

The Revelation

Book One of the *Immortal Suicides* Trilogy

Kat Ellinger

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Ted Anton, English

Kathleen Rooney, English

“You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something - your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.”

–Steve Jobs

PROLOGUE

FALAISE, FRANCE - September 15, 1036

Acelin pressed her back against the warm stonewall, clutching her tray. She didn't dare to peer past her shoulder into the arched doorway where she could hear the clanking of men's armor as they entered the room from the opposite side.

"Bonsoir," an older voice greeted the men. "What news have you regarding the good Duke's condition?" Acelin recognized the voice as belonging to Ralph de Gacé, the Archbishop Robert de Rouen's son, whom she had been serving for the past eight months in the castle at Falaise.

"Unfortunate news, my lord," a second voice responded. "His condition has worsened the further he has traveled from Jerusalem."

"Where is he now?" Ralph de Gacé asked.

"Trés loin," the second voice said. "The Duke made it as far as Nicaea, where his party has since ceased their attempts to return here until the Duke is well again. Toutefois, my lord, he does not seem to be healing."

There was silence. Acelin held her breath; craning to hear the information she was charged with collecting.

“Thank you, you may go,” he said, dismissing the men. Acelin heard their armor clamoring as they exited back out the entrance from whence they came. The doors shut and the room was silent for a moment. A chair creak broke the still atmosphere and Acelin could tell that one of the two remaining men had sat down.

“The boy is but eight years of age,” a new voice commented, “and illegitimate. What will be the state of France if Robert does pass of this illness?”

“Though illegitimate, Robert declared William as his rightful heir before the pilgrimage. There’s nothing we can do about that now but try to protect the boy,” Ralph de Gacé said. He stated the words with such ease, so little concern. Acelin could guess what the intonation truly meant.

“Ralph, you know the barons will fight to take the Duke’s title. Protecting William will be practically impossible!”

That was enough. She’d heard what she needed to know. Acelin peeled herself from her auditory vantage point and passed through the archway into the room, carefully balancing her tray.

“Ah!” A smile stretched across Ralph de Gacé’s face. “Our tea. Finally.”

CHAPTER 1

DENVER, COLORADO – October 4, 2007

“And they all lived happily ever after I’m sure...” Meryl huffed, and snapped the book shut, gently tossing it on the floor next to her backpack. She sat in the vestibule at the Junior High, waiting for her mother to pick her up. Mrs. Astor happened to work only a few blocks away at a physical therapy center, and would get off right after the school let out. They’d share the events of their day together as they drove, usually to the library. This was their routine. Mrs. Astor would drop her daughter off to peruse the books, while she went to have her ‘me time’ in a yoga class.

Real life wasn’t like it was in the books, Meryl knew. It’d be great if it were though; saving the world seemed like the adventure of a lifetime. She sighed, tossing her dark brown hair over her shoulder. *What a way to go, too.* She thought. So many of the heroines and heroes of the magical lands she loved to read about, risked their lives or even plain sacrificed themselves for their worlds and for their people. They were then immortalized in legend by their deeds, a hero of time. It seemed like a fulfilling life to her. Real life was boring, or at least, relatively boring.

Books made day-to-day life bearable for Meryl, providing an easy escape into adventure and magic. They used to be her only friends until just four months ago a new classmate transferred from Michigan into her seventh grade class: Austin Murray. His forward, overly

friendly disposition made Meryl tentative at first, but his affinity for jokes and lighthearted nature quickly won her over. Besides, Meryl considered him rather handsome and it was hard to turn him down when just a smile from him could make her blush. Austin's Puerto Rican blood from his mother's side left him with tan skin, enticing deep brown eyes, and dark wavy hair that sat in a tousle on his head. She'd never admit it to him, but Meryl often wondered why he hadn't joined up with the popular crowd. They'd shown plenty of interest in him when he first moved, especially the girls.

Instead, Austin had chosen her – the recluse bookworm. Well, she wasn't a full recluse. She preferred to think of the friends she had as 'casual friendships,' mainly because she couldn't stand being wrapped up in ridiculous pre-teen drama. They stuck in their cliques while Meryl acted as a lone wolf, bouncing between the packs as she pleased. It suited her, but more often than not, she preferred to spend her time alone. At least, that was the way it was before meeting Austin. Now the two were relatively inseparable.

“Hey!” A body plopped down next to Meryl on the ground, startling her.

“Wha- oh!” Meryl nudged Austin in the shoulder playfully. “Speak of the devil, I was just thinking about you,” she said.

“All terrible things, I'm sure,” Austin replied, nodding.

“Oh you know it.” Meryl smiled, then said. “But what are you doing here? Did you-”

Austin cut her off, finishing her thought, “-miss the bus? Yeah. You think your mom would mind givin’ me a ride?”

Mrs. Astor loved Austin, but she was also very serious about her yoga. Meryl hesitated to answer, running a few options through her mind before settling on a suggestion. “Mom’s got yoga today so I’ll be at the library. If you don’t mind hanging there for a while, she can probably take you back to Indian Creek after her class.”

Austin rolled his eyes. “Surprise, surprise,” he said with a teasing smirk, “the library.” His expression softened. “Sure. I’ll go. ‘Bout time I see the place you always disappear to anyways. I’ll just have to call my mom and let her know.”

A car pulled up, drawing their attention away from one another. A boy a year younger than them, stood up from his seat on a bench just outside and ran to the car. False alarm.

“What were you reading?” Austin said, drawing Meryl’s attention back as he motioned to the novel by her feet. She tipped the cover to the side so he could read. He mouthed the words silently then asked, “is it good?”

“The Lights of Arnell. It was good. Just finished actually.”

“A book a day keeps the socialization away,” Austin said dramatically.

“Hey!” Meryl protested, “I’m not that bad.” A familiar silver car pulled up to the door, and Meryl nudged Austin. “She’s here.” Stuffing the book into her backpack, Meryl stood and

Austin followed. She pushed open the door, holding her arm back an extra second so Austin could pass through the door before it swung shut, then, she went to the passenger window, crouched there and waved for her mother's attention. Mrs. Astor sat comfortably in her seat, inspecting some detail of her manicured fingers, oblivious. Meryl huffed and knocked on the window, causing her mother to jump.

"Sorry," Meryl apologized as the window rolled down.

"You just startled me," her mother said, her breathing recovering from the surprise.

"What is it?"

"Austin missed his bus. Can he borrow your cell to call his mom?"

"Absolutely." Mrs. Astor smiled and handed her phone to her younger look-alike. Meryl appeared to almost be a carbon copy of her mother. She had the same piercing green eyes and very dark brown, almost black, hair, although hers only grazed her shoulders while Meryl's cascaded all the way down to the middle of her back.

Meryl passed the phone to Austin, explaining the drop-off plan to her mother as he dialed.

"Mamá? ...sí... perdí el bus... lo siento, pero mi amiga, Meryl, dice que su madre puede-

" Meryl climbed into the back of the car and slid over a seat, leaving the door open. She knew

how the conversation was going to end; Mrs. Murray was amazing. In fact, Austin's whole family was hilariously delightful.

His father, Mr. Murray was a typical Italian: loud, and to top it all off, he loved a good 'dad joke' every few minutes. Austin's mom was almost just as loud, often doing speed rounds of speech in Spanish. When this happened, Mr. Murray would look to Austin and Meryl and mouth, *I don't even know what she's saying*, with a dramatic shrug. Meryl had gotten a lot better at speaking Spanish since she first made the mistake of thanking Mrs. Murray in the language at dinner one weekend. She now suffered through constant bouts of pronunciation schooling and forced grammar lessons. But Mrs. Murray's utter enthusiasm at sharing her language made it bearable for Meryl, although Austin always apologized later.

Austin was the oldest of three. His younger brother, Andrés was a rebellious second grader who liked to counter almost everything he heard with his own made up facts. He even went as far as insisting that everyone call him Andy instead of Andrés, and while he vexed Austin and his parents to no end, he had always taken a particular liking to Meryl.

The youngest was Gianna. She had only just been born a few months before the Murray family made their move. Because of her, Mrs. Murray had delayed finding a new job in Denver so that she could be a stay-at-home mom for some time. Austin admitted to Meryl that he liked it

a lot better that way. She was never stressed like she used to be and they got to spend more family time together.

They were a tight knit group. Sometimes, after going back to her quiet home with just her parents, Meryl wished she had a big family too. But then, other times she reveled in her quiet times alone, and she knew she'd be getting more alone time than she'd like in the upcoming weeks. The school year was drawing to an end and the Murray family was excitedly making plans to visit Yellowstone National Park. They had scheduled to meet up with their extended family there and spend two weeks together in a cabin. Austin assured he'd send her a post card or two.

“- sí... yeah. Gracias, mamá. Yeah, I'll see you at home. Love you.” He hung up and handed the phone back to Meryl, who passed it to her mother.

“We're good.”

“Excellent!” Meryl's mother said. “Climb on in!”

They lowered their windows during the drive, enjoying the warm Denver air. The car bowed up and down over some hills as Mrs. Astor grilled Austin about his move to Colorado. What did he like? What didn't he like? How was it similar or different from Michigan? Meryl wished her mom would let up, but before she could say anything they pulled up to the library's arched double doors.

“You guys have fun!” Mrs. Astor said as they climbed from the car, “I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. A!” Austin called after to her as she drove off. “So this is the library,” he said, turning to Meryl. “Glad I’ve got a pro-reader to show me around.”

Meryl pulled open the door and gestured for Austin to go in ahead of her. He made a dramatic bow-like gesture, earning another giggle from Meryl as he went by. They entered the front hall, and within a few steps were met by the vast open library. Directly in front of them sat a giant enclosed geometric shape forming the front desk. Inside it several librarians were sitting and standing, bustling about their work. At the center of the shaped in area was a large table with a winged statue of an owl. The entirety of the desk area was situated beneath the main vaulted ceiling that ranged upwards past all three floors, decorated with patterned glass skylights at its dome-shaped top. Behind the many sided front desk and towards the back of the room was the grand staircase that spiraled upwards in the open air from the main floor all the way up to the third floor. The second and third floors were like balconies wrapping around the central vaulted room and extending outwards from the open area with lower ceilings covering the mazes of shelves. Though the library was somewhat bustling, it was still relatively quiet, the various hushed discussions melded together into a somewhat gentle, relaxing and continuous hum.

“Wow,” Austin breathed. “It’s enormous!”

“It is amazing, isn’t it?”

“No kidding!”

Meryl pointed forward at the front desk. “It’s a nonagon,” she said, waiting for Austin’s confused face... there it was! “Nine sided,” she explained, reveling in her extraneous knowledge. She knew she shouldn’t. Her dad warned her that she sometimes sounded like a smart aleck.

“Ooh, fancy,” Austin said in a silly voice, unaffected by her

“Meryl!” a happy old voice greeted her. A grey haired man with a beard and glasses sat at one of the stations of the desk, smiling at them. Meryl waved happily back.

“Mr. Cornell, he’s a librarian,” Meryl explained to Austin. “Come on, I’m going to show you my favorite place to read.” Meryl excitedly grabbed Austin’s hand and pulled him to the left end of the library. A rush of heat flashed across her cheeks as she felt his large, warm square shaped palm in hers. Trying to make the movement seem smooth, Meryl dropped his hand and continued on, silently praying he couldn’t see her flushed face.

The cozy area was situated deep in the depths of the shelves against the back corner. That way, it was quiet and out of the way from prying eyes, though most people typically minded their own business in the library. Lounge chairs were scattered across the library sat in a rough circle here, along with two comfy couches and a beanbag the size of a queen bed. Nestled in the actual corner was a standing fountain wall just a tad taller than their own heights. The melodious

trickle of water was joined by a much smaller mood light next to the bean bag, which gradually shown different colors fading in and out. To the right of the fountain was a ‘Craft of the Week’ billboard. Below the words was a partially completed art project on a large poster board. At the center there was a picture of the Earth made out of construction paper. A few people had traced their hands on their own pieces of construction paper and decorated the hands with colored pencils. Austin walked up to the table that sat below the display, briefly running his hands over the piles of colorful paper and basket of pencils.

“Fun!” he said throwing down his backpack and grabbing a green sheet of paper. *His favorite color*, she observed, smiling at him as he traced his hand.

“I’m gonna read,” she said, removing her backpack as she flopped down onto the large beanbag. She fished in her bag for her other book, eventually pulling it out, and then started reading from the bookmarked page.

“Miss. Astor.”

Meryl looked up from her book to see the grey-bearded librarian holding a stack of books and smiling at her.

“Mr. Cornell” Meryl nodded at him. “How are you?”

“Well, thank you,” he responded, shifting the stack of books to one arm so he could push up his glasses. “I thought you disappeared back here. What is it that you’re reading?”

Meryl tipped the book so the cover faced towards him. “The Chronicles of the Elementals.”

“Ah, a James Coy book! Great choice,” he said. “You’re such a reader. That’s actually what I wanted to talk with you about. I wonder…” Cornell paused to balance his books on the arm of her chair and reach into his back pocket, producing a pamphlet. “If you ever considered joining our advanced reading club here at the library.”

Meryl took the pamphlet from his extended hands. She recalled him mentioning the group to her before, but she wasn’t particularly keen on the idea of her reading being chosen for her, which is why she’d never responded before. “I guess,” she started, glancing over at Austin who had turned to watch their conversation. “I mean, I’ll have some free time this summer.” With Austin leaving on vacation she figured it’d be a good way to occupy her time.

“Excellent!” The librarian looked overjoyed. “During summer break we will be meeting every other day.”

That was a lot, but it could be fun. “I’ll show it to my mom and see what she says,” Meryl smiled.

“Well, I hope you can join us,” the old librarian said, lifting the stack of books again and disappearing back into the throng of shelves.

“You gonna do it?” Austin asked.

Meryl shrugged. “I guess.” Something seemed off to her. While Cornell had mentioned the group to her before, she never saw any posters or ads for it.



“Ooh! Reading *and* meditation!” Mrs. Astor exclaimed, flipping the pamphlet over. Meryl hadn’t recalled that part when reading the paper. She must’ve missed it, and that part seemed so utterly perfect for her mother that it made Meryl laugh. “Patrick?”

Mr. Astor leaned over to look at the paper, peering down through his reading glasses propped on the tip of his nose.

“Mmm,” he grunted in approval, “they meet outside sometimes. I like that. You could use more time outside,” he said, turning to Meryl who rolled her eyes playfully in response.

“Can I do it?” she asked.

“Sure,” her father said, turning back to his Saturday newspaper.

Mrs. Astor handed the pamphlet back to Meryl. “I can drop you off for the short Intro thing next Monday while I go to yoga. But are you sure you want to do full day camp all summer? What about when Austin gets back?”

“It’s not like I’m required to go every day,” Meryl said, rolling her eyes.

“True,” Mrs. Astor admitted, then sighed, clucking her tongue once. “Ms. Harrison will miss you.”

Meryl cringed. Ms. Harrison was a much older woman, close to her grandmother's age who lived down the street. Over the years, she had become the unofficial neighborhood babysitter because she no longer worked after her husband passed. While Ms. Harrison was nice enough, Meryl hated her stuffy old house and the fact that she often reeked of cigarette smoke although Meryl never saw her actually smoking.

"I'll pass by and say hi sometime," Meryl said. It was a lie, but she knew it was what her mom wanted to hear.



The following week, school ended, and Meryl said a brief goodbye to Austin before he left in the Murray's overloaded blue van.

"I'll miss you!" she said, throwing herself at him with a hug.

He stumbled back with a slight '*oof*,' then leaned into the hug when he caught his footing.

"I'll miss you too, Mer," he said.

She loved the nickname he gave her. No one had ever called her Mer before. While it sounded like her name just with the 'yl' left off, she couldn't help but oddly think of mermaids the first time he said it to her. She still thought that sometimes, and secretly reveled in the exotic and mystical feeling it gave her.

“I’m expecting your post card in twelve point font, Times New Roman, with citations-”

“Double spaced?” he asked, cutting her off.

“No! Single.” She stuck out her tongue at him and he laughed.

The weekend was rather boring without him. The most fun Meryl had was at her mother’s friend’s barbecue and bonfire. She rarely minded sitting with the adults and making small talk, and she certainly never turned down an opportunity to make s’mores. But unlike during the school year, Monday came as a welcomed relief from the weekend.

Cornell was at the front desk again when Meryl’s mother dropped her at the library.

“So glad you decided to join us!” he said, beaming at her. “Let me lead you to our meeting room. This way.” He made his way out and around the odd shaped counter, then led her to the large staircase at the back and began to climb. Meryl followed, holding the ornately carved railing as she ascended the stairs. They hit the first landing and Cornell turned to continue up the next flight to the third floor. Between the embellished rungs of the railing Meryl could see the people on the first floor appearing smaller beneath her. When they reached the final landing, Cornell led Meryl to the left. They passed through tall shelves with old, thick books, their spines cracked and peeling, until they reached the back corner of the room where there was a small closed door with a small metal sign embedded in its wood. Meryl read the etching: *Restricted Section: Authorized Personnel Only.*

“Here,” Cornell said, approaching the door.

That seemed odd. “This is where the camp is held?” she asked.

“Yes,” Cornell stopped and turned back to her, “you’re going to be a part of our most... specialized group.”

Meryl thought is sounded as though he was fishing for the right words. *Strange*. Cornell pulled out an old key and unlocked the door, swinging it open and stepping inside. She hesitated. Inside she could see a small passageway with a set of stairs leading upwards and curving to the left. It was odd, but Meryl brushed off the idea. Perhaps the odd location was one of the reason’s she’d never heard of the group before.

Meryl moved through the door and began up the small, creaky stairs. The passage was claustrophobic, but she actually liked the warm enclosed space. As she rounded the curve to the left, Meryl could see sunlight peeking through thin glass windows along the stairwell. After the curve, the stairs straightened out again and Meryl paused to peer out one of the windows.

Beneath her, she could see the library’s parking lot, cars going by on the street, and tops of the surrounding buildings. Meryl marveled at how high up they were. She couldn’t remember seeing a part of the library stretching this high up.

“Still coming?” Cornell had paused, looking back.

“Yes!” Meryl hurried to catch up.

The passage continued for a bit longer before suddenly turning to the left again and became steeper. The air began to smell strongly of aged books and old wood. Meryl could see that the small stretch of steeper stairs ended with a wall, and a doorway on the left. She hoisted herself up the last few steps and turned to meet Cornell in a rather narrow, dimly lit hallway. There were several doors, but the one second to the last was open and quiet voices were coming from inside.

Cornell walked briskly down the hall and directly into the open room.

“She’s here,” Meryl heard Cornell announce to the other occupants.

Slowly, she passed the other doors, running her fingers along the old wooden walls of the thin hall as she did. Her heart skipped a beat as she began to turn to the doorway and the strangest thought suddenly gripped her mind: *there’s no turning back now*. What did that even mean? Unable to shake the feeling, Meryl stepped through the door.

The walls were lined with bookshelves stretching to the ceiling. Around the room, there were several desks covered in books and papers, old ornate chairs, a globe on a stand, and various other bits of furniture.

Two men stood together in the room with Cornell. The first one looked a bit younger than Cornell, with black and grey mixed hair, slicked back on his head and strikingly dark eyebrows over deep brown eyes. The second man seemed far closer to Meryl in age. She figured he was

most likely high school age. He sat slouched against one of the beautiful wooden desks. His dirty-blond hair was neat and, and he had bright, inviting green eyes. The teen stood and approached Meryl, his arm extended.

“Pleasure to meet you!” He said, smiling.

Meryl noticed his movements were relaxed and fluid in comparison to the staunch and dignified temperaments of his elder companions. She took his hand.

“I’m Steven.”

“Look at her eyes,” the man with the slicked-back hair commented, smiling. “So strong!” That was such a strange comment. He moved forward to take Meryl’s hand next, and she had to stop herself from recoiling out of discomfort at his words.

“Luxton,” he announced himself.

“What is this?” she asked, dropping Luxton’s hand and turning to confront Cornell. “This doesn’t seem like reading camp.”

Luxton chuckled, “Not to mention, smart!” He added to the others. That was irritating, talking about her like she wasn’t there, and especially with another bizarre comment. Meryl bit back her irritation and he continued. “You’re correct, Meryl,” he said, turning to address her. “In truth, we’ve brought you here for very different reasons.”

Cornell moved to the center of the room and pulled a chair out, gesturing to it.

“Please,” he said to Meryl, “take a seat.” She hesitated. While she was gripped by curiosity, a large part of her hated the ambiguity of the situation. Meryl felt like she’d been lied to. Cornell must’ve noticed her hesitate because he added, “You don’t have to be here Meryl. You can leave if you prefer and I’ll introduce you to the actual reading camp.”

This tipped the scales: curiosity won out and she sat. “No. I want to know what this is all about,” she said. The three men joined her, crowding in between the desks and leaning on different pieces of furniture. Meryl looked up at them expectantly, she deserved whatever answer they had for her. “So?” she asked.

“Do you know what a soul is?” Luxton began.

The arbitrary question threw her off. “Yes,” Meryl said.

“What do you know about souls?”

Meryl shrugged, “some stuff I guess. Souls are like the immortal part of you.”

“Yes. They’re an eternal state of being,” Luxton said. “So, based on what you know about souls, how would you explain the fact that you can move around, talk, laugh, and be alive, but something like a rock or a shoe can’t?”

Meryl’s suspicious mood evolved into curiosity. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Because,” Luxton continued, “it has to do with your soul - the ultimate essence of existence, of your life, *all* of your lives... Meryl, do you know how many times you’ve been alive?”

“W-what?” Meryl’s mouth sat open. “What-”

“Have you ever had a dream,” Luxton interrupted, “or a feeling or a ‘vision’ of sorts, that was so vivid it felt completely real?”

“So?” Meryl said. Inside, her heart jumped, startled by his mention of dreams similar to what she had been having.

“Have you ever wondered if it was real? Tell me, have those dreams ever repeated or you’ve been the same person in multiple different dreams and that person wasn’t you.”

“So you’re saying that’s another life?” Meryl asked. Luxton raised his eyebrows at her, leaving her in silence for a moment. Meryl’s heart beat faster. She felt like that woman in her dreams, but it had just been a dream.

“Not exactly,” Cornell broke the silence. “What those may be are memories from past lives coming to you in dreams. You see, you have a unique ability to be able to connect to your past lives more than others because you are a different breed of soul, our breed of soul in fact.

“I guess... Meryl said, “I understand what you are saying, but why?”

Luxton continued, ignoring her question, “The breeds of soul dictate a certain range of abilities within the –”

“Okay!” Steven said, stepping forward to cut Luxton off. “You are botching this, just like with me.” Luxton’s eyes narrowed.

Steven spun Meryl’s chair around to face the desk directly behind her. She squinted, as stream of sun from the high up window across the room struck her eyes. “Ooh, sorry!” Steven said, pulling her a tad to her right and out of the stream of light.

Steven then sat backwards in his own chair. He turned back to Luxton with an edge of playful sass in his voice. “Why do you think I’m as messed up as I am?”

Cornell chuckled, covering his mouth with his hand.

“Okay,” Steven smiled at Meryl as he pulled a piece of paper off a pile on the desk. After checking both sides, he grabbed a nearby pencil and began to draw a circle. “See this?” He said, pointing at the basic shape. “Imagine that this is the land of souls. It’s in a different dimension, which basically means it’s invisible to us. We can’t see it or touch it exactly, but it’s there. Now, in this realm of souls,” he began poking dots of graphite randomly inside of the circle, “there are millions upon millions of souls. And souls are life force. They can access our physical, three-dimensional realm.” Steven began touching everything around him to display their physical nature.

“But!” Steven continued enthusiastically. “The only way that souls can fully be part of our realm is through a very specific portal.” He began scribbling on the paper again, “Consider this TV.” Meryl leaned forward to see Steven pointing at a very pathetic sketch of a television, scribbled just on the outskirts of the soul circle.

“Okay,” she said, giggling at the ridiculous drawing.

“The way television works is that there’s a signal somewhat far away that you can’t see, sending all of the channels and everything into it.” Steven waved his hands around dramatically as an apparent visual aid.

“Yeah,” Meryl said. She was quite enjoying Steven’s animated explanations.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Luxton leaning over to Cornell to whisper something she couldn’t distinguish. Cornell’s permanent smile lines vanished a bit as he nodded to the whisper.

What was wrong?

“Oh yes,” she could hear the librarian agree quietly. He suddenly caught her gaze and flashed a smile at her. The smile seemed forced and fake, like he was trying to imbue false reassurance onto a small child. Meryl wasn’t falling for it. What were they—

“You, me, all humans and animals are like this TV.” Meryl’s attention snapped back to Steven. “We receive a signal that is sent to us. While things like this book,” Steven held up a small tattered old book, “can’t. You can’t send a TV signal to a book and be able to watch shows

on it, it's just not possible because the book's material structure isn't made to sustain a TV signal. But, since we are like TVs, we all have this ability to sustain the life force that we call souls. We are a unique code of matter, *the* code of matter, for life."

Meryl was piecing together what he said. "Okay. So I guess what you mean is the soul is the signal. But then, when we die –"

Cornell stepped forward. "In our physical world, things only last within their own designated cycles. So as you age your body gets old and rugged," he leaned in and raised his eyebrows, "like me," He smiled broadly then continued, "eventually, that ruggedness spreads so much that your physical body gives out and you die. The soul is just a signal constantly transmitting through a portal onto a physical world, so when the physical portal stops working, where does the soul go?" he asked.

"The land of souls?" Meryl answered, pointing at Steven's rough sketch.

"Precisely!" Cornell beamed.

"It's like the TV," Steven added. "If a TV gets broken with a baseball bat, it doesn't mean that the signal has stopped existing. It just means that the TV is no longer able to transmit the signal: the portal closed. So, since the signal is still working, still 'alive' and trying to send all it's channels, what it can do is find another TV, pick another portal. This is what souls do. This is how we live again, and again, and again."

“Reincarnation,” Meryl said, recalling that her mother’s yoga teacher talked about the transmigration of souls all the time.

“Yes!” Luxton stood and walked over to join the two at the desk, standing over them.

“You have lived multiple lives, Meryl, and while everyone in the world has as well, you’re more connected to your past lives. This is why you probably don’t fit in with your peers; you’re more mature and most likely more intelligent than they are at your age because you’re constantly accessing knowledge from your past and have a greater ability to sense things and learn quickly.”

Luxton had just described her well. She often gotten along better with adults and many of her parent’s friends had commented that she had an old soul. However, they often said it in passing, as a phrase that didn’t truly hold any weight behind it, as though was just a simple explanation to dismiss the reality of her maturity as a fun aspect of her personality. Now, Meryl’s head was reeling with the possibilities of what weight this idea really carried. She did feel things intuitively and had a tendency to learn rather quickly. She suddenly recalled what Luxton had mentioned earlier about her dreams. “I actually often dream about this woman,” she said delicately. “I see her doing different things.”

“Do you see her, or are you the woman?” Luxton asked.

“I’m the woman. I see things as though I’m her, and it feels like me, but at the same time, not me. Sometimes she’s just walking, or looking at things, or even listening to people. But it’s

always that one woman. I even saw her once, just her reflection in a big bowl of water, and she doesn't look at all like me."

Steven was nodding. "A past life."

"Who is she?" Meryl asked, her eyes lighting up.

Luxton shook his head. "Couldn't tell you, at least not at this point. But, what I can speak to is why you see her memories in your dreams. You see we –"

"Do you have a dog?" Steven asked her. Luxton huffed and walked past Steven, swatting him in the back of the head as he passed by. Steven let out a gentle 'ah' and Meryl could see Cornell shake his head with a supplementary eye roll.

"No," she said, her attention turning back to Steven, "but my neighbor does. Her name is Rosie and she's so sweet!"

"What kind?" Steven smiled.

"Golden retriever," Meryl said.

"Ah, nice!" Steven said. "So that's a breed of dog and, not all breeds of dogs can do the same things. Golden retrievers can swim pretty well, right? But, think about a pug. It's very hard for them to swim. They can't do all the same things a golden can, because they are different breeds. Golden retrievers and pugs are still both dogs, but they have different abilities. Same thing goes for souls. There are different breeds of souls. All of us here," Steven gestured to the four of them

in the room, “are a different breed of soul than the average person. That’s why we’ve brought you here.”

Meryl’s mind seemed to skip like a broken record, trying to grasp onto his meaning but instead, stuttering in shock.

“You can access your soul and, by extension, memories from your past lives,” he explained, “because our breed of soul has a much higher connection to the waves conducting within our physical universe and translating over into other dimensions. You see,” he moved closer to the table again and pointed at Steven’s scattered sketch of souls. “When you are born, your whole soul does not occupy your physical body. Only part of your soul transfers into your body when the portal is open, while most of it remains in its own dimension in a dormant state. There, it is enhanced by the experiences and movements of your life here.”

That made no sense. “If I can access my soul, why can’t I see that dimension?” Meryl asked.

“Because your connections to your soul are here,” Steven pressed his hand to his chest, “and here.” He poked Meryl in the head lightly. “What you can access is memories, ideas and emotions, things like that.”

“You’ll find that you have a greater intuitive understanding of our universe than you already think,” Luxton continued, “and a greater ability to control things once you understand

them more completely. You will eventually hone your link with the interconnected energy waves in the world.”

Flames burst on the table, consuming the paper and Steven’s drawing. Meryl jumped and turned to see Cornell approaching the table, his arm extended towards the paper.

“You see,” Cornell explained. “This is something *we* can do. I can teach it to you one day. It’s not magic in the fairytale sense. In truth, it is all very scientific. What I’ve done is manipulate the potential energy of the paper into heat energy. Matter is made up of atoms and molecules that are constantly moving. When something is hot, the molecules move faster. I manipulated the waves of energy within the room to concentrate on speeding up the movement of the molecules within that paper. They moved faster and faster, the paper became hotter and hotter, and eventually: flames.”

It was the moment she’d dreamed about thousands of times, but was so certain it would never come to fruition. Magic was only something in the pages of her favorite books, something she’d always yearned for, but wasn’t real. How was this possible? Meryl felt her heart still beating a rapidly from surprise. She’d seen it with her own eyes though, so how was it not possible? Cornell lowered his hand and the flames dwindled away, sparing just a meager charred corner of the paper. “And now I’ve slowed the molecules back to their original state,” he explained.

“How – is this real?” Meryl asked.

Cornell shrugged. “What do you think?”

A warm feeling in her chest grew with their words but, simultaneously, a part of her was trapped in a state of disbelief. This was all too fantastic, too fictional, yet she found herself hoping it was true.

“Can you teach me that now?” she asked.

“Sometime soon,” Cornell said.

“And we can do this because we are a different breed of soul?” She wanted clarification.

Did she actually possess that kind of power, even if it was latent within her at this point?

“More or less yes,” Steven answered.

Luxton stepped in, “the common soul, as we will call it, cannot readily access advanced parts of their soul form while engaged in a human life. They’re also not exactly equal in terms of their powers and abilities while we’re in soul form as well.”

“But don’t take that as thinking we are above them,” Cornell warned. “We are merely a different breed. There are some things they can do but we can’t, and furthermore, there are other breeds of souls, some even more powerful than us, that can’t transfer themselves into lives in physical worlds.”

Meryl was silent for a moment. This wasn't precisely the answer of certitude that she was looking for, in fact, it raised more questions.

"Wait," she said, suddenly processing what Cornell had just said. "Did you say worlds?"

"Yes, 'worlds.' Plural."

Steven was smirking, "You have no idea, Meryl," he leaned in. "Our job, as this breed of soul, is to protect the order of things on our planet whenever we enter a life. We are like the puppet masters quietly pulling strings to make things happen, or not happen. We are what are called Protectors. We protect the balance of things on this planet so that life may continue and things can fall into place, as fate would have it. There are only a handful of us spread across Earth, and we are all in contact. You will meet the others on Earth eventually, but there are groups of us on every substantial life-inhabited planet. And some of our Protectors can even contact those-"

"We don't need to get into that, Steven," Luxton interjected. "She won't even be dealing with that. She's Earth-bound."

Meryl looked up at him and Cornell, feeling dazed.

"Besides," Cornell added, meeting Meryl's gaze and smiling at her thoughtfully, "she should be along by now, your mom will be expecting you soon." He looked at the watch on his

wrist, “the first reading camp is scheduled to be the shortest because there are no books to discuss yet.” He gestured to her and she stood.

“My mom doesn’t know about all of this?” She was met with a sudden chorus of urgent *no*’s from all three men.

“Your mother believes you’re at our advanced reading club,” Cornell explained. “No one on Earth, besides our fellow Protectors, is aware of our existence. We live in a covenant of secrecy, bound by the laws of the universe to protect the balance of things in silence and without ever claiming credit to any actions we commit, good or bad. You must promise to not divulge anything you’ve heard today or anything of your future lessons here. Understood?”

“Yes.” She naturally had assumed the secrecy of what she had been told, but felt strange about having to keep it from her own parents. “I promise,” she said.

“Good.” Cornell smiled and turned towards the door.

“It was great to meet ya,” Steven said, “and, I look forward to working with you.”

Meryl stepped forward with her arm outstretched for a handshake, but Steven pulled her into a hug. He smelled of a sweet but musky men’s cologne and had a strong embrace.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in surprised.

“No, really,” he whispered in her ear, “I’m glad I don’t have to be alone with these two old farts.”

Meryl laughed and leaned back from the hug. She then turned towards Luxton and shook his hand. Maneuvering around two desks back to the old doorway, she met Cornell in the hall. As they walked, her thoughts wandered back to the whisper shared between Luxton and Cornell. Cornell's expression worried her. She could tell there was far more to everything than they had told her yet, and whatever it was, it didn't seem good.

CHAPTER 2

Austin's first postcard was sitting on the kitchen table when Meryl got home. On the front was a large stone building with bright yellow words that said: The Wyoming Frontier Prison, Under Lock and Key Since 1901. She flipped it over excitedly.

Mer,

We were only in the car maybe 10 minutes before my parents wanted to kill Andrés. He wouldn't stop talking about how he could beat this black belt kid in his class because he has a better knowledge of fighting theory. The idiot's never thrown a punch in his life. I shut him up by saying that watching Dragonball Z all day long doesn't qualify you as a mixed martial arts expert.

We stopped in this town called Rawlins to stretch our legs. It's got this cool historical prison and we did a tour there before continuing on.

Can't wait to just get there. I bet you've read 100 books between the time I left and when you will get this letter. I expect a full report, double-spaced, Times New Roman font... Miss you...

Austin

Meryl hugged the postcard, then flipped it over and studied the prison. *A* wave of excitement overtook Meryl, and she raced upstairs to her room. It was rather small with white walls covered in different animal posters. Tucked in the corner by the window was her bunk bed. Her parents had bought the two-tiered bed for Meryl's friends to sleep over, but it had been barely used. Instead, Meryl used the top bunk to store her stuffed animals and winter blankets. Meryl's desk sat at the foot of the bed, so that she could crane around the wooden platform to see the beautiful mountains out her window. Her two overflowing bookshelves, and books that Meryl had stacked around them when they had run out of space, took up most of the room.

Plopping down at her desk, she froze. She wanted so badly to write to Austin and tell him everything, but she knew she couldn't. Even if she didn't tell him about Cornell and the others, she wouldn't even know where to send the letter. She leaned back into her chair.

Despite her irritation, Meryl still buzzed lightly with renewed energy. It still all seemed almost too good to be true. She stared off into space, looking at the stack of notebooks and papers on the corner of the desk. After a while, her vision focused. She had an idea. Amongst all of the extraneous papers was a journal that her mother had given her for Christmas several months back.

Steadying the top of the stack, Meryl pulled out the leather journal, then flipped through its blank pages. Journaling was something Meryl had never tried before; mainly due to the fact

that she never found her day-to-day life interesting enough to record. But this, this seemed worth it, and it would hopefully curb her overwhelming desire to tell someone.

She began writing. About an hour in there was a knock at her door.

“Yeah?” Meryl called.

The knob flicked and the door pushed open revealing Mrs. Astor with a tray. “Hey, honey,” she smiled.

“What’s this?” Meryl quickly shut her journal and turned to look at the tray. It had a bowl of salad, tiny bowl of black berries, two cookies, and a glass of what Meryl recognized as soymilk. Her mom was always pushing healthy food.

“You’re father’s staying late at work... again.”

What a surprise, Meryl thought. He almost always stayed late at work nowadays. Meryl didn’t mind her mom’s tray dinners, they gave her more time to read, but Mrs. Astor seemed a bit bothered by it.

“Thanks.” Meryl pushed her journal aside and Mrs. Astor set down the tray on the desk.

“Enjoy,” her mother said, her voice far less heartening than her words. She leaned down and kissed her daughter on the head before leaving.

“You okay?” Meryl asked after her.

Mrs. Astor didn’t turn to answer. “Fine,” she said as she swept out the door.



Meryl followed Cornell up the small wooden stair passageway again. This time, they didn't go down the hall into the study. Instead, they went through the first door to the left after ascending the stairs. She squinted and blinked as Mr. Cornell opened the door, letting a powerful blast of sunlight into the dark corridor. Through hazy, light bogged eyes, Meryl could make out a rooftop garden complete with its own layer of nicely trimmed grass covering the open space.

“It's kind of a personal hobby of mine,” Cornell explained.

They both stepped out onto the mini oasis and Cornell shut the door. Other buildings and the mountains shone beautifully in the distance. They moved deeper into the garden. At the center was the vaulted stain glass ceiling, jutting several feet into the air and protected by a small fence. They walked along the grassy platform in-between various patches of colorful flowers. The large garden was primarily edged with various bushes but with a few complimentary flowers scattered within the natural barrier. A few small trees and tall spiraling bushes were arranged strategically throughout the landscape, each occupying their own large pots of soil.

“The trees are too big to plant with the rest of them,” Mr. Cornell explained, seeming to read her mind. “Are you ready?”

“Where are the others?”

“Steven is almost always late, and Luxton will not be joining us today.” A flash of concern shone on his face. Then he dropped into the grass and crossed his legs to sit, moving surprisingly fast for someone his age. “We are going to start with meditation,” he said. “The world moves quickly - so quickly that we often forget to focus in the moment. Think deeper, be in that moment, and you may find you know more than you ever thought you did.”

He sounded a bit like a dramatic soothsayer to Meryl and she couldn't help but picture him delivering those same words in a Shakespearean style. She tried to push the image from her brain though and focus on his words.

“In our beginning meditation sessions, you must attempt to become a blank slate. Remove all thoughts. Don't even think about thinking. It is going to be hard, but try it for the next,” he glanced down at the watch on his wrist, “two minutes. Go.”

Meryl sat still and closed her eyes. *Think of nothing... think of nothing... think of nothing... oh shoot, I'm thinking about thinking nothing – and now I'm thinking about that... okay, just breathe and think of nothing... nothing... empty your mind... ugh! My mind feels like it's buzzing! ...okay, getting irritated isn't going to help. Just stop thinking altogether... – wow! It's working! Oh shoot.... Now it's not anymore... just think of nothing.... Oh crap! I forgot to breathe!gotta breathe.... Okay, deep breaths, and nothing... nothing... nothing... okay this isn't working... maybe I could try to think of a blank white room... but a room is something, so*

maybe I'll just think of the color white... wait, but if I imagine the color white, isn't that still something?! Ugh! Forget it! Just think of nothing... emptiness... nothing-

“Time! How’d that go?”

Meryl opened her eyes and sighed in frustration. “Not so great. I kept thinking about how I had to think of nothing. How do you shut that off to actually think of nothing?”

“Lots and lots of practice,” he said.

He pat the ground beside him, motioning to her. “Try this, lay down so you don’t even have to keep your balance sitting. Now, imagine when you are in bed about to go to sleep. Every night there is a moment right in between consciousness and sleep that you occupy. I’m sure you’re familiar with the feeling. You become free and relaxed and sometimes, when you slip too quickly towards sleep, you experience a falling sensation that can jerk you awake. Try to have your mind occupy the spot just before that, and breathe.”

Meryl lay like that for what felt like forever. After a while, she nearly did fall asleep, her limbs twitched.

“Sorry I’m late!”

Meryl sat up in surprise. Steven had burst through the door into the garden. He wore a loose great t-shirt and dark jeans. Meryl looked to her right at Cornell. He was laying a little over a yard away in a patch of shade. He hadn’t even twitched.

“One hour late,” an almost disjointed voice scolded.

“Sorry,” Steven mumbled much quieter than before. He moved through the garden to join them and immediately selected his own spot to lay, closing his eyes.

As peculiar as it all was, Meryl followed suit, closing her eyes and trying to reach back into her Zen zone. After a few minutes, Meryl heard a distracting whisper.

“Psst. Don’t open your eyes, just listen,” Steven whispered. “If you’re having trouble thinking of nothing I’ve got something you can try tomorrow. Work out before our session. Go running, something like that. The exercise releases all these chemicals called endorphins. When you’re tired from a workout it’s easier.”

“Thanks,” Meryl whispered back. They were silent for the next hour or so. Finally they braked for lunch, eating their packed food in the grass picnic style. Meryl’s limbs felt stiff from lying for so long. Steven assured her that it would go away if she stretched.

“Besides, after a week or two, you won’t just be doing meditation anymore,” he said. “In fact, you’ll almost be wishing you could go back to this.”

Back to this? She wondered what could make her long so much for meditation. It seemed to be an integral part of her training somehow, but she couldn’t help but be eager to move forward. She wanted to start trying magic, to see what they got to do out in the world. After seeing what was possible, Meryl found herself lacking the patience for meditation.

After lunch, Cornell reviewed a few more tips with Meryl about meditation and reaching a state of 'being,' which he declared as the goal of the week. Then, they meditated, for hours. By the end of it, Meryl was stiff. It seemed next to impossible to really think of nothing, and what was it accomplishing anyways?

The next two days were a repeat of the first. A few times on the second day Meryl caught herself thinking of nothing, and by the third day, she could sustain it for almost a minute. She reported these minor successes to Cornell who beamed and congratulated her. Apparently it was a big success in the overall process and she was on her way to 'being.' Meryl could not help but feel woefully unimpressed by her own accomplishment. She guessed it had bigger implications in the long run, but she still felt insignificant in the realm of possibility.

At the conclusion of the third day, as they reentered the corridor from the garden, Meryl noticed a figure walking towards the end of the hall, carrying something covered in cloth. After a moment, she registered who it was. "Luxton!" she called. He turned to her, and she recoiled. A large gash split part of his face, starting from the hairline over his right eye and extending down around the outside of his eye to mid-cheek. It seemed to have healed somewhat but was clearly fresh.

“Colin!” Cornell’s voice was urgent. He pushed past Meryl, rushing towards Luxton.

“Well done today,” he called back over his shoulder at her, “we will continue tomorrow.

Goodbye.”

He and Luxton disappeared into one of the back rooms. Taking a silent cue from Cornell, Steven led Meryl down the steps and back out into the library, all the while chatting over meaningless topics. She knew he was just trying to distract her, and she wasn’t falling for it. What had Mr. Luxton been carrying? She tried to picture it, but she had been so focused on his face that she couldn’t remember. They reached the landing and Meryl turned to wave goodbye. Steven waved back then turned to sprint up the stairs. As he did, Meryl could see his face turned from a delightful smile, to one riddled with panic. An urge to follow him gripped at her. Maybe she could sneak into the corridor and just listen. For a moment, she weighed the consequences of getting caught. What was going on? What were they hiding?

It would be nearly a year before she knew that they had retreated in secret to actually discuss what she had done.

CHAPTER 3

The rest of the week Luxton was missing. When she tried to ask about it, Cornell shrugged it off and Steven changed the subject. Meryl tried to ignore her nagging curiosity, but it wouldn't go away. It made it even harder for Meryl to meditate and at the end of the week when she couldn't honestly report that she had been able to stay in her Zen state for ten minutes, Cornell declared that they would have to then just continue with meditation again on Monday. She hung back in the garden for a moment before heading back inside.

Cornell's voice echoed from one of the rooms in the middle of the hall, the door was open and light was coming out of it.

"You can't rush her too much," Cornell said.

"We don't have much time!" the second voice snapped. "We're scarce and the threats are rising. She's not a toddler, she can take it." Meryl finally recognized the second voice as Luxton. Had he been there the whole time?

"You know what can happen if you rush training don't-" Cornell suddenly cut off and Meryl heard someone moving to the hallway. She quickly tried to duck down the staircase. Even though there was no way he could've seen her, she heard Cornell say her name quietly. She pretended not to hear and left for the day.

That weekend, Meryl received her second post card from Austin. This one was from Yellowstone itself. She marveled at the beautiful images of the trees and various animals on the front before flipping it over.

Mer,

I miss you! Hope you're summer is going as good as mine so far. We got to Yellowstone (as I'm sure you can tell from the picture on the card), and it's super fun! Met up with all my cousins yesterday, which was cool. We're planning a big hike tomorrow so I'm gonna save the rest of this card for that.

...Okay, it's tomorrow! Actually, tomorrow night to be specific. Or rather... tonight... whatever! The hike was super fun! We saw some moose. Andrés swore he saw a bear, but we're pretty sure he was lying.

Wish you were here. That'd be fun.

Austin

Meryl blushed at the end, then shook herself. Missing her best friend was nothing to be coy about.

She spent a good portion of the rest of the weekend recording the events of the week in her journal. She slept soundly, exhausted, and before she knew it, it was Monday again. Meryl

woke early that morning so Mrs. Astor could drive her to the library before the meeting started.

Taking Steven's advice, she went for a run around the perimeter of the library. After a several laps, Meryl felt plenty tired, and to her surprise, the trick worked. She tried to slow her breathing, feeling her leg muscles tingle and twitch slightly after the exertion, as she lay in the grass listening to Cornell's guided meditation.

“Feel the grass tickling your fingers, the breeze across your face, listen to the world around you, and pay attention to its smells, even its taste,” he instructed.

The sun was particularly bright that day as it shone down on the rooftop garden. Steven hadn't arrived for the training that morning, and when Meryl asked about it, Mr. Cornell told her he was busy with 'more pressing matters.'

“So we're not thinking of nothing today?”

“No,” Cornell said. “I want you to breath and recognize the fact that you are alive and in this world.”

This was easier than the blank meditation ever was. For nearly an hour, Meryl felt the breeze, the heat of the sun, and a slight fragrance of petunias.

During lunch, Cornell stressed the importance of her connection to the world around her. “Never forget that,” he instructed. “Never forget to pause every once in a while and be in awe at what you are a part of.”

“Okay.” Despite the emphasis in his voice, Meryl agreed without much thought.

“*Are* you a part of it?”

Meryl paused, confused. Was this a test? Either way the answer seemed glaringly obvious to her. “Of course,” she said.

“Are you sure? Prove to me that you exist,” he said.

Meryl sat stunned. “I...” she stammered. “I don’t understand. Of course I exist. You can see me and hear me –”

“Ah,” he interrupted, “schizophrenics see and hear things that aren’t real. So what does that prove?”

“I can touch things. I have a physical body.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Forget trying to prove it to me,” Mr. Cornell instructed, “rather, ask yourself if you exist.”

She paused. “I do,” she said finally.

“How do you know?” Mr. Cornell asked. “What if your senses are all a sham? Who’s to say all of this isn’t in your head.” Mr. Cornell gestured around. “What if there was a deceiver who has fabricated all of this and is tricking you into thinking it exists. You can’t trust what you see, feel, smell, because it could all be an illusion crafted by this master deceiver. So, what are you left with? How do you know that anything is real?”

Meryl sat, stunned and unable to answer. She suddenly wished the goal was meditation because for once her mind truly was completely blank. “I don’t know,” she said, finally.

“So begins the third part on your lesson of ‘being,’ ” Mr. Cornell declared. “Prove to yourself that you exist.”

Meryl found the riddle of her existence to be increasingly convoluted. If everything she saw, smelled, tasted, and felt wasn’t as she perceived it, then what was it, and was it really there? After a while, she devised a counter-argument revolving around the fact that people seem to commonly agree on things – cookies are sweet, puppies are soft, and the sun is bright. That theory was squashed though by the fact that the people she saw and heard might not exist. In fact, most of life wasn’t much different from an extremely vivid dream. What if it was all a dream? What if this was all in her head and didn’t really exist? Was she crazy? Did she exist, or was everything a fabrication of her mind? Meryl’s head hurt.

Cornell broke the silence. “What have you come up with?”

Meryl caught him up on the progression of her thoughts over the past hour. “So basically all I’ve come up with is doubt, overwhelming doubt. I don’t even know if I exist anymore,” she said, frustrated.

“You’ve come up with valid points. Even your counter-arguments were good avenues to explore, but there’s something you’re missing. Look for the pattern. What was the one thing that was present in all the scenarios that you came up with?”

Meryl’s mind was still painfully blank. “I don’t know.”

“Thinking,” Mr. Cornell answered.

“I did think about it,” Meryl said, exasperated.

“No.” Mr. Cornell chuckled. “I was giving you the answer: thought. What you’ve just pondered for the last hour is the question that the philosopher René Descartes posed hundreds of years ago. He came to a conclusion stating: ‘I think, therefore I am.’ He recognized that even if everything around him was an illusion, it was undeniable that he was still thinking about those illusions – still thinking in general. If his thoughts were undoubtedly real, then ultimately he was real in a sense too.”

Meryl was aghast by the brilliance of the concept. It was true, throughout everything she considered, her own thoughts were the only constant and the only thing that seemed incontrovertible.

“You exist, and this is the first time that you are actually certain of it. It’s powerful. Focus on being alive, and furthermore, appreciating it. While reality can be rather binding, it is simultaneously fragile when broken down to its core. Don’t forget that.”

He was right, this was the first time Meryl knew for a fact that she existed. The revelation felt empowering, almost like it gave her new life or at least a second chance to recognize her life. The breath in her lungs was fresh and alive, the sun on her skin, renewing and warm. She truly felt her body for the first time, her whole body as a unit, as a full alive thing. Everything was connected, from her toes slowly curling and spreading in her Steve Madden sandals, to her arms stretching out to graze the grass with her delicate fingertips, and all the way to her eyelashes gently tickling the very tops of her cheeks as she blinked in the Denver sunlight.

When the session drew to an end, she turned to her teacher again. “Mr. Cornell?” she asked. “I know I exist, but how can I tell if anything else does? I feel like I’m starting to doubt everything right now.”

“That is the question, isn’t it? What *do* we know? What do you feel like you know now?” he asked.

“Nothing except that I’m alive, to be honest. It’s kinda scary,” she said.

“Yes. It can be an intimidating thought,” Cornell agreed. “But you’ve reached a crucial step in your training. Now that you know nothing, perhaps you can learn something.”

Meryl considered the thought as a whole. If she didn’t know anything, than how could she be sure she *was* a Protector. How was she sure anything was true? These thoughts whirled in her head finally culminated in an exasperated, “How can you believe all of this then?”

“What? About being a Protector?”

“Yeah. How can you be so sure of something and yet so unsure about anything simultaneously? It’s maddening.”

“You’re thinking of it as a hindrance, but, in fact, its is not. It is a stable duality, a fluidity between a suspension of belief and understanding. I am certain that I don’t know the answers to everything. By accepting this fact alone, I can truly be one with the universe, because I can move with the universe no matter what way it goes or what it becomes. It means I’m not bound by a staunch set of beliefs that prevent me from seeing truth. I am part of the universe one way or another.”

That made sense, but it still didn’t answer your question. “But how are you sure about being a Protector, or about me being a Protector? How do you believe in Protectors overall?”

“Because I have no reason not to,” Cornell explained. “I could be wrong about everything, and I accept that. There is a truth whether I know it or not, but until I know for sure, I will follow what seems to be the most truthful things in life based on what I know. That can always change.”

Meryl was shocked by his calm disposition. Could she ever be comfortable not being sure about anything? In a way it was terrifying, but it also felt somewhat freeing. She supposed so,

maybe, because, in a way, it meant that anything was ultimately in the realm of possibility.

Meryl couldn't help but smile a tad, suddenly feeling accomplished in her lack of knowledge.

The following day, Cornell met Meryl by the front door of the library. Cornell looked odd, older than usual, and he had a cane with him. She wondered what the cane was for.

Gesturing to it, she asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, this is just part of the ensemble," Cornell said, flourishing his hand over his outfit.

"I needed it for our field trip today."

"Where are we going?"

Cornell peered down at his watch. "We will have to explain on the way, we're going to be late." He passed Meryl, heading for the front door and swinging the cane in his hand with each step. *Not a very useful cane when you do that*, Meryl thought. She followed.

Just outside the door a beat-up silver car sat running. Cornell opened the front passenger seat and climbed in.

"You comin'?" Meryl recognized Steven's voice coming from the drivers seat.

"Yeah." She opened a back door and climbed in. The car was horribly messy.

Sweatshirts, old fast food bags, and empty Starbucks cups littered the back floor. She shifted part of the mound with her feet as she sat, trying to make room for herself.

“Sorry ‘bout the mess,” Steven said, throwing a sympathetic look back at her through the rear-view mirror.

“It’s fine. So where are we going?” The second her belt clicked, the car lurched forward, heading away from the library.

“Applebee’s,” Cornell said.

“We’re getting lunch?”

“Yes, actually.” Cornell shifted in his seat so he could look back at her. It didn’t work exactly, and he just ended up craning his neck in an awkward angle. “Today you will be learning on the job.”

“It’s the best way to learn,” Steven chimed in. “Learn by doing, and you’ll never forget it.”

Meryl’s heart leapt excitedly. “Wait, we’re actually going to do Protector stuff? What are we going to do?”

“First off, let me explain our roles,” Cornell said. “We’re a family. Brother and sister,” he pointed between Steven and Meryl, “and grandfather.” He gestured to himself.

That’d be simple enough. Steven already somewhat felt like an older brother to Meryl. She’d always wondered what it’d be like to have a sibling, someone who supported her and gave her advice. Since they’d met, he’d kind of filled that position for her. It would be harder with

Cornell though. Meryl didn't have her grandparents anymore; they had all died when she was relatively young. Besides, Cornell felt more like a father figure to her. Especially with her own dad being so busy with work all the time, it was nice to have another role model be there for her on a daily basis.

Cornell continued, "we will be having an early lunch like a normal family. Around noon a young boy about age four will also be eating at the restaurant. He's our mission."

"Is he a Protector too?" Meryl asked.

"No," Steven said. "He's going to choke to death on his meal."

Meryl was horrified. "What?!"

"Don't worry." Cornell held up a hand to still her. "That's where Steven will come in. He's prepared to perform the Heimlich maneuver to save him. No one else at the restaurant will know how and EMS wouldn't get there in time."

"How do you know all of this?" Meryl was confused.

"Through meditation or sometimes the part of our souls that exist in the other dimension even contact us to warn us," Steven explained.

"They can do that? What's it like?"

"Shocking at first," Steven said. "Wait till it happens to you the first time. It'll talk to you, but it doesn't need words. It's more like a rush of emotion and ideas that flow into you."

Then it responds to your reactions and thoughts as though you are having a discussion. It can happen a lot when you're sleeping, like a 'prophetic' dream."

"And it warned you about this random boy," Meryl asked, looking at Cornell. He shook his head and pointed to Steven.

"Me. And it's not a random kid," Steven said. "We only receive information about things that would tip the balance of the world for better or for worse on a relatively large scale. The boy is supposedly gonna grow up to be super important in politics apparently."

Incredible. She couldn't believe they knew that much. Excitement buzzed within her. She wanted to see if it actually came true. As much as it would be horrifying to see a child choke, it'd be amazing if Steven were right about everything. The car's loud blinker clicked as they turned right, the large Applebee's sign parading past Meryl's window.

It was relatively empty inside the restaurant. It was colorful, full of booths and brightly lit. Before heading in, Steven had slipped on a false pair of glasses, partially obscuring his face. Then, he placed his hand on Cornell's hunched back, seeming to help him move. Cornell moved slowly, craned over his cane, and trusting his weight on it with every step. Meryl was impressed. The rouse was rather convincing. She trailed behind them as the old waitress led them to a table. When she had gone and they'd decided on their orders, the conversation resumed with Cornell asking Meryl about any instances where she may have shown a connection to her past lives.

“My dreams,” she answered immediately. “The ones I told you about that day, that’s probably the biggest thing. Then—” Meryl paused, unsure if she should go on.

“What?” Steven said.

“It’s weird but... well, there was this time when I was younger and my parents brought me to the museum to see this exhibit on medieval weapons. I wasn’t able to read yet, but I walked up to a few of them I guess I identified them all correctly. The only one I remember them telling me about is the falchion, because they were so shocked I knew the Old French word for it: fauchon. My dad had to read the whole display to realize why I was pronouncing it that way.”

“How’d they react?” Steven asked.

“They laughed it off. Dad figured he’d left the History Channel on one day and that I had watched a marathon special on medieval weaponry or something. But I had always felt weird about the situation,” she said.

“It can be hard as a child. It’s very rare that a Protector is born from a previous Protector, so parents are often shocked by the signs our kind show at a young age.”

Occasionally she used to wake up from one of her really vivid dreams in full panic and drenched in sweat because something had been so terrifying in the dream. But her parents never really knew about that. Suddenly she remembered a strange occurrence from when her family had been on vacation in Europe together. Her paternal grandparents were still alive at the time

and had paid for the five of them to travel to a few countries together for their fiftieth anniversary celebration. She remembered visiting Belgium, France, Switzerland, and one other country. It was France that had piqued her interest at the time. At only age four she had started picking up on a few words of the language oddly fast. However, that wasn't even the weirdest part. When they were visiting some ruins, Meryl pulled away from her parents, yelling something about 'home.' Then when they tried to leave, Meryl had broken down crying, refusing to leave. Her parents later told her that after they returned home to Denver, she kept asking them if she could "go home." After a few months of her constant questioning, they finally yelled at her to stop, and she did. Meryl regaled all of that to Steven and Mr. Cornell, who both smiled.

"You know what that means?" Mr. Cornell asked.

"I've definitely guessed," Meryl said. "It seems like I probably lived in France during my previous life."

"And during the Medieval times," Steven added.

They quieted as the waitress approached to take their orders. Just as they were wrapping up, Meryl saw the front door of the building swing open. A young man and woman came in. The man was holding a young boy dressed in a red shirt with a dinosaur on it. The mother was taking to the boy and he giggled, burying his face in his father's shoulder. As the waitress left, Meryl turned to Steven and Cornell.

“Is that him?” She gestured at the boy. They both turned in their seats. Steven nodded as he turned back to Meryl. “Well what should we do? Should we stop him now?”

Cornell was already shaking his head. “The events must unfold naturally. When the time comes, we will intercede. We have to appear to be here on accident. No one should ever know we have prior knowledge of the situation.”

She understood, but Meryl didn’t like the idea of having to watch a child start choking to death before doing anything. The conversation turned idle and Meryl found herself micro-focusing on the boy. When their food came, she ate absent-mindedly. Suddenly she felt a nudge on her arm and looked up to see Steven pulling his hand away.

“Relax. You look all tense,” he said. “Everything will be okay. Don’t focus on it. Think of it like an acting job – we’re just having lunch nothing more.”

Meryl tried her hardest to do exactly that, turning her attention to her plate. But she was immediately distracted again when she saw the full tray of food heading to the boy’s table. He looked so innocent, happily coloring his placemat with crayons. There was a pit in her stomach. She wanted to save him, needed to save him. The food was placed in front of his parents first, then him. He did a little side-to-side dance in his seat as his bowl of macaroni was presented to him. Then, his server lifted one last thing off the tray, a small bowl of grapes, full sized grapes, and set them in front of the boy. His parents didn’t seem to notice as they had already began

eating, but the bowl stood out like a bomb to Meryl. That was it, that simple bowl of fruit could be the death of him.

Cornell reached forward and grasped her arm. “Don’t stare,” he ordered.

Meryl looked down at her plate again. Part of her didn’t want to watch, but more so, she just wanted the whole situation over with. She felt tense in her seat she continued to pretend to pick at her plate, but was no longer hungry. Within a few minutes she heard a gasp and clatter of silverware dropping onto plates.

“Chase!” Meryl looked up in time to see both parents crowd their son. “Help,” the mother shrieked, “he’s choking!”

A server ran towards the kitchen yelling, “I’ll call 911!”

Meryl looked to Cornell and Steven. They both looked genuinely shocked as they stared over at the family.

“Help!” the mother cried again. This prompted Steven from his seat and he rushed over, pushing the parents aside and pulling the jerking toddler from his seat.

Meryl looked away, she couldn’t watch. Her hands balled up into fists. *He has to make it!* *He has to survive!* There was a commotion and suddenly an ear splitting cry broke out in the room. Panicked, Meryl looked up, half expecting to see the mother wailing over her dead son. But it was the boy who was crying, clutching at his mother as Steven handed him over to her.

Meryl was overcome with relief. Both parents fawned over Steven, thanking him from the bottom of their hearts. Then, a small applause broke out from the few customers and servers around the restaurant. Meryl joined in enthusiastically. Steven had been right about everything, down to the last detail. Before, Meryl had occasionally doubted the Protectors, but now, she had no doubt whatsoever.

Their server kindly comped their meals and they left relatively quickly. All the while, Steven refused offer after offer of gifts in gratitude from the child's parents. On the way back to the car as Steven continued to fake assist Cornell, he explained. "We don't do this for recognition; Protectors operate in secrecy and besides, we don't need a reward. Doing what we do is reward enough."

So be humble, Meryl thought. She knew it was a virtue to look at things that way, but after saving someone like Steven had, it would be nice to have some recognition. Like the fact that they hadn't paid for their food was a nice benefit of the job in Meryl's eyes.

They climbed into the car and took off.

"What'd you think of that?" Cornell asked.

"It was incredible," Meryl said, still running the situation over and over through her head.

"Good. That's the way you'll be learning most of your lessons as a Protector," he said.

"Learning by experience."

That sounded great to her. Meryl was invigorated, inspired. She couldn't wait to save a life.

CHAPTER 4

FALAISE, FRANCE - September 17, 1036

Sunlight lazily stretched through the castle's thin arched window, laying itself over Acelin's ground herbs. Outside in the bright autumn colored courtyard, the pages were exercising mistress Herleva's horses. The trees just outside the castle walls had changed colors into brilliant oranges and yellows. The sound of merchant carriages wheeling down the dirt road could be heard easily over the sounds of the conversations of the castle ground servants.

Acelin sat at the table, craned over a bowl of paste, her back aching as she continued to stir it. The door to her small room suddenly burst open and she jumped.

"Acelin," the man cried as he rushed in, "Mon Dieu! What can I do? Help me!"

Acelin's twin brother had her same mousy brown hair and blue eyes. He looked panicked, which concerned her. "What is it?" Acelin said, rushing to his side.

"Merope, she's ill," his voice oozed with his distress, "she cannot loose this baby too."

Acelin stiffened. Merope had lost their last two attempts at having children. The first being a miscarriage and the second, a stillbirth in which Merope almost died herself. With practiced movements, Acelin rushed to her table, grabbing a collection of herbs, before turning back to him.

"Take me to her," she said.



The young woman lay back in her bed, drenched in sweat and clutching her large swollen belly. Acelin pressed a wet towel to Merope's forehead, pushing her damp blonde curls out of the way.

"Will she make it?" her brother asked from behind Acelin.

Acelin looked back at him and he lowered his head in response. Francis had never been adept at managing his feelings. One thing Acelin knew for sure though, was his absolute devotion to his wife. He loved Merope like nothing else, and if she died, Acelin was afraid Francis would crumble. She bit her lip, staying her question for a moment, before stepping back towards him and whispering.

"If it's between her and the baby, whom do you want me to save? I have to know..."

He turned sheet white. "Will it come to that?" He swallowed roughly.

Acelin looked back at Merope's writhing body. It didn't look good, but she wasn't going to admit that to him. Instead she said quietly, "I can not say."

CHAPTER 5

They had lied to her. Or at least that's how Meryl felt when she was assigned hours of reading and required study time. Learning by experience her ass! Sessions had become more like lectures, covering topics of history primarily. Cornell insisted that history repeats itself, and that it's important to know where we came from to move forward. While Meryl agreed with that idea, she was annoyed at being bogged down by work. Her only respite was her time spent with Austin. He had returned a few weeks back with a tan and hundreds of pictures to share.

He practically tackled her, hopping out of the van as his mom pulled up and engulfing her in a bear hug. He then got an earful from his mother in Spanish about the dangers of jumping out of a moving vehicle. From what Meryl could gather, Mrs. Murray was equating the car lurching to the stop with jumping out of a car going eighty on the highway. Austin just put his head down and let her tirade wash over him, apologizing every time she took a breath - which was rare. When she had finished, Mrs. Murray also engulfed Meryl, insisting that she join them on their next vacation.

“You're like a second daughter to me,” she had said, pulling back and brushing Meryl's hair behind her ear.

That struck Meryl. She always felt somewhat close to her mother, although in all honesty, they never did anything together. Mrs. Murray was always so involved, so energetic and friendly. Meryl loved it.

Austin complained that her time at camp limited their summer together, but never pressured her to quit, since he knew how much she loved to read. Mr. Murray once suggested Austin try to join the group. The suggestion sent Meryl into a minor panic until she saw Austin's scrunched up face and relaxed. He wasn't much of a reader anyways; she had nothing to worry about.

Meryl was stuck in the biggest balancing act of her life. Class, time with Austin, Protector sessions, meditation, homework for school, studying and reading for Protector sessions, repeat. She was exhausted. Her father had noticed and pushed Meryl to 'quit reading club.' When she told this to Cornell and Luxton about her dad's reluctance for her to continue, to her surprise, a fight broke out. Cornell had seemed disappointed, but suggested they cut back on her workload to stop her dad from being so concerned. But at that recommendation, Luxton's eyes became fierce, nearly blasting out of his skull, he didn't reveal his temper directly to Meryl though. He excused himself and Mr. Cornell to the adjacent room before going off. At first she could hear every word. He was ranting about time and threats.

"You're playing with our time like it's a game!" he shouted to Cornell vehemently.

“Colin, please...” Cornell began.

“No!”

“Just a minute,” Cornell’s voice rose. Then suddenly everything went silent. Meryl could not even hear them moving in the room when she approached the door. Her hand balled into a fist and rose to knock, but she held back, not wanting to disturb them. As exhausted as she was, she didn’t exactly want to cut back on her sessions. Since they had told her about the attacks on the orders, she felt perpetually unsafe and far too observant of any misfortunes that were reported around the globe. After waiting nearly twenty minutes, the two men emerged. Mr. Cornell’s face was creased with concern, and though Luxton’s temper appeared to have waned, his lips were still pursed in a serious, unbending expression. Cornell apologized, then said, “You need to come inside so we can discuss something.”



“Look,” Luxton leaned on the table towards Meryl. “I expect you to listen carefully and remember that everything I tell you is highly sensitive information. You will *not* leak it to anyone.”

That was a given. Why did he always treat her like a baby? Partially out of indignation, Meryl refused to answer him and, rather, stared up at him, waiting. Luxton took that as a yes.

“Good,” he said. “We were charged with the duty of protecting the balance on our planet when it was determined that ‘free will’ allowed highly evolved creatures to abuse their advantages to harm one another and the planet.”

“Furthermore,” Cornell added in, “when they became like parasites to their own planets, killing them one way or another. It was a real problem. In fact, it’s always a looming problem, which is why we exist.”

Luxton continued, “recently we’ve been suffering from a shortage of our kind, and so the scales have been tipping for the worse. You’ve heard it on the news – the fires, mass storms, spikes in terrorist activities and shootings – madness is leaking from every crevice of the planet and slowly poisoning our existence. We can tell it is coming from a particular source, but we can’t tell what or where it is. But whatever it is, it’s aiming directly at us, at Earth’s Protectors, wreaking havoc from inside out.”

“By distracting us from our work and harming us, we aren’t able to prevent the evil that exists from spreading,” Cornell explained. “But, it’s not just the four of us. We are just one Order of Protectors there’s a total of thirteen on Earth, and we’ve been getting word from the others that they’re being attacked-” he trailed off and Steven spoke up, concern spreading in his voice. “People have been killed, Meryl,” he said. “We think... we’re being hunted.”

“How is that, though?” Meryl asked. “Aren’t Protectors a secret? How could anyone be hunting us? Do you think someone exposed us?”

Luxton shook his head. “We don’t think so. We’re not sure what’s going on. When we’re protecting the balance, our meditation is what binds us to a connective consciousness of our world, providing us with the guidance of where and what evil is in action. Then by consulting with our soul forms in even deeper meditation, we receive guidance on how to proceed. This connection has become fuzzy, but it has still managed to tell us that we remain unexposed.”

“Do you think the thing attacking us is making your meditation fuzzy?” Meryl said. Immediately all three men were nodding.

“We’re sure of it,” Mr. Cornell said. “And unfortunately, it’s incredibly powerful. To simultaneously disrupt every protector’s connection is a feat none of us could achieve.”

“Can’t you guys do your own form of magic?”

Mr. Cornell’s head bobbed side to side. “Yes, technically,” he said. “But it’s more complicated than that. In order to perform something like that, one would’ve had to delve into what we consider Dark Arts, and no Protector alive today is allowed to study the topic.”

“But if whoever’s attacking us isn’t an outsider, and isn’t a Protector, then who are they?” Meryl asked.

“Or what could they be,” Steven added.

“That’s the question,” Cornell said. “We’re getting desperate for an answer.”

“So we have to rush your training,” Luxton finished. “Cornell doesn’t want me telling you this, but not long before we sought you out to begin your training, there were four of us at the U.S.-based Order. His name was Fritz. He often traveled between the Orders as a sort of liaison. But he was murdered in the first attack on us in Germany. That entire Order fell, no survivors. It was also the end of our means of transportation between Orders. Each Order is equipped with a portal that, when passed through, could connect you directly with the arch of another Order. But once we were breached, we had to close the connections.”

“The connection from Germany was used to gain access to the Chinese Order, a few of the Protectors from there escaped the attack and that’s when the official shut down occurred,” Cornell said. “Somehow, whatever this is made its way to North America. It last attacked the Order in Canada, stealing a vast amount of vital books and relics.”

“We’re pretty sure the Canadian base will be attacked again, though,” Luxton said. “So it’s being evacuated. “It might move to us next, so we may need to evacuate as well.”

“What? You mean leave Denver?” Meryl asked. “I can’t do that. What about my parents?”

“They’ll be in more danger if you remain,” Luxton said. “If their connection to you is discovered, they could be used as a form of leverage against you.

This isn't what she expected at all, and certainly wasn't what she signed up for. She was taken with the idea of helping people, not fighting a mysterious murderer.

"We're not leaving yet," Steven said, curbing her panic. "We're not sure if it's headed our way. So it is more important for you to just keep training right now and try to be ready."

A flare of excitement quickly passed through Meryl. "Does that mean I get to start learning magic?" she asked.

"Not yet," Mr. Cornell said, holding up a hand to still her. "But perhaps sooner than normal. You'll have to prove to us that you're dedicated to your training."

Especially now that she felt caught in the crossfire, she was eager to learn, and fast.



Cornell had sufficiently covered history lessons. From Mesopotamia, to the fall of the Berlin wall, Cornell had been incredibly thorough, providing crash courses on every significant historical event, date, or figure he could muster up. After that, he had begun covering literature, which Meryl found to be her favorite of all the subjects she was learning. Towards the end of her eighth grade year, he had begun to sprinkle in some discussions on psychology and philosophy. But, as Meryl came to realize, Cornell was pretty much a walking manifestation of philosophy itself.

Luxton was the hardest on her. It was no surprise that he covered all of the analytical subjects: math, physics, and chemistry. Meryl found all three to be challenging, a fault to which Luxton had little sympathy. He expected perfection, and Meryl often failed to deliver. Often she wanted to throw a book across the room at Luxton whenever he would lean forward on his desk towards her with that disapproving look on his face. He would always do it mid-lecture, as he paced back and forth in front of her, taking at a speed inconsiderate of someone handwriting their notes. He'd suddenly shoot out a question, and when Meryl would take too long to answer, either because she was pondering what he had said, or quickly scribbling out the numbers in front of her, he would spin around on one foot and plant his fists into his desk, his arms straight and straining with tensed muscles. She hated that stupid look.

Meryl shared those thoughts with Steven during one of their lessons and he laughed. Sessions with him were usually far more laid back than with the other two. Meryl guessed that part of it might've had to do with their closeness in age. Even though he covered science topics, which she never had cared for before, Meryl still found them engaging. Maybe it was his enthusiasm or the fact that they often wandered off topic, but she didn't feel like she was being lectured at for once, which was nice. But the nagging restlessness remained in her; she was desperate to move forward in her training. She finally broke down in one of her sessions with Steven.

“What is the point of this!?” She threw down her pencil and shoved away her half-drawn diagram. “Why do I need to know the layers of the sun? This is stupid.”

While he was often lenient, Steven was still serious about his lessons, and Meryl expected him to at least be irritated with her. But, to her surprise, he laughed.

“I’m surprised you haven’t figured that out yet,” he said.

“Figured what out?”

Steven moved away from the whiteboard and as he did, the painting that sat awkwardly above it began to move down, perfectly covering the board after a moment. Meryl loved how it did that. Steven grabbed the chair closest to Meryl, turned it around and sat on it backwards as he always did.

“Figured out why you’re studying all of this,” he said.

She shrugged. “Because it’s tedious and you guys want to bore me,” she said. Meryl knew she was being a bit of a smart-ass, but she was so irritated she couldn’t help herself. The snarky words felt good as they leapt off her tongue, striking at him. His lips pursed, but he maintained his composure.

“If that’s what you really think than you’re far from ready,” he said.

Meryl sighed and rolled her eyes. “No,” she said. “But I don’t know why. Tell me.”

Steven tipped his chin skyward a tad. “No,” he said.

Meryl huffed. "I have to figure it out," she said in a bit of a mocking voice.

"Yup." He nodded.

"Does it... have something to do with our meditation?" she asked.

It was Steven's turn to roll his eyes. "Come on, Meryl. You're smarter than this."

She huffed again. "Apparently not."

"Are you giving up?"

She was silent for a moment. "No," she mumbled. "I'm just..."

"You're tired, fine," Steven said. "It's because the more you know, the more powerful you are. If we started your training with teaching you magic, it would mean nothing if you didn't have a basic knowledge of the world."

"I guess that makes sense," she sighed.

"As a Protector, you're gifted with a lot of power in order to help maintain a balance of the world. But why would we trust that power to someone who doesn't understand the world first?"

Meryl felt foolish. What had she expected? Of course she would not be trusted with something she had no concept of. A feeling of sheepishness washed over her as she realized how naïve and disrespectful she probably seemed to all of them, pushing constantly for them to give her great power without knowing how to use it. She cursed under her breath. "Idiot."

“Huh?”

Meryl cringed. She hadn't meant for him to hear. “I just – I feel kinda stupid for not realizing that before.”

“Well, like you said, you're tired, worn out, stretched thin, frustrated - all that shit, so it's hard for you to think straight, which is understandable, but you let that all bother you, and furthermore, that's 'cause you doubt yourself. You gotta have more confidence in your own thoughts. You're smarter than you think.”

Meryl huffed a bit. It was a nice compliment, but it was hard for her to take it when it followed discussion of her flaws. Steven seemed to notice that her mood was still tense. He clucked his tongue once and leaned back. “Know what?” he said. “I think that's enough lesson for today. Let's do some real talk. I'm done lecturing you.”

Meryl couldn't help her lips splitting into a small smile. “And I'm done being lectured at,” she said in a light, teasing tone.

“I know. So here's what we'll do instead. I'll give you...” he paused, thinking for a moment, “-five questions, any questions, that you can ask me and I'll answer truthfully, whatever it is.”

“Really?” Meryl said.

“Yup,” Steven said. “Shoot.”

She asked a burning question she had, had since first being introduced to the Order's secret holding in the library. "What are the other rooms up here?" she asked. "I know the garden and two studies, but what about the others?"

When ascending the stairs, directly to the left was the door to access the roof garden, but to the right was the long hallway. Each side was lined with three doors directly across from one another. The main study, which was the first room Meryl had ever entered and the one all of her lessons were held in, was the middle door on the left side of the hall. The only other room she knew about was the one first on the right. It was a secondary study, the one in which Luxton and Cornell had, had their fight in just the other day. Steven smiled and immediately began to fill in the gaps of her mental map. The first door on the left side was their Order's primary portal, which connected them to the other Orders. The third door was the Relic Room and directly across from that was the Restricted Library, which contained books about magic and information collected by previous Protectors. The middle door on the right, was apparently just storage.

"Really, just storage?" Meryl asked.

"Yup. Brooms, extra chairs, shit like that. Not exciting at all."

"Are you kidding? I want an extra chair!" Meryl said in a faked tone of enthusiasm.

Steven chuckled, amused. "Naw." Meryl returned to her normal voice. "So what are the relics? I remember Luxton mentioned them before."

“It’s kinda a misnomer – they’re not like religious things. They’re more like magical items. Each item has been permanently impregnated with a specific spell, or group of spells, so it does a certain thing.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there’s this one magnifying glass that when you look through it, it translates whatever language is on the page into the language you know.”

“That’s kind of cool!” Meryl exclaimed. “What other ones are there?”

“Do you really want to waste your fourth question on that?”

“Fourth?” Meryl started. “But I only asked-”

“The rooms, the relics, then you asked a follow-up question, so-”

“I didn’t know those counted!” Meryl protested, cutting him off. Steven shrugged with a sly smile. “Fine,” she huffed. “Then I want to know about the portal. How does it work?”

“Remember how we touched on wormholes in the universe last week and how there are theory’s that they can be used for transportation?”

“Yeah,” Meryl said.

“Same kind of idea. They’re wormholes, bends in the universe here on Earth that connect one part of the Planet with another part.” He grabbed a piece of paper from in front of Meryl and her pencil, making a dot on one end of the paper. “Say we’re here,” he said, referring to the dot.

“Now a wormhole is created.” He folded the paper over, covering the dot with the other half.

“While in reality, on the paper as a whole we are way far from this other side of the paper, the wormhole, which is the fold, connects the two parts so that se can pass from one end of the paper to another as if we were just taking a normal step.”

“So cool!”

“It is,” Steven smiled. “What’s you’re last question.” He unfolded the paper as Meryl thought silently.

Finally, she said, “Do you trust them?”

“Huh?” Steven looked confused.

“Part of me still doubts this sometime, so I want to know from you, truthfully, from the bottom of your heart, do you trust Mr. Cornell and Luxton?”

Steven’s face stiffened and his eyes poured into her with a serious but genuine intensity.

“With my life,” he said.

CHAPTER 6

After their talk, Meryl found that she trusted Steven even more. It was a relief to finally get some clear answers, answers she could trust. She did trust him, he had never given her a reason not to. But even though the same went for Cornell and Luxton, she felt a certain amount of doubt towards them – Luxton most of all. He was so elusive and private that it was hard to form any connection or basis of trust. Cornell was the opposite, open and friendly as ever, but the fact that he had withhold information from her upset Meryl. It wasn't lying, but it was concealing the truth, which was kind of the same thing in a way. At least she had Steven now, and, of course Austin. Although she couldn't share anything about the Order with him, he was still her main confidant for everyday headaches and always her best friend.

That Saturday morning they had walked to the park together. Remnants of winter were evident in the brisk chill of the spring breeze. It was cloudy and dewy from yesterday's rain. Both Meryl and Austin were bundled in their coats as they tromped over the damp woodchips to the park's swing set. Meryl spun and sat on the middle swing, while Austin launched himself at the swing to her right, grabbing the chains in his hands and trying to swing his feet up onto the plastic seat. He failed miserably and his feet hit the ground skirting across the ground and sending woodchips flying. Meryl laughed. The way he had landed looked so ridiculous. He had

somehow maintained his grip and now his arms were fully outstretched holding the top half of his body up at a weird up-wrenched angle as his knees and below rested in the dirt.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer,” he teased.

“Click,” she said, and laughed again.

“Ah, this is kind of hurting.” He awkwardly managed to get himself back on his feet.

Meryl saw his jeans were coved in dirt. She used her feet to propel her swing sideways so she could reach him and began to try to brush them off.

“Ugh, its all mud,” she said, crinkling her nose, then she laughed. “I think I just made it worse.”

“Way to smear it around,” Austin teased her.

Meryl smiled, feeling a slight blush creep on her cheeks. She was suddenly very aware of her hand being on his leg, it felt strong and muscular under her fingers. She looked up at him and saw his twinkling brown eyes looking down at her. Immediately, she tucked her feet under herself and grabbed onto to chains at her sides as the swing shot back to its normal position.

Austin sat back on his own swing normally as Meryl’s swayed side to side.

“Can you believe we’re about to go to high school?” he asked.

“Not really,” Meryl responded, starting to propel her swing in the normal back and forth sway. “Seems kinda surreal doesn’t it.” She saw Austin nod. “Are you nervous?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Well, maybe. More so I’m just curious to know what’s gonna happen. You know? Not knowing is the worst part.”

“Tell me about it!”

“Right?”

Austin did not know the half of what she meant in those few words, but at least, in a way, he could relate to what she was feeling. They riffed over that topic for the next few hours before Austin surprised her with a new topic.

“So, what are we doing for your birthday?”

“My birthday? It’s not for about another month still.”

A car passed by the park, spraying up water from a puddle on the street as it passed.

“So,” he shrugged, “sue me for trying to plan ahead and make something awesome for you.”

“I don’t need anything crazy,” she said.

“Uh... have you met me?” Austin asked. Meryl rolled her eyes. What was she in for?

“I’m planning stuff whether you give me ideas or not, so spill!” When she didn’t talk right away, Austin leapt from his swing and caught her mid-sway, wrapping his arms around her middle.

“This is a holdup!” he said dramatically. “No one leaves till I get at least a favorite cake flavor!”

Meryl yelped in surprise and laughed as her heart suddenly jumped in her chest.

“Vanilla!” she cried. “I like vanilla cake.”

In the same dramatic voice he said, “and frosting?”

“Vanilla too!”

He released her. “Got it, double chocolate cake with extra fudge it is,” he said.

“You’re insane,” Meryl laughed, she felt the red returning to her cheeks and wished it would stop.

“You know it,” he said proudly, returning to his swing.

Another car passed by, this one silver and somewhat run-down looking. As it passed it suddenly slowed, then lurched to a stop and the driver’s window opened.

“Steven?” Meryl said in surprise as she recognized the smiling face sticking out of the vehicle.

“Meryl,” he called. Meryl leapt up from her swing and ran over to the car, leaving Austin for a moment.

“Hey,” she said as she reached him. “What are you doing here?”

“Just visited a friend of mine who lives in this neighborhood,” he said. “I thought I recognized you sitting on the swing. Guess I was right.”

“Yeah,” Meryl smiled.

“Who’s that?” Steven jerked his head, indicating Austin. “Is that your friend Aaron?”

“Austin,” Meryl corrected.

“Ah, shit. Sorry. Anyways, didn’t mean to bother you, just wanted to say hi.”

Meryl smiled, backing away from the car. “See you Monday?”

“Eh, probably Tuesday, but yeah.” He waved again. “Bye.”

Meryl turned and half-skipped back to the swings. She noticed Austin was looking after the car, a small frown on his face.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s Steven,” Meryl said.

Austin shook his head slightly. “He looks kinda old. He doesn’t go to school with us does he?”

“No. I know him from my book club. I’m getting kinda chilly. Wanna head back?” she asked. Austin stood without answering and Meryl did the same, falling in step with him on their way out of the park.

They spent the rest of the day at Austin’s, baking cookies with Mrs. Murray and watching Disney movies. Austin’s mood had returned to normal by the time they got back to his house, and Meryl didn’t feel like asking him about it in fear that his weird demeanor would return.

Together, they sang along with every Disney song that played. By the end of the day they had

finished five movies and made four different types of cookies. Mrs. Murray insisted that Meryl take some home to her parents. She grabbed a sugar cookie for her mother and an oatmeal raisin for her dad. She knew they were his absolute favorite, so she was excited to bring it to him. Mrs. Murray wrapped the cookies each in their own paper towel and handed them to Meryl to hold for the drive home. The drive only took a few minutes. Meryl hopped out of the van, thanked Mrs. Murray and hurried inside with the cookies in hand.

“Dad!” she called out as she closed the front door. “Dad, I’ve got something for you!”

It was dark in the hallway, and there was no answer. Then, in the silence, Meryl suddenly heard what sounded like a sniff.

“Dad?” she called again.

A voice sounded from the kitchen to the left, but it wasn’t her father’s.

“He’s not here,” Mrs. Astor called back. Her voice sounded strained, teary.

“Mom?” Meryl moved down the hallway and to the left, turning into the kitchen. Mrs. Astor sat at the table. Her face was red and blotchy and her eyes looked oddly washed out. Meryl realized this was one of the few times she was seeing her own mother without makeup, and it looked like it was because she had cried it off. “Mom?” Meryl asked again, her voice trembling and quiet this time. “What’s wrong?”

Mrs. Astor, gave another sniffle and wiped her nose with a battered looking tissue in her hand. Then she cleared her throat. “Your father,” she said. “Has decided that, uh,” she swallowed, her voice weak and shaky, “that I’m apparently not what he wants in life anymore.” She pursed her lips. An anchor seemed to hold Meryl to her spot, freezing every muscle as a sting of shock ran through her. Mrs. Astor continued, “So he has, um, packed up and, uh, left.” Meryl didn’t move, she felt her muscles twitch and sway a bit, but other than that, she felt oddly numb, unable to process the information. “And he,” her mother took in a deep shaky breath, “won’t be coming back,” she finished.

She felt like she was going to burst. Tears began to fill Meryl’s eyes. She understood her mothers words but, at the same time, she couldn’t understand what was happening. She opened her mouth to ask a question but the only word that came out of her tight throat was, “Where?”

Mrs. Astor understood and shrugged, tears dribbled from her eyes and onto her cheeks. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know. I don’t know.” She buried her face in her hands, the tissue pressing against her forehead.

Meryl felt herself sway a bit and she tried to swallow, her throat still unnaturally tight. Suddenly she felt the paper towel in her hands and looked down. The oatmeal raisin cookie had been on top, slightly unwrapped and poking out. She was going to have her dad cover his eyes while he took a bite to surprise him. *Daddy...* she thought. A wave of sadness smacked over her,

immediately followed by a torrent of rage. He left them! How could he have just left them? Left her, his own daughter?

Meryl spun on her heel and ran for the front door, turning at the staircase and thundering up the steps towards her room, the cookie still clutched in her hand. She slammed her door shut, then threw the cookie at the wall as hard as she could. It hit with a loud *thwack*, then Meryl broke down. She slid to the floor, sobbing.



After she had heard her mother go to bed, Meryl finally crept out of her room and downstairs to the computer that sat in the family room. She logged into her account, feeling like a robot as she did. She planned to email someone, but at the same time she didn't plan to talk to anyone. Austin would be there for her if he could but Meryl looked at the clock on the desktop and knew that at 2am, he would've been asleep. So she sat with her fingers on the keyboard, staring at nothing for several minutes.

Steven. She thought suddenly. She had his email and she knew he understood family problems. After all, growing up, his parents had somewhat divorced themselves from him when he showed the odd signs of being a Protector. She quickly typed brief explanation. It might not have made much sense, and Meryl was sure there were plenty of typos, but she didn't care. Without even looking at what she had written, she clicked send, and sat back in the chair, pulling

her knees up to her chest and resting her head on them. To her surprise after only a few minutes she heard a faint, *ding*. She looked up. The message was from Steven.

Oh shit! You okay? Need someone to talk to?

Meryl ignored the first question and just typed back, 'Yeah.' He messaged back instantly asking her address. When she asked why, he wrote:

'Cause this isn't something you email about. You need someone right now.

She didn't want to argue. After messaging the address. She threw on her coat and boots, and stepped outside, sitting on the porch to wait for him. It took a while, but finally she saw the headlights coming down the street and the same silver, battered up car pulled into her driveway. He parked and got out meeting her at the porch.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." Meryl barely lifted her head in greeting.

Steven sat beside her and hugged her with one arm, saying nothing. After a few moments, Meryl felt tear pressing at her eyelids and she began to cry again. Steven hugged her a bit tighter with his arm.

"Sometimes divorce shit happens, but they don't just leave out of nowhere and don't come back."

“Woah,” he said teasingly, “watch your language.” Then his voice returned to its quiet, sympathetic tone. “But you’re right. That’s not typical, and I’m so sorry that happened.”

“Why?” Meryl asked again, her voice strained.

“The only one who knows why is him, and he’s not here to tell us, so we can’t know for sure. So don’t get frustrated about why it happened. It happened. And you have every right to just be mad about that in itself.”

His words made Meryl cry harder. He just let her cry, only talking when Meryl prompted it. Finally, she felt dried out, unable to cry anymore. The numbness had returned to her. “This sucks,” she said with a sigh.

“Yeah, it does.”

“But, I guess I can’t do anything about it, so it’s a waste of my time being so upset... shit.”

“What?”

“Mr. Cornell is rubbing off on me,” Meryl said. “I’m thinking rationally about my feelings.”

Steven chuckled and Meryl gave a weak smile. “I guess so,” he said.

Meryl had the words geared up on her tongue, ready to ask. “There’s another reason why you guys won’t teach me magic right away,” she said. It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

She had been thinking about the idea for a long time and that was the only possibility that made sense to her. “If the reason was just because I needed to know a bunch of facts about the world, then I could’ve been learning the two things together, side-by-side, but that’s not the case.

There’s something you guys haven’t told me about magic, something dangerous, isn’t there?”

He was silent as he made eye contact with her. His forest green eyes looked soft, yet serious, embedded with the same honesty that she had seen there before.

“Yes,” he said.

Meryl was silent, waiting for him to explain more. For a second, she thought he might not continue, then he sighed. “Magic,” he began, “is far more complicated than it is in most movies and storybooks. It’s not something that just materializes out of thin air; it can’t do everything. Magic is a manipulation of the world around you – of the molecules, waves of energy, things like that. It doesn’t break the laws of the universe, it bends them.”

“Like the portals,” Meryl interjected. “They’re like a back door way to do things.”

“Yeah. But, you see, every action in the world is a type of force. Forces are the push or pull of one thing to another. There’s gravitational force, friction force, magnetic force, normal force, and more, which are some of the ways we are able to manipulate our surroundings. But in order for us to exert force, it costs energy, and you can’t just manifest the energy randomly, it has to come from whoever is casting the magic.”

“So it makes you tired?”

Steven’s head bobbed side to side a tad. “Sort of,” he said. “It doesn’t just drain you like running a mile does. Conducting universal forces drains energy from your life force.”

“It kills you?” Meryl was astonished.

“Eventually it does. Every time you use magic, it takes time off your life. Bigger feats take off a bigger chunk of time.”

“But wait,” Meryl protested. “It’s not like we all have a pre-determined time that we live. So how does that work?”

“I guess it’s better explained as adding time to the life you already have. Sort of like adding wear and tear on your body.”

“Yikes,” Meryl said, recoiling slightly. “Why would anyone ever use magic?”

“We rarely do,” Steven explained. “It’s more of a ‘last resort’ for us than anything. If we could use it all the time, we’d barely have any problems at all.”

That made sense, but it was still a terrifying reality. No wonder they hadn’t told her about it before. She was silent, contemplating the concept before finally asking, “Is there any kind of magic that doesn’t waste much of your life.”

“Oh yeah,” Steven said, nodding. “There’s super simple stuff you can do that might waste seconds of your time in the long run because they’re so minimal. But they aren’t very interesting things to do. It’s like practical magic stuff.”

“Like household chores?”

“Eh, kinda,” Steven said with a shrug. “Like have you ever noticed that it is never dusty in the study? Sending wisps of air to clear away dust is nothing. Basically a freebie of magic, but not good for much either.”

“Can you teach me something small?” Meryl asked.

Steven was silent again for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said finally. Meryl could hear the hesitation in his voice. Then he changed the subject. “You should really get in bed,” Steven said, standing from their seat on the porch. Meryl followed, stumbling a bit as she stood.

Meryl didn’t wait to watch him drive off. She turned and went back inside, locking the front door behind her. Then ran upstairs to her room, tossing her coat off the side of the stairs as she did. She was exhausted by her emotions. Too exhausted even to slam the door, so she swung it shut gently and went to her bunk bed, flopping down on the mattress. She let out a long sigh, feeling her tired body sinking into the covers of the bed. Meryl rolled and adjusted the blankets to cover her, curling up in a ball. On the pillow of her bed sat Amethyst, her purple dragon plushy. She grabbed her bed buddy, tucking it in her arms as she closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 7

A blast of light engulfed her. It wasn't something she saw exactly. It existed everywhere, yet simultaneously in a finite point. Meryl tried to feel her body stir, but she couldn't – there was no body. But there was warmth and an overwhelming buzz of life, erupting through the space she occupied. She wasn't even sure what space it was, or if it was actually even space as she perceived it. Meryl only knew one thing for certain. *It's her. It's... me.*

Energy fluctuated and pulsed throughout her being. Then all at once her mind felt as though it was being pried open for the first time, like the top of a heavy chest being unlocked and pulled away. An overwhelming stream of thoughts, emotions, and ideas began to flow through her, and suddenly, she found herself remembering the smallest, most insignificant details of her life. Moments of her past swept through her. At times, she even saw flashes of what seemed like different lives all together. Then the stream centralized into a collection of clear-cut forms – ideas. They were the truest form of each word: the reality of what each thing was at its essence and not as it is described by sounds that were ascribed to it. The first one flowed over her, leaving the promise that, in light of her parent's separation she would be okay. The second form came to her like the bud of a flower. It felt as though it had begun to bloom ever so slightly and with it, came the whisper of the essence: magic. Following that, flecks of darkness seemed to

strike through the light. Beware. She felt the warning before the light returned to its unyielding brilliance once more. Then, it seemed to explode.

Her eyes snapped open to find herself still in bed, curled in a ball around Amethyst and looing out into her dimly lit room. Meryl was suddenly so aware of her body. It felt foreign, almost fragile and she feared she might fall away from it again, back into the realm of consciousness she had just occupied. Everything remained still however. Her breathing seemed to ground her and after a moment she felt normal again. Shifting, Meryl rolled over onto her back and stretched her limbs out. She felt strangely powerful.

Meryl's soul emanated in the dimension around her, having just imbued her with an excess amount of energy. *You'll need your strength to defeat... defeat... stop them...* it hummed. *You have to. No one else can.* The voice was internal. Meryl heard it, without fully hearing. But before long the sensation had passed, and she fell back asleep wondering what she was going to have to face.

CHAPTER 8

She had called Austin from the library and cancelled her plans with him for the third time that week. He sounded annoyed over the phone, but not upset. Meryl hadn't told him yet about her parent's divorce and her dad leaving. In fact, she had been actively avoiding him. It almost felt like if she admitted it to him, she was admitting it to the world. It would become real then, so she was trying to hold that off as long as she could.

Lessons with Luxton were a distraction. There was no time to think about anything else. The hour and a half she sat at her desk was a non-stop slamming of information. Oddly enough, with her focus increased, Luxton had softened on her a bit. Or at least that's what she supposed it was when she saw a flash of what looked like pride on his stern face after answering a torrent of questions correctly. When the lesson concluded, Meryl descended from the stairs to the Order's base into the main library, then down the main staircase of the building and past the nonagon shaped front desk. As she walked, she passed a boy sitting on one of the benches just inside the door.

"Austin?!" Meryl froze, recognizing his figure.

His head snapped up from a book he had been looking at. "Hi," he said. A meek, almost guilty smile spread across his face.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. She felt oddly panicked, like he had caught her.

He closed his book and stood.

“I just... wanted to be sure you were okay, Mer. You haven’t really been talking to me recently. Did I upset you?”

She tried to force a smile. “No, n – no,” she stuttered slightly. “I’ve just been busy?”

“Busy, Mer? How does that account for you avoiding me at school? Seriously, what’s up?”

She didn’t want to say it, but she felt gripped by guilt. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She looked at the floor.

“What did I do?”

“It’s not you its-“

“Meryl!” They both turned at the sound of the call. Steven was rushing up to her. “Hey! Austin right?” he said as he reached them.

“Yeah,” Austin mumbled, clearly irritated by the interruption.

“Steven.” He extended his hand to shake and Austin grudgingly took it. “Sorry, but I’ve gotta steal Meryl away for a bit.”

Austin’s focus flicked to her and they made eye contact. “Sorry,” she said. “Talk later?”

He didn’t answer, just looked after Meryl and she walked away with Steven.

“What was that about?” Steven asked when they reached the stairs. “You guys fighting?”

“No. It’s just,” she hesitated, “I haven’t told him about the divorce and dad leaving yet, but he thinks I’m avoiding him because I’m mad at him or something.”

“You should. He’s your best friend right? You need him at a time like this.”

“Yeah, I know...” Meryl trailed off and they walked most of the way up in silence. When they finally entered the small wooden hallway, Meryl turned to Steven. “What’s this about by the way?”

“I, uh, had a talk with Luxton,” he answered.

“And?” Meryl pressed.

He gestured forward. Meryl turned to the left, stepping up the last few stairs and into the hallway. She made her way to the study, assuming that’s where they were headed, but Steven grabbed her arm as she tried to turn.

“We’re actually meeting in here.” He pointed to the last door on the right.

Meryl looked at him in surprise. “Isn’t that the restricted library?” she asked.

“Not restricted to you anymore.”

Meryl picked up her pace, half trotting her way to the cracked open door. “Come in,” she heard a voice say as she reached the doorway. She pushed against the wood and the heavy door slid open revealing a surprisingly large and brightly lit room. Rather than lining the walls, the

bookshelves stuck out on rows towards the center of the room. At the end of each open row between bookshelves were pedestals pushed against the wall. Each one held a different color gemstone. A relatively small rounded table sat in the middle of the room, and behind it, at the end of the rows was what looked like a long stage. Luxton sat at the table, his hands folded together.

“Meryl,” he greeted her. “Steven has admitted to me that he revealed to you some of the secrets of our magic. Is that true?”

Meryl nodded, stepping forward.

“While normally I would not agree with breaking the progression of your training and revealing this coveted information to you earlier than is our established practice, we are at a unique time in our existence of Protectors. In light of the recent attacks, we do need you able to protect yourself and others in times of emergency. Furthermore, you’ve done very well with your training so far. You’ve excelled quickly, and so I feel comfortable starting your magic training early.”

Meryl felt a buzz of excitement course through her. Steven nudged her forward, and she realized she had been frozen in place with excitement.

“Cornell doesn’t know yet,” Steven said as they moved to sit at the table. “So don’t tell him.”

“Before we begin, I must ask you, do you feel ready?” Luxton said, looking down at her with his serious, dark eyes.

“Absolutely,” she said, matching the intensity of his gaze. She’d felt ready for so long now.

“Alright then,” he said. Steven stood as Luxton pulled a pencil from his coat pocket and set it on the table. “Without touching it, move then pencil,” he said, then stood as well, following Steven out of the room. The door creaked closed as Meryl looked after them then back at the pencil.

It was another test - another ‘figure it out yourself’ teaching moment. This time, she was determined to get it right. She wanted to surprise Luxton and Steven with what she could do, but after nearly 20 minutes of staring at the pencil, nothing had happened.

The door creaked and Meryl turned to see Luxton and Steven returning. Before she could say anything, Luxton spoke up.

“You’re doing it wrong,” he said, his voice deep but not scolding. “Staring at it will do nothing, not at your level of experience anyways. Only very advanced casters can do that.” The two men joined her at the table, Steven to her left and Luxton across from the two of them.

Steven spoke. “Use your hands to guide you to point at what you want to change or affect. Like this.” Steven waved his hand over the pencil in one clean, quick movement. The

pencil shot forward, rolling off the table in the direction his hand went. Luxton bent and retrieved the pencil, setting it back on the table.

“A wave is a bit advanced for you now though,” the older Protector said. “Instead try funneling the energy through your arms and to your finger tips. Point at the pencil like this.” Luxton demonstrated, holding his pointer and forefingers together on both hands and directing them at the pencil. As he moved his fingers towards it, the pencil rolled backwards. Luxton reset the pencil and looked at Meryl expectantly. She copied the finger positioning and motion, concentrating, willing the piece of wood to move. It remained completely still.

“What am I doing wrong now?”

Steven answered her question with another question, “how are you trying to move the pencil? What are you focusing on?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” Meryl admitted. “I guess I’m just hoping really hard that it will move.” To her surprise, this response got a small chuckle from Luxton and she saw a few latent laugh lines appear near his eyes for a brief moment.

“Draw your energy from the connection points of your soul – your heart and mind. It is that connection to the soul dimension that allows us to manipulate our surroundings,” Luxton explained.

“Can I ask a quick side question?” Luxton’s silence prompted Meryl to continue. “How much life are we wasting trying to do this?”

Before she even finished the question Luxton was already shaking his head dismissively. “Nothing,” he said. “Practically nothing. In it is close to point zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, two, four percent of a second. Don’t worry.”

“What kind of things can we do that cost more?”

Luxton pointed at the pencil. “Focus on the task at hand. If you cannot do this, you haven’t earned the right to learn anything further. Try again,” he ordered.

Meryl paused before trying again, thinking instead about the fact that she bet Luxton would keel over if he ever said something really nice. Then she pressed her fingers together again. With a deep breath, she focused in on her chest almost trying to push at it with her mind. Without provocation, an image of a budding flower came to her. *Magic*, she thought. The manifestation seemed to glow and pulse, growing in her chest and sending wild vibrations back and forth between there and her mind. It welled up larger and larger. Meryl wasn’t sure what to do. She just let it grow, reverberating within her. Then it dawned on her, and with both her mind and a force in her chest, pushed the energy down her arms and out her fingertips. The surge shot through her, sparks crackled at her fingertips and the pencil careened off the table. Both Luxton and Steven jumped.

“Woah!” Steven exclaimed. “What was that?”

“That,” Luxton said, “was far more power than you needed.” Meryl looked at her own hands in shock. “And those sparks were because instead of moving the molecules of air forward, you jostled them around – making them move rapidly and setting the small particles in the air on fire.”

“But I did it!” Meryl said, a smile spread across her face.

“Yes. That’s enough for today,” Luxton said, moving to collect the pencil. “You used more energy than you needed and therefore lost more of your life-force. It still probably wasn’t a significant amount, but you need to learn to control that before casting anymore or you risk seriously damaging yourself.” The warning didn’t manage to dampen her mood.

During training the next day, Cornell was visibly irritated but whatever he was thinking, he kept it to himself. They continued with the same exercise over and over, rolling the pencil across the table. When she was finally given a break, Meryl asked about the large gemstones on the pedestals. Cornell was excited by the question, immediately praising her for her curiosity. The Orkin Stones, as he explained they were called, each held a different variety of life force and energy endowed into their essence by very early Protectors. The magic that they used to create them had since been lost, making them incredibly valuable and rare. Each of the Headquarters of the Orders was entrusted with a few of the gems.

“We use them very sparingly. Although their powers seem to never run out, we cannot know for sure. There are protective shields around them so we cannot examine them deeply through meditation,” Cornell explained. “So we use their rare power only when it is absolutely necessary.”

By drawing from their power immediately after casting a spell, one could prevent loss of their own life force, as it was instantaneously replaced. Had the extent of their powers and usability not been such a secret, and had the gems not been so large, Steven explained that he imagined each Protector would always carry one with them. Meryl agreed with the sentiment, lamenting the fact that it couldn't work and therefore, their powers were limited.

Luxton argued in favor of the limit, however. “It's checks and balances,” he insisted. “We can't be too powerful, or else one of us might run away with their power and destroy us all.”

“Maybe that's who's attacking the other Orders,” Meryl suggested. She was met with the shaking of all three of her companions heads.

“We've said it before. We know of every Protector in existence and they're all accounted for at the time of the attacks.”

“How can you be sure? What if someone slipped through the cracks? They could've tricked you all into thinking they weren't involved when they were.”

“It is... possible,” Luxton said. “But highly doubtful.”

“I suppose what you suggest is worth looking into,” Cornell chimed in.

Their acceptance of her ideas spurred her interest. She was really part of the Order now.

Meryl turned quickly on Luxton. “Why you came in here one day with blood all over you?”

Luxton leaned back in his seat. “Canada,” he said simply, waiting for Meryl to make the connection.

After a moment it dawned on her. “The last Order that was attacked!”

Luxton nodded. “I went there the second we found out about the breach. It took longer because, if you remember, our portals between Orders have been closed to prevent the spread of attacks.”

“And you were attacked while you were there?” she asked.

“Not... exactly,” Luxton said hesitantly.

“It was an accident,” Cornell said, picking up the conversation. “A lack in communication. Only two of the Order members knew that Luxton was coming, so when the other members returned to their base and saw a man they didn’t immediately recognize-”

“-they attacked him thinking he was the one who ransacked their headquarters,” Meryl finished.

“Exactly,” Cornell said.

Meryl turned back to Luxton. “I hope you’re okay. What was is you were carrying, though?”

Luxton ignored her sentiment of concern and answered simply. “An Orkin Stone. The conversation has gone full circle.”

“So they survived the attack?” Meryl asked.

“One. Only one,” said Steven, holding up a single finger. “The rest were taken.”

“Taken? Who would take them if they didn’t know what they were for? Doesn’t that mean it has to be a Protector who did it?” Meryl said.

“They are large gemstones, valuable to the average human without even knowing their magical properties. Anyone could have taken them,” Luxton said.

Meryl was quiet for a bit, considering. Finally, she changed the subject. “Can Protectors ever grow old and constantly use magic?”

“Long ago, some did,” Cornell explained, “but that’s not a practice of today. One would have to use Dark Magic to achieve it.”

“Is it a Dark Magic spell?”

“Worse!” Steven said. “They would draw on the life force of others instead of spending their own to cast magic.”

Meryl saw a quick blur as Luxton smacked Steven in the back of his head. “You’re not even supposed to know that! Why would you share it?”

“Colin!” Cornell reprimanded, Luxton. “Stay yourself. It is not like the general knowledge of an old practice will deteriorate her entire training.”

Luxton stood, his anger flared. “Teachings of Dark Magic are forbidden,” he spat.

“And so they are,” Cornell agreed. “We are not teaching them to her. This was a brief mention of history. A history lesson, if you will. Relax.” Luxton crossed his arms, still clearly peeved by the discussion, but unwilling to continue the argument.

Meryl turned to Luxton, knowing her question might upset him. But taking the risk, she said, “maybe that’s what the attacker is doing. If it’s a Protector using Dark Magic, maybe they’re trying to take the Orkin Stones to weaken us. They’ll be drawing on power and energy that we wouldn’t dare touch and without the Stones, we won’t have enough force to counter them, especially when we’re divided into our different Orders.”

Luxton stared at her, his mouth tightening. “You may be right,” he said finally.

“How’d ya think of that?” Steven said, surprised. “You’ve got the mind of a master villain.”

Meryl shrugged. “I just read a lot of books.”

“It’s something to definitely consider,” Cornell said. “Colin, we should send word to the other Orders. If we investigate this together we will have a better chance.”

“No,” Luxton said firmly. “If Meryl’s right and the perpetrator is from another Order, then all we are doing is warning them.”

“That may be true, but as Meryl pointed out: divided we fall.”

Luxton was silent, considering Cornell’s point. Meryl shifted in her seat, unsure of how to contribute to the meeting further. That’s what it seemed to turn into at least. From lesson to meeting – what they were actually supposed to be having as a united, working Order of Protectors. Steven broke the silence. “I agree with Mr. Cornell,” he said. “What does it matter if the person knows we’re on to them? All that means is that they’ll have to change their ways. It might even make them flee their Order ‘cause they’re afraid of getting caught. Then we’ll even know who it is.”

“What if it’s an entire Order though,” Luxton suggested.

Steven brushed off the idea. “Same thing, right? At least we’d be united in searching for them and ratting them out.”

Meryl added, “and we don’t even know if it is a Protector. It was just a guess.”

“A fair one,” Cornell said, bowing his head towards her slightly. “So we’re in agreement then? We will contact the others tonight?” Rather than looking at the three of them, Cornell’s focus rested on Luxton whose gaze was off to the side of the room in thought.

“Agreed.”

CHAPTER 9

FALAISE, FRANCE – September 18, 1036

Acelin dabbed at the brow of the newborn in Merope's arms, cleaning the last of the afterbirth off the baby girl.

"Rest now," she instructed Merope as she tossed that last rag into her basket of soiled cloth. "You deserve it."

The exhausted woman smiled at her weakly. "Many thanks, my dear Acelin. I fear our girl wouldn't have survived without you." Acelin smiled back at her. She could barely believe they both managed to survive. She'd had to discreetly use some of her coveted magic to achieve it, but it worked, and that's what mattered. It took more than she expected, ultimately draining more than she would've liked from herself, but it was worth it.

"Anything for my dear brother," she said, turning to Francis who stood over his wife, running his hands through her damp hair.

"Then thank the God's I married him so that you may be my honorary sister," Merope said.

"Shh." Acelin reached forward and squeezed the woman's hand affectionately. "Rest sister." She smiled once more at her bother, who mouthed 'thank you' to her, tears brimming in

his blue eyes. Acelin nodded, acknowledging the gesture, then stooped to pick up her basket and left the room.

The labor had lasted several hours and left Acelin feeling rather exhausted herself, but there were more pressing matters at hand. Discarding the soiled cloths by a corner of the maid's hall for someone else to clean, she rushed back to her room. Rinsing her hands clean in the water basin, Acelin returned to her herbs, crushing and mixing them with water in memorized movements. Minutes later, she held a small bowl of darkened water, strained of the collection of leaves that previously steeped in its warm belly. After cleaning all evidence, Acelin poured the mixture into a small vial, sealing it with a cork. Then, she tucked the poison into the top of her corset, and left her room again, heading for the personal chambers of Ralph de Gacé.

CHAPTER 10

Meryl insisted on walking home from the library that evening. Since her dad left, Meryl had grown accustomed to Steven driving her home as Mrs. Astor had forgotten Meryl at the library once or twice. Her mother was distracted and distant, depressed even, Meryl guessed. Meryl tried to give her space and taking rides from Steven was a way of reducing stress on her mom. Steven, of course, agreed immediately to the arrangement, and even insisted on meeting Mrs. Astor briefly so that she would feel comfortable with him, a teenager, driving her daughter home. When Steven had pointed this out Meryl protested that she almost about to be a teen herself.

“Nineteen and thirteen are very different, sorry to say,” Steven had said.

Tonight, she wanted time alone. The air was still crisp although the last of winter had already melted away. It wasn't getting as dark early, which Meryl liked. She hated when she didn't see sun for days; it always put her in a foul mood. She breathed in, the air tasted fresh almost alive, and Meryl marveled in its Earthy aroma. School was stressful, her work with the Protectors was dangerous, and home was a mess, but in this moment, there was peace. No stress, no trouble – peace. Utilizing the meditative skill Cornell had taught her, Meryl emptied her mind for a good portion of the walk, just letting her legs take her home, trusting in her automatic memory of the route. After a while, she snapped back into reality, and practiced noticing

everything around her. Dusk made the world look amazing. Painted in an orangey-purple hue, the sky looked almost magical.

Meryl laughed at the association of the word. It meant so much more to her now. Now she possessed it. Well, not possessed, it was always inherently in her, but now she had the knowledge and skill to use it. She was a magician! She smiled to herself, reveling in the excitement of the idea. Everything else aside, that was what really mattered right now. That was what she was meant to do. School while still important, wasn't something she took too seriously, even with finals coming up. At home, the situation also somehow seemed more manageable. Perhaps it was that she released a kind power within herself that gave her both hope and a different kind of power to face her own family and emotions. Whatever it was, she didn't care, as long as it helped hold her together in the mess that was her life.

Meryl's feet brought her home finally as the sky darkened. She unlocked the door with her key and stepped into the front hall. No lights were on, on the first floor, but Meryl could see a glow to the right at the top of the stairs. *Mom must be in her room again*, Meryl thought. She kicked off her boots, hung her coat, and grabbed an apple from the kitchen as a snack before heading up the stairs. When she reached the landing, she stopped. Mrs. Astor's door was closed and only a little bit of light peaked out from between the wood and carpet. The light had been coming from Meryl's room at the end of the hall. The door was wide open. She never kept it that

way. Wariness crept over her and Meryl began to move quietly down the hall. She couldn't see anyone in the room yet, just her desk and the edge of her bunk bed. She continued to move forward as silently as she could. When she reached the left doorframe, she paused before peering around it.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust from the darkness of the hallway to the bright interior of the room, but she could make out someone sitting at the edge of her bed. Meryl's eyes finally focused.

"Austin!" she said in surprise, stepping out of hallway and into the room. He jumped up in surprise, dropping something. He quickly stooped down and picked it up, looking incredibly guilty. "What are you doing here? What is-" Meryl suddenly recognized what he had in his hands: her journal; the one where she had written everything about the Protectors and her training. Her heart sank. "What are you doing?" she said, nearly breathless.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered. "Your mom let me in. She said you'd be home soon. You-"

Meryl cut him off, "why are you reading my journal?!" She shot across the room, reaching for it. Oddly, Austin stepped back, pulling it towards his chest.

"Mer, I needed to know what was going on with you." His voice had suddenly changed, becoming firm and assertive. "You can't just shut me out and avoid me and not tell me why. I thought we were best friends."

“Best friends don’t read each other’s personal journals without permission!” Meryl felt tears welling in her eyes.

“I know.” His voice softened. “Again, I’m sorry. But, I needed to know you were alright.”

“Give it to me,” Meryl demanded. Her throat was tight, making the words catch slightly.

“I will, but only if you agree to explain-”

“what’s going on?” she finished. “What’s going on is that my best friend lies to me and sneaks behind my back!”

Austin’s voice rose again. “I have *never* lied to you, Mer. And I never will. All I’m asking is that you do the same for me now. Tell me the truth.” He extended his arm, presenting her with the journal. Meryl snatched it from him and stepped back remaining silent. “I’ll wait,” Austin said, sitting back on the bed. “I’ll wait as long as you need, but if what you wrote in there is true, then we have bigger problems.”

An idea suddenly dawned on Meryl and she laughed. “True? Of course it’s not true. Magic? Protectors? All made up. It’s part of a story I’m writing.”

Austin glared at her incredulously. “There’s things about me in there too, Mer. Stuff that we’ve talked about, secrets we’ve shared. And things about your parents. So if parts of it are very true, then why not the other stuff.”

Meryl forced a laugh again, shaking her head. “It’s like a fantasy world I pretend that I’m in.”

“Uh huh.” Austin’s brown eyes held her. “So that’s why you’re no longer ever in your Reading Cove at the library, and why I’ve actually met this Steven guy, and Mr. Cornell-”

“-that’s-“

“-Mer... don’t you dare lie to me. Not now. If you’re still my friend, and I hope you are, you’ll tell me the truth.”

Meryl felt tension brimming in her limbs almost unbearably. “Okay,” she said. Then turned to the hallway, shutting the door before walking back towards Austin and sitting in the center of the floor. He slid off the side of the bed joining her. She couldn’t look at him. “You weren’t supposed to know any of this,” she mumbled. Then, she told him everything, filling in the blanks from the journal and answering the occasional question he had. Austin took everything in easily, without comment or explanation although she could see mild surprise in his eyes. Finally, she admitted the real reason why she had been avoiding him, since she never wrote about it in the journal. That information broke him out of his role of stoic listener.

“I’m so sorry, Mer!” he said. “That’s awful... and it explains why your mother looked the way she did when she answered the door. How’s she doing?”

Meryl shrugged. “Not so good I guess.”

Austin looked solemn. "I understand why you didn't wanna talk about that. I can't imagine how hard it must be. And I'm sorry I accused you of being mad at me, you probably didn't need that extra drama in your life."

Meryl laughed lightly. "It's okay. I totally get why you would feel that way. I'm sorry for shutting you out." They sat in silence for a moment. Austin leaned forward to her grabbing her shoulders, and pulled her towards him. She shifted, helping the movement by balancing herself with her arms on the floor until he managed to get her into his lap, hugging her. They sat that way for a while, silently.

"Mer?" Austin said, breaking the silence. She grunted in response. "Do you really believe all that stuff in your journal?"

Meryl sat up and looked him in the eye. "You don't? You think I'm lying to you after I promised to tell the truth?"

"No." he looked down, running his fingers across the carpet as he searched for the right words. "I think you believe it's real, so in that way you're not lying." Meryl shot him an angry look. "Hey! You've got to admit, it's crazy far-fetched, Mer. How could anyone just believe that stuff blindly?"

"I didn't believe it blindly. There's proof!"

"Then show me the proof."

“Fine.” Meryl stood and walked over to her desk grabbing a pencil from the jar that sat in the back. It wasn’t like the normal, wooden yellow pencils that she had been practicing with. It was a plastic, mechanical one with a protruding clip on the side. That, along with the fact that carpet was her surface instead of a smooth table, meant she’d have to use more force. It still wasted less than a second of her life, but Meryl felt herself counting the cost of every time she cast at a pencil, wondering when she’d reach her first second of life being lost. She sat next to Austin again, setting the pencil down in front of him. The accumulation of energy felt easy this time after practicing all day. When she felt the power brimming inside her chest, Meryl lifted her right hand, her two first fingers extended and thrust them forward towards the writing utensil. It shot across the room, making Austin jump. At the last second she had decided she wanted it to be strong to shock him. A pencil rolling over was hardly magic, but shooting across the room was hopefully convincing.

Austin was staring at her, his mouth agape. “You *were* serious,” he said, the words half sounding like a question. Meryl couldn’t help but smile at him. Then she shrugged and walked over to retrieve the pencil, tossing it back at her desk after she did.

“Why didn’t you just fly it over there?” Austin asked.

“I don’t know how to do that yet,” Meryl said. She continued by explaining the costs of magic and why she shouldn’t meddle with what she didn’t know. At the end of the explanation, Austin was nodding.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I’d touch the stuff knowing it drain my life.” He shuttered.

“Damn... sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“I guess I can’t blame you for that either,” Meryl said. “To be honest, I had my doubts at the start too, even after they showed me magic.”

“Really?” She nodded and Austin chuckled. “Crazy...” Meryl shifted her seat towards him again, leaning onto his lap. He automatically wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close before letting her lay loosely in his arms. It felt so comfortable, warm, and safe. The uncertainty between them had melted away, replaced by... she couldn’t say for sure, a bond maybe? Whatever it was, it felt right. As she sank into his touch, Meryl felt her cheeks flush a tad again. *He’s your best friend!* She scolded herself. *It’s not like that.* Austin spoke suddenly, his voice reverberating in his chest.

“Mer? What’s going to happen to me now that I know all this? I’m not supposed to know, right?”

The good feeling sank and fell away. Meryl sat up. “I don’t know.”

“Should we just keep it a secret that I know?”

Meryl considered that, but shook her head. “No. They’d find out. They can tell when we’ve been exposed.”

“Exposed? That sounds so serious.”

“Yeah,” Meryl agreed. “I think you’re harmless, but other people might not be.”

“I guess that’s a fair point.”

“I think the best thing to do would be to come clean about it tomorrow, first thing in the morning, so they don’t have time to find out about it on their own. It was a mistake that it happened anyways. It wasn’t like I just spilled the beans to you randomly.”

Austin looked away, thinking. “They’re not gonna hurt me are they?”

“No!” Meryl started. “At least... no! They wouldn’t.”

“You sure? You didn’t sound too sure there for a second.”

“Yes I’m sure,” Meryl said. It was a bit of a lie, but she wasn’t going to scare him.

“We’re Protectors, not destroyers. We don’t hurt people.”

“Okay, but we can’t go first thing in the morning; we have school.”

Meryl rolled her eyes. “What do you think is more important?” she said.

“My mom not killing me for skipping school.”

Meryl laughed. “Okay, we can just go to school after then.”

“If they let us,” Austin said.

The two talked for several more minutes about how to get around missing school. Finally they decided “accidentally” sleeping in at a sleepover would have to be their excuse to school if Luxton and Cornell let them go after their confession. Austin called his mom, who agreed to let him sleep at Meryl’s. She cleared the top bunk for him, pulling her stuffed animals down and laughing at the way he looked in her borrowed unicorn pajama pants. It took them a while to fall asleep as they talked to one another in the dark. After some time, the gaps in their conversation grew longer and longer until finally, it died off, and they were both asleep.

CHAPTER 11

The library opened at seven in the morning, a half an hour before school started. Meryl and Austin were waiting together at the front door of the building but seven came and past, and no one unlocked the door.

“Maybe we have the wrong time,” Austin suggested.

Meryl shook her head, pointing to the hours listed in one of the windows. “It’s 7am everyday. This is weird. How late is it past the time now?”

Austin looked at his watch. “Seven twenty four,” he said. Meryl huffed. What was going on? Mr. Cornell always opened, why wasn’t he there. “The guy’s old right? Maybe he forgot. Or maybe he accidentally slept in after a sleepover.” Meryl tried to hold back her smile. This was a serious matter.

“Ugh! I wish I had a cell phone!” she said in frustration.

“Same. My parents say I have to wait for high school though. At least it’s close”

“My parents told me I have to get a job and save my own money for one. Guess that means I’ll be at least 16 before I get one.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let you borrow mine.”

Meryl stomped on the ground. “Where is he?!” Meryl decided that the old Protector indeed did read minds, as he appeared from inside the door that very second. When Meryl saw

him she smiled broadly and waved, but her smile instantly melted. Cornell looked panicked. He unlocked the door and opened it a crack, looking uncomfortably towards Austin.

“Meryl! What are you doing here?”

Meryl had planned what to say and practiced it last night with Austin, but she abandoned it asking instead, “is everything okay?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not. You shouldn’t be here. You- Colin!”

Meryl spun around to see Luxton running to the front door from a car in the parking lot. She turned back to Mr. Cornell.

“What’s happening?”

Mr. Cornell looked at Austin again. “This isn’t a good time, Meryl. You should go and we’ll-”

“No!” she cut him off. “You promised no more keeping things from me.” Mr. Luxton reached the front doors.

“Meryl. What are you doing here?” Luxton asked, sounding like a broken record of Cornell. She looked from one man to the other, realizing most anything she said would be brushed off and they’d try to push her away. Without thinking she pointed at Austin.

“He knows. He knows everything,” she said.

Cornell was open mouthed in horror. Luxton became rigid, his eyes stabbing at Meryl with fury. Cornell stammered a moment. "Come inside!" he ordered finally. The three headed into the library.

Luxton whirled on Meryl, grabbing her shoulders. "Explain yourself!" he yelled the second the door clicked shut.

"Colin!" Cornell yelled back.

"She exposed us!"

"At least give her a chance to explain."

Steven burst through the front door. "Is everyone okay?! Was anything taken?!"

"Taken?" Meryl asked. "Wait, what happened?"

Luxton released Meryl slowly. "The Order had been attacked."

Meryl took off running for the stairs. She heard Austin calling after her but ignored him.

Her feet slammed on the steps, propelling her upwards faster and faster. She heard a collection of footsteps following her.

"We're not sure its safe!" a voice shouted up at her. She didn't care. She had to know.

She had to see it.

Before she knew it, Meryl's feet were thrumming down the old wooden passageway leading up to the Order. She turned sharply, a few more steps then... she stopped dead in her

tracks. Every door had been blasted off its hinges and was laying haphazardly in the hall. Papers were strewn everywhere, some still blowing around from the breeze coming the now open archway to the rooftop garden. Meryl felt the men join her from behind.

“Stay back!” Luxton ordered, pushing Meryl aside.

“What are we going to do?” she breathed, looking from Steven to Cornell. She noticed Austin was behind them, but she didn’t bother acknowledging him.

“You need to get out of here,” Mr. Cornell said in a low sharp whisper. “Luxton and I will salvage what we can.”

“The Orkin Stones! Were they taken? And the relics?” Meryl’s heart was pounding in her chest.

“We will-” Meryl didn’t hear the rest of what Cornell said. Her attention shifted to Luxton who was creeping down the hall, peering into the rooms. She followed him, heading straight for the Restricted Library. Luxton tried to catch her as she past, but Meryl jerked to the side, evading his grasp and reaching the doorway. The library was utterly destroyed. The books were shredded as though a beast had torn through each one in a fit of fury. Some of the shelves had been knocked down and smashed, and the center table was bashed in. But in the midst of the chaotic scene, Meryl could make out the gemstones.

“They’re still here,” she said, turning back to Luxton who was in the doorway. His expression turned from anger to confusion.

“Why?” he breathed. Then he spun on his heel, heading to the adjacent room. Cornell and Steven caught up to Meryl and together, pulled her from the room.

“This is not a game,” Cornell said. Meryl could see fear in his eyes: true, raw fear. “We have to evacuate, now!”

“The relics are still here!” Luxton poked his head out from the last room on the left. “There may be one or two not accounted for, but everything else is here.” Cornell stared in shock.

“What’s he doing here?” For the first time, it seemed that Steven noticed Austin standing in the hallway by the stairs.

This reminded Luxton of his anger. “She,” he growled, “exposed us.”

“It was an accident,” Meryl protested.

“How is something like that an accident?” Steven asked. He sounded accusatory. It stung. Out of all of them, Meryl felt he would be the quickest to understand.

“Austin got ahold of my journal. He didn’t know what he was reading and-”

“Wait, you wrote about us?” Luxton snarled. “What secrets did you put in ink outside of the safety of our Order? Do you have any idea what you could’ve done!”

“There are more pressing matters at hand,” Cornell interjected. “So the boy knows. It’s one boy, he’s hardly any harm –”

“Hardly any harm? How can you be sure?” Luxton said.

“Well, for one thing, they clearly came here this morning to come clean about the whole situation. If that isn’t telling of his character, I don’t know what is. Now, drop it! We need to focus on getting Meryl and Steven out of here.”

Cornell spun to face Steven. “You remember where the Lake Granby portal is?” Steven nodded. “Take her there, now!”

“Wait! What about the journal?” Luxton asked. “Where is this journal with all our secrets in it?”

“At... home...” Meryl said.

“It needs to be burned immediately.”

Meryl looked to Cornell who hesitated then said, “he’s right. That cannot be. You have to retrieve it first and destroy it. If you cannot destroy it before you get to the portal, then guard it with your life. If that gets into the hands of whoever did this, our own lives may be the least of our worries.”

Meryl felt gripped by a deep chill of guilt, coursing through her. “I’m sorry,” she squeaked out.

“Don’t be sorry,” Luxton shot at her. “Just fix it. Now, go!” He waved his arm and Steven grabbing Meryl’s arm pulling her back towards the stairs.

“We will meet you on the other side in about a day,” Cornell called after them as he dipped off into the Relics Room.

“Come on,” Steven said, grabbing Austin’s coat with the free hand he wasn’t using to shepherd Meryl. “Move.”

The three of them raced through the corridor, and down the main stairs of the library. Cornell had apparently forgotten to lock the door behind them as a few library guests were milling about the space. The trio ignored them, heading for the door. When they reached Steven’s car, he opened the back seat door for Meryl. She slid in and he began to close the door when it suddenly stopped. Austin had grabbed it. His face looked serious, almost threatening as he looked at Steven.

“I’m coming with,” he insisted.

“No I can’t –”

“If Meryl’s going, I’m going,” he said, wrenching the door open.

“Austin, this isn’t your fight. You shouldn’t be involved in this in the first place,” Meryl objected. But Austin was shaking his head.

“You’re problems are my problems. I’m not gonna let them send you off to Europe alone when something’s hunting you guys.”

“She wouldn’t be alone,” Steven pointed out.

“I’m going,” Austin repeated again.

Steven threw his hands up. “Fine. There’s no time to argue. Just get in the damn car.”

Meryl moved to the side as Austin slid into the car next to her, slamming the door behind him. She barely had time to put her seatbelt on before Steven took off. “You know where the journal is?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Meryl said. “My room.”

“Get in, get out. Grab it and go. Don’t bother packing anything, okay?”

Meryl nodded, not realizing the driver couldn’t see. It felt like only seconds past before they reached Meryl’s house. Steven jerked the car to a stop, throwing it into park before they had even stopped moving.

“Do you need help getting it?” he asked.

“No.” Meryl unbuckled her seatbelt and unhitched the door, running into the house. She bounded up the stairs, throwing open the door to her room and rushing over to the bed where she and Austin had left the journal the night before. It wasn’t there. They must’ve moved it. She looked on her desk, then the bookcase. Her heart began to race faster. She went back to the bed

and tore back the covers, then the same on the top bunk. She looked under the bed, in every corner, behind the bookcases. It wasn't anywhere. The book had disappeared.