Chapter 1

The rift opened in the recesses of Pazfin Falls. Cold deposition painted frosted ferns against windowpanes and a caressing breeze danced through the town's streets. Unaware of the ritual beneath them, children hung their heads back—mouths agape— to taste the ashen and bizarre summer snow.

At the same time, newscasters prepared their stations, documenting the sheets sifting onto sidewalks. People crushed the powder into balls, only to find their fingers covered in ash. The earth rumbled under their feet. The cotton clouds above the dense city shifted into blackened razors. In the morning night people fought with arched backs against the sudden winds as they clamored into their homes. They presumed themselves safe inside until a second series of gales attacked with a starved fury. They gashed through glass, ravaged across roofs, and dismantled doors off their stoops. Trees stretched against the storm's breath until they shredded into a cold wet shrapnel.

Nature's rage amplified as bolts of lighting struck the tall buildings, birthing flames more ravenous than the tempest. Floating embers bobbed in the ripping winds like hot stars through a dark fog. The bridged and suspended complexes of downtown Pazfin collapsed into the boiling slush. Crawling beneath debris, the townspeople choked on the acrid smoke that coiled through the thin alley ways.

The only guides in the maze of mist were the ringing bells of the Institute clock towers.

“Evacuate immediately. This storm is sudden and unexplainable. Communication with rescue is still underway. It could be a terrorist attack, government weapons testing…” The newscaster wrapped the rippling jacket around himself tighter and wiped the ash from his face. Straining into the lens, in turn the eyes of his audience, he caught his breath. “Maybe it’s God.”

As those words left his mouth, a bolt of heathenistic judgment struck the crew. An emergency message cut the feed. White text rolled along the black screen as the speakers blared the town's alarm. The text stalled and lagged before the television powered off. In the screen's emptiness and the living room’s silence, Roy stared at his reflection. His lips trembled before he looked down at his bloody hands. Without pause or remorse, Ista grabbed Roy’s shoulder and leaned into his ear.

“This is your fault,” she whispered.

Roy

Roy rolled out of bed as his phone buzzed across his desk. He grabbed his eye patch from his bedpost; the first piece of clothing on his body and the last taken off. Once completely dressed he walked with heavy footfalls so his sound would travel. In the bathroom, he ensured the lock was secured before reaching for his medicine. His father's morning paper stopped rustling from his reading chair in the den. Roy rolled eyes at the sudden silence, pressing the bottle against the door. As he shook the orange cylinder, the last pill rattled. His father flapped his paper to read once more. Then with swift silence, Roy clogged the sink and twisted open the tap. The water pooled, just below a scuff mark he had scratched in the porcelain.

"Don't waste water!" Amin yelled from his recliner just down the hall once the water hit the fill line.

Before turning off the sink, Roy took the final capsule from the bottle and dropped it in the water. He brushed his teeth with one hand and swirled the red tablet around with his other. It dissolved into a rusty vermilion that he flushed away with his spit.

He took a moment to stare at the starchy paste and question where it came from. The hospital on the label, Pazfin Psychological Services, had burned down a decade ago. He attempted to do some research as it was

a clue to his origins but found himself flipping the same stones. The events of that night buried themselves in denial or the minds of the forgetful and dishonest.

It was only on the other side of town, but no one cared to speak of it—actively avoided the subject. Supposedly, the fire that swallowed the building reacted with the chemicals on site imbuing its foundation with a contagious rot that inflicted psychosis and necrosis. At least that's what his father claimed. He thought quickly about what his mind would conjure up under the wreckage's influence, he hallucinated enough things without assistance from inhalants.

He stormed out of the bathroom and down the hall into the living room. Amin kept it simple, no decorations, no television, no lamps or any furniture except for his recliner, a couch, and the coffee table he used as a leg rest. As most mornings, he found Amin still enjoying his seat unaware of the time.

"We're late," Roy said, stepping into the Spartan kitchen.

"Why are you worried about being late?" Amin asked.

He rubbed his body against the worn denim upholstery and a satisfied groan snaked out of his thin lips. He slid up then dropped his newspaper on the den table. After checking his watch, his picket teeth clacked together. He slid the dozens of rings on his fingers so the jewels and stones would face upwards.

“Fix them in the car,” Roy said.

Amin rolled his eyes before pretending to strike a sword into his gut. But Roy did not smile or even chuckle out of courtesy.

“You’re still mad?”

Roy huffed and continued digging in the fridge. He smacked around until he landed on a jar in the door. A mass of meat floated in yellow liquid. Deep pores rooted locks of hair in place as their twisted ends waved through the fluid. A circle of teeth wiggled around a small opening inhaling the juice. He watched the meat float and sink with each beat then realized his eyepatch slid slightly off-center. He completely covered his damaged eye. Instead of a homunculus in a flask—just beets pickled in vinegar.

“What’s wrong?” Amin asked.

Roy grabbed the beets and shook the jar. Amin lurched forward, knocking his work bag over. His documents spilled on the kitchen tile, but he stepped on them to reach his son. Amin gently palmed the jar then cautiously slid it to the back of the fridge.

“Why are you still lying?” Amin asked.

“What?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

Amin lowered his brow and his nostrils flared. He collected his papers off the floor waiting for an admission

of guilt, but Roy just ran around him to get to the car. Amin cleared his throat demanding attention.

“It’s whatever,” Roy responded.

“It’s not *whatever.* I told you to tell me. I got you a refill. Until we recalibrate, take twice what you’re taking now.”

He reached into his pocket for the fresh bottle. Instead of hard plastic, his fingers grazed the frayed edges of torn fabric. He was taken by surprise that morning. He had just walked into the house once Roy’s alarm went off.

“How long until I have to take three times that or four times that!” Roy shouted, opening the front door.

“I’ve explained this--”

“Art and science. I know, but when the brush isn't working, stop blaming the paint.”

Roy walked to the car swatting his arms around him like he could smack his father’s words away. Amin exhaled slowly as he trailed outside with his work bag over his shoulder and a briefcase in hand. He stepped behind Roy and squeezed the handle of his case until his rings scratched away bits of leather.

“Are you still seeing him?”

“Yes...” Roy answered under his breath, pulling on the locked car door for Amin to let him in.

“And you said nothing?”

“I’ll talk to Sarah. I'm not having this argument again. Pick! You’re either my father or my doctor. You don’t get to be both. You don’t get to be everything.”

Amin bit his tongue then pushed on his key fob. The doors clicked and Roy got in the passenger seat. Once Amin took his place he tapped the steering wheel.

“I am listening to your boundaries. But why all of a sudden keep this a secret? What are you hiding?”

“Because I’m an adult and you have to let me deal with my own problems. How I want to. And you’re wrong! It’s somewhere *between* memories and imagination,” Roy said, scratching at his hair line.

Amin clenched his jaw.

“All that stuff you think you remember, it's all fictitious. This is your life. You don't have some special truth. So stop digging!”

Roy sucked on his lips to keep from adding fuel to the flame. He chewed what he wanted to say and swallowed it, choking in stewing silence. He just closed his eyes to picture what Amin kept denying was the truth. The oldest memory Roy believed happened was Amin’s face looking down at him. He knelt in muddy slush with Roy in his arms as a fire raged behind them. He didn’t know how old he was or where Amin found him, but his adoptive father refused to speak about it.

At first, he couldn’t piece together anything before the age of 15, but once he turned 19, small glimpses of

buildings, people, and different voices crept through. But by 24 years old, those dark voids grew just the slightest bit smaller. Especially since the time between medicine deliveries increased until Roy decided to stop taking them all together. However even from his first dose, Amin could never drown out the image of a man.

Blue eyes that twinkled like ice. Pale skin with dark veins and the smell of smokey iron. But it was not the visage of a lanky muscular man and the aura of masculinity that lingered and overwhelmed him— it was the passionate sensual desire to feel him. He sighed quickly as a calm washed over him. He could almost feel the dozens of grooves along the man's scarred chest and abdomen like he had been run through a shredder. Being in that small memory kept him at peace. It loitered In his mind, lifting him out of the car and flying him onto a black canvas. There he could roll with the man and paint a dance of hedonism on its wet surface.

But then the fantasy blew apart. It reformed into the image of a woman with long black hair and a dark cloak. She reached towards him and Roy gasped. He opened his eyes— back in reality. Restraining his breath to avoid Amin's attention, he looked out the window to clear his mental palette.

He had never imagined her before. It was the first time she appeared in his mind. Months had gone by of him flushing away his medication so more memories had poked through. But he needed to make sure she didn't exist in his second life. He traced his steps throughout the

week. Recently he had gone to the fish markets on the north shore, with Amin hovering over him of course. There were very few women present; the markets were just full of men who talked about a crazy sailor who fought the rogue waves of Siren's Reef. He washed up on shore a few days later barely alive, telling tall-tales of a talking seal.

They had gone to the stores on the west side just a few miles away from the burned-down hospital as well. There were many women there, but he paid them no mind and snuck away. He attempted to get a closer look at the charred ruins everyone feared, but Amin caught him and reminded him of his susceptible mind. That had been the incident which started the current rough patch between the two.

He deduced this woman had to be a new memory even if it had the aura of illusion. Amin hit a bump in the road and Roy glanced out to see what they had run over. Then at that moment, he saw that very woman— wearing the same leather cloak— behind the windows of a mansion. He pressed his nose up to the car glass and twisted his neck back at her but they had driven too far. She definitely lived in town, but he couldn't think of a single interaction they ever had. He scratched out his assumed certainty and placed the woman into more than likely a memory, but not beyond a reasonable doubt.

"Who lives there?" Roy asked.

"You're talking to me?"

“Just answer.”

“Why? If it's a voice talking-”

“Oh my god! I have a question. I just have a question. I'm a curious person. Sometimes I ask questions. Sometimes the questions I ask aren't rooted in some deep distrust of you or a-”

“Okay! I have no idea! It used to be a small house, it got renovated a year ago.” Amin said.

They continued driving through town not saying another word to each other. Amin attempted through a series of grunts and beckoning taps on the console, but Roy just kept his uncovered eye on the scenery. They drove over the river then passed the vantage point of Siren’s Reef in the middle of the beach waters. As they turned into the main road, the ambiance of coldesaques and large manors shifted into dense urbanization.

Unlike most cities, the species of flora in Pazfin ripped through floorboards faster than they could be built, even cracking through concrete. More people came looking for plots of land to build on, just to realize the forest had a power greater than pruning sheers. Growing upwards succeeded over outwards creating the nearly arboreal city. The homes and apartments were adjoined into a mega structure with vines and roots from the surrounding forest growing inwards almost swallowing civilization. Iron stilts wrapped in ivy supported the buildings and bridges that bound the many complexes.

Vines and budding flowers clung to the walls and draped down from the walking arches.

When he first journeyed through the town it made him think of a fairy tale. Imagining himself running through the bridges and swinging down the ziplines. He had dreams of visiting the small artisan shops along the stilts, but Amin refused to buy from lowlifes. The desire quickly faded. Especially as he began to understand Pazfin's culture.

The middle class climbed into whichever vacant apartment they could fight their way into. Once they had a place to stay they would create a product out of whatever talent they had and hope it sold or become a vendor for someone else. He remembered a woman who grew strawberries to sell to the man above her that made jams and jellies. Then once he moved to one of the houses by the beach, she took his place, while the man who grew blueberries below her moved one apartment up and began sowing the seeds for strawberries.

He was reminded that not all were as successful when they drove past quitter's tree. Amin had told him the story of its strange bark. A man moved into one of the lowest apartments, the ones that got almost no sunlight, that were constantly cold, and moist. He decided to write stories, but they didn't sell. A woman took his place who recognized it would be a great place to grow mushrooms. She bought a mansion down the street across from Sarah a few years later. The man ended up losing his mind living within the tall grass beneath stilts and sleeping in

alleyways wrought with ticks until he decided to sit down and give up. It only took a few days before the sapling coiled around his throat.

Amin reminded him constantly of that tree if he even lost a few points on a test. He never failed to take the opportunity to tell him what awaited the homeless, the forgotten, the ill, and undesirable that settled for the shadows of acceptable society. They lived around the swamps where alligators stalked them as they slept or beneath the stilts of other buildings hoping for an opening in the production chain. Stories of people waking up with roots and vines around their ankles as the overactive flora tried to swallow them were a constant. He thought it was morbid for the town to eat its own in need, but it kept them moving so they never overcrowded in one place for too long.

Roy stared down the swaying buildings thankful he never had to experience the crawl through the brush, the climb up the wall, then the jump over to the lavash sands. Amin interrupted Roy's thoughts when he kept driving forwards instead of taking the turn towards campus. It cut through a thick patch of forest with cardboard shelters and a hammock forgotten and fused to a tree.

"What are you doing?" Roy asked, smacking his thigh.

"I just wanted… I'm sorry for yelling. But you have to tell me what's going on. When you get this way you make irrational decisions, and I can't stop or guide you if I don't know. I want you to be independent. I want you to

be happy, but you're a danger to yourself and others. And worse you could have another seizure. Everything would be gone again. I don't want—"

"I said I'd talk to Sarah. Or did you not hear me say it like three times now?"

Roy leaned into his seat as they crossed another bridge next to the swampy parts of town. Amin flattened his tongue against the roof of his mouth, twisting his face into a frown.

"Okay. I accept that. Things have been rough, but I still care," Amin said.

He refused to speak as they drove towards the town's center where Amin built the Institute of Knowledge. In Pazfin there were two avenues of freedom, to work your way up the stilts, or to earn a certificate signed by Amin from his institute. It was the town's crowning achievement and Amin sat on its throne, but he treated the stairway to lucrative triumph like an overwhelming side project.

Amin bought the original property and remodeled the campus as a ring with thick brick walls. 8 clock towers with faces of colored glass sat equidistant within the perimeter so all students could see them from every angle. Within the circle, he contracted the town to build a courtyard with benches, a large garden, athletic courts, and other amenities. But Roy's favorite was the golden triquetra sculpture embedded in stone at the exact center of the circle.

As they got close to the east entrance, an empty SUV parked haphazardly in the road blocked the campus entrance.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Roy said, rubbing his palm into his face.

“We can go around.”

Maneuvering around the black van, Amin looked out to the tree line. Only an hour had passed since he was there. He gripped the steering wheel telling himself it was just a coincidence. He turned into the east parking lot of the Institute. Once they parked, Roy jumped out and ducked his head. He kept up with a near jog, hoping no one would connect the two of them. The bells at the top of the clock towers began to ding. The sound resonated within the circle as if the loud crashing came from within his head.

“Crap now I’m late,” he said.

The Arcana

The woman Roy had seen through the window tinkered in her mansion. The flicker of pink flames choreographed a dance of warmth and shadows across her porcelain skin. Her hand burned as a small flame danced on her finger tips. She tapped a thick candle on the table transfering the fire to the wax. In her other hand, a dagger glowed red as she held it over the flame. Once the knife sang from the heat, she dug its edge into her own palm. Black blood poured onto a map of Pazfin Falls fixed to the table. The dark liquid swirled around then thinned across the browned parchment.

“I’m not wrong.” Cana said, watching Ista smeer her blood on the map.

Cana stood at a door way fixing the cuffs of her sleeves. She grabbed the base of her wavy lilac hair and tightened it into a ponytail.

“I believe you, but the only other option is worse,” Ista said, watching her blood move around the map.

“So what? We haven't had a real challenge in forever,” Fen said, coming around the corner into view.

Her uniform matched Cana’s but she had not taken as much care as the lilac haired woman did. Her black pants were stained and torn around the knees. The back

of her shirt was merely bundled then shoved into her belt. Even her shoelaces were just wrapped around her ankles then stuffed beneath the tongue of her shoes. Cana rolled her eyes and began fixing Fen's clothing. She patted down her frizzy black hair and tucked her red lock behind her ear.

"I'm glad you've been having fun, but the rest of us are tired and worried," Cana said, folding Fen's collar and swiping a streak of blood away from her full lips and deep bronze cheek.

"Worried is an understatement," Ista corrected. "You're sure it's not the Virtues?"

"It can't be," Cana said. She grunted and crossed her arms looking for the words to defend her own abilities. "It's like a meteor just flying through the solar system messing up everything's orbit. But there's no meteor. There's nothing in the liminal space. It's invisible or outside of the known universe. Something that can't be measured is causing the realms to rub against each other. To stress and rip. Unless Kindness has some kind of butterfly effect."

"So maybe he's amplifying the signal. A positive feedback loop," Ista responded.

"Yeah, it's possible, but Kindness isn't a god," she answered.

The sound of a guttural “Ahem” came from the tattered recliner in the den. “He’s near god,” Haben grumbled, gripping the seat like a throne.

As he leaned forward the chair strained against his weight. Not just from his muscular build, but from the golden armor that grew from his muscles like skin. Planetary systems made from silver molding and embedded crystals decorated the shining plates. He slicked his blonde hair back and stood stoically in the sunlight as it kissed his warmed cream skin. “Kindness has better control over the liminal space. Doubt over your confidence is warranted,” he said.

Cana inhaled slowly and Fen held her hand.

“Finally. He’s awake.” Fen mocked from the kitchen doorway.

“Shouldn’t you two be in school,” Haben spat back.

“Speaking of, when are we done with this gig?” Fen asked Ista. “It’s been like a year that we’ve been here and for half of it we hid so nobody would know and now we’ve been pretending that we’re humans. I did not sell my soul to do homework,” Fen said.

From the couch Rubus, a handsome unrefined slob chewing with an open mouth, joked “I thought you wanted a challenge? Being human is about as boring as it gets.”

He sat with his legs wide and a fur lined leather jacket. He grabbed a handful of stones from a bowl and

tossed them in his mouth. Crumbs fell from his crunching maw and dusted his latex pants.

“Because unlike you we’ve been working,” Haben said, staring out of the window with his back towards the others as if looking at his face were a privilege.

“This is work. Someone needs to watch this trash human stuff,” Rubus said, scratching the small horn on his head and pointing at the morning news.

“I actually like pretending to be human. It’s nice being part of a calm world. It’s simple. It’s just having to be on campus 5 days a week that’s tiring. I will say that we are at the most amazing nexus and instead of deepening our connection with magic, we’re doing homework and studying for tests you tell us we have to fail. And these masks are starting to stink,” Cana said.

She grabbed onto her face and pulled off a thin clear mold of her head. Fen did the same, taking off her own mask. They wiped off the sweat from the inside and placed them back on. The edges sank into their skin becoming a seamless fit.

“I’m so sorry that my master glamour isn’t good enough for you,” Haben said. “How about you leave it here this time and see if your identity being revealed is worth a little bit of cheek sweat.”

Ista smacked her hands on the edges of the table and leaned further into the map. Her blood continued

crawling across the parchment searching the town on her behalf.

“Can you all just stop? Always complaining about something. All of you! Keep your glamorous on and go. We need something to disprove my meta math. I don’t doubt you Cana. You are exceptional, I just want you to be wrong. I’ve never wanted more in my life to be wrong. So I need you to grab Uriel and head to that campus,” Ista said, running her fingers through her hair.

The girls nodded and accepted their orders. They shouted for Uriel, but heard no response. They screamed for him again and the front door swung open. Uriel stuck his head through and flapped his wrist at them. He wore the same uniform as the girls, but for his comfort he left the top few buttons open.

“I’ve been waiting for you in the car this whole time… Hurry up,” he said.

The beams of sunlight from behind him almost pierced through his white hair. The veins beneath his skin pulsed and small gaps of air disrupted his blood flow. Haben counted the pockets of gas in Uriel's darkened veins then smirked.

“He’s hungry.”

Uriel glared at him and slowly exhaled until the very end of it almost twisted into a growl. He thought of arguing, but he was behind schedule. To stop himself he just walked down the front steps back to the black SUV.

His red eyes gleamed as he glanced over at a squirrel in a tree. His ears twitched at the song of birds nearby and the heartbeat of a deer hiding in the brush. Straining to keep his fangs in his gums he licked his teeth and bit the skin off his cheeks. It gave him something to chew as his tissues still had blood from his last meal. Fen, ignoring the clear non-verbal warnings, jumped him from behind. She placed her hands on his shoulder and nudged him towards the car.

“You excited to see your boyfriend?” She asked, swinging her shoulders like she was dancing.

“Ha! And who would that be?” Cana asked.

“That guy he's been stalking.”

“He’s food,” Uriel said, pushing Fen off of him.

Cana locked her arm around his. Unlike with Fen, Uriel accepted the affection and even leaned into it a little. “What does he smell like?”

“He smells like… power.”

“He’s human.” Fen said, almost laughing. “You sure you don’t just have a crush? I remember when I first smelled Cana.”

“Who is it? Do I know him?” Cana asked.

“Yeah. It’s Patchy,” Fen answered.

“No way! And stop calling him that,” Cana said, getting into the passenger side.

“I don't see what else I should call him. And he doesn’t really need our respect. He’s a nerdy boring human. I mean what does he even do? I’ve only ever seen him in class. I’ve never really seen him around town ever. The dude is a weirdo.”

Uriel sat in the driver's seat and looked back at Fen. “He’s not a weirdo. Some people have goals. He’s focused on getting his certificates. And yeah he is human, but he has that weird after scent.”

Cana wrinkled her brow for a moment.

“That is weird… I have nuanced writing with him. Smart one. Mouthy. But I didn’t pick up anything powerful from him. Should we tell Ista about this mysterious human?” Cana asked.

“No, she’d probably kill him. He might just be some kind of paragon,” he said.

“See. That is evidence that Uriel here has a crush. Defending humans! I have deduced the truth! You wanna fuck!” Fen said, pretending to sip a cup of tea with her pinky held out.

Uriel slammed on the gas, crashing Fen’s head into the back of his seat. Cana covered her face to block her laugh. He cracked a smile and sped around a corner towards the swamp, slamming Fen into the door. He continued swerving, crashing her body against the sides and center console. When he stopped, she lay slumped down with her neck twisted upwards and a broken nose.

Uriel smiled at the sound of her joints shifting and cracking. Then frowned when she gasped for air.

“That is not funny!” Fen shouted, straining to sit up as her bones healed.

“From my angle it was hilarious,” Uriel responded.

“It really was. I took a picture.” Cana turned her phone showing Fen the image of her corpse. She laughed even louder once she zoomed into Fen’s clawed hand.

“It still hurts! We made a deal.”

“That’s because you wouldn’t be able to kill me and we all like Cana,” Uriel said.

Fen growled and her eyes flashed yellow for a moment. She snarled and part of her face wrinkled as her nose morphed slightly into a snout.

“Calm down.” Cana said, placing her hand on Fen's knee. “I’m sorry for laughing. I know it upsets you. It’s like a funny inside joke. If it truly hurts your feelings that bad, I will be conscious about it.”

Fen took a deep breath then leaned in to kiss Cana.

“Thank you, my orchid.”

Uriel slammed on the breaks again. Fen rolled and smashed her head across the cupholders.

“It was funny once. We just went over how we shouldn’t do it again,” Cana said, grabbing Uriel’s wrist.

“What is your problem? You are such a douche when you’re hungry!” Fen shouted.

“Shut up.” Uriel demanded. He rolled down his window and closed his eyes. He inhaled and tilted his head out the car. “I didn’t stop for you.”

Fen fixed her handkerchief and rolled down her window as well. At first, she smelled the slurry of magic infused into the air of Pazfin. She picked up hints of rust, then finally the distinct odor of Sanctins. She smiled and her teeth sharpened.

“It’s an angel!”

She leapt out through the window and twisted. Before her feet hit the ground her body morphed into a wolf nearly the size of the van. A strip of her hair remained red as it did in her humanoid form. Before Uriel could respond she disappeared into the forest.

“Damn it,” Uriel groaned.

He unbuckled and stepped out of the car. Cana ran around the back and held onto him.

“I love her, but she’s gonna get herself kidnapped. Giddy up,” Cana said, jumping into his arms.

They abandoned the SUV in the middle of the street. The smell of blood got stronger with a hint of burning charcoal as Fen trampled everything on her

mission. Her heart pounded at the thought of a fresh kill. It was just a few trees away. She dropped into action and howled, releasing a plume of flame from her throat. But there was nothing to kill. Fire trailed up her body and burned away the lycan fur into dark skin. Her uniform once again ragged and wrinkled. Uriel ran into the small clearing with Cana in his arms. They stepped into the dimly lit patch of grass. Sunlight broke through an opening in the tree's canopy.

Slumped against a stone sat a corpse. The tall grass curved around the angel's wrists already dragging him into the soil. Pollen blew around with the gentle winds and caught against the sunlight. From a scorched hole in the angel's abdomen soft pink and yellow flowers had quickly grown. As the three looked around they noticed one of its wings leaning against a tree trunk. It had been cut clean off with something so scalding it cooked the flesh.

"Is it wrong that I don't find tears across the realms and dead angels to be a coincidence." Cana said, sliding out of Uriel's arms.

She stepped over thick roots and thorny brush to get a closer look. She placed her fingers on the armor plating that peeled away from the muscle beneath. She stuck her hand in the wound and felt its roughed edge. Whatever blade killed him burned him from the inside out.

"I stopped counting after like 40. But was it method 1 or 2," Fen asked.

“That’s for Dolores to figure out,” Cana said, still rummaging through the wound.

“Oh come on. Does it have its organs or not?” Fen asked.

“I'd say 1. But…” Cana removed her hand from the hole and wiped it clean in the grass. “If Ista’s right, I don’t see how so many dead angels play into it,” Cana said.

“She’s wrong!” Uriel raised his hand with his fingers held tight together. They stood in silence for a moment until a soft wind shook the bloodied thistle. “No one is stupid enough to do that again. We all saw what happened. Let’s go.”

“I mean, let's hope Ista's right. We haven’t had a real challenge in what… 10 years. Fire, water, earth, air, I got it. I got it all.” Fen said, clapping her hands to punctuate. “A rorschach attacking from the left! Lightning!”

Uriel raised the corner of his lip.

“You think everythings a joke! People died.”

Fen rolled her eyes at him.

“There’s a whole new unknown area of magic. I don’t mind understanding it more. The better we know what it is the better we can kill the things that come from it. And yeah, people died who cares, people die all the time.”

Cana grabbed Fen’s arm, anchoring her back.

“Stop it,” Cana said.

“For why? We kill people all the time. And if you want to complain about the angel, If we got here an hour ago, it would have been us leaving it behind. So who cares? Yeah sure I would have burned it, but same difference. What do you want me to say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He began texting. “We have campus wide benchmarks today and I have a philosophy midterm. Cana you have a theoretical physics study. And I just texted Dolores our coordinates,"Uriel said, putting his phone in his pocket.

Another wind blew through the forest shaking the leaves and tall grass. It carried a thick blue mist that snaked into the clearing. The azure fog condensed until a woman with nightshade skin and white freckles that made her face look like stars stepped through. She wore a suit of smoothed stone like she had been tossed into a tumbler. The banded and striped armor looked chiseled from a block of gray agate. Her green coily hair nestled around two horns that curved around her soft round face. Moss and lichen grew on her body filling any cracks or weak joints like a gargoyle who rose from a long rest.

“There’s your pick up,” Uriel said, pointing at the corpse.

“Why did you stop?” Dolores asked.

“We smelled something,” Fen said.

“Ista gave you strict instructions to not draw attention and to get to campus. We all have tasks to complete and we are working on an unknown deadline.” There was no frustration or irritation in her tone. She spoke with an empty voice.

“I was driving. I stopped for a second. Fen felt the need to run after it. It smelled like a Sanctin, but I wasn't sure. Either way its dead.”

Dolores crossed her arms behind her back and leaned over to better see the corpse. The angel had clenched its fist even in death. Thread poked through its fingers, so she pried his hand open. An orange bottle of pills wrapped in fabric sat in his palm. She tossed it in her satchel and continued examining the clearing.

“If it were a Virtue?” Dolores asked, rubbing blood between her fingers and tapping her tongue against it.

“It wasn’t,” Cana argued.

“But if it were?” Dolores asked.

“It wasn’t. And if it was, I would have just kept driving. I also would have known from the road. Fen even knows better. Actually what if we didn’t stop? That's a better question. Be the analyst Dolores.” Uriel said, jamming his finger against his temple then pointing at her.

“Your assumptions are based on known knowledge. You always assume your opponents have unknown tactics at their disposal. Secrets later used in combat. As many times as we've interacted with the

Virtues, we still know very little of their overall capabilities. Everything we thought we understood was proven wrong. They have The Seer. This could have all been a trap set for later use."

Uriel's red eyes flashed for a moment and two fangs grew out of his mouth.

"Just take the body and go!"

"Calm," Cana said, motioning to Uriel by raising her hand then slowly lowering it with an audible exhale.

Dolores studied Uriel's stance. She focused on his balled fists. He couldn't even hide the hatred in his bulging eyes or the disdain in his lips with crooked contempt.

"I will never understand your reactive nature. It is common in your species. Especially when improperly satiated but yours seems to occur more frequently than expected. You are on the extreme end of the genetic instability bell curve, but you still go against expectation. You exhibit such frustration, but I'm simply giving you a needed lesson on discretion and safety. The chance of encountering one of the Virtues at the Pazfin nexus is small, but still a possibility. More than likely it would be Diligence as we are currently traversing through his domain. He may be one of the weakest among them, but he is still far too powerful for you. Now if for some reason there were two Virtues or even worse Sobriety."

The three of them held their heads down and didn't respond. Dolores nodded to recognize their silence as

understanding then touched the angel to teleport away. Space twisted and folded before snapping open into a wall of hazey particles.

Uriel cracked his thumbs and continued staring at Dolores. “I could fight Sobriety.”

“Limits,” Cana said.

“That statement makes me question your mental state. You may pose an undue burden on this team.” Dolores touched the angel and the blue smoke swallowed her, vanishing her and the body.

Uriel dragged his hand across a tree nearling ripping away hunks of bark. The two women covered their faces expecting him to lash out in rage, but he just turned and left the clearing. They followed him silently through the forest. He took a few breaths before opening the door not to rip it off the hinges. The women ran out of the woods and got in the car. They gave him a moment to calm down before Cana leaned towards him slightly.

“Please let me say this,” Cana said. “I know this is hard for you. And If Fen and I were stronger we wouldn’t need to put you in this kind of environment. But I think it’s done you good.”

“How so?” He asked, starting the car.

“When you're happy it’s contagious. When you're sad it’s like you watched a loved one die. When you’re angry it’s like everything was taken from you.”

“He’s always been melodramatic,” Fen scoffed.

“I wasn’t done,” She said, staring daggers into Fen. “But there’s something that makes you calm down faster than you used to. You're controlling your emotions better. Having to hide our identities is helping us. I think we’re becoming better people.”

Uriel said nothing and put the car in drive. Cana tucked her chin towards her chest. She glanced away and her concerned face cracked before she covered it up with a smile. Fen bounced her leg thinking of how to shift the energy. Then it came to her and she leaned forwards.

“Are we gonna finally ignore Ista today?”

“What are you talking about?” Uriel asked.

Cana sighed and shook her head. “She’s upset right now. We’ll just upset her more.”

“Come on! We’ve been studying so hard. We had to hide for months! And then we get to this campus. We pretend to be human… I mean yuck. We study like everyone else, she makes us take all these stupid courses and do all this pointless homework like we have nothing better to do. Then she tells us to fail the benchmarks. I did not become diurnal for that.”

“What are you two planning?” Uriel asked, pulling into the south parking lot.

“I’m gonna try to pass the benchmarks,” Fen answered.

“No. I liked the idea at first, but let’s not. Amin would find out we’re here. The illusion Haben casted is strong, but Amin is stronger. We’d be going against Ista, it’s a lot we don’t want to do.”

Uriel smirked thinking of the potential outcome. They would all be kicked out. Amin wouldn’t stand for members of the Arcana being students at his campus. He wondered if Amin would call the Virtues since they had been breaking one of the rules in their treaty. He would have a chance to kill a Virtue moving him one step closer to freedom.

“I think you should do it,” Uriel said, parking the car.

“Woah Woah Woah. Are you okay?” Fen asked, placing the back of her hand on his forehead.

He flicked her on the wrist so she yelped and pulled her hand away. “I mean it. I think you two should try. You’ve been studying hard. Why not?”

“I don’t know,” Cana said.

“Oh come on! Uriel agreed with me. This is a sign," Fen said.

Cana crossed her arms and debated with herself. She wanted to place high on the benchmarks after months of work, but the overall mission had to come first. Uriel tapped his knee against hers and winked. From behind, Fen’s excited panting wet her neck.

Cana finally caved. “Okay… fine! I’ll do it.”

The institute bells began ringing for the first period and Uriel covered his ears.

“Thanks Fen. Now, we’re late,” he said.

“I felt that bonding love for two whole seconds,” Fen responded, slipping out of her seat.

Cana walked out and locked arms with her. The visual of the dead angel decaying came to her. They had found so many or heard rumors of other corpses found all over the world. Killing an angel was a capital offense and someone managed to kill dozens of them without discovery or leaving a trace. This time however it seemed Dolores found some kind of evidence. As they walked up the path she whispered into Fen’s ear.

“She pulled something out of his hand. What do you think she’ll find out this time?”

“What? Oh. We’ve never found one this fresh. She’ll probably find out what the killer ate for breakfast. She’s probably cutting him up now,” Fen answered.

They entered the institute courtyard and Uriel nostrils ripped open, his sinuses cleared and his hunger grew tenfold. He covered his mouth and looked up trying to ignore the pounding of his own heart and the tight twisting in his stomach. He looked around and saw Roy running towards them from the left.

Uriel threw himself behind a dumpster, catching Cana and Fen's attention. Cana instinctively ducked down behind him without question. Fen however kept glancing around until she saw Roy speeding in their direction. A grin took over her face.

"Don't you dare!" Uriel growled between clenched teeth.

She winked at him then stepped right into Roy's path. She dramatically flipped her hands and kicked her feet, collapsing onto him. They tumbled over each other and she wiped her forehead while groaning in false pain. Roy got on his knees and she opened her eyes with a grimace on her face. He recognized her as the loud and obnoxious woman in his molecular clock studies course. When they locked eyes, Fen stopped her moaning and smiled before jumping to her feet.

"Oh hey! Patchy," Fen said.

"The actual hell did you just call me?"

"I'm Fen, what's your name again. We have evo together." She said, leaning towards him.

Roy scratched at his ear. When she spoke her name it came out as a stream of unintelligible sound. It repeated until he could hear *Fenrir* in its static.

"I know who you are. I'd tell you how abalist what you just said was but I'm late. That's something I care about. I know you don't care about your education since you don't mind falling asleep in class. There's thousands

of people in town who would kill to be here. I don't waste my opportunities."

Roy ran past her and she giggled standing outside. Once he was inside the building, Uriel and Cana stepped out from behind the dumpster.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Uriel asked.

"I thought I'd work towards introducing you two. And oh man is he wound up tight! You're right Cana, he is mouthy."

"Absolutely not!" Uriel growled.

"Yeah, I'm gonna agree with Uriel. No connections between humans or supernaturals. The supernaturals on Earth hate the Virtues, but they could still sell us out," Cana said.

She began fixing her hair when she noticed Amin walked towards the building, Cana squeaked and wrapped her hand around Fen's ankle. She yanked her down and Uriel pulled her behind the large trash can. They both smacked their hands over her mouth. Fen fought at first. Then saw Amin walking towards the building. She tapped two fingers on her chest acknowledging the situation. They held their breath and watched as he entered the building.

"We've been here for almost the whole semester and he still doesn't know," Cana said.

“Haben’s illusions are amazing. I’ll give the bastard that,” Fen said.

Uriel shook his head seeing a man who everyone feared on the battlefield reduced to a professor that pretended he was a human. “Even then. Him not noticing us for this long. His mind has to be elsewhere”

“I know. He’s different than he used to be. We haven’t fought against him in like 50 years. He actually helped us the last time we saw him. Maybe he’s gone soft?” Fen added.

“Then why don’t we test that today? I doubt he’d be happy we’re stepping on his peace,” Uriel said, sneaking to the institute steps.

The other two followed him and stuck their heads in the hall to make sure the coast was clear before the three of them ran to their exam rooms.

Appendicular & Soul

Dolores dragged the corpse across the basement of the mansion. The banded walls of her lair matched the stone of her armor. The dampness kept the moss on her body alive and growing as the moisture settled on her skin like dew. Fluorescent glow bulbs nourished the indoor potion garden and backlit the room with chromatic blue, red, and yellow. She picked up the body and placed it on a stone slab with grooves along the edges.

She made her first cut and blood began flowing down the channels into a bucket. Using a chisel, she wretched one of the golden plates back. Bands of connective tissue snapped as she pulled the natural armor away to examine the muscle and organs beneath. She scraped the soot from the angel's mouth and placed it in a glass dish before picking up a saw. The diamond tipped blade spit out sparks as it cut through what remained of the angel's iron rib cage.

As the buzzing saw stopped spinning, Ista walked into the basement and stood by the alchemical work bench. Dolores weaved her hand into the angel's thoracic cavity and twisted out one of its lungs. She snipped off the wet bronchi and held up the pink balloon towards the light. Ista finally stopped her once she placed the opening in her mouth and began inflating the organ.

“What's the purpose of that?” Ista asked.

“I’m testing the angel’s capacity to oxygenate blood. From what I can tell, the Angel was extremely fit. He’s from the Arch of Liberality. Which is surprising because we are Diligence’s domain. Liberality's current domain is over the East Pacific. Pazfin is traversing over the South Pacific right now.”

“So an angel flew across the ocean just to die.”

“Yes. Side mote I have a comment to make about Uriel’s readiness. His overreactions may be a detriment to this team. His volatility is-”

“He’s fine,” Ista interjected. “We have bigger problems than his unresolved mommy issues.”

She placed her fingers along the jagged hole in the angel's abdomen.

“I understand,” Dolores said, jamming her hand into the angel and yanking its instensines out.

“Wow… You’re just so gentle,” Ista said, looking down at the tray of bloodied tools. “But, this one is obviously method 1, can we prove it’s Amin yet? I would love to waltz into that fancy office of his and watch him lie.”

“Due to the charring it’s difficult to know the fragment type used to kill him, but it was sharp and hot enough to melt and cut through bones made of iron. Something like hell fire could reach those temperatures.

His wing was also cut off which means it couldn't have been blunt nor compressive force. This was more likely a blade type fragment. Exactly like Amin's. The tactics used to make the battles grounded also mirror his combat preferences. But that is not enough. However, there's this."

Dolores held up a piece of torn fabric and some pills. Ista rattled the bottle and tapped her hand against it, expecting some kind of magical reaction.

"Pills…" Ista tapped her chin for a moment before smiling as she continued reading the nearly empty label. "Pazfin Psychological Services."

"That was the sight of the incursion," Dolores said. "And Amin's old hospital."

Ista thought back to her great failure. She had been too late, but only by an hour. If she had run instead of walked. Woken up earlier that morning, skipped her shower, or ate slightly faster. She had promised so many that she would find their loved ones and bring them home. Instead she delivered them burned clothing and bad news.

"What are your thoughts?" Dolores asked.

"We failed once, I'm not okay with failing again. We know what we're up against this time."