

# Chapter One

I stood shaking in the limbo between worlds. Vast galaxies swirled and twinkled around me, but all I could think about was Scott. I stared at the place where he'd disappeared. Where that monster had sucked him through the black glassy floor.

All the while, crystalline blue eyes blinked at me expectantly. The little girl's gold ringlets bounced as she cocked her head to the side. With an exasperated sigh, she repeated, "What are you *doing* here?"

I sank to my knees with relief. She came. The Guide was here before Lucien could come back and finish the job. Though...I glanced back up at her tiny form.

I never expected the Guide to be a child.

*Charlotte.* She said her name was Charlotte.

With her hands on her hips, she let out another sigh. "Something is *definitely* wrong with you." Crouching in front of me, Charlotte smacked both sides of my face with her hands. "Hello?"

"Ow—" I cringed away from her and scowled. "I-I don't know! It's not like I've been through this before." I thought back on her words. "Wait, you said I'm *not* dead?"

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It definitely *felt* like I'd died. After Lucien took hold of my body and forced my suicide, I died right there on my bedroom floor. The pain from overdosing still sent shivers down my spine. And then...

*Scott.*

My head shot up as the memory of him being sucked through the floor had tears building in my eyes. If Astraea hadn't thrown herself at Lucien to protect me...I shivered at the thought.

I had to get them back. I had to save them.

Charlotte flicked my nose. "Stay with me, kid." Then, with a flip of her golden curls, she said, "No, I don't think you're dead. You came here like all the others, but I can still feel the connection to your human body. Something is pulling you back there. And—" She pressed her lips into a tight line.

"What is it?"

"You don't have a Sjelen. Your soul is missing."

I swallowed hard. She could tell all that just by looking at me? My lack of surprise made Charlotte leer.

"So you *do* know something," she said.

I wondered where Astraea was while we wasted time pondering my situation. Did Lucien have her? Did she get away by some incredible miracle? I let out a long breath and swallowed the guilt. I needed to tell this girl the truth. If Lucien's game was to beat the Guides to the crossing souls to kidnap them, they couldn't be on the same side, right?

"Astraea is the name of my Sjelen," I began. "She sort of...left my body. It's a long story." I shook my head and tried to get to the point. "Look, I need to get to the Ren as soon as possible. There are a lot of lives at stake right now."

Charlotte's face paled as I was talking. It took her a moment to gather herself before choking out, "Did you just say *Astraea*?"

"What—yes. Yes, that's her name." Was that all she heard me say? I raked a hand through my hair. "I need to get to the Ren, I—"

“We’re leaving. *Now.*” Before I could protest, Charlotte snatched my hand and a warm feeling spread throughout my body. It cracked and sizzled through my veins like electricity.

*Ryn.* I’d recognize that feeling anywhere.

Hand in hand, we flew through a mess of prismatic light. Every inch of my being twisted and stretched and when we finally stopped, it felt like the action had mangled my insides. I hunched forward with a gag, but nothing came up. Taking deep breaths, I clenched my fists and found soft blades of grass sticking up between my fingers.

“Quit exaggerating.” Charlotte’s disparaging voice accompanied her hands as she yanked me back to my feet. “Listen to me. Do *not* stray from my side for even a moment while we are here. We don’t need any of the gods nosing around.”

“Gods?” I straightened—eyes wide.

Cherry blossom trees danced in the breeze as far as the eye could see. Rivers twisted through the vast valleys and around large white buildings with cylindrical columns. Enormous mountains surrounded us on all sides. Some were so tall that snow dusted their peaks.

“Welcome to Guddalen, Oliva.”

“The realm of the gods?”

She nodded.

“Why did you bring me here? I need to see the Ren. Shouldn’t we be in Alfa Verden?”

She rolled her eyes and pulled on my hand. “Just come with me.”

We walked through the pink and white flowering trees—following a cobblestone road and passing a few of the white marble structures along the way. Each time I asked Charlotte about them, she would huff and say, “I’m a celestial Guide not your Guddalen *sherpa.*”

So, I stayed quiet until we stopped at the entrance of a marble temple. Two identical statues of a woman greeted us at the foot of a

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long staircase. I recognized the statues' likeness right away, remembering the replicas I saw in Lucien's garden-dreamscape.

"Atlya."

Charlotte shot me a curious glance. "You know an awful lot about this world for a human. This is her temple. Each god and goddess has their own. Well..." she paused in thought, "except for the twins, Nott and Eysana. I believe they share one."

I opened my mouth, but she was already heading for the large double doors at the top. For a small child, she was rather fast—I had to skip a few steps to catch up with her. I gasped for air when we finally made it to the top, only having a moment to collect myself before the doors slid open.

As if they'd been expecting us, two young women adorned in white robes bowed their heads. "Merry meet, Miss Charlotte." One woman lifted her chestnut head. Her light green eyes studied me—silver rings glittering around her pupils. "Lady Atlya was not expecting you today."

The other nodded in agreement but remained quiet. Her silver rings burned bright against her black eyes and coffee skin.

"Merry meet, Ami. Odessa." Charlotte bowed her head to the two women. "I apologize for the unexpected visit, but I'm afraid this is an urgent matter. Please, tell Her Holiness I have the *Silver Star*. It's quite urgent."

The green-eyed woman, Ami, nodded to Odessa, who scurried away at once. I watched her short black hair bounce with her retreat.

Ami turned her silent attention back on me.

The light shade of her eyes formed a knot in my chest. Their color reminded me of Alex, and my mind drifted to my friends as we waited. What was Alex doing now? Was he holding Rachel as she cried over my body? My heart clenched. I never got to explain myself or apologize for the things I'd said...the things I'd done.

And I may never get that chance.

“Who have you brought us, Charlotte?” Ami finally asked. “There is something very...peculiar about her.”

I flinched under her scrutiny. Was it that obvious?

Charlotte rolled her eyes and flipped her golden curls over her shoulder. “*Osti*, Ami. I know there’s something wrong with her. That’s why we’re here.”

Was that...French?

Odessa returned to whisper something in Ami’s ear. She nodded and turned to walk back inside the building. “Please, follow me.”

I watched the sway of the attendants’ white robes as they led us deeper into the temple. When they caught the sunlight, silver outlines of doves sparkled into view.

The marble columns continued to line the hallway as we walked. Rose-gold marbling glistened through the alabaster floors until we turned the corner into a large greenhouse. Floor-to-ceiling glass encased us in warmth, bathing the jungle of plants in iridescent light. Shelves of saplings lined the walls. Vines from potted plants hung from the ceiling around the small trees and potted flowers that filled the rest of the room.

At the center sat a small iron tea table, where a woman sipped from a lilac teacup, her smooth caramel hair pooling over her shoulders and down to her waist. In her other hand, the pages of a thick book turned on their own, and above her head, doves made of stardust danced and flitted to their own cheerful song.

I stared in awe at Atlya—goddess of love and passion.

Upon our approach, her eyes shifted from her book to greet us. Their brilliant amethyst color took me by surprise. They were like freshly polished gemstones.

“My Silver Star has arrived,” she smiled and closed the book. “Though, I will admit this form is not exactly what I was expecting. Please, take a seat.”

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It took me a moment to realize she was talking to me. I clenched my shaking hands in my lap as I sat opposite her. The attendants bowed and left the room.

“You have my gratitude, Charlotte. Thank the merciful goddess Onasi you were the one to find her.” She pressed her hand to her heart and bowed her head in thanks before adding, “If you don’t mind, Ami has a task for you.”

Charlotte hesitated—eyes flicking to me briefly—before also exiting the room. I grew nervous in their absence, acutely aware I was in a room alone with a goddess. One who stared at me so intently I thought I might burst from the tension.

“So, dear Olivia, what has become of my daughter?”

I blinked. “I’m sorry, your...what?”

Smiling warmly, she said, “Astraea is my daughter—well, in a manner of speaking.” She searched my eyes for a moment. “You were truly told nothing?”

I shook my head, unable to find the words. “No, Your Holiness,” I mimicked the title Charlotte had used. “I was told very little until now. I learned about the gods and how our worlds intertwine, but there’s a lot of information that was kept from me. But Astraea...saved me...and I think her actions might have put her in danger.”

“So it’s true that she’s no longer with you?”

I nodded, letting my head drop. The guilt twisted and reared inside of me. If I’d been stronger, none of this would’ve happened. It was all my fault. I deserved the goddess’s fury for what I let happen.

But only sadness filled Atlya’s eyes. “I see. So the Morken have your Sjelen. I’ll admit I’ve been wary of them as of late. So many souls are disappearing and none of us have any idea why, or *where* they are being taken. After Raleigh’s disappearance, we grew concerned.”

Straightening, I said, "I've heard that name before." Lucien had said it, and I'd assumed Raleigh was my brother's Sjelen—the one that was taken from him. "Who is he?"

"My daughter gathered a small group of friends after her creation. They're a remarkable team who deals in special tasks for the Ren and the gods." She snapped her fingers and another lilac teacup appeared between us. "Tea?"

I nodded. As she handed it to me, the cup filled with steaming liquid. The sweet scent of chamomile swirled around me, and my shoulders relaxed instantly. It wasn't peppermint, but it would do.

I blew on it and took a generous sip before saying, "I think Raleigh was my brother's Sjelen. He told me a Shifter stripped his soul away, though I don't know what happened to him."

"Who, dear?"

I cleared my throat, surprised she hadn't heard of them. "Morken have shape-shifting agents called Shifters. Lucien," *if that's even his real name*, I thought bitterly, "is one of them. He wanted to corrupt me, er—Astraea."

I shook my head. Having two names was getting confusing. Who was I now that she was gone? Just a human husk named Olivia? Would I have been just another memory added to her belt if we'd joined like we were supposed to? Where would *Olivia* have gone? I had to force myself out of that rabbit hole as the goddess sipped her tea in thought.

"Now that I think about it, Astraea mentioned them only once before leaving for a mission. Unfortunately, that was the one that sent her back through rotation, so she wasn't able to go into much detail. Just that the Ren had discovered they were a danger to the humans." She sighed. "I wish that child would be more careful."

"Was she some sort of spy?"

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Atlya chuckled. “You could say that. Astraea was a very special child. She was the only one I created on my own. She embodies a very special gift that began my revolution.”

“What gift?” I asked her.

“Astraea has the power to bless the Morken with empathy without ending their lives. She didn’t start as a Morken like the others, you see. She was a creation of my design, and mine alone. Thus, she is *pure*. Filled with the golden light of love and passion. Just by touching the Morken, she can change them. It takes time to complete, and she is only one person, so the revolution was still a necessary evil. But in the beginning, she was on her own. So she needed her gift to gain allies.”

“So, that’s why...” I let my voice trail off.

“Why the Morken want her so badly,” the goddess finished for me. She set her tea down and leaned her chin into her palm. “This may be difficult for you, but I need to know what happened. Spare no details. I would like to know every step of this incident.”

I tore my gaze from her bright amethyst eyes, unsure what she would think of me once she knew everything. After a short moment, her warm hands gently wrapped around mine as I gripped the teacup.

She smiled reassuringly. “No matter what, you are a piece of my daughter. I can see her in your face and in your heart. I know being human isn’t easy. So, please don’t fear my judgment, for I promise there won’t be any.”

Tears stung my eyes as I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. With a shaking breath, I started with the first dream, or rather, the first nightmare and the night Lucien had marked me. As I recounted the events that transpired after that, the goddess merely held my gaze and nodded on occasion with only concern in her eyes.

“Lucien only interfered while you slept?” she asked.

I shook my head. “There were voices in my head while I was awake—trying to change me. He could also...take control of me, and



manifest as other humans.” My cheeks burned thinking about what happened with my psychology professor. Well, Lucien *disguised* as my psychology professor. It was a minor comfort to know he wasn’t an actual teacher.

Atlya took a moment to consider my words before urging me to continue.

“They’ve been forcing suicides so they can grab the spirits before the Guides show up. After I...died, Astraea left my body to hold Lucien off. Her sacrifice is the only reason I’m here right now.”

I felt ridiculous—like a complete idiot. How could I have let this happen? I’d been so wrapped up in the dreams, and Lucien’s façade, that I couldn’t see what was playing out right in front of me.

Atlya stood from the table and knelt before me. She pressed her thumbs to my cheeks to wipe away the tears, cradling my face in her hands. “Olivia, please don’t blame yourself. You did well.”

I shook my head in protest, but she wrapped me in a hug. The warmth of it only made me cry harder. My mother had rarely touched me, let alone hugged me. I bit back a hysterical laugh when I realized I’d been hugged by a literal goddess before my own mother.

“Charlotte said I wasn’t dead,” I whispered into her shoulder. “But how could I be here if that wasn’t the case?” I sniffed, leaning out of her embrace. “She must have been confused because Astraea’s gone.”

Atlya gave a soft smile. “No, child, she wasn’t confused. Even I can see there is something tethering you to the mortal realm. Your human body still pulses with life.”

“How can that be? What does that make me?”

As the goddess thought this over, I realized that made me different from Scott and the others who he called *spirits*. Their human bodies were dead and gone, their ties to the mortal realm cut forever.

“In a way, I suppose you are an astral being. Not a part of any world and yet you exist in multiple at one time.” With a wave of her

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hand, the star dust doves above her head descended and morphed at her fingertips. She drew three lines in the air between us. "As you know, there are three realms. Guddalen, Alfa Verden, and the human realm we call, Elysium."

"Elysium," I tested the word. "I didn't know it had a name. But isn't that a little...backwards? Elysium is supposed to be the afterlife."

"Demi-gods came before mortals. So, when they die, it *is* their afterlife. An underworld where lessons are learned. Where...mistakes are corrected." Atlya cleared her throat before turning back to her star dust drawing. "Between the dimensions," she drew squiggly lines between them, "are thin veils of *ryn*. Astral veils. When you can travel between them or exist in more than one world, you are considered an astral body. Like our precious Guides who help ferry souls between them. But it is also where our lady, The Empyrean Goddess Onasi, flows between all things within the *ryn*. Always watching."

I nodded, understanding and not understanding in the same motion, while the silver dust ascended, once again taking the form of celestial birds.

An astral body. Not a spirit, or a demi-god, or even a human.

The goddess broke through my absent thoughts. "You said something about a mark on your neck? May I see it?"

I lifted my hair and Atlya craned her neck and ran her fingers over the raised skin. I'd yet to see the mark myself. I'd thought little of it until Scott mentioned it while we were suspended in limbo.

"Oh, dear." Before I could ask, she'd summoned her ladies-in-waiting back into the room. "Odessa, I need you to contact Arion for me. Ami, please tell Charlotte it's time for her to send in the guest you had her fetch."

With a nod, the two women scurried off, and within seconds Charlotte reentered the room with a young man in tow.

A young man with messy brown hair and sapphire eyes.

His pupils ringed with gold.

*Lucien.*

Fury overtook me at the sight of him. Every betrayal burned inside my veins like acid as I abandoned all reason, pushed away from the table, and strode across the room. He gave me a look of concern which only angered me further. All I could hear was his vial laughter. All I could see was him sucking my brother through a void of black smoke.

I landed a heavy slap across his face.

“You bastard!”

His head snapped to the side. Shock filled his face as he lifted his eyes back to mine and touched his cheek. He took a moment to study me as if I was a stranger.

Something wasn't right.

After a moment of awkward silence, a familiar smirk stretched across his lips. “And here I thought you missed me.”

I blinked and staggered backward. His hair was a shade or two darker. His sapphire eyes were a deeper, stormy blue. Even the golden rings around his pupils shone differently. Where Lucien's burned like molten metal, these glittered like the afternoon sun. My mouth suddenly went dry.

“A-Adrian?”

He flexed his jaw and rubbed his cheek. “I'll admit I wasn't expecting that. You may want to save a little of that inner fire for the real deal.” With a chuckle he added, “Lucien will certainly be surprised that his pet has a nasty bite.” Adrian looked past me to Atlya. “I assume he's why I'm here.”

That's right. The memories made my head spin. Lucien and Adrian were brothers. An unfortunate fact I'd learned just before the former killed me. I slumped back into my chair, bewildered. Though I *had* fantasized about slapping Adrian many times, he wasn't the one I wanted to hurt. I looked down at my hand. If my mother could see me

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now, she would be appalled. It wasn't like me to get lost in a fit of rage...not without Lucien's influence, that is.

"Merry Meet, Adrian." Atlya bowed her head like nothing had happened. "Your brother is indeed the reason I summoned you, but I'm afraid that's only part of the problem."

"So, she's really gone?" He glanced at me and sighed. "I'm sorry, Your Holiness. I was too late."

"It matters not." She waved him off. "Astraea made a choice to sacrifice herself to save Olivia. What matters now is what we do with the information it has given us. If the Morken are truly responsible for the disappearances, we need to act before it gets out of hand. I fear Lucien's end goal is something catastrophic."

She turned to me. "Olivia, tell Adrian what Scott said to you."

I looked at Adrian as if I were seeing him through fresh eyes. Gone was my snarky classmate. Gone was the boy who saved me from the hands of my professor. Gone was the boy I might have considered a friend. My *Guardian* now stood in his place. Face serious, impassive.

Anger prickled against my composure. He was supposed to have been *protecting* me from the Morken. Yet here I sat as an astral body cast into a foreign dimension. I went over it in my head again and again, trying to make sense of it all. Why hadn't he done something? Had he been playing college student that whole time? Why hadn't he stopped this from happening? My guilt over the slap lessened.

I looked down at the clenched fists in my lap and repeated my encounter with my brother. It was a delightful change of pace to see Adrian speechless.

"I want you to escort Olivia to Arion's temple," Atlya said once I was finished. "He'll be expecting her for an examination of her mark." She lowered her voice. "Try to keep a low profile. I'm sure I don't have to tell you why we need to keep this quiet. I will join you shortly after."

With a curt nod, he said, "Let's go," before striding out of the room without a backwards glance.

I stood to follow but stopped to look back at Atlya.

I had so many questions still unanswered.

She gave me another hug. "Don't worry, dear Olivia, we'll get her back. We'll get them all back."



It was hard to enjoy the stretch of Guddalen scenery on the way to Arion's temple with the awkward silence that settled within our group. Charlotte led the way with me and Adrian in tow. I tried not to look at him. His similarity to Lucien aside, the questions inside me festered. I tried to remember everything I'd discovered about him. I questioned every move I'd ever seen him make.

How long had he watched me? Did he watch I as grew up in that cold, baren penthouse apartment? Were there other moments when he showed up for me like he had at the mall and at school? All this time he watched, and *still* let me and Scott fall prey to those demi-god beasts.

It was a lot to unpack.

I tore my gaze from the back of Charlotte's golden head to glance at him in my peripheral. Though I knew who I was looking at was Adrian, whenever I caught sight of that golden glow in his eyes, all I could see was my villain. My parasite. My abuser. I kept trying to picture Lucien's true appearance to separate him from Adrian. The menacing, blood-red rings in his eyes were hard to forget. Seeing them revealed for the first time had forced me to realize that the Lucien from my dreams was a lie. The gold that had shimmered in his eyes when he smiled at me was just a mimic of Adrian's. Shrouding the truth of what he really was.

*The truth.* I scoffed aloud.

"I'm sensing some tension back there," Charlotte teased over her shoulder. "Now, tell me, is it just that you don't like each other? Or...possibly that you like each other *too* much?"

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Adrian bristled beside me, but my swirling thoughts kept me too busy to care. He opened his mouth to snap at her, but I cut him off.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

His brow furrowed. “This is hardly the time, Liv. We’re supposed to be keeping a low profile. Getting all riled up will only draw unwanted attention.”

I pressed my lips together and looked around. There were other robed Sjelen casually strolling through the gardens. Running errands for their gods, not paying us any mind aside from an absent nod of greeting here and there.

I lowered my voice. “Fine. But you owe me an explanation.”

“Yes. Later.” He rolled his eyes. “This may seem like a peaceful place, but not everyone in Guddalen is trustworthy. Especially not now.”

A chill skittered down my spine at the weight of his words. Even in a realm of gods we had to be careful. As much as I hated to admit it, he had a point. My obsequious side took over as I obeyed and kept quiet the rest of the way.

When we arrived, I noticed Arion’s temple was much the same as his sister’s. Two statues of his likeness greeted us at a stairway leading to a grand entrance. Where Atlya’s doors had been rather plain, the handles on this temple were shaped like golden circles crossing over each other. Maybe it was Arion’s signet, just as Atlya had her silver doves.

The doors, again, opened upon our approach, but this time a flustered redhead peeked his head out. The man’s brown eyes went wide when he saw us. Like Ami and Odessa, his pupils were ringed with glittering silver. He adjusted his wire-framed glasses with a shaking hand. As I pondered why a magical demi-god would need glasses, he waved us in.

“Come. Hurry before someone sees.”

The man closed the doors and led us down a long hallway. I leaned over to Adrian and whispered, “Why do people have different colored rings in their eyes? And why do some not have them at all?” Charlotte and Atlya came to mind. Both their eyes were magnificent in their own way, but there were no metallic rings around their pupils.

“*Halos*, not rings,” he corrected, and I scowled at his condescending tone. “They’re only present in demi-gods to reflect their race. All Ren’s are gold, like mine. Morken’s are red—as you’ve already seen—and then there are the *Ashra* like our friend, Jude, here.” He gestured to Arion’s attendant. His rich purple robes billowed behind him. The same golden pattern of two interlinked circles sparkled on the fabric.

“Jude, Ami, and Odessa are souls who fall in the middle. They’re a relatively new race that’s only popped up in the last five centuries or so. Having to choose between Morken and Ren seemed extreme to those who just wanted to have normal lives in Alfa Verden. They’re a nonpartisan group who work and thrive in their own court. A select few serve the gods as hand-picked attendants here in Guddalen.” He paused in thought. “I guess you could call them ‘civilians’ or ‘bystanders.’ Their souls have empathy, but they don’t take it as far as the Ren, who consider themselves *purists* that live in harmony with all things.”

I stifled a snort. Adrian considered himself a *purist*? In harmony with all things? Right. When he turned to meet my gaze, a flash of Lucien’s saccharine smile sent bile into my throat. I turned away.

The rest of my questions died on my lips as we turned a corner into an enormous library. The library in Lucien’s dreamscape had only a fraction of the opulence this one did. I should’ve guessed the personal library of the god of wisdom would be much larger than the one he’d left in Alfa Verden for the demi-gods’ use.

“Please, take a seat while I fetch Master Arion.” Jude gestured to a large walnut table in the middle of the room before adjusting his glasses and scurrying off.

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Charlotte sat down first, kicking her tiny legs up onto the table—a bored expression on her face. Were all Guides this...rude?

"No," Adrian answered my silent question and shot Charlotte a chastising look. "Just this one." He knocked her feet off the table as he sat down beside her, causing her to puff her cheeks at him. "Charlotte's been around for a long time and has become quite the unruly old hag."

"Bite me," Charlotte spat at him. I had to cover my laugh with a cough, earning me a spiteful glance. "I have better things to do than sit here and be insulted by a half-wit."

"Are all Guides children?" I asked them.

"I am hardly a child," was Charlotte's only response.

Adrian rolled his eyes. "Yes. When human children die, the gods employ their spirits to ferry souls through the astral veils instead of continuing their Sjelen's journey."

"They split them from their Sjelen?" Like Scott and the others. Did the Morken learn their technique from the gods themselves?

"Yep." He folded his hands behind his head. "They exist only as they were as humans. Young forever. Helping the dead pass on. It's where the fairy tale of Peter Pan came from."

"But why?" I glanced at Charlotte who pretended not to pay attention to our conversation. I lowered my voice and said, "Keeping them children forever seems like...torture."

"There are millions of souls crossing every day," he said. "The gods believe children provide the most comfort. But don't worry, they are handsomely compensated."

I opened my mouth to ask how when Charlotte cut in. "Are you about done giving your lecture, professor? You're boring me half to death."

"My apologies, Charlotte," an unfamiliar voice joined us, lifting through the halls with its eminent warmth. "I know how busy you are."



You may take your leave if you so desire. I don't believe these children will need your escort services any longer."

Arion entered the room wearing the same supple purple robes I'd seen on Jude. He smiled as he took us all in with glowing amethyst eyes—a matching pair to his sister's.

Charlotte stood with a slight bow, a subtle pink hue dusting the tops of her ears. "Thank you, Your Holiness, I think I will." As she turned to leave, she shot me a hesitant glance.

I smiled and tipped my head in thanks. "Thank you for helping me, Charlotte."

Charlotte's cheeks turned a deep crimson before she huffed and dissipated before our eyes.

Arion chuckled as he sat across from us, running a hand through his golden hair. He looked so young and yet his eyes held a sharp intensity that could only come with an all-knowing gift.

"She means well," he said. "Child spirits are a balm for the fear that comes with death. However, eternity in a child's form is a heavy weight to bear. It can make them—"

"Assholes," Adrian finished.

"Adrian!" I hissed.

Arion laughed. "How I've missed your candor, Adrian. You never change." He leaned his chin into his folded hands. "Though, I *am* curious about this assignment considering your past animosity with Astraea. You truly looked after her reincarnations all this time?"

Adrian shot a dangerous look at the apathetic god of wisdom.

I looked between the two of them. "What do you—"

"Nothing," Adrian cut me off.

Before I could protest, Atlya's white robes rippled into the room. "Shall we begin?"

Adrian made a point of ignoring my perplexed stare.

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“Yes, dear sister, I believe we’re ready to discuss a plan.” He lazily pointed to one of the many bookshelves. “Grab us a map, will you?”

“Plan?”

Atlya slipped a roll of parchment from a shelf, her long silk sleeves fluttering with her movements. She spread it out on the table before us with a wink.

“Alfa Verden is split into three courts.” Her finger danced briefly over each section of the map. “Each faction of Sjelen inhabits their own sector. The northern most province belongs to the Ren, the southern belongs to the Morken, and most of the central region is home to the Ashra. They’re appropriately named the Gold, Ruby, and Crystal Courts.

She pointed to an area where all the lines met. “Here is the only border where the Gold and Ruby Courts touch. I’m sure I don’t need to mention that this area is a constant battlefield. I highly doubt whatever facility the Morken have is anywhere near this end of the map.”

Adrian crossed his arms over his chest. “That doesn’t narrow it down by much. It only means the west coast is unlikely.”

“Indeed. However,” she traced her finger around a large city at the southeast corner of the map, “it’s a good assumption that something so important would be somewhere inside the capital of the Ruby Court, Avgrunnen. Especially if Lucien is involved.”

I blinked between them. “Why?”

“Because he never leaves the walls of the capital.” Adrian sighed. “Not anymore. The damn coward.”

“Precisely.” Atlya nodded. “Which makes this our best target.”

“Avgrunnen is a big city, Lya.” Arion narrowed his eyes at the map before he stood to grab another roll of parchment. He spread out a close-up view of the Morken capital on the table. “Where would they keep such a place?”

I leaned in to study it with them. The city was massive, nearly the size of Los Angeles or New York. Buildings lined every street, and *any* of those buildings could be a secret testing facility.

Arion pointed to the tip of the city where the land was surrounded by ocean. "There's an archipelago here with islands big enough to build on. If you had a secret facility, wouldn't you want it away from the eyes of pedestrians? If it were out this far, no one would see the comings and goings of its inhabitants."

Atlya considered this. "Interesting. But how can we be sure?"

Her brother smirked. "From what I know of the Morken and Lucien, they would most likely build it here. My predictions are rarely wrong."

"Yes, yes." The goddess rolled her eyes, a small smile on her lips. "You are indeed an insufferable know-it-all." She took another look at the map and nodded. "Alright, the archipelago will be our destination. The most important thing is that we acquire Astraea and release the spirits, but this mission will provide us an invaluable opportunity to gather information on what the Morken are scheming so we can stop it."

Adrian pushed away from the table and stood. "Am I hearing this right? You want me to saunter into Avgrunnen with a human in tow? No offense, Your Holiness, but I highly doubt that will work."

"No, Adrian. I want you and a small team to *escort* Olivia there and hand her over. She'll be your ticket inside the facility."

"*What?!*" Adrian and I said together. He glared at me before adding, "Absolutely not. She should stay here and let us handle it."

"You're marked," the goddess said to me plainly, ignoring Adrian's scowl. "The Morken will most likely take you to the others, thinking you belong with them. As long as Lucien doesn't see you, that's our advantage."

Arion moved behind me and lifted my long auburn hair to study my neck. "What a curious marking." His warm fingertips traced its

## ETHEREAL SEQUENCE

outline. "This must be some sort of magic seal that gives them access to your Sjelen. This is on your human body as well?"

"It appeared the first time he took control of me." The image of Shaun's unconscious body erected gooseflesh all over my body. It was the first time I'd ever physically hurt someone. The searing pain on the back of my neck was hard to forget as well.

"Interesting." Arion slipped a notebook and quill from his robes and sketched what he was seeing. When he was done, he held it in front of me. It was a simple circle of half-moon scratches. "In all my years, I've never seen anything like this before."

"It's still there," Adrian added. "I checked Liv's neck at the hospital."

*"Hospital?"*

*"You're in a coma."*

I melted into my chair, tears of relief stinging my eyes. "So it's true...I'm not dead."

He trained his eyes on the floor, fists clenched. "I kept your body stable while your parents called an ambulance, but I couldn't hold on to your consciousness. The lights are on, but no one's home."

An eerie sensation swelled inside me. I pictured my body in a hospital room, surrounded by everyone as they agonized over when I'd wake up.

*If I'd wake up.*

Not knowing I was dimensions away.

"It's quite the precarious situation." Arion returned to his seat. "I will have to confer with Kvasir and Syna and see if they have any information that will help the girl. Though, I doubt they can do much without Astraea present."

Atlya shook her head, dismayed. "Unfortunately, brother, I'm not sure who we can trust. The actions of our own creations couldn't have

gone unnoticed this long without help from another member of The High Council.”

“The Council of Gods,” Adrian whispered to me before I could ask.

“In that case, perhaps tomorrow’s Council meeting will prove useful.” Arion chuckled. “It will give me an opportunity to monitor their faces as we introduce our plan.”

“If we can’t trust them, why on earth would you tell them our plan?” Adrian challenged.

Atlya gave him a sad smile. “If we could avoid it, I would certainly keep the plan secret. But Jerrik will notice the movement of your team.” She turned to me to explain, “As the god of war and justice, he has his Ashra peacekeepers strewn across the lands. He’ll notice your movements unless we keep him distracted with *falsified* plans.”

Adrian scowled as she winked at him.

“The traitor will inform the Morken we’re coming, so the information we give them will intentionally throw them off our trail. Only a select few will know the true plans,” Arion finished.

Atlya knelt before me, her white robes shimmering as the silver doves caught the light. She took my hand in hers and said, “I promised we’d get them back. Don’t worry about the meeting tomorrow. My brother, Adrian and I will take care of the talking, so rest easy. Regain your strength, for I will have to ask much more of you once our plans commence. For now, I only need your trust.