

*(Note: this is an excerpt that would fit somewhere in chapter 3)*

The music pounded so loudly Greg Talbot could barely hear the God of Revelry's words.

"You like this place or what?" Erik van Goring yelled into his ear.

Greg nodded, moving his body in time to the strobing lights and throbbing bass almost unconsciously. "Yeah, but Club Palati's not real, is it?" He'd gotten fairly comfortable with cosmic conundrums over the past six weeks—including meeting gods in locations that didn't actually exist.

Van Goring shook his head. "No, but it's my humble abode regardless, my friend. *Me casa es tu casa*, and all that." He gestured to a table and they sat, drinks appearing out of thin air in front of them. "You still like Grey Goose?"

Greg nodded, his attention focused on a slender brunette in a sparkly minidress cavorting on the dancefloor. Van Goring followed his gaze and smiled slyly. "I told you she'd be here."

"That's Rhea?" The dancing woman looked to be about twenty-five and was stunningly beautiful.

Van Goring drained his glass, and another immediately appeared. "The Daughter of Time, yes. Everyone in here's terrified of her, though they wouldn't dare admit it."

"Terrified? Why?"

The god laughed and threw back his second whiskey. "Because they're smart."

Greg watched the woman dance. She swayed to the thump of the music, ignoring the crowd around her, eyes closed. Her body moved with the grace of a muse, safely beyond all reproach or critique. Her lithe confidence—bordering on arrogance—was the same disposition he himself had borne just after he'd swallowed the Spark. His own hubris had long since gone, however. Getting your best friend killed tended to drain it away in a hurry.

He tore his eyes from the gyrating woman and turned back to his friend. "Pan's your father. Aren't people afraid of you, too?"

Van Goring poured down another drink. "My father's an asshole. You ready to talk to Rhea, or what?"

Greg nodded. "No time like the present." He shot his vodka and slammed the glass onto the table, then stood and straightened his shirt. "Here goes nothing, to quote yet another cliché."

Van Goring cracked a smile. "Better you than me."

As he moved away from the table and navigated the crowded room, Greg took a moment to appreciate Club Palati. Crystalline walls reflected the multicolored lights emanating from the floor and ceiling, a constant flood of iridescence that swept the dancefloor and bathed its occupants in a shifting glow. Around this centerpiece

hundreds of tables were arrayed, upon which food and drink appeared according to the desires of those seated. Outside the transparent walls the decor consisted of spinning galaxies and shooting stars, though Greg knew it was all artifice. In reality the whole setup might be sitting on a single proton or spread across an entire higher plane of existence. He favored the former explanation, since the Spark enabled him to catch a distinct whiff of quantum about the place. Van Goring enjoyed farce and absurdity, and creating something like this inside an atom fit his sense of humor perfectly.

As for the guests, gods and goddesses from a dozen pantheons filled the room, along with spirits, demons, and even a nymph dressed in gossamer who shot him a lusty gaze.

Greg, however, had eyes for only one person.

Rhea danced alone, as if inside an invisible, protective dome. Other beings gave her a wide berth, whether out of fear or instinct Greg had no idea.

"Excuse me," he said when he had closed to within a few feet. Her eyes opened, and she regarded him with a penetrating gaze.

"You're not dancing," she said in a voice both melodious and dangerous.

"I'm not here to dance. I want to talk to you."

She gestured, and the music abruptly stopped. Everyone and everything in Club Palati froze—even the light beams ceased their roaming crawl. In the distance Greg could see a statue-like Van Goring, mouth agape, petrified in the act of imbibing yet another drink.

"I like this song, so let's pause things here."

She stepped off the dancefloor and walked, barefoot, to a nearby table. High heels, a shawl, and a handbag waited for her. "Sit," she instructed.

He did, and Rhea took the chair opposite him. After a few moments of silence, she spoke again. "So you're Greg Talbot—the man who consumed the Spark. I saw you come in with that drunken oaf."

Greg nodded, reaching out as he did with his new senses. Rhea radiated placidity, but deep within her blazed a boiling furnace. Rage enough to atomize mountains hid there, and power to match—tightly coiled and frightening in its intensity.

"And you're Rhea, the Daughter of Time."

Her lip twitched in distaste at the title. "What have you learned so far, Talbot, in your brief period of ascension?"

He met her gaze squarely. "That I still make mistakes." An image of Stephen's face flashed into his mind's eye—Stephen's shocked expression as his body came apart inside the monstrous Loom of Neith.

"Making mistakes is easy," Rhea replied. "Learning from them is hard." A tall drink appeared in her hand, and she took a sip. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Now that the moment had come, Greg didn't hesitate. "I want you to reverse time. Take me back so I can save my friend."

Rhea considered this, took another sip of her drink, then leaned forward. "I want something too," she told him. She placed both hands on the table and locked her eyes onto his.

"I want you to help me kill my father."

**To be continued...**