some weird stereotype from that stupid insane witch in the rabbit hole tunnels.”

“Well—”

“Shut *up!*”

I shut up.

“You are so naïve, just like every other royal child from the bunkers.”

I wanted to argue, but if I did, she could incinerate me. Dream or no dream, I didn't want to risk it.

"The Arcane needs you, and I can't do anything about it. Let's see what we're dealing with, shall we?"

I didn't know what she meant by the Arcane needing me. The Arcane was the leader of the whisps—he had taken over most of the planet. Nobody had really seen him and lived to tell the tale. The mention of him sent shivers down my spine. He was the reason elves were in bunkers instead of living on the surface. Unfortunately, that was the last of my problems considering the fact that the witch had just grabbed my face roughly, nearly piercing my eyeballs with her giant nails, and was examining it thoroughly.

"Ice elf," she hissed. "Brilliant. Be careful, child, you wouldn't want to die before you retrieved the scrolls."

How did she know about the mission? Before I could say anything, she evaporated, and I was left alone in a dark space. I looked down. There was no solid ground. I was just floating through a black void that seemed never-ending.

Finally, I jolted awake and looked around in a panic. Logan was curled up in a corner, snoring like a dragon. I turned around and found Helix tossing and turning in her sleep, her hands curled into fists. I frowned. Why was she sleep-fighting? Once I had shaken off my curiosity, I shook Logan awake. He snorted and got up

quickly, headbutting me in the forehead. “OW!” I cried out.

“Sorry, sorry!”

I tried to speak but unfortunately, my face disagreed with me, so the words stumbled out of my mouth as a bunch of distressed gibberish.

Once the pain subsided, I told him about the dream. I glanced at Helix. “Do you think she’s involved?”

“No,” he said immediately. “No way. Her? Evil? Yeah right.”

“We can’t know what goes on inside a person’s head.”

“I know, but it just seems so unlikely.”
“Is it? Recall yesterday. Her skin was *smoking*. That’s not normal. Who knows what other secrets she has.”

“It’s not like she’s our best friend. We met *last week*. She doesn’t need to tell us anything. It’s called privacy.”

Sometimes, Logan’s optimism made me want to slap him, but I brushed it off and sighed.

“Okay, fine. Just be on the lookout.”

He nodded. I turned around to find Helix awake and waiting at the cave entrance. I tried not to show my surprise. “You coming?” She asked, her lips twitching upward. I took that as an indicator that I had failed very successfully. “Or am I guiding air?”

I glanced at Logan who rolled his eyes at me. "Yeah, we're coming," he told Helix. He grabbed his backpack, and we left, walking back into the forest. "What now?" I asked her.

She crouched down placed a hand on the grass, and focused. She stood placed two fingers between her lips and whistled. Immediately, a red trail snaked through the trees and away. She yelled at us enthusiastically, "Come on! We can't lose the trail!"

She took off, leaving us to follow. I ran after her, followed by Logan. Helix ducked below branches and leaped over logs, making us struggle to keep up. I jumped over a log, and my head was nearly decapitated by a branch. I smacked it out of my face and ran after Helix. "Wait...up!" Logan wheezed behind us. Helix turned and pursed her lips, clearly trying not to laugh. "You guys really aren't..."

"Athletic?" Logan offered.

"Yeah, that. That's what I was going to say."

It seemed like she was going to say something much worse.

"I am plenty athletic," I said defensively. "It's the stupid forest."

Helix snorted. "Yeah, sure buddy," she said, patting my shoulder. "I believe you."

“Nah, he’s right, this guy’s way faster than me,” Logan said.

I gestured at him like, *see?*

Helix rolled her eyes. “I can still outrun you both.”

“Agreed,” Logan wheezed.

We continued at a more moderate pace after that for Logan. Honestly, the guy was awesome, but he was horrible at running or sports or literally anything related to running or sports. Which was ironic, considering he loved kiope gum. Kiope was a sport where you kicked around a ball inside an elemental fluid in teams who wore color-coded mech uniforms till it smacked into a net. The gum was an advertisement for the inter-bunker games. It was like an energy drink but sticky, and you’re not supposed to swallow it.

We kept walking till we hit a river. Helix stopped and frowned at me. “Don’t push me in,” she told me. I began to feel guilty until her expression broke into a grin. Relieved that she wasn’t trying to guilt me, I still rolled my eyes at her. “Okay, there’s a boat on the other side,” she said.

“Okay, but if we already cross the river to get it, why would we need the boat?” Logan asked.

“Look at the trail,” Helix replied.

We turned and saw that the red path followed the river downstream. Logan formed an O with his mouth.

“Anyway, one of us needs to get the boat while the current’s still weak,” she said.

Helix pushed me into the river.

I flailed around in the water for a moment till I resurfaced, wet and annoyed. “Seriously?” I asked her, brushing the hair out of my eyes.

Logan burst out laughing. Helix smirked. “And that’s for the rain. Chop-chop now, Zel,” she said. “You,” I said, pointing at her. “Fight dirty.”

“You think so, genius?”

I rolled my eyes and ducked under the water to hide a smile. I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of making me laugh. *Again.*

I popped my head back out and began wading through the river to the other side. I climbed out of the river and looked around. Trees surrounded me, a little taller than the ones on the other side. Eventually, I spotted a wooden boat propped up against a tree. I grabbed it and made my way back to the river. I pushed it to the center of the river, and Helix grabbed it. She pulled it over to their side. “Wade on back over here!” Logan told me

I obliged, going back in. Something began to tickle my foot. I thought nothing of it.

Well, I thought nothing of it *until* it was wrapped around my entire foot. I slipped and my head went under the water. I flailed in a panic and looked in front of me. A massive tail was coiled around my right leg. It was green and scaly and slimy and rough all at the same time. I looked up and was startled by the sight of a massive green snout staring down at me. My eyes widened. The tail snaked up my leg and around my torso. I drew my sword and tried to stab it, to no avail. Its skin was too thick. Great, I thought. *This is how I'm going to die.*

All of a sudden, just as the serpent was about to come in for the kill, a figure shot through the water with two swords and slashed them across its eyes. It shrieked and let go of me, and pain struck through my torso and ankle. I began to sink to the bottom right before someone grabbed me. Their hand was warm. Very warm. The kind that reminded me of a comforting campfire. Steam came off Helix's body, and that, to me, was a red blur. She carried me to the surface.

She dragged me onto the grass and yelled my name. Light struck my retinas, and I groaned in pain. My vision became clear to find Helix standing above me, yelling my name. She crouched down and shook my shoulders. Steam was still coming off her skin.

"Hi," I croaked. She was visibly restraining herself from slapping me. Logan immediately bounded over and hugged me, crushing my already wounded ribcage. "Ah,

buddy, too tight, let go, let go!" I told him. Helix sat down next to me, panting. "You good?" I asked her as soon as Logan let me go. She nodded. "Looks like I ended up going in the river anyway, thanks to you," she said.

"Yeah, like I chose to be crushed by a river serpent."

"I'm glad you're okay."

"Tell that to my ribs."

Helix hid a smile, then stood and checked the bloody water. "Good to go," she told us. She and I climbed into the boat and looked at Logan.

"What?" He asked.

"Push the boat into the water," Helix told him.

"Oh, right."

And we were on our way.

Chapter 3

We might be crazy. What's new?

Helix's skin had gradually stopped smoking which was good. Her fiery hair was still wet and glistened in the bright noon light. I glanced at Logan, who was stuffing his mouth with kiope gum. His white shirt had the name of his favorite band, but it was covered in so much dirt and grass I couldn't even read it. His knees were scraped slightly, but that was always the case. The current was taking us along the river at a moderate speed with a few swells here and there. Suddenly, Helix stood and reached up. I was about to ask what she was doing when she jumped up and grabbed fruit from a low-hanging tree. She gave one to me and one to Logan, who grabbed a tissue from his giant backpack and spat out his gum. I examined the fruit. It was a disgusting shade of pink and green mixed together and smelled so much like a rock troll, I gagged.

"Helix, this is gross," I said.

"Just try it," she told me.

I yanked off the peel and bit into it, and the flavor exploded in my mouth. It was sweet and savory at the same time, crunchy at first and then melting in my

mouth like the cookies at the local bakery back in the bunker. “Wow,” I echoed very poetically.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?”

She turned to Logan, and her jaw dropped. I looked at him and grinned. He was already licking his fingers and smacking his lips, the fruit devoured. “What?” He asked. “It was good.”

Logan was fast asleep by midnight, but neither Helix nor I could sleep. I looked up at the stars. They glittered above me like the diamonds my sister and I had found in the caves under the bunker when we were younger. We had gotten into so much trouble that night that we had gotten the whole lecture on bunker safety, but I’d fallen asleep that night before the lecture even ended, and she had to carry me back to my room with Lunar. I sighed contentedly, remembering how she told me everything about our planet’s history until I fell asleep with Lunar curled up on my white tuft of hair. I remembered how her own purple eyes used to flick quickly across the page while she told stories of the surface. If only she could have come on this mission with me, but she’d already been to the surface and only left the bunker for emergencies, just like every other elf down there. That was the only thing I hated about her. She always followed the rules after her first mission. I wondered why. Being out here only made me want to break more rules just so I could stay.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Came Helix’s voice next to me. I turned to face her. “It is,” I agreed.

The tides rocked around the boat, and I stumbled a little. Helix caught my arm, so I didn’t topple off the boat. Her hand felt like a warm fire on my arm. I glanced at her hand. Her fingers were long and delicate. I wondered why she wore gloves. I asked her about it.

She shrugged. “My, er, father, told me to always wear them. I never questioned it. Same reason I never questioned why I have a jewel in my skin. It’s small, but it hurts really bad when I’m in the water—”

She snapped her mouth shut. “Wait it hurt badly?” I asked

She nodded slightly, just enough for me to notice.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted. “I should have trusted you.”

She swiveled her head toward me, frowning. “Don’t say that. Ever.” She looked down. “Goodnight, Zel.”

She began to walk away, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Wait, what? Why can’t I say that?” I asked.

She ripped her arm away from me and turned toward me, and those alarm bells went off in my chest again. Every elf has fangs and can snarl or hiss, but when she scowled, I had to restrain myself from jumping off the boat.

“I said goodnight, Zel.”

She walked away, and I didn’t drag her back this time. I stomped my foot against the deck in frustration, making the boat rock a little harder.

Logan shook me awake. I shielded my eyes from the light of the Great Star. I sat up straight and raised an eyebrow at him. “We’re at the end of the river,” he told me. I stood. Helix was already awake, staring at a swamp where the red trail snaked into and behind the thick trunks of trees. “From here, it’s a swamp and then a desert,” she said. “We’ll find an oasis in the desert and there’ll be clues there.”

The three of us hopped off the boat and pushed it back upstream. Logan was on the left, and Helix was on the right, which left me right next to her. “Stay close,” she muttered. “We can’t get lost here.”

Helix grabbed a stick and rubbed it against a tree, where it came back covered in goop. She handed it to Logan, who stared at it, wide-eyed. “What am I supposed to do with this?” He asked.

“You’re the Elementalist, aren’t you? Give us light,” she told him.

“Oh. I can do that.” He said, grinning, no doubt recalling a spell from our elemental classes. He tapped the stick, and it immediately folded into an orb with light glowing right in the center. He held it delicately in the palm of his hand, smiling. I’d known him for a long

time. Logan usually found happiness in the small things. It was for that reason I'd become his friend.

We waded through the mud of the swamp. I felt something crunch under my foot. I looked down and stifled a scream. An elven skull sat there in the mud. A burning hot gloved hand clamped over my mouth, which felt like an iron rod placed over my face. "Shhh," Helix told me. "Just slowly take your foot off of it and keep moving, alright?"

Her voice was gentle and persuasive, which was surprising considering what had happened last night. I glanced at her. Her expression showed no fear, which somehow terrified me even more. I lifted my foot off the skull, and she took her hand off my mouth. Logan was staring at the broken cranium. "Who...who..." he began, but Helix slung an arm over his shoulder and led him away from the skull. I looked at it for a few more moments before going after them. We waded through the mud when we came across a massive fog wall. I looked up. It looked like it reached right up to the sky. "Now what?" I asked.

"We go in," Helix said.

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Nope. Come on."

She walked right into the fog. I looked at Logan. "This is crazy. She's crazy." He said frantically.

“That’s been established. Now, are *we* crazy?”

He was about to answer when Helix came running back out of the fog. “BAD IDEA!” She yelled. “RUN!”

And she took off. Naturally, we ran right after her. This time, we were able to keep up pace with her, considering that we were being chased by...something. “What is it?” I asked Helix.

“Whisps!” She told me.

“Can’t you just do your sword thing?” Logan asked her.

“There are too many!”

I ran faster, given that she could fend off hundreds of whisps but couldn’t deal with these ones. Logan tripped over something, and he tumbled face-first right into the mud. We hauled him up and kept running.

“I think I ate mud!” Logan said.

I wanted to crack a sarcastic comment about it, but a dark, sticky talon that was eerily tiny scratched my ankle, which shut me up pretty fast. “RUN FASTER!” I yelled.

We picked up the pace. “There’s a trapdoor somewhere. It’s a longer route, but we’ll live!” Helix shouted.

She turned to the right, and we ran after her. “Keep going straight!” She said and climbed a tree. “Did she just leave?” Logan wheezed. I didn’t bother answering that question and instead went with: “Move!”

“HEY, SMOKE-BRAINS, OVER HERE!” There came a voice behind us, which I assumed was Helix.

I turned slightly and caught sight of an entire army of whisps—just inches away from grabbing at Logan and I—turning to look at Helix atop a tree, holding a vine.

“Come get me!” She told them. She nodded at us, signaling to keep going. The whisps chased after her, and we kept running. “She’s acting as bait,” I mumbled.

“I hope she’ll be fine.” Logan wheezed.

I had no doubt she would be fine, but I simply nodded. Suddenly, the ground beneath us gave way. We fell, screaming. I braced myself for the landing, trying to slow the fall by grabbing onto stray rocks and mud. It didn’t work that well. We smacked into the ground, and my vision blacked out.

My eyes fluttered open, and I sat up groggily. I looked around at the sight of a diamond-filled cave like the ones we had below the bunker. Diamonds glittered in every crack and crevice of the cave. I turned. Logan was passed out on my right. I shook him roughly. He snorted and sat up. “Where are we?” He asked.

“Below the trapdoor that Helix mentioned.”

“Where is she?”

My eyes widened. He was right—Helix wasn’t in the cave. I stood and peered into a corridor. “I think we can find her. Come on.”

“But there are way too many paths. How do we know which one she’s in?”

I eyed the paths, hoping for the red trail to appear in one of them. “The red trail...it’s not here,” I mumbled.

“I think it’s because this isn’t the way we were supposed to go.”

Suddenly, Logan ran off into a corridor on the left. I ran after him. I peered behind his head. An orange light glowed menacingly in front of us. I frowned. Something seemed wrong.

A shrieking erupted from the orange light...but it didn’t sound like Helix. It sounded like a massive whisp screaming. My eyes widened. “Zel...” Logan started.

“I know, but what if she’s in there?” I said.

“She’s not *that* insane.”

He was wrong this time. Helix leapt out of the light, an infuriated expression on her face. I ran toward her and yelled her name. She turned and her eyes widened, and a series of emotions crossed her face—surprise, relief, and then anger again. “I told you guys to *keep going straight*,” she said through gritted teeth.

“We were trying to find *you*.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Oh, cut it out. What are you even doing?”

Suddenly, a giant black claw emerged out of the light as fast as lightning and banged into the wall. We ducked to the sides, avoiding it. The claw sat there in front of us, scraping against the wall and then swinging around until Logan stabbed it with a dagger. It shrieked loudly, making the entire corridor shake and crumble slightly. "Oh, shut up!" We all yelled at it.

It retreated back into the blazing light. I squinted and saw that the light was actually flames licking away at the cave walls which wasn't possible considering the amount of hardened carbon in the walls—diamonds. I frowned. That meant that that whisp had to be massive enough for it to glow that much when lit on fire. I glanced at Helix. "How did you manage to light it on fire?" I asked. She looked away. "Doesn't matter. We just need to find a way to get past that thing."

I studied her. Her intense green eyes were fixated on the fire as if it were going to reach out to kill her.

"Did you see what it looked like?" Logan asked.

She turned toward him and nodded. "Looked just like a standard whisp but bigger. I did notice a few of its weaknesses, though. It's really sensitive to touch but relies mostly on sound. I think it's blind. We can use that to our advantage. We just need to settle down the fire."

"I can do that," I said. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Unfortunately, I remembered the comment Logan had

made in elemental classes. He had joked that I looked constipated every time I tried to snowblast something.

I shook off the thought and focused. Cold rushed through my arms. I opened my eyes, and immediately, freezing wind snaked through the cavern and onto the fire. The flames licked away, battling against the mini blizzard I had just summoned. Eventually, the flames became shorter and shorter until they died down. I glanced at Helix. "Nice job," she said softly. She said it like it was a compliment, but her expression was a mask of appreciation over something else, and I immediately felt bad for reasons I didn't understand.

Logan grinned. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go."

Helix shushed him, suddenly back to her old self. The tension in my shoulders relaxed slightly. "We need to stay quiet," she whispered. She walked into the cavern, and we followed. "Stick to the sides," she said.

I looked around. The giant whip was nowhere to be seen, but clearly, we weren't taking any chances. Suddenly, I felt something drop next to me. I glanced down. It was black goop. I looked up, and my eyes widened. I whacked Helix's arm, and she swiveled around to scowl at me but then she met my gaze and so did Logan. The whip hung from the ceiling, its smoky arm leaking black goop from where Logan had stabbed it. It swung its head from side to side. "Run," Helix whispered.

Chapter 4

Nerdy-Ville! It has potential death!

We ran for it. A massive *THUD* echoed behind us. “Split up!” Helix ordered.

I used to read scary stories with my sister sometimes when I was younger. This was the worst idea ever. “That’s how we die!” I told her.

“Just do it!” She ran off to the left. Logan took off to the right, which left me in the center. Of course, the whisp came after me. Just my luck. I kept going straight because running zigzag was just stupid. I was like an annoying bug to this thing. One of its claws went up over me, towering over my pathetic little shadow, about to crush me. As soon as it brought it down, I veered to the right and kept running. *I really am an annoying bug*, I thought, feeling proud for obvious reasons. It slipped and crashed into a wall, bringing chunks of rocks down from the ceiling. I leapt to the side right before one fell in the place I was just standing. The whisp got up again and slithered over to me. Fun Fact about whisps: They don’t have legs or a face. Just a tail, two hands with claws, eerily long nails, a giant creepy red eye smack-dab in the center of its head, and a jagged mouth. I blasted ice right at it, but the ice

crumbled into icicles upon impact and smashed into the ground. Its head turned towards the crumbled ice and then back at me like, *Really? That's the best you can do?*

I felt like it was disappointed instead of amused, as if it expected to have its lunch put up a good fight before being eaten. I was out of ideas. Suddenly, a rock smacked into its eyeball. It blinked in confusion and turned. Helix stood there with her arms full of little pebbles and stones, scowling. She threw a few more while the whisp just stared at her. I ran over to her. "What are you doing?" I asked. She turned to look at me. Her menacing scowl turned into a grin. "Being a distraction!" She said.

My eyes widened, and I swiveled my head toward the whisp. Behind it, Logan was sneaking up. He raised his arms, and water exploded right onto the whisp. It shrieked in agony and began to evaporate, holes appearing in its body and eye. It shook itself, swinging from side to side while more water exploded onto it. It turned and smacked its tail...right into Logan. He was tossed into a wall and I screamed his name in a panic. The whisp collapsed and evaporated.

We ran towards Logan. He was lying on the ground, his back turned to the wall. I turned him over. His head was bleeding and caved in, and his neck was bent at a weird angle. "No..." I mumbled.

“Logan,” Helix whispered, her voice breaking. Tears gathered in my eyes, but suddenly Helix’s lit up. “I have an idea,” she told me.

I turned toward her. “What do you mean?” I asked.

She took Logan’s dagger, placed it against her arm, and *cut*. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just trust me,” she said. The wound bled a golden substance, not regular red elven blood. My eyes widened. She wiped the substance on a cloth she produced from her pocket and placed it on Logan’s neck and head. Surprisingly, the bleeding stopped, and his crumpled figure began to mend. His neck snapped back into shape, and the wound on his scalp disappeared. His skull slowly fixed itself into its normal shape. Logan’s eyes fluttered and opened. His brown eyes widened, and he sat up straight. “Careful,” Helix warned. “You’re probably dizzy.”

“Wh—what happened?” He asked and looked at me.

“I have no answer,” I said and nodded at Helix.

Logan turned and noticed the cut and his eyes widened even further. Helix cleared her throat and stood. “We should go,” she said abruptly.

“But you...” I faltered, not knowing what to say. Helix gave me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about it,” she told us. Logan stood, followed by me.

Helix ducked into a crevice and looked around. "Down here," she called. We crouched into the small place, and I peered into the shaft that cascaded down into darkness. I frowned. It didn't look like anything natural. I turned to look at Helix. She was examining the walls of the shaft. "This is an elven-made tunnel. I think it leads to the desert. Come on."

She crawled inside and dropped into the shaft. Logan glanced at me. "I trust her," I blurted. He grinned. "Good."

"Let's go," I said and dropped into the shaft. I landed, tumbling right into Helix. "CAREFUL!" She told me. "One wrong step and this whole place is going to come down on us." I looked down. She was right. Cracks formed a cobweb pattern across the stone floor. I glanced up. The ceiling was the same. A thud echoed from behind me. I turned. Logan had dropped down the shaft and was now nervously eyeing the cave. "This feels wrong," he mumbled. I agreed. "This place is booby-trapped," Helix observed.

"How do you know?" I asked.

She drew one of her swords and poked the ground with it. Suddenly, holes opened in the walls. Arrows shot out of them and smacked into the ground next to her sword.

"Jeez," I muttered under my breath. "I have an idea," Logan blurted. We turned towards him. "Frost action." My eyes widened, remembering our elemental class.

“You’re right,” I said. Helix frowned. “What are you guys talking about?” She asked.

“I’ll show you,” I told her. I crouched down and studied the cracks. I concentrated on the fissures, and a wave of cold swept through the cave. Ice formed in the cracks and snaked between the rocks. Some were shot with arrows, some caught fire, some melted, and some exploded in acid, but few were left alone. I stood and glanced at Helix, who was grinning from ear-to-ear. “Nice job, nerd,” she told me. Logan whooped and hopped onto a rock. “What are you waiting for? Come on!”

He hopped enthusiastically from rock-to-rock.

Helix and I glanced at each other, amused, and we followed him.

Logan made another light orb at the end of the cave. “Now what?”

“Is this just a dead end?” I muttered

“No,” Helix said. “It can’t be.” She sounded unsure. I shifted uncomfortably. We were all cramped into a tiny crevice where the cave had narrowed down. Helix was in the center, on my left. There was minimal space, so her arm was smushed into mine. In fact, there was so little space that her fingers were practically curled around mine. She didn’t even notice but I had to suppress a blush arising on my cheeks. Helix looked up, and an idea seemed to dawn upon her.

“I know what to do,” she piped up. “Zel, give me a boost.”

My eyes widened. “Wh-what?”

“Hurry up!”

I decided to shove my awkwardness into a corner of my brain, stuff it in a steel chest, and lock said chest. I gave her a boost. She latched her fingers around a rock in the wall and climbed onto a stone shelf. “Logan, give me the orb,” she said. Logan rose up on his tippy toes and handed her the orb. She raised it to the ceiling. Writing glowed in the light of the orb. Helix grinned. I squinted at it. “It’s written in the old language,” Logan observed. “From before the whip war.”

“I can read it,” I said.

They turned toward me, surprised. “I had to learn it,” I told them. “My parents said that learning this language would help somehow.” I shrugged. “Turns out, they were right.”

“Alright, Translator, go ahead,” Helix said, smirking. I rolled my eyes and began to read it. “It says, ‘never going to give you up, never going to let you down.’”

I blinked, racing my eyes across the message, making sure what I just read was correct. “Okay, what in Terris is that?” Helix blurted.

“Maybe it’s some human battle cry or motto or something? It sounds encouraging, I guess.” Logan thought aloud. Helix hopped down from the shelf.

“Never going to give you up—” We all started simultaneously by chance, and immediately, the ground gave way beneath our feet. We fell, screaming, into darkness.

I awoke and sat up straight. Helix was passed out next to me and Logan had flopped over on his belly on the ground a few feet away. I examined my surroundings. We were in another cave covered in diamonds. The cave narrowed into a corridor behind Logan. I turned toward Helix and shook her gently. Her eyes snapped open, and she punched me in the face. I was knocked backward. “OW!” I yelled, bringing my hands to my punched face. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” She yelped and brought her head to hover above mine, her fiery hair cascading over my peripheral vision. “Are you okay?” She asked.

“No, I’m not okay! You just punched me in the face!”

“Is it bleeding?”

I took my hands away from my face. The bottom of my palm was stained red. I showed my hand to her. “You’ve got a busted lip. Uh, it’s okay, it’s not too bad. Get up.”

I scowled at her. “Five more minutes, Mom!” Came Logan’s groggy voice from across the cave. Helix snorted and helped me up. She glanced at my bleeding mouth

and grinned sheepishly. She took Logan's backpack and got a water bottle and clothes. "Clean it with this," she told me. "I'll wake him up before he calls us his mom again."

I laughed and then winced. Little tip: don't laugh if you have a busted lip. It *hurts*.

I sat down and soaked the cloth in water. I brought it to my lips and pressed down on it. I looked at the cloth, now covered in little red blotches while Helix violently shook Logan. "Five minutes!" He droned. "Quit throwing a tantrum, I'm not your mother, get up!" She yelled back. I gave her the water bottle. She smirked and poured a little onto Logan's head. He sat up and shrieked like a toddler. Helix laughed, and I grinned. Logan stood and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Seriously?" He asked. Helix ruffled his curly (and now damp) hair, sending a little plume of smoke going up from her palm but she didn't even notice. Helix screwed the cap of the bottle shut and placed it back into his backpack. I stuffed the cloth into my pocket and stood. "We should go," I said. Logan's eyes widened at the sight of my face. "What happened to *you*?" He asked.

"HE SAID WE SHOULD GO," Helix interjected and dragged him into the corridor. I grinned, trying not to burst out laughing because that would hurt, and followed them. We walked in that corridor for what felt

like hours. Eventually, we stopped, tired. We sat on the ground. Logan took the water bottle, poured a little into his mouth, and gave it to Helix. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh. Right," he mumbled and handed it to me. I drank a little, screwed the cap back on, and put it back in Logan's backpack. We sat there in silence for a while. I heard a scuttering sound and stood, my eyes widening. "Did you hear that?" I asked. "Hear what?" Logan asked but Helix's elven ears twitched along with my own. She stood. "You're right," she mumbled. Logan frowned, then his ears flicked as well, and realization dawned upon him. "What is that?" He asked.

Suddenly, something barreled toward us at the end of the corridor. At that distance, it looked like a tiny ochre blur to me, but then again, considering the *distance*, it was massive. "Guys..." I started.

"I see it," Helix said. "Running would be a revolutionary idea."

Chapter 5

I battle a sand lady

We turned and began to run. A shrieking echoed through the corridor and Helix skidded to a stop. “Wh— Helix, what are you doing?” I asked, turning towards her. She signaled for me to wait and squinted at the giant ochre blob. “Jeffrey?” She called. *Who is Jeffrey?* I thought, my eyes widening.

Another shriek came from the blob, and as it got closer, it turned out to be a Lekian, also known as a sand scorpion. Lekian literally translated in the old language as a *massive sand bug*. His eyes were big and honestly, adorable. “Jeffrey!” Helix repeated and ran over to him. She scratched his yellow exoskeleton, and he clicked his massive fangs, that could probably tear two giant holes in my torso like, *ah, that’s the spot*. “Hey, boy,” she cooed, grinning. Jeffrey screeched happily, his poison barb hanging over her head. I eyed it nervously, even though I knew it wasn’t going to do anything to us, but I still wanted to move her away from the tail. “She’s friends with a Lekian and calls it Jeffrey. Why am I not surprised?” Logan said.

I snorted. “I can hear you, Logan,” Helix said. I walked over and looked at Jeffrey. “Um, hi,” I said to him.

Helix raised an eyebrow at me. “Seriously?” She teased.

“I’m not good with new people. Or in this case, giant bugs.”

“Clearly.”

She grabbed my hand, startling me. She placed my palm onto Jeffrey’s forehead. He clicked happily and I tried to say ‘awesome!’ or ‘wow!’ but it came out more like ‘huh.’ I obviously have an amazing way around words, don’t I? Helix still hadn’t let go of my hand, so the cold exoskeleton pressed against my palm while Helix’s warm, gloved hand was on the back of mine. Logan walked over, grinning. He scratched Jeffrey’s chin, and Helix shook, with barely stifled laughter. I raised an eyebrow at her. She placed a finger on her lip, telling me to be quiet. I nodded, confused. “This feels kind of sticky,” Logan said awkwardly. “Yeah, there’s no exoskeleton on the underside of him.” Helix casually informed him. His eyes widened as he realized. He drew his hand back and it was covered in a clear sticky goop. He screamed and stood straight. “GROSS, GROSS, GROSS!” he exclaimed, clutching his hand and violently shaking it off. “I hope my mom packed sanitizer.”

Helix laughed, bringing her hand off mine. I grinned and slid my palm off Jeffrey’s forehead. The warmth of Helix’s hand still lingered on the back of my hand. “Jeffrey being here probably means we’re close to the desert,” I observed.

“Yeah, but scorpions like him only come down here when there’s something bad going on at the surface,” Helix said. “Great,” Logan mumbled, fishing around his backpack for sanitizer. Jeffrey nudged Helix gently with his massive left claw. I noticed that his right claw was bigger than his left one. Helix turned towards him and Jeffrey turned and scuttled off in the direction from which he came. “Let’s go,” Logan said, pouring the entire bottle of sanitizer on his hand.

We followed Jeffrey further down the corridor. I was careful not to step on his branch-like legs. Sweet or not, I didn’t want to mess with a scorpion the size of four elves combined. Eventually, we reached a hatch attached to the ceiling of the corridor right before a dead-end. It was made of some heavy metal and was shaking slightly. A roaring noise echoed from the hatch through the corridor. “Sandstorm,” I mumbled. Helix nodded and glanced at Jeffrey. He crouched down like, *please don’t make me come*.

“You did good, Jeffrey. I’ll bring you plenty of mice next time,” she said.

He clicked happily. Helix reached up and unlocked the hatch. It swung open violently, and dust poured in chaotically. “Come on!” She yelled at us. We climbed through the hatch and tumbled onto the surface. “Logan!” I yelled, trying not to be blasted off the face of

the planet by the sandstorm. I latched onto a rock. “Cast your shield spell!”

Considering the roaring of the storm, he probably just heard ‘Cah you shell!’ or something but he understood. He chanted some complicated spells that I didn’t even bother listening to, and in moments, a massive purple shield hung over our foreheads. Almost immediately, the storm changed direction, hitting us from the back. Logan yelled in frustration. He changed the shield to cover us from behind and once again, it shifted wind direction. “This is literally impossible! How is it doing that?” I yelled.

“It’s Sana!” Helix yelled.

“What’s sana?” I asked.

“Not what, *who*. Show yourself, you—!” She yelled some things in Draconic that would not be appropriate to mention.

The sandstorm immediately faded, and Logan’s shield disintegrated. The sand before us coiled around like a mini tornado, and a woman materialized out of it. “Hey, sweetheart.” She said.

Helix snarled. “I see you brought friends,” she drawled in a falsely sweet tone. She had dusty blonde hair and tanned skin. Her eyes were the color of the sky, dotted with swirling white dots that looked like clouds. The sclera of her eyes was black instead of white. She wore a

long, puffy, orange evening gown and carried a colorful patterned umbrella as if it were a parasol. “Sana,” Helix greeted bitterly.

“Helix. What a long time since we’ve seen each other.”

“Not long enough,” Helix mumbled under her breath. We all stood up and dusted ourselves off.

“It seems that you are here on another mission. I sincerely hope these poor souls make it back.” Sana said.

I frowned and looked at Helix, who was practically shaking with anger. “What does she mean?” I asked.

She glanced at me, and her expression softened, which I didn’t expect. She took a deep breath and said, “No one makes it back from the missions. Elves go looking for the scrolls all the time. Your parents sent you out here to either get the scrolls or come back terrified of the surface. They wanted to crush you into obedience.”

I couldn’t speak. Millions of thoughts clashed in my head. They didn’t want me to know what the surface was like. They wanted to subdue me into following their pathetic rules. Helix hurriedly tried to explain.

“I’m so sorry, Zel. I—”

“Stop,” I said. I wanted to be mad at her, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. She saved my life and Logan’s life. Her actions spoke a lot louder than her words. I was mad at my parents, not the person who had been protecting me for the past five days continuously,

even though I had offended her several times. “I’m not mad.”

Her shoulders lost their tension. “You’re not?”

“No. You could be mad at me for what I said the first day we met. You could be mad at me for bringing you into the rain even when you said no. You could be mad at me after the other night. But you’re not. You don’t deserve to be mad at.”

I looked at her. Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped as if she had never been forgiven for anything, which made my heart ache just thinking about it. She had to have been forgiven for something before...right? “Aw,” Sana sneered. “Finally forgiven now, aren’t you, child?” She said, smiling evilly. Helix looked down at her shoes, and Logan did something incredibly like himself. He tackled her in a hug. Her eyes widened even further, making me laugh.

“Well, this is sweet, but we have things to discuss,” Sana piped up.

I scowled at her, understanding why Helix hated her. Logan pulled away from Helix, frowning.

“Who’s battling me now?” She asked. “Nobody’s battling anybody,” Helix said forcefully.

“Well, you’re not, but maybe these two might try,” she replied. “You need to do it to get to the oasis. Either do it or crawl back home. What’s it going to be?”

Helix glanced at us. Logan turned toward me. “We’ve come so far,” he said nervously. I sighed. “We’ll do it.”

“BRILLIANT!” She shrieked. The sand gave way beneath us.

We were screaming as we were whisked through a winding tunnel. Suddenly, the tunnel shot up, and so did we. The three of us were thrown onto a bright, sand-filled arena. Crooked, crumbling pillars were aligned around the arena in a circle. I looked up. The arena had no roof, like the one we had at the bunker, but that was always for Tor to peek inside and laugh at, in his words, ‘the puny little elves fighting each other’. Suddenly, Helix’s limbs snapped towards her body, and she faceplanted the ground. “Helix!” I yelled. Logan crouched down and turned her over. Judging by her expression, the sand didn’t taste good. I knelt next to her. “What happened?” I asked.

“Sana happened. I think she tied up my limbs.” She said, spitting out sand. I glanced at her arms. She was right. Incredibly thin orange tentacles made of sand curled around her body. We propped her up and set her against the wall. “Okay, here’s what you’re going to do,” she started. “Stay as far away from the sand as possible, and you need to stab her right between her scapula to beat her. It’s the only part of her that remains solid. Be careful. She can materialize sand into almost anything.”

“Hello, children,” came a voice behind us. We turned. Sana stood there, her hair braided and dressed in armor. “Which one of you will fight me? Hmm.” She walked over and examined Logan and me. She lifted Logan’s chin with a chubby, long-nailed finger. She squinted, looking at his deep brown eyes. He shifted uncomfortably. “Um...hi?” He said awkwardly.

“Hm. Elementalist. Tsk. Would be fun. Then again, maybe not.” She mumbled to herself.

She turned to me and immediately grinned. “Ice elf. In the desert.” She laughed. “This should be fun.”

Logan was immediately wrapped in sandy tendrils and smacked against the wall next to Helix. *Brilliant*, I thought. Sand coiled around my legs and whisked me to the center of the arena. I felt beads of sweat streaking down my forehead. Ice wasn’t an option here, so I drew my sword. Sana grinned. “And begin,” she said. Sand erupted around me. I ran behind a pillar and hid. “Oh, already hiding, now, are we?” She called out. “Elves. Pathetic.”

Sand blasted right into the already crumbling pillar. The top chunk of it was blown off. I rolled away from the spot I was standing in. The marble hit that spot, and my eyes widened as she blasted more mini sand blizzards. I turned left and ran. Sand blasted continuously behind me. I picked up the pace, ran into the open, and ducked.

Sand flew right over my head like a bullet. "Run, little boy!" She yelled, cackling. I did. Right toward her.

Her eyes widened in surprise and sand erupted right in front of me, but I rolled out of the way and kept going. I raised my sword to stab her, but she disappeared. I turned around in a circle. "Look out!" Logan yelled. A sword circled my neck. "Hello, little elf," Sana said from behind me, exhaling rancid breath. I stared at the sword. A drop of sweat rolled down my chin and landed right on it. I grinned.

Water.

Ice began to cover the sword. It snapped in half, and Sana shrieked in dismay. I rolled away from her, and sand blasted right in my face. My sword was thrown away, and I was tossed onto the ground.

I sat up and reached for my sword, but Sana kicked it away. I stood and scowled at her. I was breathing heavily, and the Great Star bore down on me, draining my energy. Sana was full of energy, though. And angry. Let's not forget 'angry'. She drew another sword and pointed it at my face, inches away from my nose. I closed my eyes, waiting for my death. "Sana, wait!" Came a familiar voice from the left. Sana turned. "I'll trade with you," Helix said. Sana raised an eyebrow. "Do speak," she said.

"Zel's life for my blood. You've always been interested in it. Now you've got it if you let him go."

“Helix don’t..” I started, but she looked at me with a gleam in her eyes and a smirk that kind of made her look like a psychopath. She had an idea. I snapped my mouth shut and suppressed a smile. Sana had forgotten about me completely. Logan struggled against the tendrils, but she couldn’t care less. Sana strutted toward Helix, grinning. “You’ve got yourself a deal, kid.”

Helix scowled at her, but the gleam in her eyes went nowhere. The tendrils let go of her. She glanced at me and then at my sword. I picked it up and silently walked over to Sana, who wasn’t even paying attention to me. She was examining the golden cut on Helix’s arm. I raised the sword and brought it down on Sana’s back, right in the middle of her scapula, piercing through her spine. She screamed in agony and disintegrated. “Yes!” Helix yelled, pumping a fist into the air. Suddenly, the tendrils wrapped tighter around Logan and began to drag him toward the ground. He screamed and struggled against them. We grabbed his shoulders and tried to pull him back. Helix drew her swords and snapped the tendrils away. He stood, panting. “Thanks, guys,” he said.

A face appeared in the sand. “Liars! Liars and cheats! Especially you!” it yelled in Sana’s voice.

“What can I say?” Helix told it. She glanced at me, grinning. “I fight dirty.” Logan stomped on the sandy face, and we left for the oasis.

Chapter 6

We hitch a ride

I was in a good mood. The three of us cracked bad jokes about the mission the entire way there. Eventually, an oasis came into sight, and we ran toward it and knelt before it. I splashed my face with water. Logan gulped down the water and grinned. "I knew we had a water bottle, but this is just better somehow," he said. "Agreed," I replied. I stood and looked around. Helix was staring into the distance. I met her gaze. She frowned at a thick, fuzzy grey line streaking the horizon. "What is that?" Logan asked. "Rock trolls," Helix said. "They'll be here by night. We need to hurry."

"What do we do?" I asked. She turned toward the water. "Somebody needs to go in," she said. "There might be clues down there."

"I'll do it," I said. "Logan can you.."

"On it. I'll create an air bubble."

Helix raised an eyebrow at me, prompting me to explain. "There's a spell where you can give a person oxygen underwater but only if *you* can hold your breath," I said.

"So, your survival depends on Logan's lungs?"

"Pretty much."

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard.”

“You got a better one?”

I genuinely wanted a better one, but she sighed and shook her head. “Good luck,” she said. “Don’t drown.”

I grinned. “Can’t promise you anything.”

She slapped the back of my head. Logan gave me a thumbs-up. I waded into the water. “You can go under,” he told me. I brought my head under the water. A white helmet formed around my head, and I took in a lungful of oxygen. I heard Logan’s muffled screams and laughed. “Don’t play with this thing, Zel,” Helix’s voice echoed through the helmet, but I heard the smile in her voice. “Yeah, sure, mom,” I replied. “Shut up and look for clues, frost-head,” was the reply I received. I looked around in awe at the remarkable ecosystem.

Algae glowed and swayed in the water. Pink seaweed shifted and turned with the school of bright yellow fish. They took one look at me and swam off again. I held my breath for Logan’s sake, only taking in oxygen when I ran out of my own. The entire thing was filled with light from the surface, making it glow. I swam through the tiny cavern and brushed the seaweed away from my face. “Zel, hurry, Logan can’t hold up any longer, I’m taking over,” Helix told me.

Logan’s panting echoed through the helmet. “Hurry up, Zel,” he wheezed. A cavern hid behind the kelp. I swam

inside it and frowned at the walls. "There's inscriptions in here but I can't understand them," I said. "Just cut them out," Logan said.

"With what?" I asked.

"I don't know, improvise! We're running out of time here!"

I drew my sword and banged the hilt into the crack in the wall. The inscriptions were written in some weird dialect that I didn't understand. It wasn't the old language and certainly not the one we use in the present day. It didn't look like man's language either, which we had studied in museums on field trips. The slate fell to the bed of the pond. I picked it up and grunted. It was insanely heavy, even though it had easily slipped off the wall. I dragged it to the main cave and lifted it with all the strength I could muster. I kicked my legs vigorously and rose to the surface. I pushed it onto the sand and climbed out of the water. Helix had sat down, holding her breath, frowning into space, her cheeks blown up and red. I took off the helmet and smashed it against the ground, where it shattered into millions of tiny pieces. Helix gasped for air and bent over. "Could have been quicker," she wheezed. "Sorry," I replied sheepishly. Logan grabbed the slate and dragged it over to us. "What is this?" He asked.

I shrugged. "I couldn't understand anything."

"Great, so now you're useless as a translator," he replied.

Helix snorted and I rolled my eyes. The Great Star had started to set. I glanced at the horizon to see that the rock trolls had gotten much closer, and I could make out their features. They were made of boulders stacked upon each other. A troll bigger than the rest led the entire group of them. I shifted my weight from leg to leg nervously. “Guys?” Logan called nervously.

“I know, I see em,” I replied. “We need to hurry.”

We turned our attention back to the slate. “Wait, maybe we’ve been looking at this all wrong,” Helix noticed. She walked over to the side of the slate. “It’s a map!” She said.

Logan stood, and we looked at the slate from her angle. “You’re right,” Logan said. “Aha!” I exclaimed. They jumped. “So, I’m *not* useless as a translator, after all!”

They scowled at me, and I shrank a little. “Just saying.”

Helix patted my shoulder, holding back laughter and crouched down before the slate. She brushed her fingertips against it. “This,” she said, pointing at a figure near the top left corner. “It looks like a sea serpent.”

“The one we killed,” Logan noticed.

“Right!” I said and pointed at another figure next to that. “And this—a boat.”

“And then a river, swamp, giant whisp and oasis!” Logan shouted enthusiastically. “It really mentions a giant—Oh would you look at that,” Helix mused.

I laughed. "This is our entire mission so far," I said.

"After that, it mentions rock trolls, then a mountain," Helix observed, her brow furrowing.

"Maybe we need to follow the trolls?" I suggested.

"Okay, but we can't leave the slate here. How do we take it with us? It's way too heavy to carry."

"Maybe the trolls could help?" Logan asked nervously.

"And how would we manage to pull that off?" Helix asked, a sarcastic tone lining her voice. "They can't feel anything. Maybe we can hitch a ride?" I pitched in, hopefully.

"It's a long shot," Helix replied.

"Everything's been a long shot so far."

She grinned and said, "Let's do it."

We hid behind the sand dune, waiting for nightfall. Logan had nodded off, but Helix and I were wide awake. I wished I could fall asleep as easily as Logan could. If there was an explosion, Logan would still be able to doze off. I gazed at the Great Star slowly disappearing beneath the horizon. "It's beautiful," I said.

"Agreed," Helix replied. "You're lucky," I told her. "You get to see this every day."

"Yeah? At least you're safe."

“Who even is your family? Where do you even live?” I asked.

“Why do you want to know?” She shot back, but it wasn’t in a rude tone. It was soft and genuine.

“I’m just taking an interest in your life,” I replied. “Also, we have nothing better to do.”

She snorted and replied, “Well, don’t, it’ll leave you traumatized.”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. Her face was covered in shadows, leaving her intense dark green eyes and dark red hair to look black. “You want to hear something?” She asked. “It’s an old myth.”

I nodded. “Go ahead, O storyteller.”

“Why thank you, frost-head.”

I laughed pretty hard at that. When I finally recovered, she started. “The rock trolls were said to be kind of like guides..”

“Like you?”

“Um, *no*. I take offense from that.”

I laughed again, even harder. Helix elbowed me but when she moved, her face came into the light, and I saw the smile on her face. “*Anyway*, they’re supposed to be guides, *unlike me*, and every year, they move towards the mountains two nights before the eclipse. One of the wizards studied them. Somewhere in the middle of his

life, he met a little human girl. He didn't know how she got here onto the planet, but he treated the girl like a daughter, and when she was a little older, around thirteen, she wrote the Scrolls of Mankind. She put them in a book and hid them somewhere behind the mountains where the trolls visited. The girl met a cruel fate at fifteen. She was killed by a monster. Or at least, an elf with the personality of a monster. He came to be known as the Arcane."

My eyes widened, and my smile melted. Every single person on the planet knew who he was. The Arcane had built a structure around the planet called The Bridge. You couldn't see The Bridge at the level of a desert, but you could see it clearly atop a mountain. The Lliop was one of our moons that was three-quarters the size of the planet and was the reason we received end-of-year eclipses, when the Bridge could be seen. I looked up. Yep, there it was. It reflected light during sundown but almost none at night. Its dark side always faced us.

"A witch took pity on her and preserved her corpse for centuries. Legend has it, it's still laying around in the forests near the mountains. Of course, that legend's wrong." She finished abruptly.

"I—how would *you* know?"

The Great Star had set, and the other stars glittered cheerfully above us. Suddenly, a massive grey foot slammed down on the sand in front of us. It lifted and

took another thundering step, leaving a footprint the size of ten trucks. “We need to wake up Logan,” Helix said, grinning, and we abandoned the conversation. We shook him awake. Thankfully, he woke up without us slamming the slate on his head. He stood up, jaw dropped and judging from his expression, he immediately regretted it. Rock trolls looked amazing, but they smelled horrible. “I know, I know,” Helix said. “But there’s no time to stand around. Let’s go.”

The three of us picked up the slate and walked right into the crowd of trolls. Helix let go of the slate. “Stay here!” She told us. She broke off into a run and ran right towards the leading troll. She jumped onto its arm and latched on. She began to climb and reached his shoulder, wrinkling her nose slightly at the smell. “Give me the slate!” She yelled.

Logan cast a spell, and the slate flew right into her arms, almost knocking her off its shoulder. She scowled at him. “Sorry!” he shouted. “Doesn’t matter, come on!” She told us.

We ran toward the troll. I jumped, and she grabbed my arm. I nearly pulled her down with me, but I managed to latch onto the troll’s shoulder and yanked myself up. We grabbed Logan’s arms and pulled him up. “Ow,” he grumbled, landing flat on his belly. I grinned.

“Mountains, here we come,” Helix said, smiling.

Chapter 7

The weather's crazy too!

Helix had taken the first watch for the night as Logan and I dozed off. My dreams were weird, as usual.

I was falling into that same black abyss. My limbs flailed around, and though I had just fallen asleep, it felt like I had been falling for a very long time already. Soon enough, I began to feel annoyed. "STOP IT!" I yelled at nothing in particular and suddenly I smacked into the floor. I hoped I hadn't been flattened into a pancake. I stood with a great amount of effort and looked around. My surroundings had changed—I stood in a musty old library. The floor was a light, dusty orange color with a skull in front of a rose painted right in the center. Several bookshelves towered over my head. I squinted at a book in front of me. Its cover read, *Tubby, the shorty*.

And this is what you call irony.

A round wooden desk sat in front of me. On top of it, stacked a weird number of books. I frowned. Even libraries didn't have this many books or scrolls. I walked towards it and picked up a scroll. My eyes widened. A painting was on the papyrus. The girl in it looked almost exactly like Helix, only younger. Her brown dress was in tatters. Her palms glowed in an illuminating light that

made the scroll look like it was going to catch fire. Her intense green eyes were wide with fear. Another girl stood next to her. This one had black hair, dark brown eyes, and pale skin. Despite the eyes and hair, they looked almost the exact same. They were facing each other, with elves standing behind them, staring at them intently. Elf no. 1's hands were grey, nearly stone-like, and another was blue, and so on. I ran my thumb across the face of the girl who looked a little like Helix. Her eyes seemed to bore into my soul.

Much to my surprise, pale, rough hands flew in from my right, grabbed the scroll, and ripped it away from my hands. I looked up in shock to see a wizard with a long white beard, a weird, crooked hat, and a wooden staff that looked too heavy for him to carry. He was hunched over, his shoulders rounded, sharp collarbones sticking out of his skin. He wore cotton clothing that was in tatters. "Idiot boy," he spat, baring yellow, decaying, misplaced teeth. I said something intelligent— "Um hello?"

"'HELLO'? 'HELLO'?" He shrieked.

"Hi, hi?"

He grimaced, looking like he was somehow disgusted with me even though *his breath* smelled like my Gran's feet. "You have the audacity to *dream about this place*?" He smacked my elbow with the scroll. I jumped. "Woah, hey! I can't control what I dream!" I replied though I was

thrown off slightly by his high-pitched voice. He growled. "Yes, well, you're still stupid, going on this quest. Especially with that girl. And you brought your friend! Idiot, idiot!" He slapped my shoulder with the scroll this time. "Okay, I have no idea what you're talking about," I said.

"That's why you're an idiot!" He screeched. "Ah, we're out of time. Goodbye. See you at the eclipse. Please try to die before that. I'm not looking forward to meeting you."

On that happy note, I was sucked up into the air and flipped around and I was once more falling into the abyss. "OH, COME ON!" I yelled. I didn't want to fall onto the ground again.

So, instead, I jolted awake and intoned in an almost zombie-like voice, "No pancake!" Helix nearly slapped me in the face, but I caught her palm; my eyes widened. I looked down at her. She was still sleep-fighting away to glory, and apparently, her subconscious had decided to try to hit me again. I realized her hand was still pressed between my fingers. Heat rushed to my face, and I attempted to put it back down gently, but her eyes snapped open and flicked over to our hands and she frowned slightly. "What are you doing?"

"I—you tried to slap me in your sleep."

"Uh, okay. Why didn't you let go?"

I dropped her hand. “I forgot,” I said in a pathetic attempt to explain.

“That’s—”

“You sleep fight, you know?”

I was trying to retrieve some of my dignity, whatever had been left. It didn’t work. She scowled, “I do *not*.” She snapped and sat straight, her cheeks red. At least she’d forgotten about the hand thing. I smirked. “What are you trying to fight in the first place?”

Helix got that gleam in her eyes that sent that bad feeling boiling in my chest. “Turn around, frost head,” she told me. I shouldn’t have turned. Massive dark blue feathers raced past my face, practically drowning me in color. I gasped for breath when it passed. “What was THAT?” I asked, turning back. “Look for yourself,” she mused, staring up. I met her gaze. Feathery dragons, much smaller than Tor, half the size of a rock troll, circled around above us. “Scallan dragons,” I breathed in awe. Helix grinned. “It means we’re close to the mountains. Look at the slate. I studied it last night.”

I turned toward the slate and pulled it toward me. Next to the mountain was the drawing of a feathery dragon, then a bridge, and finally, scrolls. “We’re so close,” I said. She laughed, to my surprise. “‘Close,’ yeah right. We’re just starting, Zel.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“It’s only been a week. We still have another two left, remember?”

“So, we’ll be early!”

“No, Zel. We’ll be late.”

“Helix, what is in those mountains?”

“A crazy old wizard plus two annoying tests. We’ll probably be delayed for two or three days, maybe the entire new week.”

I gulped, remembering the guy from my dream. “Would it have been better if I hadn’t known?”

Helix scoffed like she’d been asking that question her whole life. “No,” she replied. It didn’t make me feel better.

“GOOD MORNING!” Came Logan’s voice from behind us. Helix and I jumped and turned. He was in a very good mood. He was stretching and practically hopping with adrenaline, having slept through our discussion somehow. I chuckled. “You’re in a good mood,” Helix noted, grinning. “Indeed, I am,” he replied. “New day, fresh start. How far are we?”

“We’re reaching in a few hours, settle down,” she replied. He shrugged and flopped down in front of his backpack, still energetic. “Anybody up for breakfast?” He asked.

“I’m starving,” I replied.

“Three breakfasts coming up. Oh, and kiope gum. *Lots* of kiope gum.”

“Right in the morning?” Helix asked.

“Of course” was the answer she received.

Logan threw me several candy bars and gum. I stared at them and then at him. “This is not my breakfast,” I said flatly.

“Yes, it is. We’ll need energy. Eat up.”

“That sugar crash isn’t going to do us any favors, Logan. We need to climb a mountain, in case you forgot,” Helix said.

He sighed. “There goes my bucket list,” he mumbled. It didn’t bring him down, thankfully. He tossed us protein bars and juice boxes, and we kept the candy in our pockets. I finished off the bar and was sucking up the remnants of juice at the bottom of my juice box. My sister would chide me about it, saying I was taking in too much air and that my stomach would make me pay the price for it later, but she wasn’t here, now, was she? Helix was gnawing away at her protein bar, having finished the juice first. Logan finished both and vigorously chewed his bright blue gum. Every pack was a different color and had a different unknown flavor, which was kind of disturbing. At one point, there was a manufacturing mistake, and the flavor turned out to be dragon scales. Logan had been sick the whole month after that. Helix

looked up at the circling blue dragons. “They’re beautiful,” I noted. “Want to see something even better?” She asked, grinning. “YES!” Logan exclaimed. Helix stood, protein bar in her mouth as if it were a straw. She walked over to the head of the troll, jumped up on it, and pressed its forehead. The cracks in the troll lit up vibrant blue. I chuckled. “That’s something,” I echoed. She nodded. I ran over and placed my hand on the spot on the troll’s forehead, grinning. Logan stood next to us, looking down at the troll’s bushy eyebrows. “Do you think he knows we’re here?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. Maybe we’re like lice to him or something,” Logan suggested. Helix snorted. “That’s disgusting,” she told him.

I shrugged. “Plus, he probably would have killed us if he knew we were here,” I said. Helix shook her head. “They’re surprisingly gentle. Even though they smell like that fruit we ate on the boat,” she replied. “I knew I wasn’t the only one who noticed that!” Logan countered.

Hours later, we were facing the scorching heat of noon in the middle of the desert. I wiped the sweat from my brow and frowned. “Isn’t the eclipse tomorrow?”

“Yeah. When the Great Star’s setting. And we’re getting late,” Helix said.

“What do you mean?”

Logan sighed heavily and put on a thick, shiny black jacket above the hideous sweater, and zipped it up. "There. Gone." He said. I sat up with great effort, still recovering. Helix didn't even bother trying. She was still lying down on her side, shaking with laughter. Logan threw a juice box at her.

Soon, we were moving through a valley, the thundering steps of trolls echoing both below and behind us by the one we were riding and the ones behind it. I squinted up. Snow was beginning to fall. Wind whooshed past my ear. "Wind's picking up. Could be a storm," I noticed.

"We'll make it," Helix announced. "We have to."

Eventually, the mountains grew closer and closer until we reached a ledge. "Here," she said, pointing. "We need to get off here." She stood and jumped onto the ledge. She reached her hands out. I passed the slate to her, and she fell backward with its weight. She kept it down and turned towards us. The troll took a step, and we were suddenly way further away from the ledge. "Hurry!" She yelled at us. Logan and I glanced at each other. "You go first," I told him.

He nodded, not wasting time. He took a running start and leapt. Helix grabbed his arms and propped him up straight. The troll took another step, forcing me to crouch. I walked back a few steps and took a running start like Logan. I jumped with all my might.

It was only a second, but it felt like an eternity that I was suspended in midair. I smacked against the ledge and hung on for dear life. Warm hands grabbed my elbows and dragged me up. Our foreheads bonked together, and we jumped away from each other, yelling in pain. “Nice going,” Helix told me, palm on her forehead, frowning. “How is this my fault?” I asked, doing the same. “Guys?” Logan called. He was struggling to hold the massive slate all by himself. “We don’t have time to argue.”

Helix and I looked at each other and came to a silent agreement. We rushed after him and held the slate all at once. We waddled towards the pathway carved in the mountain and began to walk.

Chapter 8

We meet the crazy guy

“Stop moving like a crab!” Logan ordered.

I turned towards him, scowling. “How else do you suppose we move?”

“Ow! That’s my foot, genius!” Helix yelled next to me. I took my foot off hers and sighed. “We still have the whole way to go, and that’s not even the top. Just this weirdo’s lair. We can’t do this the whole time,” I said.

“Yeah,” Logan agreed. “What do we do?”

“We can’t *do* much of anything,” Helix muttered. I frowned at her, but she arched her eyebrows at me which prompted me to really assess our situation. We were holding the slate together, in the position of a triangle and were waddling up the slope like a weird, conjoined crab. “I can try a spell,” Logan suggested. We set the slate down. Helix and I held it, preventing it from falling off the side or sliding down, which was hard. “This thing is making way more trouble than it’s worth,” I grumbled. “Oh, shut up,” Helix told me. “With our luck, this thing’s probably going to get mad and launch itself off the mountain.”

“Slate-acid?”

“Logan, hurry up, *please*.”

He grabbed his backpack. He began casting a spell. The only word I could catch was *void*.

Logan picked up the slate with all his strength and shoved it into the backpack. My eyes widened. It disappeared behind the mounds of clothing and food, and water bottles. “That’s an impressive spell,” I admitted. Logan smirked smugly. “Don’t underestimate—” he picked it up and fell. I caught his shoulders, making sure he didn’t convert the slope into a slide. It was my turn to be smug. “You were saying?” I asked. “Shut up,” he told me.

I snorted. “This thing’s still as heavy as the slate,” he noted. He thumped the backpack down. We looked at each other and came to a silent agreement. Logan took the front, leaving Helix and I with its heavy butt. We dragged it up the slope. “This is quicker,” I noticed. Helix nodded.

After a quick pit stop for lunch, we kept going. Hours later, we were up most of the slope, but it was night, and the blizzard had reached its peak. “We need to stop!” Logan shouted over the roaring of the wind. “Agreed!” I yelled back.

“There!” Helix pointed at a cave a few more steps up the slope. We stumbled into it and flopped over on our

backs. "We can't sleep," Helix said flatly. "Not right now. At least, one of us can't."

"Why not?" I asked.

To my surprise, she began to laugh. She covered her face with both palms and laughed until her gloves were covered with tears. I was worried she was going hysterical. Logan looked at me, his eyes wide. I shrugged. "You'll see," she croaked. "Okay, then," I said nervously. "I'll take the first watch."

She frowned at me. "Wake me as soon as anything happens."

I nodded. "Stay alert," she told me and closed her eyes. Logan turned to look at me. He sighed and rolled over to lie on his side, away from me. I looked out of the cave, feeling weak compared to whatever Helix was talking about.

A while passed and I was beginning to think whatever was going to happen wasn't going to happen. Then again, Helix made jokes about things, but however dark her humor could be, I doubted she'd go to this extreme. My eyelids began to droop. *Stay awake, stay awake*, I told myself, but my vision had already darkened. My knee smacked against my forehead, and I sat like that, my eyes closed. I began to drift off, but something wet dripped onto my scalp. My eyes opened slowly, and I blinked, trying to register why there were black and red scales in

front of me. I looked up, my heart in my throat. Fangs hung over me, dripping green saliva. Beady red eyes glowed beyond them. I yelled in a panic and stumbled away from it. A roar echoed through the cave. A massive reptile with six legs was about a meter away from me, looking very hungry. I drew my sword and held it, shaking. "HELIX!"

"I see it!" came her voice from behind it. "Zel, get out of there!" Logan yelled. "No, don't!" Helix said. "You need to fight it. Alone."

"Alone?"

"The wizard likes elementalism, and I've visited him before. He won't mind Logan and me paying a little visit. But he'll probably hate you. You need to prove your worth."

"And what if I can't?"

"Then you die, either way."

Brilliant. The monster growled at me. "Any chance we can talk this out?" I asked it. It growled, which I assumed was a *no*. It charged, and I rolled to the side. *Wait*, I thought. *This is my territory*.

I summoned ice to whoosh through the cave but all it did was cover it in a pile of snow. It crashed right out of it, sending snow blowing my way. I ducked, and it rained right over me. It ran towards me, its footsteps thundering through the entire cave. I scowled and readied myself. I

dashed forward and slid right underneath it. It passed ahead of me, and before it could turn, I lunged out with my sword blindly and through sheer luck, stabbed its scaly thigh. It howled in pain, and I grabbed my sword back, its blood spraying all over the place, dying a small part of my hair red. It turned with way more momentum than necessary and roared furiously in my face, spraying me with green saliva. I shook it off my palm, disgusted. A talon smacked against the ground, and I backed up as quickly as I could. Its talons hit the ground again and again until I was pressed against the wall. A talon grabbed me by the neck and lifted me into the air. I dropped my sword and struggled against its claws pressing against my carotid. A gaping maw opened beneath me, and I was dropped into a dark abyss of saliva.

Soft walls pressed against my left and right. Panic began to build in my chest. It was dark, too dark to see. I realized that I had stopped in this thing's esophagus. I hadn't reached its stomach yet. I clung desperately to the sticky film coating the walls of the esophagus while I was running out of oxygen. Stomach acid or not, I was going to die here if I didn't act fast. Convulsions ran through the tube as if it was getting uncomfortable, which was understandable. It had a moderately tall elf lodged in its throat. An idea came to life in my sluggish, panic-stricken mind. I had dropped my sword, but I had my backup dagger. I unsheathed it and stabbed it everywhere around

me. Blood began to spray around me like leaky pipes. I began to feel lightheaded with the effort. I stabbed once again with all my might, and this time, it stuck. I grabbed the hilt and *yanked*. I spilled out of its food pipe and into the open air. It thudded to the ground next to me, dead. I panted, gasping for sweet oxygen. I dropped my dagger and lay there, covered in reptile blood and green saliva. Helix and Logan ran over to me, yelling my name. Helix crouched in front of me, grinning. "You did it!" She said. "No thanks to you guys," I joked.

"We couldn't help, and you know it. Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, too exhausted to speak anymore. "I'd hug you but, well..." Logan said, faltering. I chuckled, and pain shot through my ribs, and I winced. Helix frowned. "You *are* hurt," she noticed.

"Didn't notice," I croaked. She rolled her eyes and stood.

"Can you walk?"

I nodded, and they hoisted me up. They slung my arms around their shoulders, and Helix grabbed the backpack. Logan tried to help. "I got it," she told him. She dragged it along while we waddled up the slope once again. The storm had settled down and the Great Star began to peek through the clouds, showering our grimy faces in light. We stumbled along in exhausted silence. "We're here," Helix announced, her voice cracking through the quiet atmosphere. I looked up. A castle towered above us,

almost menacingly. It was shielded by a purple, misty dome that evaporated. The drawbridge of the castle dropped, and out of the shadows inside, a frail old man walked out. Very slowly. Almost snail-like, which was funny since he'd been very energetic when he was slapping me with scrolls in my dream. "Uh, sir—" Helix began. "Give me a minute," he wheezed in his high-pitched voice. We waited. After what seemed like an eternity, he was in front of us. "Welcome," he grumbled, not sounding very welcoming like us surviving was annoying. "To the Lunar Dome."

PART 2: LOGAN

Chapter 9

The eclipse and a random lightning guy

I was cold and scared. Very scared. Pee-your-pants *terrified*. But of course, I couldn't show that. Helix was insanely brave and skilled with her swords. Zel was just thrown out of the guts of a monster and controlled ice. Me? I can make a light show with my fingers if I'm not busy shaking hard enough to cause an avalanche. Yippee! So, I put on a brave face or whatever you want to call it and marched forward when the crazy guy said to 'haul our butts into the castle before we freeze them off.' Although, it wasn't much of a march considering I was holding up half of Zel's body weight. Zel was shaking and could barely stand on his own two feet. Helix was shouldering his right side, leaving me stuck with his sticky, saliva-covered left half. Of course, I wasn't going to complain about it. He looked like he was going to face-plant the rocky side of the mountain and roll right off if we let him go. We moved like a weird bunch of very slow penguins, the three of us wobbling along behind the wizard. We entered the castle finally and the wizard turned and dug around in his knapsack—which I had just noticed—hanging by his side and produced a red cube. He stuffed it down Zel's throat, who let out stifled

screams in protest. Immediately, his pupils rolled into the back of his head, and his knees buckled. Helix and I caught him. “Zel!” I yelled and turned back to the wizard, scowling. “What did you do?” I demanded.

“It’s a healing potion in a capsule,” he rasped. “He should wake up...now.”

As if on cue, Zel snorted, and his head snapped up. “I—what happened?” He asked, sitting up straight. I grinned, my anger dissipating. “That’s some amazing magic,” I mumbled to myself, in awe. Helix frowned. “You’re okay?” She asked him. He nodded, surprised. “I am,” he replied.

“Showers are down the corridor,” the wizard told us. “There’s enough for all of you.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, we stood and raced down the hallway. A doorway opened and we ran inside. There were several massive stalls. Zel went into the one on the far right and Helix looked around to see separate stalls on the other side of the hallway. “Meet me in the hallway,” she told me. “Bring Zel if he’s done.” I nodded, and she was off.

I waited for Zel outside, studying the castle. The walls were made of ivory and marble. The hallway went down to expand into a big room filled with scrolls and decorated in baby blue, which surprised me a little. I wouldn’t have thought that the wizard liked the color. I had changed out of my weird sweater and shorts into a

black training jumpsuit that we wore under armor back at the bunkers, just in case we had any more interactions with giant reptiles. I never really liked wearing them, though. They made me look like I was the elf version of a stick, but you could never really be too careful with creepy wizards in the mountains. I chuckled to myself—I said it like it was completely normal.

Helix walked out of the room with the other stalls, shut the door, and leaned against it, arms crossed. She smiled at me. Her curly red hair was frizzier than usual, and she had changed into a plain white shirt with puffy sleeves and slacks and was walking around barefoot.

“How’d you even take a shower anyway? It’s water.”

“Is my skin steaming?” She asked. I noticed it was rhetorical, but I decided to answer it anyway. “No,” I said.

“Then let *me* worry about that.”

Zel walked out of the room. His hair was back to white, not stained red as if it were a blank canvas that had been spattered with paint by an angry artist. He wore a simple white shirt and black pants. His purple eyes gleamed again, and thankfully; all the saliva had been washed off.

We walked down the hallway into the room. I looked up. It had no ceiling, and the Great Star shone merrily above us. I whistled in appreciation. “This is pretty awesome,” I said. Helix grinned. “Pretty much,” she replied.

Suddenly, something smacked against the back of my head. "Ow!" I yelled, jumping away. We turned to see the frail old man standing there with a massive heavy staff. "You hit me," I said to him. "You are stating the obvious," he grumbled. He shuffled past us and looked back at us. He pointed his staff at Zel and me, frowning. "You two," he told us. "Go explore. Stay in the hallways. Do not stray from the path or there *will* be consequences."

"What about Helix?" Zel asked.

"She will come with me. Now shoo!"

I scowled at the wizard. This guy was getting annoying. "Sir—" Helix started, but he was already hobbling back down the hallway. She glanced at us nervously. Zel shrugged. "Try not to die in this place," she told us and went after the wizard. Zel sighed. "Come on, Captain Obvious," he told me and began to walk forward. "Don't call me that," I protested. He snorted. We walked across the room and into another corridor. This one was lined with blue glowing arrows. We walked inside. It was the same thing everywhere, ivory and marble. We walked around for about five minutes when the hallway branched into two. The blue arrows trailed off into one, but the other glowed in an orange light. I stared at the light. Zel stopped in his tracks and turned to face me.

Uh, you good?" He asked.

“I—that light,” was all I said.

He started towards it, but I stopped him. “We’re not allowed to go in, remember?”

“Or they’ll be consequences, yeah, yeah. There are always consequences. I’m going, are you coming?”

I shook my head vigorously. “You have a death wish, fine. You’re not killing me with you.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he told me and slipped down the corridor.

I squirmed for a few moments and then ran after him. “You’re a psycho,” I told him. All I received was a chuckle. “Helix told us not to die,” I mumbled nervously. “And we’re probably going to die down here. What if she comes along down here and finds our skeletons or something? That’d be weird. I wonder what she’d think. We’re probably stupid for doing this. Well, you’re stupid, I’m down in the dirt dumb for following you but still—”

I was ranting and didn’t even know what I was saying (what did down in the dirt dumb even mean?) so Zel did the only sane thing. He clamped his hand over my mouth, frowning. I slapped it away and was about to continue just to annoy him before we died when the light increased in intensity. I snapped my mouth shut. “I think we’re close,” Zel said. We walked down a little further, and the hair at the back of my neck stood up. A bad

feeling began to boil in my chest. I wanted to run right out. A roar echoed through the corridor. “Zel...” I started nervously.

“Yeah,” he said. “I don’t really want to figure out what’s down here anymore.”

We were about to turn and hightail it out of there when fire trailed through the corridor. I cast a spell, and a shield formed around us, but it was a little too late. Zel’s eyebrows were burned off, but I was too terrified to laugh. “What was—” I asked, then faltered. Fangs hung over us, dripping with saliva. The head of an eyeless, skinless monster was in front of us, all its veins and arteries bulging and painfully visible. It barely fit through the corridor. It roared in agony and retreated. My shield dissipated and I went after it, Zel yelling my name and asking me if I was crazy. I ignored him. I skid to a stop, eyes widened when the corridor stopped and opened into a massive abyss. The monster’s head flopped around midair, screeching. Its massive neck was squirting blood all over the place. It spewed fire in a panic. Zel screeched to a stop next to me. “By the Great Star,” he breathed, voice shaking. “What could make that thing bleed this bad?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I want to know.”

The monster collapsed and tumbled back into the inky blackness of the abyss.

We walked back in silence. We found Helix in the large room called the quad. She was huddled up in a corner, head on her knees. She looked up. "Hey," she croaked. "What took you guys so long?"

I explained what had happened. She opened her mouth to speak when the wizard waddled into the quad. "Eat," he told us and gave us steaming bowls of...something goopy. I hesitated, then picked up my spoon and ate. The way it tasted surprised me. It melted in my mouth, whatever it was. Flavor exploded onto my tongue. It was savory yet a little sweet. "Wow. This is amazing," I muttered.

"It is," Helix agreed.

"What is it?"

"Rapan stew," The wizard replied. Helix's eyes widened, and she spat it back into the bowl. I knew what Rapan was. It was a chopped-up monster.

Suddenly, I knew exactly what had wounded that monster, and I did *not* want to anger that wizard.

I set the bowl aside and tramped down my nausea. Zel stopped with the spoon halfway to his mouth and looked at us. "What?" He asked.

I opened my mouth to explain, but Helix clamped a gloved hand over my mouth. "Ignorance is bliss," she reminded me, her eyes taking on an evil gleam. "Also, what happened to your eyebrows?" She asked Zel.

“The fire,” I told her. She snorted. “I *will* throw this stew at you,” Zel told her. She ignored him and doubled over laughing.

It was dusk and the setting Great Star shone above us, creating a kind of horizon with the quad’s circular open roof. “Telescope time,” Helix told us. We stood up and walked down the winding corridors, very carefully avoiding the ones with light, after the incident. We reached the observatory. A massive telescope towered over us. It was lined with gold. Steps lead up to the point where you look into the lens. We walked up the steps, looking around at the dome. It was decorated with paintings of planets and constellations. An illusion of shooting stars hung above our heads, making me feel like a meteor was about to crash right into me. I didn’t realize my jaw was hanging open until Zel reached up and shut it. Helix gave us glasses, and I pressed my eye against the lens. The Great Star was coming close to one of our moons. I grinned. “So, what’s special about this one?” I asked.

“It’s special because our biggest moon is in the exact position for The Bridge to be visible. It only happens once a year. It’s exactly what we need to pinpoint the location of The Bridge.”

I looked up, squinting. The moon was coming even closer to the Great Star. “Now?” Zel asked.

Helix nodded. “Put on your glasses.”

I fumbled with the glasses, nearly dropping them. Thankfully, I managed to put them on without falling off the stairs. I had to prop them up on my usual glasses. It started to get much colder. The temperature dropped. Of course, I was the only one who noticed, thanks to Zel's powers and Helix's...well, actually I didn't know why she didn't get cold, but whatever, not the point. The Great Star was covered by the moon, a golden ring forming around it. Lightning flashed in the sky. The two jagged silver lines that snaked through the sky snapped into two golden, parallel, semi-circling lines running across the sky with a booming *CLAP*. Another golden ring formed around our largest moon, making it clearly visible. It was gorgeous, painted in gold, silver, orange, and purple by the sky and eclipse. "Wow," Zel breathed next to me.

I agreed completely. I squinted into the lens, and the eclipse came up close in my vision. "It's beautiful," I mumbled.

"Step back," Helix said. "We have a visitor."

I arched my eyebrows. "Who?" I asked.

"You'll see."

We stepped away from the telescope. Helix drew her swords, and Zel unsheathed his own. I took out my measly little dagger and waited. Lightning flashed in the dome. I jumped, surprised, not sure how that was even

possible. It struck the floor once again in front of us. A figure materialized right where it struck. My eyes widened. He wore a black embroidered cape with a hood and solid black armor that glinted in the dim light of the eclipse. Half his face was covered by a shadow from his hood, leaving the end of a scar that snaked onto his thin lip, down his chin, and onto his neck. I wondered how you ended up with a scar like that. Did he sneeze out a dagger or something? He leaned against the stairs, his presence practically radiating an attitude that felt like it was bouncing off the walls and smacking me right in the middle of my forehead like, *Yeah, I'm the coolest, shorty*. This guy was *really* tall. "Hey, Goldie," he said, looking down at Helix, showing off perfect, shiny white fangs in a grin.

Goldie? I thought absent-mindedly.

"Gray," she greeted, with a nod of the head. I frowned. This guy's name couldn't actually be Gray. "Coming home any time soon?" He asked.

"Eh, not really," she replied. He snorted. "This kid," he turned towards us and gestured at Helix. "Is the most skilled out of all of us. Only one mortality."

Helix's fists clenched as if she was trying not to punch him. "Gray," she mumbled as if she was reminding him of something. His eyes widened, and his expression turned guilty. "Ah, sorry, Goldie."

“Whatever, just tell us whatever you need to tell us.”

“No can do, kiddo. We have to test two of you. Remember last time?”

“This again? Really?”

“Wait, what’s happening? Who needs to be tested? And for what?” Zel butted in.

“Basically, there’s a system for this kind of a thing,” Gray said, gesturing vaguely. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Actually, it’s pretty simple. You don’t get tested; we all die,” Helix said bluntly.

My eyes widened. “You have to be joking.”

“Hah, I wish I was.”

Zel scowled. “How does that even work?”

“It’s a long story. Now, one of you needs to do this. I’ll come with you, so you won’t have to do it alone.”

“I’ll do it,” I blurted. They turned toward me. “Zel handled that reptile monster thing. I can do this.”

“Wait, so this random lightning guy is going to make you...take a test? Really?” Zel asked, arching his eyebrows.

Gray, aka Random Lightning Guy, scowled at him. “It is not pencils nor paper. It is a test to decide whether you are worthy of the scrolls. Also, so you all don’t die the second you get the scrolls.”

“Okay, seems fair,” Zel said, pursing his lips.

Helix rolled her eyes. She turned to Gray. “Okay, go ahead.”

The floor beneath Helix and I crumbled, and we fell.

Chapter 10

Studying tries to kill us

When I woke up, Helix was already sitting up straight. My entire body was in pain. I sat up slowly, with as much effort as I could muster. My glasses, both eclipse ones and regular ones, were sitting crookedly on my lip. I tossed aside the eclipse ones and fixed mine. I squinted at the glass. It was a little cracked, but I could see fine through it. “What now?” I asked. She frowned into the distance, though there wasn’t much of one. We were sitting in a tiny cave with several corridors snaking away in different directions. “The path changes every time. We need to find clues.”

I stood and helped her up.

We glanced around the tiny cave. I looked up at the suddenly formed ceiling that I seriously doubted had been there before, considering we’d just fallen into the cave. I squinted. There were no words inscribed onto the ceiling this time, thankfully. I felt like it had happened way too many times before. “I think we just need to guess,” Helix said nervously. “Okay,” I mumbled. I picked one out randomly and began to walk towards it. I turned and glanced at Helix. She wasn’t moving, just biting her lip, eyebrows furrowed and fidgeting with her gloved fingers in one place. “I’m not good at trusting my

instincts,” she told me. “I’m used to knowing everything at the back of my hand. It’s why I hate this test. It changes every single time. I trusted my instincts *once*, and it killed...” she gulped, not being able to continue. I reached out my hand and gave her an encouraging smile, which I was usually pretty bad at. The only smiles I was otherwise capable of giving were a smirk, a grin, and a nervous smile that was more of a This-is-my-pathetic-attempt-at-a-brave-face smile. “Well, my instincts are awesome. I have gut feelings all the time. Never trust Zel’s instincts, though. If he says to go in one direction, run away in the other.”

She laughed and took my hand.

We walked through the corridor. Helix’s hands were planted firmly at her sides. She looked around nervously, practically scanning every crevice and shadow. I was, however, completely different. I allowed myself to get lost in a thick cloud of my thoughts, both negative and positive. Most of them were just about the kiope gum I hadn’t brought with me. I made a mental note to always have kiope gum in *hand*, not just in my backpack, which hadn’t come down here with me either. I wondered what flavors I had left. I hoped there weren’t any weird manufacturing mistakes this time. Eventually, my thoughts went from gum to food, and my stomach began to grumble. I sniffed, frowning. The smell of batter and syrup hung in the air. I thought it was my mind playing

tricks on me until Helix said, "I cannot be the only one smelling pancakes."

"You're not," I assured her. We looked at each other for a moment. "This is probably a trap," I told her. "At least we'll get food that's not monster," she argued.

We picked up the pace. A light began to glow, and the corridor widened into a clearing in the open air. We walked out of the tunnel. My feet thumped lightly against the grass. I squinted at the sky. The Great Star shined brightly above us, surprisingly. It seemed as if we had spent the entire night in the tunnel, which didn't seem possible. "That's weird," I mumbled.

"Magic's a weird thing, Logan," Helix replied, shrugging.

I agreed. A building towered above us. It had a picture of books on its right. A small garden was planted around it. The oak doors on its front were wide open, welcoming. "I have a bad feeling about this," Helix said.

"Me too."

Of course, we did the only sane thing. We turned around and left. Hah. Sike. We walked right through the doors.

We were in another corridor, but this one wasn't made of stone. It was made of marble. The floor was covered with a red carpet which wasn't a deep shade but instead bright and eyeball-burning. It was honestly tacky. Medals hung from the walls, all gold. "This is really weird," I noticed. "Yep," Helix replied. Suddenly, a woman

stumbled out of a random door next to us that I hadn't even noticed. "Oh, hello!" She said, cheerfully. Her hair was orange-red, and it was straight with split-ends like she hadn't cut it in a while. She had small bloodshot eyes, below bushy eyebrows, that were a startling neon yellow. They kind of creeped me out. I wondered if they were contacts and if so, why would you pick that kind of color? She wore a full-sleeved pink dress, but the most unsettling thing was when she spoke, a green pointed tongue flicked between her thin lips. I wondered if she was a snake morphos. A tag was pinned to her dress reading: Martha. "Would you like some pancakes?" The mystery lady produced a silver platter with pancakes and two forks out of thin air and shoved it towards us. "The test is getting ready," she told us. "Go study. Down the hall to the left. All the best!"

She disappeared once more behind the door. "Wait, this is an actual test?" Helix asked. "That's...different."

"Yeah, and we apparently have an entire syllabus to cover. Come on." We sat on the floor and ate the pancakes, and the platter disappeared the second we were done. We stood and walked down the hall. A massive red door on our left swung open. Inside were shelves and shelves of books, tall enough to reach the incredibly high ceiling. We walked in reluctantly. "This is our syllabus?" I asked. "No way."

“Brilliant. There’s no way we’re passing this test.” Helix grumbled.

“I’ll cover the left side; you take the right.”

We split up. I headed straight for the shelf on the extreme left. I picked up the heaviest book I could find because why not? I figured I’d just flip through it and procrastinate. I lifted the extremely heavy leather cover, and I flipped through the pages to find them blank. I frowned and kept flipping through the pages. Nope. All blank. I reached the center of the book, where a flat black ink line was drawn across the two pages. It flashed purple, and I jumped. The line split into two joined ones with jagged triangles in the middle...almost like a mouth. “Ay, guys, we got a newbie,” it said. “BY THE GREAT STA—you can *talk*!” I blurted.

The book was amusing. “Of course I can talk,” it rasped. Its voice was very hoarse, as if it had just woken up from a *really* long nap. “How can you hear me?” I asked. “You don’t have ears.” That was my primary concern here.

“Magic, kid. Also, you’d better start running. The boys and I are pretty hungry.”

“The boys?” I started then faltered as books fell off the shelves, hovered midair, and opened themselves up, flipping to their center where their mouth opened to reveal a throat behind their teeth. My eyes widened. They started flying towards me. I did the sensible thing, for once. I ran for my life.

I ran into Helix, sending us both down. “Ow! Logan, what happened?” She asked, rolling away from me. I flopped down on my back, panting. “Studies are trying to kill me.”

“What?”

“No time,” I said, struggling to my feet and yanking her up. “Run!” She didn’t argue. We raced past the bookshelves. Behind us, books threw themselves off their shelves and came after us. Helix glanced behind us. “Oh,” she said in a small voice. “Makes sense now.”

We turned the corner swiftly, nearly falling. I smacked against the marble wall, and I yelped. I could’ve sworn I heard a crack in my shoulder, but we didn’t have time to stop. Books whacked into the wall where we were just standing. “Pick up the pace!” Helix yelled as if that hadn’t already crossed my mind. We ran faster.

“I have an idea,” Helix said. “I don’t like it, but it’ll work.”

“Do it!”

“Please don’t tell that stupid ice elf,” she said. I assumed she meant Zel. I frowned at her, opening my mouth to speak, but I faltered when she slid to a stop and pulled off her gloves. My eyes widened. Her arms were coated in an orange light. Her gloves fell to the ground. The books raced towards us. Helix held up her hand and simply touched the bookshelf next to us. From her fingers, an orange spark ignited, and the wood was

immediately set on fire. The entire shelf went down in seconds, followed by the other shelves and finally, the books that were chasing us. I grinned, and Helix turned to face me. Her eyebrows immediately furrowed in confusion at my expression. "That was awesome! Why have you been hiding this?" I asked.

"It was...awesome?"

"Of course! You just set the whole place on fire! Normally, that's not a good thing, but then again, books were trying to eat us."

She looked up, her hair falling around her face, drowning her features in a shadow except for her surprised smile, making her deep green eyes look almost black. "Really?" She asked.

"One hundred percent."

She put her gloves back on and grinned. "Thanks," she said. I glanced at the burning bookshelves in disbelief. "I can't believe studying just tried to kill us," I muttered.

She snorted. Doors swung open behind us, again ones we hadn't even noticed. We jumped simultaneously, turning around to face that same mystery lady who had given us the pancakes. Her name was Martha, wasn't it? Her eyes widened at the sight of the library crumbling in a blazing fire. "Well, that's...new," she mumbled. "Anyway, children. You have passed the first round. The test has been prepared completely. Follow me." She disappeared into the shadows, and we had no choice but

to go after her. We walked blindly in the darkness, just going straight the whole time. Finally, light struck my eyes, and I sighed in relief. She was waiting for us in an arena, like the one we had back at the bunker. There were no desks or exam papers, which sent another wave of relief overcoming me. Of course, this relief quickly evaporated. What else did I expect? A cage dropped into the arena, covered in a blanket.

“Good luck,” Martha told us and to my dismay, pulled out handcuffs and cuffed Helix’s hands behind her back. She had clearly found out how we burned down the library. Helix struggled and kicked. She shouted and blasphemed and yelled some things about the lady’s mother. Unfortunately, this didn’t work, and Martha left us in the arena. I sighed. “What now?” I asked Helix who was still struggling against the handcuffs. “We’re dead,” Helix said. My eyes widened. “At least I am. I’m of no use without my hands.”

“Well...you have your legs.”

She frowned at me. “Not the best motivation,” I guessed. She arched her eyebrows like, *you think?* I pursed my lips, thinking. “Let’s just wing it,” I said. Her eyebrows ran for her hairline. “And if that doesn’t work?” She demanded through gritted teeth as if she would punch me if her hands weren’t tied—literally. “Then yeah, we’re dead.”

She huffed and turned to the cage, apparently not bothering to argue. A metal crane reached down out of

nowhere and pulled the blanket on the cage off. Behind the steel bars, was a male Scallan dragon. He was in poor shape. His gorgeous blue feathers were ripped and torn. Scars covered his body. His snout and crest were supposed to be blue, but for the larger part, were covered in purple bruises. One of his eyes was milky white, while a scar ran down his other. "Poor thing," I mumbled. Helix sighed. "They probably tortured it," she said. "Forced it in there and made it fight."

He paced the cage, limping slightly. Smoke billowed up from his nostrils. His massive, incredibly strong tail smacked into the metal bars. I jumped. Scallan dragons had tails with the power to crush even diamonds. As I expected, the bars snapped apart. "Is anybody going to let him out so we can fight him or befriend him or whatever these people expect us to do?" Helix asked. I swallowed the lump in my throat and managed to croak out an answer: "They don't have to. He'll let himself out."

The bars all broke.

The dragon threw away the top of the cage and roared at us, spreading long wings. He blew fire at us, and I rolled away. When I stood up again, Helix was in the same position, in the same place, except now her handcuffs were melting. I didn't know why she hadn't been incinerated, but I wasn't about to complain. She grinned. "Well, that worked in our favor," I said. She snapped her hands away from the oozing metal and

turned towards the dragon, who was already charging towards us. I chanted a spell as fast as I could, and a translucent, purple-tinted dome formed around us. I held my hands up, trying to hold it while the dragon smashed right into it. Sweat trickled down the side of my face. The dome got weaker and weaker with every time it threw its tail onto the now thin violet film. “What do we do?” I asked Helix, through my clenched teeth. “This thing’s a creature of air and fire; I’m pretty sure fire won’t affect it. So that’s ruled out. He’s been beaten up and tortured. He’s probably not open to being friends...” She rattled off a list of things that we could do, but it wouldn’t work before my makeshift shield began to crack. I lost control of it, and it shattered into a million pieces, and I dropped to my knees, panting. A massive, long blue tail hovered menacingly above me and came down to crush me.

A force blew me aside and suddenly, I was a few feet away from the tail that had smacked against the ground so hard it was stuck in the cracked concrete and sand. Helix had tackled me aside, and now she rolled away from me. She stood, swords drawn. I tried to sit up, but it was like my muscles had all turned to gum—stiff but goopy inside. My vision swam but I tried to focus on Helix standing next to me, one of her swords hovering over me and the other pointed at the dragon. It regarded the sword as if it were a steel toothpick. The dragon sniffed her fingers as if it wasn’t interested in attacking anymore. I found

the strength to sit up, but as soon as I did, black and red spots danced in my vision. The dragon turned towards me and puffed smoke in my face. I froze, blood gushing in my ears. Suddenly, electricity arced through his neck. He threw his head back and roared in agony. Right below his chin was an electric collar. I snapped my head back to Helix, who was already looking at me with wide eyes. An idea dawned on me. I stood, ignoring the head rush, and mounted the dragon, who almost immediately tried to toss me off. I grabbed onto his neck. Everything instantly became a blue blur as the dragon smacked into walls and flapped around midair, trying to get me off. Fortunately, I had an amazing grip. Helix's voice echoed through the arena. I couldn't catch the words, but she sounded frantic, either trying to get the dragon's attention or telling me I was insane. It could have been both, though.

While hanging on with one arm, I reached up with the other and felt my fingers curl around the collar. I grasped the entire thing, looking for a button or *something* that would get it off. I was in luck. A small red button was in the center of it. I pressed it and finally got thrown off his back.

Helix broke my fall, and she was not happy about it. She shoved me off, yelling incoherently. I suspected they were insults and not the kind that children could hear. She finally grasped my shoulders and scowled at me. "What was your insane plan anyway?" She asked me, her

voice suddenly dangerously calm. I held up the electric shock collar. Her eyes widened. "I take it back," she said, grinning. We turned to look at the dragon. He was pacing the arena nervously, flapping his scratched-up blue wings frustratedly, his talons scratching the area on his neck where the collar had been. He snorted, smoke pluming from his nostrils, and glanced at us. I walked over and stuck my hand out, which he sniffed after some hesitation.

"Well done," a deep voice boomed throughout the arena, though it sounded like the person was very annoyed. "You may leave now. Go through exit A, and you'll be back at your starting point. Leave the dragon here."

I glanced at Helix. Her eyes gleamed as she shook her head at me, grinning. Her smile sent chills down my spine. It was honestly kind of scary. I looked around. A door had appeared on our left with letters in a rectangular box above it spelling out, 'Exit A'. We began to walk towards it, with the dragon following us. "Wh-what are you doing? Leave the dragon here! Hey, leave the dragon here!" The voice yelled. "Martha, close the exit! No, not that button! NO! That's the eject—" The voice cut off, and we marched through Exit A.

Chapter 11

My friends participate in a suicide contest

“So, what do we name him?” Helix asked me while we walked through the tunnels, the dragon trailing behind us. “Indigo?” I suggested.

“No way. His feathers aren’t that dark.”

“Blue would be a little too obvious.”

She snorted. “Sky?” I suggested. She pursed her lips, eyes widened, and eyebrows arched as if she was trying hard not to laugh. I suspected she was just teasing me, but I ruled it out. She twirled her swords while walking—completely casually, mind you— and I could swear that every single time the point got close to my face, my heart threatened to stop. I scratched the dragon’s snout, which he seemed to enjoy. He had gone from bloodthirsty killer to cuddle monster in seconds. “There’s this word in the old language—*Skrill* or *Skryllia* meaning free or freedom. Maybe *Skrill*?” Helix asked.

“I like it. How about that, *Skrill*?” I asked the dragon, as if he was going to answer. I repeated the name, and he turned toward me. Helix said the name and his snout swiveled toward her. “I think he likes it,” Helix noted. I

nodded, grinning. Finally, we reached the place where we fell. My cracked eclipse glasses, which I had left behind, snapped beneath my feet. I looked up. A ladder led up into a blinding light. "How are we going to get Skrill up there? Aren't his wings hurt?" I asked.

"His wings are only scratched up, not broken. He can fly."

I nodded and began to climb.

I pulled myself up and flopped over on the ground. Zel immediately ran over and shook me. I noticed that his eyebrows were somehow back on his face. "You're alive! Where's Helix?"

"Climbing the ladder," I wheezed. "I really hate your test," I told Gray, who was kneeling before the drop into the tunnels, trying to look for Helix. He snorted and said, "Trust me, I'm not a fan of it either." A gloved hand reached up the ladder and waved. Zel grabbed it and yanked her up. Skrill shot up the tunnel entrance and into the air. Zel's eyes widened, and Gray fell backward. "Is that.." Gray started but was interrupted by me. "Gray, Zel, this is Skrill," I told them. Zel waved nervously, but Gray was frozen in one place, jaw dropped. His hood had fallen back, making black messy hair fall over his forehead, above light brown eyes. I didn't know why they called him Gray. Skrill regarded them and then dropped to the floor. "He's been beaten up," Gray said, standing. "Poor guy."

“I have a question for you,” I said, turning to Gray. “How do these tests even work?”

It took a while for him to tear his gaze away from Skrill to me. “The scrolls you’re looking for are the Scrolls of Mankind. The tunnels you passed had a quote from the human planet—Earth—that made you drop into another set of tunnels, which eventually led to the desert. Everything here is human-made, combined with magic, except they have no idea that it is, which was the basic function. We have elves on Earth, the human planet, forming a separate branch of rebels against the Arcane. This test is from the rebels against the elves. It’s the only thing the rebels and the...controlled ones,” he faltered at this, glancing nervously at the floor and avoiding eye contact, “—can agree on. If you’re looking for the scrolls, whoever you are, you must go through two rounds of a test.”

I nodded. “It’s mostly magic, right?”

He nodded and turned to Helix. “I’ll be on my way now,” he said, pulled his hoodie on and lightning struck once more in the dome. He disappeared into thin air. She rolled her eyes. “Drama King,” she mumbled under her breath and turned towards Zel. “How long were we gone?” She asked. “The entire night,” he replied as he gestured at the rising Great Star out of the window of the dome. I frowned at it in disbelief. “It was daytime in that place, though,” I said.

“It’s magic,” Zel said, scrunching his eyebrows as if he was annoyed at the word. “It’s always magic,” I scoffed. Magic was beginning to be tiring. “Let’s go get some rest,” Helix suggested. “We’ll need it.”

I agreed.

We had wandered around in the corridors, Helix and I mostly stumbling around—we were really tired. Zel had to drag the backpack down the corridor because he didn’t particularly trust us with it, given our exhausted state. At one point, Skrill slapped me in the face with his wings to make sure I stayed awake. Finally, we found the bunks down a corridor in God knows where. Helix immediately crashed into the one below, leaving me with the one on top. Normally, I would be happy about this, but I was too tired to climb. I was staring hopelessly at the one on top until Skrill got sick of my sulking, so he bit down on my pants and lifted me up. “Thanks, Skrill,” I said, laughing. Zel had already taken the lower bed on the bunk next to us. Skrill curled up on the floor. Even though I was tired, and my eyelids felt heavier than dumbbells, I forced myself to stay awake for a few more seconds. I placed my glasses on my stomach, and I let myself stay awake till sleep finally forced itself over me. Why? It felt good. As sleep slowly overtook me, I felt like I was floating in the ocean, feeling the waves gradually wash me ashore where I could pass out in the warmth of the Great Star. It’s weird, I know. But Zel had his weird hostile thing to everyone he met for the first time, and

then he'd gradually tone the rudeness down. Helix had her secrets, and I had this sleep thing—of course, I only did this when we weren't in mortal danger, like the past few days. Finally, I washed ashore, and I closed my eyes.

Helix woke me up after what felt like seconds. I frowned at the light flooding into the room. She looked like a dark red blur in my foggy vision. I rubbed my eyes and put my glasses back on. She was hanging on the ladder with one arm shaking my left shoulder. "What? I just fell asleep," I croaked.

"Logan, you slept through half the day. You missed breakfast. Of course, I did too. I'm not eating any more monster stew," she replied. I snorted and sat up straight, pushing my glasses further up the bridge of my nose. "Come on, Logan!" Came Zel's voice from out the door. Helix climbed back down, and I followed. I grabbed my backpack carrying the slate and we walked outside. Skrill was nowhere to be seen. My eyes widened, and I did a three-sixty. "Where's..."

"Relax. Rasaki's got Skrill. He'll take care of him," Helix told me. I frowned nervously. I figured Rasaki was the wizard's name. "Are you sure?" I asked. She smiled and nodded. My shoulders relaxed a little.

"We need to leave," Zel said. Helix motioned at the path down the corridor, and we started walking. After a few minutes of walking straight, I caught sight of a flight of stairs heading up on our right. We turned and ran up

the stairs onto a stone deck in the open air. The Great Star shone down menacingly upon us. The Bridge was clearly visible as a dark arc in the sky. The jungle was below us, alive with the chirping of birds, the roars of predators, and the loud stampeding footsteps of large herds of fierce animals. Rasaki the wizard awaited at the deck with Skrill. His snout looked much better, free of bruises and his body was now covered in fewer scratches than before, and his walk was limp-free. I grinned and scratched his feathery head. "Hey, boy," I greeted. "You look so much better."

I glanced at Rasaki who was regarding me approvingly. "Well then," he rasped. "You all should be on your way. I wish you luck. Skrill is safe with me."

I pursed my lips. I didn't want to let Skrill go. It had only been one night, and I'd already formed an attachment. A giant, pink, saliva-covered tongue licked my face, coating it in clear, incredibly smelly saliva. I was vaguely aware of my friends laughing their butts off next to me. I looked up at Skrill, wiping the saliva off my face. I smiled reassuringly at him and turned to scowl at Helix and Zel, who were still wheezing. Of course, that was until Rasaki slammed his staff onto their heads. They cried out simultaneously and rubbed their heads, not finding it funny anymore. I grinned. "Yeah, who's getting laughed at now, huh?" I asked, smugly.

They frowned at me, and we turned our attention to the drop into the jungle. “What now?” I asked them. “We jump,” Helix replied as if it was completely normal. My eyes widened. “What?” Zel asked.

Helix smirked at him. “You’re not scared, are you?” He frowned. “Course not. But you’re joking, right?”

Rasaki shook his head. “You must wait for the clouds and jump.”

As if on cue, fluffy clouds swept in below us from the west and began to race across the jungle. Moments later, they were right below the deck. Helix backed up as if to take a running start when she faced Zel and arched her eyebrows. “You ready, or you scared?” She asked. I knew why she was challenging him. Zel wasn’t particularly stupid, but he would definitely jump off a cliff if it was a challenge. It was pretty funny, most of the time.

“I’m ready,” he replied defensively. I knew him. He was my best friend. He was definitely not ready. “Please tell me we’re not doing this,” I said, but Zel and Helix were too busy arguing. They stopped and backed up as if getting a running start. They ran towards the edge and launched themselves right off the side of the mountain. Suspense overtook me. I grabbed my backpack and ran over to the edge to peer into the clouds, praying for my stupid friends to be alright. Finally, two blue dragons shot out of the clouds. Helix’s whoop echoed through

the sky, reaching my eardrums. I braced myself, waved frantically at Skrill—a hurried goodbye—and jumped.

Wind whistled past my ears, and I felt my heart beating thunderously in my chest. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. I shut my eyes tightly, hanging on to the backpack, and hoped I would land on a dragon. Given my luck, I could end up as a bloody splotch on the ground of the vast jungle.

A giant, feathery surface hit against my backside and I was being lifted higher and higher into the sky. My eyes snapped open, and I grinned from ear-to-ear. I was being carried high above the jungle by a massive dark blue dragon, much bigger than Skrill. I laughed as loudly as I could. I turned forward. My friends were a little ahead of me, but the dragon I was riding beat its wings heavily, and I soon caught up. “THIS IS AMAZING!” I shouted.

“I told you so!” Helix’s voice yelled back. A giant grin was plastered on Zel’s face. He was looking down at the gorgeous jungle passing by below us. I was more fixated on the clouds. I reached out my hand. Wind passed by my palm, making me feel like it was going to fall right off. We flew for what felt like hours. “What do we need to do now?” Zel asked, his voice faint, clouded by the roaring of the wind. I pulled out the slate and held onto it with all the strength I had. “It shows an ocean and an island!” I yelled back. “And...” My eyes flicked over to the next drawing. After a large gap, there was a rolled-up

piece of papyrus. Joy bubbled up in my chest. “A scroll! We’re so close!”

Helix turned back to face us, grinning. “We’re almost there!” She exclaimed, happiness lacing her words. I looked below the gap and squinted. There was a big drawing there...but I couldn’t see it clearly. “We’re here!” Came Helix’s voice, echoing over the wind, and I stuffed the slate into the backpack again. I zipped it up and looked over the horns of the dragon. The ocean was below us now and ahead of us was an island. We were there in minutes, which prompted me to realize just how fast we were moving. Scallan dragons were extremely fast. We’d crossed that part of the ocean in an instant and slowed down above the island. Sand covered the sides, then inwardly turned into a forest circling a volcano towering above us. “Do we need to jump again?” I asked nervously. Zel shrugged, and we turned to Helix who was squinting at the island. The dragons began to turn, swooping low, slightly above the waves crashing ashore. “Now!” Helix exclaimed suddenly. I stood and launched myself off the dragon. I honestly expected it to be graceful, but it wasn’t easy, considering I was carrying a *very* heavy backpack. The result of this was me landing with my legs flailing around in the air and my head buried in the sand. I wanted to scream, but I didn’t dare open my mouth—I was surrounded by sand. Hands grabbed my legs and hauled me up. I gasped for air and tipped over backward. “Thanks,” I wheezed. Helix and

Zel grabbed the backpack and tossed it aside. They flopped down next to me. I sat up straight. "What now?" I asked.

"We head into the forest, I think," Helix said. "Nobody's made it this far. I'm almost as clueless as you guys now."

"That's comforting," Zel joked. We stood. Helix eyed the backpack. "Please don't tell me we're going to have to carry this thing like a crab again," she said. Zel chuckled and replied, "I really hope not."

I winced, thinking about it. We were barely able to drag it up the mountain, where there was hardly any danger going up the slope. I could bet that the forest was going to be much harder. I could practically see us getting attacked by something from behind while we were all too busy dragging along the backpack in the form of a weird triangular crab and arguing. It was so stupid; it was almost funny. I shook off the thought. "Maybe I can try another spell?" I offered.

"Which one?" Zel asked. I thought and thought, but nothing came to mind. I shook my head. Helix sighed. "There goes that," she mumbled. "Let's just drag it," she said. I frowned at her. "Well, who.." I started, but she grabbed the bag and began to walk, it trailing behind her in the sand. She turned and grinned. "You guys coming?" She asked.

Zel grinned and ran after her—I followed, and we marched into the forest together.

Chapter 12

Random doors and puzzle pieces.

We trudged along, Helix dragging along the backpack. “We lost the trail back in the desert,” she said. “I think I can try to get it back.” She knelt before the bag, unzipped it, and dug around, looking for the slate. “I can’t find it,” she grumbled and then gestured at me to come get it. I crouched down and stuck my hand inside. I felt my fingers brush the hard rock of the slate. I lifted it, and Zel helped me get it out. Helix repeated the spell she had cast in the forest outside the bunker, and once more, a blazing red trail snaked through the woods. We shoved the slate back into the bag, and Zel took it this time. We followed the trail into the deeper parts of the forest. Mosquitoes and bees buzzed around my face. I waved them away, but it didn’t help that much. They were torturing Helix too, but for some reason, they left Zel alone, and he seemed to find this absolutely hilarious. The bugs randomly decided to set up camp in my hair, since it had frizzed up after the mountains into a blonde mess. I yelled in frustration, shaking my head vigorously. “My hair is not a hive! *Not a hive!*” I shouted, as if it was going to help. Zel laughed so hard, he nearly fell over

with the weight of the bag he was dragging along behind him.

“Guys?” Helix’s voice came from next to me. I turned and met her gaze. My jaw dropped. The trail led right into the volcano.

We stared at it for a few moments, trying to figure out what to do. “Maybe it’s a code?” Helix offered. “Like a locker?” I walked up to the trail and squinted at the wall of the mountain. A thin line went around the ending of the trail in a semicircle. I shook my head. “I think it’s more like a door. This isn’t dormant, right?” I looked up at the smoke pluming from the opening of the volcano at the top. “It’s not,” I mumbled to myself, answering my own question, and then I glanced at Helix. She caught my gaze, and her eyes widened, realizing. She shook her head, looking at me as if I were insane. “Wait, what’s happening?” Zel asked.

Helix winced and turned away from him. “Please, Helix. It’s the only way we can get in,” I pleaded.

She regarded the door nervously and finally sighed. “Fine,” she said. “Step away.”

I tackled her in a hug and ran out of the way of the door and dragged Zel along with me. “You cannot be judgmental about this,” I told him.

He opened his mouth to say something when Helix made a forward movement with two of her fingers, as if

beckoning something to come forward. Lava erupted from the door, and it immediately cracked away from the mountain smoothly and was carried away with the lava. The entrance was covered in magma, which immediately dried and hardened. Behind the pile of dried black magma was a staircase.

The lava had circled around Helix and stopped right before setting the entire forest on fire. Zel's jaw dropped, his eyebrows arched, and the backpack was forgotten. I frowned. I knew Zel wasn't judgmental about things like this but given the way Helix had been so nervous back at the weird magic library, I couldn't help asking. "Please don't tell me you're judging—"

He laughed and said, "I'm not."

Helix dropped to her knees, and his smile evaporated. We immediately rushed towards her. Zel crouched down next to her, but she held up a hand. "I'm fine," she told us. "Just hard controlling a volcano." She looked up, grinning even though her face had taken on a greenish shade. "We should get going. Scrolls are awaiting."

We had decided to leave the backpack hidden safely behind a tree. I removed my sweater and jacket and stuffed them back inside. We climbed up the stairs that were right in the middle of the volcano, surrounded by lava that, surprisingly, didn't touch the stairwell. "Let me guess," Zel said, his tone sarcastic. "Magic?"

Helix snorted, and I rolled my eyes. “Magic is starting to be really annoying,” I muttered. The staircase was a reddish-orange, the color of the lava surrounding us, which made it hard not to fall right off. The stairwell was wide enough for us to walk along together. The stairs spiraled up and swirled around. When I glanced up, it made me dizzy, the stairs acting like a hypnotizing swirl. Smoke plummeted up around us, making it hard for me to see. “I think we should move faster,” Helix said nervously. I turned, about to ask why when I met her gaze. A dark figure stood at the bottom of the stairs; sword drawn. It wore a silver mask with eyeholes and horns. They wore a black cloak and golden and white armor. Their sword was black so dark that it didn’t shine. The sword seemed to radiate fear. “Yeah,” I squeaked, my voice an octave higher than normal. “I think we should.”

We ran up the stairs as fast as we could without tripping, going two or three steps at a time. “What is that thing?!” Zel asked frantically.

“It’s best you don’t know!” Helix replied.

“Helix, just tell us!” I exclaimed.

“It’s Belroth,” she said. “She’s The Arcane’s lieutenant!”

I nearly fell right off, but scorching hot gloved hands grabbed my arm, sending pain shooting around my forearm and dragging me back. “Keep going!” Zel shouted, and we continued running up the stairs.

Finally, we reached an exit around the middle of the mountain, and Helix shoved us in, lava blasted right through the cave, forming a door and the entire cave was washed in darkness. Moments later, small amounts of light lit up on the wall in the form of sconces and torches. They led into the cave and down a shaft. “Logan, you need to go,” Helix told me. “This isn’t going to hold against Belroth for very long. Zel and I can deal with her. Go get the scrolls.”

I shook my head. “I’m not leaving you guys here against that thing!”

“You won’t be,” Zel assured me. “You’ll come back. Now go!”

Brilliant. The only thing these guys agreed on had to be *this*.

I backed up slowly and then broke into a run. I recalled the barely visible drawing on the slate and silently cursed the stupid stone. I didn’t know whether it was magic or just some annoying joke the universe decided to pull on us, but it didn’t stop the anger from bubbling up in my chest. I ran as fast as I could, my heartbeat thundering in my chest. My feet slammed against the ground so hard that every step jarred me to the brain. It seemed like forever till I finally reached the shaft. I tripped over the side and fell.

I woke up covered in dirt. I spat it out of my mouth and pulled my glasses away from my face. It was covered in dirt and blood. I touched my cheek, and my fingers came back stained red and wet. I touched my other cheek. That was wet too. My face was covered in tears. Had I been crying? I couldn't remember. I looked around to see that I had landed on concrete. I mean solid concrete. Sconces graced the dirty grey walls. I looked up. The shaft was really deep, so I didn't know how I was going to get out. I struggled to my feet, and I wondered how this corridor was in a volcano. Or was it underground? I'd lost track of my location. I stumbled down the hallway, pain shooting up my left leg and arcing through my body. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to move forward. Suddenly, a scream echoed through the hallway. It was the scream of a child. I moved faster. Was there someone down here? Were they hurt? Did they need help? The lights above and next to me flickered and glitched till the entire corridor was bathed in neon green. I frowned as a doorway opened at the end. *That hadn't been there before*, I thought, but I shuffled forward.

I walked inside, and the door slammed shut behind me. I turned and all of a sudden, I was in a forest at nighttime. My eyes widened, and I swiveled around in a circle. *No, no, no*, I thought, going into a panic. Sweat trickled down the side of my face, making my cut burn. "Hello?" I called out, trying to stop the panic from flooding into my voice. Something smacked against my

hand, and I looked down. A little girl in a brown dress had bumped into me. My eyes widened. "Oh my God," I mumbled and knelt.

Long, dark red hair fluffed around her face. Her bright green eyes widened with enthusiasm. "Who are you?" She asked. She looked around nine or ten.

I told her my name and frowned slightly. "Are you Helix?"

"Helix," she mused. "That's a nice name. I'm Gold."

"Gold?"

"My siblings call me Goldie."

Realization hit me like a slap in the face.

She pointed with a gloved finger at the golden jewel between her collarbones. It was exactly the one that Helix had embedded in her skin. "Gold," she echoed. I nodded, but my mind was kind of floating off somewhere else. I wondered if I was going into shock. Suddenly, she looked around in a panic. The bushes began to rustle, and birds erupted from the forest and into the air. "Someone's coming," she said and dragged me behind a bush and forced me to hide. I protested, asking questions, but she shushed me. I took some offense to that. The child version of Helix or Goldie or whatever frowned at the swaying trees. Out of the bushes emerged a figure. He had stark white hair and small, light blue eyes. He was clearly an ice elf but looked nothing

like the ones I knew except for the color of his hair and the fact that he had a slim face. He had broader shoulders and sunken cheeks and was clearly malnourished. It struck me—even the kid version of Helix looked unhealthy.

The boy looked a little younger than me now.

“Goldie!” He called out loudly, spinning a sword that seemed far too large for him to hold. “Where’d you go?”

She stood and glared at him. “You’ll attract attention, Cy,” she told him. He tried to speak but she shushed him. He was younger than me but a little older than Helix/Gold. He was thin and wiry, and he wore a simple white jumpsuit. “We’re breaking the rules,” came a high-pitched voice from behind another bush. Another young girl, only a little older than Helix walked out. She wore the same brown dress as her. A dark afro exploded onto her shoulders. Her skin was a dark shade, and she had a concerned frown plastered on her round face. An emerald was embedded in the same place as Helix’s gold jewel. Her eyes were bright green. Vines curled around Helix and lifted her off the ground and brought her to the girl. “Hey, Greenie,” Helix said, grinning. Her two front teeth were absent. Greenie smiled, but the smile quickly disappeared as she turned to face the ice elf. “We need to leave unless you want to get your mark early, Cyan,” she told him. Cyan nodded, but he didn’t look so happy about it. They left, leaving me in the forest

hiding behind leaves. Helix seemed to have forgotten completely about me. The forest disappeared, and I was back in the room. The door still hadn't appeared. The room shifted into a large, dimly lit stadium. The only thing in the room was a dark, spiky throne. A figure sat there, its armored legs thrown over the side and swinging around as if they were bored. Their face was obscured by shadows. Their armor was silver and black. An elf kneeled at their throne. He had white wings, was wearing a white jumpsuit like Cyan's, and had curly black hair.

"Sir, just give me more time," he pleaded. "I can—"

"You can what? Convince her not to rebel?" came a voice from the figure on the throne. The voice was deep and alluring. It would be pretty easy to manipulate somebody if you had this voice, I noticed. I stepped closer, ignoring the pain, and looked down at the elf sitting at the foot of the throne, looking up at the figure on it. His eyes were such a light blue, they looked white. His pointy, elven ears were riddled with holes. A jagged scar slit through his eyebrow and onto his eyelid. He looked around sixteen. "She's attached to them, sir," he mumbled. "They were different. She nearly told that ice elf the truth."

"Then we wipe her memory."

"No! Not again!"

The figure sat straight. "Are we showing attitude now, White? Or should I say, Beck?"

Beck winced. “No, sir,” he replied. “I just mean that after all of it, we can’t just wipe her memory. They’re worse than Jake.”

“Worse than Jake,” the figure mused. “I see. Then let her rebel. The jewel will get her anyway. And if they are really worse than Jake, then they shall meet a similar end. Belroth shall get me the scroll even if she has to rip it out of their puny little elven hands. You are excused.”

Beck stood and bowed. He was an entire head taller than me. I wanted to grab his shoulders and slap him. He had to stop this figure, whoever they were. I tried to tackle the figure, but I passed right through the throne as if it were mist. The stadium evaporated. It dawned on me who they were talking about. Helix/Goldie, Greenie, Cyan, White, Gray...it all added up. I remembered Gray mentioning ‘the controlled ones’ and ‘rebels’.

I remembered the legends talking about the people the Arcane controlled. The children were taken out of the bunker by ‘guides’ who brought them to him. How they would be forced to work for him, forced to have their memory wiped.

The Whisp War, the Arcane, Belroth, everything fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Gray, Cyan, White, Greenie—whoever they were, they weren’t evil, and neither was Helix, like I had predicted, but the person controlling them was.

That figure was The Arcane.

Chapter 13

I meet myself, and he's not so great

I lay on the concrete for a long time. I couldn't move. Shock had hit me, finally. I felt frozen, yet I knew that my skin was burning up. Helix flicked past my mind too many times to count. Why had she lied to us? We could've helped! And what was that thing about the jewel getting her? I wondered about how much she'd gone through. The number of times she'd grinned and joked and laughed...was it fake? Or was she just really positive? Also, it seemed like everybody had weird, color-based names. 'White,' 'Goldie,' 'Cyan.' That's not normal. I forced myself to sit up straight. My head spun, and my vision swam. I was tired. I just wanted to keel right over and take a nap. Unfortunately, the scrolls were waiting for me. I just had to find them. I leaned on the wall for support and hauled myself up. I stumbled towards the door and grabbed onto it. I was hobbling along like Rasaki, the ancient wizard. I laughed out loud, then wondered if I was going crazy. It was a fairly viable option. I leaned against the doorway, trying to catch my breath and I glanced down at my leg.

It wasn't bent weird, which was good. My knee was swollen, though, and since I had taken a first-aid class when my mother forced me to go camping, I hoped it wasn't an ACL tear. Whatever it was, there was no way I could walk with it. So, I glued myself to the wall and shuffled along the corridor. The lights flickered, going from yellow to green repeatedly. It wasn't long before it began to hurt my eyes and sent a headache pounding through my skull. The corridors split off into different directions. I frowned at the ceiling. "Enough," I told it. "Where are the scrolls?!"

I didn't get angry very much. I was usually a happy-go-lucky, rule-follower. But after I saw The Arcane and Helix and those kids back there...I don't know. But what I did know was that I had to get those scrolls

To my surprise, the corridors shifted, obviously by magic, and folded into one. I grinned and walked into the corridor. I focused on the floor, trying not to get dizzy. I couldn't even remember the 'Aid' of 'First Aid'. I had no idea what to do, so I just forced myself to move forward. A shadow fell onto the ground, and I bumped into something. I looked up, startled...to stare into the deep brown eyes of my own face.

'My' curly blonde hair was slicked back with gel except for one coiled strand that fell down 'my' face like it always was. 'I' was grinning but not like...well, myself. It

was less, *hey, just passing through, don't mind me!* And more, *hey, if you don't move, I will rearrange your face, ha-ha!*

The other Logan's eyes behind golden spectacles were calm, way calmer than they were supposed to be. Every time I looked in the mirror or somebody popped up to take my picture, my eyes were always wide like a Scallan wolf in headlights. "Hello," OL (Other Logan) said cheerfully, but in a voice that was way deeper than it was supposed to be. I'd heard my voice on record. It wasn't particularly high-pitched, but it wasn't as deep as the freaking trenches either.

"Um, hi?" I replied. Other Logan snorted as if he found me amusing.

"Look, I don't know what you are or if I'm just hallucinating, but I'm just going to—"

I tried to step past OL, but he moved into my path. I moved to the left this time, but he blocked me again. OL held up a palm and lifted my chin with a finger that looked nothing like mine. I had regular hands, not black, steely claws. My eyes widened, and I shoved the panic down my throat, trying not to shriek like a five-year-old. I froze in my place, eyeing the claw nervously. *That's not normal*, said one part of my brain. *No wonder they call you Captain Obvious*, retorted the other.

"I see you've noted my hands," OL mused. "And I suppose you'll run like any other elf. I'm giving you a

head-start.” He stepped aside and waved at the corridor like, *Go on*.

My leg was never going to take my weight with the state it was in, so I simply drew my dagger and stood there, shaking. “Interesting,” OL said and faced me. “Maybe I misjudged you. Or perhaps I misjudged that leg of yours.” OL’s claws enlarged, and he raised his hands, grinning wickedly. The claws slashed at me, and I ducked, throwing my entire weight to the right. I flopped onto the ground and rolled over. I was immediately met with a claw coming down upon me. I stabbed it with my dagger, and it retreated quickly. A laugh echoed through the corridor, near me. I struggled to my feet, trying to catch my breath. My thoughts were sluggish, the adrenaline telling me to run even though I couldn’t. The voice was familiar...I know I’d heard it before, but I just couldn’t pinpoint where. “This is fun,” came the voice from behind me, and I swiveled around to face the Other Logan. His hand had already healed and he was leaning against the wall, arms folded. His eyes moved around slowly as if he was slightly bored. “Elves. So amusing. You’re much taller than us. Kind of ironic, considering that Santa-and-the-elves thing. Perhaps the elves are quaggers.”

I frowned. I didn’t know what Santa was and what he was doing with the elves. The only thing I understood was that elves were tall and gnomes were short. Quaggers were basically teleporting elf rip-offs with beards that

steal your things because they're bored. They were an entirely different species from elves, so I didn't know how Santa could confuse them with elves. I wanted to tell him that he wasn't making any sense. Also, whatever Other Logan was, he was my exact height, so I didn't know what he meant by the 'taller' thing. This was the least of my worries, however, when the voice's owner popped into my memory. Sweat trickled down the side of my face, streaking through the mud already plastered to my cheeks. "You're the Arcane, aren't you?" I asked.

He tipped an imaginary hat. "The one and only, boy," he said. I felt the hair at the back of my neck stick up. The seemingly-primordial-being-from-figurative-Hell and I faced each other. "I would kill you if I wanted to," he said, examining his claws as if imagining plunging them into my skull. "But you're funny. You're so afraid you can't understand that you're afraid."

"That does sound like me," I admitted nervously. He snorted. "Well, go on. Go get the scrolls."

I opened my mouth to say something, but the words died in my throat. Just like that? The Arcane just popped up, tried to murder me, joked about Santa, and now he's like, 'Okay, bye?'

"Oh, don't worry," he said, reading my expression like a book. "We'll meet again, very soon."

He vanished. I blinked, and poof, he wasn't there anymore. I didn't waste any more time. I limped down

the corridor, sheathing my blood-coated dagger. The hallway ended with a black door. I sighed. "Here we go again," I mumbled to myself. I twisted the doorknob and stepped inside a stadium full of mirrors. I looked down at the floor. It was covered in mirrors, and so were the walls and the ceiling. My dirt-covered, shocked face stared back at me. Suddenly, the images in the mirrors shifted to show different people. One mirror showed Zel. He was a few years older, his snow-white hair messier than normal. A grin was plastered onto his face, and he seemed more confident, happier. When I studied his features, he looked somewhat more experienced—definitely not the grumpy ice elf I knew at the time. He was looking at someone behind me. I glanced behind me, but nobody was there, as I'd expected. He was taller, and his purple eyes were ardent and powerful, a scar crossing his cheek. He was dressed in bronze armor. Another mirror showed Helix dressed in leaves, her hair longer. She was looking behind her shoulder, smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes, which were hidden in shadows. She was also older. Golden lines jutted across her skin, and her skin was covered in scars. Her back had four lines that looked suspiciously like claw marks running down her spine and ending above her waist. Another mirror showed a boy with black hair and bright blue eyes. He had a sharp jawline, eyes that glinted with humor, and olive skin. He was smiling affectionately, his black hair falling onto his forehead. He seemed to be

looking right at me, and I fought back a blush. There was no reason to be flustered, it was just an image.

Of a very pretty boy.

There were a thousand more mirrors, showing various people, sometimes Zel, sometimes Helix, sometimes that boy, sometimes elves I didn't even know. It started giving me a headache. I stumbled along, ignoring the mirrors and the way all their eyes seemed to follow me around. Panic started bubbling up in my chest. I needed to get out of there. I drew my dagger and tried to stab one of the mirrors, but a hand grabbed mine. I looked up, startled. A girl stood next to me. She was short. Very short, even though she looked around my age. She was only a little taller than my waist. She had jet black straight hair, pale skin, and twinkling brown eyes. She was dressed in a blue cloak and white armor. She smiled at me, but it was less friendly, more pitiful. "I see they got another one," she said, shaking her head and lowering my dagger. I sheathed it and stared at her, confused. "What do you mean?" I asked her.

"I'm not sure," she answered. "I'm old. At least, my ghost is."

"You're dead?"

"Kind of stuck in between but leaning towards that, yeah."

I wanted to say something, but she shook her head. “You’ll only get more confused, if that’s possible,” she told me. I shut my mouth and raised an eyebrow at her.

She reached up on her tippy toes. I leaned down to make it easier for her since she was ridiculously short and she placed a palm onto my forehead, and something snapped. I tripped but she caught me with both arms and propped me up against a mirror with much difficulty, considering her height. “What did you do?” I croaked, standing up straight. “Healed your ACL without surgery,” she replied, smirking proudly.

I blinked at her in surprise. So, I *had* torn my ACL. *Oh, yeah, Logan, that’s what you need to think about right now*, I chided myself.

I flexed my leg and nodded. “Well, that you did,” I mumbled and grinned. “Impressive.”

“Come along, now. You’ll find out who I am soon enough.” She brushed her hair behind her ears, and I saw that they were *round*. Not pointy like elves. *ROUND*. My jaw dropped, and she realized what I was looking at. “Oh, right. I’m a dead-ish human. Now move your legs, kid.”

She kicked my shin, forcing me to walk. I followed her around the room, past numerous mirrors. “So, what is this place?” I asked.

“It’s kind of like a maze. It’s a branch of the Rabbit Hole Tunnels.”

The name sent shivers down my spine. I’d heard stories about the Tunnels, and they kept me up at night. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Best you don’t know,” she told me, still grinning. “And you’re Logan, I know.”

My eyes widened. “How did you—”

“Scrolls,” she reminded me.

“Right,” I mumbled. We walked for either seconds or days. Time seemed like nothing here. Millions of thoughts sloshed around in my mind, some crashing into things and being just generally chaotic, and the others just moving around sluggishly. I worked up the courage to ask another question eventually. “Are my friends alright?”

It came out soft, barely audible, but she heard me. “It’s a weird term, ‘alright’. If you mean unharmed physically, no. If you mean mentally, no.”

I frowned. “Hey, you asked,” she said. I honestly wish I hadn’t. I started picking up the pace. “Woah, hey, slow down!” She called, hurrying after me, moving her little legs as fast as she could. I ignored her. A palm grabbed my elbow, and I turned, scowling. “You’re not going to get anywhere walking like that. You’ll just get lost. The mirror hall’s confusing, okay?”

I huffed but nodded, tramping down my annoyance. Finally, we reached a door, and I twisted the doorknob and ran out of the room into...a forest. I pinched the bridge of my nose. Again? Really? I turned to face the girl, and she sighed. “Well, what now?”

‘It’s another vision,’ she told me, her eyebrows knitting together. “Okay,” I told myself. “Let’s get this over with.”

Chapter 14

All hail Broth

Helix stumbled out of the bushes. I knew it wasn't actually her. It was a flashback to her past or something. Nevertheless, I forced myself to stay put behind the tree. It would be weird if I ran over and started yapping about the maze and the doors, and she wouldn't even know who I was.

She was grinning from ear-to-ear and talking to an older girl. The other girl had dark blue hair, light grey skin, and was wearing a simple white dress, while Helix was wearing the same brown one I'd seen her wearing in the other vision. Helix was older than she was in the other vision, but slightly younger than how I knew her to be. The other girl had white dot patterns strewn across her face and three black slits on both sides of her neck. She looked like a water elf. Her hands were gloved, like Helix's, but her gloves were white. They both had their swords drawn. The older girl had a deep blue gem in the middle of her collarbones. "And the way you—" The older girl said, cut off by her own laughter. "I know! And you got that tsunami!" Helix exclaimed, her eyes wide and gleaming with awe. "And Cyan!" The water elf wheezed. They both burst out laughing again. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I was exhausted,

and their laughter was so infectious that I had to stop myself from giggling along with them. Greenie walked through the bushes, looked at them, and her eyes widened. "It wasn't *that* funny," she said.

They ignored her, prompting her to shake her head and grin. Her curly hair was braided, going down to her midsection. She was older than she was in the previous flashback and now had a scar on her right cheek. She was older than Helix but younger than the water elf. "That's Sapphire," came a voice next to me. I turned. My newly acquired human friend was gesturing at the water elf. Her tone was that of melancholy, but I didn't know why. An ice elf emerged out of the depths of the forest, saw them all laughing, and his pale face went red with embarrassment. "It was one time," Cyan grumbled. "Alright, enough you guys," came a voice from behind Helix, and they all turned.

Massive white wings unfolded behind Beck. He was frowning, but his light blue eyes twinkled. He was amused and was doing a horrible job of hiding it. He was taller than all of them and unlike them, his clothes weren't dirty or speckled with blood or mud. I noticed that all of them except him had either a black eye, scraped knees, or a busted lip and everybody had a scar on their face except for Helix. She looked around twelve here. Beck was younger than he was at the other door. He was slightly shorter. He looked down at Helix, who

was still grinning, and ruffled her hair. “We have the tournament today,” he told them.

Everybody’s smiles were wiped right off their face. “Hey, we’ve made it through the others. We can do this,” Beck said, but it didn’t do much. The ground began to rumble, and everybody turned towards Greenie, but she shook her head vigorously. Lava erupted from the ground, and they shouted in panic. Helix stayed put, scowling, gloved fists clenched. “Gold—” Sapphire started.

“It’s *Helix*,” she hissed and walked away from them and into the woods, leaving them all standing there, dumbstruck.

“She chose a name,” Cyan breathed, shaking his head, eyebrows knitted together.

“This is *not* good,” Greenie said nervously. “The Arcane..”

Beck spread his wings, took to the air, and flew after her. We ran after them, leaving Greenie, Cyan, and Sapphire conversing in hushed tones.

We found Helix sitting on the grass, grumbling to herself. A shadow fell onto the ground, and Beck dropped out of the sky and crouched down next to her. “Hey, Goldie,” he said.

She frowned. “Helix,” she insisted.

He winced and said, "You can't use that name around anyone, okay? You'll get in trouble. Trust me, I know." He crouched down next to her.

"You changed it," she argued. "You chose the name Beck, and Gray gave you the same speech you're about to give me, but you didn't listen. And look, you're alive."

Beck scratched the back of his neck. "I got lucky," he said. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Look, do you remember those days when I wasn't there, and you all nearly reduced the place to rubble?"

She grimaced and nodded reluctantly and then ploughed on. "But that was before Sapphire showed up, and what does that even have to do with—"

"Goldie."

She hissed, baring her fangs. He wasn't fazed. "The Arcane is going to punish you," he said, frowning. She shrugged. "Let him."

Beck's eyes widened, and then his wings flared open.

"Well, then" came a voice from behind the trees. It was a deep feminine voice, laced with hate and bitterness. A masked figure stepped out of the woods, and I caught my breath, trying not to yell or shout or do something stupid. A palm grasped my elbow. "Don't," came Human's (that's just what I'm calling her now) voice next to me. "Vision or not, it won't impact the present, but if you do something irrational, you can die."

I nodded. “Belroth,” Beck mumbled, gulping.

“I see another one of you has chosen a name,” Belroth said, fiddling with a little dagger that seemed like a slightly overgrown toothpick in her massive, gloved hands.

Helix nodded. “I have,” she said proudly, but a wing smacked in front of her face, hiding her. “Belroth, please, she’s a child,” Beck said. “She doesn’t know what she’s saying!”

“I do too!” Came Helix’s voice from behind his white feathery wing, but he ignored it. “Must we begin protocol, White?” She asked without looking up from her dagger, but it was less of an actual question, more of a threat. He shook his head vigorously. “I’ve got it under control, Belroth, please just let me talk to her.”

“Jade would be ever so disappointed,” Belroth mused. This is when Helix lost it. She jumped right above Beck’s wing, and lava erupted from the ground along with chunks of rock.

She threw her gloves off and crouched down on the ground, and the grass was immediately set on fire. The trees began to burn, and the shrubbery caught fire and turned to ash in no time. Beck took to the air and hovered above them, eyes wide. Belroth sheathed her dagger and thrust out a fist. Instantly, Helix’s eyes rolled into the back of her head, and her knees buckled. The lava settled down, but the forest fire continued to blaze.

Belroth turned and walked away. Beck beat his wings hard, and a freezing wind spread across the forest. My teeth started chattering. The fire died, and he dropped to his feet. He hugged Helix's crumpled form, wary of her hands. "You're so stupid," he told her.

The scene shifted, and we were in a black room again. "That made no sense," I told Human. Helix was recruited from a group of elves with special abilities. That's why she wears gloves. She was made with a spell cast by her mother—Jade. Then Helix was temporarily raised by that group, who knew Jade, until The Arcane found her. He 'took care'," she made air quotes, "of her, along with Beck, Greenie, Cyan, and Sapphire, who was recruited from the same place, and a bunch of other kids, in that forest on an island called the Evergrove. Sapphire died in the tournaments, but before that, Helix and Sapphire were sent on another mission when they guided another bunker's royal child, Jake. They befriended him and tried to escape the island with him, but he was killed. Her next mission," she glanced at me, "was her come along with you and that ice elf. She was supposed to guide you and Zel to the scrolls so The Arcane could get them. But she's rebelling and it's not really going to end well for any of you."

I felt like my soul was floating above me, as if I was watching myself listen to her, but I wasn't anchored to the ground. "It's confusing, I know," she mumbled. "It'll get better, though. The Rabbit Hole Tunnels tend to

mess with your head. Just stay sane for a little while longer, yeah?"

I nodded slightly, just enough for it to be visible. The room shifted again, and we were standing in an empty arena. Human frowned next to me. "This is weird. It's not supposed to be empty."

As you can guess, this didn't really help my nerves. Would you really go up to an elf who is literally on the edge of insanity and say that the tunnels they're stuck in aren't doing the thing they're supposed to be doing? I doubted that I was the only one going crazy.

I squinted at the shadows. Was I already hallucinating, or were they...moving? The darkness in the shadows shifted and squirmed, and out of them materialized a golden masked figure.

"Logan..." came Human's voice next to me.

"I see her," I said, my voice shaking. "Belroth."

I wished I was hallucinating.

Belroth drew her sword and faced us. "Run?" I asked. Human nodded, absent-mindedly, blinking rapidly at Belroth as if she closed her eyes, she would just go away. We started to back up and broke off into a run. We burst through the door and ran as fast as we could. I glanced behind, and Belroth was walking calmly behind us, spinning her sword as if she was killing time before tearing us to shreds. "How is this possible?" I asked while

we ran, and I immediately wanted to slap myself. I really hated the word ‘magic.’ Luckily, she noticed my expression and instead screeched, “I’ll be fine. I’m dead-ish. But you’re not! So RUN FASTER!”

Adrenaline started to pump through my veins, and I’d never been more thankful. I picked up the pace, racing ahead of Human. We turned the corner, and thankfully, this time, I didn’t slam into the wall. Instead, I crouched and skidded across the floor. I slammed my palm against the floor, hauled myself up as quickly as possible, and kept going. “The scrolls are up the staircase!” Human yelled next to me. “What staircase?” I shouted back but then all of a sudden, I tripped.

I didn’t know how I fell, but in a moment, I was upside-down on a step, my legs flailing around midair, pain flaring through my body. “GO!” She yelled at me. I righted myself and ran up the stairs into the shadows. I was moving on autopilot, jumping three steps at a time and wishing I had brought a torch.

I stopped in my tracks and looked down. Human wasn’t there next to me. She was at the foot of the stairs, screaming her head off. Her yells echoed through the stairwell, but they weren’t of fear, but of anger. I restrained myself from running back down and dragging her up the stairs. *She’ll be fine*, I reminded myself and kept going. Unlike Belroth, I had no time to kill. The stairwell twisted around too many times to count, making me

dizzy. My glasses were perched up crookedly on my nose, covered in dirt and, I suspected, some of my blood. My legs felt heavier than dumbbells, yet I ploughed on till I reached the top, then halted and looked around.

Torches hung from the wall, bathing the entire hall in an orange glow. Warmth practically bounced off the walls, but it wasn't a comforting warmth like a campfire. It was the heat of a burning building or a forest fire. A little further inside the hall was a glass case sitting atop an obsidian pedestal.

Inside that glass case was a thin parchment—The Scrolls.

They practically radiated power. Chills ran down my spine as I took a step toward the case, but I stopped immediately. Something tugged in my gut, and I didn't dare move. My instincts never lied. Then again, with all the magic in this place, it could have easily been magic manipulating me.

I decided to go with my instincts, which is what saved my life. Belroth shot through the stairwell way faster than I had, and I swiveled around, eyes wide. She didn't really care about my existence. In fact, she tossed me aside and I slammed against the wall. I yelped upon impact and landed on my butt.

My heartbeat thundered in my chest, and my blood rushed in my ears. I didn't know whether it was fear or anger. Maybe both?

I restrained myself from getting up and doing something stupid. I suspected she would either ignore me or just kill me with a flick of her finger.

Belroth stood before the scrolls, thick gloved fingers hovering above the glass case. “At last,” she murmured. Her voice was deep and laced with longing. “The scrolls of Mankind. Finally, I will be respected. I will overthrow that bumbling, clawed fool, and *I* will be the overlord. All hail Belroth!”

“All hail, Broth,” I blurted out, speaking under my breath and interrupting her villain monologue. It wasn’t like me to do stupid things like this. Then again, I should’ve also had my sanity intact but that wasn’t happening any time soon in this place.

I really didn’t know what I thought was going to happen. I was probably just hoping she wouldn’t hear me. Unfortunately, she did. She turned around quickly and faced me. “What did you say, elf?” She asked, her voice strained as if she was stopping herself from murdering me then and there, though I didn’t know why. “Broth,” I repeated.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME? I screamed internally. I wondered if I’d inhaled too much death-wishery from Helix and Zel.

“You know, stew, soup, food,” I elaborated, way too far into the joke to stop.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she hissed. That didn’t offer much comfort, but at least I could live for a few more seconds. She lifted the glass case, and all hell broke loose.

I shut my eyes as tightly as I could when the entire room erupted in an explosion. I felt myself get thrown across the room again. A charred smell snaked into my nostrils, and I grimaced. When I finally opened my eyes, I saw a cloaked mass huddled up in a corner. I assumed it was Belroth. Smoke curled up from her cloak, and she wasn’t moving. Everything else seemed normal except for a few torches blown out and tossed around, and the glass case now lying shattered on the ground. I struggled to my feet, stepped over Belroth, and knelt next to her. She was still breathing, but I couldn’t decide whether that was good or bad.

I stood and made my way to the scrolls. I hovered over the pedestal. With my luck, the scroll was going to start talking and try to kill me like it did Belroth. I poked it and ducked for cover. Nothing happened, much to my embarrassment. At least no one had witnessed that. I touched the scroll gingerly and then picked it up. I walked towards the staircase, jumping over Belroth. “So much for ‘all hail Broth’,” I mumbled to myself and ran down the stairs.

Chapter 15

I ride the Worm of Doom

I raced down the stairs, trying hard not to trip. I clutched the scrolls tightly, pressing them against my chest, trying not to rip them as I stumbled down the steps. I had to get to the surface as quickly as I could, but with my luck, I'd probably end up stuck in the corridors, slowly driven insane, with no food or water. My stomach rumbled at the thought of food, and I shushed it.

Fooooood, it whined.

Priorities, I retorted.

Food is a priority.

I ended up contemplating that for a while, wishing Zel or Helix was in my head. My heart panged, remembering what Human had said when I'd asked if they were okay, and I picked up the pace. I dug around my pockets and ended up finding a stale bar of kiope gum. I grinned and stuffed it back in. *I'll pop it in later*, I told my stomach. Thankfully, it shut up.

After what seemed like an eternity, I reached the bottom of the stairs and looked around for Human, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Human?" I called out nervously, my nerves firing for some reason.

Something was wrong. Had Belroth hurt her? Could she even be hurt?

But that wasn't my only concern. The hair at the back of my neck pricked up, and by pure instinct, I ducked behind a wall and waited. Suddenly, a black blur sped past me. My eyes widened. I couldn't see its face, but it was something like a worm, like the trains we would take to school back at the bunker, but this one was much smaller, obviously. It raced along the floor and finally went away after a few minutes.

What was that thing?

I couldn't find out because after it passed, something bumped into me. I turned around, my hand on the hilt of my dagger. Human stood before me, smiling weakly. She was slightly bent over, out of breath, and had a hand over her midsection. "Hey," she croaked. A grin spread across my face, but it immediately crumbled when I saw the blood coating the arm on her midsection.

She met my gaze and grimaced. "Belroth is good with a sword," she admitted, and her knees buckled. I let go of the scroll and caught her before she slammed into the floor. I propped her up against the wall. "It's fine, it's fine," Human said hurriedly. "Also, 'Human'? Really?"

I shot her a scowl, but I suspected it looked as half-hearted as it felt. I kept one hand on the scroll and the other on her shoulder. "You could have just come up the stairs with me, you know?" I told her, raising an eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Belroth would have killed you."

"Broth," I murmured under my breath. She snorted and then winced. "It'll heal," she assured me when she noticed my expression. "Already dead-ish, remember?"

I rolled my eyes and helped her up. "We need to get you out of here," Human mumbled. "While avoiding the *womuslia*."

"Okay, so basically, the plan is, 'get Logan out of here, avoid Worms of Doom?'" I asked.

She nodded. "Brilliant," I mumbled. She limped forward but immediately stopped and glanced at me, pursing her lips. She clearly couldn't walk. "I have an idea," I told her.

"I already hate it."

I ignored her, stepped into the corridor, and looked around. Honestly, I hated the idea too, but at this point, Zel and Helix had practically ripped my thinking skills to shreds, and if I was going to get to the surface any time soon, I needed to do something really stupid. Unfortunately, I needed a rude name, and I was horrible with coming up with rude names, except maybe 'Broth' and that wasn't exactly innovative. I turned back to Human. "What do I call these guys?" I asked.

She opened her mouth as if to say 'womuslia' but stopped when she saw my expression. "No! You're not insulting these things!"

“I kind of have to.”

She scowled. “Then come up with your own insults, moron.”

I shrugged. Good enough. “HEY, MORONS!” I yelled.

I stepped back, and the black blur sped past. I turned to Human. “Now or never,” I told her. She was looking at me as if I’d just dropped from The Bridge. Nevertheless, she stepped into the corridor and grabbed onto the worm.

One second, she was there and the next, she wasn’t. I shoved the panic back down my throat, and I leapt onto the worm right after she did.

My eyesight immediately sharpened. I was aware of everything around me. I pressed the scrolls tightly to my chest, hoping I wouldn’t rip them. I spun around in circles, clinging on for dear life. I’m sure I let out a scream, but I couldn’t hear myself over the roar of the wind whizzing past my ears. It was ten times louder than the wind seemed when I rode the Scallan dragon. It was weird since it was underground, but I was tired of having the answer be ‘magic,’ so I shoved the question into the back of my mind.

Suddenly, everything halted to a stop with me hanging from the bottom of a giant black worm, desperately clutching The Scrolls.

A face appeared in front of me, and I stifled a scream. It was hideous and that's the only word for it. Not ugly, not creepy—it was *hideous*. It had the skin of a snake, and massive fangs yet no other teeth, as if it only killed for fun. It had the antlers of a Scallan wolf and multiple eyes. Its head was the size of my torso. It opened its huge maw and screeched.

Chills ran down my spine, and I restrained myself from running. Instead, I dropped to the ground and drew my dagger. I slashed, but it swerved. I tried again, and by blind luck, I struck one of its eyes. It shrieked in pain, and I brought my dagger down right between its antlers, but it bounced right off. It jarred my elbow, and I dropped the dagger.

When I looked up, the head was right above me—fangs bared, and coming in for the kill. I ducked out of the way, and the worm ended up getting a mouthful of the floor. Chunks of concrete were ripped out of the ground and stuck in its mouth. It shook its head from side to side vigorously. I doubted concrete tasted good. I grabbed my dagger with my foot and pulled it over to me. I grabbed the hilt and slammed the concrete further down its throat with the butt of the dagger.

It retreated, turned around, and zipped back to where we came from. When it was gone, Human came into sight. She was practically plastered to the wall, skin tinted green and jaw hanging open.

“Well..” She mumbled. “That was...different.”

“Trust me, I would never do this kind of thing under normal circumstances.”

“I don’t think anyone would.”

I laughed. “Now what?”

She turned, and I met her gaze. Ahead of us, the corridor narrowed into a shaft with a ladder in it. I glanced at Human once more. She nodded, giving me a reassuring smile. “You got this,” she told me. “And Logan? Trust your friends. All of them. They’ve got you, no matter what happens.”

I grinned. Trusting a person was something I could do easily. My father would chide me, saying it wasn’t particularly a good thing, but it had to be, right? If we can’t trust, then we can’t live. Trusting people makes you strong. At least, that’s what I believed. I ran towards the shaft and turned around again.

Human had disappeared, and I frowned. “Thanks,” I whispered anyway.

I grasped the scrolls in one arm and started to climb up the ladder. When I reached the top, I barely had any time to even breathe before agony arced through my body and my vision darkened. The last thing I heard before everything went black was a hoarse voice yelling my name.

PART 3: HELIX

Chapter 15

I burn Broth

Logan disappeared down the shaft, leaving Zel and I bracing ourselves for a fight. I used to annoy Belroth a lot, as a kid. She had been particularly pissed when I chose my name.

I clearly had a ‘tiny’ hole in my plan where I could rebel against The Arcane.

So far, I’d only planned till: ‘Get Zel and Logan safe, annoy The Arcane and *run*.’

How I’d even survived this far, I didn’t know either.

“Well..” Zel piped up, snapping me out of my trance. “It’s nice to go down fighting with friends, right?” I turned towards him, and my jaw dropped. I started holding back laughter after a few seconds.

“Oh really?” I asked, smirking. His pale cheeks turned a bright shade of red. He shot me a glare that was already crumbling. “What happened to ‘professional’?”

“Well, you saved my life,” he mumbled. “Also, my ego kind of died on the surface.”

I snorted. The surface did that to you—made you realize how tiny and insignificant you were compared to everything around you.

Suddenly, the guilt hit me, and I glanced at him. I had lied to them the whole time and kept secrets. It wasn't fair. Especially not for Zel. The Arcane wouldn't care too much about Logan, but he would use Zel. He would make his bunker surrender in exchange for his life, or just keep him there, like he did to the rest of us. I knew where Gray and Beck and everybody else—except for where Sapphire and I—had come from. They were all loved ones of the rulers of bunkers, about forty to fifty of us on one island.

Like Zel. I had a chance to save him. I had to.

The makeshift door I'd made began to shake. I tightened my grip around the hilts of my swords. We had to face Belroth, one way or another, so I willed the door to collapse.

The dried magma immediately shattered, lava flying all over the place. Zel jumped out of his spot, where lava smacked into the ground, sizzling.

A shadow fell across the ground, and I looked up. Belroth stood before us, sword in hand. I swallowed the lump in my throat and readied myself.

"Well, hello, there. Long time no see, *Goldie*."

And she charged.

Belroth swiped her massive golden sword at me, but I ducked. It passed right above my face, inches away from

my nose. I righted myself and slashed at her. She parried it.

Zel jumped in here, coming in from behind, but she saw him and deflected his blow. Zel started slashing blindly, which was pure stupidity, but it ended up working. Belroth swung her sword at him, but he reached out with his own and by pure luck, it didn't decapitate him. I went in from her side, going for a stab, but she rolled away and then disarmed Zel.

"No!" He cried out, reaching for his sword, but it was too far away. I stepped in front of him, scowling at Belroth. "What are you doing, child?" She hissed at me.

"What's right?" I retorted and pointed one of my swords at her.

"Alright then. *Fight, Gold.*"

"It's Helix, by the way," I said, and a grin spread across my face. I charged at her. She pointed her own sword at me, but I dropped mine and leaped into the air. My foot connected with her masked face, and she was sent stumbling back. I flipped midair and dropped down. I heard a startled laugh behind me, and I turned briefly. Zel was looking at me, wide-eyed and sword hanging listlessly by his side. "Okay, that was awesome," he told me. "Nice having me as a friend, huh?" I asked.

He was about to say something, probably a snide retort that would make me laugh, but I'd never know because then I couldn't breathe.

I'd known this trick for way too long. Belroth's gloved fingers were clasped in front of her, taking advantage of the jewel between my collarbones, magic manipulating my breathing, and making me choke. She'd done this a lot when me and the rest of my group were young. My vision blurred, and I gagged, clawing at my throat, but it was no use. This time, she wasn't doing it to threaten me. She was trying to murder me. Suddenly, I could breathe again. I gasped, taking in a lungful of air, and dropped to my side. I desperately tried to get my body under control, but it spasmed for a few seconds before settling down. Somebody was shouting—it was a feminine voice, so I knew it wasn't Zel. My sight cleared up and I saw Zel battling Belroth, who had recovered from the kick to the face. He was doing well so far, but Belroth was an expert. He wasn't going to last long. I whipped my head to the side and extended a hand towards my swords, but gave up quickly. They were too far, and I was barely conscious. My gaze moved to my palms, and an idea sparked in my mind.

I struggled to my feet and slipped the gloves off my hands. "Hey, Belroth!" I called. I winced when I heard my voice. It was hoarse and strained, but I hadn't really expected anything else after being strangled. She turned

slightly, but most of her attention was on Zel, who was swinging his sword like a mad elf.

I walked right over and simply touched her shoulder. Her entire cloak caught fire, and she shrieked. "This is not over!" She yelled and disappeared into thin air.

I leaned against the wall. "Yeah, it's probably not over," I said, though I grinned. Zel was panting, gripping his sword as if he were still fighting. His eyes darted around as if Belroth was going to pop up next to him and go, 'Boo!'

"Hey, she's gone," I told him. "For now, at least."

He looked at me and winced. I snorted, which sent pain shooting up my collarbone and through my throat. "That bad?" I asked.

Zel didn't answer. Instead, he picked up my gloves and handed them to me. I took them gingerly, careful with my fingers. I figured it wouldn't be a good thing if I set him on fire. I glanced at my arms, which glowed a deep orange. They were the only part of me, except my face, that wasn't covered in scars, and that was only till my elbows. My shoulders were riddled with scar tissue.

I put the gloves on and looked up at Zel again, who had grabbed my shoulder to make sure I didn't topple over. "You know, the first time I fought Belroth was two years ago."

He raised an eyebrow, and I nodded. “I er, had bumped into her in the forest,” I lied. I had actually chosen my name that month, and she strangled me one unfortunate day, but later, that evening, I stabbed her in the shoulder. Sapphire had saved me. She’d swooped in on a tsunami and yanked me away, but after that, Belroth forced me to fight her. If I won, I’d get to live. If I lost, she’d kill me. “I walked out of that fight with a broken arm, a new scar, and a huge grin. Of course, that was before the pain set in.”

He snapped out of his concerned and alert daze and laughed, thankfully. I picked up my swords and sheathed them. “There’s a maze down the shaft. Time is kind of confusing down there, so he’ll either pop up with the scrolls soon or days later,” I said.

“Brilliant,” he mumbled.

We waited for a few moments and then heard shuffling noises coming from the shaft and immediately turned to it. Belroth stood behind the shaft, her mask blackened and her cloak smoking. Fear and bile climbed up my bruised throat. A charred smell filled the room.

At the same time, Logan emerged from the shaft. He looked like he’d gone through Hell. His glasses were nearly completely broken, covered in mud and blood from a cut on his cheek. His clothes were covered in dirt and blood, but in his hand were scrolls. *The Scrolls*.

Things went south from here. Blue arcs of electricity arced through his body, and he dropped to the ground, spasming. “LOGAN!” I shouted.

“Oh, come on!” Zel yelled from next to me, letting go of my shoulder, and we ran towards him. Zel knelt next to his form and picked up the scrolls. “What did you do to him?” I snarled at Belroth. “The same thing I’m about to do to all of you.”

Pain shot through me, and I cried out. I felt myself drop to the ground and heard Zel shouting next to me. I forced myself to stay awake for one more second. I saw Zel yell something at her and draw his sword, but soon enough, the same thing happened to him, and he collapsed.

My eyelids became heavier and heavier until I finally slipped into darkness.

Chapter 16

Physics saves my life

When I came to, the first thing I noticed was that my face was pressed against grass and not the warm rock of a volcano. I cracked open my eyes with great difficulty.

Voices whispered around me. I was in a forest. Bushes and trees surrounded me. Trees that were marked with small scratches and initials and random curses—trees I knew all too well. I was in The Evergrove.

I sat up straight and nearly blacked out again. I felt hands grasp my shoulders. They were large but delicate, and I was instantly pulled into a massive hug, both arms *and* feathery white wings. “Hey, Beck,” I croaked.

“You’re so, so stupid,” was the reply I received. “What were you thinking? Taking on Belroth? *Again?*”

He pulled me away from him and started ranting, something about me being careless, stupid, reckless, and stupid a couple more times. I zoned out after a few moments, and my gaze moved to my other teammates, or siblings, as I liked to call them.

Greenie was gnawing away at the tips of her nails, and I felt guilty for making her worry. Cyan was frowning at me, but I knew that expression all too well—it was the one he’d give Greenie or me when we got into trouble

and the one Beck would give all of us when we breathed dangerously. That anger, plus annoyance but also a tint of actual concern. All too familiar.

I was so happy to be back.

But Zel and Logan...

Eventually, Beck stopped ranting after noticing that I wasn't listening, and I turned back to him. "Where's Zel and Logan?" I asked, trying not to wince at my own hoarse voice.

Cyan grimaced, Greenie turned around, and Beck avoided my gaze. I repeated my question, more forcefully.

"Arcane's got em," came a familiar voice from behind me. I turned a little too fast, which earned me a skull-splitting headache.

Gray leaned against the trunk of a tree, fiddling with a dagger. He was the oldest out of all of us—seventeen. He smiled at me, but his eyebrows were furrowed. His hood wasn't obscuring half his face for once—and I could see his brown eyes.

I stood and would've faceplanted the dirt if Greenie hadn't caught me. "Careful," she chided. I looked up at Gray, who was regarding me as if I was about to drop any second, which was highly possible. "Take me there," I said.

“Goldie, it’s not a good idea..” Gray started, but I shook my head and stood straight. I gently disentangled myself from Greenie and smiled like, *Yeah, I’m fine, totally not dying here*. Unfortunately, I was pretty sure it was more of a grimace and looked like, *Yeah, I’m dying here, but it’s okay*. Gray scowled at me, clearly not buying it. Pain suddenly erupted in my arm, and I turned.

Cyan loomed above me, casually stabbing me with a needle which I suspected was a sedative.

“Sorry, Goldie,” he said, but he didn’t sound very sorry.

“*You little-*”

I had phased in and out of sleep. Greenie later said that I’d ended up punching an elf before the second dose of sedatives hit me.

When I woke up completely, I was in the med wing on The Evergrove’s east side. The east side was where we slept, ate, trained, and yes, got stupid injuries. I was lying in a cot on the right side of the infirmary. Greenie was sitting on the edge of the bed, scowling at me. “Hello,” I said. The first thing I noticed was that my voice wasn’t hoarse anymore and my throat didn’t hurt anymore. “You’re awake,” she noted.

“Nah, this is a dream.”

This earned me a pillow to the face. I sat up and frowned at her, setting the pillow aside. “How long was I out?”

She chewed her already torn-up lips. "A few days," she said. She noticed my shocked expression and grimaced. I hopped right out of the bed, yanked the IV out of my arm, wiped away the blood trickling down it, and started to walk away, but Greenie grabbed my hand and pulled me back. "Where are you going?" She asked.

"I'm fine now, right? I'm going to go get Zel and Logan."

"You're still stuck on that?"

I nodded and yanked my hand away. I walked out, Greenie still following me. She didn't say anything, which I was grateful for. I pushed through the chaos. Elves hurried around, some of whom were amazing friends, others sworn enemies. I waved to a few, and they waved back. Some were carrying weapons, others medical supplies and sometimes baskets of food or cloth.

"Hey, Gold, good to see you back," one said. I gave them a grateful smile and then turned away, biting back the 'It's Helix!'

"I need to get to the Slingshot," I muttered to Greenie. "You're crazy," she hissed back. "There's no way Red's team is going to let you have it."

"You'll see."

And I started running towards the Slingshot. Like I said, my plans aren't always thought through. The Slingshot was, well...a massive slingshot. It propelled you across the island if you couldn't fly. Usually, Red's team had

control over it, and she hated Beck with a passion, which meant she loathed our whole team. We crossed the East side into a forest clearing marked with a dark red circle. Beyond that was the massive Slingshot looming over us. “Well, well, well, look who decided to show up.”

Red stepped into the clearing. She was a fire elf, like me, but was nothing like me. Her hands didn’t set everything she touched on fire, so she had no need for gloves. I’d never known why I had fire hands, but none of the fire elves around me did. It was something that had always befuddled me. Everybody loved the fact that I could set anything on fire with just a poke, but I considered it more of a curse, less of a gift.

She had flowy brown hair and amber eyes. Red wasn’t dressed in armor. She was wearing missionary clothes—a red embroidered shirt and slacks. Her smile was menacing and could strike fear into the heart of anyone who crossed her. “I see you didn’t die out there,” she noted. “Again.”

“You’re wearing surface clothes,” I said flatly. “You came back from a mission a few days ago, too, didn’t you? Which poor soul did you get now?”

It was a sore spot for all of us, but it’s not like I was thinking clearly. I heard Greenie wince beside me.

She sneered and drew her sword. I reached for my own, but the scabbard on my back wasn’t there. I swiveled around to stare at Greenie, wide-eyed. The realization

dawned on her, and her jaw dropped. I shook it off and grabbed a spear. It was going to have to do. "Here's the deal," Red said. "I beat you and your entire team loses Slingshot privileges. If you beat me, you get to use it just this once."

I didn't bother arguing. Instead, a smile crept across my face. "I'll do you one better," I said. "I fight your entire team."

"GOLDIE—" Greenie shrieked, but I clamped a hand over her mouth.

Red laughed and nodded. Her entire team stepped over, grinning like they were going to enjoy smashing me to bits. Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

"First team out of the circle loses," Red said.

We stepped into the circle. Greenie was pacing and biting her nails. She was ranting and yelping and telling me how dumb I was.

I tightened my grip on my spear and faced her team. The sky elf had wings, like Beck but hers were blue. Their other sky elf, like Gray, wore a cloak, but he was less fancy. He was slightly older than me. Their water elf had gray skin like Sapphire used to have, and blue lines etched her body. The forest elf had dark hair and bright green eyes.

"You remember the rules. No powers, only weapons," said the sky elf.

“Good luck,” wished their forest elf, but Red elbowed him. “You don’t wish the opponent,” she hissed.

I waited, twirling my spear casually. I was debating busting out some random dance moves when they finally stopped arguing.

“Fight!” Red yelled, and they all charged me.

I ducked under the blue wings and smacked the butt of my spear against her head from behind her, sending her sprawling. I battled against the other sky elf for a few moments before finally ducking beneath his sword and landing a kick to his stomach. He stumbled out of the circle and blue wings flared into my vision, and I staggered, disoriented.

I swung out blindly, and by pure luck, my spear caught onto her side and sent her toppling out of the circle. I turned to the water elf and after battling for a few moments, I managed to push her out of the circle.

Red charged at me, but I rolled out of the way, my foot skidding onto the border of the circle. I stood and was immediately met with the forest elf’s sword, which I thrust aside with my spear, leaving him unarmed. “Thanks for the luck,” I said, grinning, and tossed him out of the circle.

Red stood before me, sword at the ready. We ran at each other, our weapons meeting. I sent a kick to her midsection, and she was sent skidding back. This time,

it was her foot that touched the border. She got right up, fuming. I smirked. "Having fun?" I asked and held up my spear.

She snarled and threw several attacks at me with her sword, which I narrowly avoided. I stabbed with my spear, but her sword met the tip, and I was forced to turn it. The sword was brought down onto the shaft, and it instantly broke in my hands. I panicked internally and rolled away when that same sword was brought down above my head. "Goldie, get out of there!" Came Greenie's voice from behind me. I ignored her. Probably not my wisest decision.

I threw a few punches, trying not to get decapitated. Eventually, Red ended up right in front of me, the border inches away behind me. She smirked, the tip of her sword one movement away from rearranging my face. I held that stance for a few seconds, my hands mid-air, and then dropped to all fours. I came back up behind her. She swung her sword, and I ducked. I kicked her midsection again and sent her tumbling away.

We had switched places. Unfortunately, she had a sword. But she also had something that was holding her back: actual sanity. I tackled her, and we were both sent sprawling out of the circle. "What are you doing? We've both lost!" She yelled. I rolled away from her and stood, brushing myself off. She got up, furious.

"Actually, thanks to physics, you lost first."

She sputtered, so angry that she could barely form an actual sentence. “You—I—How—?!”

“She’s right, Red,” came a voice from next to us. It was the winged sky elf from her own team. “We lost.”

Red turned back to me, snarling. “Fine,” she managed and stormed off. Her team went after her, calling her name. I was instantly tackled in a hug. “You did it!” Greenie said.

“What’d you think I’d do?” I asked, trying not to feel a little offended. She didn’t reply, which was probably for the best.

“Physics just saved your life,” she mumbled, pulling away.

I laughed and nodded. “Yes, it did.”

Chapter 17

Toss the Helix!

We sat around the bonfire, eating dinner. I sat on a log, next to Cyan. Greenie and Beck were on another. Gray sat alone on the third log, poking the coal. “Tournaments are next week,” Beck piped up, and I nearly dropped my bowl of soup. Cyan groaned and cupped his face in his hands. “It still feels like yesterday,” he muttered. The image of Sapphire’s bloody body flashed into my mind’s eye, and everybody fell silent. I set aside my dinner, my appetite lost, and stood. “Well, we’re not going to be there for it,” I said, and they all looked at me in surprise.

“Goldie, please don’t tell me you’re thinking of—” Greenie started. “I am,” I interrupted. “And when we escape, we’ll get better supplies. We’ll learn. We’ll do regular things! And we’re ready, we come back for everybody else. And we won’t fail this time. It’s not going to be another Jake situation. It’s time we stop this.”

I was standing on the log now, my hands on my hips. “We can do it,” I said. “I just need to get to The Bridge.”

“Okay, and assuming this works, how are we going to rescue your friends?” Cyan asked. I grinned, which prompted a memory to pop up in my head. A year ago,

after Sapphire died...Beck had said that when I smiled about something dark or wrong, I apparently looked terrifying. "Leave that to me," I said.

"Alright," Gray chimed in. I looked at him in surprise. "Let's do it."

He looked up, smiling, but it wasn't the good kind. It was kind of scary, like he was plotting to kill someone, and he was going to enjoy it. I bit back a wince. Was *that* what I looked like?

"Get some rest," he said to all of us, over Beck's protests. "I'll talk to this guy," he said, motioning at Beck. Greenie, Cyan, and I headed towards the bunks while they argued. "This is stupid," Cyan said. "I love it."

I glanced at him. I was the youngest, then Greenie, then Cyan. I recalled how short he used to be just a few years ago. His height had shot up since last year, towering over me and Greenie. Greenie and he usually teamed up against me when I wanted to do something stupid. When he got into fights, I was usually fighting along with him with Greenie yelling at us from behind. It was honestly kind of funny considering that Cyan had no policy against getting into trouble for himself, but when I did something that could get me killed, he started acting like an annoying professor.

This was the first time we had all agreed on one thing. And this time, it could get us *all* killed.

"You were nearly killed," Sapphire said as Lavender wrapped my wound and placed my arm in a cast. "Yes, I was," I replied, still smiling. "But I beat Belroth."

She rolled her eyes. "You're going to get an earful from Cyan and Greenie."

"And Beck?"

"Beck will be freaking out about the tournaments too much to yell at you."

I laughed, jostling my arm, and winced. She ruffled my hair, and I grinned at her. "Okay," Lavender said. "We're not supposed to use this unless it's an emergency, but we've got the tournaments tomorrow and I highly doubt you can fight with this arm."

She pulled out a golden potion and dripped it over the bandage of my gash and my cast. Immediately, there was a cracking sound, and it stopped hurting. She removed the bandage and the cast. Everything was as good as new. I laughed, not believing it. "That's insane," I said.

We reached The Bridge, and Beck started spewing out random instructions, which I didn't bother listening to. Hours later, after we'd changed into armor, I stood before the weapons, trying to figure out which one to use. Sapphire walked up to me and picked up two swords from off the top of the rack and handed them to me. I regarded them thoughtfully, and when I looked up, she smiled down at me. "You'd do good with these," she said.

We marched into the battlefield and waited. "Good luck," came a deep voice echoing around us. "You are aware of the rules. Survive till dawn and find the chest. Medical break at dawn. Do try to live. It would be a shame—all those supplies wasted on you if you died."

And the voice cut off. "Inspirational," Cyan muttered next to me. I snorted.

11:00 pm: so far, so good. We'd killed a few creatures and set up camp.

12:00 am: We'd settled down but had a run-in with another team. The team left, and we drifted off.

1:00 am: Three hours in, so far so good. Things were going smoothly.

2:00 am: Found a freshwater source.

3:00 am: Things went sideways. We got attacked by a monster and Beck broke both his wings.

4:00 am: Just trying to keep Beck conscious.

5:00 am: Another team blindly shot an arrow, which struck Greenie's leg.

6:00 am:

"Beck, stay awake," I hissed into his ear. Greenie winced, shifting slightly. "Beck," she called. Cyan knelt down and shook him. His eyes snapped open, and he cried out in pain. I grabbed a cloth from my pocket and stuffed it into his mouth. "Bite down on that," I told him. Sapphire stood, keeping a lookout.

"We've only got forty-five minutes left. It's almost over," she muttered.

6:30 am:

'The chest!' Cyan exclaimed. "I'll go get it," Sapphire said. "It's only a few minutes away from dawn."

"Conch shell?" I asked. "Have you got it?"

She nodded and started to walk away, but Cyan grabbed her wrist. She turned around, eyebrow raised. "Be careful," he blurted. "I—I have a bad feeling about this."

"Hey, it'll be fine. Just keep a lookout, okay?"

And she ran off. I heard him take a deep breath. He drew his sword and glanced around nervously. Sapphire blew into the conch shell, and the noise echoed across The Bridge.

And a shadow passed across the hill where the chest was. It lunged at her, and they toppled down the side. "SAPPHIRE!" I yelled. We raced towards her as fast as we could. Every team was running towards the hill now, but we didn't care about the chest anymore.

We reached the bottom of the hill and found a black wolfish beast looming over Sapphire's crumpled, bloody form. I drew my swords, but Cyan stepped ahead of me and drove it off. I knelt before Sapphire and cradled her head. "Saph?" I called softly. She blinked at me as if she couldn't focus properly on my face. Her abdomen was in shreds, organs spilling out, her ribcage seen in the broad daylight, and her leg was so misshapen, it didn't

look like a leg anymore. Blood pooled around her mouth and nose, her teeth painfully visible through her cheek, the skin hanging limply to the side.

Cyan crouched down. “We need to get her to the medical wing,” he said.

We waited outside the tent nervously. I sat on a rock and stared into space, waiting. Finally, Lavender stepped out of the tent reluctantly and faced us. We all looked up at her, and she grimaced. Beck wasn’t there with us. He was in another med tent; his wings were being taken care of. Greenie’s leg wasn’t an emergency, so she sat down with us.

Lavender looked at us hopelessly for a few moments, opening and closing her mouth like a fish until she gave up on words and shook her head.

Cyan cried out and punched a tree, looking away. Greenie sobbed. Me? I didn’t move. I sat there staring at Lavender blankly.

Until I lost it. Lava erupted from the ground and spewed all over the place. Trees fell, most engulfed in massive waves of magma. I felt someone hugging me. Their touch was cold, not warm but it was slightly comforting, nonetheless. “Stop,” Cyan breathed. “She’s gone. Stop. It’s not going to bring her back.”

Yet the lava ebbed and flowed.

I sat up in a cold sweat. “Well,” I mumbled to myself. “Those nightmares aren’t getting old, now, are they?” I

threw my legs off the side of my bunk and walked to the bathroom.

When I was done with all the morning necessities, I walked outside and frowned at the bright daylight. I found Gray cleaning up yesterday's things.

"Did you convince him?" I asked.

"He's still worried, but he's on board now, at least."

I nodded. "Thanks," I said. "So, what's the plan?" He asked. I scratched the back of my head awkwardly and said, "Escape?"

He gave me a look and I grinned sheepishly. "That's a title, not a plan."

"It can be both."

"Goldie—"

"No, I don't have a plan, but hey, we've lived so far, now let's go."

He rolled his eyes and kept everything down. We headed for the Slingshot. "They're all there already," he told me. I nodded and we kept going. When we reached the clearing, Greenie waved us over. Red's team was eyeing us from behind the trees, even though we could see them clearly. I ignored them and stepped in front of the giant sling. I stepped into the giant purple orb that was supposed to shoot me to a portal across the entire island and waited.

“Okay, let’s toss the Goldie,” came Cyan’s voice from behind me.

“It’s Hel—you know what? Never mind, just toss me!”

“*Do not die!*” Beck yelled.

“Not planning on it!”

“You’re not planning on *anything*,” Gray shouted, though I heard the amusement in his voice.

“*JUST TOSS ME!*”

I grabbed onto the sides of the purple orb and hung on for dear life as it was pulled back and shot through the air. I shut my eyes tight and toppled around in the orb as I soared through the air. I wondered, with all this spinning, if my heart had ended up in my esophagus.

Then the impact hit, and I wished I hadn’t done something so stupid. It jarred me to the brain, and I spewed out a couple of draconic curses. When I finally got over the shock, I popped open the orb and climbed out. I curled up on the ground, breathing heavily. I stared up at the sky, trying to control my breathing. I sat up straight and looked around. Looming above me was a gravel wall, the border of the island. Beyond that, there were miles and miles of ocean.

And before that wall...was a portal. *The* portal. The one that was going to get me to The Arcane’s towers.

Chapter 18

I hang around

Purple and black smoke swirled ahead of me like the eye of a tornado. Chunks of gravel and concrete swam along with it, and I developed an irrational fear of being dive-bombed by gravel. I stood and took a deep breath. The others had used this portal countless times, but I'd always hated it. I only used it on Tournament days. I walked up to it nervously and stepped through.

It was fun if you thought being blinded by smoke, feeling like you were being ripped apart, and your face being peeled off all at the same time was fun. I shoved down a scream and kept moving. Finally, I stumbled through the portal into a room. It was small, dimly lit, and riddled with the gag-inducing yet familiar smell of burning flesh.

Just like how I remembered.

I recalled the way the Arcane would drag me forward, toss me into a dark room, and injure me as best as possible without killing me.

Ah, childhood nostalgia.

I regarded the stairwell spiraling up in front of me. I walked up the stairs and for some reason, while I was walking, a tune came to my mind, and I began to whistle.

Stupid? Maybe. Childish? Oh, definitely. But there was a significance to this tune. Sapphire used to love it. She would hum or whistle the melody when she was bored or sometimes nervous. It was a happy, cheerful tune that reminded me of the times she was really happy. Not fake happiness, like the fake smile she had to pull on the surface, or around teams, but *actually happy*.

Sometimes, when I hum this tune, I feel like she's standing right next to me. It warmed my heart and promised me that everything would be okay.

Because it had to be.

So, I skipped up the steps like a five-year-old, preparing to fight a primordial being.

When I reached the end of the stairs, I heard voices. I instantly ducked behind an obsidian pillar. I knew this room—we called it The Hall. Awesome name, I know. We usually lowered our heads and walked right out as quickly as we could. But right now, I had no choice but to stay hidden. “Where is the girl?” Came a deep voice.

“I don’t know, sir,” came another. This one was feminine and raspy with exhaustion.

“And Belroth?”

“Missing from the premises.”

A growl echoed through the hall. “Very well,” said the deep voice. “Dismissed.”

A girl passed me. She had thick, blonde hair and amber eyes widened by fear. She kept her shaking arms stuck to her sides. She was dressed in a brown dress, the same as most of us. She was a little shorter than me, maybe even a little younger. When she saw me, her eyes widened even further. I placed a finger to my mouth and hushed her.

She looked behind her and then turned back to me. "You—"

Before she could continue, I grabbed her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "Tell the others that it's over. I'm escaping and I'm coming back for the rest of you later. Get prepared. You have a year, at the most. *Now go!*"

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but she decided against it. She snapped her mouth shut and nodded stiffly, her startled expression turning into a determined scowl. I let her go and she raced down the stairs.

I stepped into the hall and glanced around. I'd never gotten the chance to study the place properly. Usually, a bunch of whisps ushered us around to the fields of the Evergrove for the tournament, after some sort of announcement. The entire thing was comprised of obsidian. Obsidian pillars, obsidian walls, obsidian...table?

I walked over to the table and frowned at it. I'd never thought much of the table before, but now, for some reason, I had a bad feeling about it. I glanced up and the image of Zel came into focus above the table, his figure shining through a cloud of white mist, the background dark.

I inhaled sharply. He was frowning at me, his purple irises covered by shadows. "Helix?" He called out.

"Zel! Are you alright?"

To my surprise, he laughed. He brought his hands up, and I snarled. They weren't his hands. They were claws, black claws—claws I knew all too well.

"Hello, child," boomed The Arcane, not using Zel's voice anymore.

I scowled at him. "What have you done to my friends?" I demanded.

"Oh, you'll see soon enough."

It was kind of weird, seeing The Arcane speak to me as Zel. Zel was a ton of things—rude at first, horrible with new things, funny, sarcastic—but as far as I knew, he was *not* dark or creepy. Zel trying to be dark or mysterious was an idea so ridiculous that if the situation didn't enrage me so much, I might have laughed.

Unfortunately, The Arcane came in fifty different shades of (insert screaming here).

“Can you give me a specific time period or something?” I asked. A twisted smile crossed his face. “Attitude. Normally, I would punish this. But let’s see how this plays out. Good luck with the whisps, kid.”

The image faded and I unsheathed my swords, turning in a circle. Just when I began to think that he was messing with me, maybe trying to send my mind into a panic—just when my adrenaline started to fade—a shriek echoed through the room.

They came in from behind me. I turned around as fast as I could, but I acted too late. A whisp latched onto my arm and sank its fangs into my skin. I cried out in agony and sliced it in half. It dropped onto the ground, and I turned to the other smokey tendrils swarming me.

I slashed a sword through the air, and a few withered and collapsed onto the ground. But that was nothing. There were hundreds around me, maybe thousands. There was no way I was going to win this battle. I kept slashing my swords, spinning them, shielding myself, but it was a last-ditch attempt to live.

I was losing blood, *fast*. My vision blurred, and all I could see was black and grey. Pain throbbed through my arm, and I bit back a scream. Suddenly, an idea popped up in my mind. I dropped my sword and pulled off my gloves. Orange light radiated off my hands. Every whisp that came close went up in flames.

But it wasn't enough. They still came in from behind, from my left, from my right, and I couldn't stop them.

Pain seared through my leg and then through my left shoulder. I burned the whisps that had attached themselves to my skin, and then the scream that I had been holding back tore its way out of me as another latched onto my abdomen. I managed to get rid of it, but my knees buckled.

I slammed into the floor and blacked out.

I'm alive, why am I alive? was the first thing I thought when I came to. The pain I was in had disappeared. I forced my eyes open, ignoring the heaviness of my eyelids and the protests my body screamed at me. My hands were chained up. I hung from the wall, my feet barely reaching the ground. I was in another room made of stone. It was small and cramped, and there was no one there except me. A torch was lit on the wall opposite the one I was hanging from. I glanced down. My wounds had disappeared, somehow. I wasn't about to complain about it, though.

I struggled against the chains, yanking my arms forward, to no avail. I grunted in frustration. Where *was* I? After a few minutes of hanging around (get it?), there was a click, and a black metal door that I hadn't even noticed swung open. "Ah, you're awake," came The Arcane's voice. I cursed in Draconic, under my breath. I lowered my head and gave up the struggle against the chains. A

clawed hand brushed away the hair from my face. “Don’t be so glum. You tried. That’s something. Let’s try the memory wiper, now, shall we?”

Intense fear climbed around inside me, doing aerobics, but I said nothing. “Are you finally broken?” He asked, menace lining his words. “That’s a shame. You were one of the fierce ones.”

After a few seconds, the fear turned into slight hysteria, and a laugh started building up in my throat, and I started giggling. I looked up. He’d taken on my figure, so my own face glared back at me.

“You will *never* break me.”

Something climbed up my throat—a burning anger that consumed my insides. I grinned and immediately wondered if I looked psychotic. There was a fine line between bravery and stupidity, but most forgot to mention insanity. I think I had crossed that line.

I planted my foot against his stomach and used most of my strength to send him sprawling. The flames dimly illuminating the room erupted into a massive fire. The chains began to heat up and slowly turned orange. The flames turned white hot and tore away the chains. When the fire died down, The Arcane was gone. I knew I had to face him one time or another, but not now. I had to find my friends. I ripped my hands away from the melted metal and stepped out of the room onto The Bridge.

I'd never been here. And honestly? Hanging above a planet was *terrifying*. It was a thick bridge from my viewpoint, made of obsidian. But down on solid ground, it looked like a skinny black line streaking across the sky. It wasn't technically above the planet. It was in the atmosphere, but where the air started getting *really* thin. The stars glittered above me, the mountains below. I gulped, shaking. I took a step and closed my eyes. I had never been afraid of heights, but this? This was pushing it.

Yet I forced myself forward, one steady step at a time until I broke into a jog. Before I knew it, I was racing across The Bridge. It could've been hours, it could've been seconds that I was running along the path, but I didn't stop.

I didn't think to look back.

I didn't check.

I *forgot*.

When I finally reached another door at the end of The Bridge, I turned. And there they were. Whisps. Hundreds of them were racing after me. I reached for my swords, but they weren't there. I had left them behind. Panic settled down in my chest, but I did my best to ignore it. This was the time to do something stupid. So naturally, I tossed my logic into outer space and yelled, "OVER HERE, SMOKE-BRAINS!"

I had already used this insult, but there was so much anger in me that there was no space for creativity.

I waited as they came closer and closer. I stepped behind the door and grasped the handle. Just when they were about to charge me, I slammed the door in their face and locked it. The door immediately dented with the pressure of hundreds of whisps slamming into it. I backed into the wall and waited, my heart climbing back into my throat. Nothing happened. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I looked around, spotting a staircase going down. I managed to get down without somehow getting myself killed. The hallway at the foot of the stairs branched off into several rooms. I decided to take a risk.

“Hello?” I called out.

“Helix?” Came Zel’s voice after a few seconds.

I didn’t reply. What if it were The Arcane again? I bit down hard enough on my lip for it to bleed. I had to do it. I *had* to.

I walked into the room where the voice had come from. “Helix,” Zel breathed, his face lighting up.

He was chained up like I had been. He was scratched up, badly, absolutely covered in gashes that were bleeding profusely. Worry replaced my anger. I winced when I glanced at his busted lip, which was bleeding again. His

snow-white hair fell around his face, light grey in the lack of light.

I rushed over to him and pulled off my gloves. I placed my hands on the chains, and they began to melt. “I’m sorry,” I said hurriedly. “I had to. I had no other choice. I—”

“I know.”

I glanced at him, and my eyes widened.

“There was an image—I can’t really explain it, but I saw everything. And it’s okay.”

I wanted to say something, but my voice didn’t work. The chain on his left arm broke away, and he flexed it, wincing. “What’s the plan?” he asked.

I started laughing, to his surprise. I cupped my face in my palms, wheezing for breath. “I don’t have one,” I whispered and then repeated it louder.

“Okay, sounds foolproof.”

I looked up. It was my turn to be startled. He was smiling at me, as if we had just shared an inside joke. “I trust you, Helix,” he said. “As weird as it sounds, I do.”

I straightened my shoulders and nodded. I melted the other chain and put my gloves back on. After trying to stand by himself, Zel nearly faceplanted the floor. I caught him, and then we both fell. “We’re pathetic,” I stated. We glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

Once we recovered, he struggled to his feet and helped me up. "Where's Logan?" I asked.

"Before I blacked out, I saw a whisp take him to another room. I think it was a little further down the hall," he replied.

I nodded, and we stumbled out of the room and headed down the hallway.

"Come on, slowpoke," he said even though he looked half-dead, practically clinging to the wall.

"And he's back," I mused.

He snorted. We staggered down the hall like zombies. "Logan!" I yelled. I didn't receive a reply. Zel called his name after me and then frowned. "Logan, we have candy!" He shouted.

I shot him a look. "It was worth a try," he mumbled. A delirious groan echoed through the hallway. We looked at each other, grinning. My energy came back, and apparently so did his, because then we were running down the hallway into the room at the very end. Logan was blacked out, on the floor. He hadn't even been chained, and that's exactly what made my heart sink. Why wasn't he chained?

I rushed over and knelt down. I shook his shoulders, and he yelped in pain. Zel looked at me with an alarmed expression. "Logan?" I said, trying not to let the panic

seep into my voice. “Buddy, wake up,” Zel said, in the same tone.

I looked around for his backpack and found it in the corner of the room. I raced over to it and dug around. My fingers curled around a candy bar. I brought it out, unwrapped it, and snapped it under his nose. His eyes snapped open, and he immediately grimaced. He opened his mouth to say something but decided against it. I frowned and hovered a hand over his forehead, where a purple mist shimmered. I knew exactly what happened.

And I wished it was literally anything else.

Chapter 19

What's new? You wouldn't believe me if I told you

"Oh, brilliant," I muttered.

"What? What's wrong with him?" Zel asked.

"It's a pain spell. He can't move or do anything without experiencing...well, pain."

"How do we get rid of it?"

"We need an Elementalist. We have an Elementalist. *He's the one with the pain spell.*"

"Oh, brilliant," Zel said.

I frowned. "Unless..."

Zel turned back to me, eyebrows arched. "You have an idea?" He asked.

"Yeah, but like most things, it's probably going to get me killed."

He glared at me, and I shrugged hopelessly. "Most elves *know* spells, but we can't perform the complicated ones like getting rid of a curse as powerful as this without dying. I can *try*, though."

He looked away, glancing at Logan and then back at me.

“Would trying to get you killed?”

“Not if I leave the spell halfway.”

Of course, I wasn’t going to leave it halfway, but he didn’t need to know that.

Zel looked skeptical but contemplated it for a few moments and then nodded. I stood and hovered a hand over Logan. I began chanting and I *felt* my soul being torn to shreds. It was like someone had a hand clasped around my heart and was picking at it roughly with their nails. I channeled all that power residing somewhere deep inside me and dragged it out, inch by inch. My vision turned red for reasons I didn’t know. Red-tinted Logan sat up, and his eyes widened at the sight of me casting a spell.

A pain erupted in my abdomen as if someone had driven a shard of glass into my midsection. I gritted my teeth and continued chanting. I felt the spell leave Logan and get torn to shreds, but with each second, the agony intensified, and my vision swam. The nails finally dug into my heart, and the last bit of the spell shattered. I stopped chanting and dropped to my knees. My vision turned to normal, but the pain didn’t go anywhere. I bent over, gasping for breath, when I felt someone tackling me in a hug. “Glad to see you too, Logan,” I said, laughing.

“Glad you’re not *dead*,” Zel said, grinning, but I wasn’t sure who he said it to.

I smirked. “They took it!” Logan exclaimed, pulling away from me. “They took the scrolls, and I couldn’t...I couldn’t—”

He looked away, blinking furiously. “What if all we went through was for nothing?” He asked softly. I grabbed his shoulders roughly, the pain erupting through me again, but I ignored it. I was about to say something, but Zel beat me to it. “What matters right now,” he said, “is that we’re all alive.”

I nodded. “Now come on. We’re going to go get those scrolls and tell The Arcane to deal with it.”

I stood and immediately regretted it. My vision went so dark, the only thing I could see was a rock on the wall. *Just brilliant*, I thought, but made myself take a steady step, as if I were back on The Bridge. I couldn’t afford to pass out now. “Helix?” Came Zel’s concerned voice.

I ignored him and focused on an old trick that Gray had taught me.

When you’re hurt, you can remove the pain by visualizing it being put into a box and locked away, he had said. *Your magic will manipulate it, and the pain will go but it’ll come back later. Only use this in emergencies.*

So, I imagined locking it into a box and throwing it off a cliff. That ought to work even better, right? Much to my

relief, the pain faded. Exhaustion nearly overcame me, but I shook it off. "Okay, let's go," I said. We walked out of the room and glanced around. "Where do we go?" Zel asked. "I think I can cast a trail spell," Logan said. "You *think*?" I said, shooting him a look.

"I *can*. I *can* cast a spell," he amended. He chanted a single word, and a golden dot began to glow midair. "Follow the dot," he said, grinning. It was the best idea we had so we followed the dot. It bobbed along cheerfully, leading us down the hallway, up the stairs, and into a corridor. I looked around. "That's the weapons room," I noted, nodding at a door. "We were never allowed in there."

I walked inside and gasped. Shiny axes and swords hung from the wall. Bows and arrows, along with quivers, sat in glass cases, but what really caught my attention was the black pistol in the back. "Woah.... this is...a lot of weapons," said Logan. Zel whistled appreciatively and picked up a sword from the wall. I eyed the pistol. Someone like me should *not* be trusted with a gun. I was a little trigger-happy. The first time I tried to fight with a gun, I just ended up shooting Cyan in the foot. It is called 'trigger-happy' though. I delicately lifted the glass case off the pedestal and set it aside. I picked up the gun, grinning. Logan nervously regarded the weapons and gingerly cradled a tiny little dagger. He sheathed it and seemed content with his decision. The golden dot

wobbled impatiently above me and started bopping against my forehead.

“Okay, okay,” I said, shielding my forehead. “We’re coming. Jeez.”

We walked out, going after the dot. I fiddled with my gun, which was probably a horrible idea. Then again, I was the queen of horrible ideas. Suddenly, the dot stopped and hovered above our heads. I turned to Logan. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I think it senses a block,” he said.

“Well, what do we do?” Zel asked.

I squinted down the corridor, my senses pricking, and I felt like a little kid seeing my sister get mauled all over again.

I had been down here before. The Arcane would make me look at it—dare me to kill it. I never could. As a punishment, he would try and kill me.

Thankfully, he never could.

“Oh,” I said, gulping and forcing the words out of my mouth. “Okay, I know what it is.” Zel raised an eyebrow at me. “What is it?” He asked.

“We keep moving, then you’ll see.”

I gripped my pistol, anger and guilt and fear and a whole lot of other things fighting for dominance inside my

heart that already felt shredded to pieces. I couldn't give up. Not now.

We walked for a few minutes and then came across a door. I pushed it open, and we stepped in.

A giant black figure was curled up in the room, laying on hay. It was coated in blood, wounds glistening on the surface of its skin, underneath its thick fur. Its wings loomed above us. Its body resembled a very overgrown canine with giant wings. Its eyes cracked open, and large blue irises gazed down at me, and I felt something rustle in my heart. I wanted to kill it—I wanted revenge. But it wasn't right.

I couldn't.

"What—?" Logan started to ask, but I answered his question before he could finish it. "It's called a kithenial," I said, biting back the word *monster*. "It's really rare, almost extinct. And this specific one killed my sister."

I stated it so blankly, I might've said, *this one bit me when I was little*.

Zel stared at me, surprised. "Oh, Helix," Logan said.

I hadn't realized I had pointed my gun at the kithenial until its gaze shifted to the pistol in my hand. I *definitely* hadn't realized I was trembling until I saw the gun shaking violently in my grasp.

I lowered the gun and stared back at the beaten-up animal. It didn't feel right to call it a monster. Monsters had no emotion. They were bloodthirsty things, with only the need to survive or rip apart creatures that were more than just half-alive. I knew that kithenials had emotion, but I could also see through those blue eyes. It—she—definitely had emotion. “Helix, it's beaten up,” Zel said, his tone gentle. “If you need to...”

He trailed off, but I knew what he meant. *If you need to kill her, you can.* But he didn't mean it. Of course, he didn't. He loved animals. I did too. But that's not the only reason I couldn't shoot it—why I never could. This one may have murdered my sister, but it was being controlled by the same thing that had controlled me for so long. I dropped my gun and kicked it aside. Zel's sigh of relief echoed next to me.

I knelt before it. “I don't forgive you,” I said to it. I was barely audible, but her pointy, wolf-like ears pricked up as if telling me it was listening. “Actually, I don't know what I feel about you. But you don't deserve this.” I looked up at Logan. “I need your dagger,” I said. He handed it to me nervously, and I cut it into my arm. Pain rocketed around the wound, but I ignored it. The golden blood pooled into my palms, and I dribbled it over its wings and paws. It began to heal. I stood and handed Logan back his dagger, picked up my pistol, and forced a grin. “Look at that, I'm suddenly so wise.”

Logan gaped. "You have the worst sense of humor," he said.

"What's new?" I asked, still smiling.

"Come on," Zel said and gingerly shuffled past the kithenial. Logan followed him, the dot bobbing along. I walked after them, but at the exit, I glanced back at it. "I'll come back for you," I whispered. "You'll be free. One day, I promise."

Just like me, I thought, giddily. I'll be free too. In just a few more hours.

I had changed—gone from hating this thing to—well—not being sure of what to feel about it—*her*. I felt stronger—more independent. I believed in myself for what felt like the first time in my entire life because it probably was. I could even be free in the next couple of hours after years of torture, wounds, pain, bleeding, and agony. *Free*.

So, to answer my own question, *a lot* was new.

Chapter 20

Liar, liar

We followed the golden orb down complicated hallways, past rooms that had several different things. One even contained several boxes of sleeping fire-breathing snakes.

At what point in life do you ever go, *Ah, this is a difficult job? A situation like this calls for fire-breathing snakes!*

“They’re kind of cute,” Logan said.

“Sure, let’s go with that and get out,” Zel replied.

We shuffled past the room, managing not to disturb the flame-snorting reptiles. As we turned another corner into another hallway, Logan started walking a little ahead of Zel and me, jogging after the golden dot which, for some reason, had started bobbing along at a faster pace. Maybe we were close? I couldn’t decide if that was good or bad. I wanted to escape, but the scrolls had to be guarded. The Arcane wasn’t stupid. In fact, he was annoyingly clever, always a step ahead of me, whatever I did. He would figure out how to use them—and it definitely wouldn’t be good. “Helix,” Zel whispered, breaking my train of thought. I turned to him, raising an eyebrow. “Are you alright?” He asked.

I nearly laughed. It was funny seeing him concerned. I recalled how much he had changed in just three weeks. "Yep," I said. "Just peachy."

For once, he didn't laugh at my poorly timed jokes. He glared at me and hissed, "I'm serious."

"Serious is boring," I replied, brushing him off.

His glare intensified, and I almost relented. "I'm fine," I said flatly.

"Liar," he muttered, and it was my turn to shoot the other a withering glare. The corners of his lip twitched at my expression and then turned to Logan. "How much further?" He asked. Logan turned and shrugged. "I don't know. It's getting really excited, but it can't exactly talk, now, can it?"

He squinted at the golden dot, as if it were going to grow a mouth and tell us how much further. I frowned into the shadows. "Guys?" I called. "The shadows are moving."

They squirmed and writhed, as if something was trying to rip them apart. Or worse...trying to emerge from them.

"RUN!" Logan yelled, and we raced down the corridor, staying away from the shadows. A shadow elongated and a smoky tendril reached for me, but I shot it. It shrunk back into the walls, and I kept running. I ran ahead of them and turned. I shot a tendril that was scraping away at Logan's legs, trying to drag him back. It retreated, and

I pulled the trigger on another that had slunk out of the corner and was trying to grab onto Zel's shoulder. "Hey, I didn't end up shooting you!" I yelled victoriously. "WHAT?" Logan shrieked. "Nothing, keep running!" I replied. We turned the corner, slamming into a giant tendril. Zel drew his giant sword that he could barely hold and managed to slice it in half. "I think this was a bad idea!" He said, gesturing at the sword. It was so heavy he had to hold it with both hands and was still a second away from falling over with its weight. "Ya *think*?" I replied as he sheathed it, and we kept going. We crossed a room, and I halted to a stop, staring into it. "Helix, what are you doing?" Logan asked. I heard the panic in his voice, but I didn't answer. I stared at the grey mist floating around in the room. "Something," I muttered, "is wrong...GET DOWN!"

Blue flames exploded above us as we ducked. I looked up at them, frowning. I was immune to fire, but this was something else completely. "Zel," I said shakily. "I need your sword." He handed it to me, and I struck it into the air. The flames deflected, slamming into the walls and ceiling. I shifted the position of the blade, and the flames shot back into the room. Soon, the fire died, and I stood. I tossed aside the sword and squinted into the smoke. "And we meet again," came The Arcane's voice from inside the room as he stepped out, in the form of...Sapphire.

I snarled at him as Zel and Logan stood. “*You*,” Logan spat. “Me,” he replied, grinning evilly. “Let’s cut to the chase, shall we?” I asked, menace lining my words as I pointed the pistol at him. Surprise flashed across the face he had taken on—my sister’s—but he quickly masked it. “I don’t believe we’ve met yet. At least, while you were conscious,” he said to Zel.

Zel scowled. “Yeah, but I know all about you.”

I pulled the trigger, knowing it wouldn’t do much, but it would at least buy us a little more time. It would make him gloat, which would save us a lot of time. And *that* was useful.

Boom-boom-CRACK! Two bullets smashed into his skull, and his head snapped back. Honestly, it felt weird shooting the face of my sister, but I shoved the guilt into the back of my mind. Zel grabbed his sword, and Logan kept his hand on the hilt of his dagger. I hoped he had enough spells to cast. “Well,” he said, bringing his head back to its regular position. A hole bled in the middle of his forehead, the black blood dripping down his brow, onto the bridge of his nose. “That was ridiculous. It would take a lot more than two bullets to kill *me*. And of course, that’s exactly what you thought, wasn’t it? I would gloat, and you would get more time?”

My eyes widened. Always a step ahead. This was getting old really fast.

So, I steeled my nerves as everything fit together like a puzzle piece. There had to be a reason why The Arcane hadn't killed me off already. I didn't know why, but for some reason, he needed me. I was a little chess piece in his game.

Well, this little pawn wasn't having it.

I turned the pistol to my own head.

"HELIX?" Zel shrieked from next to me, his voice an octave higher than usual. "Are you—"

"Crazy? Off my rocker? Maybe. But that's exactly what I need to be. Isn't that right?" The last part was directed to The Arcane who was shaking with fury, trying to cover it up with a smile. "I see you've figured it out," he hissed. "Very well. I—"

He cut himself off with a scream of agony as he dropped to his knees, clutching his head. "No. Those pests—they're interfering! They—AAHHHH!"

The ground shook and we grabbed onto the things nearest to us. I latched onto the wall, glad the wisps weren't crawling out of them anymore. When I finally turned back to the room, the Arcane was gone. "What just happened?" Logan squeaked.

Zel was staring at me as if I'd dropped out of space. He eyed the gun nervously. "Oh, right," I mumbled and turned the pistol away from my head.

“Helix,” Zel said, his voice dangerously calm. “What. Was. That?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said, waving around my gun, which he didn’t exactly appreciate. “Try,” Logan said. “*Please.*”

“He needs me for something. I don’t know what, or why, but I’m not surprised.”

Logan nodded, but Zel still stared at the gun as if I was going to try to kill myself again.

It was funny how casual I was about that.

We’d completely forgotten about the golden dot at this point. It bumped against Zel’s head, shaking excitedly. Once it caught our attention, it floated into the room filled with smoke. Logan stood and sighed. “Okay,” he said, managing a smile. “Let’s go.”

We marched into the room and followed the golden light emitting from our little guide. It led us to a hatch leading down. “OH, COME ON!” Logan exclaimed, making us jump. He was clearly not a fan of hatches anymore.

We climbed down the hatch into a cave dimly lit by torches. The scrolls just sat on the floor, unguarded. “This has to be a joke,” Zel said. I stepped forward and picked them up.

Nothing happened.

I looked around nervously. "They're just unguarded?" I mumbled to myself. "This makes no sense," Logan said. "They're just...here."

I grinned. The pests were interfering. "We need to leave," I said. "NOW!"

I raced to the hatch and began to climb, after handing the scrolls to Zel. I ran down the corridors, Zel and Logan racing after me. "Where are we going?" Logan asked. "You'll see!" I told them.

When I got there, I unlocked the door and ran onto the Bridge, to the sight of a rebellion. Spears were thrown, fireballs were shot, gunshots echoed, and ice frosted onto the tower. Vines curled up from the ground, engulfing thousands of whisps and ripping them apart viciously. Monsters were slain, animals were freed, and dragons were ridden. "Hey, Goldie!" Came a voice from above me. I looked up as Cyan swooped above us on a black dragon, spear in hand, ice coating The Bridge. "Nice of you to join us!" He yelled and disappeared below the obsidian bridge.

I laughed and threw a fist into the air. I whooped loudly. "THAT'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT!" I yelled as Greenie shot past us on a massive vine and brought down several whisps.

"What do we do?" Zel asked. I turned around, grinning. "You get the scrolls back to your bunker," I replied.

“What?” Logan chimed in. “We’re not leaving you here!”

“You have to, okay? I *need* to fight.”

“Helix—” Zel started, but I shook my head, smiling. “I’ve waited my whole life for this. It’s time for me to fight my battle. You guys need to go back down the tower, avoid the fighting, and run. Logan, you need to cast the trail spell. It’ll get you home.”

I pulled Logan in for a hug, nodded at Zel, and turned to leave, but an ice-cold hand wrapped around my wrist pulled me back. “Zel, you can’t stop me—” I said but I was cut off as he hugged me.

Warmth spread over my heart as I hugged him back. “I’ll try not to die,” I said, hopefully. He snorted. “Liar.”

I laughed and pulled away. I backed away from them, turned around, and broke into a run as I raced toward the battlefield.

Chapter 21

I set The Arcane's pants on fire

I skipped two steps at a time as I ran down the stairs. I fired bullets at a couple of whisps and kept going. I hopped off the last two steps and started running backwards, shooting the whisps that were following me when I banged into someone. I whipped around, gun ready. Red held up her hands, looking down at me and grinning (to my surprise). "Hey, kid," she said.

"Red? What are you doing here?"

"I'm fighting. It's not just your rebellion, you know?"

I smiled. "I'm glad to have you here, Red."

"C'mon, kid."

We ran down the hallway, shooting every wriggling shadow. She'd also acquired a gun somehow. I didn't bother asking. She was a part of *my* family, after all.

We turned the corner, coming face-to-face with a giant monster without skin. Red reacted before I did. She fired her gun quickly, and soon, we were shuffling past the bleeding monster's hide.

"Where are you going?" She asked as we ran.

"What do you mean?"

“After the fight’s over, where are you going?”

“I don’t know!”

Her question had snapped me back to reality. Where would I go? I couldn’t exactly go to Zel’s bunker...right? I would just cause more trouble. I doubted anybody would appreciate that. I shoved the thought into the back of my mind. We had bigger problems to face right now.

“Where would you go?” I asked.

“Black Market!” She replied immediately. The Black Market was a city below the surface, but it wasn’t like the bunkers. There were no rules, and it was completely immune to The Arcane’s attacks. It was the only place that was completely safe from him. It was perfect for Red.

“How did you guys manage the attack?” I asked and shot a whisp.

“Yellow told us what happened, and then your team came up with a plan!” She said as she struck down another.

“Who’s Yellow?”

“Blonde, giant amber eyes, twelve years old, fire elf!”

I recalled the girl I’d run into above the stairs and grinned. “We weren’t waiting a year for a rebellion!” Red said.

“I love you guys!”

She laughed. We pressed our backs to the wall and waited. "The coast is clear," came a voice. I glanced up at Red, eyebrows arched. She shook her head. "Password?" She called out.

"*Koracast!*"

I knew that word. It meant *pest* in the old language.

She grinned and we stepped out into the open. Violet waved at us. Her jet-black hair was braided, and her brown eyes were wide with excitement. "The fight's moved down the tower. Come on!"

We followed her down winding paths, past rooms. We ran as fast as we could, wanting to join the fight as soon as possible. "STOP!" Red exclaimed as the ground began to rumble. I skid to a stop. I'd just dragged Violet back when the ground erupted into chunks of obsidian that flew all over the place. A massive block sailed over my head. "Other way!" Violet said.

We turned, but the same thing happened. "What now?" I asked. "Hello, girls," came a voice from behind us, and we turned again. I snarled at The Arcane's twisted smile. He hadn't switched from Sapphire's face. Looking at Red's and Violet's expressions, they were just as disgusted and enraged as I was. Sapphire would never have smiled that way.

The wound on his forehead had healed and hadn't even left a scar. So, I decided to give him a new one. I pointed

my pistol at him and, wasting no time, shot him thrice this time. His head snapped back again, and this time, he was annoyed. I leaped across the wreckage and punched his face. He stumbled slightly. I acted as quickly as I could, attacking as fast as possible. I threw a few more punches, kicked his stomach, and shot him again, but he kept coming back. My attacks were barely doing anything.

I concentrated, and the fire from the torches shot up, white hot, engulfing The Arcane in white flames. When they retreated, his pants were on fire. “YEAH, TAKE THAT, *I guess?!*” Violet yelled.

The primordial being hopped around, shrieking, trying to pat out the flames. “Enough of this tomfoolery!” He yelled, and before I could take another breath, I was pinned onto the wall like a poster. Red and Violet leaped across the chunks of obsidian and began to fight. I struggled but I continued to be stuck to the wall. Suddenly, pain shot through me. Pain so bad, the last time I’d felt this kind of agony was when I’d removed the pain spell off of Logan.

Not now! I thought, panicking. *Why now?!*

Of all the times it had to pick to come back and bite me in the butt. My vision spotted up so badly that I couldn’t see the fight. I could only hear Red’s gunshots and Violet yelling horrible insults, but after a few minutes, I slumped to the ground and my gun clattered out of my

hand. “Helix? Helix!” Violet exclaimed and ran to my side.

“Relax, I won’t die,” I managed and sat up, pain coursing through me. “The fight,” I reminded them. I picked up my gun, and they hauled me up. I didn’t want to be deadweight, so I refused when Red offered to support me.

We made it down the last flight of stairs and turned the corner, away from the portal and swirling chunks of gravel. We ran out of the gate of the tower into the open.

I saw the walls of the Evergrove for the first time on the other side. They were far away from the desert, considering the sea between the island and us. How was it a desert if the shore was right there? Well, we could call it a beach, but that would be scientifically inaccurate. It was a lifeless environment that had no effect on the ocean. How? Simple: Magic. Yeah, I’m getting sick of it too.

I had no time to stick around because we were immediately attacked by whisps. We fended them off quickly, Violet and Red doing most of the work. I could barely stand on my own, but I managed to shoot one whisp. Gray ran up to us. “We’ve got things under control,” he reported, “but we’re still waiting for The Arcane himself to attack.”

He pointed at me. “Med tent.”

Before I could protest, he was already dragging me there. I was too tired to argue. Soon enough, Lavender was giving me that emergency liquid to swallow. I frowned at the golden substance that sizzled in the bottle. When I drank it, it felt like acid running down my throat. I put the bottle aside and tamped down a scream. After a few seconds, all my pain faded, and I straightened my shoulders. I stood and nodded at Gray. "You're forgetting something," he said, smirking.

I raised an eyebrow at him, but he gestured outside the tent. We walked out and I immediately grinned. Greenie held my swords. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed them when I finally held them again. "Thank you," I said.

"I can't believe you forgot them," Greenie mumbled, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Hey, it runs in the team," I argued. "You'd forget your own name if we didn't say it every day."

She rolled her eyes.

"Guys!" Came a new voice. Cyan came running over. "He's here."

A chill ran down my spine. Gray nodded grimly, and lightning flashed above us, even though the skies were clear. I balled my hands into fists, and the ground rumbled as the lava below us shifted. Greenie frowned, making the cacti bristle angrily. We made our way back to the battlefield and waited as more of our forces joined

us. "What's the plan?" I asked Gray who stood at the front. Being the eldest and most experienced, I assumed they'd elected him general. I was wrong. "I wouldn't know," he replied. "This was your idea."

My eyes widened as I swiveled towards him. You can't be serious."

"I am. Tell us the plan, Goldie."

I wanted to tell him he was insane. Me? In charge of an *army*?

In the distance, an army of wisps waited, a black smudge on the horizon. But considering the distance, the army was huge, way bigger than ours. Correction: In charge of an army that had to fight another *absolutely massive army*.

But something sparked inside me, and I steeled my nerves.

"We hit them hard first," I said, turning towards them. "Which means we'll need our strongest. Our best fighters, our best spellcasters, and our fire elves. Next, cue the storm," I nodded at Gray. "It'll throw them off guard. After that, we throw any attack we can. Cactus bombs, dragons, anything you can think of. We play the offense today, not the defense. This is the fight we've all been dreaming about. The rebellion. Today, we *will* make that dream come true. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" They yelled.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

“WE’RE READY!”

“Good. Now disperse. Get back here when they’re close enough to start the attack. Rest. Sharpen your weapons. Train. Anything. Now go.”

They ran off in different directions. I glared at Gray. “Wipe that smile off your face,” I told him.

“I have a good feeling about this, Goldie,” he said and then walked away, still smirking.

I was training with Cyan. He was the only one who ever beat me in combat. In fact, he was the one who taught me how to fight. Well, of course, Gray could also beat me, but he usually trained alone. Today, though, we just sparred back and forth. Our adrenaline was already soaring even before the battle had started, so neither of us could beat the other.

“This is annoying,” Cyan said as he thrust his sword at me.

“Agreed,” I replied as I sidestepped.

Beck and Greenie were watching us fight, yelling random insults at us. “Shut up!” Cyan told them.

They burst out laughing.

“Goldie!”

I turned to Gray, who was running over with a conch.
“It’s time,” he said solemnly.

I eyed the conch nervously. I gingerly picked it up, wondering why Gray had chosen me, out of everybody, to lead us. Nevertheless, I walked over to the battlefield, conch in hand. I studied the advancing army of whisps nervously and held back a laugh at the sight of their leader’s blackened pants (apparently, his clothes were nearly indestructible too).

The weight of the situation finally rested onto me as the laugh in my throat turned into a horrible lump. I gulped it down, shouldered my metaphorical burden, and held the conch to my lips.

I blew the horn.

The battle had begun.

Chapter 22

I lead an army. I'm serious, stop laughing!

When the armies clashed, I raised my fist and lava exploded out of the ground, bathing the desert in an orange light and heat so intense even I felt it. Whisps burned, their ashes scattering across the ground, but I didn't relent. Magma thrust itself out of the ground and went up so high, it looked like it was trying to touch the sky. When it came back down, half of The Arcane's army dissipated, and so did my energy. My vision blackened, but I kept myself standing.

Cries echoed around me as our side advanced. Thunder crackled above me, and more lava shot up from the ground, but it wasn't my doing this time. Red, Yellow, and several others copied my actions, lava erupting out of the ground. I grinned and slipped the gloves off my hands. Every smoky, one-eyed tendril I punched went up in flames. "So far, so good!" A girl yelled next to me. I jumped over her and set a whisp on fire that had been heading for her.

Lightning clashed into the ground, charring several whisps. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw The Arcane. He was switching faces every few seconds, sometimes

Sapphire, sometimes others, but by the way my army reacted, they were important. I'd seen them around the Evergrove a lot, before they'd died, and it struck me pretty hard too. The Arcane perfectly mimicked their faces—playful grins, glittering eyes, determined scowls—it was perfect.

So, I charged through the battle till I reached him and punched him in the gut. They snapped out of their stupor and continued fighting, though they stayed away from the center. I couldn't blame them. I didn't want to see Sapphire's face any more than I already did in my dreams unless she was alive and that wasn't happening ever again. He stood right up and sneered when he saw who had punched him, but quickly covered it. "I see you've got a death wish," he mused, coating his words with fake amusement. "I thought I taught you better than that."

"You did," I said, battling a swarm of whisps. "And yet, here we are. Kind of questions your torturing techniques, huh?"

I put my gloves back on as quickly as I could and unsheathed my swords. I slashed them through the air, the whisps going up in smoke instantly. I charged at The Arcane, who simply sidestepped. I snarled and tried again, but he tossed me aside.

"Your anger," he barked, "makes you weak."

I stood, panting. I closed my eyes and focused, hyperaware of The Arcane advancing toward me, the wisps around me attacking my friends—my family—and cactus bombs exploding all around us. He was right. Anger made me weak. But it also made me strong. And I could use it, if I just *focused*. I focused on who I was, what I was doing, and why I was doing it.

The ground shook, and The Arcane was tossed into the air by magma that erupted loudly from the ground. When my eyes snapped back open, my vision was tinted red. The Arcane landed so heavily, it left a crater in the ground. Sand trickled inside the crater as he struggled to his feet, laughing like a psychopath. I wasted no time. I jumped into the crater and fought him, face-to face, blade against...fist apparently.

“You’re no match for me,” he said, still grinning, blocking my sword with simply an arm. “I am indestructible!”

“And yet you can’t kill me!” I yelled. “You *need* me. And the scrolls aren’t in your possession anymore. Just let us go! You’ve lost!”

“Oh, dear child,” he said, shaking his head as we just shared a horrible inside joke, deflecting the point of my sword yet again. “I am far from losing.”

“Are you far from winning?” I asked, slashing my sword.

He didn't answer to my delight. I grinned. "You are! And we can stop you! I won't rest—" I stabbed "Till," I slashed. "We," I kicked him, sending him sprawling. "STOP YOU!"

A cactus bomb sailed over my head, exploding right on top of The Arcane. Unfortunately, the impact hit me too.

Everything went black.

I heard my own heartbeat thundering in my ears. I heard screams and people barking orders at each other, yelling for bandages. When I woke up completely, I sat up straight immediately and reached for my sword, but pain shot through my abdomen. I looked down. Cactus spikes stuck out of my side, staining my shirt golden. "Oh, great," I mumbled to myself.

No one had found me yet. The Arcane was gone. I was at the bottom of a crater, alone. I grabbed my swords and stood. The spikes didn't hurt too badly—I'd been through worse. I walked to the center of the crater and waved my arms. "Hey!" I yelled. "Over here! Help!"

"Goldie?" Came a panicked voice.

"Here!"

Cyan ran over, and his scowl crumbled in relief. He turned and shouted, "I found her!"

He slid down the crater and frowned at the spikes sticking out of me. "Hi," I said casually.

"Idiot," he muttered. He gave me a boost and I climbed out of the crater. "What happened?" I asked. "Where's The Arcane? Did we win?"

He sighed and hoisted himself out of the crater. "We can't find The Arcane, but wisps keep attacking us in waves. We haven't won yet. Not even close."

The Great Star was setting below the horizon. "We'll be defenseless soon," Cyan said, glancing at the sky. "He's the most powerful at night. He'll bend the darkness to his will and..." he shook his head, not completing the sentence. I opened my mouth to say something, but everybody was already rushing over. They bombarded me with questions, most of which were about what our next attack would be. I wished I had the answers for them. "Goldie," Red said calmly. "What do we do?"

I turned away and faced the horizon. Almost nothing was at stake for the rest of the world. Zel and Logan had the scrolls. But for us? Our lives were hanging by a tightrope. One wrong move...

I remembered the number of times The Arcane had broken a promise. It was absolutely zero. If he said he'd do something, he did it. Even the old stories said so, in the early years of the war. He was noble.

But I wasn't. Like Zel had pointed out, I fought dirty. I scraped along to survive, unless other lives were in danger. That was my advantage.

Maybe villains were supposed to be the ones who broke their promises, maybe they were supposed to be the ones who tricked and fooled. Maybe heroes were people who were supposed to keep true, be noble, and be trustworthy.

I'm not a hero.

But I had to save the people around me.

I turned back to them grimly. "I fight him alone," I said.

My team argued with me. *A lot*. If it wasn't so annoying, it would've been sweet. "This is stupid," Greenie said. "There's no way you'd be able to defeat *The Arcane*, not by yourself."

"If you go through with this, what would your plan be anyway? Wait, let me guess," Gray piped up, scowling. "You don't have one."

"Hey," I said, turning to him, glaring. "You put me in charge. That's your fault."

His expression crossed with guilt for a second and then turned frustrated. "Goldie!" A new voice echoed from outside the medical tent. I winced as Lavender yanked yet another spike out of my side. Beck ran in, panting and pointing at me, then wheezing. "—whole way.

Desert's big," he wheezed. "What are you *thinking*? You'll get yourself killed!"

Cyan was glaring daggers at me. It felt weird since Cyan had taught me how to glare like that, how to strike fear into people's hearts. It sent chills down my spine.

Beck started rambling about how The Arcane could beat me and maim me in a hundred and one different fun ways.

"Enough!" Cyan yelled, and all our heads immediately snapped towards him in shock. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Arguing isn't going to get us anywhere." He turned to me. "Are you sure you can do this?"

I matched his glare perfectly. "Yes," I said. "I'm sure."

"That could be a lie," he mused, a ghost of a smile on his face.

I shrugged, my glare disappearing and a grin replacing it. "Could be," I agreed. "Fine," he said. "Whatever you do, be careful. I'm not losing another sister anytime soon, understood?"

I nodded and stood once Lavender had finished wrapping my abdomen in white bandages. I grabbed my swords and walked outside, where the stars glittered above me.

Greenie helped me set up a saddle on the dragon's back. She hadn't spoken a word since the tent. She climbed

down the ladder and turned to leave, but I grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "I'll be fine," I assured her.

"Goldie," she said, her emerald eyes heavy and sad. "I have a hard time believing you. You get into trouble every five seconds."

I laughed at that, and she smiled, but it disappeared quickly.

"Just remember that if you die, you hurt everybody you know. It's not just your life at risk here. We'll hold back the whisps. I know 'be careful' sounds stupid, it's *you*, there's no point in saying that. It won't work...but be careful."

She pulled me in for a hug and walked away. "Alright, boy," I said, turning to Quabi, the dragon. "Let's do this."

I mounted Quabi, and he took off, heading for The Bridge. Below me, the dark sand and Quabi's glittering ochre scales blended together so it felt like I was riding a hovering saddle, then gravity was going to realize something was wrong and drop me, leaving me to plummet to the ground. I wisely decided to turn my gaze ahead.

Right before Quabi started to turn up, towards The Bridge, he hovered in the air for a few seconds and turned his snout towards me. He stared at me with big black eyes as if trying to figure out why I was so insane.

“Yes,” I said patiently, as if I was explaining something to a toddler. “We need to go there.”

He snorted, small flames shooting up from his nostrils. I pointed to The Bridge, scowling, and he seemed to get the idea. He turned, and all of a sudden, we were swooping up so quickly I felt like my face was going to rip right off my skull. My grasp on the reins tightened, and I held on for dear life. I wish this dragon didn’t have so much attitude. I was kind of beginning to understand how everybody in my life felt.

Finally, we landed. My peripheral vision was completely red, and I wondered why until I realized my hair had fuzzed up into a giant puffball. I tamped it down grumpily, scowling at Quabi, who chattered happily. I dismounted, my bare, bruised feet hitting the freezing cold obsidian of The Bridge. “Go on,” I told the dragon. “Get out of here.”

He tilted his head at me, and I pointed down. He took off and zoomed away, more than glad to get away from The Bridge. I unsheathed my swords and waited.

“Well,” a voice echoed from the open door of the tower ahead of me. Out of the shadows materialized The Arcane. He hadn’t switched from Sapphire’s face. “Look who decided to show up.”

“I could say the same about you,” I replied.

He snorted. "What's your deal, kid? What plan have you got here? What elaborate scheme to try and take me down? I've seen all of it. Go on, out with it."

"I don't have a scheme," I said, amused at his surprised expression. "And 'elaborate' is such a stretch, it's practically elastic. But I *do* have a deal. If I beat you, you let us escape. That's it. Nothing changes. You still have your power, your towers, and The Bridge. You still have control of all the bunkers you conquered. I mean, sure, if we escape, we're a risk factor, but with the curse and all, we're *barely* a threat—just a tiny blip on your radar. If you win, you get us back and we never try to rebel against you again. You could conquer the world more easily. You win either way. Have we got a deal?"

The curse was a story people used to tell me about. I didn't even know what it was. But I knew it was lethal.

He smiled cruelly and said, "The first one off The Bridge loses."

I mean, The Arcane wouldn't die if he fell off, he'd just lose. But me? I was mortal. If I fell off, I'd be squashed flat, but I nodded. I regarded what I'd said for a few seconds. Of course, if we won, I wouldn't just be a tiny blip on his radar. I would stop at nothing to win my world back. But he seemed to buy it. He was overconfident. Good.

He unsheathed a sword. I'd never seen this one before. This one was thin and twisted like a unicorn horn. But unicorn horns healed if they stabbed you. Kind of weird because a unicorn would rip you to shreds and eat you if it saw you. However, in any case, this sword was *not* going to heal anything.

"Shall we begin?" He asked.

"Whatever floats your boat," I said, tightening my grip on the hilt of my swords. I make bad jokes when I'm nervous, sue me. No, *please* sue me, maybe it would stop me from doing stupid things that threaten my own life.

His eye twitched. "Very well," he said and before I knew it, I was fighting for my life. His slashes were so precise that if I had dodged them or blocked them a millisecond late, I would've ended up dead. I barely avoided his stabs. I was playing defense, and I didn't like it, so I slashed my swords together and nearly chopped his head off, but he ducked, and something smacked against my legs. Suddenly, I was flat on my back. His spirally black sword was brought down upon me, but I rolled away at the last second before it could mutilate my insides. It banged against the obsidian.

I got to my feet quickly and my blades immediately met with his sword. Brute force had never been my strength. I was agile, quick, and clever. But right now, I needed brute force, and I didn't have it. My crossed blades

pressed against his. I was slowly being pushed back, no matter how much of my strength I tried to use.

“Give up,” he snarled.

“Never,” I hissed.

“Sapphire would be disappointed,” he mused.

“I highly doubt that.”

Sapphire wouldn’t be disappointed. She would be proud, and I knew it. She was proud of all of us. She would be proud of Cyan for not blaming himself for her death as much as he did last year. She would be proud of Greenie for not letting me get killed every few seconds. She’d be proud of Beck because he took such great care of us. She would be proud of everybody for *something*. That’s just who she was.

And I knew that.

“It’s your fault she’s gone,” he mused.

I snarled, and my anger gave me strength. I pushed forward and dragged him to the center of The Bridge. But soon, my arms began to tire. My hands shook and I struggled to keep The Arcane’s sword away from me.

The glistening black sword was an inch away from my face. The only thing between me and death—literally—was my two swords.

I wasn’t going to win this battle. Not this way. I swiped my blades sideways and ducked. I came up from behind

him and planted a kick to his back. He stumbled forward. While he tried to regain his balance, I stabbed a sword into a chink in his armor on his back—the same way he had done with his claws when I was young. I had done something stupid, maybe I'd insulted him—I couldn't remember now—and as a punishment, claws had raked across my back. I had the scar to prove it.

He roared in anger as thick, black blood streamed down his back. He turned, snarling. I narrowly managed to sidestep his sword, which left a graze on my bandaged ribcage. My side immediately screamed in agony. We sparred back and forth for a while. I was back to playing defense. I ducked and dodged and sidestepped, leaving me tired and bleeding. When I tried to attack, he deflected it easily with his sword.

While I fought for my life, I remembered my friends, old and new. Cyan, Greenie, Beck, Gray, Red, Violet, Yellow, Zel, Logan, and so many others. I remembered the scrolls.

If The Arcane got me now...I'd never get to see them again. Any of them. I'd never get to see the world get saved. Would the world even be saved if The Arcane got me now? Could Zel and Logan figure out how? Did they even need me?

Yes, my mind decided for me. *They do. They need me.*

I didn't know if that was a good thing or a horrible thing. If they needed me and The Arcane controlled me...who knew what I'd do to them under his control? *Then don't let that happen, genius!*

Yeah, my mind was annoying. Then again, that sentence was exactly what I needed. My exhaustion faded and before I knew it, I had my left sword at The Arcane's throat.

He was on the edge of The Bridge. One tiny movement and he would fall off. Had I really won? He snarled. "Well done, Gold," he said. "I suppose you've won this. But if I go down...you go down." A black claw grabbed onto my sleeve, and the next thing I knew, I was falling.

Chapter 23

Last but not least

My hands hovered above me uselessly as I fell. *Protect your skull!* I remembered Gray telling me when I was little. *If you're ever falling from a great height, ball up and protect your skull.*

Yeah, I doubted that it was going to help. Either way, I was going to die. It felt like hours that I was falling, even though I knew it was only a minute. My life flashed before my eyes.

—professional, Zel said. And then a second later, nice to go down fighting with friends.

After that, I saw everybody I knew. I saw Logan and then the girl I'd run into above the stairs, Yellow. I saw Red, then Cyan, Greenie, Beck, and Gray. Finally, I saw Sapphire. Emotions flooded through me as the wind whipped past my ears.

No. I was *not* dying today.

I remembered how Gray called the dragons with a simple, sharp whistle.

I forced my fingers to my mouth and blew. A sharp whistle echoed around me, and I wondered if it had

reached any nearby dragon. If not, then it was worth a try.

Just as I began to lose hope, I landed heavily against something. Pain erupted through my side. I looked down at what I'd landed on. It was the color of sand, but it glittered. I saw small hexagon ochre patterns and a brown leather saddle.

“Quabi!” I exclaimed, grinning. He roared. I grabbed onto the reins and hung on. We swooped towards the battlefield, where they were battling a swarm of whips that were quickly dissipating. One elf finally looked up at the ochre dragon I was riding and yelled something. The rest of them immediately snapped their heads up and cheered. The whips were either withering and dying or slinking back into the darkness.

I circled the battlefield a few times before landing. Quabi flapped his wings a few times, hovering a few feet above the sand before finally thumping to the ground. I dismounted and was immediately met with clashing, urgent voices. “DID YOU DO IT?” Red yelled, grabbing my shoulders.

I grinned and nodded.

Shocked silence fell onto the crowd.

And then they cheered. The sound echoed around us—the sound of victory, of triumph. The sound of freedom.

By dawn, we were in shock. Some of us were crying, some were laughing, others were completely silent, the realization still not hitting them, and all were extremely happy.

All of us were free.

A few of us were wounded and were being taken care of in the med tent. I stood inside said tent, as Greenie got her arm wrapped. I shook my head when Lavender offered to check my wound. Lavender looked me up and down, as if searching for something. "I can't believe you did it," she said in a small voice.

"I can't either," I said, grinning.

And suddenly, I was being hugged. I hugged her back awkwardly. I'd always, on some level, blamed her along with myself for Sapphire's death.

But we were still family.

"You freed us," she whispered, her voice barely audible and cracking with emotion.

"We freed ourselves," I amended, pulling away gently.

"Where will you go?" She asked.

"Zel and Logan's bunker," I said, and surprised myself with my own answer, somehow. "They need me. I'm going to help save the world."

She smiled. "You're a good person, Goldie."

I doubted that, but I stayed quiet.

“Where are you going?”

“Black market. They don’t have a properly functioning hospital down there. Maybe I can help.”

My grin widened. “That’s a brilliant idea, Lavender.”

“This was the last battle we’re going to fight this year,” she said softly.

“Well, don’t jinx it.”

That made her laugh. Her smile faded when I asked her what the curse was. “You see our jewels? She asked.

I nodded. “They weaken us,” she said. My eyes widened. “They’re there so we don’t get too powerful. And if we disobey, poison leaks out from it into our bodies. It turns us erratic—almost animalistic—before it kills us. Nobody found a cure. It’s why we’ve all listened to The Arcane for so long.”

It took a while to process that. Finally, I nodded. “Okay,” I breathed. “Then we’ll beat it. We’ve gotten so far; we can’t stop just because of a curse.”

Once Lavender was finished treating the wounded, we all walked outside. I called for everybody’s attention. They all turned to me.

“We need to leave,” I said. “Now. I know we haven’t had much time to rest, but we don’t know how long it’ll take

for The Arcane to reappear. Next year—which begins, er, in a while I guess—”

I had apparently lost track of time during the battle.

“—When the curse begins, we all meet up at the Black Market and figure out how to cure it. In the meantime, we can lead normal lives.”

Someone in the crowd snorted, earning them withering glares from the rest, but I laughed along with them. “I know,” I said. “Sounds weird. Nothing will be normal for us. But we can *try*. We split off at the end of the desert.”

Soon enough, we were on our way, on dragons or animals we’d freed or just walking. Cyan eyed the massive kithenial nervously. “Don’t,” I warned. “It’s good. It was just...controlled, like us.”

He glanced back at me and smiled. “What?” I asked.

“That mission really changed you, didn’t it?”

I felt my cheeks heat up. “Not just me,” I mumbled, thinking of how much Zel had changed in just three weeks. Logan was pretty much the same—still a kind, very huggable soul—just a lot more traumatized.

“So, I hear you’re going to Bunker Nine,” he mused. I nodded.

“It’ll be boring without you,” he said. I immediately snapped my head towards him, eyes wide. Cyan was

never the sentimental type, which I was glad about. I didn't like the sentiment, leaving out a few exceptions. "Nobody else has a hope of beating me in sword-fighting."

I grinned. "That's true."

"Eh, we'll meet again in a while. Because of the..."

He trailed off, not finishing his sentence. *Because of the curse*, I thought. The rest of the trip was spent in comfortable silence. Nobody spoke, but everybody smiled. The animals jumped around and licked the people around them. They stared at the environment around them like they couldn't believe they were free any more than we did.

The wounded hung around at the back, joking and talking with the healers who helped them walk.

Exhaustion began to hit us around the evening when the adrenaline turned sluggish. But we pushed forward.

Finally, we reached the hatch. Not the bunker hatch, but the one in the desert from which Zel, Logan, and I had climbed out to be annoyed by Sana. I grinned, remembering.

"Well," I said, turning back to them. I was surprised at how soft and fragile my voice was. "This is my stop."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I didn't want to say goodbye after everything. But I had to. I needed to

protect the scrolls; I needed to save the world. Cyan took a deep breath and hugged me. I hugged him back, blinking away the tears. Greenie joined the hug and so did Beck. Gray stood next to us, smiling. I pulled away gently and faced the crowd. "You've been my best friend," I said, smiling. "My family. I don't want to say goodbye. But I have to."

I sniffed. "Duty calls, and all that."

A laugh echoed through the crowd. "You did good, soldier," Gray said. I gave him a mock salute. He grinned. "Go on," he said. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be. We'll meet again."

I nodded and opened the hatch door.

I waved a final goodbye and slipped down the hatch, into the darkness of the tunnels.

I had forgotten what the bunker city looked like. Lights flashed by me. Buildings towered over me. Blue lights of hovercrafts zipped by above me. Young children ran around the alleys, playing games. Tor, the giant dragon, occasionally sent rumbles across the city as he walked or sat down or literally did *anything*.

I walked among the crowd, unable to wipe the smile off my face as I made my way to the dragon pens. I had a feeling he'd be here. Why didn't I look for Logan first? I didn't really know. I had entered the bunker and made a beeline for the dragon pens, after asking for directions.

After an hour, give or take, of walking, I finally got there. It was a simple place, with a big red house and white fences. Hay was thrown everywhere. Baby dragons, some that could fit in my palm, some that were my size, ran around creating chaos.

A girl who was a little taller than me, and definitely older, ran after them. “Jenkins, no!” she yelled. “*Do not eat that!*”

She had long, straight, stark-white hair and dazzling purple eyes, like Zel. She wore red flannel and blue jeans. Her shoes were caked with dirt. When she noticed me, she grinned. “Well, hello. You picked a nice time to show up.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re Helix, aren’t you?” she asked, walking over to me.

“I—how do you know?”

“Oh, Zel hasn’t stopped talking about you and the surface. It’s been Helix this, and Helix that. He practically drove himself mad when you didn’t come back.”

My eyes widened as she spoke, and I felt my cheeks heat up. Zel had been talking about *me*? *WHY*? I mean, I understood why the surface. It’s *the surface*. But *me*? I snapped myself out of my confused train of thought.

“Um, is he here?”

She nodded. "I dragged him here before he could actually go insane."

She led me to the back. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Zaira."

I started asking another question as we reached the door, but she interrupted me. "He's behind this," she said. "Don't get discouraged if he doesn't hear you. He's been kind of absorbed in his thoughts for the past few days. Feel free to throw a clod of dirt at him."

Zaira walked away, leaving me facing a wooden door that I was too scared to open. *Come on, Helix*, I chided myself. *You can fight The Arcane, but you can't do this? Just open it!*

I twisted the doorknob and walked inside a room filled with hay and dirt and screeching little dragons...and Zel.

His normally bright purple eyes were dim, and the dark circles under his eyes were dark. He was wearing blue flannel and jeans. He was crouched down, scowling into the eyes of a tiny dragon, clutching a broom in one hand and an open packet of fish in the other that emitted a horrible smell. "Just eat it!" he told the dragon. It squawked angrily in protest. I wondered if the dragon had some vanity thing going on.

"Zel," I called. He didn't hear me.

"Zel!"

No response.

“ZEL!”

Nothing.

So, I picked up some dirt and flung it at his face. He stood angrily, wiping the dirt off his cheek. “*What is your prob—*”

And then he saw me. He froze in his tracks, dropping his broom and the fish. “*Helix,*” he breathed, as if not believing I existed.

“Hey,” I said, smiling.

Epilogue

Terrified. That was the word, wasn’t it? It was how Zel felt when Helix didn’t show up the next day. He spent hours trying to convince his parents to let him go back out and look for her, but of course, the answer was no.

She couldn’t have died. She was too strong. And she wouldn’t give up. It would take days of stabbing her again and again—torturing her—for her to relent. So, what had happened to her?

Eventually, Logan and Zaira decided that he had been driving himself crazy and made him work with his sister in the pens. He scowled at Kay, the stubborn, annoying dragonling with serious vanity issues, who was refusing to eat her fish. He was holding a broom in the other hand because, for some reason, she hated the broom. In

case she tried to bite him, he'd just heft the broom at her. "Just eat it!" He told her.

She squawked angrily in protest. He didn't relent, shoving the fish at her. She just jumped back.

After a few seconds, a clod of dirt landed on his face, but it had come from his left. He stood, anger boiling in his chest. He was tired—okay, *exhausted*. He didn't need dirt thrown at him. He didn't even know who threw it. It could've been his sister, it could've been Logan, it could've been some mean idiot, but he didn't care. "What is your prob—"

And then he saw who it was. Helix. She leaned against the doorway, smiling, her bright green eyes soft and kind even though she'd just thrown dirt at him. Her shirt was stained golden with blood on one side, but she looked like she didn't even care. He might've said something, but he didn't know what it was. "Hey," she said, her smile widening.

He didn't waste even a second. He ran to her and pulled her in for a hug, relief spreading through him. She hugged him back. "Glad to see you too!" she exclaimed, laughing. He pulled away from her slightly and held her at arm's length, his hands on her shoulders. "I can't believe you—you're here. You're actually *here*."

"I'm here," she agreed. "And I'm here to save the world."

Her expression turned serious. “We need to protect the scrolls, Zel. They *cannot* go into the hands of The Arcane. That kind of knowledge—he can’t use it, okay? He’ll destroy Terris.”

He nodded, his smile fading and his expression turning grim. “I didn’t give it to my parents. I told them the mission failed. They think I’ve finally been scared into submission.” He rolled his eyes at the thought. If anything, he wanted to go back to the surface—it was the craziest rush of adrenaline he’d ever felt in his life. Of course, he hated the almost dying part, but the rest was amazing.

“Oh, and this,” he said, grabbing some dirt. “Is revenge.”

He wiped the dirt off her face.

The Arcane was angry. No, that was an understatement. He was *furious*. He dragged himself to his throne room. “Mother would be disappointed,” Belroth mused.

“Said the woman who got charbroiled twice in a day,” he snarled.

She didn’t answer. “The curse will get them,” he said and turned to his sister. “As for you...mother would choose a suitable punishment.”

“No...” she said, horrified.

“You tried to overthrow me,” he hissed, “with a very weird monologue, as well. Now pay the price.”

Jade emerged from the shadows and the witch walked up to them. "Where is my daughter?" She demanded

"She's safe, for now," he said. "Now get back to your cell."

She sighed, playing with the tip of her staff. "Do not hurt her," she said. "Nor that Zel boy. Nor that elemental. Not yet. Wait for your moment. But bring her to me *alive*."

"I am the jailer," he said. "And you are the prisoner. You do not get to demand things from me. But seeing as I need you for the spell, I will grant your wish. Now go."

"That boy really is annoying," she grumbled. "'Don't look like a witch' pfft. Elven stereotypes."

And she slunk back into the shadows, her feet dragging behind her submissively. "And now for you," The Arcane turned to Belroth. "You are exiled until you get me the girl...*alive*."

"Brother—"

He shot her a glare. "Sir," she amended. "Mother would not—"

"Do I have to remind you of what happened the last time we did this?"

Belroth stared at him, horrified. The Arcane thumped down onto his throne and examined his claws. "I need something better," he mused. "Another form. Once I get

the scrolls, I *will* manifest the power. That girl and her friends will never stop me. The alliance must never happen. I am entrusting you will be bringing Gold to me. You have two years. Better hurry.”

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I also want to thank all the people at the Blurose publishing house, who have all been patient with my obsession over every single sentence and the need to take days just to edit.

And, thank you, dear reader, for getting this book in the first place and reading it. I hope you enjoyed it, and that you will continue to wait for the next books in the series.

Also, if you're looking to the back but haven't finished it, go back to the page from whence you came.

Thanking you, Aarika.

*Turn the page for a sneak-peek at The
Alliance, Book 2:
The Jewel's Curse*

PART 1: ZEL

Chapter 1

Aftermath and actual math

The last few months had been hectic, to say the least. Helix, having nowhere to go, had happily accepted Logan's mother's offer to come and stay at their house. Mrs. Kiore was a very motherly person and was delighted when Logan said Helix needed a place to stay for a while.

We'd all turned fifteen in the last few months and spent half our time at my place and the other half at Logan's, both times trying to figure out how to deal with the scrolls. We kept them hidden from my parents—the king and queen of the bunker. When we rolled the scrolls open, all we saw were drawings and maps and random splotches of color all over the place. There were a lot of paragraphs, but only a few were written in a language we knew. One passage described the way humans dealt with society. We got pretty mad after reading that they had things called sexism and racism and a whole bunch of other horrible things. Logan had to stop Helix from ripping the ancient papyrus into shreds. After that, we'd called it a day because we were all too annoyed with the humans to study the scrolls, and I had gone home.

I didn't live with my parents. No, I paid rent to stay at a run-down, tiny apartment that was in the corner of the city. Why? Because I really didn't want to stay in the same

place as them any longer than I had to. I'd always envied Logan's relationship with his parents—caring, sweet, and *regular*. Logan had a good family. I hated that.

Anyway, Helix had been oddly fascinated when I told her about the concept of school and that it reopened in just another month. That night, she'd knocked on my window, carrying thick textbooks of algebra, and nearly gave me a heart attack.

I had slid the window open and hissed, "What are you doing here?"

"Math," she had said, peering from over the pile of textbooks in her hands. "Can you help? The letters are pretty annoying." I had sputtered for a few seconds, my face heating up. "Um, sure," I had said awkwardly and took a few books from her hands and thumped them onto my desk. "You're aware it's midnight, right?" I had asked.

"No, no, I thought it was 10 am in the morning," she said sarcastically. She set the textbooks down on the desk and dragged over a chair from the corner of my room. She sat down on it, and I sat down on mine. I felt embarrassed just sitting there in my pajamas while she was properly dressed in blue overalls and her regular black gloves that prevented her from burning down the place. I was pretty sure the left side of my hair was plastered to my face. I had shaken off the feeling and focused.

We spent an hour or so grinding on complicated problems. She got a little irritated with the letters, but she got the hang of it soon.

After that, she stood. "Thanks," she had whispered and collected her textbooks. She had slipped out of the window and waved goodbye. I waved back, a faint smile forming on my lips for reasons I didn't know.

And after that, she showed up every alternate night with arms full of textbooks. In return, she taught me how to fight better. And back to now.

I paced back and forth in my room, checking my watch a couple of times. She was late. Why was she late? I froze in my tracks after hearing a knock on the window. I turned around and raced to the window. I shoved it open, grinning. "Took you long enough," I said.

"Yeah, the stupid guard had tried to get an explanation out of me. I mean, can't an elf visit a friend who's part of the royal family in the dead of night with two swords and a pile of apparently suspicious textbooks?"

I laughed and stepped aside as she climbed in. I'd gained some height. Last year, we were at the same eye-level, but now my eyes were at the same level as her eyebrows. Impressive right? Yeah, I didn't think so either, but she hated it, and I found it hilarious. "Alright, let's start the midnight math class," I said, as she set the books on the desk. She gave me a lop-sided grin which I hadn't seen much of last year. She never smiled this way around

other people, not even Logan. I sat down next to her and began to read the problem out loud.

Logan and I showed Helix around the school. She was staring, wide-eyed at everything. She ran over to her locker and shoved her books in. "This is awesome," she said, turning to us, grinning. Logan shrugged. "It's alright, I guess," he said.

"If you like torture," I mumbled, underneath my breath. Logan elbowed me. I decided to change the topic. "You know," I said. "Since you signed in with Mr. and Mrs. Kiore as your guardians, you two are technically brother and sister."

Logan blinked, surprised. "I guess that's right," he said. "I *have* always wanted siblings."

"Why?" Helix and I asked simultaneously. I mean, I loved my sister and all, but at the same time, she pulled pranks on me, made me do stupid things, and basically made a fool out of myself. Helix laughed at Logan's startled expression. "Back at the Evergrove, everybody was a sibling. That didn't stop us from trying to murder each other."

"Please don't murder me," Logan said drily.

"We'll see," Helix deadpanned, and he went sheet white.

A classmate appeared next to me, and I tried not to punch her—she'd popped out of what seemed like thin air. "Hey, Zel," said Edana. "Who are you talking to?"

“A friend,” I replied calmly.

She glanced at Helix and grimaced. “She won’t last a day in here.”

Edana didn’t really have a filter for her thoughts.

“I lasted fifteen years on the surface,” Helix said casually, smiling not unkindly. “I think I can handle a school.”

I suppressed a grin as Edana paled next to me. “You...the surface...”

“Oh yeah? You and the surface? Yeah right,” Waren piped up from the other side of the hall. Somehow, the big stupid brute had apparently overheard. “Prove it!”

“How is she going to prove it?” Logan asked, clearly confused. “She can’t exactly drag daylight down here or anything.”

I snorted. Sometimes, Logan would deliver an insult and not even know what was happening. “I can prove it,” Helix said through gritted teeth, just as Waren was about to rearrange Logan’s face. “I just don’t want to.”

“Lame,” he said.

I shot a glare in his direction. Helix didn’t even bother, her eyes taking on a gleam that reminded me of how quickly she could beat someone in a fight.

As school went on, we finally reached sword-fighting, which turned out to be the highlight of the day. Helix had trained me, and I’d started getting really good. Not

good enough to beat her—I doubted anybody was—but good enough to beat literally anyone else. Everybody had changed into the training outfits—black stretchy jumpsuits that covered every inch of us except for our heads. Well, everybody except Helix. She was wearing regular clothes.

Coach finally walked in and took a head count. When she finally reached our little trio, she frowned at Helix. “Why are you not wearing a training suit?” She asked.

“I don’t need it,” she replied cheerfully. The coach glanced at Logan and me, her brown eyes flitting back and forth between us and her. “Oookay then,” she said and walked off, her short black hair bouncing as she jogged to the other side of the room. She tossed us swords but scowled at Helix’s. “You can’t bring your own swords,” she said.

“Why not?” She asked.

“It’s just not allowed, now take this one.”

She gave her a heavy sword, and Helix nearly flopped over with the unusual weight. I waved around my thin one awkwardly. It was way too light for my comfort. We faced each other. “Switch?” I asked. She nodded her head vigorously.

We switched our swords. Coach rattled off names. “Logan and Edana!”

Logan gulped nervously. “I’m dead,” he whispered.

“You had a good run, buddy,” Helix said.

I started cracking up. Logan glared at me.

Coach finally got to Helix’s name. “Helix and Waren!”

I turned to Helix enthusiastically. “You can beat him,” I said. “And pretty easily, too.”

She gave me the lopsided grin this time. I turned away, suppressing my smile. “Zel and Jacob!”

I glanced at Jacob. He was pretty good at sword fighting. I wondered if I’d be able to beat him.

“After you beat your partner, you fight the others until you’re the last one standing.”

We made our way to the center of the room. I faced Jacob. “Good luck,” he told me.

“Thanks, you too.”

We began to fight, and I had him beaten in seconds. Jacob stared at the sword point an inch away from his chest. “You got good,” he admitted.

“I had a good teacher,” I said, glancing at Helix, who had already beaten Waren. Jacob walked away after giving me a joking salute, and Waren slunk off, grumbling. Logan walked off too, after giving me a thumbs-up. I faced Edana and ended up winning even quicker. After that, I faced a few more people before it was finally me and Helix. She grinned. “Well, you made it this far,” she mused.

“I did,” I said, feeling proud of myself.

“Alright, hot shot, don’t get your hopes too high.

Her sword met mine, and we sparred back and forth. “That’s all you got, loser? I could parry that in my sleep,” I taunted.

“I could fight *that* off while I’m getting shot in the chest,” she snapped back, arching her eyebrows at me like she was about to start laughing at the way I was fighting.

The fight turned more intense, and soon, the only thing keeping her sword away from rearranging my face was the metal of my own—and just barely. “Come on, shortie,” I said, grinning. “That can’t be your best shot.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please, if that was my best shot, your head would have been lopped off by now, and also, you’re *just* an inch taller,” she protested. I pressed my sword against hers, and she was pushed back, but she dropped to all fours all rolled out of the way. My momentum made me stumble, and I felt a foot planted against my spine.

I fell. When I turned around, the point of a sword was an inch away from the tip of my nose. At the end of the sword, Helix grinned crookedly down at me. “I win.”

I snorted—I hadn’t really expected her to lose, despite the trash talk. She helped me up and we walked out. “You’ve gotten better,” she admitted. “I mean, not good enough to win but...”

She gestured vaguely, and I rolled my eyes. The rest of the day rolled on until school finally ended.

We chattered in hushed tones about the scrolls as we walked to Logan's house. "What do we do?" Logan asked.

"The same thing we've been doing so far," I replied. "We study the scrolls and until we have enough answers, we're not telling anybody."

"We're running out of time," Helix muttered. I winced, remembering the curse she'd told us about.

"Guys," Logan whispered. "Over there!"

I followed his gaze to a museum on the other side of the road. It was built completely of marble—marble pillars, and marble doors that had swung open for the public. The words written above the door read: 'MUSEUM OF HUMAN ARTIFACTS'.

"Maybe we can get more answers there?"

"You might be onto something!" Helix stage whispered. We crossed the road and walked towards the entrance to the museum, but a guard stopped us. "Tickets?" He asked.

"Oh, we don't have any," Logan said.

"Buy tickets and come back later than!"

"It's kind of important," Helix insisted.

“For what?” He asked, frowning. “A school project? These are *human artifacts*, kid. You can’t come in without a ticket.”

“How’d you even get human artifacts?” I asked, puzzled.

“Centuries ago,” the guard said, sighing as if he had to explain this way too many times. “The human girl who wrote *The Scrolls of Mankind* left behind some things. Now, no ticket, no entree. So, shoo!”

“Would it help if I said I was the son of the king and queen?” I asked, hopefully.

“They were the ones who specified that you and your sister were not to get special treatment.”

I sighed. “Of course they did.”

We walked away sullenly. “What now? We can’t exactly sneak in at night!” Logan said, shaking his head. He probably didn’t mean to give us a horrible idea, but he did. Helix and I swiveled our heads to face each other. She was smirking, her bright green eyes gleaming. “Hey, Logan,” Helix said. At the same time, I piped up, “What if...?”

“NO!” He exclaimed, as the realization dawned upon him. “No way! *No!*”

“Have you got the stuff?” I asked Logan. “Yeah,” he grumbled, shouldering his backpack that was practically ripped apart from our journey to the surface. We’d

suggested that he get rid of it, but he got offended and launched into a lecture, something to do with memories and stuff so we'd dropped the topic. We were waiting at the door for Helix. I looked around at Logan's house. Very small things had changed since last year—a vase had shifted from one corner to another. The wall paint had chipped away a little, but that was pretty much it. Logan's mother was an artist, so beautiful paintings hung from the walls. Paint was splattered here and there. Logan's dad sat at the dining table, reading a newspaper. His rectangular glasses hung low on his nose. He looked pretty much like Logan, except his skin was a darker shade of brown and he wasn't blonde. He looked up at us from over his glasses. "So where are you three going again?" He asked.

"Uh, just a diner to work on a school project," Logan answered.

"What project is it?"

"Human artifacts," I answered. Logan nodded.

His dad eyed the backpack. "You need all that for a project?"

"There's a lot of art and craft," he answered, nervously.

"Alright, then. Be back soon."

I nodded. "The diner closes at nine."

Helix walked down the stairs hurriedly, her feet thumping loudly against the wood. She wore a green shirt and blue jeans and of course, her black gloves to avoid burning everything down. She looked paler than usual for some reason. "Let's go," she said. We walked out and headed right for the museum.

We were in the alley behind the museum. "How do we get in?" I asked.

Helix walked over to the side of the building and squinted up at the top. "There's a window," she said. "But it's too high up."

"Can you cast a spell?" I asked Logan. He shook his head. "Flight spells are confusing. If I mess up even one word, you'll probably end up floating midair for the rest of your life."

"So that's a no," Helix muttered.

"We only have two hours, we need to hurry," Logan said.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," I retorted.

He shot me a glare. "Can we try and find a back entrance?" Helix asked.

"It's probably locked," I replied.

Helix smirked. "You got a bobby pin?" She asked Logan.

"Why do you assume I'm the one with a bobby pin?" He protested.

“Logan—”

“Yeah, I got a bobby pin.”

We walked through the alley and wandered around until we found large wooden doors locked with a large chain.

“Bobby pin, please,” Helix said cheerfully, holding her hand out. Logan dug around in his backpack and handed her a thin black pin. She turned to the door, crouched down, and began to pick the lock. The chain clanked to the ground, and the doors swung open.

“Impressive,” I said.

“There are probably guards,” Logan said nervously.

“Then we avoid them,” I said.

“Aha! Who’s Captain Obvious now?”

“Still you, buddy.”

He rolled his eyes. “Alright, let’s go,” I said.

We walked into the museum.

Chapter 2

We become criminals in five seconds

As soon as we were in, we ducked behind a pedestal and waited. “I can cast an invisibility spell,” Logan whispered. “Any side effects?” I asked. He shot me a look, unamused. “No, but it can only work on one person.”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

Helix winced. I raised an eyebrow at her. “It’s just,” she said, scratching the back of her head awkwardly, “You’re not the stealthiest person ever.”

“Wh—hey!”

“What was that?” A voice came from the other side of the museum. A flashlight was shone in our direction. If we weren’t hiding behind a pedestal, we’d have been found. “I stand corrected,” Helix deadpanned. “You are very stealthy.”

I hid my embarrassment with an eyeroll. “I’ll cast it on myself,” Logan said. “What about me?” Helix asked, frowning.

“Oh please,” he said. “You’re way more impulsive than any of us. You’re almost as bad as Zel when it comes to stealthiness.”

She opened her mouth to say something but decided against it. I smirked.

Logan chanted a spell and suddenly, he wasn't there. I smushed down my panic. "Logan?" Helix called.

"Still here," he said. His backpack zipped open, and two walkie-talkies hovered midair. "Take one," he said. "Get up the stairs and be my eyes, in case you find anything."

Helix picked one up. "Honestly," I said, grinning. "This time, I'm glad you packed thinking it was going to end up like an action film."

"Thanks, I guess?"

"Be careful," Helix said.

I grabbed his backpack. Helix and I made our way to the stairs in silence. We walked up the stairs and looked around. "There!" She exclaimed. I met her gaze in a small empty compartment above the entire museum. "We can hide there."

We went up another flight of stairs and climbed into the compartment. I was immediately reminded of the surface. The three of us were stuck in a tiny cave at the end of a tunnel that was filled with booby traps, trying to figure out the meaning of a phrase inscribed on the ceiling.

I dug out a flashlight from my pocket and shone the light right at Helix's face. She looked away, grimacing. "Cut it

out!" She said, laughing. I grinned and lowered the light. "You know, this reminds me of last year," she muttered. "Me too."

"Us cramped in tiny spaces, and you're being annoying." I rolled my eyes. "I wasn't that bad."

"Of course, simply professional," she reminded me, her tone flat and condescending at the same time.

I winced. "Okay, yes, I was a pain."

She gave me a crooked smirk which I couldn't help smiling back at. "You know, you're pretty annoying too," I said.

"I know. It's my best quality."

I stifled my laughter, covering my mouth. If we got caught, I'd never hear the end of it. After a while, the walkie-talkie crackled with static. We turned towards it. "I think I got something, over," came Logan's voice. "What is it?" Helix asked.

Silence. I sighed. "What is it?" I repeated. "Over."

"*Thank you.* There's a slab of stone here written in the language we couldn't interpret from the scrolls, over."

"Is it translated? Over."

"No, it's not, but if we figure out which language it is, we might have a clue about what's going on. Over."

"Alright, let's get out of here. Stay near the exit, over."

We crawled out of the compartment and went down the stairs. Helix and I waited at the exit, hiding behind the pedestal. "The guards really aren't paying attention," I mumbled.

"Don't jinx it!" Helix hissed.

"Boo!" I jumped but then realized who the voice belonged to. I turned to tell Helix, but I was too late.

Helix had a sword at Logan's neck. Logan was fully visible now. He stared down at the sword, eyes wide. "Helix, it's me, relax!" He said,

Helix lowered her sword. "Oh," she said and sheathed her swords. "Sorry."

She grinned sheepishly. Logan eyed the swords nervously. "I probably shouldn't have done that," he muttered. "Come on."

But I wasn't focused on what he said. My gaze was on a necklace in a glass case, a little further away from the pedestal we were hiding behind. It was made of simple black thread and had a purple gem hanging from the center. The gem glowed coldly. It sent shivers down my spine. "What is that?" I asked.

Helix met my gaze. I heard her inhale sharply. "That's her necklace," she murmured. "Whose?" I asked.

"The girl who wrote the scrolls. It's her necklace."

"Do you think it's important?" Logan asked.

But Helix wasn't listening. She stepped forward, but I dragged her back. This was not a good time to be impulsive unless we wanted to get arrested. "Guards," I whispered.

She frowned and glanced back at the necklace, and then turned to us again. "This is important," she confirmed.

"Then we need a plan," I said. I let go of her hand and peered past the pedestal. Beams of light still flashed around. I spotted multiple guards. There was no way we could get that necklace without getting caught. "What about a distraction?"

Logan bit his lip. "It's a stupid idea," he said.

"Let's do it," Helix said. "Logan, you get the necklace. Zel and I will lead the guards away."

"Why two of us?" I asked.

"You'll see. Logan, you got disguises?"

He tossed us brown cloaks. "I love the way you pack," Helix said, grinning and putting on her cloak. "Where'd you even get these?" I asked.

Logan shrugged. "I don't even know anymore," he said.

"Let's go," Helix muttered and jumped out from behind the pedestal, right into the beam of a flashlight. "Hey, get back here!" A guard yelled as she raced off. I panicked for a second and then took off in the other direction, alerting several guards.

“They’re here!” One guard yelled, pointing at me. At the same time, Helix ran past their left.

“No, here!” Another yelled. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I shot past yet another guard. Helix took off in another direction.

“Here!”

“There!”

“No! Here! WHY ARE YOU GUYS SO STUPID?”

I watched as Helix raced up the stairs, pursued by several guards. I skid to a stop as she reached the rail. Dead end. NO, NO! I thought.

She turned, glancing at the guards behind her. She took off in another direction, racing towards the compartment. She grabbed onto the shaft door and *leaped into the air*. The guards slammed into the wall. She planted her feet against the wall and kicked herself away from it. She landed behind the guards, turned, and ran back down the stairs.

After a few moments, I shook myself out of my shocked stupor and kept running.

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Logan hold up the necklace. I raced towards him. “Where’s Helix?” He asked.

“I lost her at the stairs,” I wheezed. “Did you see that? She—wall—”

“Yeah, yeah, great. *Where is she?*”

I turned around. Helix was still running, twisting between marble pedestals. She ran back up the stairs and jumped out of the window. My eyes widened. “Go!” I told him. I took the necklace from his hands, and we ran out of the back entrance. I saw Helix hanging on for dear life on the roof of the house next to the museum. She pulled herself up and kept running. We followed her. She jumped from house to house, villa to villa, while we ran after her on the ground. “I think we lost them!” I yelled, glancing back. She slid down a hill and ran toward us. “Have you got it?” She asked. I nodded and held up the necklace. “We just became criminals,” Logan panted, “in like, five seconds.”

Helix studied the necklace in my hands. I thrust it towards her, but she backed away from it as if it were coated in poison. I raised an eyebrow at her. “You said it was important.”

“It is,” she said, her voice hollow and distant as if she were speaking from the end of the alley. “Just hold onto it, yeah?”

She gave me a reassuring smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. I nodded. We handed Logan his cloaks back. We walked back to his house, *slowly*, since we were all exhausted. “So, we’re doing illegal stuff now,” I said casually.

Logan's laugh was an octave higher than usual. "Yep," he said nervously, glancing around as if guards were going to pop up any second and tase him. Finally, we reached the house. Logan pulled out his key and unlocked the door. "I'm just going to go take a walk," Helix said and walked back down the stairs. Logan waved goodbye at me, and I waved back.

Helix and I started walking in the same direction. "Are you alright?" I asked, breaking the silence. She looked up at me, surprised. "Yeah, why?"

"It's just, with curse and everything..." I trailed off.

She snorted. "Yeah, kind of messed up, isn't it?"

"I think 'kind of' is an understatement," I replied.

She gave me that crooked grin, and my worried thoughts dissipated. "Rock bottom is our new solid ground," she mused.

"Agreed."