

# Parallels

Book 1

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Sci-Fi / Mystery

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## Prologue

His breathing was heavy and abrupt. Unable to move. Body held by exoskeleton. Lower half is already sunk to the floor. Legs scraped and cut by broken glass. Some bits are already stuck in flesh. Eyes having trouble focusing. His white hair is sticking to forehead.

He is bleeding. Unable to even cry. Pain is excruciating. Yet he is already exhausted to be minding it. He's got no idea how the glass pod broke – he woke up to pain. Still all the wires are connected to his body. Needles scraping inside of him – tearing flesh. Internal bleeding is severe by now.

From what he sees in this room – it has been decades. Many years since everyone got killed. Mummified corpses of researchers are left around, in the same places they were shot. The stench is sickening.

Facility running on reserve energy supply from hell knows where. Air is heavy, dusty, and most of the research lab is raided and destroyed. Yet quite a lot is still here and operating. Perhaps thieves just don't know how valuable equipment really is.

Monitors, although covered with layers of dust, display graphs and stats of the last existing patients – test subjects who are still attached to the system. He can barely distinguish his stats. It looks grim. He is dying.

He knows – there is no way for him to survive. He gives a look around – glance leads to another cryogenic container. There is someone else, besides him, who'll have more chances of survival. Way more chances than he does. Maybe there is hope.

With all there is left of him – he can last another 6-8 hours more, before his mind fails him completely, just like his disabled body that is dying rapidly.

Time that's left – he must get her out. She is the last of the once existing family. His family. His hopes are now on her.

He closes his eyes once again. He still remembers how to operate this.

“System Compliance Granted” – the rippled muffled voice of AI says as he drifts off.

## Chapter 1 “Young Winter Morning”

/Erick

Room is filled with sounds of Radiohead music, it is playing quietly in the background, as I stroll to the kitchen to make my morning coffee.

Amazing weather outside - all bright and white. It is rough and cold outside. Pleased to enjoy it from here – my humble home.

There are always moments when you just go on shivering from the view of something very chilly. Perhaps there's something that is built inside you to automatically get such a reaction.

As I am making my chocolate coffee I observe scenery outside. Sun is reflecting its light upon the white snow - making it “blinding obstacle” for the eyes to focus.

Yet eyes manage to look at the landscape spreading further: great forest valley just underneath, the snow gently covering each tree branch, each rock.

Keeping the earth pleasingly under the white blanket. Beauties of living high up on the hill. Pretending to be a mountain man on the inside, yet externally I'm quite far from one.

To explain a bit about my world...

Due to us going through the journey together now. It might be hard to grasp, but it's like a parallel to the place called Terra - where Humans live.

With the fact that we have a nice understanding with our nature, we still progress out with science. We managed to find a great new sources of energy, that does not interfere with the course of nature.

We advanced our technology and architecture, took fond love and care towards education and we are pushing individuality.

Most population is known to be Different, within all means possible. Having similarities here - is what seems unnatural, even dangerous - all of these perspective teachings are taken from observations of Terra.

The treacherous tendencies we have observed have implied our system to encourage being “abnormal”, but even that, with the new scientific progress, left us with a specified definitive state of “abnormal”. That's where AIO comes in.

AIO is the governing system - Autonomous Intellectual Organism. It is evaluating the balance levels of each individual to keep specific merits, tabs, on the populace, so that if the abnormality is beyond the “expected” level - the person is under “The Protection Act”.

With the good understanding of AIO we got to balance out our creativity, which is a wonderful companion to every one of us and regarded as “The Keeper of Greatness and Wisdom”.

I hear the click and look down on the cup - indeed, coffee is done. I take the cup and go to my green conservatory, that's suited just outside the kitchen.

Taking a seat at the round marble table, still keeping my eyes on the heartwarming scene of winter morning.

The moment I take my first sip of coffee - I hear footsteps towards me. Apparently, dear Lonely Orchid woke up.

She's the new student of mine, from the lectures I have in the few universities I work. She walks into the conservatory after making coffee for herself.

By the looks of her - she's awake for a while.

“Lazy Cat?” - She called.

“Uhum.” - I replied.

“I am just thinking... Why are there still those who try to destroy, who begin wars, who just hurt others, are selfish, think too highly of themselves? What is the point of being submerged into misery to such an extent of not being able to see the goodness?”

I looked at Orchid, as I sighed.

“You do get that I just woke up, right?” - I exhale.

“Yes, but are you not the best lecturer of such arts? For you it shouldn't be much of a problem to answer.” - Her innocent look reminded me of how she got to stay with me.

Because she requested to stay with the same innocent look and I denied. Though director who stood next to me, gave me a “soft” nag for not excelling at helping the students. Vouching that she'd not cause any trouble, as she's just so not looking like it.

Oh, how looks can be deceiving.

Our silence hung in the air for a while. I managed to finish one cup of coffee, then get another one.

During the whole process she was watching me, waiting for me to answer.

Sometimes it feels like this innocent student is leeching off by having free lectures. So troublesome.

I clicked my tongue, then walked back to the conservatory entrance.

Standing in the door frame, cup in hands, I decided to give in and land a short lecture.

“When we’re given challenges, we are meant to seek for the solution” - I began, - “The righteous way of the path that takes you through and out. To then understand the core of the problem and learn from it. To never return to this pitch black, but to acknowledge it. Some fail to get it. They look at it and absorb it, making it their core - something now pushing them towards new generated harsh actions which cause expansion of the darkness and the harm to surroundings.”

I gave a short glance at Orchid - she’s all ears. I look outside, as I continue.

“It takes courage and some time to be able to see the light in the dark. It is a hardship to craft out of yourself the means to not give up and not give in. You learn by giving up on something, or giving something away to gain new knowledge that will make you wiser. That is hard, but no one said it would be easy. Ones who manage that over and over again to then protect what they get to build and raise - are the Wisemen or just bonkers.”

“Bonkers?” - Orchid’s brows were knitted. It made me let out a short smile.  
 “Mad Men.” - I replied to her quizzical look, then continued.

“When you get to understand and acknowledge - you start to do your best to help others overcome their abyss. To not let them feel pain you felt, keep them away from darkness. To understanding what abyss is filled with and what it does. How much pain it brings. How much life it takes. And what you must lose to gain back some light. Some listen to the ones who went through abyss. Others tend to learn it the hard way around. Another bunch get stuck and do not wish to move in any direction.”

Silence hung in the air. I started wondering if what I said made sense. Though it made perfect sense to me.

Orchid seemed deep in thoughts with an answer.  
 I decided it’s my moment to leave. Turning round, facing the hall, I hear her voice.

“Say, Lazy Cat” - she calls to me, - “ So we all must craft our light cores from courage and strength, to not fall for the darkness, to be able to go through the abyss?”

By the tone of her voice - seemed like she got it. Barely so, but there.

“Yes, each is responsible for their own light core. They have to pour more light to keep it being strong, to be able to overcome the abyss. Yet in case it dares to claim you - it is hard to come back to the light.” – I spoke as I was walking towards study.  
 My own mind felt like it reminisced about the light in the abyss.

Faint flash of memory rushed through my mind. The way I cried to the heavens when I lost my Light. I stumbled back, almost losing my balance.  
 “My Light” – my memories whispered.

Suddenly it was harder to move. Steps heavy, as I managed to make my legs walk, making it towards study.

Tears began swelling up in my eyes, lump in my throat, as it became harder to breathe.

“I see. Thank you.” - mumbled Orchid, whilst staring at my back.

I got into my study, closing the door behind, locking it.

In an instant tears flooded down my cheeks. Voice faded, as I opened my mouth in silent cry.

I heard Orchids' voice behind the door - she seemed on the phone. I wouldn't want her to see me like this.

“My light...” - I let out, crying, hand clasping at my heart, as the tight, crushing pain tore me from inside. - “Why am I crying?” - I asked self, as tears blurred vision, heart beats thumping in my ears.

The feeling of something precious that got forgotten - made me want to remember.

## Chapter 2 “Flower Rain”

/Erick

A new Garden opened near my house.

I enjoy the flowers and taking care of them, though I am not as good at it as I'd like I've a feeling that there are a lot of us – who are really enthusiastic about flowers and plants, but at times it just doesn't work out.

Such an amazing opportunity to go and take a look at new breeds of flowers, bushes, trees - plainly just to enjoy the flora itself.

For me - it's art. Plants differ from one another, yet all seem in so much harmony.

There are great architects specialising in creating landscapes that change each season – using plants, knowledge and imagination.

Usually I'm alone during my walks, to savour the moments, but today I had Orchid accompanying me.

Orchid wanted to take some time to understand my point of view regarding flowers. She is not fond of the whole idea and process. She said it is too time consuming – that you have to care for it. That's another point of view.

We were pacing through the arch of wisteria. Purple flowers hung above us. Like the garden of the mythical goddess - guiding us with this passage to meet the goddess herself.

Orchid struck a question. Once again – not minding the joy I had, nor time and place.

“Why is it that humans are so much into not liking differences? Why do they have problems with how they look or where they live? Even with their preferences in love? Does it not come as weird to be pointing out the differences and disliking them without understanding them?”

This girl had to bombard me with diverse questions when I was feeling all good and fuzzy.

Not that she looked like it, but she had this odd habit of getting me uncomfortable. Perhaps it was somehow related to her – the questions she asks. Yet she does crash them questions on me, when I'm off guard. Irritating.

We walked across a little stand. I bought a bottle of flower wine and in silence walked to a bench that was conveniently hidden behind the corner of the next passage.

Whiff of the chrysanthemum scent caught me. We sat down. I got out a glass that the seller gave me with a wine bottle. After a little struggle I opened the wine. The deep maroon was poured. Mellow was a fragrance that waffed towards me.

In the corner of my view - Orchid was staring me down. No escape from the 'needed' lecture, is there?

"Not really sure how to approach such a topic." - I took a deep breath, looked at passing by creatures of this world, enjoying wine. Marvellous taste. - "In the human world, when a person is born - it's born into the world that has toxicity - which is being taught and burned into the brain from the moment he appears."

I took a deep breath, shook head, and in a moment went on.

"Such happens due to the fact that the ancestors were through experiences, which lead them to believe that differences are bad. People with another colour are pinned with some sort of specific criteria and stereotypes. Then there's another sort of preferences in love or bounds - all looking atrocious and heretic to the previous generations. Elders teaching you that only your place of birth is one to be prayed for and only one that shall accept you."

I smirked in bitterness, as I downed a glass and poured more.

"Unfortunate path for the adventurer it might seem. But there are brave souls. Ones, who despite the words they heard and took in - allowed their soul and heart to seek the answers to all pending questions on their own. So they begin their travels."

"These adventurers take it upon themselves to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears. For what these 'others' are different, or have in common with each other, or reasons why they made their decisions."

"Throughout the time spent with the rest of the world, they learn to see that different skin colour is nothing to be frightened of. They all remain the same human beings within one race. They share the fact that they have goals in life. They also breathe and hope, believe and work, possess the body and communicate.

They care about their families, whether the family is a good town, country or few close people - it does not matter. They all have needs, they eat, they sleep, they seek pleasure. So why are they still viewed by others as a threat?"

I gave a short look in Orchid's direction. She stood watching passers by, yet maintaining the best concentration to my words she could muster in this moment.

Giving a little head shake I continued.

"Ones who are not afraid to express themselves - become a cause of threat for their open soul. For the wish of being with others, or just someone they love and care for. When it was all about conquering the land and showing strength - it seemed appropriate for male to have a male as a lover. It was even quite a strange occurrence if a man did not select another man for a lover."

"Women were just the same as men. Allowed to love one another, or whomever they



choose, and it was all a part of the norm. Then as it took a turn, the changes started to occur. Then men were meant to only stay with women. To be a pair within despair, who on the side, hiding in shadows, were available to gasp the joy of same sex love and intercourse.”

“As, in their later opinion, such a move is viewed as ‘not normal’, something out of stories of the devils and angels. Then religions came to pressure people - to make them look in the direction which satisfied someone above. I can truly call it rubbish.”

“No one, not a single soul besides yours can judge your decisions or choices - judgement from others is the learned “norm” of acceptance and obedience. They were not teaching logical sense and integrity for what they really are.”

“Then time later - people rejoiced for being able to, alas, not hide their love and family, which may consist of same sex couple. It is not bad, or hideous - it never was.”

“But as they started to accept the ways of nature, there appeared those who're still frightened by such norms of life and nature. They lack the vision and understanding that rules which were made in history were made by Humans.”

“There are no creatures that control us or judge us from aside. There’s only soul - possessed by each and every one of us. Perhaps not scientifically proven to have merits that can be understood. And actions which we take are only to be judged by us. Based on love, logic and common sense nature.”

“So in the sense... When differences are viewed as natural, when strange is being part of life. When others stop to make up rules which nature did not provide, stop trying to conquer the world, stop making up the horrid stories of the encounters that weren’t faced... Which then become the awful lot of new toxic rage of rules against the others. Instead - accept and be open, learn, help, cooperate, empathize - that could lead to norms of nature.”

“I can’t deny the natural selection. Yet there are weaklings that end up being the toughest ones. Not always physical strength overcomes the mental strength.”

“Wise men and women are the ones who keep the sanity in a mad world. Although endlessly told they’re possessed by evil of some sort. I always see that. The highly referred evil - is just hatred and lack of knowledge of one who speaks of it.”

“We, just like them, in our world have hate and love. It’s just that our teachers make us learn that knowledge, work, ideas, free expressions and love - are ones for making progress. Yet there is a whole dark place - which is within some of us. It was proven greatness to know and understand the dark, but chose the light. Or even live, whilst maintaining both.”

“With these components we’re made. That’s what makes us. And the choices we make. Thus each decision is your own. You craft your life and are the one to live it.”

“The things that differ should only let us get closer. Learning and understanding them strange things and making them become a part of what we all are.”

My throat was dry from all this yapping. I downed a whole glass of wine. Amazing potion. Orchid was bored, yet trying to maintain composure. Guess the philosophy I lecture can be to some - endlessly boring.

I put the glass down, pouring the last of the wine, then swiftly finishing the last of the fine drink. My head tilted back, eyes glued to iris hanging, leaves and petals fluttering in the soft breeze.

Another pang of pain in my head. That suffocating feeling and dire wish to burst in tears. My muddled mind once more starts to whisper “My Light...”, as this odd yearning comes again.

The strange sadness and sentimentality is really frustrating.

After a harsh wind gust - rain poured down. Petals fell with raindrops on all that was underneath. As they fell - they looked magical.

The shower of the blue and purple. Although it felt like a part out of my memory, like I've seen something similar before. Yet I knew well that it was my first - observing such a scene.

“We should go home.” - exhaled Orchid. The frown on her face stated her disgust with the weather.

We stood up and walked through this flower rain. My feet walking towards the wine stand - to get more flower wine.

“So, ones who nag the differences are simply afraid or taken over by hate. They fail to understand why such an occurrence takes place. That makes sense.” – Orchids' voice sounded like robot. The frown deepening on her face.

“It's not the best of explanations, but that is one I see as true.” - I spoke, paying for wine.

I asked her to go home first, as I'd still wanted to enjoy more wine and flowers. Without any debate, just plain disgust with the weather, she left.

I walked back to the bench I sat on. No passers by. Somehow the garden became deserted.

The petals felt like kisses all over my face. My coat got soaked, the nape of my neck collected petals. Somehow I felt like this rain was giving me its blessing. Like before...

Before...

I opened the bottle and drank straight from it. My tears blurred vision, falling down. Rain was adding up to my feelings.

Once again the lump in my throat, the pain in my chest, and the suffocating feeling grew larger.

With no one there to see - I wept.

“My Light... My Light...” - I mumbled under my breath, choking on sadness that washed over me.

I watched the petals fall, as the rain grew heavier. Thunder and storm befell this region.

Drinking this sadness down, I found solace in roaring thunder. It felt familiar, it warmed my heart.

After I finished wine - I walked home.

“That’s not my home. Never was.” - Thoughts protested, as legs stumbled on.

## Chapter 3 “The Night in the Kitchen”

/Erick

Insomnia - greatest self-destructive system. It comes out when you are troubled, floating somewhere in between reality and dream.

My only safe place, no matter where and how... I'm drawn to the kitchen. It seems quite strange by many means. As I, grown-up, sit on the kitchen floor. Hands holding a cup of coffee, eyes staring into space. Like that shadow over there is the answer to something that is bothering me.

But all I really see is just the hollow nothingness of that point blank I stare into. The dreams of dying 'Light' recently keep me up through the night.

Somehow this bit of cold place called the kitchen is just where I feel safe. In a way, like in a story by Banana Yoshimoto “Kitchen”, yes, somehow to some of us it is the best place to “hide”. This moonlit darkness, in blue hues, really makes me feel at ease.

When I was in the room, on his bed... His bed?  
Head shook a few times, fingers brushing through hair.  
“Who is Light? What have I forgotten?” - thinking to self, as I lean back against cabinets.

“Are you alright? You seem out of it.” - said Orchid, standing a few steps away. Barely any sound made, as she approached.

She stood, her gaze examining me. Like she's burning a hole in my skull. In side glance - she looked beautiful. Her hair is like stardust in a moonlit kitchen. Her night dress - short and pale.

Heh... What can I explain regarding this moment? I am here in the middle of the night, without light, looking out the window trying to get a glimpse of stars. There is something that tries to get back in my memory and I still don't know what it is. Or why. But I truly do not wish to share that.

“Something on your mind?” - Spoke Orchid. - “I might not be someone who will understand, but I can try.”

I kept on plainly looking ahead. She took a deep breath. Then I went to sit on a chair in the kitchen. Swift and silent movements.

“Can you tell me about yourself? Even a bit of how you became the way you are. I want to know.” - She let out.

Her questions were the oddest kind. Right now I was curious why.

Telling about self to this young brat that was pushed onto me. Not like I enjoyed her presence here, nor she was fond of my company. It's like she's here because it's needed so.

"How I became this way." - I let my frustration seep through. - "What way?"

I gave her a glance. She got surprised. Definitely not expecting words to backfire. She was seeking for the right words now - I saw it in her darting eyes. Looking at the surroundings, trying her best.

"The way you're into Terra and exploring its ways. It's very rare to have a person to be this much into a subject." - She was trying to sound so much less agitated, then she was - it was showing.

I kept my mouth shut.

"I apologize." - She let out in defeat. - "It was rude of me to use words I used. I want to genuinely know more of you."

"Why?" - I saw how she was doing her best at covering up whatever she was up to. Now she was at a loss of words.

Few minutes later she managed to find her reply, in spite of her real ideas.

"I feel like I can learn from you." - She let out.

"Learn?" - I was annoyed, - "By flaunting questions, not trying to be attentive to answers, harassing someone by insisted presence and pestering by all means? That does not sound like learning. Sounds more like a stalker or offender! Which one are you?!" - My voice grew into an angry shout.

Now she looked frightened.

"What? Didn't expect I'd pick up on it?" - I was annoyed and irritated.

I got up, opened the top cupboard, pulled out a bottle of strong liquor. Once I turned around - I opened the bottle and downed some. I gave her a glance, then sat back down.

She kept her mouth shut. So did I.

Half a bottle later I kept my eyes on the sky. Now it was covered in dark clouds, with silver grey rims from the moonlight behind.

"Cat?" - Orchid spoke.

"What?" - I heard my tired voice.

I sounded exhausted, pathetic.

"I'm not the best choice, but at least I can listen." - She sounded more honest. Voice dropped the pretence tone she used before.

"The hell with it, maybe it'll lighten." - my mind gave a short thought. I felt my fingers tremble, as I raised the bottle, drinking more. Once the burning feeling coursed through me - I closed my eyes, my tired voice softly echoing in the kitchen.

"I am not very good at explaining my feelings. I can't seem to find the right words. Others become offended or misunderstand when I try to explain. I am bad at it. It's just that I have not been taught how to express my feelings right. It's a mixture of what comes to mind on how to let them know what goes inside. Saying something rude whilst happy, or cheesy when sad. When mad - I can't say things right at all. I end up bluntly speaking out. That I was not in charge of making in my head." - I felt my own breathing.

I was feeling the faint trembling inside, then, as if off, it dissipated. I felt that my 'Light' hugged me, wrapped tight. I still don't know who or what it is - but the warmth seems so real.

Orchid kept watching me. Her gaze felt heavy, burdensome. Then she looked out.

"Guess I'm a little miserable that way. When I really have something in my heart that eats me up - I just make up a good side to it. Pretending that all is for the best. Although the pain does not go away. It keeps pulsating inside, reminding me of self every time I wake up in the morning. That's making me sort of pitiful." - My head leaned back, eyes looked up.

Still the same ceiling. Same lamp. I heard how Orchid shifted in chair. My trembling was already faint. Warmth left me. Once again I felt loneliness.

"But then again, not all in this world is best or perfect. I am still working it out to find the most suitable words to describe what possesses my mind. At times it is a delusion. A collision of two differences that make a mess inside. I just can't get it right. I keep fiddling with words, mulling them over. In the end what I spit out - are the things that have nothing in common. That is where most wave their quizzical 'What?'. Unable to understand - they complain about it. But how can I explain that - what lies in my head is not easily said. Sometimes it's better on paper instead. Mostly then - it seems to make more sense."

The bottle raised to my lips, a harsh drink falling down in my bodily pit.

I breathed out. Trying to find the passage for eyesight to catch onto stars, that hand cannot reach.

Orchid turned to check me, then let out a deep breath. Unable to understand, she shook her head.

"You tend to speak in riddles. Sometimes sounding like an old creature. Sometimes pain is the most common return to the faith you give. Yet you sound like you ate the pain and let it

grow. Although you never looked that way. Always positive, always inspiring” - Orchid said her piece. She was tired of seeing me tired.

I really couldn't care for her shenanigans. My irritated sarcasm was unsheathed.

“Many speak of the Wise Men they meet on the path of their life.” - I began, - “They say they learned a lot during that moment in time. Yet they do not use the knowledge they got. They just mind it inside themselves and forget what they're told.”

Orchid seemed offended. I let out a smirk. Yes, facing up to your shit can be tough indeed.

Eyes glued to the stars that shone bright in the sky.

Odd sensation that they were similar to ones I looked at with beloved 'Light'.

Who are you? Why don't I remember? These darn feelings...

“These stars - amazing beauty are they not?” - I said. Right now my dearest wish would be to remember this precious 'Light'.

Orchid just looked up, giving the expression of “This? Is this it?” - she really is shallow.

I shook slowly my head in disappointment. Then downed what was left in the bottle. Sense of being drunk got me. The exhaustion fell like a ton of bricks. I now felt like speaking to self more, then telling someone.

“I remember the days when I saw stars, similar to these - but different. As if from someplace else. Back then my view would be accompanied with strange forests and swamps. Small houses made of wood and bricks, with no lights in windows. Covered by moonlight. Sound of a train passing somewhere nearby. I was gazing at the stars, when I heard a voice - girly voice from inside. She said, 'I wish there would be someone like me, so I'd share what I see and that person would share what he saw with me.'

And I was awed. Wasn't sure what was on - but spoke in return: 'I am here. You're not alone.' The voice gasped with surprise. I think she thought - there would be no one to reply to her, that moonlit night. 'My name's Niko' she said. 'You can call me Erick' - I replied.”

“I spoke to her and she spoke to me. We became one - her and me. Somehow I could see what she saw, and she saw what I've seen. That was magical. Her voice was nice to hear. I was struck with the belief that we were the female and male sides of one soul. Sounds like a mystery and something quite crazy. But that is what we ended up thinking about us.”

I felt my mouth corners slowly rise in a smile. Such distant memories, slowly falling on me like that petal rain.

“One time I heard her sobbing. I asked her to tell me more of what bothered her... Abused, physical pain, poisonous words and lack of ones who would take her the way she was - those were the poison bullets and lashes which took her bit by bit away to see Belphegor and Mammon. Eventually to be frightened by these creatures of witchcraft.

Each time I tried to strike a conversation with her - she cut it short. I could hear her hollow out slowly each time. No matter how much I showed her the life here - the nature that I enjoyed, the creatures... No matter how I tried to cheer her to get out of misery - it didn't work. She distanced herself further. One day I could no longer see what she saw. Neither she heard me anymore."

"Then, I noticed things here, which bore similarity to what I saw through her eyes. I felt pain. I could feel part of what she felt as I looked closer at what was going on. What I saw deep inside the system gave me shivers. Made me mortified with fear, hatred, disgust. Made me hollow and miserable - just like her."

"From then on I was walking through this world - seeing grime everywhere. Unsure how these things could be in existence. Then I stopped one day. I was poor. Had no living soul who would take my hand, say something to make me believe in the world I live in again. It was a horrid time - back then."

"Just as I was about to kick the bucket and say my last goodbye to the world: as I stood on the hill looking across the city I was born, smelling the night air and scent of narcissus - eyes closed, silence around... I hear a familiar voice in the background.

'Erick, - she spoke softly, - I am here, next to you, looking at the dark sky, surrounded by the scent of narcissus and the chill of the night. I know what you feel. I feel the same, but look at all closer, yet from far far away.'

'Beneath us - people, rushing somewhere, beeping car horns, crying police sirens, swearing and yelling, words of love falling and someone caring for some other one. There are so many of us, still unaware of the Hell, that crawls back at them, if they meddle from the path they are on. The buzz never stops. Even if we both go, they will keep on being. Some might be wrong, some are right, some are strong, some are weak, even the inside of their mind can be fragile.' - She spoke with a smile on, yet with great pain in heart, that was tattered apart. - 'You know, it's been years since I saw your stars.'"

"I kept my gaze fixed on the stars. Somehow, I was warmed up again to hear that someone was beside me, holding my hand. Knowing the path through which we went."

"Niko, where were you? I tried many times to see through your eyes, but never again have I managed to get to you. What happened?' - I wanted to know. I was eager to know. She was a part of me, to begin with."

"Eh...' - she let out. - 'There was a lot going on. More sorrow, more pain and more loveless of heart. Aching to become someone's beloved, but somehow that dream fell apart. But then I fell close - with nature, with stars and with dreams, hopes for someone to love. You know, Erick, I tried to become someones 'the one' - but ended up stranded in things that I was not really ready for. Ended up hurting someone. But I learned that once you are alone - just like then - when looking at the stars and the forest of swamps with trains that go by nearby. You just see the peace still dwelling within. In little doses - in something small - you nibble on this bit of happiness, from recalling the feeling of before and adding it to the bit which became more.'"



“You know, I am here with you now. Aren’t we two halves of one? I love you, Erick. No matter how long and how much more we will struggle, feel pain or disappointment - I am sure that we, heart in heart, can overcome things that will try to break us apart. We can apologise for the trouble we caused along the way. Minding our paths as we shall stay. Promise me that we shall keep on going.’ - She said then.”

“All I could muster to reply to her was that I promise to walk on, heart in heart, struggling along. I was crying - so was she. We were happy inside. From then on, we were always together, side by side. I still see what she sees and she sees what I see. She laughs at my jokes and my sarcasm. Through laughter we keep on going.” - I felt myself smiling. My eyes closed.

“So, I was where the hell was all cold and frost was biting, chilling the heart to the core. With the last of the light I had in me - she saved me, just like I have saved her before.” - Very slowly I felt things starting to untangle. I remembered her. But I felt there was more.”

Orchid was greatly puzzled by my seeming nonsense. Seeing her knit brows made me let out a giggle.

Orchids' eyes traced my moves, as I got up.

“You’re drunk.” - She stated boldly.

“Pfft!” - I let out, - “Don’t want to see me drunk - go to sleep.”

She got up and went back to her room, the door shutting loudly behind. Her tantrum throwing made me laugh.

“Yeah, drunk. But you heard of my real past, you brat.” - I smirked, grabbed the water and went to sleep in my study.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.” - Floated in mind. - “Didn’t mean to offend her, but she jumped the loaded gun. Researching me must be fun.”

## Chapter 4 “Water Petal”

/Erick

Dawn - with darkness fading, it's getting brighter.  
Still in bed. Feeling the warmth of sheets on my skin. Breathing in chilly air.  
Oh, I did leave the window opened for the night.

Cannot recall the dream I had. As the morning goes - have to get up. Today there's plenty of work in need of my attention.

Getting up from the bed was the toughest part. My tendency of liking towards the warmth is bigger than love for cold. Fetching next to bed my long sleeve shirt and jeans to wear for today.

Although it's the end of summer, yet mornings are pretty chilly. Thin frost clinging to petals, grass and trees, covering houses and window sills. I find it fascinating to observe the transition from the crystals of cold into the tiny water drops. That eventually falls down or evaporates, uncovering a world with enhanced contrast.

My room looked like a schizophrenic mess created by some stray artisan, who went through here as a gust of wind. Multiple canvases, books, paints, brushes, papers with random writing on them scattered around. Through all that I made my way to the kitchen.

My morning typically starts with coffee. Yet Today somehow I craved green tea. Guess my body is a bit fed up with coffee. In a cupboard I grabbed the container with white leaf tea. Was this one a present from a company?

Boiling kettle was whistling cheerfully. I could feel a bit of satisfaction as it also woke up to greet the new day with me.

Took out my favourite tea set. Handmade, very exquisite work, it was expensive and really hard to get. The two-colored set of tea cups and tea pot had a unique mixture of black and blue. Person who made this beauty put a lot of effort, thought and soul into them. I admire the intricacies of different craftsmanship.

It felt like a swirl of tea poetry - putting tea leaves in the pot, pouring boiled water in. I felt like it was a little ceremony. The kind of ritual between me and my tea, my cups and tea pot.

Kind of like the tea ceremonies in Japan or China, for what I have read about them. The preparations, the delicate handling of cups and pots. The happening of intimate momentum – a mysteriously charming ritual.

Once on the tray - cups, tea, piece of cake, I went to sit in the conservatory.

The outside scenery – dew drops forming on almost everything, sun is slowly up, shining and warming the earth. Pushing the cold away and swaying the dance of nature.

Up on the tree branches I heard a few birds - their charming, melodic singing. A Neighbor cat came to sit on my porch, giving me a glance as if greeting me, then absorbed himself in his morning cleaning routine. This cat had a tendency of licking himself clean on my porch and then sleeping there for the better half of a day. I do admit that that place had sunshine drawn to it. And this cat loves sunshine.

Preoccupied by the joy of a beautiful morning, I did not notice that Orchid passed through the hall and into the kitchen.

“Good morning. I see you already enjoy your... tea?” - She said with a slight confusion. Her eyebrows in a knit, messy bun on her head, night-dress, in cream pink that hung freely, her widened eyes staring at me - like I’ve committed a crime.

“Is it a crime to drink tea in the morning?” - I asked, my brow raised.

“Ah... Eh...” - She was digesting the new view. - “Guess that’s more healthy.”

She said and went to make coffee. Once done, she walked closer, her back against the doorframe of the conservatory.

She shook her head slightly, as her eyes drifted aside to view my morning tea and me.

I felt her stare, yet I was more preoccupied with the cat on my porch.

The way he meticulously cleaned himself. Then turned to lay on his stomach, looking into the distance.

“There’s a long forgotten legend. Told by old men. A legend about the Water Petal. That was quite an exquisite story.” - I looked inside my cup, which had a tea leaf floating in the middle. This sight just somehow reminded me of that “petal” legend.

“Care to share?” - Orchid let out a sigh, speaking in an indifferent tone.

She has been frustrated lately. Not sure if all the credit goes to me.

Her frustration was really getting me to smile.

“Well, that’s what you get for your curiosity.” - my mind spat out.

I looked back into the distance, the same endless view cat was eyeing.

“Long ago, in the lands of forests and mountains. Was a cave with a garden inside. It held great treasure - The Goddess of Rivers. It was told that possessing the heart of the Goddess gave you the power to all the waters on earth. With such hearsay there were many men eager to capture the Goddess. To rip her heart and use it for power. Long expeditions in search of her went through the forest of the mountain Sekka. It was said that she lived in the lake, inside the mountain.”

“Somehow men who searched the far forest - died. Mainly towards the middle part of the north side of the mountain. For whatever reason - many could not pass that point. Those who returned - said that evil spirits were chasing them out as they went there. Ones who did not listen were dragged into the dark - to never appear again.”

“With such a strange story - a young girl decided to try her luck at finding the Goddess. Girls’ motive was simply to see her. She believed that she could learn from Goddess about the world.”

“One summer night, as the moon shone bright, a young girl, called Mai, went up the mountain. With the light of the moon shimmering through leaves, yet darkness lurking around each corner - she mustered bravely and kept on. Later - she reached the part that was said to have demons hidden. The rustling of leaves gave her a scare, yet she came closer - stumbling upon a harmed hare. Without a moments thought she got closer to hare, examining the wound - it bled. ‘I am not of harm to you, just bear with me dear!’ - as she spoke, she tore a strip from her dress, wrapped it around the hares leg, taking him in her care. She held him with softness and bitterly said: ‘Who could have done such atrocity?’”

“‘Humans did. Ones who were here to find the Goddess of Rivers. They tormented us. In fear I run off.’ Amazed by the fact that hare spoke - Mai was looking at its ears. She rubbed one with utter care: ‘I am seeking for Goddess as well, but unlike others who come here, I am willing to learn from her. My name is Mai.’

‘Mai you say...’ - hare sniffed her, - ‘I’ll lead you to her.’”

I paused, as I sensed that Orchid let out another deep sigh. She cared less of the story. She had her own worry.

I did not really care, I just like this particular story. Therefore with a faint satisfactory smile I went on.

“Hare led her towards a cave higher up the mountain. Entrance moonlit, fireflies floating around like small lanterns. Mai walked through the cave to discover dazzling light of the sun inside. A garden stretched out in front of her eyes - the kind like she’d never seen in her life. The grandiose view of flowers, trees, bushes, small fountains and rivers inside. With stairs leading upwards to a simple and beautiful shrine.”

“Having hare leading the way - Mai went up. She stood still in front of the gate that led inside. ‘Oh Goddess of Rivers, I apologize for disturbing your peace.’ - Mai said as she bowed to the gates of the shrine. Moment passed and she heard a chuckle inside. Shrine doors silently opened in front of her. The Goddess of Rivers sat inside having tea with the hare. She smiled and offered a seat at the table to Mai - ‘Come, here’s plenty of tea to share.’”

“‘I told her the intention you arrived with here.’ - Hare spoke, holding a small cup made of translucent blue clay.”

“May nodded. Goddess smiled softly - ‘I shall teach you. I shall give you the knowledge. But you have to promise me that if I die, you will be looking after the shrine.’ Mai was feeling

strange regarding words of death, but promised that she'll keep watch over the shrine if it so happens that Goddesses cease to exist."

"Years passed. Mai learned a lot, became wiser, more observant. Now, there was a new sort of desire inside her - stirring her up making it hard to breathe. One night she dreamed of some heat urging her feeling so sweet - leaving her breathless. So amazing it made her head spin - with butterflies fluttering within. She spoke about it to the Goddess. Two of them sitting in Goddesses room. Mai was ordered to undress. Revealing bare body to Goddess."

"That day Mai experienced all she felt in her dream. Goddess caressed her body, kissed her lips, touched her soft rosy spot, and felt it through from within. Made Mai moan and scream, from all the feelings Goddess stirred inside her. After that every night for a week the Goddess caressed Mai. Later unveiling that Mai is the bearer of Goddesses child."

"Mai began feeling that she had something inside her, bit by bit swelling to bloom."

"Months passed and one day, as Mai was being with the child, the Goddess asked her to go, hide in the forest outside - the south side. Stay there for three nights and come back as she might. Goddess called out the hare, which led Mai to the shrine. Making a hare drink breath from a cup. Hare became human with the given name Naire. Then the Goddess asked Naire to take good care over Mai and her child."

"Mai and Naire went to stay on the south side. During that time they heard an awful fire - saw the smokes, heard the blasts. They were afraid. On the third night Mai had a dream: she came to the shrine. Her kids by her side - looked after a grey haired Naire. The next day, as Mai and Naire came back to the shrine, they saw land rampaged by an outrageous disaster. Mai rushed towards ruins - which once were the shrine. She stumbled towards the remains of the Goddesses room - the place where they were together to feel flutters and heat. Mai found a small box left untouched. She took it in hands, opening the lid - inside was a note with a Water Petal. Note said that it was the heart of the Goddess - which will forever belong to Mai."

"People of villages nearby, had now the legend up about the strange shrine that fell over. When hunters found it, with no Goddess in sight, or bounty of heart - they took what they deemed valuable, burning rest to the ground."

"Years later, the villages around had a saying which floated. About a shrine in the mountains with a wise old hag, helping people in need, teaching them, nursing them. This old hag has a daughter, beauty of legends, and wiser than mother."

"One day, just as Mai was on the verge of her death, came the Goddess of Rivers. Making her young again, then holding her one last time - making her feel heat and pleasure. After Mai disappeared in thin air - Goddess came to power again. She met her daughter - daughter of Mai, saying that now this child shall be keeper of the shrine, for the rest of the time. As long as she keeps the box with the Water Petal inside, the Petal which holds all the heart loving soul of the Goddess that fell in love with a simple girl."

“This story also had a different setting - that in search of the goddess a man came, and upon the death of the Goddess he was the one holding her hand. Eventually the last what was left of her - became Petal of Water. Which he held dear. And then Water Petal was eaten by daughter of his. That transformed her into the Goddess of Rivers.”

For some reason I prefer the story about Mai. She did her best to share the knowledge she inherited during her time with the Goddess. Restored the shrine, made it save heaven for the lost and withered.

The love and sacrifice made it more appealing to me.

I enjoyed tea, still watching the cat on the porch.

Orchid once again let out her unhappy sigh, turning on heels and leaving.

I could hear her mumble: “What random story.” - as she left.

“Pfft! Ha-ha!” - I laughed.

She surely is now deeply in her issues.

Fluff ball on the porch was very appealing. I opened the door and pet him. Such soft fur. He purred.

“You know,” - I softly said to the cat, - “I think I remembered something... He had porcelain skin and soft hair... There was something about bond and love.”

I smiled, watching the sun shine, day unfold.

## Chapter 5 “When Butterflies turn to Ash”

/Elyon

So called “entertaining” day at work. Meetings, documentation, preparations, chatting about mundane matters and making jokes about the strangeness of the life cycle. One might say it’s a typical work day.

I had my research in stacks. Each representing a specific topic related to the general file, that read - “Erick Sparrow /Lazy Cat”.

Few knew that I became his house mate just to figure out the strange occurrence of the logical irrationality. Sadly to say, Lazy Cat was my experiment patient, who gave the strange information. He seemed like the fine person, up until the point when he was expressing the involvement with this parallel universe and a strange person he relates to.

At first it seemed like an appearance of alter ego. Maybe due to false information which could plunder into his head from someone or something. But with every passing day this hypothesis began to clash and crumble. It was not supported by any reasonable explanation. Erick was an absolutely strange patient.

Getting ready, packing files, saving data, closing all. Then getting one long check across the office floor filled with cubicles. After another deep breath - back to field work.

Had to meet Erick in a cafe, as he typically sat there after morning lectures he taught.

He sat at the table next to the window. Making his observations, fully lost in thoughts. I could only approach and act “normal”. For what my “normal” was.

“What are you thinking of?” - I asked, having a feeling that I don’t want to know.

He seemed to be preoccupied with own thoughts, therefore might not have understood that it’s me. He answered in a relaxed manner.

“These creatures remind me of story, that we once made up with Niko. It is a small tale about Fairy who ended up losing wings.”

“Fairy who ended up losing wings” - I repeated as I pressed the "record" button on a device in my pocket.

Erick looked up at the sky, tilted head, then continued.

“The Fairy who approached human and fell in love. It happened one day as we were observing the butterflies in the garden through Nikos eyes. Just happened to mutter the story as butterflies were spiralling around flowers and trees. It went like... The Fairy grew up next to a garden made by humans. She lived her life there.”

“One day in this marvellous garden a boy appeared. He liked to sit with his back against a tree, looking up to the sky, his face unnaturally pale. He looked dazzling to Fairy. She hid, as she observed the boy. With one sided love blossoming and continuing for years. Fairy and by then, Young Man, sat there - in the garden. In silence and solitude, observing time passing by. Fairy was mumbling to herself, hidden next to the Man : ‘You look at the blue sky again, it’s clear today, just the way you like it. This breeze makes your soft hair tangle a bit.’”

“Then out of nowhere a dark fairy of an old religion appeared speaking to a young fairy. Saying that she could turn her into a human. So that this boy gets to know of her feelings. Muttering that the price shall be negotiated later. Fairy agreed excitedly. Next day, as He came into the garden to sit on the same spot he was respectfully using for years - appeared a young girl. She wooed him with her beauty and his love at first sight was born.”

“They sat there talking about the sky and endless time. Suddenly - dark fairy of an old religion appeared in the disguise of an old witch - cursing the turned fairy to become a butterfly and the boy to become fire. Whole love ended quickly - with butterfly burning to ash from the flames. Fire withered out with ash in it, due to the rain that soon came. A bit of a very sad romance. But I think that Niko and I have a thing for such stories.”

Erick looked at me now, his eyes piercing into mine. Every time he looked in my eyes I felt stripped down. Like he saw through my skin and bones. To me, that was a lot of pressure to put up with every time.

Erick got up from his seat, picked his bag and started to walk off.

“Where are you going?” - I was confused.

“Going home.” - He coldly replied with a tinge of annoyance.

Evening crept. I sat in a conservatory. Having tea and mulling over the lot of ideas. Morose at the end of the day. Erick walked into the room and sat in the chair. It was just plain silence for a while. Then as I turned my head to look at him - I found him asleep on the chair. Looking so peaceful.

He liked his conservatory. And it was absolutely the lavish place. Once he said that he felt at ease here. Guess he lately decided to do his best at ignoring my presence.

I turned to watch the scenery behind the glass wall. World devoured by darkness, bit of moonlight peeking out from the clouds.

Sort of like demons and dark souls are trying to take over the world, and the moon shakes them off every time it comes out to watch the planet.

“It is a marvellous night. Don’t you think?” - Gentle voice of a woman made me jump in my seat from surprise. Getting me to turn around, in search of the source of the voice. There she stood - right next to Erick. Black and red hair, pale skin, strange clothes. She was half see through, like a ghost.



This is an abnormality. I have never seen anything like this. All the data I read and processed, studied, meticulously observed, yet there was nothing about such development.

“Ah... indeed.” - My voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. So unrealistic and shaky.

“I know who you are, Elyon. I know what you do. I think it is about time I get on with introductions. My name is Niko. I think Erick mentioned about me.” - Gentle and cold simultaneously. Her voice gave me shivers.

I was stunned by the frozen in time piece of fact. There is a ‘ghost’, in front of me and its speaking.

Slowly the mind begins to see that it truly is not ‘part’ of Erick. It... Niko exists? That was not a possibility up until now. This is on a level of something unreal. Absolutely not possible. Yet how?

“Don’t fear me, dear. I am of no harm. Unless you threaten Ericks peace - that is when I am of harm.” - said ‘ghost’ and smiled at me. She seemed to know that my research is not just keeping ‘tabs’ on him.

“I am not doing anything to him,” - I finally got my voice back, - “I am just...”  
I needed to ease this tension, in case things get complicated.

“You are just ‘researching’ him. Because you find his stories ‘intriguing’.” - Niko cut me off, slight sarcasm in her tone.

“Yes,” - I breathed out, - “I am researching Him... And...”

At this moment I was not sure what to say. Was it now up to this creature to continue the story? I did question her existence and I still do. But seeing Her is more than something odd and new. No available science can explain - This.

“Would you like to ask questions? Anything?” - Niko, with sarcasm, seemed to encourage me.

I felt that this could turn worse. The pressure of trying to not make mistake was getting me anxious.

“What are you? I was sure that you are Ericks alter ego. Not something like... This.” - Some droplets squeezed out of me. I wanted to ask so much more, yet I was not sure if that would be ‘fine’.

She put her hands on top of the chair, where Erick slept.

“I am more like a ghost in this realm, but I am a living being in mine. I am an actual person,

with own life and things to do. Family, problems." - She smiled at me, then looked at Erick. - "As for Erick... I am a differently connected with him. We have a link that keeps us resonating with one another. Therefore we are like two parts of the same mind, just in two different places at the same time. In a way like a voice in your head. Able to look through each other's eyes, listen through each other's ears. Estranged and alienated."

She lowered her hand, fingers touching Ericks head.

"I allowed Erick to have a walk in my body once - that was a lot of new experiences for him. He found it tough, but he keeps on coming back - asking me to give him my body for a few 'walks' now and again."

I couldn't make out if she could actually 'touch' him. I got up, walking closer to her. She didn't seem to mind me coming closer to take a look at her.

"So, he was telling the truth all along... But how can this happen?" - My hand reached out to touch her, to feel what it was. But she turned, dodging my touch.

"Maybe one day you'll see..." - Niko abruptly stopped, then looked aside. A kind of reaction when someone calls you.

She spoke in a cold, serious tone.

"I have to go now."

Just as I opened my mouth to say words - she vanished in thin air.

Unclear of what just happened or how to digest it - my legs decided to take me to bed.

I think I am too morose right now to process any information. And this information is greatly beyond my understanding at the moment.

I left Erick, Lazy Cat, sleeping in the chair, inside the conservatory.

Though - I could swear, when I was already at the end of the hall, going upstairs - he woke up and said something. But I was already too far to make out words.

What caught my attention - the fact that it for some reason scared me.

It gave me chills. I felt like I don't know the person who stayed there. At all.

With these thoughts crawling through my head like bugs - I stood in my room looking around. Simple room: chair and table opposite the window, then very big windowsill that perfectly can fit and hold me sitting there. Bed in the corner of the room and an old dresser. It recently became part of my life. But right now - it seems to swirl into the abyss of nothingness. Leaving a feeling of absence. But, should I look for it? Where is this outer space knowledge that will make me whole again?

Getting into bed, staring at the ceiling - like it will have the answer written on it. Am I just going insane or is this truly the new reality?

/Erick

World is lit bright with moonlight. Stars are endlessly mimicking the blinking of one another.

“You will take care of her, right, Niko?” - I said as I opened my eyes, hearing footsteps at the end of the hall.

Right now the ghostly appearance was hard, touchable and as real as me. Niko reached for my hand, gripping it tight, her face drew closer to mine. I could feel her breath on my cheek, as she spoke.

“You don’t need to worry. I’ll erase her if it needs to be done. You know I will.”

I closed my eyes, breathing out heavily.

“I know you will protect me.”

I turned to face Niko and kissed her gently on the forehead. My hand reached her face, palm cupped her cheek - as I pulled her softly, our foreheads touching.

“I love you.” - I breathed, feeling like worries flee away. I like the touch of her soft, warm skin.

“I love you, my Muse.” - Her voice is stern and soft, with a slight tinge of her being tired. She gave me a gentle nod, then vanished again.

I sat looking at my hand, which just a moment ago touched her.

“You always leave that feeling of ash in my hand, as you fly like the night moth. Bloody butterfly in the sky...”

## Chapter 6 “Rain Fades Away”

/Elyon

Situation became entwined. No longer things seemed the same. Definitive statement of change over 13.1%. Brain can notice the difference, if the difference is around 13.1% or more.

This case was just a rich mass of things that could not add up.

I kept on looking at my screen. Reading my own words that I typed, but couldn't believe in. Most normal beings would not believe such strange 'natural' occurrence. Something like, another creature showing up in front of your eyes? And even conversing with you?

My report looks like a bag of crazy. How am I supposed to explain the situation? How do I explain something I encountered for the first time?

Writing up a report - task of extraordinary difficulty. No matter how much I looked over the situation - solutions of the right words didn't come.

I went over the details of creature projections, of particle magnetism, light reflections, clusters and flows. These could be nothing of the same feel and view I've seen. Astral projections? Is that even possible?

All the tech available on the planet, with AIO on it - nothing could be of likes, of what I saw. The Niko I've encountered seemed like an underprocessed and not-yet fully developed creature of some game industry. Programmed maybe? Created by the new type of software I know nothing of?

But how can you create That, with such odd looks and clothes?

Even after endless hours of research - it still just won't seem to add up.

I stared at the screen in search of something. Words did not appear. At some point all clusters of information in my head decided to go “Puff” and it went silent. Presumably the whole system just went bust from overheat, overwork and overprocessing.

I saved what I had. Turned everything off. Took a glimpse around.

Many of the office bugs have left. Just a few hard workers left - me and the two newbies. I decided that I should call it a day and go. Packed my bag, got it hanging over the shoulder, then waved “Bye” to co-workers and left.

As I step out onto a busy street - I feel the buzz continue on. The lights and brightness of the shops, stalls, barely let you notice that it's minutes to sunset.

Everybody is going somewhere or to someone. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes for a moment to collect self, yet my mind kept on going in work mode.

I was looking directly into her eyes... What was her eye color again? Her lips...

I opened my eyes, as I caught myself thinking about her. Perhaps I am exhausted. Brain still playing tricks as it takes time to get out of working mode. I shook my head, wiped my forehead trying to get my focus back.

Have to get myself 'home' now.

Erick should be back by this time of day.

Trip back in packed vehicles that ease our transportation, yet give a mild case of disgust, due to lack of private space. Then it's all about getting out and having a little moment of walking a few roads in silence, covered in pale lights, to Eric's house.

Turning the key in the lock, opening the door and coming in.

Somehow this house is like no other ordinary house I've been in. Erick said that everything here was created or selected by both him and Niko. All he said back then did not make much sense to me. Now I am understanding a little, from what might actually make the story complete. Maybe make more sense?

When I got into my room, I dropped all belongings near the table. Took out change of clothes from drawers and went to have a shower.

Need that relaxation at the end of the day.

Standing under running water relaxes a lot. A hum that takes away unnecessary thoughts, mess and pieces.

To my surprise it was suddenly disrupted.

"Hey, I wanted to talk to you."

I jolted as I saw Erick standing next to me. Guess, due to me being absorbed in my thoughts - I didn't notice that the door opened and he walked in, leaning his back against the doorframe.

"Do you mind?!" – I half-shouted as I started to blush, realising that shower curtain wasn't drawn and I was fully exposed to Erick. Stark naked in front of a handsome man. Marvellous. He genuinely was unfazed.

"Not at all," – said Erick as he shifted legs, his eyes piercing mine with that typical look he has. – "I will be going away for a week, starting tomorrow. I'll need you to take care of the house for me. Hope you can manage that."

Erick peeled from the door frame. Then turned around, closing the door behind him, as he left.

“Where are you...” – I couldn’t even finish the sentence. Erick was already out. The surprise, the embarrassment and him being this cold. Am I really not that attractive for him to at least fake it?

After having shower with intruders to my privacy, I went downstairs for dinner.

One more thing that is lately tingling my senses is Ericks cooking. Somehow anything he cooks, makes or bakes, even for the first time trying - he makes it perfect. He did say that he has a liking towards cooking. Surprisingly for me - he always seems very serious when cooking. Very precise, very methodical, yet gentle.

Today Erick made green salad, Farfalle macaroni and shrimp sauce. I bit my tongue whilst eating his divine cookery. Can’t be mean to the food he makes. From day one in here - the food was and is absolutely fantastic. Also - he doesn’t let me cook. Not that I can. Eh...

I found it a bit lonely eating by myself in the kitchen. Although I was aware that Erick was just upstairs packing things for tomorrow, but I already felt lonely.

Today for me was a really long day. Studies, office, home, endless mess inside my head. Did I start to crave some consolation from another being? How unprofessional.

When I finished eating and cleaning up - I went to my bed, dropped down, rolled up in a blanket and in a matter of seconds fell asleep.

/Erick

“This evening sure seems long” – I thought, as I sat in the conservatory holding a cup of hot coffee.

“You seem to think too much.” – Niko said softly.

I watched the darkness outside. Not surprised by Nikos sudden appearance.

“I’m continuously thinking. Over-thinking. Drawing conclusions. Changing perspectives in my head nonstop. Quite silly to make any judgements based on this.” – I replied, still glued to endless darkness.

“Dear oh dear,” – Niko breathed out, – “It’s just a week. I’ll keep my watch here for you, my sweetie.”

“I do forget how sarcastic and sassy you sometimes become towards me.” – I shook my head lightly. Feeling my eyebrows knitted for a moment.

“Sometimes I remind myself how hopeless you can actually be.” – Niko was looking at me with a smile. – “But I do know that on this trip you’ll see ‘him’ to enjoy yourself and please that sexual frustration. The sort I’m not wishing to be a part of. But I’d sure like to participate as a bystander. For ‘science’ reasons, of course.” - She giggled.

“Peeping Tom, you’re horrible.” – I gave her an evil eye. – “But indeed I’ll make sure to enjoy myself as much as possible, so that my great story leaves you jealous.”

“Good to hear that!” – Niko said joyfully.

“I hope you...” – I looked at Niko with absolute seriousness. She gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, dear. I’ll take care of her! My best treatment is promised. Somehow I’m sure she’ll enjoy it a lot.” – Her saying that didn’t give me any reassurance. But I knew that with this person anything is possible.

“I did ask to have her under control and leashed to not be able to snoop around.” - I spoke.

“Yeah, yeah. She won’t touch a thing. Though I can’t promise the same for self.” - Niko smirked.

I had some coffee, it began to cool down.

“Say, did we have someone who was ‘Light’? Thing’s popping in my head lately.” - I looked at her.

She seemed to let out a surprised grimace for a second, little fear crossing her face, before she smiled at me.

“Ha...” - She exhaled. - “Let it go. If it pesters you - let it go.”

“Doesn’t belong to you anymore.” - She whispered.

“Huh?” - I grimaced at her. She smiled her fake smile that I despise.

“Just don’t do shit you’ll regret. And have Him, the fine sexy beast you go to - fuck you silly.” - She was pissed off. Her tone of voice always gave it off, for me to know. Then she smacked my shoulder with some force and disappeared.

Night was taking over the land. Just about four or so hours until dawn.

From tomorrow someone will learn of new aspects of life, of joy, of sadness... Perhaps become a bit foul...

But rain is the creature to fill in the world right now. Clouds covered the starry sky - rumbling with thunder tonight.

Heavy downpour to hammer all living with replenishment, give that bit of frightening darkness, lurking in the holes of endless minds.

Hope it will cleanse the bitter aftertaste she left.

The dark, wet and cold air came into the room, as a breeze from the opened window.

"Why the heck did you say that? Haven't seen you so annoyed in a while." - I said to self. -  
"Did I open some old wounds?"



## Chapter 7 “Shadow of Dim Light”

/Elyon

...Running through the city, not looking back, frightened.

There is something unknown chasing you.

You run into a small alleyway behind the nearest building.

Everything your eyes look upon – broken, devastated. War recently finished, leaving a ruined town.

I'm left with a beast that is chasing me, with an urge to kill.

This endless feeling of fear. Kind of fear that is gripping your throat, making you unable to scream for help, unable to let out a word, your body shaking, your mind constantly paranoid.

Right then - someone, another one of my kind, takes my hand and pulls me away. To the inside of the building, closing doors behind. Carefully. Silently. This someone keeps pulling me further along, holding my hand. Up the stairs, hall, another flight of stairs, hallway and stairs again. Though I'm pulled by this stranger, I can't make out how this person looks. He or she? But this person is just soundlessly floating through the halls.

We reach the top floor, open the old wooden door and step into the hallway.

Inside there's curtains barely hanging, ripped from wind and blasts of devastation that went on. Floor covered in shattered glass, broken metal, pieces of fallen-in wall.

This person lets go of my hand. Going further into the hallway, still so soundlessly. I stood there - watching that person go. All the noise that was filling my head up until now - became silenced. I froze.

I finally heard the sound of wind blowing softly, rain patter, the sizzle of ember. Then I make out that music is playing down this hall. I stared at the person who was more than ten steps away, further along the hallway. I finally could recognize features.

She opened the doors and walked in. The piano music was louder. Not sure, what should I do? Once more I looked outside the window.

Windows were shattered and broken, mainly concrete outlines of what they once were. Just outside - I could clearly see the dark raindrops. Slowly falling down on a ruined and burned out city. The streets were covered in black ash, after all the violent fires that happened.

The glimpse of a rose garden that hid aside, with blackened vines, with rusted paths, with bloodied leaves and walls. Small fountain in the middle - not working, but the rust of blood and ash were in it. It felt like the memory of something precious. Once.

I glanced over the houses on the other side - streets that are littered with what's left after destruction. Yet there was something that made it worse.

Dark shadows of unknown monsters lurking on streets - giving the horrible chills down the spine. For I knew somehow - they were the worst death scenario for anyone who'd encountered them.

Finally getting a grip - I walked towards the doors. Ready to see what's inside. My heartbeat

loudly pondered in my ears, along with the melodic piano tune.

Inside I saw five figures in a massive ballroom. All were in their different corners across the vast space. One was playing the old piano. A girl, in long fluffy chiffon dress, red hair, slim figure, gesturing for me to come in.

And I really wish to step into the room, but something is holding me. Own body not willing to listen. I can feel that they can help me understand something, but my body is heavy, unresponsive to my commands. Thunder rattles - shaking fiercely the air. Lightning strikes – all vanishes and I fall...

Waking up in the morning in cold sweat, feeling tense and uneasy. Birds chirping outside, sun shining through curtains. I'm in bed, wrapped in my blanket, yet shaking. Still feeling that thunder. My heart is still in fear - skipping a beat.

Deeply breathing in, breathing out. That was just a dream. Just a dream. Pulling myself together and in my thin nightie, that sticks to my body, walking downstairs to the kitchen.

Smell of freshly made coffee pulls me back to reality.

What a strange dream.

I found a note left by Erick on the table in the conservatory: "Take care of the house. Don't make a mess. Give food to Fatso."

My brows furrowed.

Erick sure as hell is thinking that I'm incapable of doing any chores. Telling me off like a kid, with these note-reminders. Eh, he'd be the annoying type of a parent.

I made coffee, crawled up on the chair in the conservatory. Holding a huge cup in my hands, looking outside at a sunlit porch - my heart begins to calm down.

As worry comes to ease and head is clearing up - I notice the neighbour's cat stretching on a porch.

"Enjoying sunshine are you?" – I said out loud, so that the fur ball would hear me.

Cat outside ignored me, as he made a stretch. Then laid down for a nap. Enjoying the warmth from sunshine. That cat sure is a chubby thing. Is that why Erick calls you Fatso?

"Am I in need to disturb your nap to feed you, or should I let you be?" - I stared at the fur ball.

Deciding in favour of finishing the task - I went into the kitchen to grab the plate Erick left for him.

As I took it, I walked back to Fatso, putting the plate next to him on the porch.

He did not even move. Just opened his eye to check who came, then turned his face away from me.

"Even this cat has an attitude." - I exhale in slight frustration, yet decide to sit next to him.

Sun feels nice. Warm breeze is calming. I closed my eyes, drank more coffee, breathed in. Such a relaxing situation. I laid back, enjoying the warm breeze. Feels blissful.

Not even realising it - I dozed off.

Evening turned out beautiful. Sunset lighting up the sky in orange and red tones. No clouds. Warm breeze and chirping of birds. Definitely like a scene from a romantic movie. Fatso passed by, I said "Hi", he went on ignoring me, just jolted his tail in frustration. "You remind me of Erick." - I let out.

Joyful scent of evening. A kind of aroma that has this little chill of the river in it, scent of forest with green warm grass. I took a deep breath, as I came to appreciate some peace and nature.

"Nice evening indeed." - A familiar voice with a tinge of sarcasm sounded from behind me. I swiftly turned around in surprise - there stood Niko.

"You do have that ghostly feel about you." - I said, as I was calming down my heart from skipping a beat for a moment there.

"Surprise with a pleasant chill down the spine or the chilly fright one?" - Her sarcasm does seem to remind of Erick. And that cat with an attitude.

"It's the mixed feelings one." - I let out.

I took a better look at her - right now what strikes me most is the fact that she was no ghost. She definitely was flesh and bones. As real and living as I was.

Wearing short shorts, top, black long cardigan, barefoot, her red and black hair down, as she's looking at me.

"Oh, don't worry," - She smirks, - "I'll help myself to a cup of coffee. Care to join in for once?"

She blurred out as she went to get that coffee sorted.

"Sure, thanks." - I muster.

Watching her making coffee got me goosebumps. Every move, every detail made with precision, gently. Polished skill set of tender coffee making. I never saw someone make coffee to the extent of getting pleasurable goose bumps. Through all this work she looked charming. Feminine way of look, the feeling you get for some women, when you appreciate them, as you feel their charisma.

"If you keep on staring like that, you'll burn a hole in my back." - Niko turned around handing me a cup of coffee. - "Please, enjoy."

Warm as the morning sunshine – her smile. I took the cup, then followed her to the chairs in the conservatory. We sat down, looking at each other. Enjoying coffee - slowly.

“You know you can ask me questions, Elyon. If you want the answers - you must ask questions. But some questions require no answers, or it is better not to know answers to them. I hope we’ll get along.” - She calmly stated.

She seemed ready. In anticipation of me asking things.

Therefore I have to select where I should start. What I’d like to know foremost? Connection? Relations? How does it work?

“You and Erick. What is your relationship with him? How did you get to know each other?” – I felt like these could be a good conversation starter.

Niko looked around, her gaze stopping on the vase with orchids.

“At some point in young age I figured out that I can hear someone else in my head. And once I spoke to it - voice replied back. Male voice. It spoke about interesting things. So different from what I know. That intrigued me. Eventually my driven self managed to transfer to him. First as a ghost of a sort, then like this.” - She tapped her foot on the floor. - “That is when we touched. Even slept whilst holding onto one another. We became an inspiration for each other.”

Such an obscure piece of a story. I see how they reflect on each other - both are goddamn riddles. Guess one of them things they have in common, besides sarcasm. Care to know what else these obscure persons have in common.

“So you know everything about Erick?” - I went on.

“Guess so. Except his thoughts at times. I merely learned how his logic and decisions work. The rest is up to him.” - She replied as a matter of factly, yet in a relaxed tone.

“And what are you?” - Seemed like the right time for this one.

“Me? Human. Just one more sack of meat and bones. With some logical processes going on.” - She shrugged.

“Can you tell me more about yourself?” – I can feel that I wish to know more.

“Show me yours, I’ll show you mine”. - She looked at me, smiling. Her smile was comforting, yet mysterious. She finished her coffee and got up.

“Another cup-a-coffee?” – She said, as she turned to face me.

I took a look at my cup - just now noticing that my cup was empty. I managed to drink all of it

within this short time. That was the first time for me to finish drink so fast. I held out a cup for Niko to take. Then followed her. She walked into the kitchen, put the kettle on.

“You’re so stiff.” – Niko gave me a glance, then turned to take a few steps towards me.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen. I looked at her - she smiled at me. Somehow I felt every inch of my body tightened. I was like a string. There was this odd pressure that I felt.

“Elyon, close your eyes.” – Softly spoke Niko, making her way towards me.

I closed my eyes, as I hear her getting closer to me. Then I got this intimidating feeling. My body wouldn’t budge an inch.

Strange fear. Like a cornered animal, shaken to the core by the watchful predator.

“Please honey, don’t be afraid,” - Niko was close. Next I feel her close to my ear, - “I don’t bite, unless you say you want me to.” - I felt her breath on my skin, as she spoke!

That was a sensual whisper right there! I couldn’t stop myself from blushing. I didn’t have anyone who would whisper in my ear so sensually! Harassment!

My body felt hot, but the embarrassment from this situation! And I still could not move! Body wouldn’t listen! Then it hit me, like a sudden thud - I was filled with anticipation.

Her fingers, soft and firm, touched my face, as she gave me a soft butterfly kiss on my lips.

Ah... Such a gentle kiss.

## Chapter 8 “Three Blossoming Flowers”

/Elyon

She let out a short giggle and went back to making coffee. I opened my eyes, feeling my cheeks burn.

“I see you haven’t got your cherry popped yet. So sweet.” - Her sarcastic remark made me beet red.

She was absolutely calm - making coffee like nothing had taken place. Like nothing happened.

Her voice made me get back to the time of “now”.

“At times,” - She began, - “I feel like me and Erick are like shadow and light. I prefer the role of the supporter, from side lines, just keeping watch over from shadows. Therefore I’m a shadow. Fully aware of Eric’s fame and success as a good artisan. He is fine, young and in momentum. Has more of the inner “prosperity”, as he once said.” - She grabbed onto the coffee pot handle, - “I’ll take it with us, so we can enjoy chat outside without worrying about refill.”

Niko took cups to the conservatory. With a little fiddling - she opened the side touch pad navigation of the room. After pressing commands in - the soft mechanical sound buzzed. Front and side walls of glass began sliding inside the floor, giving the place an open feel - like we indeed were outside.

All the while I just sat on the chair - blushing and thinking "Why is she so at ease?". She sat down at the table, poured coffee and gave me a smile.

For some reason it feels like she is seducing me. Is she, is she not? It bugs me, it irritates me and puts me in a weak position!

Am I weak? As much as I checked last time - I am strong! Reaching to where I am in career - is a hard work for strong and capable only! And I, due to my strength and capabilities, was assigned this case!

It was the strangest mystery. Hard to solve. And because I am the best - I got this case! I can do anything! I am strong! Niko can’t confuse me! She can’t get me off my track! I won’t succumb to her seduction! Tough cookie me shall get to the core of this strange occurrence and close the case. Easy!

My thoughts were stopped, as Niko spoke.

“How rude, Elyon, how rude. You know that right now I’m here and we’re sharing a moment. I’d appreciate it if you would stop the debate inside your head. Daydreaming at this moment in time - how rude.”

“I... I am not daydreaming!” – I objected, becoming flustered. – “I was thinking about what you said earlier.”

My voice cracked - sounding like a schoolgirl that got caught sleeping during the lesson.

Her lips on the rim of a cup, as she had coffee. Then in a short moment - let the empty cup down on the table. She faced me, as we sat across the marble table.

“Sweetie, it’s time you tell me about yourself. Otherwise it is not fair. You’re making me feel lonely in this conversation.”

All of her attention - on me. She was looking at me with a smile, yet I felt naked. Similar to Erick in this bit as well. I shifted in my chair, my hands crossed on my chest. That should cover me up a little.

“About myself...” - I let out. - “Umm... I am a very hard working person. Achieved a lot for my age. Left parents when I could. Am greedy with my workload. I am new to artistry and philosophy, where Erick is like a fish in water. It all is just so weird to me. My usual life is much more different to what it is here.”

Room fell in silence. For me it felt like we both were mulling over something in our heads, or that's what I hoped for.

I remembered the time when I was so keen on my studies, kept a hard grip on sciences, as my dad always reminded me to become smart, educated and achieve a career. Even now - I am all about work. All I wished for - was a good living. Nice house, great job, lots of things that are there for me. No nagging from parents, and for them to admit that I’m doing great, I am happy, and able to take care of myself.

“Let me guess,” - Nikos voice broke the silence,- “You never had a partner. Even lover. Have you thought of the situation or possibility of being a girlfriend? Wife perhaps?”

She sounded like an aunty that nags you for being alone. I guess many know such a sort of "aunty".

Niko got up. She walked to the porch, standing on it, looking outside into the darkened world.

I watched her, unable to pull away. Her presence was not burdensome. Not even worrisome, or troubling. Her slim figure on a night filled background, with chills of the night air.

The rustling of leaves of all the plants surrounding them - felt like a private mystery. Niko tapped the side of the porch - glass walls began rising up from the ground. In a moment - she stood outside, just behind the glass door.

In a reflection against the glass - I saw myself. Such a dreamy look in my eyes. Smile.

She opened the door and walked back in. My eyes kept tracing her movements. She walked to the table and poured herself coffee.

“Indeed, I did not have any partners. Not even considering getting into a relationship. My main goals are not related to other people. Yes, I am egoistic that way. But I do what I do - and I am good at it. Perhaps, a couple of times, I had ideas of becoming someone’s partner or love someone. But due to me being as I am – full of duties and workload - I quickly withdrew from such thoughts. Not that I have much against that entire relationship thing. For me, it just so happened to be like this.”

I finished my short speech. Attaining some sort of clearance regarding this uncomfortable topic. I got up and went to put my cup in the kitchen.

“You know,” - I heard Niko from the conservatory, - “You’re quite lucky the way you are. Formidable. Unlike you, I can’t live without love. I must love at all times to live and I live to love. I wither without love, like flowers without water. See, I’m also a selfish creature of sorts.”

I heard the cup being put on the table. I turned around to see Niko - she vanished again. “She is one hell of a weird person” – I muttered to myself as I cleaned up pot and napkins from the conservatory.

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Barely managing it at work. With lack of interest in what's around, or on my screen. Why in the world did I stay awake half the night?

Thinking about what she said, what we spoke of...

And then - her luscious lips were not going out of my head. I even dreamed of her kissing me. More intensely. Pushing her tongue inside, she kissed my most sensitive and sacred parts. She fiddled her fingers inside me, so soft and persistent. My body arching, orgasming hard, moaning her name every step of the way, clinging to her like crazy, letting her violate me more and more. I woke up wet. That was my first time ever when I came from a dream.

I am not celibate, nor I weren’t really interested in being close that way to anyone. Also, nobody ever got close to me in that way. Niko left me in a pent-up haze.

Daydreaming of her kiss. The feeling of it still lingering on my lips. “She’s a pervert!” – I grumbled in the ladies room, as I washed my hands. The feeling from my dream - how she pushed her fingers inside me - popped up and I blushed. Looking back at my reflection I rectified my previous statement “Nop. I am a pervert.”

On the way back to my desk, I bumped into a girl that sat in a corner of our office cubicle



maze.

“Elyon, you seem unusually strange today.” – She spoke to me. Her name is Orin, as I recall.

“I... I’m alright.” – I mumbled.

“You know, if you want to talk about anything - I can hear you out. I’m also good at keeping secrets.” – Orin slightly nodded as if agreeing to her own statement, then went off.

Not certain about how to react to that offer - I went to sit at my desk. What did Orin specialise in? She seemed a blurry character to me, aside from the fact that she's a newbie of division. I never paid much attention to her.

Then I remembered a technical instrument in front of me and looked her up on our server. A lot of cases were solved by her. And so much hate from the head offices and division head persons. Jealousy. She is good at what she does. So much so, that she is hated. Orin surely resembles me a bit. In her work ethics that is.

Perhaps... Just maybe... I might accept her offer and go talk to her. Based on these reports - she seems to be a great chatting companion. And I do have to get rid of this buzzing "haze" somehow.

My case became awkward and hard for me. It felt like a massive "Error". Pushed right at my face.

I do have a need to vent this frustration out.

I took Orins’ offer. We went to a place in a recreated, old part of town. The part had its architectural beauty and strange, heart warming sort of charm. Rock-laid pavement, slim alleyways and old lamp posts. Feels like back in time - somewhere else. That kind of reminded me of some stories Erick had told me.

Orin and I went through a bunch of maze-like alleys. Orin was leading. Eventually we ended up in a strange restaurant.

We spoke about many cases we had before. Strange individuals we ran across. How things changed our view about some issues. Then we drifted upon a rocky topic - my current case. I blurred out about Niko. The chat about love and how she kissed me.

In my defence - I was half a bottle of wine in, had a fuzzy warm feeling inside that let me babble leisurely.

Orin spoke shyly, yet somehow she knew about love matters more than I did.

I do lack romance related experience. A lot.

Somehow I happened to tell her about my dream with Niko. In all the details and feelings that washed over me in the process. Even my dirty underwear. All in great detail.

Did I say it was in a really great detail?

“Elyon, you know, I am still not so good when it comes to all that. Perhaps you want to um...

Try it out with me?” – Orin was blushing, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. Must admit - so were mine.

I found myself craving to experience such skinship. My inner drunken mess woke up - I felt my libido taking over my thoughts completely.

“Let’s go to my place then?” – I blurred out.

We paid the bill and went out to get a cab.

Getting out of the car next to Ericks’ house was a bit of a pickle. We were both wobbly. I almost tripped falling face down - as I got out of the cab, but Orin gripped me tight. We thanked cabby and went inside the house.

First of all - we went to my room and took off shoes and clothes. Left standing only in underwear - we went downstairs to the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of wine - from Ericks "special" cupboard.

I opened the bottle and poured wine in glasses.

That’s when I heard this devilish giggle from behind me and Orin. Surprised - we turned around. And there she stood - Niko. She was smiling widely. Me and Orin felt like teens busted by older sister.

“This... This is not what you...” - I started to explain the obvious drunken situation.

“Shush you.” - She laughed. - “Pour me a glass.”

The air changed. From feeling busted to - we’ve got now a partner in crime.

I was a bit slow in my movements. Orin got a hold of the situation and got another glass, poured wine in it and held it out to Niko, who took it gently. She looked at us from our heads to our toes - still smiling. We were in panties and bras.

I assume - for her it was an amusing piece.

“Soo... What were you planning on?” – Niko looked at Orin.

I felt that! The gaze that undresses you! The way you feel like you are stark naked! Now Orin felt it too!

“Um...” - Orins cheeks flushed red, - “We were thinking of um... T-trying some erotic b-bits.”

She could not avert her gaze. Their eyes - interlocked. Orin stuttered from the exposure. The piercing gaze that Niko had, yet accompanied with that smile. Now there were two of us who knew! I smiled at self.

“Uhuum... I can help you out with that, if you ask nicely.” - Niko touched Orins neck, then

drew line towards breast with her finger.

Nikos voice sounded like liqueur. It wrapped us up. We slowly got absorbed by it. The fact that we were drunk was adding up to the new experience.

“C-could you...” - Orin started out. Her voice as if vanishing in thin air. But I knew what she meant - I was burning with the same desire!

Nikos hand pulled away from Orin. Niko held a wine glass to her lips, then finished the contents in a beat.

“Are you going to waste a perfect drink?” - She remarked.

Nikos eyes turned to look at me. This gaze got me hot in my own skin. I felt a slight chill down my spine. Then I remembered my dream. I feel now I am becoming wet in between my legs. Perverted lustful excitement.

Orin drank wine in one go - making a little grimace due to sour taste. I gave it a nod and downed my glass.

Niko put her glass on the table. We did the same. She pulled me by my waist, drew closer and kissed me on my lips. She licked them, pushing her tongue inside my mouth. I replied to her with my tongue wrapping around hers, my hands touching her back, as if I'm clinging to her.

Niko pulled away, turning to Orin, to kiss her in the same way. Her other hand placed on Orins back, then slowly brushing down her hips, belly, then massaging Orins breasts and returning to Orins waist. Niko pulled us both close to her, so that our skin touched. Orin pulled me to face her - as we kissed, I felt hot wet tongue on my breast.

Niko took my bra off, tossed it aside, and then softly touched me, licking and sucking, softly biting. Orin was kissing me passionately. In return I touched Orin - slowly taking off her bra, then tracing invisible lines on her body with my fingers. Loud moan escaped Orins lips, as she pulled back from our kiss – Niko was kissing Orin on her panties, her tongue tracing around most private and sensual parts.

Then Niko looked at me, smiled, gripped my bum tightly with hand and pulled me closer. With another hand taking my panties off - she kissed me down there on my bare skin. I felt her wet tongue on my sensitive parts. Niko sucked on my skin, then licked me more, I couldn't hold my moans back either. Orin was breathing heavily, my mind was going blank.

“Let's go upstairs - it should be more comfortable there.” – Said Niko with her never changing cheeky attitude and very seductive voice.

We agreed. There we got completely bare. Got on the bed, kissed and sensually touched each other's bodies - closely feeling up each part. Niko was one to make both - me and Orin squeal with utter pleasure and moan until our throats felt dry. When gasping for air - we kissed.

Night went on with three of us embracing each other, seductively pleasing, sensually submerging bodies in ecstasy. Then, bare and exhausted, we found embrace in beds warmth and softness of pillows.

All of the night - felt like a dream.

Very pleasing dream.

Chilly breeze woke me up. Giving me cold shivers. All in all - it was still night - warm night.

With my mouth thirsty for water - I went downstairs to the kitchen, got myself a glass and poured it full with water. Managed to down half of the contents, when I saw Niko standing in the conservatory. I made a few steps closer to her, and I watched her drink coffee. Embraced by moonlight, resembled a fairy. The kind of one that would be a descendant of Eros.

I walked towards her - my legs made this decision. I stood next to her - the person who made my body squirt from pleasure.

"You know, your body is perfect." – She said as she noticed me from the corner of her eye. Niko turned to me, looking directly in my eyes - "You should know - you are beautiful."

"Thank you." - I let out.

Niko came in closer, her hand wrapping around my waist. We shared a kiss.

Most sensual kiss I've ever experienced. My eyes were closed, then I opened them as I felt a soft breeze on my lips - she was gone. Vanished in thin air. Like she was never here to begin with. As if it were my dream.

"When will I see you again?" – I mumbled. - "Hope soon."

Sun shined through blinds mercilessly, birds ever so loud. My eyes are cracking open, body still woozy. Mind is hazy.

Looking around - no sight of Orin. A note stood on top of the table which read:

"Thank you for an amazing night. Perhaps we could do that again sometime? P.S. Sorry, have to run home!"

Orin, you cheeky woman!

Showering was long. I stood under water and recalled memories of past night events.

"Eh, I'm such a pervert! But it was good."

A night's kiss flashed in my mind, as I touched my lips with my thumb. I barely, still, sensed her lips on me. My body too - had this sense from last night. I never knew I could feel so much pleasure.

Interesting, when will she come back again?

## Chapter 9 “White Hare”

/David

I stood watching changes outside the window: skyscrapers, smog, people, cars, noises – forever running engine. In the reflection of the window - seeing self with my hair white, eyes brown-green, figure slim, wearing jeans and holding a glass of whiskey. In the background - the sound of shower turning down, then a person walks into the room.

“Are you sure Niko won’t damage them badly? Because I am definite that her indulging in sweet temptations shall pull that girl at risk.” - I turned to face my lover. - “Erick, are you listening?”

“Ehh... So? She does what she feels like. As long as it doesn’t cause any problems for me - I am not getting involved in what she does. She has her way of sorting problems.” – Erick breathed out as he was getting dressed. – “And why would she concern you now, huh, David?”

Erick gave me a jealous glance. I kept my cool, as I downed my whiskey.

“Cat, you’re not the only one having a relationship with Niko. I shall remind you that there is more than just the story between you two.” - I walked to the coffee table behind me, putting empty glass down.

Piles of mixed up manuscripts produced by Erick were stacked on top of the table.

“Bloody rabbit,” - mumbled Erick, - “anything else, other than mocking me is about to be said by you or am I delirious?”

Having Erick frustrated and outright jealous was amusing. I picked up a few pages of his manuscript from the pile.

“Here the story misses out something. Perhaps a bit of what is going on. You should add one more episode here, preferably more details. Part where: ‘Strands of life were pouring into him, as his dead body rejuvenated from sudden love and compassion. Life wasn’t as he dreamed it. Perhaps alike, but different. Eyes showed life now. All surroundings and all events before - became some twisted shallow metaphor. For the first time in his life he knew he’s loved, although lover has left him. He knew – he finally loved like never before.’ - This misses a bit of continuation to the picture.” - I waved the pages that I held.

Erick eyed me, then let out a mad growl.

“You’re a hell of an annoying accomplice.”

“Yet as annoying as I am, you love me.” – I smirked at Eric’s anger. – “And lately - you seem

more agitated by something. Keeping that anger all to yourself?”

“That’s none of your business.” – Hissed Erick, coming over and sitting at the table, grabbing a notebook in hands, - “Let’s get on with work.”

Dealing with angered and frustrated Erick was a lot of work. I rolled my eyes, as I sat down to help with the manuscript. There were around seven piles of printed works – all to be edited. So without further ado - we got on with it.

My phone rang. I took it and went to chat in another room. My own work never lets me have it easy.

As I left Erick to work, I spent quite some time on the phone with my manager.

Out of habit I walked to the window to observe the scenery below. Other skyscrapers varying from offices to apartments. On the streets - swarms of creatures below.

For me it was always amazing to observe them.

Most are short sighted, delusional, obsessed with their idea of being the one with the right answer. Being sure that they’re the one that’s always right, mocking others without realising how much they actually are alike.

Having everything in their heads stereotyped. Their ideals – stereotypical farce, being hollow. And they’re being so vicious to show how much stupid stuff they possess. Just as most are empty meat bags, some rare tend to be with dignity and knowledge.

Devastating reality: integrity is close to extinction. Right now the world is full with cold blooded liars, two faced creatures, theatrical divas, lazy twats and the list goes on.

My own list of upcoming work had been stated and verified. A tired voice of an overworked manager thanked me and finished the call.

The sound of boiling kettle came from the kitchen. Everyday life is right next to you all the time. Crazy to know that there are still some mundane things left in life. Unless you are the sort of person seeking a lot of adventures for yourself - just to make life more complicated. Most adventures are full of risk - regretful at times. Life at its finest - always.

“Plain green tea as usual?” – Ericks voice came from the kitchen.

I let out a short sigh, then walked to the kitchen.

“Indeed.” – I said, taking a seat at the kitchen bar.

Expensive teaware, silver spoons, gold plated rims – I also got this taste for riches from our common friend. We’ve pieced this lifestyle from our made-up stories with Niko. We have our secret life we share.

“We sure are missing her for this tea party. Lunch with her is always interesting. Her observations are worthwhile. This makes me miss her.” – I smiled, as I watched Erick pour tea into cups.

Erick also seemed to smile, as if recalling memories of moments together.

“She does come across as a muse. I suppose she is an inspiration for both of us.” – Erick spoke, voice sounding softer than usual.

Oh, we do have a soft spot for that beastly creature. Though I know that the secrets we share with her are not shared between us. Quite the lovers we are.

“Do you remember the story about the living tree?” – Erick asked as he looked over the contents of the coffee table - the same piles of paperwork.

I turned around in my chair to give some attention to papers, then turned back to face Erick. “Not sure I do.” - I said plainly.

“The Tree that’s a sort of descendant to mighty Yggdrasil. It grew in the midst of a forest next to the greatest mountain. Close to the tree was a village - a small village. Villagers called the tree their Mighty Mother. They prayed to it. Believing that the Tree protected them. There was a legend: atop this Mother Tree was chalice filled with water that gave you immortality. Villagers treasured and protected the tree, looked after it. They had Mighty Mother protecting them from cold winds and from horror that existed behind the mountain. Because the tree was as high as a mountain and wide in look - most travellers didn’t really notice the village.” - Erick began to tell the tale.

Whenever he reminisced about old tales that he happened to retrieve from somewhere in his head - there’d be no way of stopping him. Just have to let him go on and tell the story. He calms down after that.

I watched him go on, as he stared into his cup of tea.

“But as time passed - the village grew into town, it had a lot of travellers stopping by. Still, as time passed - the custom of taking care of Mother Tree was kept.

One day, far merchants came by asking about the Tree and why it had such strange authority in town. Merchants went from tavern to tavern - hearing eventually the legend of chalice. That’s where curiosity kicked in. They asked more about chalice - whether it is still there, why no one took it and why people are not in the slightest interested to acquire such chalice.”

“The merchants were amazed that people never wished to get the immortality chalice. Holding the information acquired - they went to a nearby kingdom and sold information to the king. But it didn’t stop there. They sold information to wealthy merchants as well. Words spread far and wide about the chalice of immortality atop Mighty Tree. From then on - Town next to Mother Tree was raided by armies of people. By merchants, by bandits, by knights and kings men, making people flee to live on the mountain nearby. Many tried to climb the



The Tree - others shot them down, people fought each other over chalice. They tried to cut down tree - but failed.”

“The bloodshed kept on going for years next to the roots of Mother Tree. The trunk became red, leaves became orange with hues of maroon.. Bark excreted small red drops, looking like blood tears – tree cried.

One day, a little boy managed to sneak past guards. Even though they were on posts all around. He sneakily climbed to the top of the tree. Covered in sticky red tree sap, he stood atop the tree - amazed.”

“There, in depths of leaves and tree branches, sat an old lady. She guarded the chalice, that was in the middle of a tree-grown fountain. Above - where branches spread out, it truly looked mesmerising. Boy took a few steps towards the old lady. She turned to look at the youngster.”

“‘Are you here for the chalice? Are you here for it?’ – she grunted in a squeaky voice, sounding frustrated.

‘Um, granny, I am not really here for it.’ - Boy was really amazed by what he saw. His eyes twinkled and sparkled.

‘Why are you here?’ - Granny grumbled annoyed.

‘I was told by my mother that this chalice gives immortality. Is it true?’ - Boy walked over, then sat next to granny. Her eyes squinted - as she looked at him.

‘Yes. That is true in a way. You are one curious boy. I see.’ – She squinted her eyes even more.

Boy shifted his position, getting closer to granny.”

“‘Granny, tell me, what is immortality? I don’t understand why everybody is trying to get it?’ – Boy was so greatly amazed - he never really thought he’d find the chalice or even someone atop Tree. Even a fountain? Whole occurrence was magical.

Granny relaxed a bit.

‘Immortality is the ability to keep living forever - in memories of others, in their hearts. People are interpreting immortality in a way to let their body live forever - maintaining youth. It is all a fakery, such never happens. These fools just don't know what they are fighting for.’ - Granny spoke.

‘Then why are they willing to get chalice? It won’t give them what they want.’ – Boy was confused.

‘Chalice holds the immortality of a tree. Trees life. Without this water - held in chalice - Mother Tree will die.’ - Granny looked around, as if admiring Tree once more.”

“Boy sat confused. He did not know what to do. He climbed the tree to see with his eyes if chalice was real - it was. But immortality was not the kind of one people down there were looking for. Why can’t someone tell them that it was not the "immortality" they're seeking? Such as him could not possibly. Nobody would believe him. And how and when did this granny get here? The endless questions were reflected in his eyes.”

“‘Dear boy, you think that the truth will make these thieves and beggars leave? You are

wrong. They will keep on trying to get this chalice - even if it won't give what they want. They still will try to achieve it. Just for the sake of it. Their greed is driving them to insanity. Making them conquer more, get more. They don't care about anything or anyone but themselves. And all they want is to fulfil their greed, needs, wishes. Even if it destroys everyone and everything around them. Telling the truth to them is useless. They won't listen. They are deaf to sense. They are blinded by money, by treasures, by power. Don't worry too much, boy, I'll protect the tree from whoever with a dark heart tries to reach up here.' - Granny smiled."

"By the way, granny...' - Boy tried to ask another question, but the old hag cut him off. 'You boy go back. Your mother seeks for you. Shoo!' - She threw leaves in his face, chasing him away.

He got up, walked to the edge, then turned around to take one last look. Once he turned around - no granny was there, no chalice, no fountain. Dumbfounded, he climbed down."

"Years later he was the last to protect the Mother Tree. Everyone else left. Roots of Mother Tree took back to earth bodies of dead men. The oblivious to reason, that fought for non-existent "immortality".

Old man left a manuscript telling a story about a tree and his encounter with an old lady atop the tree. He left the truth before he passed away. By then - the story about tree became a legend.

New inhabitants of town did not pay attention to old customs, nor did they care about the tree.

One day in a library - young girl found a manuscript which spoke so much about the tree, about people and the life of one man. It was enough to spark something inside her - making her start taking care of the tree. A wave of new life - before history repeats its gruesome self."

After Erick finished his story, he drank the tea he made. I watched him, seeing that he is definitely reminiscing about something.

From then on - we went back to editing.

For hours on - diligently doing work.

Once my eyes were up from the manuscript - I saw sunset. Orange hues and purple tones. I looked over at Erick. He's deeply asleep, while sitting with papers in hand.

"You're cute when you're silent." - I smirked.

After taking Erick to bed and putting a blanket over him, I felt like I crave for something. Mischief.

Got some clothes, changed, got out of the bedroom and closed the door behind. I pulled my phone out and dialled her number.

"You free?" - I spoke once I heard her pick up.

"Oh, so you decided to show some courtesy? If you're coming over - leave a note to your lover." - Nikos' sarcastic tone. Missed it.

"I'll be there in an hour." - I said with a smile stretching on my lips, as I hung up.

The way my excitement was brewing, as I left Erick to sleep behind - like I'm cheating about something. Going behind his back. Ha!

I grabbed a manuscript from the table that we finished editing.

"A decent conversation starter" - I thought to myself, heading out of the apartment.

Something was moving towards unravelling the past, or maybe something deeply forgotten...

Someone's voice in the dark spoke to the sleeping Cat, giving a token.

...

Lazy Cat dreaming wonderland and of high garden,

Led by White Hare towards goal - the great gates of marble,

Just as Cat was about to walk through –

He saw Flower aside - that was new...

"Lonely Orchid" – he thought, as he left a path to follow.

There, ahead - a big tree. Branches spreading all over,

Under sat old time muse – once the Great of Mad power.

Due to time that then flew - he forgot by the morrow,

But important once was, just before it was over

King was madder with lust,

Witch was drowning in sorrow.

Once a Light of the Heart - later dying from an arrow.

...

## Chapter 10 “Ghost of Past or Ghost of Future”

/David

Roar of car engine. Classical music playing on the radio. It's Schuberts piano sonata number 16. Surely this piano gives off some chills, but in a way - it gives a feeling of strife, push for something - as if you're on your way to a greater manifesto.

Road ahead is packed with vehicles - all doing their best to keep up with the flow of traffic. That emerged due to the end of the working day for many.

Flood of mechanisms and engines. A hell for the manufacturers and energy consumers. The beauty of the light propellers, the ghastly fear of bad retailers. The advertisements on the side of cars - like battle scars.

And what? It's all possessed or in possession, ownership, discretion of creatures that consume the air, that shit and yell. And stare at you through tanned dyed bodies.

A great conveyor belt created marvel - stacked nobodies.

Well, maybe somebodies - wearing finest painted, crafted, tailored masks.

Put on daily for convenience of interaction, to keep abstraction in the resourcefulness of action.

Faking what eventually we piece together as. Hiding worries, sadness, faults, hate and oh so much more. We can not find as much as an accomplice in daily crimes we do. Just fugitives - running from and to.

Some playing dumb. Most of the times - actually being dumb. Have you noticed the amount of stupid and oblivious people? Consumers who could not care much about others? Who fuss about simple things as they lack “common sense”, getting offended by profound comments and so purely unable to cope with other opinions, don't mind the critique.

Or moments of comparing with one another on how much or how many piles of unneeded junk they possess? When all they care about is money. They become so cheap.

Due to continuous dependence on money - they lost their most valuable qualities: compassion, love, self-development, ought for art, restlessness for life. Have you seen how many are dissatisfied with life? Oh, and then there is much obliged questioning of self-purpose: “What I've been created for?”. Yet not a single step taken forward to look at what One can do with life, or for the good of Ones' life. Not even an inch taken to try.

Then there is no appreciation for what one has. Filthy dissatisfaction, greed and craving to possess. False beauty standards, false impression of needing to live as told, fear of what others will think of one's actions. They forget to think - they trust without a doubt to the ones sitting at the top of the money chain.

Why? Because all of them are under the impression that top folk are “wiser” ones, because they got so much money. Forgetting that usually they get this wealthy by ripping off others - lying so confidently that all seems like the truth. Yet all is a farce, staged farce.

Just confident lies and the advantage of fear of others. And what are we left with?

Oblivion with masses so blindly believing in freedom they have. Whilst living in cages, they grow to fear more, worry daily, question every action they do, distrusting their gut, forgetting all and converting to a new religion of "money" which by popular ideology - rules the planet. Why can't they get off each other's throats?

All this, in a way, makes me sad. With each generation the degradation of the nation falls further in pit of destruction. Knowledge lost along the thinning shore. Truth hidden further away. So that in the end - there are masses of food stock of people. And filthiest part - that masses let and allow to be led into further hell created by someone somewhere “above”.

Pulling into a familiar driveway, finally the mind seems to let go.

I parked outside an apartment complex, more like a detached house block. It is about two and a half stories high. Person who I seek - lives in a house. It's quite decently even called a “penthouse” really. Looking at this building makes me think of some modernism gone slightly off.

I got out of the car, beeped the alarm, then shoved the keys into my bag. That hangs over my left shoulder. I walked towards the door with number 11 on it. As it were – the door left slightly opened. Owner always leaves the front door open when expecting me. That was mostly the unspoken rule between us.

Inside the spacious home played Griegs Cello sonata Op.36. Owner sat on the garden porch, pens and paper scattered around. Typical chaotic workspace. She was looking at the sky - darkened pit, with grey outlines.

I approached her - now standing less than a step away.

“This annoying weather makes me think of some depressive bits that I'm not fond of. And by the looks of it, heavy rain is on its way.” – Niko looked around to find her mug with cold tea. - “Did you at least leave some kind of note before you got going?”

“I did. Don't worry. He won't know I came over or that I saw you.” – I replied.

“So... You are so much in need of something - you remembered about my existence. By the look of your cheeky appearance - you need it bad. You even came all the way here.” – Niko looked at me. Her greenish eyes are empty of any emotion - like soulless puppet.

“Favour. I need your favour.” – I took out the manuscript that I grabbed from the table, before

I left, and held it out to Niko. – “Can you?”

“Let me guess, it is something you aren’t fully sure of?” – Niko took the manuscript, then had a bit of her cold tea.

“In a way. I want it to ‘bloom’. Possible?” - I knew it took time for her to recover. She most definitely used her trickery on that girl, that’s staying at Ericks’ house right now.

“Let’s see what you have here.” – Niko flipped through the pages, then got back to the title page that read : “Petal on Lips”.

I looked at how she began reading the manuscript. The air began changing around her. Like she slowly accumulated focus in small doses.

I breathed out in relief. By the end of the reading she should be properly back. Knowing it will take a while - I went to sit on a couch, that directly overlooked garden and her. Still wondering how she loves to read in the redded lamp light.

The red and pinkish crystals placed around the house were lit - dim lights, to me - very subtle. A sort of lighting that is stereotypically romantically used. To set the ‘mood’. But she used such light for the convenience of resting her eyes.

I heard silence. For a bit it was silence. Music stopped, then began again, but grew muted, slowly silenced to the point of barely-audible. Then a pitter-patter of rain resounded. Felt like time froze, standing still. A painting of classical eerie touch. The gothic, romantic mess of a murder that’s about to take place.

The moment of this eerie feel was broken like a spell, to draw me to another hell. Her soft voice, as she began reading the manuscript out loud. The tone and feel that gives you chill, places a new heart squeezing feel - of familiarity.

I noticed music changed to Mendelssohn piano trio and violin concerto, accompanying Nikos voice.

“Heberra appeared during the darkest night. She was twisting little strands of fabric on Yrres work desk. Dresses were made to the tastes of Lords and Ladies. Soon becoming grim drapes. Embroidery withered, looking like tears.”

“Heberra moved her pale hand softly. Above the fancy shoes, with silk laces, sewn-on gold – they turned into horrid heels with thorns and claws. ‘Yrres will regret what he did to me!’ – she said as she left master Yrres Tailor Atelier. Walking back to her home victorious – happy about her vengeful deed. ‘I’ll have you mocked, Yrres, I’ll see you crumble. You shall regret what you have done to my Mistress.’”

She read the manuscript with incredible sense. Adding emotions to characters, as their lines were read.

“Next morning Yrres cried to the heavens: ‘Gods, why? What have I done to anger you so? Why had you ruined my work? This dress and shoes! Work of my life! Coronation gown for princess! Oh I am doomed!’

With no time at hand, Yrres made his best attempts to recover the gown that before bloomed and sparkled. Now ruined. All his attempts - useless. When the thread touched the gown – it decayed instantly. When the needle touched the dress – needle rusted, silver was breaking and the laces were tearing apart. Anything touching the dress broke apart. ‘So this is the retribution for what I’ve done to Nellaidas? Curse you all!’ – He shouted as he ran out. Full of despair he hopped on his horse and galloped away.

Townfolk saw him scared - galloping out the town gates on the horse. News of this sight spread across town like wildfire.”

“Kings squire at the same moment was knocking on Master Yrres atelier door. With no reply - he walked in to see the most dreadful gown one could imagine. Yrres apprentice stood shocked beside gown - unsure of what will happen now.

Squire asked where the coronation attire was – the apprentice just silently pointed out to this monstrous gown. Nothing valuable came out of the apprentices' mouth, just stuttering sounds. With nothing left - squire took this horrid dress with thorny shoes to Kings castle.”

“‘What on earth is the meaning of this?’ – King Alland shouted madly at the sight of the outfit that squire brought. Bloody tears, drabs of cloth, all decayed and barely holding together with filthy shoes wrapped in thorns and animal claws.

What did Yrres think of him as? How dares he humiliate his King and royal family? Making such an atrocity for my daughter's coronation? Has he lost his mind?! ‘Find him and bring me his head!’ – King was ranting with rage.

Squire bowed and ran out on a mission to deal with Yrres.

News of horrid dress spread like plague - becoming the new talk of the town.”

“Meanwhile - Heberra was squealing from happiness, as she observed the situation unfold. Smiling, in high spirits, she took the outfit she made, prepared along with outstanding shoes. She set out to present her work to His Majesty. Her carriage smoothly drifted through the streets of Old Kanningsworth making way to the castle. Birds chirping, sun shining, sky brightly blue, people cheery on streets – all made her mood grow better.”

“She got out of the carriage in front of the main stairs. Ones that lead to the castle Dorain. Taking dress along with the shoes, Heberra gracefully walked up to request for King to spare a moment of his time. So she can present him with the finest solution.

The moment King Alland heard that there is a woman who brought a gown for coronation - he was perplexed. King asked the guard to present to him this woman who claims to have brought him a great ‘present’.”

“Heberra, looking her best, presented King Alland the gown that she made. King Alland was awed with the beauty of the gown. This gown was on par stunning with the beauty of the gown he saw once before.

The memory long forgotten appeared in his head. Moment when he - a young boy with his mother, stood looking at the Queen sparkling brightly like a goddess. In a gown with ineffable

might. The beauty of the gown he never before saw. Queen Nellaidas birthday it was. She was the mightiest Queen that ruled the lands far and wide. Never again in his life has he seen anything as mesmerising as the gowns Nellaidas wore. Not in the whole world.”

“He never got to know who the royal tailor of Nellaidas were. Twas kept a secret from everyone. Throughout his whole life - not a single soul got to discover who the tailor of Her Majesty Nellaidas was.

And now - standing in front of this dress - he knew that that is what his daughter Lenaria shall wear.”

“Coronation day went smoothly, as it was a success. The beauty of new Queen Lenaria became the greatest talk of the land.

Heberra was pronounced royal tailor from that day on by the Queen Lenaria herself.

Once, during fitting, Lenaria asked questions to Heberra. About her past, where she was from, so young, so talented in making such wonderful gowns. Heberra took word from the new Queen that she will keep all the answers a secret, otherwise Heberra will leave. Then Heberra told a story of how she served queen Nellaidas long ago, how she is an elf, and so-so much more.

Time later the bond between them grew stronger. Becoming one passionate secretive love.”

Rain was rumbling, hitting the glass roof with great might.

I sat looking at the downpour outside.

Garden trees - shaking, leaves trembling. Perhaps it's good - lack of wind. Niko got up from her warmed spot on the porch, holding the manuscript. She walked to sit down next to me. Her slim figure had nothing more than just an oversized shirt and underwear.

“Now, now. This is a very well-known story to me. From a place very much enjoyed and explored. Did Erick write this?” - Niko was back to her usual self, as her eyes had proper clarity and focus.

“Indeed. Erick had lately coughed up around seven stories of such odd origin.” - I replied to her.

She leaned her back against the couch. Seeming to think about something troublesome. The rain outside slowed down, becoming weak pitter-patter. The smell of petrichor was tingling the senses.

Just having her sit next to me - already was making me feel like she's the only one who I can really be self with. A relief, a familiarity, a bond.

“I feel like Erick might brew more trouble. He's close to being exposed.” - I tiredly said, as my hand found hers, fingers interlocking. She likes holding my hand, or maybe that's what I tell myself.

“Too close. That girl is a very good investigator. A little more and we all might end up in deep shit.” - She lets out with a sigh.



“Is she a problem or can you manage her? By the looks of your eyes - you’ve used the trick.”  
- I softly sneer.

“Yeah... Sweet dreams of lewd character. Though I’ve exhausted self due to keeping it up for hours for two people simultaneously. Plus they were inebriated. So it was easy, but hard to maintain trick mode.” - Niko slowly leaned on my shoulder.

“Is Adrian on the concern radar?” - I ask.

Niko shifts away, still holding my hand. She exhales. Red lighting play a dramatic ambience on her.

“So you come here, out of that concern, regarding Erick. Yet you didn’t even let him know you get to see me. What a disgusting character you are.” - She lets out, yet the smile on her face and the eyes that look into mine - still gentle, still caring.

I do get that she is offended a little, also jealous. But right now - too weak to give a fierce fight.

“But I’m worried about my sweet-sweet lover. He is after all, my dearest of heart.” - I softly say words that shamelessly pick on her.

Oh she is annoyed. Tired, but now very annoyed. Tried to flick my hand away, as she gets off the couch. Though I manage to grab her hand tighter and pull her back to sit with me.

I can feel her anger seeping through as she speaks.

“David, my magical white hare, our Alice will be perfectly fine. Why can’t you sometimes worry about me instead? Am I not important?”

So cute - she’s pouting. Guess she missed me as well. I pull her in closer, my fingers caressing her cheeks, my eyes locked with hers.

“Close your eyes.” – I said. She went along with it.

Then I leaned closer - our foreheads touching. ‘Make spell’.

I hugged her, pulling her on top of me. Laying down on the sofa. My hands on her waist - pressing her body tightly to me.

“You are as precious to me as Erick. If not more.” – I let out, cheekily.

“Liar.” - Oh how she pouts.

She was up on her elbows, trying to get away. But once more I pressed her tighter to me. She let out a breath, saying “Alright.”.

After succumbing to my whims, she stretches her hand to reach my hair.  
Her fingers brushing through them.

Now her eyes that looked at me - felt slightly dazed. Yes. That's it.  
My hand brushed her sweet cheek, then ran towards the back of her neck, pulling her closer to me.

"Liar indeed." - I spoke with my lips touching hers, my tongue pushing in, as we passionately shared a kiss.

She slowly pulls back, breathing heavily.

"I'm jealous of Erick having you all to himself." - She lets out.  
I can feel that she's mine now. Can execute the mess that I need.

"Don't be. I'm here now. Wouldn't you like to have more than just a kiss?" - I gently asked.

"I would." - She breathes out.

Her head on my shoulder. Her body was burning with desire, skin feeling hotter to touch. My hands felt her body slowly. Her hands, her back, neck.

"You haven't changed." - I softly spoke.

"Neither have you." - She let out a sigh. - "You still have a habit of teasing me. You're horrible."

"So horrible that you want me." - I have a laugh. - "From what I feel - you like me more than anyone. I love that. I love that you want me so bad."

She clicked her tongue, as she got up on her elbows, looking at me with that wish to throw a punch.

"David, you're an asshole. I truly can't stand your horrid nature." - She said whilst pushing herself out of my tight grip.

"Oh, you don't have to be rude." - I pulled her back, pushing her down on the sofa, getting on top of her. - "Wouldn't you like a special treatment from me, or do you rather pout?"

My hand touched her tight, slowly tracing her body upwards. Her shirt going up with my touch. She faced aside, feigning her being upset.

"You know you can't win. I'm good at this game." - I whisper in her ear.

My hands reached her breasts. Softly touching her, I lowered to kiss her neck.  
She still pouts. I sigh, yet the game's on. I grab her face, forcing her to look at me. I kiss her, dominating over, making her reply to my kiss. I felt her succumb, releasing my grip.

Once she kissed back, as she reached for more with her lips, my hands went to wander across her body.

Fingers finding way in between her tights, pressing on her hot part.

Then caress, as her breath slowly turns to moan, her hands desperately clinging to my back.

I rip her panties off, grabbing her tights, pulling legs up, as I forcefully enter her.

She loudly gasped, moaning, looking me in the eyes with that sad yearning look. Like it's not me she's having this intercourse with.

I pulled her on top of me, grabbing her neck, pulling her to face me, as we share another kiss.

"You're an asshole." - She lets out.

"That indeed I am." - I smirk.

Spell break - I kiss her forehead.

She opens her eyes. Looking at me, as we sit next to each other. I can't stop myself from grinning.

"You're a pervert, you know." - I say, holding back my laugh.

"Bloody hate when you practice my tricks on me." - Niko tiredly grunted at me.

I laughed, getting up, making my way to her kitchen.

"I'll pour some wine, you pervert. Oh, and how many times now you had sex in your head with me? Priceless!" - I couldn't stop myself from laughing hard.

The spell that I executed on her is the same as the one she plays. Difference is - I'm still learning and need actual touch - contact to execute it. She - only look at the 'victim' of it.

She clicked her tongue and walked to her study, grabbed a manuscript and got back with it.

Wine glass waited for her on the table, as she returned. She was annoyed, but too tired to get back at me for this mischief.

"So," - Niko gave me a glance, as I enjoyed wine. - "How's it going between you and Adrian? Did he forgive you for that time?"

She drank the wine, whilst eyeing me.

The background became silent. No music, no rain, no wind. Night set down hard on land. Muting the unrest.

"Na-ah, he still holds a grudge against me. He's also envious of what we share. Without him around. And how madly you love me! Such tough love! Heart breaking!" - I sarcastically let out. Seeing her pout felt good.

“Ri-ight.” –Niko mumbled.

She kept watching me. I know that she likes me. Very much. But even during ‘spell’ - she feels like the saddest person. Like she wants to see someone else in my stead. Not that I feel offended by that, yet I do.

Knowing that I truly can’t be with her this way, though in minds - I can play it.

Before - she was, as if happy by it, but now - it feels like I’m hurting her.

Right now - just being next to one another felt fine. Good, familiar, warm, at home. Most times I don’t feel that with Erick, but I can’t live without him. He’s my lover. Mine.

Well, if looking over the whole of our dysfunctional bunch there’s a lot to take in.

Us three and Adrian are quite the circus show. All up to strangest tricks. Me and Niko, her and Erick - we have this connection shared from the start. Each one is different. Me and Niko - we share space, becoming mad in love there, but that’s now just something that’s of my mischief.

Learning to use it on others - a gift to ravage and manipulate. She’s a professional of trick trade.

But what’s the mad magic of a circus act? The main one and most valuable one - AIO can’t sense some of us.

We made our way here from different places, times. Staying in hiding, so we can simply live our lives.

My and her secret - that we’re absolutely invisible to the system. Erick - not so lucky. He’s very much discoverable. Due to being from here.

Niko was still happy to see me, even if I cause trouble. She came closer, putting glass down, hugging me. I hug her back.

“Enjoying being with a national model and idol?” - I cheekily say.

“Well, apologies, your media-popularity hiney. But I’d still like you, even if you weren’t the almighty idol of this world. Simply being the perverted trickster David.” - She pinched my side.

“This majesty will allow you such filthy commentary just this once.” - I smile.

“You know, Merin is now looking after Adrian. Although that’s already a different matter. You know we’re still connected in our way.” – Niko said.

“I considered many possibilities all in all. Yet I am still quite scared if they find out about what we are.” – I felt slightly concerned.

“I know. I do worry too.” – She hugged tighter, pressing her cheek against my collarbone. -

“Tomorrow I’m meeting with Adrian and Merin. We might get some new intel on what to do next.”

I felt that she does try hard. Always alone. I peck her on top of her head.

“Dear, it’s getting very late. I have to go back to my fabulous lover - Erick. Therefore I must leave you in utter jealousy, as I walk out the door.” – I ruffled her hair, as I got out of the hug. Slowly making my way towards the door.

“Take the manuscript on the table.” - She pointed out.

“Thank you dear.” - I softly said, grabbing papers and walking towards the exit door. - “I love you.”

“Love you too.” – Niko smiled.

I blew her a kiss as I walked out the door.

My key in the ignition, I put the papers on the seat next to me.

“Feels like she’s going to disappear for a while. Again.” - I mumble to self, giving a glance in the rear mirror to the house she lives in.

Gotta get back before Erick finds out.

I set out on the night road back home.

## Chapter 11 “When Roses Bowed to Emperor”

///

There was a story once.

About insane King, wise but unstable Emperor and their shared love interest – Rose. King selfishly snatched Rose, looked after him, cherished and protected in ways he could. The Emperor was not fond of such an atrocity - he wanted Rose for himself, so he went to face the King and retreated to Rose. But once the Emperor got to Kingdom - he got sucked into the void of events inside Kings castle – strangest mind twisting games.

The Emperor became lover to both - the Rose and the King. Without realizing how it turned out this way. But all three were handsome, lands utter beauty. They devilishly swayed anyone or anything.

The heavy fog of lust in the castle was held by Ary – demon, bound by the King. Ary helped captivate Rose. Strangest messes and unpredictable whims that were allowed.

Days went on, things were getting mixed up, everything to possessiveness and madness. Becoming fiercely strange.

One day, Rose had thanked King and asked him to be released. Rose would like to go back to his ‘normal life’. The one he had before meeting King, before coming in. Oh, Rose was naïve. Kings fury and yearn to possess made him dense. Unreasonable. It lead to a fight between King and the Emperor, as the Emperor supported Rose's freedom and will.

King ruined his own kingdom, putting it in ash and despair. Creating utter mess that was left for Rose to handle. The Emperor left to rule his lands and to protect what was left.

With an odd turn of events - Rose came to love King. That lead to Rose taking a step further into darkness and murdering King.

So be it death out of love or of madness. Ary the Demon, now helped out Rose. Guarding, staying by his side.

During that time the Emperor waited for Rose to awaken - come to the Emperor's side. His hope was futile. Later the Emperor's patience snapped – taking forces and an army, leading it to conquer Rose and his kingdom. At the end of the war, the Emperor found Rose on thorned throne – eyes filled with insanity, pleading his endless love to the deceased King.

Emperor tortured Rose for a long while. Eventually breaking Rose to bow to him, follow him, as well as belong. Yet at times Rose still went pleading about his strange love. Though not as much any more.

Story showed between lines - how Rose was first of all stolen by King, then ‘tamed’ by King. Even though Rose had not much liking towards King at first - time spent together made Rose

get used to King, get accustomed to Kings created captivity - slowly falling into this fake love.

Little by little Rose found bits about King that were similar with Rose himself - that made King more humane. The love King had towards Rose went to great lengths to show his affection, odd, strange appreciation for Rose. Communicating better in between. Showing how they began to share emotions, feelings. But there were indeed secrets kept. Incredibly, the insanity that King possessed was partially transmitted to Rose. Leading ultimately to King's gruesome death. Although the Emperor spent time with them - he wasn't deluded by magical farce. He was maddened in own ways, his flaws weren't on par with insanity.

And so, to understand: insanity spreads over onto a person of affection - if forced upon day and night. So that eventually there are two or more minds sharing the same 'reality' of insanity.

Due to the Emperor's lack of 'affection' towards Kings Insanity - Emperor kept being unfazed.

Love works in weird ways. Perhaps that is the moral of the story.

Yet so it happens that this story and morale has one more character. One always staying in the shadows. The most trusted, secret lover to Mad King - Witch. Suffering from the whims of her beloved, she still endlessly hoped, as she was so faithful. Eventually, she was the last to kiss the dead King goodbye, as blood tears came from her eyes. Her faithful devotion to the King, caused the world to crumble from within.

## /Adrian

I was slowly pacing on my favourite path in the park. Enjoying the morning. Noticing Merin waiting, sitting on the bench where I tended to relax after my walk. But seeing her - that was a sign that no sitting is to be done, unless I want to ruin my morning. Hope she was also appreciating the morning fog of this early hour, though knowing her - she hated the weather.

"Did you manage to sleep tonight, or did you select the path of becoming an insomniac?" – I asked coldly, as I approached Merin.

"That must come across as a revelation to you, but miraculously, actually, I sleep at night." - She let out, with her frustration and wish for conflict seeping through. - "Though right now I'm not here to discuss my sleeping issues with you, not that it bothers you, to begin with."

"That sure has to be of great importance - if you came out to meet me at such an early hour." – I kept on walking, as I spoke. She got up and followed me.

“We have few issues to clear up.” - Her arrogant tone and eagerness for conflict are troublesome. - “What exactly happened during your meeting with Erick four weeks ago? AIO is spiking crazily, when it comes to him.” – Merin was punching holes in the ground with her heels, as she walked.

“This is of no concern to you.” – I cut her off. – “Why, is that the only reason for your appearance? How trifle. If you decide to walk with me - be silent. I’m still trying to enjoy my morning.”

“You’re a filthy, rude ape. Even though - my husband.” – Merin fussed, but kept on walking.

This woman is so goddamn annoying. I sigh. Yes, it was me who made her say ‘yes’, not only in marriage issue, but in partnership as well. Though she developed a filthy character along the way.

Good enough to see her once every two months. I get tired of her too fast. Loud, irritable, badmouthing creatures and spouting pitiful crap. Yet this annoying person is crucial for my plan.

The chill of the morning air, the fog and silence - oh, how I appreciate silence. I stop for a moment - deeply inhaling the misty air. Next to me I hear Merin let out an annoyed sigh. God, how this woman pisses me off.

In silence we make our way to the corner of the park with the exit from it. Parking lot with a single vehicle parked - my jeep. So she even took a taxi, not her car. I sigh.

“Let’s talk over breakfast, shall we?” - I say, as I gesture towards my car.

Merin annoyingly gave a glance. She hated that there was the option of me leaving her here. To sort out her own way back. She stumbled to car, got in and shut the door with force. She hated this obedience I requested, in order for her to get any answers she wanted from me.

We drove out into fields and forests, half an hour later reaching my well built mansion. Once the car was in underground parking, along with a dozen of other cars for me to daily select from, we walked up to the dining room, where I knew - breakfast awaited.

My butler greeted me, as I made my way through the hall to the dining room.

“At thirty past eight there's a meeting with the research facility. Doctor is eager to show his report. There's three interviews with photoshoots for magazines later. I scheduled lunch in 'Frosco'. Dinner is to be in the city, Grayton Hotel. Brandon requested an appointment. Should I confirm?” - Francis, a fine gent in his late forties, my butler, gave me a short overview of today's schedule.

“Please do. Message Trisha regarding the plans with Brandon. She's eager for him.” - I simply answered, as I took a seat at the table.



After a short glance - I noticed Merins confused, then proud look, when she saw a set of breakfast for herself. I did message my butler on our way back.

A full breakfast course consisting of italian style omelette, thin pancakes, breakfast tea with shortcake, and a glass of juice. A finery executed and meticulously prepared by the staff that work for me.

“So, are you going to share about that Erick or not?” - Merin remarked, as she began to eat.

I felt myself restrained from the wish of kicking her out. It was, after all, my idea to have breakfast.

Cutting a piece of omelette and devouring it - fine taste. Once finished and rinsed with tea, I replied to the annoying stare Merin gave me.

“I spoke with him about David. Reminded of his attractions and issues of physical matter he has to sort out periodically. Also spoke about the girl that’s staying at his place - Elyon, as I recall. We saw through the flaws of him giving away his ideas. Perhaps a bit excessively, to his co-workers and multitude of students. Which triggered the reaction within AIO. He should be with David now. – I calmly stated, as I started with pancakes.

Merin shifted her legs, boot heels scratching the floor. Her short red dress was too revealing, with her long chestnut hair barely covering that cleavage. So unsightly for her status and work.

“Are you sure that did not make the reaction go the opposite way? The AIO is spiking even higher. With this intensity rising - we might get to the problem of being discovered. Sure as hell we don’t need that! You do know how risky it is within our environment!” – Merin raised her voice, expressing her ever growing concern.

Just why does she need to make drama out of everything? Especially when all is under control.

The sounds of swift footsteps were audible, like a little clatter. Sometimes it was nice to hear the buzz of maids and other staff taking care of the mansion.

I looked out the panel windows of the dining room into my garden. My favourite hydrangea and peonies are blooming closer to the windows. Just a fine aesthetic of colours and class.

Feeling Merins stare burning hole in my side, gave me a craving or ripping her eyes out. What an annoying thing she was.

Footsteps got closer to the door, then once opened - Francis entered inside.

“Lady N is here to see you. Should I invite her here, or do you wish to meet her afterwards in study?” - his calm demeanor and professionalism is the balm to my frustrations.

“Invite her over here. Bring coffee for the Lady.” - I reply, picking up a tablet that’s filled with notifications of news relatable to my work.

“Yes, sir.” - Francis replies and walks out.

A moment later door opens once again. This time it's the guest. Her black and red hair messy, she seems dressed casually, with her ever so typical black leather jacket present. What a character.

She walks in, shortly noticing Merin at the table. Mischievous glimmers in her eyes, as a smirk appears on Nikos face.

“Oh dear! Merin, haven't seen you in a while! Or is it that our dear Adrian is finally becoming a 'loving husband'? Hard to picture that, but guess love makes people change. Ha-ha! Although your short dress and those boots scream of cheap easy prey, which would suggest the situation otherwise. Have you changed your career yet? Would suit you more.”

“You are as horrible as ever.” – I looked at Niko, unable to hide the small smile that her remark made me let out. - “Take a seat, your coffee is on its way.”

Niko took a seat at the table to my left. Merin sat to my right.

Sometimes I question my own decision making. Especially during times of the cold war between these two.

Merin hates Niko from the deepest depths of her heart. Another just likes to sarcastically and toxically remark the obvious poor choices Merin makes. Not that it bothers me. Merin just hates being called 'cheap' by Niko, so in protest and to convince otherwise she buys expensive luxurious items and wears them. Which even more lets Niko to be of greater amusement.

But knowing Merin - this reason to hate was one of many. She despises the latter. Having them two in one space right now - was a sort of show for me.

“Adrian,” - Niko looked at me, her voice cold, yet sarcasm blooming. - “Did you cut your wife's tongue? It's a miracle she's still silent.”

I looked Niko in the eyes - yes, she was just killing time before coffee arrives. Then I looked at Merin, fuming with silent anger. Yet testing the level of her obedience is amusing. Therefore I speak to her.

“Merin, be nice and reply when spoken to.”

“Fucking disgusting that you're taking her side!” - Merin hissed, watching Niko. - “I wish that you die a miserable lonely death, as rotting corpse will be fed to maggots. So that I'll never see that filthy face of yours ever again!”

“Oh, the tongue's intact. That's good to know.” – Calmly replied Niko.

Francis came in, bringing coffee and placing it in front of Niko. Latter softly said 'thanks', with a smile. Francis gave a short nod, returning the smile, then left.

“Adrian, I am here to say that you have to reconcile with David.” - Niko gave a cold glance, having some of that hot coffee. - “Be gentle. Also, regarding the observer Erick has – I took care of that. Most importantly - I'll go on a trip for some time. Duty calls, you know.” - She

finishes her coffee, as she's standing up. - "Do look that all stays intact."

"Understood." – I exhaled. – "Enjoy your time there, Niko."

Niko let out a chuckle, gave me a kiss on the cheek and left.  
The moment Niko was out the door, Merin exploded with rage.

"This bitch! And you're telling me that you're the boss? She is fucking younger and bosses you around like a muppet! No respect towards you whatsoever! Rude bitch!" – Merin was throwing a tantrum. - "And how she dares talk to me, that insolent whore!"

I felt my cool reach the edge. Her filthy mouth spouting trash was getting my mood down. That outburst of filth must be contained.

"You better shut up. If you keep on with these 'anger shows' - our divorce will be sorted in minutes. I do have respect for you, but if you keep it up - the last of it will fade. Niko is the key to our programme, unlike you. Wish to continue in such a frivolous filthy manner and you'll be disposed of. Without a trace."

I felt my own ice cold rage seep through. My cold gaze directed at furious Merin, made it clear that I do have a murdering intent, yet she is way too bashful.

"Just say it! Say it! Admit that you love that bitch! Admit it!" – Merin slapped her hand against the table. Her rage was beyond her. Eager to prove whatever point she made up in her head. What a foul temper.

"Yes, I love her." – I said without batting an eye. – "Will you shut up now? Your tantrums are not changing anything. Just makes you more of a miserable woman in my eyes, and the eyes of the others. Have some respect for yourself."

This disgusting wife of mine is greatly troublesome. Making me openly admit my love for Niko. Which is something I had to admit to self for a long while. Those feelings for her.

Though Merin took it as empty words thrown her way for her to shut up. She still will rage out at any opportunity she gets.

Such a lonely woman - trying to cope, by sleeping around, changing partners daily. Nothing that can satisfy her void.

Though, look at me - man in his late thirties, with model looks and downing own empty hollow in wine and whiskey, or, for that matter, any good alcohol.  
Because I can't reach what I crave. Yet.

But here we are, at the breakfast table. In a marriage that was not meant to happen, made to cover the work needed. Though we still keep appearances for others. Nobody needs those 'exclusive' news. She, as daughter of the director of AIO, manages to cover up things finely - by bending the system to needs and wishes. Well, every world has its lies.

“I am still annoyed that she is the only one that physically is capable of going through ECHO.” – Merin blurred out, as if remembering own science doctorate and work she does.

“Believe me,” - I sigh. - “You should be deeply grateful that you’re not her. She already became insane. ECHO messes you up, well, messed every other up. She just somehow got out alive, faking being fine. I would never in my life swap places with her. I had my little bite of that experiment. I would never try it again. But that also is what’s appealing. How she keeps up being ‘fine’.”

“ This bitch actually has her screws loose! Ha! Knowing this makes me happy in a way.” – Merin downed her tea, leaving lipstick stain on her cup.

Then she got up to make a call and left, blowing a kiss. I watched her go. As doors closed behind - I exhaled, looked at my phone, then at the wall, then out the window.

“I’m tired of people, dragged into my hell with her.” – I smacked my teaware from the table, making it fly against the wall - shattering to pieces.

My hand brushes over my forehead.

“Oh, how tiresome.”

///

Engines roaring, mechanisms keep on blasting up, engineers run around like ants – panic is spreading bit by bit. AIO is reading out some code red disturbances. Engineering staff is doing best to computerise the data and find intel about the object of such drastic change.

Few seconds later the system shuts down, restarts and runs again without fail. All data, information and bits about faulty and code "red" – lost, all is deleted. Engineers - puzzled about such system occurrence. This bug is not the first time. Yet somehow it flicks up like crazy, making alarms blast out like sirens, and then it all shuts off like nothing happened.

No one can prove the problem, as there is no record left of it. On the system everything looks clean. In the research - engineers are left hanging. No matter what they say - without proof it's not going to go anywhere.

## Chapter 12 "Looking at my Grave"

/Niko

"Thun-thun-thun" - I can hear my heartbeat. Feels like I was hit by a ton of bricks - body slowly reacting again, though it hurts.

Pang in my head, the silence and the dark that enveloped me crashes down.

Familiar buzz of cars in traffic, people chatting, opening and closing of shop doors with the ding - the sounds find me, as I am getting my senses back. Another hard smash on me, as I'm pushing to open my eyes, trying to remember how to breathe.

After light of day burns and scorches, as I squint eyes, then slowly open them fully - I get to see a familiar sight of the backstreet. A pub called "The Glassblower" and food place "The Warwick". The life of Piccadilly Circus greets me.

Ah, yes, the madness of the endless buzz of the big city. The loud loneliness in the crowd and the quiet shout in the empty street. It's back alright.

After a moment of recollecting the map of the city in my head, I turn to my right, making my way through the back streets to reach Covent Garden. Have a destination I must visit.

The odd shops, restaurants, cafes, posh corner stores and speciality shops - how nostalgic. The atmosphere to this never grounded city that keeps on growing, going and grumbling.

Fascinating to pass by the opened side doors of the staff entrance to theatre, then off to the parking spots, empty short roads with high iron bar fences and steel windows. The distanced and forthcoming feel this place gives you.

Another shop passing by, another street, then into the less and less crowded roads to the corner place cafe called "Verona". A nice name, though not the typical sort of top place. But, due to the university nearby, as it became more student oriented - not such a bad spot.

A need of a cup of coffee and that smoke. Body's craving that nicotine and caffeine dose like there's no tomorrow.

I walk in, make an order of one large latte and walk out to sit at the conveniently located table. After a short check in my pockets - sure enough I find a pack of Marlboros and a lighter. The wallet with the spare change, bank card, Oyster card for travels and a few business cards.

Pulling out one cigarette, lighting it up and having a drag.

Ah, that's it. That's it. Pain begins to subtle down.

Waitress comes out bringing my coffee, putting it on the table. I kindly thank her, as she goes back in.

It's always tough to go from place to place. Not only are you physically beat up by the feeling of it, but mentally - you're battered with all the experiences, memories, feelings and knowledge of your other self.

It's hard for me to do this every time. There's a reason I've been off the radar of the travels for a while - it's very tragic. Once you travel through with this, taking yourself in consciousness to the other you somewhere along the many parallels in the universe - you end up screwing up a lot along the way.

How?

Well, to begin with - memories. Sudden recollection of all the memories of your other self that floods into you, but the issue goes both ways - so other you knows of your issues too. Yet there resides a sad trick - sometimes the other you does not remember your visit, while you still remember everything. But that visit is a memory hole for the other - with just not remembering the time, the events and life through the duration of your stay. And imagine that you've been here for months, years - so that'd be a lot of time erased for the other.

Then there is another issue - the other you might get broken by an overload of information. Thinking that insanity took over - which sometimes leads to suicide.

Or it can be even worse - the other you has all the memories wiped. All of them. Becoming in vegetative state. Unable to communicate, walk, eat... Eventually, in the worst cases - they forget how to breathe - suffocating instantly.

Well, this 'me' has a habit of smoking - gotta say that I enjoy how it tastes, as this body likes it, which gives me the viewpoint of all smokers and how they like the taste.

Ah, the smoke inhaled deeply - just fills the lungs with this remarkable pause of the moment, in which I take a note of surroundings a bit more.

The evening that's creeping over, as the buzz of office workers ceased, with many fleeing to underground stations, bus stops and going off towards home, plans, dates, pubs, bars, silent homestay nights.

The cabs pass by this squeezed road. The caricature-like artsy people pass by, some already eager to get that booze in the system and party all night. How very much familiar, how nostalgic.

I tiredly smile at the scene - indeed, I should prepare for the next jump over, soon. That'll take up more power than the previous time.

I finish coffee, get up and walk towards the central - there's a spot that I have a craving to see. The place called "The Quadrant Arcade" - passage with memories of good times.

As I slowly stroll through the streets, with evening darkening and street lights shining bright - I begin to recall my own memories of old. Well, with all the jumping from place to place and information overdose - sometimes I do forget things as well.

I walk up to the quiet back street, as there are close to no people, darkness and frozen moment in time - I recall how Adrian had his first dive in the system, during project "E.C.H.O."

It lasted five minutes, he was pulled out with haste, as his levels dropped and he was in danger of not recovering if he'd lost anything. Well, he did spend two months in intensive recovery, via medical help, due to being in a coma. Once he was back - he said that in the system he spent five months. It was long and mad. He was really tired from the dive, mentally exhausted from the brain overload of information and body had to recover after all that. He was not really capable of going in.

Though I feel like lately he might have something to do with "E.C.H.O." that he's keeping from me. Which is why I'm diving.

I walk to the shop, grab a bottle of rum, get it paid for and walk out. Oh, how fine is the evening in town. I walk to the passage and give it a look - ah, sweet old memories.

Slowly walking through it, as steps echo, then going out right in the midst of the busy street packed with people and traffic. I go across, making my way to St.James's Park. That is the ultimate place to sit down in the dark and drink own pity away, as you stare at the ducks and lake.

Managing to find the calm spot of the bench in the park, although there were few moments of kissy couples, drunken hobos and even a police patrol car. Well, patrol is circling this place in a timely manner - so I'll just enjoy this as it goes.

"Yeah, E.C.H.O. - Electromagnetic Cerebrum intoxication by Hydrogenic Oxoacids. The damn toxic poisonous chemicals that Adrian thought will be fantastic aid in the dive, as the electromagnetic system on top of your head was not enough for you to get there." - I let out, as I stare at the sky, with rum in hands, talking to self like a crazy person.

"Well, silly as it may - nobody cares what the heck you say." - I speak to self, as I open rum and down it bit by bit.

"That asshole made David and Erick also do the thing. There's three first test subjects to E.C.H.O. and those included me, David and Erick. Aww boo. Erick was in coma for a month after, with inability to recollect much of what was there - memories were jumbled. David managed to go in and out, remembering the thing - yet he was puking blood out for a year after that. Oh, the crap side effects of the toxins." - I gulp that rum. A duck quacks at me, as if my talk was not satisfactory.

"Oh, fuff you too mate." - I make a face at it, - "So, there were us, and there were others that followed after. Might I do a spoiler - most of them died." - I snort, as I feel the alcohol do the thing. - "Ha! Like, they were so damn brain-mushed that they were unable to function. Can't judge. They died from brain bleeding out. Like, it was a tragedy to watch them spasm out, as they bleed from ears and nose, eyes, mouth, still hooked up to the system."

I pour more of the hard liquor inside.

“Know what, sad quack?” - I look at the duck. - “The time is odd as well.” - My free hand makes gestures in the air. - “See, the time there should be like - what? If I spent a day here, then... Oh! It should be about a minute in time out there!” - My own enthusiasm got me. - “Oh I’m so good. So, there it’s a minute - here is a day. The next dive though... The next dive though...” - I felt the heart becoming heavy.

“It’s the time equivalent of a minute to a hundred years.” - The enthusiasm vanishes. - “Shit, no wonder I’m mentally old as fuck.” - I sigh and down the bottle.

“Holly shit, pirates were mad thinking this. Whoooa.” - I breathe out, then breathe in and try to look around - having my view become hazy.

“It hit my head well.” - I scratch the corner of my mouth. - “Well, sweetie, let’s do the boo-boo again.”

I concentrate in the haze - close eyes, feel the darkness, sounds become erased - then it begins.

I opened my eyes to see it unfold - the reality I’m in right now falls apart like a rusted puzzle - the surroundings remind me that the game crashed and virtual reality smashed to bits. Then it all disintegrates into complete darkness.

Another deep dive in the parallels. May the body of another me recover. If ever. In death may it be at peace.

## /Elyon

Quiet house, so much so that it seems dead. Even though the weather outside tries it’s best to be as grey as possible. Is it because of my stupid self - who maybe longs for her? Or am I crazy enough to keep on daydreaming about her?

Erick is not home yet - not that I am worrying.

I am... maybe just a little... lonely?

“Oh, right.” - I exhale, as I notice the big fur ball appear on the porch of the conservatory. He’s here to get that snack, which was prepared by Erick before he left.

I get up and get the few strings of that - ‘not sure what’s it made of’ thing, open door and leave it on the porch next to cat.

Once again - Fatso looks at me judgingly, flicks the tail, waits for me to close the door and only then does he proceed with eating treats.



“Just so much attitude in this fur ball.” - I shake my head, as I walk back to the seat in the kitchen. I grew fond of staying in the kitchen - food is close, drinks are close, the technology at the reach of hand and no need to jump and run to get that item you want.

I felt exhausted - been working best on updates and observations for the office, but due to nothing happening and no Erick in sight - there was not much to report on. It was odd.

Also - there was the sensation that I missed something during the night when there were three of us. Orin did say that she felt like she had me all to herself. Nor do I recall much of the sense of Nikos body - all a misty forest. That event was on just between me and Orin. That made me try and figure it out - was it drinks? But Orin and me - we both saw Niko. And the whole thing was very much realistic, yet I can't recall her touch.

My phone rang. I poked the 'answer', before checking who it was.

“Hi, it's me, Orin.” – Said sweet voice on the other end.

“Oh... Hi.” – I felt poked out from my bubble of thoughts.

“I was wondering if I could come see you today after work? So um, would that be alright?” - Orins voice was so nice to hear.

I fiddled with the ends of my hair, twirling it around my finger.

“I'd be glad to have you over.” - I said.

“So happy you said that,” - Answered Orin in a bubbly voice, - “so I'll see you in a few hours. Bye!”

Orin hung up right after, yet the lonely feeling I've had dissipated - I'll have in my company a great sweetheart of a person. I felt myself smile at that thought.

Weather was calm, the sky was greyish-blue, it was warm, although each whiff of wind gave chills. The surrounding world seemed like it's on hold.

Like nature knew something I didn't, preparing beforehand for some sort of events, which might not be of the best sort.

Soon enough Orin came over. With a short buzz of the door, me dashing to open up and seeing that sunshine of a person - I felt happy to have her with me.

We had good food, warm tea, cozy hugs.

Then bed and intimate loving. With Orin next to me it felt like the rest of the world could wait, as I enjoy my time with my lover.

The cold of the night was biting bare skin. Fatso sat on the porch of own house, having master in full concentration working on canvas, as the speakers played 'Depeche Mode –

Wrong’.

“You signed your way into the world of madmen.” – Calmly spoke Cat.

/Adrian

I was downing my fourth glass of red wine.

Back against the comfortable large chair, as I wasted time in my bedroom.

Large bedroom, large mansion, vast amount of space, yet somehow, right now - alone.

In my head was the picture of the empire being built slowly and surely - to create exactly the world I want to create. Piece by piece. Brick by brick. System coding after coding. The investors bending over to give, give and give.

Outside - pouring rain, wind howling, the trees rustling... It felt like it reminded me of something being ripped apart. Scary, as if omen to keep one’s mind in touch with what one might have forgotten.

“It’s going to be a big storm” – Cats voice said.

I jumped from my chair, looking around.

This can’t be real. Must be some sort of auditory hallucination from overwork.

“Ha-ha, ha-ha.” - I heard my own fake laugh, as I try to calm down. But it doesn’t work that well. - “Aha-ha-ha-ha!”

I sound hysterical. I feel that I actually am hysterical, scared. My maddened laugh made me break into tears. Laughing and crying - like a breakdown. Great breakdown.

I look around, watching it as it all is still intact, as all is in place. Then the door opens, making me almost shout and flee, yet as I saw my butler - I just kept on laughing, as tears rush down.

“Master, that’s...” - Francis came closer, concerned, I see panic on his face.

Though as hard as I try to stop laughing - I can’t.

Francis grabs me tight in a hug, as I begin to struggle to breathe. Though once I feel another person’s touch - yes, a reminder that I’m here. Here.

I begin to calm down. Laugh stops, I heavily breathe. Francis pulls me by the hand to the study, seats me down and goes to the drinks cabinet.

After pouring me a drink and bringing it over - he gets on the knee in front of me.

“Master, might I ask for apologies for speaking freely.” - His eyes stare into mine. - “I feel like you need to have a longer break from work. The research is too heavy on you. You must take care of your health.”

I start crying - having someone genuinely concerned for me - what a miracle. Hicks and tears, I down the drink given to me.

“My apologies sir, but you must have at least a proper night's rest. I'll watch your sleep for you.” - I can hear Francis' voice fade. The worrywart put some meds in that drink. How silly. I fall asleep, with a smile on my face.

### /David

In my apartment, staring at the city being hammered by a storm below. Rain becoming dense by the moment, like it's trying to wash off all wrongs made by endless populis.

“You feel it too, right?” – Erick looked at me, as if seeking reassurance. He knows that I'm capable of sensing her. What I don't tell is that I sense her somewhat more lately.

“Yes,” - I reply, still watching the city below - “I do feel it too. This time, something from there is upon us.”

“There?” - Erick was quizzical for a moment, - “Do you think Niko will be alright?”

I turned to face jittery Erick. I can't really tell him the truth, can I? All that work to protect him from memories and now revealing them? I can't. I'm sorry.

“She'll be fine.” - I say out loud. Then turn around and mutter to self - “Hope she returns before all hell breaks loose.”

I heard Erick get up and go make tea. As I watched him in the window reflection.

“Voices are coming to get all of you” – Spoke Cat. - “Are you ready to face it?”

“Did you say something?” - Erick asked.

“No, nothing.” - I replied. My eyes wide, trying to hold my heartbeat steady.

I saw him for a moment in the window reflection - the trace-shadow from the parallel dive. Niko. She's there now. She's in that mad hellish place.

### /Niko

Darkness. Once again - the darkness and the silence are slowly breaking and the sounds, along with other senses return to me.

Eyes open and I notice that I have a paper-like wall in front of me. Inside this room - darkness, behind that thin wall - light. In front of me is a shadow of a person, seems male.

Chains hanging from the sides of his attire, rabbit ears perk atop his head. He comes even closer to the wall, places his hand on it.

I can feel heart racing, blood freezing fear. The senses make me feel the urging need to flee. He's a menace.

"Welcome back, patient Zero!" – His cheerful voice echoed. - "I remember you visited us quite often, but then you disappeared for quite a while. Oh, that was saddening, but look at it now! You're back with us! Oh that makes me so happy!"

The rabbit-eared shadow paces back and forth, his fingers tracing a line on the wall. I try to move, but I can feel that this body is numb. It's painful to lift a finger. Pins and needles all over, like I've neglected blood flow in the body for a very long while.

I manage to look down - I'm in a chair, big padded chair.

Guess it was made for this body to have some comfort while residing here. Wait, how long has it been like this? Through pain and tingly feeling I manage to have a look around - I see the outline of the door. All the walls seem thin, though some feel thicker than others. The floor and ceiling are as if made of something entirely else.

The entire time I was looking around, trying to make the body regain feeling, as I sit up, I hear this Rabbit go on chatting.

"You know, Red was so sad after you left. She took it out on all of us!" - He pouted. - "You do remember Red, right? You played with her so much! And so I..." - Excitement picked up in his voice.

Red? Shit, I have no memories of this... Have to rewind them to reinstate it. I closed my eyes for a moment, and traced the 'red, red' in a chant in my head. And then the hard painful 'thud' of memories flooded. I opened my mouth, as if the sudden pressure was raised and I had to balance it out.

Shit. Shit. Shit. The heart pumped blood in my veins, I stood up, legs wobbly, managing it to the wall where Rabbit paced. Close enough, my hand touching the wall, palm placed on it - cold. I tried pushing it - hard as steel.

Red, the one who chased me with a single thought in her head - to kill me. All the horror of running in this madness came back, all the crying, pain, all the despair, hate, crushed and broken feelings.

The experiment land filled with the living undead. The sent rescue team commando - in pain left to die. Doomed crew with a suicide mission to save survivors. The location of this madness, the 'head' town in the mountain.

And the sealed off area where I was thrown in - the maze... Maze. Right, I was left in a maze when I moved up a notch with the drift to another parallel.

“Hey! Hey! Are you even listening?” – Rabbit's voice sounded frustrated. – “Uhm, nevertheless. Darn Cat still sees you as his favourite, but you know, I'll be happy to see you again sometime. When you get it back on track to play with us more.”

Rabbit came close to the wall again, his hand placed right against mine, I felt his warmth with my hand. He jolted slightly, but kept his hand on.

Now I felt that he spoke with his lips touching the wall, his shadow right opposite me. Separated by a paper-thin layer of wall, yet one that's unbreakable.

“Ah, you make me excited, being so close again. I can't wait... Can't wait.” - His voice was giving me shivers, my hand feeling his. My body started to tremble from fear. “I'll make sure to tear that skin off them bones.”- He spoke in a satisfied tone, then pulled back again - “See you!” – he happily added and went away.

My heart kept thumping loudly in my ears. My trembling hand pulled away from the wall - I'm in the Maze again. Guess this time it's been more than a couple of thousand of years...

## Chapter 13 “Dark Corner Bound”

/Niko

After my body began cooperating - I made a decision to leave the room. Opening the door and stepping out got me greeted with cold air, cold surroundings. The walls were covered in frost, but to the touch some seemed to have more warmth in them.

That's right - this place is in the mountain region and is known as the frost covered town. So, having an endless cold - is what is normal here.

Walking on and on, with the cold biting at my skin. Still feeling my hazed and discombobulated mind reminded me of the touch and heat through the wall that came from the Rabbit.

Although a bloodthirsty maniac, he's still a living one.

The maze was called so for a good reason - much of it consisted of endless rooms that are square, although different by size variations. And that all is located under the ground level. So, with around ten floors under and around the same amount upwards - it was a cold hell.

The cold and the darkness made me remember the feeling of being crushed mentally - fallen in despair, as I stumbled through these rooms. The downside is that each time I got here - the position of rooms would switch, change. So, even if I knew how it looked - I'd have to re-explore again. And cold. Ah, so cold. I can see my own breath in the dark.

Sadly - there is close to no light. Just a few lamps on the sides of the rooms, that faintly still work, yet keep giving that eerie feel.

The worst part was when I entered the room with a few lifeless mongrels - that's when some memories sparked inside - indeed, these creatures were men once. But due to chemicals in this lab - they just mutated beyond recovery. Grotesque creatures.

A sort of ones that kill. These ones were the light sensitive ones - they react to light and attack it. Many others react to sound and attack anything that disturbs utter silence.

So many in one room. Shit. That's troublesome. I managed to walk on the side of the room, passing them by. The door was straight ahead and happened to be open.

Once I walked in - I felt that this room had broken glass all over. The faint reflections of the light from the room with mongrels gave it away.

Right, few doors more and there should be someone I'm seeking for.

With heart thumping in my ears, as I walk slowly, putting my balance and weight from toe to toe, I felt that the cold walls were biting skin more. I felt my fingers get cut on the ice.

Shit. I grit my teeth, slowly breathing out, as I stop for a moment.

Am I going insane? Returning to this hell to check on Adrians plans. Fucking hell. I'm definitely out of it. And what for? Just to stop the silly man from making mistakes. Eh.

Oh. I looked ahead - the dozen straight passage doors were open, making it a long corridor with some light shining at the end. I see the shadow of that Rabbit pass across this corridor, at the end.

My heart stops for a moment. But what did that Rabbit look like? I can't recall his face. I managed to get a grip on myself, before my legs tried to walk after him.

It has been a long time since I was here. I do grasp that most of the rest - all the important things - I still can't recollect.

"I wanna grab your hand." - I whisper to that Rabbit that left.

Dammit, that's some screwed up version of 'Alice in Wonderland'. I sigh, put my fingers on the wall and once more follow a few rooms into the small corridor, still in the dark. I manage to touch a wall that is made of metal. The biting cold piercing and burning upon touch.

After gulping down the pain, I pull the door open. Surprisingly - it was not as hard to open as I imagined. It was light inside - I walked in.

Room that reminded me of a prison cell - open window, iron bars, single bed and toilet in the corner.

On top of bed - massive pile of blankets and breath fog coming out.

All the walls in the room are covered in ice, the frost made walls crack in places, the ceiling had icicles, and the floor had a faint snow layer. This room was even colder than the rest of the maze. Yet it had one plus - the window with moonlight pouring in.

As I made a few steps inside - the blanket pile moved. I stopped.

The blankets slipped, staying on the bed, as a person emerged from that blanket fortress.

Can't deny - that'd be the only way to keep warm in here, although food and water would be of question.

"So you're back. You sure left me hanging for too long this time around."- The person spoke, as she got to stand in front of the moonlight. I came closer.

"Oh, it's you. That's still so weird to see myself from aside." - I replied.

In front of me was - me. No kidding. It was 'the me' from here. Well, only in this parallel I could come as another self, without having harm done to this other me. This part I did recall. And fast. Although her hair was longer, the chest area was bigger. And I do have a few questions about hygiene here, as she seemed to be well looked after.

I came over to give her a hug. Though it was still feeling odd. Like I suddenly had a twin sister.

Guess that could be some warmth in this forever winter land.

## /Kriss

The indicators show stability of the patient, special machine engine keeps on humming. Couple of scientists walk around keeping tabs on all the data they have hands on, observing one body connected to many wires, inside a chemical filled capsule, supplied with needed oxygen and other in-vein vitamins and proteins to keep the body functioning.

I get to stand in the room behind the three inch window. I fix my glasses, so they don't slip from my nose. Then I reach over for the pen in my pocket, still eyeing the person in the capsule, I note down a few things on the paper in front of me.

The pressure is annoying. I let out a sigh and walk out. After I cross into the other hall, I'm stopped by the scholar.

"Sir, it's time to report the progress to the Chef."

I give a nod, take the papers from the scholar and keep going to my office.

There are so many things yet to discover.

## /Niko

We sat down on the bed. She was covered up in a blanket. I kindly refused. I still had to regain all of my memories, before I gave my body any comfort. So keeping it in turmoil was a better option.

"So remind me, what happened?" - I solemnly let out.

My Doppelganger eyed me, then shrugged. She was curious where I was. Not that I was in dire need to cover it up.

"Well, you left me here a long while ago. I got some help from "Forces" supplying me food and water through the window. But each time someone was sent - it was killed right after making delivery to me, well, only a few managed to get back out." - She looked out the window. - "Cat sometimes comes to keep me company. But he is under suspicion, and almost gave away my whereabouts in here, so he is not as often as I'd like it to be. All the rest - just days passing by and the sun barely shining through this thick darkness."

As she told the story, she walked around the room. Not a single sound was made - special sourced boot soles that were provided by "forces", she explained.

"So... With the door open, were you unwilling to open it on your own?" - I looked at Doppel, brows furrowed.

"Waiting for you." - She said, as she seemed annoyed. Well, reasonably. - "You said it yourself before you disappeared - that I should stay and wait for you. You said that there was



something else you had to take care of, before we could get out. Did you lose your memory again?" – Doppel took a good look at me, her eyebrows raised.

Oh right, she was more of an annoying talker. The only thing that is shared between us - similar looks. When it comes to character - two absolutely different people. I let out a sigh. I looked at my hands, fingers on the left hand scratched, blood cold.

I needed to remember it all - and it required effort this time. A lot of effort.

My mind wandered to the shadow of Rabbit. That bloodthirsty maniac now felt more reassuring than staying with my own Doppel that questions me, pressuring me to recall things I did get scattered in my head.

I closed my eyes, my right eye hurting. I twist my neck, trying to remember.

"I was cornered by Red. I was bleeding from my punctured left side, blood on hands, scratches all over my body." - I push myself, feeling like this last memory of being here before 'return' was splitting my head open. - "Red was overjoyed by circumstances, as she got me in the room downstairs, while I was shaking with terror, although I was absolutely exhausted. That's all what I can recall."

Doppel listened to me, then she came close.

"We should go, right? Before you become like one of them 'lifeless'." – Doppel smiled at me, but her words implemented that I'm one of those who lost all will to life.

Well, if you do get cornered by a maniac such as Red and don't have the least feel to fight, as you barely gasp air, with blood in mouth, pain across the body... Oh yeah, I was ready to die.

Doppel took my hands and pulled me up. I was still recollecting that feeling of broken despair when I was cornered by Red.

A sudden slap across the cheek brought me back to now in the cell. I looked at Doppel. This brat still didn't know how the dives work, nor did she ever experience one. She wouldn't get me explaining to her the strain that it has on a person.

After tightly pressing own hands in a fist, feeling the blood smearing across my hand, as I'm doing best to subdue anger and not smashing this prisoner in the face. I turn to see where this trouble went.

She looked at me, as she opened the door and gestured with "The heck you waiting for? Come on, let's go!".

Deep sigh. Sure, let's do this. Let's sort this thing out. Let's reach the exit from this hell of a science idea going bad.

/Kriss

I crossed the corridor, ending up in my office with a fake fancy name on the door. I sat down in my chair, as I felt the heavy part on my shoulders - to keep on the work. I took off my glasses and put them on the table, whilst I leaned back in the chair.

Now what we have to do is wait.

I give a tired look around this office, where I live for a couple of good years now. Shelves stacked with books, research and more. The space behind the row of shelves - a full on studio flat. The dresser, bed, kitchenette, bathroom... What a life. What a life. But have to admit - this room hosts so much data that it is protected by the highest level of security, pretty much the same as AIO HQ. The personal fortress.

The person I'm waiting to call is the one that began the project. I'm really eager to share the new found data.

I checked on my screen - statistics, live feed and data of the subject in the research process. The person that is valuable to this research falls right under my jurisdiction, but I'm still to answer to someone higher up. What a troublesome way of keeping it going.

Ehh, must clean up the system of everyone working this shift, so that the AIO won't be notified or affected once they leave premises. Though, as they return to work - they have their personal neurolink back with all the information needed for the day of work. Though, besides me, it's great to have the higher up available at all times to have a conversation about this project. So intriguing how he keeps the system from finding out about his knowledge. How meticulous play is going - for that all not to affect or trigger the system.

What an admirable person that man is.

/Niko

And here we are - walking slowly through the endless rooms of the labyrinth. As we try to find the hell way out, I deeply wish to just stumble across that Rabbit and kick the information out of him on how to get out. Hope he does know that. Otherwise that would be a waste of time.

Doppel somehow is fine at avoiding the scattered items that are from broken tech and pieces of whatever was bombed out. Still, the only thing that does not give me peace of mind were the intricate walls - how the heck did they come to existence.

I get that this was a scientific research lab made by a really twisted man. And I'm still in the process of recalling the details and memories, which, by the way, is painstakingly hard and my headache is very annoying. The lack of light and visuals add up to my aching head - the level of concentration I have to maintain is very troublesome.

The deformed mongrels roam freely. Though right now they look like grotesque deformed statues you're able to see, sort of, from around the middle of their bodies. As most lights are still working on the level of a meter or so from the ground.

After a few rooms of these not so pretty things, we got to the hall with a staircase upwards. It gave the feeling of a broken down well. The moonlight poured from the top. The sight of piles of snow in the middle, torn by explosions, with half stairs left to walk up. With a challenge of broken glass frozen in ice on top of those bits of stairs.

We came closer, viewing the challenge before us. Sudden realisation of a shadow flashing aside, then around us and away - that can mean two things and one of them is not a good one.

I stand in place waiting for the reaction from the shadows.

They're either the scouts of Red, or the pieces of Cat.

One was sort of an adequate person, quietly helping from aside; another was a bloodthirsty maniac having strangest affection to me - craving madly to cut me in bits, enjoying blood bath along the way. Yet these shadows could never be distinguished between which belongs to whom.

The shadow dashed away. Maybe the Cat? Maybe all is well?

A few seconds later mongrel crushing sound and evil laughter of Red was audible from depths of rooms.

"Shit, we better make a run for it." – Doppel jolted.

"Upstairs!" – I rushed up.

Maddening hell! The boots are scraped by the glass, the torment of shoes slightly getting stuck, then pulled up and on and on, trying not to fall inside the cold pit of broken glass from these icy stairs. I barely manage to get a few floors up, when I see a familiar sign covered in frost.

"Floor 7" it read - one of few floors with windows and different sort of walls in the entire labyrinth. I pull Doppel along inside the hallway of "Floor 7".

The chilling sound of chainsaw, the crushing sound of walls broken, glass being chipped to bits by footsteps. Then - crying of the lifeless bastards dying, as they most likely got in the way, and the voice of Red: "Oh you're back! Let's play! Let's play!".

Once I hear that voice - I stop in my tracks. The familiar fear creeps up and that feeling of letting go - as I feel my head spinning, standing lost in the corridor.

Light was coming from the windows on the right side. Floor was creaking, in some parts it had holes to the floors below - where Red was lurking and scouting like a maniac for me. Shouting out about her so-called 'love'.

"Come out and play with me! I want my dear chainsaw to love you lots! Oh come on! I want that view of your heart in my hands! I'd love to hug your weak bloodied heart and feed the rest to mongrels!" - Red kept shouting.

Suddenly one of the doors on the left opened - Cat was standing there. With the gist of his hand he showed to enter the room. The crushing sounds of Red being on her way up echoed across the hall.

Doppel pulled me in by the hand, as I was still in this daze or recollection.

Bare moments later the glass windows shattered in the hallway. Red yelled "I'll find you!" as she walked. Her chainsaw scraped the walls, floor, her heels echoed in the darkness. That voice made mongrels cry in fear. "Come on out, you bone pillow! I wanna pla-ay!" - Red groaned in madness.

Cat was holding Doppels mouth, so that the latter would not scream from fear. I was just staring at the door. Knowing that behind was - Her.

Just as the sounds died down, with Red and her minions walking away - somewhere further into the depths of Lab - searching for the prey - Cat released the grip. Doppel breathed out in relief. She really appreciated the gesture and was happy to see Cat.

This person, Cat, was the lookalike of Erick. Cat had white hair, fit body, green eyes, but he was in his black-framed glasses and strange suit. Looking somewhat like a butler, but with less officiality - with his shirt always undone - showing his pale skin. One big thing of visual reminder - Cat had cat ears and a tail. Also being the victim of chemical experimentation at some point in his life. There's no other way some augmented trials from this lab were ever released further than lock up in the Forbidden City.

"Oh, good to see you outside." - Cat, smilingly, looked at Doppel, then turned to me, becoming more official. - "And good to see You back."

Happily, Doppel hugged Cat tight. I gave it a look, then turned around to examine the room. The dazed feeling was still lingering, so I felt like my movements are slower.

It was one of the many classrooms that this lab had. The lessons, the teachings of the ways of the new research. The gore that was slowly becoming the new norm. It was all covered in frozen ash and ice, the frost clung to tables, to papers, there were scrapings of nails across some ice tables - the runaway fails. The old curtains hung down, whatever was left - was frosty, forever to remain in this time capsule of endless torture.

I took a look outside the window – study-maze city, broken and burned, with these bastard creatures walking around aimlessly. Further out is a massive wall, with lights beyond and

thick smog, hovering above it – it's refuge of the "Force", as far as it were. Behind it should be The Forbidden City of Lights.

That is the place where Doppel and Cat have to be returned. They are both from there. Well, actually Red is also from that same place, but she had the worst of it by agreeing to become a pet to a scientist that made her this way, then threw her out here.

I remembered the mission I was told to carry out here. A sad sort of mission requested by the Emperor.

Kill the monsters, erase Red from existence.

And oh, I did feel sorry for her - that's the reason I smiled last time we parted. I was ready to be killed after all the torture "Force" inflicted on me prior to that. Damn traitors.

Oh, the heavy work yet to be done...

## Chapter 14 “Bittersweet Labyrinth”

/Adrian

The loud sound of crayon scraping the floor downstairs made the young mother wake up early in the morning and go check the ruckus in the living room.

“Adrian! Not again!” – She exclaimed as she saw the new drawings of strange geometrical obscenities on the living room floor.

Boy, aged 11, was fully taken over by what he was doing. He would not stop at anything until he would finish this strange map of sorts. It looked like some outer space architecture drop-out, rather than a drawing - if you pay a bit more attention to it.

Mother rushed to Adrian. She grabbed him tight and hugged him, but he, with all might, kept on trying to escape to continue. He seemed obsessed. His mother would often say that he was “Possessed by some sort of a demon that made him do this.”

Doctors would come and go - trying to figure out this strange occurrence. Yet not a single one had the answer why every third night boy would go and draw, with no memory of his actions he’d silently go back to sleep.

“No! Adrian! Stop! You’re scaring me! Monster! You’re a monster!” - Mother pushed the child.

He fell on the floor.

Like nothing happened, he got up, then went back to the started drawing - to continue.

Crying, mother in fear backed away.

“You’re possessed Adrian. You’re a monster.” - The cold determined voice of the mother condemned the child.

I woke up, with my head feeling heavy. I wiped my face with the palm of my hand - cold sweat. The darn memories of my past haunt me as dreams now, huh? That was quite the childhood.

The clock next to bed showed quarter past nine in the morning. Well, that sure is the latest I got up in a while.

Getting up, with my head still heavy from the dream, walking to the dresser and pulling out my clothes for today. The moment I was fiddling with the buttons on my shirt - there came a knock on the door, as it opened.

“Morning Sir. Breakfast awaits you in the dining room. May I pull the curtains, Sir?” - Francis seemed happy that I’ve had my long sleep. With a faint smile on my lips I gave him a nod. He went to open those curtains.

Breakfast was filling. My coffee - darkest and harshest from all a soul can find. It was just right to my taste, as I needed to really wake up.

With my breakfast finished, Francis was on his way to grab my paperwork - I checked my phone. A missed call from David. Oh, did he decide to apologise for that incident now?

I rolled my eyes, trying to have a glimpse into imagining the apology I deserve, yet I felt that knowing this man - it could be that he'll do the opposite.

For a moment it felt that I touched something rotten.

Francis arrived with a pile of documentation and handed it to me.

"Car is ready, sir." - He led me to the selected car of the day. Black jeep. Inside, on the back seat, coat and some tech to help me along the day.

"Please, if anything - I'd love to be of help." - Francis gave a smile, as he bowed.

I got into my car, poked the start button and the engine softly buzzed. The moment I set out on the road - I decided to give a call to David. See what that idol is up to.

Phone call system in the car - the lovely add on I loved. Just a few pokes on the screen and the ringing of making a phone call began.

Moments later - the phone is picked up and I hear David.

"I've got a problem with Erick. He again is in the zone and keeps writing non stop. This has been going on for around nine hours, soon the AIO might spike up higher than before."

I let out a sigh.

"On my way." - was all that I replied, changing lanes on the motorway, dialling the lab.

Upon my arrival I got interrogated by the security of the building where David resided. It took around five minutes for security to call David's apartment and for latter to come and get me. Visitation without consent of owner was quite the issue here, so all had to be checked multiple times over.

We got into the elevator and headed up. Once the door to the apartment opened and we walked in - I saw Erick on the floor, hunched over the papers, protecting them like they were of endless value.

David came to touch Erick, but latter slapped Davids hand off with force, letting out growls.

"How long is he like this?" - I asked, getting my phone from my pocket. The lab sent remedy was on the way, soon arriving.

"For the past half hour or so - can't get him to calm down. He stopped talking." - David breathed out.

"Give me five minutes." - I checked the tracking of the delivery to the apartment, then walked over to Erick for a short examination.

Quite obvious paranoia, fear. All of a sudden Erick jumped aside from the papers, began backing away to the corner of the room, covered his mouth with his hands, as his eyes watched something in the room darting around.

Ericks pupils small, he's absolutely out of it. In the shadow of the jump. The parallel dive affected him harshly. He sometimes sees things that belong to the other place. Yet he can never explain it properly.

David paced around the room, anxious. I let out a deep sigh, then walked back to the entrance of the apartment.

"The meds have arrived. I'll go pick them." - I said, leaving the two to it's moment.

Going down the elevator, grabbing the container purse, going up again.

"Guess this time she is somewhere very close." - I say to self, as I think of where Niko might have dived in the parallels.

"Is there something I must know?" - David asked me, as I walked back with the container, then closed the door behind. I walk over to Erick and pull out the lab syringe.

"I assume that is mainly none of your concern. Just fulfil your role." - I let out.

Erick was crying, yet holding hands to cover his mouth. Like he viewed something highly deadly, looking to eat him alive. Though right now in front of him was me.

Was I that much of a monster to you now?

I pushed the syringe in his side. He whined, yet kept holding his hands over his mouth.

Crying more and more. Eventually falling to sleep.

"There have been changes in the perspective. Data was needed. I need new people. You know by yourself how it gets out there..." - I said, as I got up facing David.

"It gets ugly," - David spoke as he eyed Erick laying on the floor, - "It takes a toll on body and soul. Did you forget what happened to us?"

"Yeah, I still feel like crap at times due to that, but the thing is - I need to know. I have to make it work out. Sometimes achieving success takes a lot of sacrifice. Some cases prove that sacrifice is essential." - I speak, as I watch David pick Erick and take him to the bed.

Once David returns I hand him the pills - specifically crafted for Ericks case.

"During that experiment you wasted away around what? Hundred? Three hundred students?" - David looked at me, as he took the pills. - "Want to tell me that you continue with it after all those lives ended?"

"I'd lie, if I told you that I didn't." - I turned around, on my way out and to the lab.

"Are there more dead?" - David said, I felt anger in his tone.

"What if there are? How are you to change it?" - I asked, as I turned again to face David.

He approached me, his face expressing anger and concern, disgust even.



“You said you’d stop. Why are you killing more? For what goal? To dive better? To explore more? How many have returned safely?” - He spoke through teeth, his anger burning hard and bright. Oh, I do recall him getting all defensive like that, but oh well, the advancement I seek needs the sacrifice that is made for it.

“I did tell you that. So I told many. Glad you believed it. And my goal is for me to see through. I’m thankful that you and Erick were first to dive in. You provided quite the amount of very valuable information.” - I spoke calmly.

“You almost killed us all.” - David spat out.

“Almost. See, you’re still alive and well.” - I say, as I finally turned to walk away. Too much of a silly conversation going on in here.

“Does it satisfy you to see us suffer and die for something you so eagerly crave for? And what’s the point for all that?” - David raised his voice.

I left without turning back. Got in the elevator, once the doors closed and I was going down I replied.

“To finally see her real self.” - I said, feeling a smile on my face.

An hour later I am in my office at work.

I can hear people chat outside my door, as they do their secretarial issues and manage the endless requests from the high standing personas that require the oddest sort of medication or remedy crafted for them - the board of directors of AIO. Pompous arrogant assholes. Good thing they pay me, invest in me and keep their patronage like a very delicate flower. A glass of alcohol is on the table.

My fingers tap the corner of the document submitted to me by Kriss in the lab below. It is sometimes bother - to read through these piles at times, though all is worth the time and effort. E.C.H.O. in advanced manner and stages - that’s what’s important.

My office somehow feels like it became even more closed, making me feel claustrophobic. I walk to the only window in the room and check the outside - the single small park made from the local office infrastructure, so that creatures have a place to have lunch in, or simply relax. The feeling that was frustrating me through the whole of the time - the dream I had.

I was not a monster. I won’t be that monster. She was just dumb to understand and not so ready for it.

If I’d scream - nobody would hear - I assume. Grotesque death by strangulation or hanging. I shake my head - the hell am I thinking about.

I walked back to the table, grabbed my drink and finished it in one go.

Seeing Erick the way he was - poor sod. But there is nothing I can really help with. I too, sometimes see things from there. But now - I can connect to that place differently - like an

oracle - sending sort of messages. But, I do try to advance that dive effect and appear inside it.

“You’re a monster! You’re devil possessed! Get away from me! You’re not my son!!!” - My mind recalled the last thing my mother said to me, before I was taken away.

The situation back then was a massive burden, then troubles and issues rolled like a snowball - ending with blood.

All what I did back then - was to follow the labyrinth, get through the strange land of wonders and in the end - kill monsters to return home. All promised by the Creature that said he’d be forever released from this place and returned back to “normal”. To his loving parents.

But when I returned...

When I returned to senses - my hands were covered in blood, I was out of breath, the floor was covered in blood and there were two bodies below. Blue, cold, horror frozen on their faces.

I was shook. I was mortified. I screamed and cried and wept, but none of that helped me to return my parents back to life.

Then the damn Creature that overlooked my going through labyrinth spoke in the same reality - “You’re absolutely free now. Unburdened from the shackles of the mortals. No more concern for anyone. No need to fear the chants and scriptures from Otherland. You’re free.”

I escaped one nightmare to wake up in another - one that lasts a lifetime. I had to find ways to cover up the death of my parents. To start my survival here in another way possible, so that I’m never caught.

I was barely fifteen at the time. The officer that found me got me to the mental facility - as the “mental struggle” of a child that had his parents leave him was, in his opinion, quite the blow. Little did he know.

Figuring out how to control my “moments” when I was in the otherworld and scribing in my room, or chanting some things - was a pestering issue, but an accomplished one.

Have to thank some being for allowing me to be in the family of really wealthy parents. So I never had problems with finances.

The reason why I began E.C.H.O. and other research - all to uncover how I dived in there the first time around, how I was pulled there back and forth for some time and the way it all stopped when I was sixteen.

By the luck bestowed to me - I stumbled across David and Erick. They exhibited the patterns of the accidental parallel diving subjects. I went to pursue that with great luck.

The eventual ongoing tests lead to other discoveries. Though that appearance of Niko was quite the show. The survivor who managed to recuperate in record time, to dive over twenty times in a row and not feel side effects.

That’s when it struck me - it only happens if you are already in a dive. So I pursued the theory. It was a success. I managed to find a lead. Then the curiosity grew exponentially and

I had a craving to figure out where she is. That is the main objective - to figure out where she is.

I sigh, drinking a fourth glass of scotch. I do have a nightmare of my own that keeps showing up ever so often - the last battle between me and the Creature, before I woke up to dead parents.

It was a magical, beautiful place - garden. Finest roses of red and yellow, the carpet of other flowers stretching on the ground, the place was a wonderland.

Raindrops stuck to the petals and leaves, the sun shining through thick layers of clouds. The blood that was flowing ever so gently from the body of a Creature that was directing my moves all this time. The scales of that creature were falling off, the ooze of body spreading across the garden ground. Once all that was down - I saw myself inside the creature.

That was my other self.

I murdered my other self. I was stuck there, watching my other self dead, with a smile on his lips and just there. Colour fading from the body, the lifeless carcass of a person, or a creature... of me.

I was in such a state that all I heard was white noise for a few days. No sounds reached me.

“Everyone has their own Labyrinth to conquer. Their own Monster to kill.” - I spoke to self out loud. - “What did you know, m? What were you meaning to teach me then? How the hell do I find myself missing you and that Labyrinth? That determination in your voice... And that convincing look, daunting...” - I turn around, exhaling heavily and with a thud landing on my chair. I’m tired.

Guess I’m drunk. At work. Oh what a shit director I can be. More like an idiot one.

/Niko

The time spent in that room had come to an end soon after. Cat held hands with Doppel, as they were going towards the exit. I slowly followed behind.

My mind was genuinely trying to remember as much as possible, still. And the feeling of being unable to - made me feel pathetic. One of the best parallel divers and what? Unable to recall the memories? Pathetic.

A hall on the eleventh floor. The exit is the rooftop, as Cat had explained in his small briefing, before we departed the room.

I could faintly hear the crazy chainsaw screech against the walls downstairs - Reds shouts and pleads for me to come out. That goddamn maniac.

BTOOM! Whole building shook. Monsters shouted in pain, growling and panicking.

“The hell was that?!” – Doppel said, looking at the Cat who shrugged in answer.

This specific floor was known for the closed facility rooms - all had the keypad lock on them,

so unless you know the code to the room - it's impossible to get in. Doors and walls are protected so much - that even TNT blasts are unable to break through them.

Cat and Doppel rushed to open the doors of any room possible. I heard the hoard of the mongrels swamp upwards to the floors up. Guess all the action is downstairs.

"Come on! Hurry!" - Doppel pressured both self and Cat.

"Let me help." – The calm voice of another - takes us all by surprise.

Door opened in front of me. Doppel pulled me by my hand as we all rushed in - door closing behind us.

"Not even a 'thank you'?" – The voice let out.

I stand still, watching the picture unfold.

Cat shields Doppel with himself. She clings to the Cats back.

I silently admire the bold ruthless person standing in front of us.

"What do you want, you sick bastard?" - Cats voice cold, determined.

"Don't be so uptight. I am not going to harm you... For now that is." – White hair, jade eyes, rabbit ears. His pleasant, calm, fake smile. This man was the definition of trouble.

He was the shadow behind the wall, the warmth that I have my mind wandering off to.

He is the keeper of Labyrinth - White Hare.

Somehow I felt happy by seeing this murderer, torturer and maniac. My eyes locked on him.

## Chapter 15 “Escapes and Newcomers”

/Niko

The ruckus caused by someone had made quite the show by now.

The shouts and grumbling of the creatures was maddening - the pain and the agony. The shouts of unknown sources echoed from the floors below.

I walked to the further wall - a small window located there - I wished to check if I could see anything, but to great misfortune - the window was textured, leaving me with nothing to distinguish out there.

Cat was on the edge and defensive towards Doppel. Another barely understood the gravity of the problem when facing White Hare.

Although he was the keeper of the Labyrinth and the main trouble of the place - he was not to blame. Not by me at least. He was made that way through all the endless experimentation that happened here. Just trying to protect his new obtained dysfunctional home.

He forgot that he could escape from here and be having freedom.

Guess I am not the only one with memory issues.

Screams and scratching noises could be heard from outside, Hare would not budge from his spot, staring at his prey.

“Not happy to see me?” – Keeper spoke softly. –” Saddening to see you like this. I think I might actually help you out.”

His rabbit ears are pointy, hair soft, eyes looking around as he mulls over own words. Well, the downside to this lunatic is that he's charming.

“Why would a keeper dare involve himself this way? Is it not your wish to keep the labyrinth forever?” – Cat spoke.

Well, might assume that Cat had survived some of the torture inflicted by this maniac. Not that I am ever defending Hare in any way. He was one to torture me at some point. I won't really wish to go through that again.

My sullen cries for help and pleads for mercy just excited him more, as he loved to push needles where they're not supposed to go, knives slicing parts of skin from my body. Not a happy time at all.

“Hmmm...” – Hare walked towards me, as I kept my eye contact. - “I might sometimes just feel like it.” - He answered Cat.

With each step Hare made, ashes on the ground made a rustling sound like snow, walls were covered in splattered blood of ones who suffered here. Bones scattered near walls.

Faint light from ceiling holes made room reveal how much of a torture chamber it was.

“Where is Red?” – Doppel looked up, hearing laughter somewhere.

Crushing sound of chainsaw slashing through bodies, bastards crying out for the last time as they die. Some commands being yelled and firearms used. Explosions are echoing again.

“Stop ruining my precious labyrinth you bastards!” – yelled White Hare as he snapped. He stopped and kicked a pile of bones, ripped off a leftover map that hung on the wall tossing it aside. “How dare they?! I worked so hard on it! Darn these soulless oblivious bastards!”

He was upset, which made me smile. I let out a tired smile, as I observed him throwing a tantrum.

“Apologies.” - He let out, trying to collect himself from the fuming rage that burns.

I couldn't help myself and laughed out loud.

Cat grabbed Doppel by the hand again, pulling her close to self, as if the knighthood in his veins were reinstated.

Hare looked at me puzzled. He was the least to expect being laughed at.

Growling of something new arrived. It was mixed up with yelling of a man - presumably commanding this obscene creature. Most likely forces have united to storm this fortress of madness. Well, this place was giving nightmares to people for a few good centuries.

I walked closer to Hare and touched his ear. The warm, fluffy, soft ear. I couldn't keep self from smiling.

He was in utter confusion.

“You smell like chrysanthemum. Sweet and warm - like summer.” – I let out.

“Why... would you say it?” – Hare was in awe - uncertain where this might lead.

My healthy guess - he never had anyone touch him after the experiments in such a way. With a corner of my eye I noticed Cat giving me nod, wrapping hands around Doppel and using his magic to teleport from here.

Sudden sharp pain in my chest took me by surprise. I opened my mouth to gasp more air, whilst grabbing onto my chest. My eyes began tearing up.

Hares hands held me by the shoulders.

“I must find Red.” – I cried.

The Keeper looked at me with a gentle feel. His forehead touched mine.

“Go get her. Red is seeking for you too.” – Hare spoke. Then after a short pause and a soft kiss on my forehead he spoke again. - “I just realised something. I... I missed you. Torturing you was my greatest pleasure.”

I looked up at him. His smile was that of the warmest ones, his eyes gentle. But the idea behind - he is broken beyond comprehension - true keeper, true torturer.

The pain in my chest was lesser, I smiled at him, letting out a giggle.

Before letting my shoulders go, he kissed me on the lips, lightly. It's like the kiss from death itself - funny in a way.

"I'll dream of the day when I can put you into misery, as you cry my name whilst pleading for mercy." - He spoke softly.

"You do know that it sounds like the torture and pleasure simultaneously." - I laugh.

"I'll be looking forward to it next time." - He gives me a smile, as my heart skips a beat. Then he vanishes in thin air. His magic allows him so.

"Me too. I guess." - I let out, as I checked something at my side - the little purse was hanging from my left side. Few daggers and a few dozen of thin needles.

I felt my heart squeeze. He, although such an asshole - gave me weapons to fight with. Damn Hare of the Labyrinth. Maybe you were the one to keep watch after my body this whole time I was out?"

I gulped down the wish to find him and ask. Red is waiting for me, after all. I pull myself together and walk to the door, yanking it open and stepping out.

Hallway is reeking of gas - filthy kind. I see that it makes bastards corrode and become pile of gooey liquid. Making it harder to move - as it all is slippery. Not the best sort of circumstances when already having half floors crumbled to bits - nothing much to step on already.

The cries of chainsaw were coming from the area where blasts took off. There was a great chance that maybe Red was exhausted from dealing with intruders.

"Well, whoever you are, you better leave her for me to handle." - I thought as I was about to set off into the hall.

In an instant - the wall on my left blew up. Having bastards flying in - smashing against the next wall. Red was blasted along with them.

Reds' messed mad look, as she gripped her chainsaw, was quite amusing.

"Refurbishing, are we?" - I giggled with sarcasm.

Red noticed me, her smile spreading on her lips, although she managed to give me an evil eye.

The gunmen who fought Red were pushing in. The bombs thrown by them, gave a new wave of gas, making bastards dissolve, crying in pain.

“We have another one! Shoot to kill!” – Soldier shouted through his protective mask, as his gun pointed towards me, noticing my existence.

“What? Me too? Really? How flattering! But not today!” – I darted towards men, grabbing needles from my waist pocket, given to me by Hare.

I pushed needles in their spines - knocking boys off to sleep.

Red smirked as she observed. When all the distractions were asleep - I turned to face her.

“What the hell are they about?” – I took a good look at Red.

Her dress ripped, stockings barely holding, her cleavage ever revealed, hair a mess and a chainsaw as bloody as it gets, with chunks of someone's meat on a side.

“Red, that look - you are trying to seduce me?” – I pressed her lips and nodded. Somehow it was pretty funny.

“ And you sure dare talk smack to me.” - Red flicked strands of blood soaked hair from her face. - “I need to wipe that happy look off your face. Before these goons intrude again.”

She sounded slightly tired from all the combat she led downstairs.

“Ugh, you give me chills.” - I smile.

I turned to the rustling sound - more soldiers were coming. Someone fired shots.

I ran to grab Red by the hand and pulled her along with me to escape.

“Let's sort it out a bit later, shall we? Or we'll get evened out by these lads. Don't want you dead yet, darling.” - I felt like my adrenaline spiked.

Such obscure atrocity made Red comply for that one moment. Having to cut her play time so early surely was frustrating.

We ran through the hall, up the stairs, having something blasted aside behind us, getting stairs to crumble down, before all the stairs collapsed.

We managed to reach the rooftop of the building. Guess the curse magic began to break, if I ever could reach the rooftop.

A grandiose view around. Smoke rising up from below. Fire burning around the labyrinth. I went to check what's below - battalion - fully armed and storming the labyrinth.

“What the hell? What are They doing here?” – I said.

Red breathed out, now seeming like a ceasefire situation caught up with her. She wiped her forehead, then tossed her red hair back, so they don't get in the way. Her long blood soaked hair looked majestically, delicate face, feminine and beautiful. Her grey eyes flickered - reflecting some fire that kept up outside.



“These idiots just blasted their way in, seeking for something. Someone. Finally mustering courage to face what they fear most. Silly sods.” – Red checked her chainsaw for damages, then looked up at me – “We still have a fight to sort out between us.”

With this said Red made her chainsaw screech and gunned towards me. I managed to dodge at the last minute.

“Oh hey now! You want to sort it out now? Of all times?” – I spoke as I dodged the attacks.

“Now or never!” – Growled Red, launching at me with another attack.

I grabbed the stashed dagger - defending myself.

Red made move after move targeting the head and heart of the opponent. One hit with her chainsaw guaranteed imminent death. So balancing it out in such a place - having gun handling fighters around - is troublesome. I moved swiftly, mostly due to my adrenaline spike. Feeling more like the insanity void starts crawling from my depths to the outside.

I heard a voice inside me. Like a telepathy that was used by certain species here. But the voice pleaded for death. Over and over. Then it hit - it was Red! In a softer, more humble voice. The way it was years ago. Before she became the "experiment that went wrong". Such pleading made me distracted for a moment, having chainsaw flying at me.

Getting me pinned against the wall, that conveniently was a single such thing out here. The pressure Red put on the chainsaw made it lower down, bruising the edge of my shoulder. Having blood gushing out, as pieces on own flesh are torn.

Red, smiling at me, looking victorious, as chainsaw gripped well at my bone.

Red put her hand on my wound, admiring damage. Her chainsaw was silent, standing still. With a trembling hand, I pulled out a dagger, gunning it swiftly at Red's heart. Red coughed blood, smiling.

“I knew I could trust you with this. With getting me freed. Thank you.” - Her blooded fingers touched my cheek, then the weakened body fell in my embrace.

Holding Red with one hand, as I'm pulling self down to free myself from the chainsaw grip.

As I slithered down the wall... Holding Red, smiling, lifeless, she felt cold. Last hug and kiss was all I could give to Red as goodbye. Pain was coming to me as waves at sea - making me grit teeth, then let out a breath, then again.

The blasts got closer. Soldiers found me, seized me and dragged along with them to the outside.

Camp was set right outside the labyrinth. There were few generals hurdled around, keeping control.

I was tossed inside the tent. With a short look around I saw Doppel. That gave a bit of a question. Though I wanted to know where's Cat and Hare.

In a beat a few guards and three men walked in. Guards set up around the perimeter of the tent, the trio stood opposite us.

"Are you a part of this labyrinth setup? What are your duties within it?" – harshly spoke bearded man. By the looks he had - he seemed to just come from mountains. Rough and hairy. Bulky man.

"Am not. Never were. Not a single duty in here. Just got tossed inside to clean it up. Order was from a psycho as far as I'm concerned." - I looked right in this beast's eyes. Calm, like the man just walked into a trap. The conviction of my voice was of high merit.

"What's your name, you piece of trash?" - The mountain man growled.  
Talk about lack of manners. I let out a sigh.

"Right hand of Emperor Elleney Drieth, Niko." – I replied in a cold voice. That reply made all the men around freeze for a moment - having the most surprised look you could think of. Then the man gave a laugh.

"You'll be sent out to trial in the City of Amereq. Along with this person." – He pointed at Doppel. – "There sure as hell can't be two right hand people of the same Emperor. Unless you both are lying."

This clutz lied about being associated with the Emperor. Geez. She's bloody troublesome. I open my mouth slightly to let out the growl from pain. The cut on my shoulder from Red was highly painful, highly annoying.

"I suppose that would be a nuisance." - Man in priest robes walked in, his long white hair caught my eyes. - "I'm taking custody of these prisoners. The Commander General agreed."

Man handed the piece of a letter to the mountain man.

"Heh! It's all yours Verin! Make sure they get the right deserved punishment!"

Bearded man signalled to others, then they all left.

Verin took a look at both of us.

"Apologies, but the restraints will be off later. Please follow me."

I got up, then gave a judging glance at Doppel.

"What? I wanna live." - She said to me, as she followed the priest.

"Fucking idiot." - I murmured.

We follow the man into the carriage, where inside I see Cat and Hare. Verin snaps fingers and restraints fall off.

"I'm Prime Oracle Verin, came as a magic support commander." - Spoke priest, as he gave us a look.

Oracle ordered the driver to get a move on, hurrying out of St. Gregor Labyrinth's land.

"I apologize for crude treatment from these soldiers. They are far from genuine comprehension about ways of magic. They are more of a different type." - Verin smiled. - "I was ordered to scout you all out and make sure of your safety."

"I'll return the three of you to the Emperor's palace, there, you'll decide what you want to make a path for next. As for you," - he looked at me, - "I'll leave you off near a sacred tree. I'm told by spirits you'll find your way from there."

Doppel changed seats with Hare, to hug up to Cat. Hare took a look at my bleeding shoulder.

"You should get this treated." - His soft and reassuring voice was not really reaching me. I kept looking at the fast changing scenery in the window, trying to divert self from the annoying pain that makes me want to cry.

"Ni.." - Hare pulled me by the chin to face him. My eyes now locked with his.

"Dare to lie to my face again and I'll skin you alive." - My own voice, in a hushed tone, made him smile.

He pulled closer to me, his fingers now tracing my neck, going towards the wound.

"Red did a good one on you." - Hare smiled wider. The madness flickering in his eyes, fingers pushing into the wound. I only grit my teeth. - "Oh, yes, yes. I do remember, you always were the one to bring me such pleasant satisfaction."

I gripped his hand, pushing it away from me. He yanked it out, fingers having my blood on them. He licked it.

"You still taste splendid." - He suddenly pulled my face again, to kiss me forcefully, tongue pushing in. In return he got slapped across his face, having my elbow smash his torso.

"Play this shit again and you're a dead rabbit." - I hissed.

Hare, although feeling a sharp pain, smiled and giggled.

"You are the one for me." - He almost sang out in a cheery tone.

## /Kriss

“Patient is dying! Get a PHY syringe! We can’t let her escape!” – Doctor shouted in despair.

Around the bed, where the red haired girl lied, swarmed a doctor and nurses - trying to keep the body alive. But it was too late.

Although injected with dozens of liquids that worked before to keep her alive. In a state of coma, even if against her will - now all of that drugging was pointless. Nothing worked.

“Thank you...” - whispered redhead, her voice hoarse and barely audible. Then it all ended. Heart stopped.

Personnel started leaving the room.  
Only I stood behind.

“Shit.” – I mumbled. – “She got her claws on another one. Shit.”

The frustration was building up

“Doctor Kriss, you have a call from the Director!” – Nurse called out from the hall.

“Coming!”

With the most unsatisfied look I got out of the room. Before going further, I requested nurses to get rid of the body.

“Cremate it!” - I groaned.

## /Erick

A splendid day outside! Sun shining, flowers blooming – making my heart fill with joy. Up ahead was a great city with picturesque white walls and ancient rock pavements.

“I sure am here again!” – I took my first step towards the great destination – Town of Amereq.

## Chapter 16 “Path towards Fate”

/Erick

Eyes were warmly greeted with familiar sights. The changes were obvious, as many years have passed, but this city I will always recognise.

Sun warmed the air, brightening up the day even more. Typical streets of Amereq were crafted of stone. Smooth, great for travel, yet slight texture wouldn't let your carriage slip off. The great beauty of this city left me in awe every time. Walking through, towards my known destination was a challenge, due to changes, but in my gut - I knew where it still stood.

Passing by houses of stone - sand coloured, with great decorated windows, flower pots near entrances and doors with gardenias and petunias blooming. Eyes catching the sight of small bushes of yellow and green leaves. Stray cats crossing streets graciously, not even bothered by carriages or city folk.

Fine looking ladies and gentlemen - fancily dressed and acting spoiled. There's a lot of half-armour dressed “knights” with weapons at their side. Then you can see some drunks sleeping in shaded alley ways.

The sense of nostalgia still was there, as my feet took me to that old tavern, which miraculously still stood there. The doors of this establishment were always wide open. Where men and women spend their money and time on alcohol and fun. You always have a few souls sitting straight faced, then there are ones who try to scare off anyone and everyone who dares talk to them.

That's the ones I'm looking for. Actually - there's one specific person I'm seeking for. By the luck of feather-fall, I do find this person near the window with the best view.

I came over, sitting down opposite him.

This mountain-like looking person, bearded and heavy built, one that could pull boars apart bare handed, instead of swearing and sending me off, exclaimed in joy:

“Erick! Old friend! Long time! Where did spirits take you?” – Man smacked his palm on the table.

“Good to see you, Resam! Sorry to show up so randomly. Guess I'm in need of your skills.” – I said.

Resam took out cigar, lit it up, turned to look outside once more and puffed out smoke.

“You know, I've heard of you long ago. You were one to protect town from power obsessed leeches. My grandfather told me stories about you. Then one odd day we met. I was young -

just had my nineteenth birthday. You came round to ask me to guide you. Now I am forty six years of age. Grew beard and grey hair, got children that made their families, I even became grandfather. And you? First you came here looking barely twenty. Now you come back again - looking not a day older than before. Just like when you met my grandfather. I know this world has magic and things not possibly explained by logic, but this is just something utterly out of this world.” – Resam smoked out the whole cigar and mashed what’s left of it in an ashtray. He raised his eyes to look at me. – “I know that you won’t give me answers no matter how I ask, so let me just clear one thing: Where do I have to guide you this time?”

I smiled wholeheartedly:

“I need to get to Krea. To the Mother Tree. I need your skills to get through the dungeon, and keep me alive for what it’s worth.”

Resam slowly nodded, taking a note in his head somewhere, with some thoughts of his.

“To hell with it!” – Resam reached inside his pocket, took out a few silver coins and slammed them onto the table. – “If adventure calls - I can’t deny it! Shall we?” – He looked at me as he got up and started walking towards the exit.

I gave a slight nod, as I got up and followed.

“We need horses. Hope you remember how to use one, ha-ha!” – Resam laughed.

I picked my brain for a second there:

“I’d say I do? Perhaps I need some, ehm, bit to remember perhaps. But at some point I was pretty good at it.”

We walked down the alley to a more run down part of town.

Meanwhile Resam took the moment to explain the latest changes in the Empire of Ancile.

“Remember that old fart who was ruling over the Kingdom of Sopdar?” - Resam breathed out.

“King Alland, was it?” - I replied.

“Yeah, yeah! That one! Well, now that he’s gone well to rest in the ground, his grandson Neith is a pain in the butt of the Emperor Elleney Drieth. Apparently that kid has no understanding of what he’s doing. Being a greedy dumb brat with short fuse and no brains left in that head of his.” - Resam pointed out to the new shop on the left side. - “This place has some good magical items, well, if you know how to ask. Ha-ha!”

“So what’s going on with Drieth now?” - I asked, after I checked the windows of that shop. It had some magical staff, potions and some books on display.

“Pfff, Emperor is not well. His patience is running low, due to that punk over the mountain. The whole thing is due to Neith being a descendant of Nellaidas witches bloodline that was

mixed with royal blood. That's why that brat is turning the place into the den of dark and eerie monsters." - Resam shooed the dog that bared fangs at them. - "On a different note, the Forbidden City of Lights is up to some shady business."

Resam pulled another cigar and lit it, smoking the tobacco.

"They dump out more waste in the labyrinth. I had scouts out there to get the info, sadly most of them got consumed by whatever evil is there. Ones who returned said there's the land of darkest doom with monsters unparalleled in gore. The missionaries keep dying there like bugs. Although I'm not sure if Drieth shall purge clean that horrid place. He was the one to authorise it into existence, to begin with."

I felt the sort of pain, the sort that's very nostalgic, very close to heart. Labyrinth is not what it seems, even though I don't know where that's from, but I feel like I know it.

"I've begun the jobs that are odd, yet as long as they pay - I don't mind whatever. My family joined in, although in different ways. Some went into scouting for information, some into weapon crafting, all within the same vicinity. Guess that's the blood calling in the family. Aha-ha!" - Resam smacked me on the shoulder, making me smile and give a slight shake of head.

"Some things seem to be brewing more - the official notices keep coming more and more often, so much so that every week there's new changes to policies or work. Like they are preparing for the war, or the dawn of a new age. This is as creepy as they make it." - Resam shrugged.

"The time has changed. Many cities and towns became different. There's technologies that City of Light authorised and pushed, then the new items Emperor made people to adapt to, thank spirits Amereq was left to be as steady with traditions and charms, as it were." - Resam pat his pockets to check if he still has his items.

We arrived at a stable near the edge of the city.

"Malavind!" - Resam exclaimed, as he saw an old man with a beard adorned with silver beads, chubby and short.

"Resam! My man!" - Malavind replied and they smacked each other on the shoulder.

"I need two fine horses for a long trip, my friend." - Resam pulled a pouch with money.

Malavind looked at the pouch, at Resam, then turned and pointed to the stable.

"If only I had them." - Malavind shrugged. - "I've only got left with stags from the Blue Aracha hand region. They are finer than horses, but have tempers. And that's all I can give. The unrest in the region got me customers swarming and getting all the horses in a few nights."

Resam turned to me with a smirk.

"Hey, you think you can handle a stag? E-he-he."

That made me feel like he'll enjoy his best out of this situation.

"What can we do, if that's what we've left with." - I sighed.

"That's my man! Malavind! We're taking them stags!" - Resam laughed and gave a full pouch of money to Malavind.

Just a few minutes later, Malavind took out two magnificent stags, equipped and with bags of provision on their sides. The stags had a night-blue hue to their fur. Stunning creatures.

Resam helped me mount one, as he laughed. Then we began our journey south.

It took a day to reach the next village, although all places were closed, they managed to find a barn to sleep in. Next day was a long sunny day.

As we passed by other villages, somehow the air seemed different. Even if the looks were similar, something felt awkward and strange. Like changes unseen to the eye had taken place.

On the third day - seeing the mountain of Three Sain Sages on the horizon was a bliss. It meant we were getting closer to our destination. I felt a slight relief.

There still was the second hand of the Aracha river to cross. As we were on the bridge, heading over, I noticed a lot of ships with large cargoes mounted. It was not usual, back when I was here.

“Do you know what this is about?” - I called out to Resam.

He replied without turning to see me.

“It’s what I feared most.”

I felt that I knew where this was going. It usually meant that war was closing in.

The river itself was beautiful, it gleamed in sunlight. The flowers growing in the riverbed were of old magic, the sort that is viewed as one you should not mess with.

Ah, right. It made me recall a very old memory.

I can’t remember the time or how come I was in Amereq, but I have been listening to this old lady that sold the potions for health and recovery. A wise old lady.

I was stunned by the beauty of a painting she had above her trinket carriage - with four colours merging into one and I asked what it was.

“Oh that old thing.” - She turned, her messy braided hair falling down her shoulders, head scarf glistening in the sun. Adjusting her glasses and smiling, she explained.

“It’s the hands of the Aracha river. First is the “Green Hand”, it’s green due to moss growing in the riverbed and on the sides of the river. It’s used a lot in medicine, that moss. And it’s well believed that swimming in these waters can cure you.

Second hand is the Yellow river, it has yellow flowers of old magic growing on the riverbed. But many do not dare to swim in these waters. Old magic is not to be messed with.

Third hand is called Blood hand. That has the rust and metals thrown out by the Forbidden City of Lights. They say it’s very contaminated. Ones who went in the water there, got cuts and these cuts bled endlessly. There’s no way to stop that. And that always leads to one’s death.

Fourth hand is called the Sky hand. The purest of waters, the cleanest of waters. You can drink from it, swim in it, it’s magical. Water always reflects the sky, no matter day or night.



And there is the Body of Aracha river - the most colorful river to be ever seen.

Due to waters mixing in - water is drinkable, clean, pure, but the riverbed rainbow coloured plants are filled with acids and toxins. Very poisonous, very deadly. But some wise creatures found a way to use those in medicine. Careful, meticulous, cautious ways to extract the best medical properties of those deadly plants.

And I have some of those finest medicines with me.” - The old lady smiled like the sun. Warm, tender.

Whilst my head was reminiscing about the memories of the past, I didn't notice that we approached a road leading straight into the dungeon under the Three Saint Sages mountain. A little more, we saw the road blocked off.

Full force war machinery, firepower mechanisms, robotics and guns that were not used anywhere besides the Forbidden City of Lights - it was all here like a toy fare. Military personnel buzzing around, like they were preparing to go into a dungeon.

“My apologies Miss”, - I got off my stag and walked towards a lady with a mini machine gun. She turned around, her dog tags clinging, having a deadly serious expression on her face. - “May I ask what is going on here?” - I smiled at her, as cutely as I could muster, yet with that concern on my face. - “It's just that my friend and I are trying to reach my wife in Krea... And I see that it seems quite busy up there.”

Lady, although looking strict and cold hearted, gave warm smile at the word “wife”, then looked around to make sure there are less eavesdropping folk:

“I'm sorry, guess she'll have to wait. Right now we're having a clean-up crew in there. The Forbidden Lights City made some very dangerous waste dropouts in there - causing high risk of death by chemical suffocation. So we'll need to keep it sealed until all is cleared out. My apologies, but you'll need to let your wife know you'll take some more time until you reach Krea. That's all I can say.”

Lady gave a nod, as I thanked her, then she went off for duty, for what could be understood.

“So, a clean-up...” - I heard Resam behind my back. - “Well screw the squirrel on the top. Guess we're heading to Gregor.”

“Gregor?” - I asked as I mounted a stag.

“Yeah, there's no other place nearby. And even if there is - that won't be safe at all.” - Resam remarked.

We traveled towards Gregor and half way in I understood - the roads were made of concrete, the kind you see in the advanced cities. What on earth did take place here, while I was gone...

“Stags are tired, we have to find a place to get them sorted.” - Resam let out and went off-road towards the village to the north.

A few minutes down the road we found an old farm.

“That’ll do.” - Resam nodded and got off his stag. - “You alright, my beauty?”

He patted the stag, who was obviously tired from the long trip.

“Are we staying here or?” - I followed Resams' example of getting off and walking along.

“Na-ah. We’ll scout for the other type of ride and we’ll be in Gregor in no time. But these stags need rest.”

We left the stags in a large barn, taking off all the saddles and items they’ve carried throughout all these days. One that was off - both stags relaxed and went to sleep.

Resam and I scouted the place - abandoned.

“What happened here?” - I openly asked, as we paced the premises.

“My guess - they ran the heck away since the unease in dungeons and don’t plan to get back any time soon.” - Resam looked at the fruit trees and gardens with food. - “Shall have to send notice to Malavind, so that he can retrieve his stags.”

“And how do we do that?” - I stretched out.

“Magic, my friend. Malavind is still an old git of fine magic.” - Resam pulled out a paper, scribbled something on it, then set it on fire.

The paper burned blue, then a magical circle appeared under and the paper along with fire disappeared.

“So that’s sorted.” - Resam gave a nod.

After a bit we found an old car. I checked the tires and engine - seemed to be alright. No keys were no problem, Resam fiddled with the wires and got it back from the dead.

“With the gas in the tank - enough to last until Gregor. Come on, we gotta go.” - Resam sat in the driver's seat.

“How about stags?” - I felt confused.

“In an hour or so, Malavind will come with his magic and pick them up. Don’t worry.” - He replied.

On the way to Gregor, even though Resam was driving, he kept pouting and complaining how these technologies do not survive long and break often.

“All these machines, warfare shit and teleportation buzz from Forbidden city are so unreliable, so shabby and lifeless. Oh how the old mages fell into the trap of improvement...”

- Resam went in length.

But even with all that protest and unease, we reached Gregor in half an hour. We had plenty of time until evening, so I had enough time to go look around.

Gregor is a town that was always known for diversity. It's an outcast of a place in the Empire, a place that attracts outcasts. It was a supposed “dumpster” for all that’s left behind or thrown out. Experiments, old and new tech, magic, alchemy, crafts... All which was thrown out, but wanted to live - it all ended up here.

The place, long ago, was just at the beginning, when I first saw it. But now...

Now it was filled with skyscrapers, humanoids, car buzz, magic fizz, anthropomorphic

species, like girls with horns, or animal features, some with bionic body parts, some pure android cyber robot creations. It all coexists here - in a town with the same name as one of three saint sages – Gregor.

Houses - some fancy and modern, some - old-like, some barely hold together. This is a clustered town.

Yet one thing stands out the most – the pond with water so clean that you can see the bottom of it. It's quite deep - some said. Somewhere around 12 metres down. But the fascinating thing about it are the swans who swim at the bottom - having all the fish above them. The mossy greenery on the sides of the pond, on man-made pillars inside the pond - make it look like the most beautiful underwater oasis that eyes set upon.

The whole cluster and buster of things made me feel sadly at a loss.

As another street was under my feet, I felt like coffee. And as I turned my head - there it was "Cafe Noir".

"Resam!" - I called out to him, as he wanted to go on with own plans. Though he turns around and comes back. - "Care to join me for a coffee?" - I smile at him.

"Care to join"? Like you gave me a chance to decide. Ehh." - Resam waved his hand, as if shooing off some flies, but as he did, he still followed me inside.

Maybe he felt that I space out a bit too much, although I had to recollect some thoughts, gather the things I lost. So I did feel bad that he had to be a bit of a nanny to me.

Once down at the table, with coffee brought by a fancy girl with cat ears, we enjoyed the view from the rooftop of the cafe. The view of skyscrapers, flying tech and mages on brooms, odd animals of features unknown and more - just a typical day in Gregor.

"So care to share why you seem like you've been here before?" - Resam lit his cigar to smoke.

"I feel like I was here with a friend of mine. The one I seek to find in Krea. Hopefully." - I say with a strange tinge of sadness.

Resam rolls eyes, drinks a bit of that coffee, then takes a deep breath.

"You know Erick, I'd like to remind you once more - perhaps I sound like an old record but... I am here, with you. Right now. If you need to get something off your chest - I'm your best shot. You show up rarely anyway. Depending on how long you take elsewhere. I might die by the time you come back again. So right now is the best time to spit out all the crap that eats up your innards."

I took a cigarette out of the Resams pack and lit it up, inhaling smoke deeply. As I took a toke and breathed smoke out, I nodded.

"I am something that does not belong here. Usually I am here to acquire information." - I feel like these are my words, yet I don't piece together with them. - "But right now, I am here to notify my friend of things that are happening in our reality. So that measures and precautions are taken. Although right here right now, at this time - I had to do something entirely different. And yet here I am - ditching my assignment for coffee, in search of a friend. But if I don't do this - all might crumble to dust."

I finished smoking in silence, Resam looking like I'm insane, one eyebrow raised. Then he downed his coffee.

"If the world is falling and that one person can help - get that help. But if what you say, that you ditched your original job for this - is true... Must mean one of two things. You either were meant to kill that person, or create a more destructive issue." - Resam poked the table with a finger. - "So what is it?"

"Was asked to kill and gather information. Instead I want to save one I'm meant to kill and go for a different play." - I replied.

Resam laughed.

"Atta boy! You better not shit your pants and make it worthwhile! Say what, I'll do you a favour. You go get your rest."

I finished my drink and gave a nod, leaving Resam in the cafe. The road to the hotel seemed like I was in a daze. The lights and the smoke, the mist and the cold. It felt eerie.

As I was leaving I saw Resam make calls from a pay phone. Surely that's something I'll know of later.

In the dark of the room, in the hotel, with some sounds still dripping from the windows, I felt that I couldn't sleep for the life of me.

Head was filled with this thought - 'I have to tell her, the sooner - the better.' And the thought would not leave my head. Buzzing like an electrical line under pressure, making my head feel like it will split in a half. Then out of the blue - sudden halt, sudden silence.

I felt this one before, long-long ago, nervous, I knew what it was. Heart was pounding restlessly.

"You seeking for me?" - Nikos surprised voice resonated in my head.

"Where are you?" - I asked back.

"Close by, from the feel of it. I assume that something is up, if you're here. What's wrong?" - She sounded busy, like she herself was up to something.

"It's Adrian, he's planning on..." - I began to explain, but she cut me off.

“Shit” - She hissed through her teeth. - “You better stay out of trouble. See you soon.”

And then it came back - the pain in the head after the silence. Hitting like a mountain of bricks.

Shit! I couldn't manage to tell her! Fuck! Where was she rushing? What is she up to? Dammit... She sounded like she was borderline in trouble. Like a thief that is about to get caught.

Through my dread and pain, I heard my room door open, Resam walking in with some girl by his side. They did their best to be quiet.

“Hey, you awake?” - Resam whispered, as they got closer.

I let out a deep breath.

“Of course you are.” - Resam smiled. - “This here is my daughter. She's got a message for you.”

“Message?” - I got up in my bed, sitting.

“Yes.” - Girl spoke. - “So you're Erick. What a surprise.” - She seemed to smile. - “I was told by Oracle Verin that a woman by the name Niko is on her way to the shrine by the Mother Tree. She is safe and expects you.”

From the conversation moments ago - it did not feel like it. But I couldn't say it.

“Oracle wants to help,” - Girl continued, - “Therefore tomorrow at 6 in the morning you shall have a guide waiting outside Cafe Noir. He'll lead you through the shortcut to Krea. There you'll meet Oracle himself to help you to the Mother Tree shrine. That's all.”

“Thank you.” - I said back.

“Well, my friend, that's all. From here on out I'm no longer needed. So do me a favour and get some shut eye. You'll have a hell of a day tomorrow.” - Resam gave me a pat on the shoulder, before they both left.

It somehow feels like I got them in trouble. So now they'll have to flee to see another day. Maybe that war sure is to come, so they need to prepare. Well, not sure I can process it all, having such a lack of information...

Shut eyes he says, huh?...

/David

I paced around the small office meeting room, in hopes that he's not too late.

Pretty looking lady came in, smiling and gesturing to sit. Then she seated herself opposite

me.

“My name is Orin and I am going to be advising you on the matter you proposed.”

“To be honest there is sensitive data I’d like to discuss. So would you mind turning all devices off due to privacy and confidentiality?” – I pushed a smile.

She seemed slightly confused, but she knew that details can be sensitive at times. Understandingly she turned off all devices and pushed the button on the desk that shut the entire room offline, drew special shutters and locks on doors. It was a sort of EMP that blocked all devices inside. Making room device-proof. Nothing worked - nothing could work. All was shut down. Like a bunker. This business company dealt with things at times that required these sorts of measures.

“All done.” – Smiled Orin. - “Nothing will be able to even walk in, unless we allow it. Room is locked tight. All information said will stay between us.”

I took a deep breath, finally a bit of relief. It was good to know about the company policies regarding privacy. Once I looked in her eyes, my smile faded. I was short on time, after all.

“I am aware that you’ve started a relationship with Elyon and that you shared intimacy with someone by the name Niko.”

Orin looked speechless, by the obvious shiver she was shocked. Understandable, but not really enough time to explain it all.

So I continued with the time I had on my hands:

“Right now, I need to know if you had exhibited strange symptoms or occurrences within your body that you never had before and if any such changes happened to Elyon?”

Her mouth went agape, I could tell that her thoughts were running hundred miles per hour and she was trying to understand how and what. I saw her hand slowly move towards the “privacy cancellation” button, as her gaze was plastered to the table.

“Look at me! Don’t be stupid. You don’t want to push that button for your own safety. Believe me things can mess you up more than me. So please, I need you to focus right now. Be as honest as never before. Your and Elyons life are at risk. The course of what happens next depends on your honest answers. Please,” - I got up, walked up to her, - “I don’t wish you any harm. On the contrary.”

I paused, looking at Orin - she does not take the bait. Though I had a feeling it’d go this way, I knew how to balance it out.

I stepped back.

“I’m sent by Niko. I really am here to help. So please, tell me the truth. It really might just save lives.”

Upon mentioning Niko - the girl looked up at me.

Huh. Jackpot.

## Chapter 17 “Fugitive of the Forbidden City”

/Erick

I forgot how cold it could be in the mornings. The chill was biting into my flesh even through the layer of my clothing. Waiting for that ‘someone’ sent by Verin is quite a feat. Even though it’s quarter to six in the morning, I don’t like to be late.

Due to waking up early, I managed to get a coffee from the cafe. It’s a fine type that makes you feel some warmth circulating through the body. The steam was rising from the cup. How nostalgic.

Whole scene reminded me that in this town there are some new technological shenanigans that were installed. One of such was the weather control within the premises of the town. So even though right now it is summer for the rest of the world, today someone from high up decided to have a winter wonderland theme.

So, frost on windows, snow on streets, all being warmly dressed as they rush towards their jobs and endeavours.

Some long ago I was a part of this world, with friends that were there, family, job... I actually started off from here. When it was after that catastrophe in far land. I can’t remember much of it. Just that it was all ablaze and there were no survivors. But that was also what a man had told me, one who found me. Not that I had so many memories then. But after - living in Gregor, having a...

It must have been over a century or few ago... But there was a wife, there were kids... And all was lost when I was pulled out once more. Upon return - there was nothing to find.

The time was six on the dot. I see a man in monk robes. White kind, long and with hood over the head, laced up furr shoes. He did not even make eye contact - he just gave a slight bow towards me, his hand with a small gesture that meant “follow me”.

We went through the passage in between houses, then another one, then an alley, then roads that were small and compressed. I followed barely five steps behind him, so I’d not get lost in this maze of a town. Seemed like we were on our way towards the ancient part of town, one that was built first, from where the whole maze had been born.

As we walked small passages, with brick walls on both sides, the thought caught me - there were less people, so much so, that it seemed like we were alone.

At the end of the passage I finally see the Great Chapel of Gregor, built by the Wise Sage Gregor a long-long time ago.

Few steps closer to the chapel, I noticed that there was a defect. From where we walked - it was snow, where we went - there were blooming flowers and great stone paths, wooden benches, all this sunny beauty.



I turned around to look back as we crossed the wall of snowfall, leaving cold streets of town houses covered in snow blankets, with snowflakes still falling down upon that world. But here, as if just behind the curtain, I was back in the summer.

Quite a delightful sight. I was caught up by it for a moment, but heard the monk give a cough, to get my attention.

I turn back and hurry my pace behind him. He led into the Great Chapel of Gregor.

We walked behind to the shed of prayers. A built extension from the chapel, that allowed even ones who were deemed unholy to give prayers to sage. That's also known to be the place where Gregor himself prayed.

We walked further, where the garden of prayers began, there were small booths, sized about two by two metres, that had doors to close behind them, for all to have a private chat with a saint.

To my surprise the monk opened one of those booths and walked in, I followed. It was quite cramped, but he managed to open a hatch in the floor, the small stairs leading down. Monk gestures for me to go down, I give a nod and do as told. He follows behind.

Ground feels cold and wet. Shoes sticking to it.

Monk takes out a lighter and lights up the torch. Down here is actually spacious. Who knew.

He kept on going further down the tunnel. Dark, damp. We still shared silence, as I've still no clue what this Verin had in mind or how come the monks got in some mess.

The patter of water hitting the rocks was like a thump of drum smashing at the ears. With such silence around - these small things were exaggerated out of proportion to my ears. Then I began seeing the swarms of something glimmering up ahead, then all around us.

Are those elemental spirits?! I've heard of them eons ago, but seeing them with my own eyes...

Those little lights were running about the walls of this tunnel, playing around. They even dashed under the feet, crawled up on rocks, some flew about nearby. It was like a magical cave. It pained to know that they were in fact ones to save many lives long ago.

These elemental spirits were usually sighted in the place surrounding mountain Sekka, as these creatures were utterly rare and would keep on existing in only peaceful and mostly untouched lands. As they had love for peace. They also would instil this love for peace in travellers who'd spend a lot of time with them, but too much time would make them docile. As these elementals passively draw life energy out of you. Cute, handy, but also with the evil side effect.

Soon I started seeing light at the end of the tunnel - the exit. The pathway was carved out on the mountain side, that's where we are - the other side of Saint Sage Mountain.

I saw a river below us, opposite us was mountain Sekka within reachable distance. So the river must be the river Emmea.

This monk gave me a soft pat on the shoulder and pointed downwards. There was a small bay, carved out most likely by the traders of darkness, with a ship waiting.

“Go there, I must return to cover the tracks we’ve made. He’s waiting for you.” - Monk said in a hushed voice, bowed again and left back inside the tunnel.

I knit my brows for a moment - does he not get the energy drawn out by those elemental spirits? How’s he so alright? Or is he partially dead?

Then again, I turned to see the ship awaiting me. Legs taking me down to this more and more damp place.

The ship itself looked fancy. One that would be pronounced as the “entertainment ship”, large space for rest that’s covered up with walls and not so much deck space. The ornaments that adorned it and the carvings were overly fancy.

Are they really monks or some black magic traders?

Getting on a plank to get on the deck, it was wobbly. And for a moment there I had my heart jump. It felt like it’d fall.

I was greeted with another white robed person with a bow. No words spoken. The hand gestured to get into the salon. So I did. The small note on the table read : Destination Krea. So that’s where they’re taking me. Alright.

This silence and a steady trip to Krea. Have not seen it in a while. We’ve been going on for a while. It was already darker outside.

I thanked the monks, as one would bring some food for me, now and again, as well as leaving me a large jug of water to drink and a bowl of fruit to have.

I’m still not sure how to treat this situation. Good? Bad? Who is this Verin?

Sceneries of mountains continuously stretching on both sides - one being the Three Saint Sages, another mountain Sekka. The fields and people working on them, the busy people with fishnets, small boats and small docks, sheep on the grass further down, cows, fields, forests...

The sound got my attention - a beautiful melody that came from the edge of the river, I came closer to the window to see.

Blue-green scales on her tail, glimmering in the light, she brushed her hair and sang – water nymph. It’s been so long since I’ve seen one.

They were the kind of beauties that would mesmerise and charm, yet as deadly as the poison itself they were. Only a few mages, witches and warlocks were able to communicate and work with them. Their customs and language were really ancient.

It was getting ever darker. The setting sun colouring the sky in orange.

Finally we’re reaching the first destination - village Nia.

Monk walked into the salon, gesturing that we go out. I follow as told.

We walk from the ship onto land, then a bit further to the carriage. There stands another monk.

This time he looks way more different than previous cases. Embroidered robes, small crown of green ivy and branches, long white hair and golden eyes. Few strands across the face, a bit of a messy look, yet a warm feeling was beaming from him, yet somehow this smile of his felt like a mask.

“My pleasure meeting you, Erick. Niko had told me about you.” - His golden eyes set on me, as he spoke.

I kept my mouth shut, eyeing him.

“Apologies, my name is Verin. I am the oracle of the Emperor Elleney Drieth.” - Verin gave me a look over. - “Although that might not say much to you right now. Let’s continue our chat on the way.” - Verin gestured into the carriage.

I boarded inside, then him. It felt like he’s patronising my moves somehow. And that is not making me feel at ease. Even though it’s warm, there’s no ease to this tension.

No idea what Niko had told him or what her relationship with this guy is, but I definitely feel the judgement upon myself here from this thin built priest-monk being. I’m sure he ain’t human, even if he looks like that.

“As you know - here is a bit different to your world, or how it was since your last visit here.” - Verin removed the stray hair strand from his face, - “the Emperor and the King, the two rulers of two sides to the mountain of Three Saint Sages planned out to overtake the free lands towards the mountain Sekka. And from there - all the way to the Land of Spirits and river Lea and Nila. They each have their own view of what they want from this venture” - The way he calmly spoke was giving me chills. I absolutely felt the authority in this calmness.

“As far as my birds fly and sing, I got to know that the Emperor seeks the chalice from the Goddess of Rivers.” - Verin calmly continues.

But as he speaks the only question now is - how old is he? His hair is absolutely grey, glistening with hints of silver as the last light is caught by us. Though by the looks he does not exceed around thirty. This is either a demon or someone with a blessing.

“The Emperor refuses to believe that chalice ceased to exist. The very thought of him owning that item and ruling over all the seas, rivers and waters infected him like a plague. Poisoning his mind.” - Verin gave a soft smile, one that ran chills down my spine, as now my full attention was on him. - “There’s also the search for knowledge from the spirits of town Sier. Knowledge that gives the power to be the wisest. That all inflates the greed in that poisoned man.”

Although he spoke about the Emperor, it felt more like the idea of knowledge was more about him, about Verin. Sinister feelings about this priest. He gives me the feeling like he’d kill me in a heartbeat, without thinking about it.

How the hell does he know Niko and is actually helping? Who is...?

“The King... He Craves to take over the Land of Spirits. All due to that one time, when his ancestors lost in a battle against those lands. He too, found legend about the divine weapons that fought those beasts and creatures of Land of Spirits once. Making them the small land they are now, although, at some point in history, they had owned the whole world. These weapons are said to be in the Castle Mavur, in the town with the same name. Told to be blessed by some of the most powerful beings of historian myths.” - Verin sneered at his thought, that crossed his mind, but I damn sure saw that scary dark glint in his eyes.

“Those beings are the Goddess of Rivers, Spirit of Mother Tree, Queen of Madelaines Blood Land and Witch of Roseam. The mythical quartet of chaos. I wouldn't be surprised if you knew them.” - Verin eyed me, giving me shivers from his look. Just what is he? Why does it sound like...

“What the King needs is the Emperor's forces. So that during the storming of land and castle, there's enough to die through all the mazes, magical barriers and protections, as well as just enough to find and fetch what they crave to find. Both of them see each other as disposable tools to reach their own goals. Although, it feels like they are but mere puppets, with puppeteer being in shadows, pulling strings. I am not certain who'd behold such power. Yet. Though I presume you might have a clue to the identity of that being.” - Verin's way of speaking and pressuring me makes me feel smaller. Like a prey in a cage, with an elaborate predator playing with me, before his meal.

“I have an idea. But before that is revealed to anyone, I need to share it with Niko. If what I assume is right - she'll most likely share it with you.” - I let out. Verin gave a small nod. In a few minutes after, a silence instilled in a carriage, there was a stop.

Carriage came to a halt. Verin opened the door and got out.

“I shall go. From here, you'll be on your own.” - He pulled out a sky-blue rosary from his pocket and handed it to me. - “This might be of help, rather, come in handy.”

He went to the side of the road, where a hippogryph stood, got on him and flew off.

The carriage resumed its pace towards the town.

Forest where we were passing through - it began feeling familiar to me. The different beings selling items stacked on their carts, right on the side of the road. Seems that now it's way less populated than before, but the remnants of the similarity and nostalgic wave got me. Ah, in these forests are very elaborate spirits. No one knows their real name, so they're called “harvesters” by the locals. These spirits, if encountered, can tell you all about anything. Truthfully, in all great details. Though the price for such information - are your rare emotions. And although it might sound harmless at first, but not being able to feel joy, love, empathy - that's when it goes bad.

Some used such barter for greater gains, advancing them, though, others couldn't bear the lack of taken emotions. Eventually leading them to death.

Hmm... Maybe, just maybe, but had Niko used the “harvesters”?

I felt through each bead, as I thought, watching the road change, the town border appear and the fine laid stone slabs of roads and pavements begin.

The new, different faces began to appear. More dwarves, elves, and other creatures. Some working, some relaxing, some reminding tourists on vacation. Well, Krea was known for its diversity and inclusivity without any judgement. Such was the policy.

The pavement had magical stones embedded within them, so that at night the pavement would glow softly, so locals could find their ways. But during the sunset, such as now, these stones made the pavement resemble the lava floor, sparkling, glistening orange red, daring to the eyes, reflecting the last rays of sun.

The houses remained the same - marble, stone and bricks with concrete, all with sand red hues, like it was a made-up desert in the land of forests.

Pubs were buzzing with life, fire was lit in some corners to celebrate some new event. The whole thing pulled something in me. Something old and forgotten.

“It changed a lot, since... I last lived here.” - I let out, surprising myself with my words. But the feeling is there - I lived here. Son, wife... There was something of that sort some very long time ago. Maybe.

The carriage was going towards the one destination. I felt that it would be that place where I met some very elaborate old hag, that shapeshifts.

/David

Orin stared at me with utmost confusion.

I felt tired. I had no time to sort out sassy ladies. It was already too packed with things that had to be sorted and done in the squished time frame provided.

“Listen, you can question me later. Right now I need to know what happened to Elyon. When did you last see her? What did you speak of? I must know everything. We're short on time.” - I let out.

Orin just stared blankly at me. Maybe she was trying to put the puzzle, trying to find out how and what might have happened to Elyon. Yeah, normal thing for most of us, mortals, but we're short on goddamn time.

“Hey! Speak!” – I snapped, raising my voice a notch to get Orin out of her daydreaming.

“Ah! Yeah, um, she went along with a smart looking man. He came in asking for assistance with his work. He even specifically requested Elyon. Our superiors were quite nervous, saying that such a high ranking person would need someone more efficient, but that man insisted on Elyon. Superiors gave in, not even disclosing the details of man - saying he is the

priority non-disclosure customer. Nothing else. Elyon just left with that man. It was a few hours ago.” - Orin tensed up, yet alas, replied hastily.

“Shit.” – I clicked my tongue, - “Alright, then I’ll have to take you along. You can’t stay here anymore. You’ll now go fetch your things, keep it short, don’t talk to anyone, don’t tell anything. If you won’t do as I say - within the next few days you’ll end up dead, and it won’t be my work, got it?”

Orin glared at me with multiple questions per second rushing through her pretty little head, but I was not really into sorting it out now.

“Got it?!” - I raised my voice again. She jumped up, staring at me, I looked her in the eyes. - “I’ll answer all questions later, now go, don’t waste the time.”

She nodded. Then pressed the button to lift security measures.

“Now go get your stuff, I’ll wait here. You need to hurry! Shoo!” - I stood up.

Orin got up dashing out for her belongings. I watched her hurry to get her bag and then be on her way back towards me. Good that she said nothing to no one.  
Good that she complies.

We got downstairs at a hurried, yet serious pace, to attract less attention to us. We got in the car. I started the engine and we got out, making our way to the closest motorway.

Right as we were getting into the fast lane, I turned to Orin.

“Give me your phone, any tech along as well.”

Orin blinked at me a few times, then fetched out of her bag the tablet and the phone. I took them with one hand, as the window was open, then chucked them out the window.

“Ah! Why?!” - Orin cried out.

“I’ll reimburse them, but that was necessary.” - I let out.

My phone rang a moment after.

I picked it up.

“He’s already looking into it.” - started the voice from the phone and then the call was cut off.

“Well well well, guess we’re about to be found out.” - I let out.

“What does it mean?” - Orin looked confused.

“That call my dear, was from the only person on our side inside the system, and darlin’ we ain’t about to compromise our good friend Kriss. He has his hands full with our great twat Adrian, aka, your head boss.” - I let out, as I put on some calming music for myself.

The radio of the pre-programmed system played in the car.

“So?” - Orin let out. - “Why don’t you throw out your phone?”

“I won’t do so, as I have special precautions placed there, making my phone and tech non-traceable for anyone that tries any shady things. Guess you don’t know half of what the AIO does to the whole lot. Anything from tracking of people, to sorting out preferences, to not

only knowing all about all, but even inflicting ideas, changing opinions, changing people altogether, in case they decide to have themselves do a magical marriage with chips inside them. But that's a story for another time." - I smacked my lips, as I checked on Orin. She was quite confused.

"Alright, darlin'. You see, you spent some good quality time with your girlfriend and one more lady during that time of heat, which sort of granted the two of you some distortions. It's not like every person that hangs out with Niko gets issues, but those that get somehow close in sexual sense or the private life sense - get in trouble. The issue that arises is that you and Elyon are both compatible with the system, which gives Adrian the need to test you both to see if that will give results. What is he testing for, you ask? Well, that's the goddamn evil thing that makes you dive in alternate realities and universes to live and explore life in there. Why is that needed? Because he is an obsessive prick with issues. Now we're going to my place, as that's the safe place for now and we've got a whole lot of things to sort out, before we're down the rabbit hole of evil shitstorm that one prick concocted. Seems about all for now."

Orin had her brows knit, making me feel somehow proud of myself. She kept quiet the whole road to my place after.

Parked car, then the elevator to the right floor, the fiddling with the door, the getting in, and finally I can feel like I can relax.

The security system here is beyond anything normal, not to mention it'll take that asshole a while to get to me in ways that can allow him to harm me. For now - that's the thing to be staying away from in this small apartment hut in the most prestigious area. That dude ain't gonna cause a scene in a place packed with famous and influential beings. For now, that is.

I went to make the coffee, Orin sat down on the couch.

"Want something to drink?" - I ask politely.

She gave a nod.

"Preferences?" - I let out.

She looked up at me.

"Whiskey?" - She said.

I let out a laugh. Quite the interesting lady.

I pulled out the bottle of whiskey in my cupboard, then poured her a glass, putting it on the kitchen island. She came over, sat on a chair and took a gulp. Her face went sour for a moment, then she let out the breath.

"Yeah, that's not a simple thing to do. One other thing. I have a friend, who'll bring you anything you need in the ladies department. Anything from clothes to other things. So, just make a list - I'll get that sorted pronto." - I said.

"How long are we staying here?" - Orin asked.

"Until it's all sorted, so a while, I'd say." - I let out.

"A while..." - Orin sighed, then downed the whiskey glass. I poured her more.

"So, who's Niko? What's up with that Adrian? And who are you?" - Orin squinted at me.

I smiled at her questions.

“Hun, my name is David. I am the friend of few people including Niko, who were guinea pigs for the experiments Adrian did. We all were friends with Adrian, until we fell out of love with him. So to speak. Now that prick got my boyfriend, as well as your girlfriend and is going the nasty in his lab. So our job is to make sure that you get to Elyon and get her to safely return, as we rescue that captivated princess, along with my sad, tired and broken boyfriend. Hope he pulls through, after all that happened. But we can't get our hopes down, for now, as we've yet to train you to access the link between you and Elyon, coz honey, time is of the imminent essence here.” - I laughily said.

## /Merin

The filing of the papers and messages to the board of directors was frustrating. Besides now having to deal with piles of documentation left by Adrian, with his new tech developments and the arised issues, there was more to cover daily. At this moment in time - it seemed that the work was piling up more and more by the minute.

“Bloody asshole!” - I grunted out, throwing the papers across the room. - “You make me do so much work for no actual rewards to see.”

He just got another girl in the lab. A new lab rat that I got to check out just now on the project documents, as she's a new test subject to whatever that thing is on about at this time. Does he ever get tired of it, or is the goddamn idea just not contained so much?!

Though, having him be preoccupied with some new plaything is a bit better than dealing with his anger.

Although, I'm glad that there's that rat, as a test subject.

“Sure, darling, have them as a lab pet, than a new crush you might develop with a bit of time. None will dare to move between us. Even that brat.”

Sheer reminder of that bitch makes my skin crawl. Just seeing the relationship between them is enough for me to hate them both. But losing that asshole is way more of a dent on my reputation and pride.

May the new thing he came up with be less problematic for me to deal with.

New ping on the computer got me to check it - new messages and requests to deal with. Why does that, brat of a husband, not take care of the goddamn work?

“Ehh...” - I rest my head on the chair, as I look up for a moment. - “Just when should I plan my vacation?”



/Adrian

I still can't get used to this poorly lit container room that he uses. Though it's all for the scientific privilege of confidentiality. So that is enough to put my worries to rest.

"You managed to get him in, but is he doing what he was told? Is his whereabouts known to you?" – I paced around, looking at one of the test subjects.

"I did try to calculate his whereabouts, yet in one town he ditched the hunters. So now I don't know where he is. But you know how he gets when he goes there. He'll go on with his mission. Also, thus far he is not aware that there is anyone else within that realm." -Kriss replied.

"You better be sure he does not twist the plans I prepared for, for months. Or I'll be the one to administer your memory "purification"." – I sensed my anger seeping through.

Sheer thought of Erick fleeing the surveillance of the other side, right after he got there, is concerning. We did manage to negotiate for him to do as I say. He always does as I say, yet every time seeing how he just darts off into some place with no warning and explanation is infuriating.

I just hope that the memories don't surface, or we're to face some throwbacks.

Seeing Erick in a container, right under my thumb is nice. Having him being docile and obedient is always pleasant. Though that childishness he exposes each time he goes in - is frustrating. Real damn frustrating. Hope he doesn't screw things up.

I touch the glass surface of the container. With my fingers running on that chilly top. How nostalgic, having him once again in my possession as a test subject. Sweet poison of mine.

"Keep watch on him. Make sure to report everything back." - I look at Kriss, as he nods.

## Chapter 18 “Memories and Light #1”

/Elyon

The high trees and their branches reach towards the sky, dividing it, so full of strength, giving off the light. Strange creatures in this place lurked everywhere. Little beings crawl on the leaves, the fairies that fly around rustling flowers and leaving traces of starry dust behind. All this seemed like a part from a movie or dream that is too real and too vivid.

I got up, wobbled a bit, before gaining my footing. It felt like my feet were jelly and my body was made of wet cotton. What is this?

Ahead was a path, leading somewhere. Unsure of what was going on, I took a few steps ahead, then bumped into something, almost tripping over.

Looking down I saw a fairy-creature standing opposite me. This fairy was barely one metre tall, looking like a child, watching me with her blue-green eyes, her wings fluttering on her back.

“You!” – Angrily spoke fairy, hands on hips, eyes squinting.

“Me?” – I pointed at myself with a finger in surprise.

“For as far as I see - you’re the only intruder to our forest, so yes, you! Follow me, as I,” - fairy flew up to be on the same eye level as me, - “the amazing Lilly, shall guide you to our magnificent Goddess!”

Lilly pointed a finger at me.

“You! Follow me!” - as she said that, she turned around and flew above the path, turning around a few times to make sure that I would follow.

I decided to walk behind her, so as to not be that lost in here. It’s still unknown what’s going on. Am I really in a dream...?

The swishing sound caught me, I took a look - it were Lilly's wings. Do wings really make that much sound, as they work? Never seemed to notice.

“Where am I?” - I asked, to get some ideas of what this is.

“The great Goddess will explain.” - Lilly replied.

“Can you not tell me?” - I persisted.

“The Goddess will explain it all. Lilly is not doing that.” - She replied without looking back, as she now knew for sure that I’m tailing behind her.

Path was twisting up ahead, with scenery slightly changing after the trees that hung just a little below the clouds.

I enjoyed the scenery of what I observed around me, trying to keep up with this fairy, as we were on our way to this Goddess.

The creatures reminding of small fairies were like bees buzzing around a tree, then climbing up, going down. So hard working.

There were like, small fire lizards, breathing small fire, which was totally not safe, in my opinion, but other beings did not seem to mind. As I walked I also noticed something odd - lumps with glowing fungi on top of them, with eyes... And they watched me.

I felt a shiver down my spine. That was unsettling.

“Elyon! Is that you?!” – I suddenly heard in her head. Loud voice, a shout directed at me. I looked around - nobody there. But the voice...

“Elyon! That is you! Oh my, it’s Orin!” – voice kept on going.

Now I did recognise the voice, the worried and excited tone of my girlfriend.

“Orin?” – I shook my head, trying to figure out “how” I heard Orin, as it was too strange. What was going on? She spoke around me? Or is this in my head? Am I hallucinating? Is this the fairy thing that affects me, maybe?

My head began hurting, like it was a migraine.

“Hey! I am with a man. Name’s David! He says that you should be careful! He says that we are linked in some way. Oh! He’s asking where you are, he might know...” – Orin’s voice was buzzing inside my head, and the fuzziness with dizziness, reminding of a hard hangover, hit me hard. I stumbled back, as I couldn’t balance myself. World began to spin.

It felt like this was too much for a body to handle. I tried to grab onto something, I reached out my hand, but could not grab onto a single thing, it all was floating. The world seemed to be spinning round too fast now.

Orin kept saying something, but I could not make out words. Each sentence was like a hit that made me feel worse. Like a really bad type of phone call that makes you hear sounds, but not make out the words. Suddenly everything went dark.

/Lilly

I turned around to see this girl trying to grab onto air, then she fell down. Passed out.

“Really? Ehh...” – I exhaled, flying back to Elyon. I stood right next to her. - “Using this straight up now, eh, how annoying.”

I felt the magic through me, as my body began glowing and I managed to get in my original

self - two metre tall elf. The magic given was to use it to change back and forth between different looks, to not get in trouble at work. But this is annoying.

I let out a sigh, as my arms were filled with old battle scars, few armour plates protecting me, and my trusted daggers at my sides. I brushed back my long, green hair, then got down to pick up this girl in my hands.

Guess now I have to carry you, as you just decided to give out like that. Still must get you to the Goddess though, so you better not die on me.

/David

I look at Orin, as I absorb the sense of “made it”, as Orin is happy to experience the connection with her girlfriend. The sheer surprise, yet happy face was all there needed to be. A large cup of hot chocolate was on a table, as it was set for Orin.

Orin turns to me, now that she seems to be ready to get on with the program.

“Now, darlin’, tell me every detail you saw, heard, sensed. Alright?” - I spoke to Orin. She nodded, as she was trying to catch her breath, holding onto the chair, as the dizzy fit hit her.

It was hard for me at first also, until Niko drilled the sense of reaching it into me. Yeah, but then, as you connect - it all appears. What the other sees, senses, feels, tastes, all of it. I get it, it’s not an easy thing to do, nor the one that comes in easy from the first try. It is absolutely the pain and the exhaustion that drain you the hell out, at very first, but then, as you allow yourself the very things that are needed - all makes sense and you’re right there, with your person all the time, no matter the space, place and distance.

“It was a forest, tall trees... Elf? I think I saw an elf.” – Orin wiped beads of sweat from her forehead.

“Elfs you say... Forests... That sounds like... Shit!” - I felt the familiar sense that was out for a while, one that I’d not like to feel again. - “She is near Krator! Well, let’s hope she gets to the Goddesses hands before anyone else grabs her. I hope that elves still answer to that old hag. I gotta let them know...”

I walked to my study, and opened the room, which welcomed me as it always would. I began searching for it... The notebooks fell off the table, the books fell down from the shelves, as I rummaged through the items for that one thing. Where did I bloody put it?!

AHA! It’s here! I felt the joy for a second, and the next - the pain and the defeat that comes after. The goddamn old vinyl was staring back at me.

I walked back out with the recording, going right to the phonograph. I let out a breath, as I knew how it would hurt in just a moment. I put the music on, and the opera-rock began playing.

I gave self a nod, as my body began to tremble. Yep, the body is true to itself and knows what's coming. And that in itself is nothing good. I go towards the cupboard in the kitchen, take out the bottle of absinthe, take out a glass, then pour myself full of it. Then I walk towards Orin.

"Now listen carefully. I need you to slap me hard if I begin to tremble too hard, most likely it'll look like I have a seizure. Might look scary, but don't freak out. Muster courage. All you need to do is slap me as hard as you can. Got that?" – I asked Orin, as I took a seat opposite her on a couch. She gave me a nod.

"Good girl. Do whatever to get me back, once I'm there." -I smile at her, yet my body trembles. It senses the pain and the ruin that comes with too many times connecting to your other half. That's the payment for fucking around.

I pulled out purple pills from my pocket, the great magical concoction by Niko. Put them in my mouth and downed it with a glass of absinthe.

Well, here we go again.

## /Orin

I looked at this man, as he was dozing off, eyes closed, breathing so slowly, as if dead, his chest barely moving.

He is handsome. Messy white hair, his features seem to be chiselled out of marble, rose lips, long lashes... I turned around, blushing, realising that he is that one man many dream of - the prince in shining armour. But David was real.

Oh my, keep them fuzzy thoughts at bay! I have Elyon as my faithful partner! Shoo bad thoughts! Shoo! Shoo!"

I chased invisible thoughts above my head with a hand. Then slapped a few times my cheeks. Getting me the stinging sensation. I sat down next to David. He was out, sleeping or so it seemed. The travels he explained were quite bizarre.

Now that I had a moment to think over what he said prior to me a few hours ago... I decided to look it over in my head.

Once the drinks were settled and he felt more at ease, explaining to me all the troubles that we got into, it was a mess.

He was explaining to me the whole thing, as he sat and drank the heavy alcohol, like it was water.

"You see, there was research once. About people who had extraordinary abilities.

Researchers called it telekinesis with infused dream data sharing, morphing and shifting through time parallels. I was one of those lab rats for tests. So were a few other people."

“One man in particular was curating this process. His name is Adrian. He, along with Niko and Erick, were the co-founders of the whole research. It just so happened that when Niko and Erick were ‘communicating’ Adrian managed to intercept that. But things got muddied. The experiments and tests were trying to figure out “how” this thing worked, as the occurrence was rather unique and rare.”

“You see, this was a sort of communication between individuals in different places. I mean not even planet wise - universe wise. You could talk and exchange what you see and hear, feel, taste and perceive to someone else, who is on another planet.”

“Later we discovered that it also spread through time. So you can even send the ideas, as well as communicate through time. That is where terms like ‘multiverse’ and ‘time travel’ had floated up in the experiment's thesis.”

“As the experiment progressed - we discovered we could insert Our consciousness into Us in different time or universe. To participate in that life. We called these places “parallels”. As the body you transferred your consciousness to was You. But from another time and another universe. That led to multiple casualties.”

David poured himself some more whiskey, as the topic progressed.

“See, once you insert your mind into the body, the mind that was there is either merging with yours - giving you the information that ‘you’ knows, or does something else - pushes out that other ‘you’ completely.”

“It causes an amnesia effect, once that consciousness returns. But that is where gore comes in - sometimes the impact of replacement is so hard - it leads that ‘other you’ to commit suicide or finds ways to drive self into death by all means.”

“When such ‘death’ occurs, there is no longer a body to ‘host’ your consciousness, but the availability to get there still exists. That is when you transcend not only consciousness, but also your body. So you fully ‘teleport’ there - wherever you go.”

“But since discovery of transcending fully to other parallels experiments took a shadier turn. Piquing the interest of ‘original body and main consciousness’.”

David paused, let out a sigh, then continued.

“Erick and I have the original bodies in this world.

Adrian achieved the skill of transcending the body through parallels, so we’re... I’m uncertain where he originally is from, but right now - he is here. As far as I’ve got it, he’s unable to transcend anywhere as much as before.”

“The lack of freedom to roam places grinds his gears. But not as much as the mystery of where the original Niko is.”

“Due to me joining the research later on during first trials - I’m not as far advanced as they are.”

“Thing is - you can transcend through parallels, your mind and body, but no matter time spent in another parallel - you must return to ‘original you’ to avoid the ‘breakage’. In other words - to not die.”

“So when I learned that Niko is transcending here - I did ask where she originally was - she never replied. Erick might know, but he would never tell. Not because he wouldn’t - because he can’t. He lost his memory about it.”

“Yes, losing memories is also something that comes along when you transcend in parallels. Because you obtain new information and at times a new full bunch of memories, because that other you lived life from birth, just as you, and you get the whole thing in one go - the whole load of information mixes up. Sometimes even leading to replacement of your original memories with memories of the other you in a different parallel.”

“When you travel, transcend, a few times - you can still maintain order to memories from each parallel, but transcend one too many times - and all memories become jumbled up. Indistinguishable in where was what.”

“Like my memory of Niko, me and Erick studying together and Adrian being the professor there. But it is not correct in this reality.”

“After I had the incident in the Labyrinth - all my memories became mush. Right! Labyrinth! All of us, who transcend, end up in “labyrinth” at some point. A place of horrors, especially crafted for every one of us, with each having a remarkable name to it. Mine was called Krator. Quite the madness it was. Heh. The goal is - to escape. It is never easy to escape from the Labyrinth. It grows on you. It really does. ”

David downed his glass of whiskey.

“Right, Adrian. I’m still clueless about what exactly he did to Erick. Poor sod was the main experiment puppet in Adrians hands. Niko was there, but was not. Due to ‘original’ not being here.”

"She can transcend through parallels better than anyone. A veteran at transcending. She was the one who taught Adrian the basics of transcending. This occurrence was referred to as ‘Echo’, eventually the name became the name for research.”

"She taught us, too, how to transcend. That takes up a lot of sanity and strength. It's like your brain overloads on endless types of programmes, data, viruses, bugs and others - simultaneously.”

"That led to many other test subjects dying from the overload. Transcending through parallels takes a toll. Huge on body, immense on mind. Eventually the replacement and

mixture of memories at times led to suicide and death of the 'original'."

"For you might have experienced a new life, a better life in that parallel."

David laughed, as he remembered something.

"What else? Although it seems like Adrian is the eldest out of all of us - Niko is the predecessor to everything. Forever stuck in twenties, for what it looks like. Her being the ultimate mystery that rubs Adrian the wrong way every single time. He is real mad about it"

David looked out the window, a shadow of sadness lingered in his expression.

"Erick was damaged when he went through his Labyrinth and his parallels collided. He was ripped out of coma only three months later. He no longer was the same. We kept him on medication, but there's not much we can do. He still proclaims he is a journalist, although he studied law with me. But he remembers none of that. I also have memories of things I'm not sure if they happened, but they feel real."

"Once Erick said that for him it was not three months, it was around three hundred years if not more... Well, in each parallel time flows differently. Here you are spending a day - there it can be a decade."

"By all means it's as twisted as it gets, but all you have to know – now due to encountering Niko, both you and Elyon are endangered. Adrian had been up to other sorts of experiments, and some of those are worse. I don't know what he wishes to accomplish but he became insane. It wholeheartedly took piece by piece out of him - each time he dived deeper to solve the mystery."

"So you and Elyon are most likely linked, just like I am linked to Erick and Niko. Right... The concept of 'linked'."

David ruffled his white hair, taking a deep breath.

"'Linked' refers to individuals who, although are not the same person, but might be friends, lovers, very closely entwined through life in all parallels. Making them have a strong bond that allows them to communicate through the same or different realities, time and parallels."

"Basically - your love and deep affection for a person, just like strong hatred or loathing - are the strong feelings that link you to that person. Allowing you to communicate with them. But that works only if one of this couple had been transcending through parallels, which enables the other to be communicated to."

David stretched, as he was talking a long while now. He seemed to feel like the whole mass of heavy fog was on his shoulders with all this.

I just watched him, trying to soak in all that he spoke of. Staying silent and listening the whole time. It just felt like this is hard for him to go over.



Then he continued.

"So, now we're in a huge pickle. Erick was abducted from under my nose, so I couldn't protect him. Elyon was taken away. They both most likely are now in the system, inside some parallel."

"Right now the only person able to get them out is Niko. But just in case I have an informant who helps keep tabs on our loved ones - just in case... Just in case the wind blows in another direction."

David got up after all this spiel, stretched some more, then walked into the kitchen.

"Let's start with some food, then I'll teach you how to reach Elyon. We need information, after all."

Thinking back to it - when David was talking he made pauses, deeply inhaled, then exhaled, as he spoke of his memories. He rustled his white hair, being so unsure of what was real or from parallel, is how it felt like, as he was speaking of all of this. He was sincere in what he said, but it still was so complicated.

I got up, walking around the apartment. He was still on the couch, 'asleep'.

I checked out the study he had been rummaging prior. The place was filled with different writers of known and unknown names, cover backs were in strange languages. There were writings and drawings of weird creatures on the scattered pages on the table, as well as scattered on the floor.

What was going on in those parallels?

I noticed that there were a few highlighted words on papers repeating over and over - "Hikaru", "Yuki", "Gabriel". One of the papers with header read "War between kingdoms and Feriton". What are these endless stories?

## Chapter 19 “Memories and Light #2”

/Erick

The town had changed, the outskirts gaining new roads, new connections. Yet there still were deserted, forgotten paths. Less groomed, since not many took the steps through these ancient groves. But still in existence.

This same path I once walked, to discover the old lady, with much to tell on the top of the tree. Birds cheeping, tall grass rustling softly from the wind – these things did not change. Although, how much time has passed by now?

Some parts grew more trees, some became fields, yet one mighty tree stood untouched. Its slightly bared roots are still coloured in red, although not as bright now. The Color reminded me of rust now.

Now the climbing part.

I came close to this tree, grabbing onto the trunk, pushing off, then getting upwards. Slowly. The branches were small stoops, at the beginning, very hard to hold on. A tricky tree even years later. After a while the branches began, making it slightly easier to climb.

Well, if I did it once, I can do it again! The tree is the great challenge and a great achievement.

I felt at some point that I'm somewhere half way up. I sat on a branch, holding on tightly, looking out. The wind was notably rising, gusts were quite harsh. The view through the branches - a town seen even to its outskirts. I don't even want to look down. It was too goddamn high up. Even the birds were on the branches lower, not all the way up here.

I looked up - endless branches and still a good climb up.

Well, looking at how the greens of leaves are up there, seems like the Keeper is still alive. Oh my, just remember to not look down. Just look up. I thought to self, as I kept climbing.

/Niko

Wings fluttered heavily. My body was exhausted.

Feet touched the flooring made from years of tree branching, right after that the weight of the wings pulled me and I fell to my knees. Wings flopped down with a thud. Black blood ran down the feathers.

Once again practising this was a great feat in itself. Recalling this to fly, when I am well off hurt after all that madness. Eh...

I rubbed my forehead, heavily breathing, trying to keep it together as the pain was keeping me close to fainting.

I heard the steps from inside a caving of the tree. An old woman came towards me.

"Ha!" - She exclaimed sarcastically, almost laughing, - "You still alive?" - She slapped her knee and laughed.

I grunted in pain, slowly getting up from my knees and walking towards her, noticing a chair nearby to rest in.

"You sure know how to receive guests." - I remarked.

"You look like shi-it!" - The old woman was a ball of sarcasm right now. Unable to contain the joy and laughter.

"That should be obvious enough, Anne. You're still the royal thorn in the rear?" - I sat down on the chair, leaning forward, as the black bloodstained feathers shed off, the black goo along with it.

"You're spilling forbidden shithole magic all over the place." - Old Anne pioned with finger at the black blood and falling feathers. That was oozing around into a liquified gore fest. - "You better clean up all this mess after your stupid self. Yuck-yuck-yuck."

"Anne, just bring me some tea, will you?" - I was dreadfully tired, yet even in this situation her remarks feel friendly.

Anne clicked her tongue and went into her home. After a few minutes that felt like eons, she eventually brought out a kettle with cups, placing them on a table that appeared in front of me. Being the keeper on top of "Mother Tree" had its magical perks.

"So, what shitstorm brings you here this time?" - Anne poured the liquid in cups, pushing one towards me.

I took a cup and downed all the contents in one go. The cup was refilled again and again, until this dreadful thirst that felt suffocating left me. That's when I could reply to her.

"Ha-a..." - I breathed out in relief. - "The main problem child is being stupid again."

I looked at Anne. My feathers and last bits of the wigs started to sizzle and burn, then fell off completely. I felt the ripping skin sensation through all of that, but hey, use magic - have to pay.

"You mean Rose or the other one who seeks you?" - Anne tapped her foot.

"The one who seeks me. He brews up a storm." - I let out a sigh. - "He just... I don't know."

He's being the problem child again."

I shook my head, as I was trying to just not go into too much of a detail.

"And besides that, he most likely pushes this war." - Anne clicks her tongue. - "Another war... Do you think you can manage that? You ain't so almighty any more."

"I'm not sure. I need to. Not like I'm given much of a choice." - I tiredly reply.  
Anne shifts the tea cups on the table, then gets up to pace around.

"So the king wants power, the emperor is on wits end, the oracle is close to taking over, your student is becoming a problem child and what? You are once again doing what?" - Anne glances at me. - "You are again fighting for all the wrong reasons. Not that I'm not grateful you gave me life by making me the old hag of Mother Tree, but you sure need a reason to make better decisions, dear."

Pfft... This made me laugh. Her nagging is just so nostalgic, so home-like. Even with all those years as we were apart, the bond we made when it was the time of... Of... I shook my head.

"I've known you since you were a small child. This bold sarcasm never dies, does it?" - I smiled at Anne.

"It will never cease to exist! It'll burn like eternal fire!" - Anne gave a witty remark - making us both laugh out loud.

"But seriously, with this war on the horizon, you have to retrieve your powers." - Anne walked over to me, placing her hand on my shoulder.

"Meaning that I'll have to face them again." - I placed my hand on top of Annes.

"You'll have to break their curse. You can't keep them in the dark. They need to know. Just like you gave me back my memory, just like you took it out with Serra. That's a thing that you have to do." - Anne gave my back a soft pat, then walked over to the edge of branched flooring, looking at land beneath.

"Even though you suffered for us in many battles since before King Leon, it's not something you can escape. You have to make Maddy proud by taking all that pain. She knew you could do it. For all of us."

I sat in silence. Mulling over this all. One thing was the war, then there's also the thing that's not giving me any rest - missing memories. I do recall a lot of things, but some holes are burned out in the memory. And I can't manage to find what I'm looking for.

"I still remember how we all were friends. I still remember how we fought against the festering darkens in the Land of Spirits." - Anne turned to look at me. - "Have you found your lost Light?"

Something snapped inside of me at the mention of Light.

"Ah!" - My eyes watered, I felt a soft smile show on my face. The sense of something so close, so loved and warm, yet choking me, as if even crying wouldn't help but just make it bleed again. - "Right, my Light..."

"I assume no." - Anne shook her head, then clicked her tongue. - "You better not cry, once you gain back what you lost."

"Not in the case of my Light. Never." - I felt that the Light would not make me feel this endless pain. Maybe the sorrows surround this Light, but I... The love that's also about it would never...

We spent time reminiscing about the times of when I found Anne, how I helped her and almost raised her. How the times got us cornered and as she was on the edge of death, I made the pact with the old Mother Tree owner and made Anne the new Mother Tree keeper. To not lose her.

Loss was out of the option, as it felt suffocating for some reason back then...

"Stay the night. You must replenish your powers. The upcoming struggles will be real tough." - Anne pulled out a warm blanket from a crack in a tree branch.

I took a blanket and gave a nod. Staying here was a good option. Warmth, protection and some sense of being back home. The chair under me became a bed-like shape, for me to lay down.

My body was exhausted and the idea to get rest was a good one. I felt almost dozing off, as I heard Anne say this...

"You better find Light and also - never let that problem child find you." - Anne went to her bed. - "You are what keeps our existence."

/Erick

I'm already out of breath. Sweat dripped from my eyebrow, as I pulled myself up onto the thickest branched out point. The size of this little field was still impressive. In the back sat the Old woman - the keeper and protector of the Mother Tree. Then I looked a bit around, noticing Niko, wrapped in a blanket, sleeping next to the keeper.

I pulled myself up and onto the floor, as I crawled a bit more in, then laid on my back, catching my breath. This damn tree is no less of a challenge, than it was once before. Impossible and hard achievement.

"Tea?" - Keeper smiled at me.

“That would hit the spot, so yes please.” – I got up, coming closer to the little table with tea cups.

Old Anne poured me a cup of tea made from herbs and tree juice. This mixture gave the greatest result of getting healed and back on track with the body. Feeling of replenishment and nourishment fulfilled was really a needed thing.

“Sweet child Erick, Tree gives you its blessing, just like the forest of this part of the mountain. Be careful when encountering evil forces.” – Anne looked at Niko, - “You on the other hand - you already know what needs to be said. Once you’re ready - get off my tree. I don’t need any freeloaders here.”

Anne shook Nikos' shoulder, waking her up. Groggy and tired - was what I felt from looking at Niko. Anne gave a large cup of tea to Niko, then went into her home in a tree.

Niko drank the contents of the cup, letting out a sigh. She got up, leaving the blanket behind, then walked to me. I already felt the new energy and replenishment from the tea of the old Mother Tree keeper.

“So...” - I was about to say more, but she took my hand and we walked to the edge of the flooring. Ahead were fields and forests, towns and clouds, wind barely moved here, no sounds reached this far. Watching the land like this felt nostalgic.

“Do you remember the one person you wish to avoid the most throughout all parallels?” – Her voice resounded in my head, her lips not moving. Some sense of pain was in her words. We’re linked.

“Who? I would not have such a person... Can’t recall any...” – I looked into her eyes.

“Then you’ll need your memories back, my dear. It’ll hurt like hell, but we need this creature to help us out.” – Her eyes felt sad, then grew colder. It felt like she just cut into my soul, depths that I don’t even know, making me exposed like there’s nothing on me. She continued. – “Erick, you must remember Ary.”

Once the name “Ary” was out here - my body began sweating, growing hot and cold. I began shivering. I felt puzzled, my body felt a sense of shock and fear I couldn’t explain. Something broke inside of me, it felt like an inner chack of the sane little self that was there.

Then the body relaxed, my shoulders fell, I felt emptied out, like I somehow became hollow. What was it about? A... A-ah... Right... That... That was...

I felt Niko wrapping her hands around my waist, tightly gripping me, then I saw her back growing out wings. She winced for a moment, biting her lip, as the sense of pain was hard to handle. The wings were out, large black wings with blood stains, few odd feathers still white.

“Now, we must go.” – She said, as she pulled me along in a jump from the tree.

///

Bench of burned, charred wood that over the decades became rock solid. Roses of red are blooming, oozing the sweet scent to the choking extent. Cigarette smoke puffing out of soft rosy lips that deformed into a grin.

Grey eyes squinted, looking far ahead, slim fingers holding his cigarette.

“Fascinating, our Roses scent returned.” – Deep voice full of hate gave chills to those who heard it. Although, to most of the fortune – this creature was alone for miles around, without a soul near him.

He turned around, long ash grey hair swooshing in the wind.

“I’ve missed you, Erick.”

## Chapter 20 “The Issues in the Deep”

/Adrian

There are little moments about life that you may regret later. But there is nothing quite like the same two events repeating themselves all the same way, that makes you boil with anger, before having regret.

I'm pacing in my office. Puffing out angrily. Rummaging in my head about when and what went wrong. What 'might' have gone wrong. The “Echo” is going well, although there are disturbances that violate security of the whole operation.

The Grande plan that had been executed stage by stage for so long... The wanted documents, tech, all were going smoothly. But then the ripples began.

People that were sent in - were all administered into where they must be, having the information that needs to be right there and then, playing their parts well. But there still is something causing ripples. Damn things do not work well!

I swooped the table. Having all that was atop - fly off, hitting floor. Whiskey glass crushing against the wall.

“Muppets! Who on this damn planet would pry on my plans?!” – I shouted out. Dozens of other questions were swirling in my head along with swearing. Having all this to deal with, the issues, the tests, the information and plans... How did I not notice the intruder?

“Darling, you sure need a nice cup of hot chocolate now, for all the crazy you are steaming out with.” – Smirk and giggle, she stood next to the door.

I pressed fingers against my forehead, then wiped my face with the palm of my hand. The one trouble to add onto all the rest would not do much right now, and this trouble was right there, in my face...

“Merin, go sort out your papers. I don't need you here right now.”

“Silly man. Let me guess, you are seeking that one person who is wreaking havoc.” – Merin looked at me, as she pointed her finger towards me. - “Making a mess out of a situation in all this is making a mess out of you.”

Usually if someone else would speak in such a manner to me - that would be the call upon the careless death wish of that individual.

I was too tired and too preoccupied to deal with her. Even if sometimes she makes sense of things. I glared at her intently, wishing she'd go away and finally leave me be.



“If only looks could kill, huh? Come on sour puss, my treat.” - Merin gestured to me with her hand.

I let out a sigh. There’s only one way I can get rid of this really annoying woman... This goddamn wife of mine. To go along with the whim for a bit, for her to fuck off.

The high street was buzzing with chatter of people, car engines, songs that played from the open door shops, the people in costumes handing out fliers and the endless buzz that’s quite typical for the big city.

Aroma of coffee and street food is like an invisible fog hovering around this part of town - becoming its special charm.

Teens laughing as they go after school, men passing by in their suits, ladies window shopping, delivery couriers making their rounds, people on the phone making business runs.

## /Merin

Second floor of the café. Velvet seats, sand coloured walls, big paintings of pop art hanging, people chatting leisurely.

Me and Adrian sitting with coffee mugs at the window table. He is staring out at the street, whilst I’m trying to enjoy my large cappuccino. All the while eyeing him.

“I heard that you'd come here often when in trouble. I thought that this time it's not much different.” - I said out loud, but his glare at me made me feel the disgust that he has. - “Mind sharing, what's bothering you this time?”

He’s like this every damn time I try to help him with his things. I’m already helping him a damn lot, yet each time I try to get the information out of him - it’s like I’m not using words, but a set of pliers that’s on fire, with hot iron poking his weak spots. This sour puss is quite a show. After giving me one more evil glare, he just gazes out the damn window, to the street below.

“You better drop that attitude and spit it out, as I am that one person handling all the mess afterwards!” – I hissed at him. I’m also not fond of pulling the damn rope back and forth.

“And you do that clean-up well. Why trying to figure out the issues now? Weren't you the one who said you wish no part in the gritty details? Change of heart?” - Adrian tapped the top of his mug.

Oh dear god! This prick of a bitch! Not only did he just re... Oh my dear fucking god, give me strength not to pull out his hair here and now. I do want this bitch to be mine, but for fucks sake, why is this man such a bitch? Ok, ok. I've got this. I've fucking got this. I close my eyes for a moment, then open up, as I let out my breath, to keep my cool. Or else.

"I have a right to know. I'm your wife..." - I let out.

"Yes," - Adrian cuts me off, - "a wife. But only on paper, my dear. Never once did we share a bed, have any more physical contact then required for appearances in public. Also, you're the one who agreed to obey, as it was and still is, very convenient for you."

I kept my mouth shut, but I felt the wish to just sucker punch him. His cold look and tired smile. Sure, sure, try to do that as you may. But this wife of yours is not just for show, you goddamn prick. Like I'd ever forget what the marriage with you stood for.

"If this is you worrying about me - then I rather not have it. Weren't you the one demanding a new male "toy" every few days? Whoring yourself out to your whims. I still don't care about your shenanigans, just don't play that disgusting concern ever again. It's sickening me." - Adrian continued his insults.

And like he never dared to go and try his ways with female 'patients' of his, huh? Like that never ever happened? I'm sure he screwed with those whores, maybe even when they were out of it, being out there in that system doing god knows what.

"Sure, my darlin'. I enjoy my share of fine dick, as you clearly lack one of those yourself." - I let out. He's not phased. - "And truthfully, I'd rather know what the fuck you're up to there, to know prior to the shit surfacing that there it is. Instead of dealing with end fucking result you put in my face every damn fucking time. What a great husband indeed. Eunuch in the making, are you even trying to use that dick of yours or you cut it off somewhere and placed it like a pet in a jar?"

"Just keep doing what you always do and don't get in my business." - Adrian tiredly said.

"Right, right. You piece of fucking prick. Sure. Have it your way." - I did not even finish my drink, stood up and the wish to dump it on him was as great as my burning desire to go and angry-fuck a pretty hunk now.

So, after getting up, I just left the cafe, leaving that no-good-husband to his own company.

"Bloody fucking prick!" - I mouth, as I get in my car.

Few touches on the phone and I call my favourite boy-toy.

"I'm gonna pick you up in ten. Get ready. We're gonna do it in the parking lot." - I say and cut the call. Engine started.

Fucking prick. I'll go get it out of my system and get on with my own shit.

## /Adrian

Finally some peace and quiet. The moment Merin left it sort of eased the mood for me. Like a dead weight dropped.

A woman appeared, sitting opposite me, right where Merin sat prior.

Classy, posh. Her faux fur coat open, royal blue dress underneath, chestnut colour locks of hair hung down. She stretched, rubbed her neck and locked her hazelnut eyes on me.

“My, my, seeing you here is surely rare nowadays.” - She leaned back in chair.

I gazed at her. It was indeed a long time since I last saw this woman. She still was the same. Same warm smile and proud look.

“So, you coming over to my place?” - She softly said.

With her, I didn't really have to reply.

Minutes later we were in an office that belonged to her. No people inside - she had worked mainly alone.

I sat down on a sofa, as she prepared some tea. Then, like usual, she lit the incense and turned on the humidifier.

“You just keep it to yourself, don't you? Like you always do.” - She smiled, as she sat down next to me. Then, as she did, tapped on her lap.

“Lay down, let me take that weight off.” - She said softly.

I stretched out on the sofa, put my head on her lap, using it like a pillow. Her hand covered my eyes. I raised my hand, softly placing it atop hers.

“I...” - I tried to find words.

“Shh. It's just the two of us here. Don't think of anything else.” - Her soft caring voice was reassuring, calming. It was a good thing - meeting her. She was my special person. My best friend, my labyrinth keeper, the one who'd know all. Madeline.

Sun was shining from large windows, bringing warmth to the body. Her touch was the best remedy. The feeling of peace slowly drifted me to sleep.

///

Wind is rattling tree branches against the window, thunder is roaring beastly, rain is pouring down like a river. House in mountains, forest all around. House belonged to the grandmother – vintage and antique furniture, peculiar items.

Sadly, at home was only a young man, bearing a faint fear of darkness that is lurking behind the walls. Kettle is whistling jolly, as water boils for tea. The youngster picked up a kettle from a brick laid stove, poured water in a tea cup.

Lightning lights up the whole house, thunder shakes the ground. Then silence falls - the eye of the storm is passing through.

Footsteps are heard from the hallway, making the boy step back to the stove, trembling. His hand sought for a weapon - he grabbed fire iron. As steps got closer, a man walked into the kitchen.

His appearance was of a king - with embroidered gown, jewelled crown, heeled boots, waistcoat with unknown crest on it. His face was clean shaved, hair blond, sticking but like ravens feathers, eyes cold, grey like fog. King looked at the young man, furrowed his brows.

“Who are you?” – asked the boy in a trembling tone.

King tilted his head a bit, squinting his eyes as he took a good long look at young Adrian. Then the King spoke.

“Put that poker down boy. You don’t want to harm yourself.”

Adrian grabbed tighter onto fire iron, then he pointed it at the King.

“Who are you?” – He asked again, now his voice steady.

King took a few steps closer to the boy, standing barely now a step away, at the edge of the fire iron, he repeated in stern voice: “Put that down”.

The strong tone with the weight of a truck fell upon Adrian, making him succumb and put down this make-shift weapon.

“My name is Leon, King of Sopdar. Where am I and who are you?” - Grey eyes were intimidating. That's how the kings show their strength - with simple words and eyes that make you kneel.

“Adrian. And this is my house. How did you get in here?”

Wind swished again, having the weather outside rumbling hungrily. Adrian was facing this

hard shell person with all his bravery mustered. He was still one in charge to take care of the house. It was his, for the time being. Leon looked around, as he evaluated the surroundings.

“I was in the throne room, when lightning flashed. Then I found myself here.” – Leon's eyes are locked on a vintage chair. He walks up to it, then sits down.

Two spent three months together, before one more storm ravaged the place. In those days Adrian shared as much information as possible, written schemes of inventions, mechanisms, literary overviews, ideas. All was out of this world. From a distant parallel. Leon shared his knowledge, whilst trying to figure out how he got here. He was amused by Adrians curiosity and eager nature of craving for knowledge.

Later on - Adrian began creating and publishing things that were mind-blowing to people at the time. Alas he got sponsor attention to invest in his ideas, such interest helped create a company, where on one side he produced items and advanced mechanisms, at the same time he got his own research going on, that was only known to few people. With all that he got during those three months, he was capable of visiting Kingdom Sopdar on and off for years, there he met with Leons family, then the next king, next and next. Time difference between parallels was quite huge. Days in Adrians world equaled years in Sopdar. Throughout that time he met one more parallel traveller - a girl that was referred to as "The Witch" in Sopdar Kingdom.

She rarely showed up , but when she did - things changed. Some said that she worked alongside the Empire, with the great Emperor Mirai, others said that she is the pawn of "The Mad King" who ruled lands centuries ago. All who spoke of her - told times again that she was the evil "Witch".

Adrian spent time getting to know as much as possible about her, but people kept repeating the same stories. So he waited patiently to finally meet her. That was the sort of the start of the odd friendship between Adrian and Niko.

## /Niko

Old road forgotten and lonely. The two of us walked in silence.

Uphill, which still had burned trees that turned to ash, barely standing, the remnants of old lingering. Greens don't grow here, by the looks of it – nothing possibly would grow here for a few more centuries. It's Wasteland that was left after the war.

History had forgotten, did its best to throw out that part of history, to prevent such horrid experiences from ever repeating again. The massacre of magical creatures by the one Witch Monstrosity, that was pushed by a person with the name that means – “Light”.

It was so much more here, truly. So much more. The flower gardens that stretched around,

the time spent walking here and tailing the 'Light', as that's the only thing that had me... It's that... That... I can't remember...

"And here I was trying to never return to my old Kingdom." – Erick took a good long look at the castle Guille Rose. – "Ruling kingdom was the harshest decision made by my sadness and loss."

Heh, like you... No. That's not how it went. Not at all. It was not your sadness and loss. Not at all. It was my cross that I'm still carrying.

"Overwhelming memories, dear Kings Rose?" – I smirked. – "Let's hope that Ary won't wish for your head on a spike."

Ahead stood a huge castle, partly in ruins, covered in ash, blood that turned to rust, bones scattered around. Light with faint smoke trails coming out of the far end from the Castle.

The bridge to the entrance of the castle was still standing.

Near the entry stands a man. Short dark hair, hazelnut eyes, old armour, tall and bulky, giving off that "knight" feeling. He eyed the guests as they walked towards him.

"Long-time Gabriel, still looking after the house?" – I smiled.

Gabriels face was stone cold, yet feeling he gave off was one that he's ready to murder without thinking twice. Silence hung in the air. The Knight of the castle was ready to unleash hell itself upon us. We might have been fools for getting here, but there is something I really need. And I'll gain it even if I must play the Fool.

"Are you possibly immortal, foolish and lost - to come back acting oblivious?" – Gabriel spoke up.

I took a few more steps towards Gabriel, then a few more, until I stood a few inches from him, then I swiftly hugged him tight.

"Old grumpy knight talking back? Don't you love it that we're back? I missed you too, my dear!" – I pinched his cheek. – "You don't change, do you?" – I laughed then pulled closer to his ear, - "You know me well enough to not stir it up. Is the demon here?"

Gabriel looked at me, displeased with my manners. He already knew my attitude and ways of being, but my manners were dreadful in his opinion. Although I was not once real with him. There's always a... Yeah, someone to play.

After taking a breath, he was about to reply, but Erick cut in:

"Are you still in sworn oath to serve me, Gabriel, Knight of Kings Rose?"

Hazel eyes looked at Erick, then Gabriel clenched his fists, smashing right hand atop armour

on the left side, where heart is, fell on one knee, spitting out:

“Long live our Kings Rose!” – then looked at me, - “I still have not forgotten the oath, but you are one person I must see to die.”

“All in due time. We’ll get to it. I promise. But right now, would you be so kind to lead us to Ary?” – I pulled a fake smile.

Gabriel frowned. But before he could express his anger, Erick got in a way:

“Gabriel, please, lead us to Ary.”

Knight stood up, feeling like his King's Rose is but a mere puppet in witches hands, then murmured “Follow me”, as proceeded into the castle.

### /Erick

Crumbled throne room, yet it has the oddity of having roses growing and blooming around.

“Hikaru was happy with these blood red roses.” – this thought flashed in my head.

Footsteps echoed, as the three of us stepped on rubble. Leftovers from fire, explosions, war. I was looking around - feeling nostalgic, having memories float back bit by bit, recalling episodes that took place in these rooms, corridors.

I was getting a clearer picture of Hikaru... One that’s deemed “The Mad King”, by the ones who faced him, feared him... But there was someone else... Someone who led ‘King of Light’ Hikaru - to insanity. It was still too foggy to recollect - who.

Gabriel was oozing with hatred, as Niko walked beside him. He despised her at all times and could not get over it. But for some reason he’s not able to kill her. These two fought endlessly before - during multiple battles that took place in the lands here, also the further out lands. And even though they fought side by side, he always had something against her. Something had him resent her. Even during the longest war, that wore out everyone - Gabriel still had it there, the endless anger.

Eventually we reached the far end of the castle. Restricted part that forever belonged to one person. One who was right now needed the most. Gabriel stopped next to the tall door, thick and heavy, having old runes carved on it to preserve the inner room to the best it could be. At all times.

Gabriel looked back at me, waiting for some sort of reaction, hoping for something. I wasn’t sure what it was, so I just gave a nod. Gabriel grabbed the handle and pushed the door inwards, opening it.

Light and warmth were inside. Two chairs with shadows who sat beside the fireplace, chatting, not noticing us, guests, right away.

Gabriel closed the door behind, right after Niko and I walked in. He then walked towards the shadows, across the spacious room.

The ceiling was around 4 metres high, walls made of stone, having drapes in muted red hanging. Windows tall and narrow. Along the walls were hanging chandeliers with candles in them. Outside the windows was dark - tree branches of the castle garden were poking in the sight of the windows. Dining table is set in the middle of the room, with just 6 chairs left at it. Originally it was made for a dozen guests. With time though, these "guests" ceased to exist. Marble floor, with animal fur used as rugs here and there - which sparkled little memory in me.

I was here quite often, some very long ago.

I sat at the table, with many important people – it was right in the midst of the first war. There was one man who rounded everyone up at the time. The most insane person in existence, but even he... I felt tears swelling up slowly, I held them back, feeling like it's not the time yet - to whimper and sob.

Gabriel stopped next to two royal chairs right opposite the fireplace.

"They arrived, just as you said." – Muttered Gabriel, then shifted aside, to let the hosts take a look at the guests.

They turned to see who dared to appear once again, then the tallest one stood up, taking a few steps away from the chair, taking a good long look at Niko and me.

"After all these years you finally decide to show up again, acting like nothing ever took place. Quite the audacity, my dear friend." – Spoke tall figure.

"Ary, I..." - I was about to speak, still holding back the tears with lump in my throat, as it's hard to speak...

But then the other person stood up, walking towards me.

"You are bloody despicable! Do you know how long you were gone for? I have waited for you to pull me out of here, yet you never showed up! I had already forgotten how it was on the other side. Really can't start to imagine the time that had passed in there, the time I won't be able to retrieve, to get my life back! How dare you leave us and disappear to fuck knows where?! We were looking for you. Searching for hundreds of years. And you know what? We had no bloody trace of you! Not even a single hair left! Nothing! You better make up a good fucking excuse right now!" – As this angry rant finished, the person stood beside me.

Manly, thin and fit, blond hair having a hue of red from the candle light. Dressed in a shirt and pants, so reminiscent of the old school classics. He was from another parallel. I could no longer hold my tears back, because I couldn't.

I took the last step that was parting us, to hug this blond man tight. Tears flowing down my



cheeks, as I grip him tight.

“Yuki, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I could forget you... I knew I was missing something dear to me.” – I said whimpering.

Yuki frowned in misunderstanding, unsure what was wrong, but hugged me back.

“I’m sorry to disrupt this dramatic reunion, but due to the progression of events, things got to be done fast. Ary, I’m in need of your skills. Another war might soon be upon this realm. Not that I’m here to protect anyone, but we have to move quickly before some stupid brats get to sacred weapon and break sovereignty to bits.” – Niko looked into Arys' golden-red eyes. - “Can you be so kind as to lead us to the sacred weapon in Mavur?”

Ary pulled his sleeves down, having his priest resembling a gown in black and gold, making whooshing sounds. He crossed his hands on his chest. His ash grey hair glinting like silver in the lights of room. Just like centuries ago, his eyes are seeing more than any human can.

Gabriel gripped the sword's handle, having a slight nod exchanged with Yuki. They all did not forget the simple fact that it was due to her, that the last war was in rampage and the King lost his sanity. Darn Witch had no rights to even stand here, let alone ask for anything. I felt that way too. It was due to her, the Witch who lead my king astray, that all was lost and I had to take the reign and sit on the throne.

“You drove our King to death,” - Ary began, his voice cold. - “you took away Kings Rose, you burned lands, got the oldest living species extinct, you were “merciful” enough to spare me when the fifth realm came to us. But that does not let you ask favours of me, Witch from the Fifth realm.” – He was really annoyed, furious, in fact, but he stood still, like a Royal Demon he was.

Ary was no joke when it came to power, he was the wisest and strongest adversary to King. Yet there she was - the person he could not kill, no matter his magical powers.

Her eyes were burning with fire, yet face was expressionless. She came close to the demon, grabbing his face with her fingers pressing hard into his cheeks.

“Don’t get me wrong boy,” - Niko smashed Ary into the wall, - “ if not the promise to the King – you would long ago join the dead. I was kind enough to revive Kings Roses memories, reunite you fools, but I am not here for all this sweet dramatic show.” - She spoke through her teeth. - “You’ve seen how I make obedient dolls out of creatures,” - Her face got close to Arys, - “yet I asked you nicely to play along and help me out. Or are you foolish enough to try and go about it the hard way?”

Silence hung in the air. I held onto Yuki, I now remembered the whole history of this castle, of these lands. My memories of this treacherous woman had returned. She was worth being feared of.

Gabriel was about to strike her with a sword, but his body was frozen, shaky and not willing to listen - he couldn't move.

Ary was barely breathing. He felt pain across whole body, a burning sensation. He remembered that it was in her power to control one's perception of pain. Niko released her grip on Ary, then turned to face the rest of us.

"I suggest you all to cooperate, before this realm is ripped to shreds by one greedy student of mine."

## Chapter 21 "As it slowly gets Back"

/Merin

I have the persistence of a very jealous wife, who tries to accomplish what I began. I want to see what my eyes want to see, my heart shut its door to it permanently.

I am used to accomplishing all I set out for. Adrian was of no mistake one of those goals. Though with years that goddamn son of a bitch showed his true colours of emotionless, cold-brick bastard.

Sure, he can be the multi-billionaire Adrian, the fucking holder of sixty percent of shares to AIO, the good looking man of science and progress that allows the new generations to blossom. But guess what?

This bitch is using me as a great asset, due to me being the daughter of the founder of a medical company that made billions due to greatest inventions. I am the one that helps him when dealing with board of directors, those old fucking bastards that cling to damn heavens of medical advancement to keep them going. Like, even viagra is not the answer when it's all old and unable to work. Just leave it the fuck alone, but no. Not them bloody lot.

So I am the one that deals with those old farts on my dear husband's behalf, making it all nice and peachy.

Officially - Adrian is the head, practically - he dumped the company on me and is absolutely obsessed with the "Echo" project, leaving me to deal with all the rest.

And of course I am the one that's labelled 'bad wife', the 'cheater', the 'player', all because I unwind by messing around in bed with some hot hunks, that give me pleasure. But that is what I enjoy. And the amount of other drama that I'm pulled in due to my interests or tastes... These fucks have no life, do they?

Then again, this fucking "Echo"... Why is he so hell bent on this shit? I know that what he's more obsessed with is that bitch by the name Niko. A fucking trouble maker. That bitch is all around him, like, what is he on about? She's not interested in him, but he's all like 'where's she?' or 'i'll find her', like... My dear hubby, you lost your fucking mind and I've no clue which bitch fucked it out of you senseless, but it's not her for sure.

Then one time he claims that he needs to find real her, then other time that they can communicate at a distance. Like, telepathy and all... I knew he's growing more and more crazy by day, but this shit was too much at some point. And yet he won't give the fuck up, the chase for something unreal, for some crazy ass bitch that has no interest in him. But her just being - is annoying the hell out of me.

For my betterment - I'd rather her die in a ditch. But then again, even as I tried sending some thugs her way - they couldn't find where she lives. Like a fucking ghost. I was shocked. I

personally researched and yes, she's a ghost that has no trace nowhere. Even that lit a fire up my cooch, so that I'm now also in need to find her, but to only kill her myself, so that this fuckery would end for good.

Even looking through the experiments - that's where something is, although her files are classified to be accessed only by Adrian, I managed to take a peek - some odd ass universe somewhere with her being like an overpowered character, another place where the main power she wields is the people skills and creativity, like, this is what the whole fuss is about? Like, even this 'Erick' or 'Elyon' that's a lab rat test subject, is way more interesting than that bitch. This husband of mine surely has his priorities wrong.

Oh god this work is killing me! Kriss had not been doing anything good lately also - just no reports from that rascal. And then the directors meeting is close by. This work is just argh!

I picked the phone and messaged the service I use to get hot men. One delivery straight to my office. I need to unwind.

The damn work with papers is already having my head spin in circles. The new developments are not even much to be shared with the board and the board wants to know what Adrian is doing there. Much fucking fun.

Ahh.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." - I call out, as I'm at my work table, on my comfy office chair.

A fine piece of man walks in.

"As requested." - He said.

"Come over here." - I gesture for him to come closer. He does as told.

"Get under the table." - I let out. He does as told.

I take off my knickers, spreading legs apart.

"Now eat this up like your life depends on it." - I told him. And he does as he's told.

/Adrian

Ah, so calm and peaceful. I rubbed my eyes, as I woke up. Feeling like the weight of the world fell off my shoulders after this rest. Faint sound of "Bach Cello Suite No.1" was audible.

I looked around and as usual I saw Madeleine at her desk - replying to emails, managing paperwork. Quite a business lady she is. I sat up. She noticed me being awake.

"Good evening. Tea? Coffee?" - Madeline said to me, as she was about to get up, but I

gestured to her to stay seated. I got up and walked up to the kitchen corner by myself, putting the kettle on.

“Are you alright with coffee?” - I asked.

“If you're the one serving it - then I'll be happy with whatever you decide to make.” - Madeline looked at her phone as it rang. She took the call about the query of lingerie, noting down order information.

Call did not take too long, yet it was enough time for me to prepare coffee and place a cup on her table.

I leaned on her table, right next to working Madeline.

“Never thought that I'd stumble across you in that cafe.” - I smiled.

“Honey, you were lucky I had my coffee with a client there. Had I not noticed you - you'd be the sad stooge in the corner.” - She remarked with the classy sass she has.

I smiled at the familiar tone and way she spoke to me. It was not always like that, but at some point it just became a familiar thing for me.

“So, business is going well?” - I asked.

Madeline picked her coffee.

“Actually, very good. The new lingerie collection is out in two weeks. We've opened a new shop with boys. So even my sexy industry is thriving.” - She took a sip.

“New shop?” - I raised my brow.

“Yeah. You know about my shop where you can book girls for pleasure and sex. You booked girls through me. So, now we opened a shop with boys. And it's good. I treat everyone well, they are all protected and looked after. Also - the adult video brand is boasting sales. Guess the "sexy" is back in the game.” - Madeline turned to look in my eyes. - “Not your average ex-porn star, huh?” - She smiled.

“Maddy, you are brilliant. Admirable and brilliant.” - I smiled, as I cheered with my cup.

“Have you forgotten how to relax, whilst sending Merin out to fish for some dick?” - Maddy grinned.

I stopped midway drinking my coffee. I was about to spit it out, but got hold of self and gulped it down.

“Guess I've been too preoccupied with research to even have any strength left to battle

Merin.” - I looked into my cup. - “Maddy, I forgot how at ease I can be. And you keep reminding me of it.”

“Because you're a forever busy man, Adrian. You're just you.” - Maddy shrugged. - “Have you had any sex in past few months? Or have you not even had time to wank off?”

She was asking me in a matter-of-fact calm manner, just like a person would ask about weather. She was indeed the lady to say and ask the most embarrassing things with a straight face. I laughed, as I face-palmed myself.

“No Maddy, I've been working the whole time. So neither of that.”

“Well, that explains it.” - Maddy waves her hand. - “Just get laid, you old fart. Or have you waited for me to sort it out?”

We both laughed.

“Guess the need for your services shall be requested. Or so it might be.” - I let out.

“Don't worry sweetie, I've got just the right selection of beauties for you.” - Maddy laughed.

We spent time talking about nothing in particular and everything there is.

“Maddy, I'll call you.” - I said, as I was getting into my taxi.

“Honey, you just make sure to appreciate the girl I will send you. So that you'd remember how to commence the deed.” - She waved her hand, as I drove off.

/Kriss

The programs are running on stacked monitors, the stats for all the progressions, changes, and vital escalations that occur to the bodies of “Echo” subjects, for this is the “key”, as far as I believe in it.

I was noting down the subjectified observations in regards to transgressions on office system software, developed especially for his project.

I got up to walk to the other workstation.

Mulling over the last data from subject foreseeing scan. Looking at uneven projectiles was getting me nervous.

This is not making it easier. This stress is too much lately. Ok, ok, what was it? Yes, breathing. I'm breathing in, then out, trying to straighten my wrecked anxious thought process, then looking at the charts again.

One of the subjects is overly stressed; his brain wave flow was rippling others. Such an occurrence was unexpected to appear so much in such little time. Though due to what I knew, I got the gist of who broke the bonds to release the stress pent-up inside everyone, and it's slowly raising havoc.

I know that it's the basic bond trio, but this is a bit too much for me at this moment. And having Adrian on my case, to report all the progress, all the news - oh how I'm under the pressure of making it work, as they all inside that hell pit are figuring their shit out. Hope David is all out and tackling it from his side.

Knowing how Adrian will lash out once he gets the data... The least I can do is try to minimise damage, which he'll eventually conduct on all subjects under the "Echo".

Oh, all my nerve cells that'll die this week. Hope I don't become one of the test subjects, if Adrian goes into a frenzy.

I let out a sign, calmed down to get my calm voice back and pressed record: "Body vitals are stable, fine intake of chemicals, brain work is advancing as predicted by the programme. Activity sparked a few times, but that seems to be the small glitch. Vitals are all green." Sent.  
Hope Adrian will give them a bit more time. As well as a bit more time for me to get ready.

/David

I woke up in the garden - roses blooming all around. The walls surrounding the garden remind me of castle walls. The inner castle garden. The pitch darkness, moon barely shining over this ashen land. Guess that's it.

Let's hope I find you fast enough, before the connection breaks.

I stand up, look around. By the feel of it - the person she should be near. I looks towards the single entry to this garden, as I manage to see with this pale light.

Pacing though the arched gates comes a person. Dark hair with shimmering red gave her away.

"I felt you were coming." – Niko spoke as she came closer to me.

"There are complications. They took Elyon and she is here. Most likely supported by Goddess by now. As far as I've got to her, through Orin. Well, I've got Orin at home." – I said without any introductions, going straight to the point.

Niko came closer to me, then gave me a hug. A rare occurrence. She felt somehow small and fragile for a moment. Like she crumbled to bits and needs protection herself.

“Erick got his memories back about time here. I’m the evil witch again.” - She spoke, sounding tired.

I hugged Niko back, gently kissing her forehead. When this happens - she always gets devastated, then clings to me for support, which I always give.

“Oh dear. But I’ll be here for you.” - I replied.

“That won’t happen. Can I kill you?” - Niko said in a certain tone, yet it sounded lonely.

“That’s a harsh way to joke.” – I smirked.

“Tell me that you love me. Even just as a lie.” – She looked into my eyes. I smiled. If that’s to make you feel less of that pain, sure.

“I love you.” – I purred the words for her.

“Me too. I’m sorry.” - Her eyes glistened gold for a moment.

Sharp pain struck my head; I fell down, as Niko was backing away. The ground was cold, as if sucking me in. I kept looking at her, this pain paralysing my body. The whole ordeal was too sudden.

“Thank you for saying it. For you to move on - you must have your memories back. I’m sorry.” - She sounded broken to bits. But why would she?

I listened to her voice as I was drifting into the abyss of dreams. The pain of thousand needles sticking through each nerve - that’s what it was, once the memories flooded back. The times in Labyrinth, the other lives, the whole of the war, the pain, the sorrow... My eyes closed, with the last thing I’d see – a saddened look on her face.

Waking up was a tough part. Surprisingly the body was not feeling cold, yet the head felt stuffed with wet cotton, tremendously heavy. I felt that I was being transported, as my hair rustled in the wind. Eyes were hard to open, as the light felt too bright. It’s like the worst ever hangover one can attain. I squinted his eyes as they teared up.

I heard dragons grunt, and that is one thing I would recognise anywhere.

A dragon... How did I get on it?

“Ah, you’re awake. The Witch got us to send you to Goddess. We’re almost there.” – Voice of an elvish man was soothing. I used to live with them, so hearing something familiar is indeed soothing.

I sat up, looking at my chauffeur-companion. Typical elvish man under command of Goddess of Rivers, handsome, tall and capable of riding dragons. This elf had armour - meaning that he worked as a guard. The long silver-green hair and pointy ears, beautiful posture and



manners do their trick of making you feel calm even in the heaviest of storms. They just have that magical feel about them.

“These women are up to no good again.” – Flashed through my mind.

The endless lands of forests stretched to all sides. A great perk when riding a dragon - you get your dragon eye view of the area. Ah, the stunning beauty of land was greatly nostalgic to me. The vision soon was drawn to the mountain on the horizon. Flying closer to it I remembered the place. The mountain I climbed all over... The flying sky Labyrinth beyond that mountain and the nesting area of dragons further ahead.

I saw Mountain Sekka - the home place of the Goddess of Rivers.

We flew over it from the north-west to south-east side. The view soon stretched to see the floating islands. The picturesque sky waterfalls. I felt too familiar with the beauty of the beastly nature that roamed these lands.

I saw the perking castle on one of the flying islands – “Labyrinth of the Sky Castle Krator”...

It was the torture chamber, which I survived and got out of.

In that Labyrinth dying was not a way to make it all end. Suicide was not sufficient to escape. No matter how many times you died - you were brought back to life. Until one day I had received help from the Witch, just because I reminded her of her “King”. That was how Niko and I met. Yet the rest of the events blew somewhere absolutely else. Making me doubt her and what I thought of her.

We landed inside a forest on the mountain side. As the dragon sat down, folding his wings, grunting, the elf patted him and gave the fire berry. Finally we got off this beastly taxi ride.

Me and an Elvish soldier walked to the cave, which in itself was a hidden oasis in the forest. It has its own land and ecosystem inside, along with the main reason they're there - the house where the Goddess of Rivers lives.

Oasis was stunning in beauty and size. With its own river, forest, changing of fog and clouds, sunlight and warmth. In the midst of it all was the Goddesses home. Her house is a few floors tall, with a balcony on each floor, embroidered drapes hanging. On top of them - charms and trinkets.

Soldier accompanied me to the gates that lead to the house. At the gates he bowed, turned around and walked back. Not a word was dropped by this elvish man since the ride was done.

On the other hand, I knew where I was going, so a guide would not be that necessary.

Wide room. Drapes with sequins hanging down, acting as a wall. Two ladies sit inside this spacious room. Wearing long priestess gowns, belts tied around the waist embroidered with texts in ancient goddess language.

One of them stood out - wearing layered silk dresses under the layered priestess gown, shoulders bared, her chest peaking out. Youthful body accompanied by long black hair, smooth skin and sweet smile - such would charm anyone. Making whomever - fall into a well prepared trap. So anyone, no matter the resistance or cause, would cooperate.

She was the Goddess of Rivers.

“Long time no see, you old hag.” – I spat out, as I saw her.

Goddess laughed in return.

“I see you don’t change, little one.” – She gestured for me to sit on the cushions nearby them. Just as I did, a man appeared, bringing me a cup of tea, putting the cup on a wooden saucer next to me.

“Thank you, Naire.” – I said, then looked at the Goddess. – “So what now?” – I asked as I took a tea cup and breathed in the sweet and fresh-leaf aroma.

Goddess pointed out to one of the girls.

“She was found in the forest. One of yours?”

I took a better look at the girl. Although I saw her only via CCTV or the system navigation, I was indeed sure – it was Elyon.

“Yes. Thank you for taking great care of her.” – I downed my cup of tea. – “Any good plans or measures?”

Goddess stood up, crossed hands in front of her, pushing her breasts even closer, and began pacing around the room, having her gowns flow behind her, like a peacock’s tail.

“To great misfortune I cannot leave this place, although all this mess would be minimised if I could. I can’t really send my creatures to negotiate or even share the news, as silly people in Kingdoms and Empires long ago forgot who is the owner of lands here. Can’t blame idiots for being idiots. They don’t learn. The Witch will take care of the demon and his herd. They’ll go for the weapon. It has to be taken away to a safe place. Warriors are already piling up next to the borders of Three Saint Sages Mountains.” - Goddess shrugged, then shook her head and continued.

“As if taking over lands has ever solved a thing. King still fears creatures of old, but has no idea if they are still alive; Emperor is a blind jerk, having no real sight of any situations, his predecessors were way wiser. Greedy man. One greedy man is singing sweet nectar songs in their ears, to get a hold of knowledge and weapons. The biggest sin of greed is pushing this fool. He really doesn’t know what kind of mistake he is making. But blasphemy seems his thing here.” – Goddess stops near me. – “I assume they took her in,” - she looked at

Elyon, - "so, do I keep her here under protection, or do you have means to get her out of Their claws?"

This woman was always aware of all that was brewing in the lands. Having eyes and ears everywhere. She despised any high rules, she also disliked any new religious movements. She had her own domain and she ruled it well.

Although that might be funny - but I always found it absolutely fascinating that this old hag kept contact with the Witch. Even kept helping her, at times.

Seems like this time is no exception, with how I was picked and delivered here. They do things in their own ways. And then just keep each other posted about events.

I felt that things are changing fast. With Adrian going his foul ways in his reality and dragging Elyon into it, alongside Erick. What was his plan?

Even Kriss in the lab had no specific clue. He just mentioned that Adrian himself went into the system a few times. The rest is plain mystery. Even when Adrian gave specification orders to drugged Erick and Elyon - there was nobody else present in the room. So even the main research directing official knew nothing.

That was annoying to me - the lack of information on events.

But I was sure I could rescue both Erick and Elyon, if all was "perfect". The main issue there is the time it takes them to recover and act upon the cue in the lab. So they can escape. Dragging them out whilst they are in the system is impossible. They are connected straight to computers. So they both have to be in their senses to leave. Which is really hard.

I took a look at Elyon. From all I heard, she should have been more chatty and engaged in conversation.

Then my eyes glanced at the Goddess of Rivers.

"Guess old hag did her training of discipline on this girl. That's most likely the case." - I murmured under my breath.

Goddess keeps her eyes on me. Waiting for a reply. She knows full well that I'm good at coming up with ideas and exits when cornered or presented with a tough situation. This would be no exception. But the whole lot is a bit hm...

I finally turned to face Elyon.

"Elyon, I will be contacting you through Orin. Our dear Goddess must have trained you to perceive and contact. Right now your body, just like Ericks, is at the AIO Lab facilities, in the closed section of the project "Echo" department. I've got Orin with me. I'll keep her safe."

I got up and walked to the drapes at the entrance, then turned around to face the ladies.

My body began fading, becoming ghost-type see through. I looked Elyon in the eyes.

“No matter what you do, don’t trust Niko. It always ends with despair.”

I vanished in thin air. Leaving an empty tea cup behind.

“I already know that she is to be feared.” – Elyon replied to the traces of the feeling that were left behind from me.

Goddess shook her head, turned around and walked over to her seating spot. She wiped her face with her hand, as she thought to herself: “Little one, I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you from her.”

“So then... Until he's back in contact, we must be ready. You'll have work to accomplish.” - Goddess took a deep breath.

## Chapter 22 “More than one Battlefield”

/David

Orin's really concerned look surprised me, as I "returned". She took out a handkerchief to wipe blood from a corner of my mouth, once done, she went to turn the music off.

I checked the watch, from here - I was gone for no more than five-ten minutes.

"I ah, I walked around the flat... And uh, then you just suddenly had a seizure, with blood going out of your ears and mouth. I... I did as you asked and managed to slap you out of it."  
- Orin trembled slightly.

Indeed, witnessing a person going through the damn jump to this extent is indeed a painful sight.

"Can you get something to drink? I'm parched." – I asked as I tried to get up, but dizziness got me to stay seated.

Slight nod and Orin went to get some water. She checked the cabinet for cups and pulled one out. She poured the water from the container, then took it to the coffee table near the couch.

"How did it go?" – Her worries were written all over her face.

I took a few gulps, gathering thoughts that had to be said.

"Elyon is holding up well. In care of a decent person. She's safe." - I breathed out, closed my eyes. - "Then there's Niko, the Witch of darkness... I'm not feeling well, so would you be kind enough to be silent for the rest of the day?"

Orin softly replied "sure", as she saw how horrible my condition was.

After the memory regaining I feel like I look close to a ghost, with my body being the frail me, the broken vessel, the tainted thing... With all that history between us... Why'd she just...

I stared at a random point in the room, nothing in focus, nothing in particular. Having memories back has its harsh appeal, making you re-live the moments in an instant. For most memories that he had already and just obtained – all contradict one another. Mind was in a hectic battle.

I thought that I'm the same as Niko, but that was a lie. The rest of memories swirled back. I felt the tears fall down my cheeks, the blurred vision and the inner pain that was raging out. I

cried out, weeping with sorrow. I remembered the loved ones who I cared about and cherished - those who died. The consequences of my stupid mistakes.

“It’s all my fault...” – I mumbled.

## /Niko

We were walking through the dark. All five of us. Eventually getting through the outskirts of town Lativa. A fine known spot of great artisans, performers, creators, musicians and all that’s artistic within the large art spectrum. One thing makes this place even more special - here, inhabitants are mainly inhuman looking creatures.

Part animals, elves, dwarves, pixies, Ents, nymphs, some mixed race witches – all beastly, magical and part human, or inhuman, together in one place. Leaving anything as humans - the least expected thing here. Therefore in this town – deformity was viewed as beauty. In different parts of Kingdoms that was the peak of disgust, yet it all was naturally accepted here. No matter what it was or who it was.

Pathways were crafted from enchanted stones and rock wood. A magical stone type that glows at night. Architecture pleases the eyes with a vast selection of innovations, ideas and beauty. Mechanisms that used fungi as street lamps, houses made of enchanted ice, houses made in trees, houses made of stone, some out of metal, glass, everything varied in length, width, colours and décor.

Street musicians playing on medusa strings, coral instruments. Craftsmen chiselling out scenes on snake skin blocks, which are around metre by two in size. Painters with ink from gollumns, dancers with many tails, covered in fur. Magical place – Town Lativa.

Gabriel found a hotel to stay for a night, run by a Ware-cat. Ary went out shopping, I sat in my room, Gabriel with Yuki and Erick spent time together, going through memories, people and events. It is a lot to get on with from both sides, and as they were – they chatted in tavern, whilst drinking local magical brew.

They all were not at all happy with helping me. Not at all. But I cast a spell on all of them, a binding that makes them stick around with me in a certain proximity until we find what I seek for, or until something comes to kill me. They are unable to do it though, that’s not what they are capable of even with all that hate that they have in their essence.

They just went along with it, due to Ary sticking up for everyone. Although that sly demon material sure is a cunning being. He loathes me with pretence, but others buy it. Ary somehow can understand me, somehow he seems to feel sorry for me. As I already paid in full and even in excess for all I did. Well, that happened to me very-very long ago. Not that all my memories came back.. It’s still the issue of certain things missing. So I need to find it all. I just hope it won’t take too long. The other ladies, from Anne to Goddess and maybe,

maybe, Maddie... Maybe they're all worried. Although - Maddie, I don't really think so. She was the one to always go with whims beyond my comprehension. But then again. We sort of all did that.

### /Hare, Doppel, Cat

Bright lights shimmer in the distance, and the trio is lurking in shadows outside the Forbidden City.

"Do I have to remind that it was reckless to accept such a request from him? It is impossible to kill the Emperor with all this guard." – Cat looked at the other two.

"Better to kill, than be killed by that maniac." – Doppel had a tight grip on her blade.

"I'll go, clear up a path." – Said Hare and jumped off, leaving the other two behind.

Doppel looked at Cat: "We only have one chance at this."

Once taken away by Verin, the three escapees from St.Georges Labyrinth ended up in Oracles Sanctuary Cathedral.

Place was a castle in the ancient town of Ornir, near the very beginning of the Green River. Tall spikes on roofs, huge statues, massive rooms, endless halls. But the trio ended up in less merry place - the Chamber of Redemption, otherwise known as torture chamber.

All three were chained and hung from the ceiling. Not able to move, nor have a slim chance of escape.

Verin was pacing around them, as the lights from windows atop were shining through. The ceiling was decorated with mechanisms and chains, as they hung ten metres down, yet being two meters from the ground.

The three were here for a few weeks now. Besides being chained, they had close to no issues. The food was brought to them, the needed minerals embedded in chains were not letting them lose nourishments, nor pursue easy death.

"So who exactly are we waiting for, Verin?" - Cat's voice echoed around the walls.

Verin stopped near the altar. His slim fingers tracing the embedded blood jewels.

"The man of interest." - Verin replied.

It was the first time to have Verin call someone by such an expression. Which meant that the person was either of very high standing or someone very powerful.

The metallic skirr of the door had everyone pay attention to the guest.

Man in a suit, of stature, with tense air around him, walked over to Verin.

“Quite the catch you have here.” - His voice was cold, as he eyed the captives.

“You took your time, I see.” - Verin remarked.

The man only threw a short glance. Then walked over to Cat.

“You... And the resemblance...” - His eyes looked at Hare and Doppel. - “Remarkable resemblance.”

He touched Doppels cheek, then pulled her chin up.

“Yes, you look alike, yet look in the eyes differ.” - He broke the touch and walked back to Verin.

“And who exactly are you?” - Hare asked with a smirk.

“I think you've heard of me.” - Man turned to look at the scriptures on the altar. - “I'm the one to bring peace to these lands, as I help uniting them. But I'm not here to talk about myself. I'm here to talk about what you will do for me.”

“Pffff, ha-ha-ha!” - Hare laughed. - “What makes you think we'll do anything for you? Seen these chains?” - Hare wiggled, making chains clatter.

“If you value what's up in the future of a certain Witch, you'll do what I say.” - Man turned to face them. - “As I came to know, if I kill you three - I will inflict a lot of pain to Her. As all of you are - part of her.”

All three looked unfazed by the words. Cat let out a snort.

“You sure seem to know some weird crap.” - Cat said.

“Worthy information, actually.” - Man casually replied.

“So, how about you tell us your glorious plan, m, Adrian?” - Hare laughed, his eyes glimmering with insanity.

Verin was surprised at Hares' words.

"He knows this man?" - Flew in Verins mind.- "So this is Adrian... Not Count Leon of the Kingdom..."

Meanwhile Adrian said that the goal is to get rid of the Emperor. The old man has days to live anyway. So moving the succession of the Ascension of the new Emperor is the goal. If



three agree to kill the Emperor, Adrian is to spare them.

Then Adrian left, saying he had urgent matters to tend to. Verin also left.

Three days later Verin came back. After putting the three down, taking off shackles and walking them to his private quarters, Verin spoke freely.

Cat checked the bookshelf, Doppel sat on a chair, rubbing the ankles, Hare leaned on the table after shortly scanning with eyes the whole room.

“I had my doubts, but it appears that the man is, as you said, Hare.” - Verin looked Hare in the eyes. The latter just smiled.

“After considerations, I decided to go on with his proposal of assassination of Emperor.” - Verin pulled out a small leather pouch. - “This has to be delivered to the one who'll ascend the throne. He is the rightful owner of this relic.”

Verin handed the pouch to Hare.

“I assume you know everything already. Including the required recipient.”

Hare took the pouch, then stuffed it in his pocket.

“I sure do.” - He curtly replied.

Surrounded by the darkness, lurking outside the top secure place. Hare glanced up at the sky. Just knowing that there are two more trained weirdos did not quite put him at ease. He placed his right hand on his heart - the heartbeat. Alive. He smirked. "She too is alive."

## /Adrian

The phone call rattled the air, making me deeply displeased due to lack of sleep as is. Though I switched the darn button to “Answer call”.

“Seriously? How many hours per day do you sleep?” – Merins voice rang loudly in my ears. As usual, she's loud. Too loud.

“Goodness gracious, you never learn! You better get yourself well dressed, hopefully, presentable at least. We've got board members coming in today. I couldn't postpone the meeting any longer. So you better deal with it.” – Merin grunted. - “Adrian, I'll make your life a living hell, if you fail to make them believe in whatever bullshit you'll pull this time. For they, buffoon sand bag farts, are majorly unhappy, to say the least. It's 11 in the morning now, so

be ready by 1.30pm, dear husband.”

With this entire ruckus spewed out – call ended, leaving me with hurting eyes, pale look and headache.

“ Oh how I hate this bitch...” - I breathed out, turning around to get another hour of sleep.

### /Hare, Doppel, Cat

Halls reek of disinfection chemicals – nose bleeding greeting of the Forbidden City. All to keep high priority places surgically clean. All these precautions are due to other types of chemicals and viruses used on site, as well as bacteria types and quirky contaminations.

Due to technological advancement, as well as any sort of emergency, it is highly recommended to keep face masks on, which became a norm here. Today again there was a virus outbreak in the east lab. Due to this - the whole east wing was sealed off by a barrier, keeping everyone quarantined until further notice.

Such “events” are normal for those who live here, work here and waste their lives being a lab rat to scientists that rule over the majority of this city.

Emperor's quarters are in the south-west, covering a quarter of the area with massive gardens and a huge mansion. But all of it, like most of high-class priority objects, are protected by a barrier, not allowing any outside interference with ecosystem that is kept inside.

Doppel and the other two bribed the guards of one of the “underground gates” that lead to the mansion. In needed time both guards walked away, jacking the system to not notice anything within next 10-15 minutes, keeping everything “protected”, yet leaving the entry up for the Trio to sneak in.

Spotless hall, small of detergents and alcohol based cleaning products was heavy. Cat had to cover up nose with thick cloth above his mask – it was unbearable. Soon enough they reached the door that led to the garden, used by mansion staff.

Change of aroma was pleasing. All three took masks off to breathe the scent of flowers and mown grass.

Night time was quite bright in Forbidden City, but here it was dark. No lights – just stars shimmering above.

Hare dashed off to check the area – clean. Trio then moved in, towards the far out conservatory, where the Emperor tended to his writings. Rumours had it that he preferred to be alone there, with nobody bothering him at all, unless he came out first. All three silently sneaked in, closing the glass door behind them.

“You’re late.” – Voice with steel strength, spoken from inside the conservatory, having the three assassins feel confused.

“I knew you were coming,” - Voice continued, - “May I guess: dear friend of mine asked for my death, but before you’ll harvest my soul, I want to shed light on things you’ll need in near future.”

The Emperor lit a candle near him - letting the trio see the man clearly. Old age was his definition. He was thin, yet maintained his muscles. Wrinkles on hands and face. He wore his royal robe. Grey eyes - the mark of the Emperor's bloodline, stared into intruders.

“He asked you to “assassinate” me. That’s just like him. Making sure he’ll get what he’s after.” – The Emperor lit up tobacco in his pipe from the candle fire, smoking it pleasantly.

“Your excellency, you knew we were coming?” - Doppel spoke up.

The man just puffed out smoke, like a dragon, then turned his glance towards Doppel.

“Still keeping up manners, even though you’re here to kill me? Thank you for that. Take a seat, you three lost lambs. What you’ll get to know will be needed by someone close to you dearly.”

The Emperor's voice was implying power. Each word was spoken in a strong manner, so much so that it compelled the trio to obey. Doppel, Cat and Hare exchanged looks. The three sat on the chairs opposite the Emperor.

“So, we’ll be messengers to Niko. That’s what you’re saying?” – Hare raised his brow, smirking.

“Yes.” – Emperor puffed smoke.

“What is the message?” – Cat asked.

“You’re hired by Adrian. Is that right?” – The Emperor eyed them.

Doppel nodded. Cat pressed lips.

“Ha-ha! Might add that Oracle is in this.” - Hare let out a short laugh.

The Emperor nodded.

“I see.” - The emperor's grey eyes looked down, onto notes he made on parchment.

“Adrian is in this for technology blueprints, information and resources. Although during my first encounter with him I sat in awe listening to his stories about "parallels".

Only later did I get information about the occurrence in Kingdom Sopdar long ago. King Leon had once disappeared for years, only to later come back not a day older, with endless stories. Of land which had no magic, neither creatures of old. Only humans. He spoke of many wonders. Yet it was hard for the Kingdom - by now with a new King, new rule. Then the old King comes back - that causes many problems.”

The Emperor puffs his smokes, as he continues the story.

“As time passed, a young boy came to appear and spend time with Kings. He was learning about customs and knowledge the kingdom built. Then he'd vanish to reappear decades later, once again to gain knowledge.

Mentions in historical documents about him were once a century, if not more, yet each described that boy did not age.

during the wars - nothing of him was mentioned. Our curiosity deepened once we learned of him. So we dug deeper.”

The Emperor checked on the trio, to make sure they're invested in this, listening attentively. Hare was all ears, even though he did not let it look like it. Cat, just like Doppel, was confused.

“Thousands of years ago, when we still had prime species walking the earth, ancestors came to the discovery of the "Fifth Dimension". Which judging by scriptures - lead them to great losses. Much was said about Mad King.

Apparently a descendant of a family which for eons was a sideline historian for the planet.

They were the peaceful bastion of Knowledge and History. They were known as "Observers" who'd never to be touched by any and all.

Yet their descendant, Mad King, acquainted with the Witch, that supposedly slipped through from Fifth Dimension. She was always beside the King. Also, there were mentions of Demon and Rose.

Nobody knows of the Witch or Rose, of their origin or their destination. History was messed with, to erase all what was recorded of them.”

The Emperor shook his head, as he felt the needed wish to get some kind of revenge on Adrian, but there could be nothing attained now.

“Adrian is seeking for the impossible - origin of his teachers. I assume it could be that Witch or Rose, yet he never told me.

He's eagerly seeking for that erased part of history. Thinking that our technology along with the power of this planet can unravel his mysteries.”

The Emperor puffed smoke, pipe at his lips, as he smiled.

“My ancestors mentioned that they've met that Witch. They all spoke of meeting with tenderness. I've in a way met her too.

The First Emperor, who survived the Great Famine, led a diary. This diary is only revealed and passed down to Emperors. So now you three are aware of its existence too.

I have read it. The First Emperor spoke of his love for Rose, Kings Rose. He tried to take away Rose, but was faced with a made-up prophecy of Roses never ending love for King. And it really seemed - never ending.

Rose was consumed with insanity upon King's death. The Emperor in anger took it to kill the Witch, as he knew of her love for King. Yet he only learned of the Witch being next to King long before Rose.

He saw how she endlessly sacrificed herself for her King, obeying all requests and orders, each whim - she was one to make it all. But once Rose showed up, taking King away, she felt her soul burn from agony of having the loved one being pulled from her.

Yet she never once made anything or did anything to hurt her King. For this loyal endless love, each Emperor conjured sympathy towards the Witch.

Hold onto this information, as for when the time comes - you know how it will help."

The Emperor tapped his pipe, then gestured to the Hare with hand. This gesture was known to all high rank assassins - "Glorious death." The Emperor closed eyes.

"For agonising love." - He breathed out with a smile, as Hare pierced daggers deep through his heart.

"Rest in the glory of death." - Murmured Hare, pulling daggers out.

"What is really going on in this world?" - Doppel eyed Cat.

"We're at war." - Coldly replied Hare. - "We're at war."

## Chapter 23 “The Sadness of every Matter”

/Niko

Bird tweeting is joyous, sun is shining bright, wind is caressing skin softly. Yet the sour faces of the gentlemen are annoying to boot.

I kept my hands in my pockets, as I walked. Knight walked beside Erick at all times, just like Yuki did. Both were pressured about recovering their Rose, as well as keeping him safe. Ary lead way.

Ary sometimes would be there to join me, without any words, to walk beside me. There was the sense of the pain and camaraderie that was only shared in this miniscule way we could. Others were not part of it.

“Your brother is up to some really interesting things.” - I let out quietly, so others would not hear, as we were going through the woods.

“I’m not even surprised that you know of him and what he does.” - Ary said dryly.

“Even though you are like that, he might be interested in, maybe, getting to know you again.” - I said.

Ary gave me a glance.

“As much as my brother Verin is a pompous brat, he’d not ever dare speak to me. After the blessings we’ve got.” - Ary sighed.

“I’m sure you two have way more in common by now, that the two had changed after so much. He’s not such a goody two-shoes priest, and you’re no longer that much of a notorious demon.” - I smiled.

“We’ve had our falls. So did you and others.” - Ary let out tiredly. - “I’m not sure that this whole trip will really help you. It might do just the opposite. But that’s your choice. Ehh...” - Ary cut the conversation with this, then walked to the front, resuming the guide role.

Others had shared their stories among themselves to certain points, but now is now, and then is then.

Destination we keep our sights on is already half a day away. It takes us time to get there.

Horseback riding was quite the moment there. Yuki and Erick were not really fond of it, as they were not happy with these horses. Unique breed to local lands, half horse – half draconian, so, scales atop this pretty thing were off putting to some, but they were one of the fastest creatures to ride.

I enjoyed for a moment the way how Ary was atop one of these horses. He had not been out of the Castle along with others for a long while. They sort of cursed me for it, but somehow, it was not my curse that bound them to that land. It was someone else. And he rode with them now as the person they longed for the most. Though, he, Erick, would not remember that

curse even if I poked my magic at him. It was a curse that stemmed from the implements of his pledge to King. Eh.

How sad it is, to remember some parts, but not having ones that I need. I did have a small moment of this remnant of memory cross me, once I saw Ary and Gabriel riding. A small flash from the times of war.

They were going away on these beasts, leaving me struggling on the field. Where dead bodies were piled and the burned flesh was all I could smell. Blood was covering me, blood was oozing out of me and it was pain and hollow mystery that had me tight in a grip, as I wailed in cries.

The moment we took the ship to cross river Nila was quite the show. Gabriel, although the typical heavy knight, he forgot how the rocking feels on the waves, so he was puking his guts out. Yuki was in the same situation, Erick managed to hold it out, although he was quite sick every so often, but due to watching others feeling sick. Maybe the smell of fish oil was also triggering for them.

Me and Ary had another moment of chat, as brief as it was, as we stood both in the far corner of the vessel.

“You’ve still managed to come back.” - He let out. - “And you let that thing let us go.”

“It was not my doing that you were there.” - I replied.

“Lies.” - He said without looking at me.

“Ary,” - I said, - “Look me in the eyes.”

He turned for a bit, sending daggers with his look.

“It was not my doing.” - I repeated.

He looked down, as if puzzled.

“Not me.” - I repeated myself.

“But how?” - He let out quietly.

“There’s things that were the chain on the Rose, there’s chains on you and I. But all of them differ.” - I said tiredly. - “He was special to each of us in own way. Same as the curse he planted on us.”

Ary gave me another glance. Then gave a short nod.

“I see. So it was not you.” - He said.

I turned and started walking the other way.

“Niko, I’m not going to be sorry. But you better...” - Aru turned to me.

“I know.” - I turned to him. - “I know as much as you do. And as I pledged - I never would lie to you. Never did.”

Ary looked at me, pressing his lips, then turning away.

“You... Always sacrifice yourself for him. Eternally did, eternally keeping at it.” - He let out.

“That’s how much...” - I muttered.

“That’s how much you love him.” - Ary sighed. - “I won’t watch it any more. There, you’ll be alone. Not even I will be witness to this kind of bond and sorrow.”

Once we were across the river, we resumed the walk on foot. As the next part of this path - nas no roads leading to it. None which are paved.

/Adrian

I kept fiddling with my tie.

“Can you just bloody get in?!” – I lost my temper, roaring – “Double Windsor my ass!”

I took off the tie, threw it aside, then unbuttoned the top of my shirt.

Bitter aftertaste left by the new coffee I had barely ten minutes ago was disturbing. Having slept long after parallel diving had its effects. Thus getting ready right now was getting purely irritating.

This board member meeting was absolutely uncalled for. I was pushing Merin to postpone this as far as it could go. So much for her help there.

The original plan for the day really consisted of sleeping in, then being in the lab for the rest of the day.

But knowing that Merin would be one to meet board members and as her shit goes - she'd make things worse, as she's no clue what to give them to shut them up.

I did my best to keep my tantrum at bay and deal with this issue at hand.

“Shit, I have to notify Kriss about it.” – I let out, as I got the phone in my hand. Right as I was about to click on Kriss' name, the call from Merin appeared before it could happen.

“On my way! For god's sake!” – I answered, then cut the call and threw the phone on the bed.

Car was roaring like a beast, as it was on the highway driving towards headquarters. I was finally suited up, with Double Windsor tied, sleek and classy - all ready to meet the pompous board members, who have the oblivious perception that they own the world.

“Call lab” – I spoke to an automated system installed in the car. Sound of beeping and ringing began, few seconds later – someone answered.

“Ah, you're finally calling, Sir. I was getting concerned.” - He let out straight up.

“Kriss, get the docs ready. Merin right now is the pain in the rear. So you will have to proceed with tests by yourself for now. I'll get to the lab once I'm done.” - I let out, as I sped up towards HQ.

“Alright, shall be on with it then. Oh and... Good luck, Sir.” - Kriss was trying to be supportive, I presume.

“Thanks, that'll be needed.” - I replied, with my whole self feeling tired, such sense growing



by the minute.

Call gets cut off.

I take a breath. Highway was surely crowded today, as I got stuck in a traffic jam right after having the ride going fast for a moment there. But maybe that was for the best.

## /Elyon

Mountain air and mist that covered the land below was truly magical. Sounds of waterfalls, rustling of leaves and sometimes the growl of dragon flying by. I was walking downhill to greet the herbalist, who wishes for Goddesses assistance. I breathed deeply to capture the freshness of air in my lungs.

From the moment I appeared in this forest until now – a lot of time has passed. I got to mature, discover new things, and learn much from Goddess herself and her subordinates. Taste of the food here is quite “out of this world” experience. Through these new experiences I gasped my new self.

Discovering things which are not what they seem. Also discovering that Goddess has a sort of obsession of keeping close watch over “Witch”. Besides the Goddess, nobody knows who the Witch is.

It got to the point where I realised that perhaps there is more to this “Witch”, more to secrets that Goddess keeps, more to the legends that are told.

I knew that Orin was at David's place. Yet knowing that, whilst sharing with Orin experiences which I went through here seemed very difficult. For Orin time was going slower, way-way slower than here. To her it was minuscule minutes, to me it felt like slow weeks to months passing. And with the time warped in the Goddesses place - I could not truly tell how much time really passed.

Sun shone through tree tops, its light reaching earth. Grass shimmering in morning dew. Each step I took was light, floating even - I learned to move like a river. At the foot of the mountain base I met an old Elvish man - the herbalist from town Sier.

I bowed as I approached the man, as it was required of me, for I was now one of the Goddesses priestesses. Being under Goddesses wing meant its duties and responsibilities. This time around - helping man to get his wishes told to the Goddess and asking for blessings.

“Darling,” - Goddess walked into my room, - “I must ask of you to get ready. You have a few

hours to prepare.”

I gave a short nod, got up and started preparing items I needed to be along with me on my journey. One that was planned with the Goddess herself, but one that I had to execute alone.

/Kriss

I'm really worried about this next step in research. Having all subjects receive pain stimulants with a new type of drug that Adrian has developed, made my skin crawl.

Knowing that it would kill all the present subjects - made me stress out even more. Yet there was no way that Adrian would change his mind.

Stress was bursting over the top horribly. My palms are sweating, like the rest of my body, the mind is half hearing white noise and the pressure makes it boil like the kettle with bad wiring that just can't stop boiling.

I tried a bit, then some more... Finally an idea showed up. With so little time to think I called David.

“Hey! He pushed for a new drug to go in. This one actually kills after taking a few minutes. We don't have time.”

“Don't worry, it'll be taken care of. Somehow.” - David seemed exhausted, like his mind is also someplace else, but it's not a worry that has him, it's something else.

I let out a sigh.

“I'm not sure what I can do.” - I say.

“Neither do I.” - He replied and cut off.

The heck was this about? Do I have more people to worry about or actually... Oh god.

I have to pull the time. I must think of something... Something... The shelf unit with a fridge caught my eye - the liquid that stood there was less harmless, kind of like a vitamin booster, which had the same look as the drug which Adrian wants to administer.

Well, switching the two could give us some more time. So, let's get cracking before the angry master shows up.

/Adrian

I met Merin in the hall right in front of the meeting room doors.

The meeting room that is right now hosting the pompous men and women. Waiting for something new that will allow them to control people even more. Monitor every last bit of their souls.

AIO was never about prosperity for them or the ones that use it. It always came down to business at the end of the day.

No matter the means used, people were fed the lies of this world's beauty, prosperity, generousness and so much more. All to navigate each step they made, get rid of troublemakers, spoon-feed the needed information through the media.

Indeed, I was the science man who built this nature filled reserve and motivated people to work, with their thoughts filled with greatness and righteous beauty propaganda.

Right now the pompous bureaucrats must taste their own medicine, which they produce and push out daily – endless lies.

/Niko

Town Mavur greeted all travellers with two giant statues. They were ancestor-built mechanisms that froze and turned to stone. The two giants were tall and bulky, making you feel safe. It's like they waited for you to return home, so they can protect you.

Mavur, if looked at it from above, reminded of a giant octopus spreading its streets all around, keeping its great body always firm and beautiful. Once passing this town and heading the day's journey south - there lied the destination.

A place which we sought for. It was empty for most part. Guarded by monstrous creatures that were made and locked within vicinity to protect the place at all costs from anyone that'd dare to mess with it. All who knew about this cursed land - avoided it. Passing around it for tens of kilometres, being afraid of the darkness that lured there.

But for those who don't know: it looked like a castle in the middle of a gloomy forest, built by an unknown man, for unknown reason, with unknown magic protecting it.

Path that leads towards the castle was grown over with tall grass. It was all the harder for the matter that it was getting dark.

"We should stay the night in a tavern. Then during the day we'll be on our way again." – Gabriel proposed.

Ary kept his hands in sleeves, just like he does most of the time, he eyed everyone as he turned around. Erick looked exhausted. His body barely kept up with everyone else, with all the walking and feet dragging, it was hard on him. He was not like before, and by the look that Erick gave, he regretted not having the power he once had, surely if he'd recovered it, he would probably have been able to fight back. Yuki held Eric's hand, feeling that his friend needed it to keep on going.

"I agree with Knight." – Ary spoke. – "Some things must be prepared in order to get inside that place. We shall stay the night in the nearby Merchant Union."

With the way they all were - I had no option, but to agree with their proposal. I clearly saw the suffering of Erick, but due to some grudges, even the "love" I developed for him was no longer holding me or him from being who we are.

We found a nice place to stay right near the forest. The Merchant Union lands are like a scarf that leads to river Lea, hosting many taverns, markets and odd sorts of things.

Place was known for all kinds of merchandise. You could buy the smuggled technology from the Forbidden City, as well as the relics raided from inside the Three Saint Sages mountain to dragon eggs from near Sky Castle.

We've booked the rooms, leaving me alone with myself, just like it always was. This time there was something different.

Usually when alone there was nothing unusual, but this time I had strange pain throughout my whole body, way more intense than previously - leaving me sitting on the corner of a bed, hands clasping my heart, gasping for air.

This pain was always with me, usually not as bad, so I could just bear with it. Not this time, it seemed.

Strange feeling was overwhelming me. Head felt like it was splitting in half from the pain. Suddenly a little oddity sparked my interest – in the corner of her room, near the window, someone stood. By the features I could make out it was a young man with white hair, crown gleaming in moonlight. So, so dear and close to me... So ah!  
I clung to my own heart, as pain made me squirm like a beaten pup. Then the sense of fear got me for some reason.  
My heart felt like it dropped and stopped for a moment there. Few seconds later, just as I mustered myself to take a better look – the shadow was gone.

"No, it can't be you..." – I muttered.

A premonition I felt - that this night held much more to it than any other night.

## /Elyon

"The dragon will take you to the castle in Ruins. Soon you'll meet a friend of yours. Be prepared. You'll know what to do." – The Goddess was sending me off, while I was getting on a dragon. – "Your journey will not take long, but adventures surely are great. Take care."

Goddess bowed to me, as the blessing she gave me prior is one that holds in respect. I gave a nod, then got the handles. Dragon gave a grunt, then he set off into the night sky. The scenery of forest becoming small, then disappearing under, with nothing but an endless sea of stars above me, guiding me to the needed quest I must accomplish.

## /Hare, Doppel, Cat

Doppel and Cat held bags, each containing research and blueprints which are conducted in the Forbidden City. The two had to drop off the bags in the designated area, which they negotiated with Adrian.

Getting from the Forbidden City to the place that's called Mavur, was a menace. It was hard. And due to lack of funds that were with us, as well as pressing for the money, nothing could be sorted out fast with some fast money made. No time for that. That mad man was waiting for his things.

After such a long trip to Mavur, with lack of food, with great exhaustion - we were barely functioning, yet they were close to our destination.

"Something feels off." - Hare muttered, as a strange pain in heart jolted him.

## /Niko

Early morning brought along Ary. He was the one who still dared to come and wake up the most hated person right now – me.

As always – three knocks on the door, then he would walk in, in his particular way. He stood next to my bed and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Wake up. We must get ready to be on our way." – His voice is beautifully charming.

I turned around, dragged my feet aside to hang from the bed, as I sat up. I looked at the floor, then onto the spot where yesterday I saw the shadow.

"You're even paler than before. No matter how much pain you're in - seeing you this miserable makes me pity you."

Ary once more put his hand on my shoulder. I raised my face, looking into his eyes.

"Don't you dare tell them about it." - I let out, my own voice hoarse.

Something was off and I coughed, covering my mouth with my hand, then as I pulled it away to look – there it was - blood.

"I'm fine." – I let out, taking short breaths. - "I'll get ready now, so you can go wake up others."

"Ehh... Just how long will you last like this? King would be really sad if he saw you right now." – Ary purred, then decided to do something he did not dare for many centuries.

He hugged me, patting my head softly.

“And here I thought I’d leave you in your pit.” - Ary let out. - “Don’t tell them about this.”

He pulled back, looking me in the eyes.

“Hikaru still pains you this much, haunting you to the death, hm?” - He purred, with a smirk spreading on his face. Here we go, the devilish side to his sympathy.

I slapped him off of me.

“Don’t you dare speak his name and sully it with your voice.” - I angrily replied, as my throat hurt speaking.

Ary let out a giggle, then got up and left the room.

I felt the tears fill in, blurring my vision, then streaming silently down my face.

“How dare he say his name...” - I let out.

After I got myself pulled together, I got out and saw them all waiting.

Ary coldly gestured for us to continue our trip.

Just seeing them, just hearing him call the precious name of my Light... How dare he... The inner anger seemed to fuel me now. Letting me feel less of the pain for a moment.

Our destination awaits us.

## Chapter 24 “No longer in Focus”

/Niko

The entrance to this forsaken place was guarded by scale covered ash ghouls. All this menace was left for Ary to deal with, well, enough killed for us to make way to get in. For more than one reason Ary was deeply involved in this mess. Using his dark magic Ary managed to get all of us inside the ruined castle safely.

Halls were long and dark, light was a luxury here, since all that was made to have light was broken a long time ago. Moon lizards were roaming around halls, with their claws scratching walls and ceiling as they moved around.

The sudden cracking sound of the burning furnace and weeping in pain was audible. It felt like outside had become a sort of menacing purgatory. The sound of ghouls, screeching in agony, as they burned alive.

“That’s a dragon. Calm down.” – Gabriel said.

“What’s a dragon doing here?” – Asked Yuki.

“Occasionally these creatures migrate further from Sky Garden. Perhaps this one got fascinated by all the murky ghouls here and decided to have fun by burning them.” – Ary kept on walking as he spoke, making us keep up with his pace.

These halls had a lot of doors to them. Different in size, texture and what they were made of. Seemed in a way like walking through cabinets which hold precious memories, or knowledge, perhaps even treasures of old. Chambers with secrets would be also close to describing them.

Something pulled me to stop near one door. It called out to me in some mysterious way, as if opening the door would solve something really important.

The moment I touched the doorknob I was swept away to see the street full of people in fancy clothes. Hearing the buzzing of buses and beeping of cars. Cabs were eating up then spitting out different people. Shops with dazzling collections, ladies with fragrant perfumes, men in tailored suits, street food, chatter, laughter and memories of living here took over her like a wave.

Before my eyes was Oxford Street. A young man, white hair, stripy shirt, jeans, knee high boots, feminine features, walked up to me.

“Hey!” – He said, but I was too surprised by the change of environment to reply. - “Oh, you are now thinking a lot, I see.” – He continued. - “By the way,” - he grabbed my hand, - “it’s

good to see you again!”

This guy pulled me along with him, walking down towards Piccadilly Circus.

“How the hell?” – I let out.

“Am I alive? Or would you say it’s not real? Don’t think too hard yet. I’ll get you there.” - He smiled.

We walked into the Quadrant Arcade passage. He released my hand, then gripped me by the shirt neck and smashed me against the wall, holding me there, pressing on my chest.

“It’s as fucking real as it were back in Roseam, baby.” – With free hand he slapped me across the face, then released the grip.

Standing next to me, looking at me, as I was speechless.

“And you know what? This might be your preparation towards the death parade.” - He smirked.

“Hik...” - I almost said his name, but in an instant was pulled back into the hall, appearing to where Ary and others were, walking a few steps ahead of me.

I touched my cheek - it was burning from the harsh slap, my chest hurting from the hit. Head spinning, heart racing like a machine gun, my thoughts are getting fuzzy, everything messed up.

How is he alive? How is this possible?

Were the only questions right now.

## /Elyon

I sat on a dragon, as he burned ghouls that surrounded the castle. Perhaps it was harsh, as fire damaged a good part of the walls that were left from previous damage, garden and pillars, but measures were required.

I sensed that my friend was inside. I made a dragon smash wall, so I would get into the castle.

Dragon tail swung hard, smashing part of the castle wall – entrance cleared.

“Um, Elyon?” – Orins voice appeared in my head, - “Some guy called from the Lab. Said that you and Erick are endangered.”

“We’ll do our best to sort it out from this side.” – I replied back.

Dark halls were annoying, the sound of scratching from lizards that hectically ran from sighting the dragon were equally frustrating. Dragon began pushing himself inside the halls. Damaging walls and ceiling as he squeezed further in, but that does help clear a way from menacing little rats or lizards. Also having a dragon by my side gave me advantage at killing any dangerous beings, or having escape in case of emergency.

Such was the plan and such was the needed execution.



## /Niko

“This way.” – Ary opened the door revealing the staircase that was leading downstairs. Just as Ary was about to enter, Gabriel pulled him back and stepped up, taking the lead. He, as a knight, is knowledgeable about how to be a shield to protect, as Ary is usually the damaging force.

Everything was covered in mould, moss, it's wet and cold down there. Decaying fungi exhibited a harsh smell. Each step we made, as we stepped on the stairs made a sopping sound, as the dirt and goo of decaying lizards stuck to boots.

As we descended further down - walls became covered with rust, making it seem like blood stuck to everything around.

I walked behind all of them, clenching my fist, nails pressing hard into my skin... I needed some reassurance of “here and now”. Like a pinch - that signified reality. The pain which was self-made, helped me cope with a burning cheek and pain over my chest. That flash “back and forth” took me by surprise.

“Are you scared?” – I heard a voice, making me stop.

Others went on, as they seemed not to hear it. I felt dizzy, my hand reached for the wall, trying to grab onto it, but instead it was held by the white haired man.

Everything got swooped again, and the next thing I saw was being in Ericks conservatory, with this man holding my hand. My heart sank, making me feel slight fear, like a rabbit cornered by the fox.

“Oh come on! Admit it! You clearly love seeing me again!” – He squeezed my hand tight, bringing pain to me; then got in my face. – “Seriously, just say that you’re happy!”

His arrogant and selfish nature, smile that gave chills, his endless beauty and eyes that captured my soul - were always treasured in my heart. I barely managed to open my mouth to say something, but he threw off my hand, which he held, then began pacing around.

“Oh baby, what’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?”

“H-how are you alive?” – I kept my eyes on him.

He turned around on his heels, grabbed a vase from the tea table next to him and sent the vase flying against the wall, making it shatter in pieces.

“That’s all you’re worried about?!” – He shouted. – “What’s got into you? You’re like a throw rug! Geez.”

“Hikaru, I...” - my voice is wavering, weakening.

“Shut up!” – He got in my face again.

He grabbed my hair, pulling them back, bringing my face upwards. His face being an inch away from mine.

“You know, I really missed you.” – He licked my lips as he looked in my eyes. – “Why did you not look for me, you twat?” – He suddenly bit my lip, pulling on it. The bite left me bleeding. He threw me onto a chair.

“I saw how you died! There was no way to...” - I muttered as blood oozed from my lip. “Shut it!” – Hikaru shouted. – “You bloody idiot, did you forget who you are? Perhaps with all these idiots buzzing around you, you might have gone ahead and started to believe in lies you’ve made.”

Hikaru looked at me, like he’s scolding me for mischief, with the consequence of severe punishment. My eyes darted to random points on the floor, unable to look him in the eyes, tears swelling up, heart bumping insanely, air so much harder to breathe. He did that often, when we were together, as he’d throw antics in anger, if things would not go his way. I hated it, yet the things he did after - I couldn’t hate him no matter what.

“I see... Toy forgot her master, huh?” – He crouched next to me, his slim fingers raising my chin up to look at him. - “You are my toy, my trash. Remember?” – He purred out these words with the warmest smile on his face.

I mustered strength to get up from my chair and move away from him, even if it were a few steps.

“You were meant to stay dead!” – I managed to get my voice back again, but it felt soar. – “I never forgot you! How dare you blame me?”

“How dare I?” – Hikaru cut in, having a surprised look. – “Do you even hear yourself? You got some guts to talk back to me now?”

Tears were rolling down my cheeks, my body trembling; I knew full well what he was like. Hikaru stepped closer, hugging me by my waist, pressing me tightly to his body with one hand, with the other hand he wiped my tears away. With his finger, wet and salty from tears, he pressed hard onto the wound on my lip. I flinched, trying to push him away, but he was stronger.

“It hurts.” – I whined.

“Oh I know. And it will hurt more. Way more than you can imagine.” – He purred out words, as he licked my blood off his finger.

In an instant I was back on the staircase, with Ary, Gabriel, Erick and Yuki right where they were when I got swooped again.

My body was trembling, blood oozing from my lip, hands shaking, eyes darting from one spot to another, thoughts flipping back and forth.

What the hell is wrong with me? I thought to myself, as I touched my bitten lip.

- He really is back... - I muttered aloud.

From that moment on, as I followed the party, my mind was away with thoughts rambling about one matter – figuring out how exactly Mad King got back.

## /David

Outside weather seemed to be a great support for today – bright, warm, breezy. Orin already prepared breakfast along with two cups of brewed ground coffee that she found in the cupboards of this apartment.

She walked into my room, shaking my body to wake me up. I lazily turned around, now facing Orin instead of the pillow. Seeing her made me exhale deeply, then nod that I'm awake, so she'd leave the room, for me to be able to get dressed.

As we sat at the bar stand in kitchen, Orin spoke:

“Elyon said that she'll take care of things on her side, but I am still worried.”

I swallowed the last of my food on the plate.

“She'll be fine. She has some help from the dear old Goddess of Rivers.” – I pulled the coffee cup closer, breathing in the sweet aroma.

“But will she really?” – Orin held her cup in her hands.

I took a look at this damsel, who stared inside of her coffee cup, seeking some reassurance there, but reality is not as easy as a cup of coffee.

“Right now there is not much we can do.” – I drank half my cup. – “We can't break into the lab, nor can I go back into that realm for long. My body just won't last,” – I gazed at her, – “and you're unskilled for going in there. So risking it all would not be wise.”

Orin sat silently, head going through ideas, but none ever so appealing. I looked outside the window. I was at a loss. There was really nothing I could do right now.

The only possible guess I had was to go to Nikos house. Perhaps I could find something of use in there, maybe even inspiration towards the idea that could help.

Even though I convinced Orin that all will be peachy, I am absolutely clueless as to where to begin.

After Kriss called - it really happened less than an hour ago, yet the exhaustion from travel in the parallels haunts for days. I knew I had some time. So maybe, just maybe the damn Witch had left some clue.

## /Hare, Doppel, Cat

“Town looks amazing!” – Cat happily exclaimed. – “Awh, so much food everywhere! I want to eat! Let’s go grab some food, pretty please?”

Doppels stomach growled, requesting food, as it was empty for far too long. Cat looked at her surprised at Doppel making such a feral sound.

“Yeah, food would be good.” – She said as she blushed.

Nice old tavern greeted us with a mouth-watering menu, from which we selected “Days specials” and sat waiting for food to be brought.

As we got seats on a terrace, enjoying the aroma of flowers, our food was brought. Dishes with well-done meat, side dishes and two large glasses of ale. It’s been a few good days since we enjoyed a meal, so having this food made us feel like they were having a feast.

Filling up the empty stomachs was great. The two were relaxing, as they drank ale.

“A little left for this job – just give this entire paper load to Adrian and we’re free.” – Cat lazily stretched.

“I’m still perplexed about that Witch story and the fact about Adrian being quite some centuries old, not to mention that he has this obsession of seeking his “someone”.” – Doppel surveyed the street, then gave Cat a look, who raised his eyebrow.

“Was it not some fairy tale?” – He ruffled his hair.

“I would have thought that, but I’ve heard stories about “boy in Kingdom” before, so I’m really thinking that it might be just as real as any part of history. But what I am interested about is: Why is he so dead set on finding those origins?” - Doppel said.

Cat looked up in silence giving this idea some thought.

“Because this person can destroy plans that Adrian worked so hard on.” – Hare showed up jumping over the fence, taking a seat next to Cat, giving him a slight scare.

“Plans?” – Doppel looked at Hare.

“Yes, plans.” – Hare simply repeated. – “One where Which brews a great war in these lands, while he enjoys his life in that other parallel.”

“So did you deliver what you had to?” - Cat asked.

“Sure did.” - Hare took ale and had a gulp.

“Who...” - Doppel was about to ask, but stumbled in own words.

“The less you know, the safer you live.” - Hare remarked.

## Chapter 25 “Dead come back to live”

/Niko

Long underground hallway that leads to the sacred room. In its possession is a sacred weapon, capable of slaying anyone and anything in this realm whether monster or human, magical or not.

This weapon is blessed with a Demons strength, Goddesses light, Witches curse, Human hope and the Elders bliss. The makers of the weapon held great power once. If legends are speaking the truth - some of them are still alive. Still wielding great power.

The basic ones to cast such a great feat on a piece of an item were quite the messy lot - Me, Anne, Goddess, Ary and Maddy. We did so when the War with Fifth Realm came to us.

The King of Sopdar is seeking protection by possessing this weapon. He and his army are crossing the mountain of Three Saint Sages. Ready to rampage the towns, take over the land, then get the weapon and rule this world, or more accurately - the remains of this world.

They still don't know many flaws this weapon has, nor the fact that only ones who travelled through parallels can wield it. But right now it doesn't matter. The spirit of Mother Tree called upon forces to come together and protect the land.

Bloodshed will not be avoided this time.

I've done much that can be regretful. This weapon is a part of that list of regrets. Though, it was indeed made upon my request... More like, the pressure I held upon all those who blessed it. And why? Because... Because my beloved King ordered me to be victorious in the war that he began just for own amusement...

That's the one where I was left in shambles, as Ary and Gabriel left me on the battlefield. I was cast aside as that toy, which served its purpose.

Heh, yeah, my King is indeed merciless. But I still feel that it was not always like that. Like I'm still not remembering something very important.

It is incredibly foggy inside this hall. The last barrier which Ary disabled, triggered some sort of reaction to release this darned fog.

With vision getting more and more obstructed, it becomes harder to navigate and keep track of the party around me.

Men though, not in slightest bothered by this fog, as they kept on going further. It's like they don't even see it.

I was trembling as I walked. My pace in comparison to others was slower, making me fall

behind.

It was still quite filled with darkness in this hall, although oil streak fire burned on the sides, due to magic that Ary cast.

Erick clung to Yuki's hand. Gabriel was in lead, walking alongside Ary. All were concentrating on finding the right path towards the weaponry room of these Ruins.

A close blast shook the walls. Stones rumbling behind us. Ary looked back to see that there was a wave of dust coming onto us, putting out fire, as it went. They dashed towards the wall with a gargoyle statue. Gabriel grabbed its tail, opening a hidden room beside them, letting them in, as the door shuts closed after Erick, right at the moment when dust swallows up everything behind them. Hallway now is eaten up by dust.

Room has a crack in the wall, letting some air and light in.

"That was close." – Erick looked back at the door.

"We're missing that witch." – Ary stated unhappily.

"From where I see it, I wish she dies, and surely I'm not going to miss her in any way." – Knight breathed out.

"I couldn't have agreed with you more." – Yuki wiped sweat from his forehead.

I heard them behind the wall, then sounds withered.

With dust slowly clearing up, I was left coughing, trying to get some air. My hand reaches towards the hall walls, trying to find a path, but to my surprise I touches the shoulder of the Mad King.

He reached and gripped me by the waist, pulling me along with him, further into the depths of the hall.

I almost fell, as I stumbled, but he gripped me tightly, almost raising me off the ground, as he pulled me along.

King pressed some stones on a Demon statue, getting a door to open, letting us in.

Bright, with the furthest wall having metallic bars on it instead of an actual wall, making the room resemble a cage. What makes it differ is the great view of narrow canyon walls and forest. Sound of the river below was audible. With so much fresh air and breeze floating in and out, I still needed a few moments to get my breath back and wipe my face from all the dust.

"What an idiot. Can't leave you alone for a minute, can I? You shabby clutz." – Hikaru paced around, after releasing the grip on me.

My eyes looked up at the King: his restless self being impatient, pacing around, looking out and about. I felt the pain and pang of heart. I can't manage to hate him...

“You silly twat!” – Hikaru stopped, looking at me. – “I seriously want to just. Mm...” - He came closer to me, raised his hand in a gesture of thinking something up, then slapped me hard across the face. – “That’s it!”

I clenched my fists, with my heart racing crazily, not a whimper was let out of me. I was pulling myself together. I knew that he hated the sounds of whimpers and cries.

“About damn time you snap out!” – Hikaru walked towards the metallic bars. – “You, little silly girl, need to remember one crucial thing, before some shit goes down and...” - Hikaru pulled back on last words, then looked out, taking a good look at the canyon's wall, then turned around on his heels and smiled wide. – “Won’t you just say something?”

“You’re an asshole, you know.” - My voice trembled, - “Can’t wrap my head around the harsh fact of still loving you. Although there's this urge to push some needles into your body.” – I found a chair to sit on.

“Ri-ight, trying to be tough are we? Awh, how cute! But right now, as I have your full undivided attention, I need you to think hard. Think back at the time when you showed up first in my Kingdom. Way before anyone else came from That Realm. What do you remember?” – Hikaru took a seat next to me, poking my stinging red cheek.

Each slight touch buzzed with pain, yet I kept it together.  
 What does he want with all of this? Why the time of our...  
 I was trying to wrap my head around his words, questions and actions.

Then this feeling again. The feeling that made me succumb to his selfishness and obey his whims.

“Just think back to that first time.” – Hikaru purred in a tender, soft voice.

First time huh?

I thought to myself, as I closed my eyes shut. Pushing myself to remember at least a thing from all the way back then. It was not the easiest of feats at this time, after all this time...

Hikaru began humming a tune, whilst I concentrated. This tune felt really nostalgic.

The tune was something he’d humm whilst he did his work in a... Right.

Hikaru was pacing around in his library when I first saw him. It was in the library inside Guille Rose Castle.

Tall stands with books flooding the shelves. Vast majority of this library side covered the art of sciences and the great books of formidable creations by the Sylphs air crafted sculptures. The most deserted area.

Hikaru walked around, trying to figure out his troubles. He looked up, doubtful about what he sought for. He looked consumed with anger, yet somehow sad. He stirred my heart the first



time I saw him. His white hair messy, his green-golden eyes, red from lack of sleep, puffy from crying, body slim, with air of death and misery around him. He was in his early twenties.

“I want to save him.” – I thought to myself, as I followed him down this book shelf, on the other side of it.

“Hey! Can you hear me? I’m talking to you!” – Hikaru shouted into my ear, making me jump in surprise. – “I was saying that we can get out of here.”

### /Elyon

I was covered in dust after the explosion I caused. Unlike Ary, some doors wouldn’t work without magic. So I used brute force to get the darn doors open.

Dragon was grunting somewhere behind. He despised loud sounds. Those were the oddities when trained by the Elves under the River Goddess.

“I must take it to him before he gets into any more trouble.” – I thought to myself as I paced down the path I created by myself.

“It’s hard in here, we don’t have much time. Please let it all end well. Oh god, please.” – Orins voice sounded in my head.

### /Verin

Military forces complied the call of the King. The forces of the Forbidden City were called out to help with this brute war that was about to unravel.

I held up my binoculars to look at the positions of the forces from around the Omir town. I had enough time to get myself to the pique that divided the Kingdom and Empire. I looked at the preparations that were held here.

One of the biggest air force fields was “hidden” here, but I knew the cost of this disaster – death of Last Emperor. Such wrongdoing will never go through the fingers of the ones who asked for this to happen. Yet my other concern was the ascension of the new Emperor, his safety.

“Hey! Need any help?” – Resam called out.

I turned around, as I heard the familiar voice.

“It’s all right. I’ve got this. They are making preparations to get more vehicles for invading Krea. We should notify the Assembly.” - I replied.

Resam nodded, then turned around and headed for the camp side.

“The Emperor's last work will not be in vain.” – I spoke to myself as I held up my binoculars.

### /Adrian

“Hide the bodies.” – I ordered Merin, as she stood in surprise, gaping at the bodies lying on the table and the floor of the conference room.

“Call Mark. He’ll get this sorted.” – I looked at Merin. -” And be sure to clean up all the mess left behind.”

Merin was in shock turning around to face me as I was already holding the door knob.

“Where are you going?” - She said with a trembling voice.

“None of your damn business my dear. Just do your job.”

I closed the door behind me

### /Merin

I stood with my hand shaking as I dialled the number of so-called “rubbish collector” Mark, who was liked a lot by Adrian. Now I understand why.

The sight that can’t be unseen still filled my head: the board members drinking the water, the new supplement water that was especially made only for them, to keep their “youth”. Adrian was explaining to them the miraculous work of this water, then they choked after a few sips, turning grey-blue from lack of air, gasping, looking desperate and trying to convey their last words, but all that happened was them drying up alive.

Their skin wrapped tightly around bones, eyes fell in, mouths open, tongues stuck across the throat. They resembled mummies from horror movies. Their faces frozen in the most utterly disturbing expressions.

The phone dial ringing stopped and someone finally answered.

“Garbage centre. Marks listening.”

“Adrian has a situation here. Boards meeting, it’s...” - I try to find words to describe it all, but helplessly I am at a loss.

“Oh,” - says Mark unfazed, - “He did notify me of some old organic shit cans to be taken care of. Don’t worry dear. Sit tight, I’m on my way.”

Phone call ends right after he says it. Now all I hear is the : “Beep-beep-beep” of the tone.

Just what the hell is Adrian thinking? What the fuck is this monster up to? Why? Why? WHY?!

### /Hare, Doppel, Cat

“I’ve heard that Verin actually gathered forces to defend the realm against the King.” - Cat looked at his new pint of ale.

“That is true.” - Hare replied, whilst thinking of own issues.

“Should we go and join them?” - Doppel asked.

Cat spat out his ale.

“Seriously, we could try and kill for "good" this time.” - Doppel continued.

“There is no such thing as murdering for "good".” - Hare glanced at Doppel. - “This sort of issue is up to you to decide. I won’t be part of it.”

“But, truthfully, you’re the best out of us in that regard.” - Cat remarked, as he cleaned up.

“That means nothing.” - Hare downed his pint, then threw coins on the table. - “Don’t you dare drag me along to any war.”

“But they could use your skills.” - Doppel said

Hare gave a glance, then waved his hand, as he got up and was on his way out.

“I’ll never be part of that joke again. Take care.”

## Chapter 26 “Famished Savage”

/Verin

“Just how long is it going to take?” - Resam looked at my struggles. Dealing with technology that was more than a century old.

“Give me some time. One must keep patience.” - I fiddled with mechanisms.

Loud roar of the dragon shook the earth, sending shivers. Huge armoured dragon landed in the resistance camp. Forces of protectors have come together here to be ready for when the King's men will attack.

Elvish man, the same who gave lift to David, stepped off from the dragon's back, holding onto armour that covered the beast. He looked around, eyes seeking for someone. Dragon grunted, which got a slight tap on the nose from the man. Elf gave another look to the surrounding soldiers, then his eyes met with Resams' gaze, making him walk towards this old man.

“This barrier mechanism needs some elvish touch.” - He spoke, as he pushed me aside, then switched some gears on this old thing. The moment he said something in Elvish, producing the last click with a switch - gears went in motion working perfectly - releasing a protective magical barrier that covered camp for miles around.

“Thank you, Herion.” - I bowed to him. Elf nodded.

“I'm here to deliver some goods from Goddess. This letter is for you.” - Herion pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. - “She said it'll help in your cause.”

Sun was up, heating the earth, shining upon both - the army of King and the army of Resistance. Both sides of Three Saint Sages Mountains host warriors; young and old, magical and human creatures, about to fight one another for causes only they know.

/Niko

Choking on the air, as it was leaving lungs, unable to have a bit of a breather, I was turning blue in skin, for I got stuck in some trap room that sucked the life out of me.

“You bloody fool! Get yourself out!” - Hikaru choked me.

“I can't... I don't understand...” - slipped in my mind as the world began spinning, sight hazed and darkened, I was about to let my spirit go.

Hikaru pressed harder with his hands.

“So that's how it'll be. You shall learn it the hard way then.”

World slipped through my fingers with my last breath. Eyes closed, heart gave a few last beats before stopping.

“When will you snap out of it, you clutz?” - Hikaru softly touched my cheek, as I lay on the floor, turning stone cold. - “I learned your secret from so very long ago. I remember the library. I remember you.” - He pressed his lips against mine, closed his eyes. Hands reached out to hug the dead body, as he lay down next to me. - “You must remember, my love, for all it's worth. You don't belong here.”

///

Emergency wing of the hospital, doctors rush towards the doors. New patients arrived with multiple injuries - just out of a car crash.

“Barely breathing! Hook them to life support. These two need operating!”

Nurses whisper as they check up on the girl and boy in the life support system room. Patients are here for more than a week now.

“They said it was one mess of a crash. Poor kids. They're brother and sister, right?” - Nurse looked up at her co-worker.

“Yeah, relatives. Poor kids, having their parents die during operation. Such a tragedy.” - Another nurse said as she changed the liquid system.

“Still, they are both in such a critical condition. Coma is nothing of a simple sort.”

Few days later the boy was pronounced dead. Heart failure. Then suddenly taken away.

Girl was alone. With no relatives to claim her, she was left on her bed, with tubes hanging out of her, unable to breathe by herself, just waiting for life to end.

///

The war was rampant for months. Taking lives of men and beasts, protectors and warriors

that belong to the King and to the Resistance.

The king's army took over the area that spreads across Three Saint Sages mountains, town Krea, then all the land that leads to river Emmea.

The spirits summoned by the Mother Tree lasted for a month, before once again - turning to rust and blood.

Resistance is now keeping their camp near mountain Sekka, the bastion under protection of Goddess of Rivers, as they count their losses, mourn the dead and pray for the end of this mess.

"How about a few bottles of dear old Raven Town booze? I really need some good liquor now!" - Cat smiled, as he put his blades away.

"Not a bad idea." - Hare replied.

"Oi!" - Cat shouted to Herion. - "Give us a lift with your dragon, will you?"

Elf rolled his eyes, turning back to look at these two weirdos that he viewed as quite skilled assassins. Then remembering that they don't take "no" for an answer, Herion waved his hand for them to hop on a dragon.

"To the Raven Town! Let's get wasted!" - Laughed Cat.

Tavern with a name that sounds like a joke - "Bulls Balls", hosting three men of odd sort, having bottles and bottles of liquor piled next to them.

Cat, downing bottle after bottle, Hare just finishing his 4th glass, Herion being gentleman with his drinks - as he empties his third casket.

"I miss her so much!" - Cat cried out, his voice soar.

"Heard it." - Hare took a deep breath.

"She was a good warrior. Sadly, not good enough." - Herion coldly replied to man's sorrow.

"Doppel was a good fighter. Lasting week during that massacre, with battle not stopping even for an hour - that's a lot. She kept on fighting, taking down many strong opponents." - Cat raised his bottle of liquor. - "Cheers to her memory!"

"Cheers!" - both Hare and Herion toasted on this.

Hare turned to Herion.

"Mate, I'm eager to know - how do you drink in the Sky Castle, if you don't get hammered after a casket of Raven Town liquor? What alcohol do you brew there?"

“Best one!” - Herion said proudly. - “Distilled liquor using dragon semen!”

“Forget what I asked.” - Hare placed the palm of his hand on his forehead.

///

Erick passed the meeting hall.

Here he once met with all the last species of this parallel. There were sylphs, undines, salamanders and golems.

They received the representatives of the Fifth realm. With Hikaru, The Mad King, hosting this whole charade.

They were close once - Ary, Hikaru and Erick, but it faded in time somewhere along the way. They had their disagreements, lust, battles, sex. They tried it all to work for them. But only sex worked.

“I suppose you'll stay here for now.” - Yuki was walking next to Erick. - “When should we plan on going back?”

“Not sure, but due to information we got from Elyon we don't have much.”

“She got a lot out of that dungeon, when we went there. So many sacred scrolls and artefacts.” - Yuki snapped fingers. - “Hurts to admit she saved those sacred items from destruction that swallowed the dungeon fully. Still can't wrap my head around those things. It all just suddenly went berserk.”

Erick was walking slowly, as he enjoyed his momentum.

“Elyon got us out just before it all went into depths of some hell, swallowed whole. I can't even start guessing what triggered this sort of situation. Darkness swallowed the ruins - leaving a crater behind. And there were no sights of Niko ever since.” - Erick stopped, looking out to the garden. Roses bloomed red.

Something right now felt so strange. Erick had his senses heightened, with nerves being on the edge for some unknown reason. He felt something was off, but couldn't still figure out what it was.

Ary kept his watch over the Guille Rose Castle, where inhabitants spent their time seeking mercy of faith. Ary sensed unknown disturbance, but he too - was not sure what could have caused it.

All he felt, as he sat in his room - is that time is running out. Yet he doesn't know why or how, he just feels that events are about to get way worse.

/Niko

Deep breathing, eyes so hard to open up. Feels like time itself slept for eternity. Soft. Warm. Someone was breathing next to me, someone held me tight. I dreamed of so many things at once. So many lives.

"Finally you're awake, you clutz." - Hikaru kissed my lips. His warmth and caring softness.

"I was getting worried, you know. With all the crazy braking loose around us, I knew that this was the only way. Now you must remember." - His voice was fading.

///

"Doctor! We're losing the patient! The Conditions are unstable!"

A company man with assistants barged into the room.

"This patient is in our care now. Here's the papers." - Tall man in his forties handed doctor documents stating that the patient belongs to this unknown group of medical aces, where the patient shall be taken for special treatment.

Doctor had nothing to say - he nodded, as his priority patient was taken away.

Beeping of technology, scientists in white coats, with lab masks on, gather around to collect the new arrived test subject.

"Finally! We finally have a younger specimen! And a female at that! I think we'll get it working this time! I can feel it! - Wrinkles on this old man's face raise, revealing his smiling eyes, as he fiddled with a new lab experiment.

Tubes attached, wires connected, specimen in the organic stasis tube. Chemicals are injected in the organism every half an hour for the brain activity to become higher, times and times higher than a normal human. They observed the reactions of the body to the chemicals, the vitamin structure enhanced her, so she can stay preserved in that tube for longer, with just her brains being the most important part of this experimentation.

There was another test subject next to the newly arrived one.



Male, also a recent acquisition, young. His performance was fantastic, but the lab needed a female specimen to see if such measures of the test could be replicated on different bodies.

“Sir, I have finished the analysis. These results are phenomenal! With such activity there sure will be a way for the military to become greater.”

“Oh madam, I longed for this day.” - Wrinkles smiled again, as he touched the tube with the young woman in it. - “This experiment excites me in more ways than one. Oh it does! It does!”

It took a few months...

Muffled sounds of guns firing. People shouting, running. Gun blasts again and again.

“So you wanted to betray me, you old rat?” - Tall man was dead serious, as he spoke to his ex-subordinate.

“You won’t have it! They shall make better use of my research! You coward!”

Gun fires. Blood oozes out of the old wrinkly head.

## /Niko

“Wake up, darn it! I’m restless!” - Hikaru takes me by the shirt and pulls up to his face.

“Mnn... Why shouting so early in the morning?” - I let out, groggy.

“You dimwit! Get up!” - Hikaru pushes me back on the bed and puts his whole body weight on me. How can such a man have so much weight to just... Argh!

“Ok, ok! I’m up! I’m getting up! Gosh, Hikaru, you’re heavy.” - I sit on the edge of a bed.

“Heavy? Not that you had something against it last night.” - Hikaru smirks, as he meets the death stare from me. - “You wish to tell me you did not enjoy finally having some ple..”

“STOP!” - I covered his mouth with my hand, feeling my cheeks get beet red. - “I got it, I got it. No need to remind me... About how good it was.”

Hikaru pulls me in, hugging me tight.

“But you still need to recover some of the "erased data" from that dimwit brain of yours.” - Hikaru bites on my ear.

"Oh you're a pest..." - I push him off and go to the bathroom.

"The biggest pest is yet to come, but right now I'm famished." - He lets out.

///

Laboratory is empty, dead bodies trashed. Both specimens are still attached to wires, tubes, with reserve energy support running to keep them alive.

Computer screen has lines running horizontally, as a bullet got it to crack. On screen, along with lines running there is a research object's maintained "diary", with a small screen capturing visuals of the object's dreams.

"Help me..." - is written in the diary, on repeat, on and on, for years and years that passed.

Just after one mistake of a crack...

There is a bleeding body on the floor, supported by exoskeleton, as one container had crashed.

Another specimen is still inside the cryogenic container.

The Visual screen provides an image of "dreaming subjects view right now".

Hikaru takes a glance:

"Having a peek, are you?"

*To be continued. . .*