

CURSE OF TIME: BOOK ONE OF THE AGNAVINA NOVEL SERIES

by

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ABSTRACT

JAY KU. *Curse of Time: Book One of the Agnavina Series*. (Under the direction of DR.

ELIZABETH GARGANO)

This Master's thesis contains the first five chapters of my novel in the young adult fantasy genre. The story revolves around a young man named Kieran and will explore themes of identity, depression, and family (both biological and chosen). The novel can be categorized as a “hero’s journey,” as the main character begins as a reluctant, disoriented foreigner of a fantastical world, and develops into a hero whose skills and abilities turn the tides of a bloody war between Agnavina and the invading Harkin Empire. The story will initially take place on Earth in America but will quickly transition to Agnavina early on in the story.

Agnavina is a world rife with magic, diverse races and monsters, and various locales, all of which I have built since my teenage years. The transition from Earth to Agnavina and Kieran’s feeling of vague familiarity in a world he’s never been in parallel with my personal experiences as an international student living in America from 2016, which, for lack of a better phrase, was a time full of unease. The characters Kieran meets and the relationships he forges with them change him from a distrusting and jaded young man into a more caring and responsible individual. These reflect some aspects of my personal life, and as such this story can be considered a symbolic meditation of my trauma, emotions, and relationships, through exaggerated and fantastical representations of my experiences in America.

On Earth, Kieran has nothing left. He is a high school dropout who has recently lost his loving mother. He barely has any memory of his biological father, and the only male figure in his life has been his abusive stepfather. A depressed, laggard teenager, Kieran has meandered

through life ever since his mother's tragic passing. Left with nothing but the keys to his parents' old cabin in the Appalachians and an obscured polaroid of his father, he leaves for the mountains to escape the law after an altercation with his stepfather. In the cabin, he discovers a hidden, mysterious artifact that gives him the untapped power to control time, and he stumbles into the world of Agnavina. His journey will take him through a land of opportunity and danger, where he will learn to process his grief, trust and care for others, and develop a sense of belonging and personal responsibility. *Curse of Time* is a story about a wanderer discovering himself and finding his own place in the world--or rather, multiple worlds.

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Critical Introduction: Curse of Time - Book One of the Agnavina Series

Younger me would have scoffed at the quantity that I have written and read as an adult, not knowing that it is not quantity, but quality of the work. Most of my work had always been longer pieces of fiction, spanning 20-30 pages even in creative writing workshops that I had been in. I don't write as much as befitting of an aspiring writer - my stories are sporadic, and original ideas seem to only appear when I am prompted and expected to write them. For the thesis, I knew that it was an excellent opportunity for me to expand upon my previous works. I considered revising and continuing some of the short stories that I had written for my creative writing classes, but decided to pursue the Agnavina project, as it has been something that I had been working on since I was a teenager. Considering much of the work that I had done for Agnavina prior to my Master's program, I knew that I had been hesitant to write a fully-fledged novel, as I rarely had the time or motivation to pursue my dream of writing an Agnavina novel that is an improvement of its predecessors. When presented with the opportunity to write *Curse of Time*, I was more than eager to pursue it. To me, Agnavina has always been a project that I had been most passionate about, and to breathe life into it via the Master's program is one step closer for me to getting it published one day.

When I first began conceptualizing Agnavina, I was in eighth grade, having finished a 100+ page Minecraft fanfiction starring a self-insert and fictionalized version of my friends and family. Of course, I don't think I really wrote anything that deserved critical acclaim - the dialogue was forced, the story was contrived and full of plot holes, and the work was rife with grammatical inconsistencies. Whenever I reread it, I cringe a little, frustrated that I can never make any changes to it because I had gotten it published at an amateur publishing house. My work is out there, and some other kid has probably read it. By the time I finished my work, the

cast of my story had already left the Minecraft world and into another. That was when I began working on Agnavina. As I began writing the sequel of my Minecraft fan fiction, I decided to make a transition away from Minecraft, and build my own world with its own creatures and people.

I had always been a fan of YA fantasy novels. Growing up, I would spend hours reading Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series and Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant*. As a teenager, I even began playing Dungeons & Dragons, and gained a better understanding of the intricacies of fantasy worldbuilding. Many of my formative years were spent imagining a world full of magic, monsters, and gods with unscrupulous goals. The idea of creating my own world and placing interesting characters in it has always been one that I wanted to explore.

I continued to develop the world of Agnavina as I finished the second and third book, and even after I decided that I would drop the story due to burnout. As the years went by, I grew up and my interests evolved, and so did Agnavina and its characters. I continued to build the world, influenced by the media and literature that I had taken an interest in. Particularly, I was drawn by the vivid, realistic yet fantastical world in Andrej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* series, and Brandon Sanderson's grounded magic in his many works, especially in *Mistborn*. I was even inspired by video games and animated series as well, including Netflix's *The Dragon Prince* and the worldbuilding in Riot Games' *League of Legends*. As I absorbed new content, I added new ideas into Agnavina, and molded them to fit the aesthetic of the world.

Despite the many changes and shifts, the world of Agnavina was still populated by elves, dwarves, and dragons, but I decided to give them my own spin. Throughout much of the fantasy literature and media that I have consumed, the existence of certain races in those worlds seemed to lack explanation that was satisfactory for me. Where did elves come from? What about

dwarves? How did humans come to populate these worlds? I recall hearing about Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, a collection of myths and stories that detail the origins of Middle Earth. I also thought about C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*, telling the story of the creation of Narnia. I decided to take the creation of Agnavina with a similar approach. Rather than building just a simple fantasy world, I decided to create Agnavina out of scratch, applying what I understand of certain scientific fields including but not limited to anthropology, geology, and biology.

But Agnavina's worldbuilding didn't come from the vacuum of my creative mind. To help me get a better picture of the world, I made Agnavina as large as the North American continent (so that there is plenty of room for its many inhabitants) and based many countries on a mixture of the world's countries with differing political systems. My process of creating cultures, races, and characters stems from my ability to take preexisting things and mixing them together; by playing around with these aesthetics, I'm able to craft unique takes on certain fantasy archetypes. I have already given the example of the Solatai/Sun Elves in my prospectus, so I shall briefly cover my process in developing other races for brevity's sake.

Take the dwarf archetype for example. There are different interpretations of the fantasy dwarf in many texts, but two of the main interpretations include the hardy axe-wielding, vulgar warriors, and the reclusive, technologically savvy inventors. I decided to include both interpretations. I concede to the trope that dwarves are not inherently adept at magic but compensate for it with savagery or ingenuity. I divided the dwarf into two subcultures: the Dhul-Fjil/mountain dwarf and Gorot-Dhull/cave dwarf. I gave the mountain dwarves the stereotypical tribal warrior culture, while I gave the cave dwarves a much more unique spin. Befitting their name, they dwell within the many dark recesses of Agnavina's caverns and cave systems but have constructed vast cities and invented powerful technology to help them thrive in their

habitats. I took some inspiration from the Dwemer in *The Elder Scrolls* video game series. I not only play with archetypes, but I also ask myself questions about their physiology and appearance, as I do not want them to be indistinguishable from versions in other texts. If they live in caves, should they not be pale? Lack any pigmentation? More adaptable eyes for darkness? While they are short and stocky, they may be less hairy than their mountain-dwelling cousins. As inventors and craftsmen, they have less need for strength and endurance, so should they not have stronger or more dexterous hands? This is just one example of my creative process. As of now, I have at least thirty pages' worth of worldbuilding material, and I periodically add notes should new ideas appear.

As a fantasy world, magic is an important aspect to creating Agnavina. I was particularly interested in Sanderson's dichotomy of "soft" and "hard" magic - an undefined and defined power system respectively. His "Rules of Magic" are also what got me interested in the idea of "hard" magic, as the limitations of magic are much more interesting than what magic can do. It also creates more tension within the story, as long as the reader can follow the logic of the magic system. For Agnavina, I have created a magic system that parallels magic as a volatile power with radiation. In brief, magic permeates the air of Agnavina, therefore most people can channel magical energy through their bodies, but their abilities are limited by their mental fortitude.

Realism is important to me. Much like in art, I believe it is important to understand the anatomy of the world in order to effectively distort or fictionalize it. One must know the rules before they can bend or break them. As such, I try my best to do extensive research of the world we live in so that I have the knowledge to distort it into the world of Agnavina. To be able to create a believable world, I must understand how our world works.

While worldbuilding is important in developing a lived-in world, it is only a portion of writing an interesting novel. The characters and story have to be just as interesting, if not more. I've made significant changes to my characters since I began writing *Curse of Time*. As I believe the characters I wrote for the original stories are a bit contrived due to them being based on myself and my friends, I significantly reworked some of them, and placed more emphasis on genuinely interesting characters rather than simply placing people I know into my story.

The main protagonist, Kieran, is a completely different character from the protagonist of my origins stories, who was a self-insert that is in some way a projection of my ideal protagonist persona. His personality differs much more from mine, as the trauma and pain from his backstory provide much more emotional stakes and more motivation for him to continue engaging in the new world that he is in.

As a story with a protagonist stuck between two worlds, *Curse of Time* is meant to be a allegoric meditation on my place in the world. Kieran has no concrete home: he has lost everything that ever mattered to him on Earth, and as Lilly asks him in chapter 5, "*You've suffered a lot in your realm. But I don't understand one thing: why, after all the pain you've endured, that you wish to return, besides scattering your mother's ashes? It sounds to me that there is nothing left for you on Earth.*" This sentiment is essentially the thesis statement of this project: what is a home for someone who has lost connection to their origins? As someone who does not feel much of a connection to my hometown of Hong Kong, I always felt much more of an affinity when living in America. This connection is represented through Kieran's Agnavinian heritage, his inherent ability to understand the language, and his innate magical powers that manifest through his Relic and (later) in himself. *Curse of Time* is meant to reflect my journey in America, and my perspective of the new world I live in as a foreigner.

Curse of Time is a *bildungsroman*, much like many other YA fantasy novels. With a traditional hero's journey arc surrounding a young protagonist, I thought it would be a safe choice as I can focus more of my energy on developing creative ideas rather than experimenting on storytelling techniques that I am less familiar with. Writing this story as a *bildungsroman* is also quite fitting of its allegorical origins, as it reflects my journey as a foreigner in America as well as my years developing as an adult. Kieran's journey as an initially reluctant, homeless teenager is much like how I was when I first came to the country. Of course, I was not orphaned like him, but I felt lonely and lost in a new environment until I found new friends and a new purpose. In subsequent novels, I plan on continuing to represent some aspects of my life in America in my Agnavina stories.

The main influences for *Curse of Time* are Rick Riordan's first-person narration and Sanderson's worldbuilding. I find that it is much easier to focus on one character with his style of narration, as there is a sense of immediacy and reader/character closeness. I have also watched many of Sanderson's online lectures to help develop a comprehensive world while keeping the exposition to a minimum. Like Sanderson, I want to develop a rich world that feels lived in, but not overwhelm my reader.

Through Dr. Gargano's guidance both as my instructor and my thesis chair, I have been able to learn important lessons on effective writing practices. Thanks to her guidance and genuinely insightful feedback, I was also able to gain more confidence in my writing. I had always felt that my writing was lacking in creating an engaging story. While I do have many interesting ideas for my story, I have a hard time in putting them down in writing. One such difficulty lies in my fear of writing in an unsatisfactory way. Instead of actually writing the story, I obsessively spend hours writing notes for characters and worldbuilding in an attempt to avoid

holding myself to exceptionally high standards in my writing. This impedes my writing pace and turns into a negative feedback loop of “why can’t I just write?” and “why is my work so bad?” With Dr. Gargano’s guidance, I was able to simply just *write*, and revise after I’ve completed a chapter. I’ve learned that developing an outline and then “word vomiting” helps my writing process.

A major issue that I have had in my past was plotting. I have a habit of writing excessive amounts of detail that sacrifice the pacing of the storytelling; even my English teachers have (jokingly) given me backhanded compliments, saying that my writing is “Tolkien-esque.” What I have learned in novel writing is that while I have much more room to work in contrast to short stories, it is important to remember the “iceberg theory.” This theory, coined by Hemmingway, is a writing technique where the details are implicit rather than shown on paper. By doing this, I allow readers to make their own interpretations as they read along and experience the satisfaction of having their theories confirmed later.

I have a tendency to excessively exposit, as I am always excited to show my readers the kind of worlds and characters I’ve built. I have a lot of worldbuilding and subtext that I am excited to show, but restraint is important in order to avoid slowing down the story. For example, chapter 4 and beyond is where Kieran travels through Agnavina as a wanderer. The worldbuilding is shown through Kieran’s perspective, and there may be some aspects of Agnavina that he and the readers do not yet understand, and I try to resist the urge to show everything to the reader at once. This might be also a benefit to place the burden of narration on Kieran’s shoulders; on top of forming a stronger connection between the reader and protagonist, first-person narration can immerse the reader into the world, as they get to experience Agnavina *with* the protagonist.

The main aim of my project has always been to tell an interesting and engaging story, one that readers of all ages can appreciate, especially with its more fantastic elements. As a YA Fantasy novel, my aim is to replicate the same feeling I got when I first read *Percy Jackson* or *Harry Potter*: the sense of wonder of reading about a world filled with monsters and magic, exploring them by forming a connection with young protagonists. As an avid YA reader, I had always wanted to create my own stories to appeal to younger audiences. I wanted to inspire and awe them through my worldbuilding and relatable stories.

I plan on finishing *Curse of Time* after I graduate with my Master's degree. As an aspiring novelist, I hope to one day be able to publish it and continue Kieran's story. The vast world of Agnavina opens many opportunities for me to tell other stories. As it is now, I know that there is still a lot of room for development, but I am confident that with time, I am able to create a believable and lived-in world. I also have other works in my backlog, as I plan on dipping my toes in science fiction, crime drama, literary fiction, and create my own web comic. To me, Agnavina is still my life's work, and I hope that if I do get it published, I could garner a fanbase and inspire younger readers, much like how Riordan's work did for me.

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Chapter 1

I slam the door of my Subaru station wagon and breathe in fresh Appalachian air. The two-story cabin before me is small and quaint, but I stand helplessly on the gravel parking spot, awestruck. The smell of birch trees and the gentle cool autumn breeze welcome me like an old friend, rustling dead leaves from the surrounding trees.

My heart thumps like crazy but I take the first step anyway. *Chill, Kieran. It's just a cabin in the middle of nowhere.*

I take out my e-cigarette and inhale the filthy air from the tiny device. Sweet vapor fills my lungs and nicotine tickles my skull, offering a moment of respite. I look at the metal urn snug on the passenger seat, loosely secured by a seatbelt. Mom's voice echoes in my head.

"Aiya, Kieran, stop breathing that poison, it's killing your lungs."

I wish I could tell her that it's the only thing keeping me together besides her memory nowadays. That my nicotine dependency has worsened in the past few weeks, and that I miss her. I pick up her urn, its lid fastened, preserving her colorless, microscopic remains forever, its engraving a meager summary of her entire life:

In Loving Memory of

Linda Sandar-Chen Chiying

February 21st 1973 – September 30th 2022

I hold the urn close to my chest.

"We're finally here, Mom."

I take out my backpack from the passenger seat and nestle her among the spare clothes, my books, and the manilla envelope. Opening the envelope, I fish out the polaroid that was enclosed with her will and other important documents. On the back, the date October 2002 is written with a black marker, the year before I was born. The woman in the photo looks just like her, save for a few key differences – she’s wearing loosely fitted acid washed jeans and a checkered polo, and her wide smile emanates a jovial brightness I had never seen during my lifetime. The Mom I knew always had bags under her eyes and a perpetual sorrow, hiding behind a thin veneer of old-fashioned Chinese perseverance.

I never understood that sorrow until she told me about my father. She told me I was his spitting image. Paul made her get rid of all traces of him when she remarried. The only evidence of his existence is this photo that she kept hidden for years, and his face is obscured by a years-long coffee stain.

One last thing Mom included in the envelope is a jingling mass of keys: for Paul’s house in Cary, for her twenty-year-old Honda, and others whose purposes are lost to me. The tiny “C” right in the middle of the key’s bow, is faded and smudged from decades of use. I walk towards the cabin, gripping the key, gravel crunching under my tattered sneakers.

It’s been years since Mom and I were here last. At this point, I expect half of the cabin to have fallen to disrepair by now. I prepare myself for the cleaning and fixing I would have to do. Dread creeps into my chest, clenching my heart as it struggles with a quickened beat.

I unlock the patio door, sliding it open. My heart steadies when the dread washes away, replaced by relief.

The air is clean, static, without a single speck of dust floating about. The coffee table's polished surface is almost as reflective as a mirror, and the sofa's leather isn't weathered and rotted. Since when did Mom hire somebody to do regular cleanings? We could barely keep up with downtown rent, let alone afford cleaning services for a cabin in the middle of the Appalachians. The mottled glass windows show nothing but a bright afternoon glow that floods the cabin with warm, welcoming colors that remind me of my childhood. Everything looks just like the way we left it years ago, like the room had been perfectly set to where I can barely feel it.

I plop down on the sofa, but its unexpectedly uncomfortable hardness makes me jump to my feet, and my bottom leaves a dent on the fabric.

The depression remains, as if locked in place.

I guess that's not surprising, given the temperatures around these parts. My hoodie can barely keep me warm at lower altitudes, much less up here.

I flick the switches for both the fan and lights. Nothing. In the kitchen, I ignite the gas stove. It coughs out a couple of sparks that disappear into nothingness. The landline is dead, too.

Nothing in this damned house is working.

I take another hit to calm my nerves. Now my throat's dry.

Unclipping my empty water bottle from my backpack, I walk over to the sink to turn the faucet. Stagnant water sputters out into a brownish grey mist and dies away. I slam my fist against the lacquered wooden wall. Another puff. The nicotine has plateaued, and I can't even feel it anymore.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

It’s 4:12pm, and I’ve missed several of Liz’s calls. She’s been bombarding me with texts.

babe i heard about what happened with u nd ur stepdad. im really sorry. screw him he sucks – 1:30pm

where r u??? pls call me back im worried about you. - 2:00pm

kiki why arent u responding wtf??? r u srs rn??? - 2:30pm

fine its whatever. im going to my friends since u dgaf. - 3:00pm

K. - 3:30pm

Ah, yes, the cursed “K”, followed by a single period. It’s her way of saying “I’m mad at you but I’m too lazy and piss poor at communicating my feelings”.

The digital padlock on the screen shifts and my lockscreen zooms into our text conversation. Crap. Now she knows I’ve read her messages, and the dreaded grey bubbles await my reply. My thumbs hover above the keyboard. How can I come up with an excuse now? I take a deep breath and type out a screen’s worth of text to explain everything.

Message not sent. Please try again.

Zero bars. Of course. She probably thinks I’m deliberately ignoring her when she expects me to grovel for her forgiveness. Then she’s probably going to go “hang out” with any one of her “friends” and blame it on me. Then probably another “break” again.

I’m sick of this game we’ve been playing for three years. I’m tired of it. Skipping town was a good idea—not only do I not have to deal with Liz yelling and throwing things at me and

threatening to break up with me because she desperately needs attention, but I also won't have to look at Paul's disgustingly pale, balding face.

By now, he must have already ratted to the cops about what happened. If I go back, I'll be arrested on another assault charge. Just the thought of seeing my stepfather again makes me see red. After abusing and cheating on Mom for years, he had to go ahead and contest the will and win it, knowing I could never afford a lawyer. It makes me sick to my stomach that people trust him with their lives. My head grows hot from rage.

I take a deep breath and the rage briefly subsides. I need to remember where I am, why I'm here. I'm somewhere in the Appalachian wilderness, and besides, the cabin is practically an anomaly on the map. If I want to, I could just disappear—live off the grid, like I never existed. Maybe I could even become a lumberjack. After all, my plaid jacket and my jeans already make up half the uniform. I can live the rest of my life in relative peace and quiet here.

I can't go back.

I'll stay at the cabin while I figure out how to fix things around here, assuming my deadbeat father had the foresight to keep anything useful. Hopefully, he has some tools lying around. But I'll worry about that later because I didn't come here just to escape.

I look at the keychain Mom left me. Dangling beside the cabin key is a bronze, four-bladed key. Its surface had lost its luster from decades' worth of rust—the key to the only room in the cabin that had been inaccessible to me until her untimely death. My father's study. It's steadfastly guarded by a reinforced wooden door with a dark metal knob and a cross-shaped keyhole, carved out to match its key. Its dark, lacquered wooden surface, trapped in its metal cage, is the only barrier between me and my father's secrets. Ever since I was a child, I always

had a curiosity about it, often standing and staring at it much to my mother's chagrin. It always had strange symbols carved onto the metal, but I always figured that it was just part of the decoration.

She had always been inseparable from that thing. This was the only thing that she couldn't trust me with, and for whatever reason never once showed me what my father's study looked like, despite my yearly attempts to convince her to show me even a peek at the kind of person my father was.

"I'm sorry Kieran," she used to say through tears. *"I wish I could, but I promised him not to give you the key until you turned eighteen. It's too painful for me to revisit those memories. I hope you understand."* The pain of watching my mother cry would keep my curiosity at bay for a year, and I'd think that I'm old enough to handle it.

Now, she's gone and passed it down to me. And whether she wanted it or not, I can finally dig around my old man's dirty laundry. She never once talked about him in detail, and the persistent curiosity that has plagued me my whole life takes over.

But what if that's not what Mom wanted? What if she meant for me to keep it as a memento, even though I barely have any memory of him? I can't help but feel guilty. She kept this from me my whole life, so at least I deserve to know more about my father, right? Surely, she wouldn't want to keep me in the dark forever.

But then I remember Paul. I remember the days when Mom would tuck me into bed with a black eye or a bruised wrist. I remember coming home to their fights. I remember asking counsellors and Mom why my dad left me. I remember asking if he ever really loved me. If he

did, he'd try to find a way to stay, right? That way, Mom wouldn't have been heartbroken, Paul wouldn't be in our lives, and Mom wouldn't have died.

Screw it. My father was never a part of my life. He owes me an explanation about who he was and why he left. Some clues, information, *anything*.

I jam the key into the slot, then twist the knob. I pause, and for a moment I forget how to breathe. I throw open the door, its hinges shrieking under the force of eighteen years of pent-up aggression. A part of me expects a stash of guns, illegal drugs, and maybe even classified dossiers, and the other hopes for him to be there greeting me with open arms so I can strangle him.

But what I find instead is a small library. Bookshelves line the walls, stocked to the edges with tomes and thick grimoires with loose sheets of paper sticking out between the pages. Throughout my life, my vivid imagination had convinced me that he was a spy or runaway criminal. Mystery solved: Dad was just a regular guy who collected old books, and probably abandoned us for some bimbo who would leave him in the dust at the first sign of a better life. I move to close the door, my anger somewhat quelled.

But there's no harm in snooping around, right?

I swing the creaky door back open and hurry to one of the bookshelves, as if to catch a nonexistent culprit off guard. I pick up an unmarked tome with a thick, purple cover and gold inlays. Its condition is almost pristine, as if frozen in time. I open the book.

The letters inside the pages are written in black and red ink, are a mix of sharp edges and soft curves, all connected by a single line in the middle. Georgian? Sanskrit? Mongolian? The closest thing I can relate it to is Tolkien's Elvish. Maybe my father was a huge fan of fantasy

novels. But it is so meticulously handwritten. There is no way that it's a published book.

Whatever it is, this book must have cost a fortune to make.

I pick up a notebook from the bottom of the shelf. It looks as if it was bound by an amateur, with loose pieces of paper sticking out from between the pages. I flip through it, expecting to find more illegible nonsense. But this one has scattered English words mixed with it.

Maybe I can at least learn a little bit.

Stuck between the cover and the first page of the journal is a sheet of paper—a cipher. The alphabet seems simple enough: characters that correspond to the English alphabet, with some additional symbols for diphthongs and digraphs. By some odd coincidence, many of the letters resemble distorted versions of the English alphabet. All I have to do is match them, and I should figure out at least how to read them out loud. Vocabulary and grammar, on the other hand, are nearly impossible to figure out on my own. Good thing my father was helpful enough to leave some nifty translations on the margins.

I plop myself down on the leather chair at the end of the room behind an ornate wooden desk, the old leather cushions deflating and crinkling under my weight. The chair's joints creak when I lean and rest my legs on the desk, ready for an impromptu study session.

Much of the diary is unreadable thanks to the complicated vocabulary and sayings. Even context clues are failing me. My eyes dart between the cipher and the entries:

... Cannot return to Agnavina. Found a quiet warm realm of lush forests. My pursuers have not caught my scent yet, at least not for a while in this remote sector... encountered humanoids that speak strange tongue. Their technology is

confusing. They use sound and light emitting panels and horseless carriages, apparently without the need for Sourcestone power... One local fired a loud, crude weapon at me... viciously territorial, like the Mountain Dwarves... Ran away when I could not cast a barrier and failed to communicate. Fell unconscious... Woke up with locals gathered around me. One was doing surgery on me. Tried to staunch bleeding but remembered magic is useless in this realm...

Wait a minute—Mountain dwarves? Magic? Spells? What kind of fantastic delusions did this man have? Did his brush with death cause some sort of delirium? I've never heard of Agnavina before. Something tells me it's probably a backwater European country I've never heard of, and he's just using magic to rationalize the culture shock.

... Relic translated their tongue, "Anglisch", to Agnavinii... in an empire called "Unified Nations of Merika," a vast diverse land not unlike home, also rife with conflict and division...

I suppose that's fair assessment of the current state of the country, and I'm sure that's how the rest of the world feels about us, too.

... Stayed at the local infirmary to heal. I became friends with one of the healers, Linda...

So that's when my parents met. Under some strange date marked as "31st day of Qartan, 154 EE." I'm guessing this was around the late 90s?

After I healed, Linda took me under her wing. We travelled whenever she was summoned for her healing skills. She showed me and taught me great many things about Amerika... I see a lot of Agnavina in this kingdom, particularly "Nu Yurk",

which reminds me of Erestport. She taught me how to blend in and speak “Anglisch”. I cannot help but think of my family. I miss my wife and my children, but I must not dwell on that anymore. Returning will bring them and my people more shame than my desertion already has. It is better that they believe in my death.

Did he just say that he had a family before coming here? That two-timing bastard! I can feel my teeth grind, but I stop myself before I grind away my enamel. Guess Mom and I weren't the only ones he abandoned, then. Maybe if I find his ex-wife and my half-siblings, we could share in a mutual hatred for this man and the pain he's caused us.

But “desertion” is the one that intrigues me the most. Who or what did he desert from? Was he in a military, fighting in a war? What made him leave? Was it that bad that he had to fake his death to preserve what dignity he had left? These questions won't answer themselves, and I might not ever find out unless I ask him myself. Assuming he's still alive.

There are more entries, but they've gradually transitioned to English, albeit somewhat broken. I flip to one entry. Its margins are filled to the brim with notes, sketches, and the occasional translation back to Agnavinii. I'll give him credit where credit's due: he's done his due diligence in translating, and he's not a terrible sketch artist, either.

Thanks to what I learned from my quick study of Agnavinian script and my father's broken English, his journal becomes way more legible to me.

...Linda has child (katom). The Amerika technology shows a writhing figure in a machine of dark light. The healer says it is a boy. What wonder! I shall name him after the great Kirano'o. Linda is enthusiastic to learn about Agnavinian history.

He's talking about me, and he's describing an ultrasound like it was some technological marvel. What century is this man from?

A joyous day! Little Kieran is born. We have decided to spell his name to fit the Amerikan language. He looks more like his mother, but perhaps it is a good thing. Ardan traits may make him too conspicuous in this homogenous world. Changing my actions to fit in Amerika is already difficult for me, and constant casting of a disguise spell leaves little reserves for my Relic. I do not wish for him to suffer because of me.

Too late, "Dad"—my ashen grey hair and green eyes have always been the banes of my existence. For the longest time, I had to dye it black at least once every year since my teachers thought it wasn't my natural hair color. For most of my early school years school authorities branded me a delinquent even though my GPA and attendance scores were perfect. Not even Mom could personally convince them by saying it's a "genetic mutation." Her English could only get her so far with those people. It wasn't until I went to college that I let the roots grow back. At least they knew wearing colored contacts for a long time would be bad for me, so they couldn't do jack about my eyes.

Thanks, Dad.

The inevitable has occurred. I saw one of them in the forest the other day, and I made eye contact with it. It has locked its gaze on to me. I can no longer remain in this realm. I managed to send it back to whence it came with my Relic, but it will not be long until more of them come. I must not put Linda and little Kieran in any more danger. Linda and I cried before we said our goodbyes. I promised to see

them again eventually, but I am uncertain if it is a promise I am able to fulfil. Tonight, I will gather the necessary equipment and make preparations to conceal Earth from their gaze. Only my blood will break the spell so that I may one day return.

What kind of fantasy is this man living in? Is that why he left me and Mom? All because he was being chased by some people, and he's trying to justify it under the guise of me and Mom's safety? I was right all along; he was involved in some sort of criminal underworld, and they've finally come to collect on his debt.

Furious, I turn to the last page. A single passage written in neat penmanship with perfect English, greets me in an otherwise empty page:

Kieran,

If you are reading this, then I am no longer in this realm. I regret not having the opportunity to watch you grow into the man that you have become, and my inability to tell you about your heritage. By way of apology, I have left something for you. It will provide you the ability to search for the answers that I cannot give you now. Search within my desk, and what you will find is my most treasured artifact. I pray we may one day meet in person. And beware - once you remove the Relic, they will be able to track you. And they will hunt you. You must be ready to fight.

Your father

Hold on. He's "no longer in this world," and yet he hopes to meet me in person? Is he dead or not? How did he know I was going to see this? What questions did he expect me to have?

But I am most concerned about the last sentence. Who's "they"? Is a cartel involved in this somehow? A government agency? Whoever they are, surely they would've made their move by now, assuming they were real. I doubt my father was in a sound mind when he wrote this. Still, if he didn't abandon us and leave for our good, who was he running from? I need to find him.

I need answers.

I search the front drawers only to find some loose sheets of official looking paper with Agnavinian text, with inane, meaningless headers like "Guardian Certificate" and "Union Document." Great. They totally answer all my questions. I throw myself against the back of the chair, exasperated and ready to give up with a loud sigh. Then, I notice something metallic in the corner of my eye, shining under the sunlight.

It's a metal ring embedded on the far side of the desk, almost inconspicuous with how the material blends with the dark wooden surface of the desk. There aren't any gaps that suggest that it's a drawer that could be pulled out.

Maybe it's some kind of decoration? No, it's probably just a random pipe or tube, and I don't think there's any decorative value in there. Maybe it's some sort of hidden compartment? What other secrets is my father hiding? Wait—I think there's something inside.

I fiddle around with it, trying to look through but only to be greeted by absolutely nothing. I stick my thumb in it, hoping to wiggle it around so that I can find some hidden mechanism, but it's a tight fit and I can feel nothing but unpolished wood.

“Ow!”

Something at the end of the tube pricks the tip of my thumb and I feel the ring tightening around my knuckle. The gap between the metal and the wooden surface glows a bright blue, and it emanates an oscillating hum. I try to pull my thumb out of the hole, but it's stuck, as if the metal tube had shrunk right after it pricked me.

I curse out loud, struggling to pull my thumb out of the finger trap. I struggle even more, feeling the joints in my finger pop from the constant yanking.

Something cold slithers up my thumb, and I let out a yelp. My hairs stand on their ends and my eyes widen with horror: a shiny black goo takes over my hand, starting from my thumb. Then to my palm. Then the rest of my fingers. Finally settling on my wrist. It forms some sort of dark greyish skin above mine, hardening into a layer of onyx metal plates that looks like a sleek gauntlet on my left hand. I shriek and yank even harder, and at the same time, the metal finally gives way. I fling my hand backwards and it hits the shelf behind me, but the metal absorbs the impact.

I shake my wrist to dull the pain in my thumb. The glove covers my entire left hand, with intricate lines running down my fingers. A circular sigil rests on the back of my hand, complete with twelve notches that resemble a clock. The strap is nowhere to be seen, and yanking it just pulls my skin along with it, seemingly fused together.

A faint blue glow spins around the sigil, speeding up with each lap, the humming growing with a crescendo until it becomes a loud whirring. The revolutions are almost imperceptible, making a blurry circle of light. I shield my face with my free hand, fearing that it might blow up. Instead, the whirring stops with a chime.

Whatever that was, that was crazy. There's a deafening silence in the room.

The environment around me deteriorates into a void. The walls crumble into planks, then splinters. The pages of the books around me dissolve into flakes of paper and parchment. The house disintegrates into darkness. A bright, loud bang. And then darkness. And then in a split, incomprehensible nanosecond, I can see everything and everywhere. Specks of light in the sky move into lines across space, all four seasons mashed into one, every birth and every death, happening all at once. Time and space coalesce into a swirling mixture of past and present and future, the world's greatest miracles and disasters mere flashes in the temporally infinite stream. The universe sings an ethereal tune, rising to a spiral crescendo, until it all comes crashing down into a silent singularity.

...

Dark. Light. Wet. Screams. Crying. Hands grabbing. "Congratulations, Mrs. Sandar. It's a boy." Woman panting. Tears. "My baby..." Mother. Different man voice. Strange. Father? "Kieran. His name is Kieran. I love you, Lin." ... playing GameBoy at home. She comes to me and hands me my favorite: corned beef and egg sandwich. She says she is sad about my dad. Why is she sad? ... remarried some white guy she met at a mixer... Paul was drunk, and he yelled at Mom, angry at her for missing my dad. He raised his hand to slap her. I tried to defend her. I'm a "good for nothing half-breed." ... Mom's sick. She insisted I go to college. Paid for

Mom's medical bills. Saw her every day after class. She told me how much she loved me... Paul lying on the ground, battered and bruised, calling 911, blood splattering onto the concrete. I left town, going 90 on a 70...

The surge of information crashes into my brain. Every muscle in my body convulses, and my heart palpitates. My mouth is wide open, but I can't make a sound. I gasp for air, but my lungs refuse to work. The stream of memories evaporates. The ringing in my ears subsides. My eyes roll back into my skull. I fall onto the ground, motionless. The sigil on my hand stops spinning.

Silence rings in my ears. Everything turns black.

Chapter 2

Saturday night. November. Mom was out on a double shift again and wouldn't be back for another couple of hours. These nights I would cook myself a bowl of mac and cheese and microwave a hot pocket for dinner like every other night. I sat down on the couch and turned on the cartoon channel. My favorite show came on, its catchy opening song echoing in the living room, and my eyes were glued to the bright technicolor screen. As compensation for her absence, Mom had let me stay up until 2am that night.

Midnight rolled in. I could hear Paul's obnoxious Beemer rumble in the distance. His car knocked down a trash can outside, its metal lid clattering on the concrete floor. My cartoon continued to play, but my mind was outside, listening to Paul's erratic footsteps thump toward the front door. He fumbled with his keys, mumbling something at the other side.

He stumbled through the threshold. I slunk into the corner of the couch, hoping the darkness concealed me. Our eyes met and my heart sank.

"Oh hey, it's you."

I remained silent. He looked around and glanced at the TV. His frown deepened.

"You watching that god awful crap again? Do you know what kind of day I had? An idiot got stabbed today. Several times! Barely stitched up a wound before he bled out on the table. His damn wife gave me an earful for a good hour. Do you know what that's like? Having your skills be put to question all because some schmuck decided to fight a mugger? A word of advice: don't be an idiot and spend eight years in medical school. Least you wouldn't end up a hack like me."

I sat there. Frozen, not knowing how to respond. He turns his head to face me, his eyes bloodshot, pupils dilated, in the cold glow of the television. His moustache twitched.

“Not even a word to comfort your dear ol’ stepdad, huh? Say something!”

He slammed his fist against the wall. Tears welled up in my eyes.

“Stop crying!”

I said nothing.

“I’ve just about had it with you, boy.”

He stormed towards me, each thunderous stomp reverberating my already shaking form.

Like lightning, he struck my face with his palm. Before I could register the pain, his face swooped in, glaring at me and breathing heavily, reeking of liquor. Tears streamed from my eyes, but I remained silent, shaking. My breath quaking.

“I said, stop crying, boy!” He slapped me again. He grabbed me by the shoulders, his iron grip bruising my fragile skin. Paul stopped. He winced, like he was the one who had been hit. He growled under his breath.

“Why did you make me do this? I was the one who took you in because your mother would die without you. I gave you a roof to sleep under, food to eat, and allowed you and your immigrant mother to live in my household. At least she works hard and actually cares for me. But you? What have you got to show for, other than watching this... brain rotting trash on my TV while I pay the bills and take care of everything around here?”

He dragged me by the collar of my shirt and made me stand up. His eyes were shaking. This time, it was he who was quivering. He let go of me and lightly shoved me.

“Get the hell out of my sight.”

I didn't feel the stinging in my cheeks until I finally got into bed. I couldn't sleep that night.

I gasp for air and I jolt up, panting. I'm greeted by a throbbing headache and overwhelming fatigue. Every muscle in my body feels as though I had run a marathon nonstop. With whatever energy I can muster, I push myself off the floor and lean against the wall. Nope—that just makes the headache even worse. How long was I out?

Judging from the afternoon glow from the windows and the dark wet stain in my jeans, I'd say not too long. I groan out a measly curse, my voice raspy from a dry throat. Fighting through the pounding in my head and shaking muscles, I manage to stand up, though not without wobbling a little.

I drag my feet across the wooden floor, waddling under the uncomfortable wetness in my groin. I leave my father's study, my back hunched like I had just woken up from a bender. What the hell happened? The last thing I remember is that seizure I had, and this insane vision of the Big Bang and the formation and end of the universe. Did my life flash before my eyes? I guess this is what people see before they die.

But I didn't, right?

I feel like hell, but I'm still functioning. Besides, as dazed as I am, everything feels real. The counter that I'm touching is cold, hard, and I can hear my fingers when I run them across its smooth surface. My throat is parched, and I've run out of water in both my bottle and the cabin's water isn't running. Thankfully, I have a couple of gallons of emergency drinkable water in my trunk.

I change my underwear and put on a pair of joggers that I meant to use as pajamas. The last time I had wet myself was when I was with my friends at the school cafeteria during fifth grade, and I laughed so hard I pissed myself in front of everybody. I remember having a full-blown panic attack from the embarrassment. To think that this would happen to me as an adult! I slam my face into my palms, but one of them feels harder.

The “Relic”, as my father called it in his journal, is still on my hand. It’s coming back to me now—it had pricked my finger and slithered up to me like an amorphous mass of shiny black goo. It’s now stuck to me in the shape of a glove, and the sigils that sent me through time and space are inert.

I try to move my hand, and it feels as though it isn’t there at all. I can move them freely, and their movement isn’t hindered by what seems to be a thick layer of dark mesh over my skin. I inspect it, touching the cold, hard material on the back of my hand. The sigil is intricate, and its lines are angular and sharp, as if someone had taken a chisel and magically carved out an fancy symbol of a clock with lines branching out over each of my fingers. Secured around my wrist is a silver bangle covering the leaking metal. It looks as if it’s stained my forearm.

I try to dig my fingers into my skin to peel the dried goo off me, only to pull my skin along with it, sending a sharp pain through my arm. I spend at least a few minutes trying to figure out the best way to pull it off me, but it still won’t budge. I look for my addictive crutch and take a hit from my e-cig, and I let out an asthmatic cough. I really should get that water.

I get up and leave the cabin. A blast of cold, autumn air flows into the room, the door revealing a dark outdoors.

I stand there, lost for words. The time of the outside world and the inside world don't match. I rush back inside and try to open the mottled window above the kitchen sink, still emitting the bright glow of a calm afternoon.

It slides open, and I see nothing but a blank canvas of whiteness and still air. Convinced that I must be hallucinating, I poke my head out and look around. Still nothing. It is just whiteness everywhere, and even the cabin's exteriors are non-existent as I try to look for them. It reminds me of an out of bounds area in a video game, where the developers had neglected to include textures.

What the hell is going on? Did the needle that pricked my finger inject me with some kind of hallucinogen? Am I going insane? I sit on the divot that my bottom had made earlier on the couch, and stare into space, trying to process of what I'd just witnessed. I'm too dehydrated and hungry to think right now, and my supplies are in my trunk. I'll think about it once I get something to eat.

I put on my jacket and creep out of the door, looking around for missing textures or strange glitches in reality. Ok—everything outside of the door looks real. It seems that the door is the one way back to reality. I see my car waiting for me down the gravel path. The cold mountain air threatens to dry my skin and I dash toward it, shivering, hoping to make this quick.

The trunk opens, and I scramble to carry the two jugs of water and plastic bag full of granola bars. My stomach growls.

A low, wet growl wafts from behind me at the foot of the hill, somewhere among the trees. It's almost like a bear's, but drawn out, accompanied by quiet clicks. I stay still, pretending not to hear it, looking behind me through my car's rearview mirror.

There's a vague, dark mass among the thicket of trees.

It's not a bear, that's for sure, but rather a humanoid figure with spindly arms and legs. It's watching me.

Oh, god.

I've heard about the legends of Wendigo. But it's not real, is it? Maybe it's just a lost hiker who desperately needs a lozenge. Who am I kidding? It's not a person. Something not of this world.

My legs quiver, but I try to stay still, hoping it would just leave me alone.

I blink, and it's gone.

I set down the food and water and close the trunk. With the moonlight reflecting off the window, I see myself. And a dark, thin figure right behind me.

I turn around. Time feels as though it has slowed down. For a split second, I see it under the shimmering moonlight: its hunched, bony frame, supported by hind legs tipped with three claws sticking out of its thick paw. Its body seems to absorb the light around it, covered in dark purple muscles and an overgrowth of sinew. Are those rusted metal plates poking out of its skin? Its long skull hangs from its spiny neck, staring at me with its beady yellow eyes. It stands up, turning its emaciated waist, and lets out an ear-piercing shriek.

The creature swipes its claws, and I duck and land on the ground with my chest. It cleaves through the back of my car, shattering the window and tearing the metal like it was paper. I scurry on the gravel floor and make a break for the cabin. Another shriek. All my hairs stand up. I slam the door behind me. I grab the couch, chairs, and the coffee table one by one and

shove them against the door. There—that'll at least buy me a few more seconds. It slashes the door, sending splinters and glass into the house.

I snatch the poker from beside the fireplace and scramble into the kitchen, frantically searching the drawers for a backup weapon. I find a knife and retreat with my back against the wall, the poker in my sweating hands. The door gives way, and it clatters onto the stairs to the upper floor. Thousands of curses go off in my head. The creature stops.

I stay silent. The windows darken, and night descends onto the cabin. The previously static air grows colder. Silence rings in my ears, and my heartbeat grows into a percussion. I've just trapped myself into a corner. I just need to find a way to kill it—

I blink.

And it is right in front of me.

A low chuckle vibrates from its throat. It gets down on all fours and scrapes the wooden floor with its claws. It pounces, but this time I'm prepared. With its gaping maw opened, the creature tries to grab me with its oversized claws. I scream, thrusting my weapon at it. The poker finds its mark on the creature's chest, puncturing deep into its thick hide. It howls, grabbing me. It snaps at my face, its mouth reeking of rotten eggs and toxic sludge. The poker is the only thing that's stopping it from biting my head off.

It snarls at me, spitting glowing saliva on me, its claws threatening to dig into my skin and my weapon sinking deeper with each struggle. I keep the poker in one hand and with the other I plunge the knife into its thick hide. Its claws dig into my skin, and blood seeps from my shoulder. I stab it again, and again. It gets angrier and its grip tightens. I scream louder, but I

notice the glowing crystal embedded in its sunken chest. I let go of the poker. It releases me for a moment and I duck under it, shoving the knife into the crystal.

The crystal cracks and a flow of purple energy rushes out of the fissure. The creature howls again. It slams its arms into the wall, tearing into the wood. it's distracted, I run into my father's study, locking the door behind me. At least it can stop it from charging straight into me.

The only thing left that could give me a chance is this new gauntlet my father left for me. He called it a Relic. Its sigils are glowing, waiting for me. But what am I supposed to do? It's not like I can comb through my father's notes while a bony creature of the night is turning the cabin's walls into tinder.

I touch the sigil. It glows brighter. Vibrating, as if some sort of power is trapped inside it and is fighting for release. A strange projection of light hovers between my tingling, open fingers. Now what am I supposed to do with it?

As if on cue, the creature slices through the wood, slamming into it repeatedly. The metal grate warps, giving into its barrage of swipes. Panicking, I tap at the back of my hand, like pressing a button or a touch screen. Nothing. The monster continues to slam its claws into the halfway-destroyed door. It peeks through a gap and lets out a blood curdling scream when it sees me, a mixture of glowing drool and deep purple goo splashing from its flailing tongue.

It tears through the door and charges in.

I put my hand in front of my face to protect myself. Its claws slice into my arm and I scream. I close my eyes.

Something shatters, and the Relic chimes.

Death doesn't come.

I open my eyes, hoping the Relic has somehow blown the monster away.

Its horrifying face is frozen in front of me. Not with ice. More like a wax figure, a trail of my blood following the tips of its claws, also frozen in stasis. I walk away from the creature and through an invisible barrier with a prismatic glow in the air. I step out of it with ease, and I see a ball of that same energy surrounding the creature, who now has a shimmering outline.

I don't know what I just did, but I have a feeling it won't last long.

The Relic continues to glow, and I realize that my fist is clenched. Whatever this power is, it's connected to why the cabin seemed stuck in the afternoon, and removing it forced it to catch up to the current time. Is this what my father meant? That removing it caused this creature to find me and attack me?

An invisible force pries my hand open, and I struggle to keep my fingers closed. The creature shudders and after images shimmer around it. Its movements are lazy, but its eyes are following me. I try to clench my fingers even harder. Purple energy from its chest crystal flows through its veins, and an invisible force pries my fingers open. The sphere of slowness disappears, and the monster resumes its movement, making large gashes at the wall. It notices my absence and lunges at me.

I try to slow it again by clenching my freed fist, but the Relic is unresponsive. I try to defend myself again, and its claws collide with the metal of my glove. Sparks fly and a deafening, reverberating *clang* rings in my ears. Time seems to slow, and I watch the creature's purple aura intermingle with my gauntlet's blue energy, swirling together and into a blinding

flash. It sends the monster into another frenzy, but before it can swipe at me again, something emits a bright glow behind me, stunning it.

The creature is dazed, and I look at the source of the glow. It looks like a tear in the fabric of space-time, and through it is a white, sanitized room filled with a crowd of gawking people. They're all dressed in grey and wear strange masks—a team of scientists and armed guards.

One of them shouts, “*Vysna! Kelo ni moy!*”

Is that Agnavinii? No—the syllables don't seem to match what I've read in my father's journal.

Anywhere is better than here. Without a second thought, I rush through.

I stumble through the glowing rift and fall face first onto the cold, metal floor. My heart is pounding inside my chest, and I take a deep breath to gather myself. Immediately, an overwhelming nausea floods my mind. My vision blurs and my head spins. My limbs feel as though they're covered in pins and needles. An aching pain crawls through my body and I lie on the floor convulsing, blind and almost deaf. Through my muffled hearing I can hear someone bark an order. Someone runs up to me and puts something on my head.

“*Hashatya, hashatya!*” the voice urges me.

I take a deep breath and the nausea fades away. My convulsions stop, and I slowly regain my senses. My Relic emits a light chime, its glinting sigil indicating five notches on the back of my hand. The light within it stops swirling and fades back into nothing.

The crowd gawks at me. I'm in a spacious dome lined with white hexagonal panels. Behind me is an open rift in space, an image of the creature in my father's study shimmering

within a circular portal. Through it, I can see the creature whipping its head, confused. It shrieks in frustration and begins tearing through my father's study. It doesn't seem to notice the portal yet.

Robed scientists back away from me as if I carry some sort of contagious disease. Crouching in front of me is a soldier wearing a full garb of white and grey. An opaque visor covers their face, but they let out a sigh of relief when my breathing steadies, slowly standing back up and retreating amongst their companions.

Secured to my face is a device that resembles a hi-tech respirator, the exact same model as the scientists. Instead of straps, the mask is suctioned to my skin, covering my entire face. Thanks to the visor in front of my face, the world has a slight iridescent hue of blue and purple. Though somewhat restricted by the filters, the air that enters my lungs clears my mind instead of clouding it. I can finally breathe again.

The soldiers close in on me, their glowing weapons drawn. They look like futuristic guns created out of a grey polished metal. Most notably is the shape of their barrels, which resemble tuning forks with a blue glowing crystal at the base.

A guard shouts something unintelligible at me, and I raise my hands.

"Please, you gotta help me," I say, gesturing behind me. "That thing's trying to kill me!"

The guard shouts again, this time louder than before. His voice is muffled by his helmet, and I can barely see behind the iridescent visor that covers his head. His gun is a few inches from my face now, as if getting it closer to me than point blank would change the fact that it could kill me either way. He turns to one of the scientists and barks an order. The scientist flicks some switches and presses some buttons before the rift shrinks at a snail's pace.

The creature shrieks from behind me, and they immediately turn their attention to it. One of them grabs me by the arm and pulls me away. The wound on my shoulder still burns, but my mind is occupied by the horrific sight before me. The guards are inching towards it while it's demolishing my father's workspace on the other side of the portal. It finally notices the approaching guards and it hisses at them, charging while flailing its arms. The soldiers stand ready. The portal is almost fully closed.

Then two pairs of sharp claws puncture the closing rift, forcing it wide open. The creature struggles at first, but with another piercing shriek, it cuts through the rift, creating a new one. It steps through, panting.

The headguard shouts a signal, and the soldiers open fire.

Streams of concentrated, hot blue energy drill into the creature, and it lets out a blood curdling scream. Unknown liquids hiss and evaporate as the monster tries to shield itself from the burning beams of light with its chitinous arms, but to no avail. Boiling pieces of what I think to be its flesh fall to the ground, and the soldiers don't let up. The creature falls to its knees, its screams piercing my ears, and it stops flailing. It stops guarding itself, allowing the streams of heat to pierce its torso, leaving a gaping, sizzling hole. The poker that I had stuck in it clatters onto the ground, its sizzling, molten tip tarnishing the white floor. It falls on its face, saliva and blood pooling from its slack jaw.

The guards keep their guns trained on the creature's corpse while one of them shouts an order at a scientist, who presses buttons on a panel behind us. The circular machine hums in response, and the rift closes. There's a silence. Relieved, I let out a deep sigh, breaking the silence. Everybody stares at me.

Then it dawns on me: My only way home is sealed. A deep dread surfaces from my chest.

“Uh, hello,” I say, my hands raised. “Um, thank you for the rescue. Now can I get back home? Where am I, anyway? Is this Agnavina?”

The soldiers glance at each other, as if confused. Confused murmurs of “*Agnavinayts?*” echo among them. But they fall silent when the man who barked the orders approaches me. He’s dressed in full white armor with an outline of gold, and a singular metal blade protrudes from the top of his ornate helmet. He leans in to inspect me.

“You. Agnavinian?” He speaks in a language I have never heard before, but it almost sounds like Agnavinian. But how can I understand him? My ears hear Agnavinian words, but they echo into my mind as English—no, not exactly English, but rather his intentions and meaning are made clear to me. Could this be an effect of the Relic?

He examines me, and I can see my own reflection on his darkened visor. He turns to his compatriots. “No. You are not of Agnavina.” He seems satisfied. Taking my right wrist, he examines my Relic. He chuckles. He knows something I don’t. He turns to his fellow soldiers, speaking a different language. It’s guttural, each word pronounced with a hardness to it.

“Voy, ech kin fandali! Egun Impuri vyetinat.”

Two of them nod at his command and walk towards me.

I stammer, “Whatever’s going on, we can talk about this, right?” They grab my arms and prop me up. One takes out a pair of metal cuffs and slaps them onto each of my wrists. They activate. A strong magnetic force pulls my wrists inward, forcing my arms together. My first

instinct is to push them forward, and the cuffs slam together with a metallic clang. The guards lead me toward a metal exit.

No, no, no. This isn't right. This place is straight out of a science fiction, and they're treating me like a prisoner! I need to get out of here somehow.

A deafening explosion blasts through the doors, sending me and my captors into the air. Everything is blurry around me, and there's a constant ringing in my ears. My body screams from the explosive assault and I find myself lying on the cold floor. The stench of burned metal and plastic invades my nostrils. The ringing subsides and I can hear screaming men and clamoring scientists around me, a muffled siren blaring in the background.

The doors are smoldering, smoke billowing everywhere, flooded with pulsing red hue. I cough through the smokescreen that's filled the room and try to keep my bearings. Projectiles whizz past me. Soldiers bark orders at each other and fire at their unseen foes only to get cut down by glowing blades soaring through the air.

They panic. One of them – the very same soldier who had put the respirator on me, shouts, “*Zachit Agnavinayat!*” Before a blade slices through his torso, cutting him in half.

His surviving comrade looks upon his fallen friend and screams with guttural sorrow. “*Anzi!*” before getting cut down himself.

Within the chaos I see the glowing figure of a woman dashing through the room cutting down men left and right, radiating a golden splendor. A soldier leaps from the smoke and fires his weapon, almost piercing a shimmering golden silhouette of the woman's back. Then, out of nowhere, giant of a man swoops in with flaming wings and smashes the soldier's head with a

chunk of rock he tore from the ground. He howls, beating his chest with a tribal ferocity that I had only ever seen in New Zealand haka dances.

The man screams something incoherent and rushes off, tearing more soldiers apart limb from limb.

Horried, I inch away from the fight. Whoever they are, I am caught in the crossfire of a battle I have nothing to do with. I need to get out of here.

I bump into something, and a female voice yelps from behind me. It's a young woman with light blue skin wearing a magenta cloak above her green and black dress. Gripping a metal staff with a glowing gemstone at the tip with her gloved hands, she shrinks into the wall. Her turquoise "hair"—long tendrils that droop to her shoulders, quiver, glowing at the tips. She looks at me with large, fearful eyes, as if I'm a monster about to strike. She holds up her staff with her four-fingered hands and it shimmers. A blue barrier materializes between us.

I hold up my hands and take a step back. "No no no no," I stammer, "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to get out—"

"Mecna vu plen slenat mi. Banasya flinu!"

Her words resonate in my mind, like the helmeted soldier who examined me.

Please don't hurt me. Stay away!

As she says this, her earrings behind her "hair" twinkle, reacting with a loud chime like a struck tuning fork. The echo seizes my mind with unimaginable pain. Every emotion – anger, sorrow, fear, hatred – all flare inside me, as if my brain is absorbing the sensations of everything around me. My mind feels as if it was being inflated like a balloon and I scream, gripping my

head in agony. Whatever power she's using, it's pounding on my head, each wave of pain intensifying. My head can't take any longer, filling to the brim like a dam about to break. Blood leaks from my nose and eyes.

Everybody around me screams and a cacophony of anguished cries fill the room, even the burly man and the golden woman, who yells with a strained voice. I can understand her too.

"Etoila, stop! Stop!"

Then, pops. Numbness. Darkness. They overtake me.

I'm sorry, Mom. I guess I never got to fulfil your last wish.

But the darkness does not embrace me. My vision returns and I can see everything moving in a quickened reversal, but I can't feel anything else. I look around me, a passive viewer of a dream. I see the headless bodies of everyone, save for the turquoise girl, reconstitute into their previous state, standing back up and fighting in a deadly regressing dance. I see my writhing form stand back up and moving towards the girl. The man reattaches limbs, a dart of light zips from the golden woman's shield and into the soldier's weapon, glowing blades fly across the room and fade into the woman's body. Time slows down to a halt, and I am pulled back into my body within the smokescreen.

Everything is black again.

Chapter 3

Once again, darkness, but one that is perceptible to my mind.

A flash and a bang. A train of memories flow through me with blinding speed but I can focus on none of them. It's like trying to see individual orbs of formless light dashing through the fog in never-ending cycles. I seize one, giving it shape.

It becomes one with me, finally comprehensible.

It was Monday afternoon. I remember hopping off the school bus as it dropped me off in front of our apartment in Charlotte. Mom wasn't standing at the spot on the curb like she usually did, but I didn't think too much of it. Thankfully, I had the keychain she gave me in case she was at work. I entered our small home and found nobody there. It was strange—I didn't remember Mom mentioning her having any work at this hour. But then I heard a strange sobbing. Muffled, but unmistakably within the two-bedroom apartment. A stabbing feeling lingered in my heart. Up until this point, I had never heard her so much as make a sorrowful noise.

I followed the source of the sound to my mother's bedroom, her door cracked to reveal a Mom-sized lump under the sheets. Retreating and entering the small kitchenette where Mom would cook simple meals, I opened the fridge and gathered the ingredients. Something must have upset her, and with whatever recollection I could muster, I emulated my mother's culinary skills and created a simple ham and cheese sandwich—with the crusts cut out. Surely, she was crying because she was hungry, because I often did the same when I was little.

I creaked the door open, secretly hoping the sobbing lump wasn't actually a monster tricking me into letting my guard down and eating me. With her back turned, Mom couldn't see me come in. I gently set the plastic plate of this jumbled mess of torn white bread, ham pile, and

pieces of American cheese haphazardly ripped from their compatriots. Mom's crying ceased the moment the plate nudged the back of her covered leg, and she scrambled to face me.

I gasped at the sight of my mother's face. Its left side had been flushed completely, and loose strands of snot and streams of tears clung to her freckled face. Her hair was disheveled, and she was still wearing the work clothes that I had seen her in this morning. Hunched over and sniffing, it took Mom a few seconds to register the spilt attempt of a sandwich. And me, waiting at the foot of the bed.

She wiped the tears and snot off her face with her already wet shirt sleeve. "Oh, Kiki, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to knock off your lu—" she checked her watch. "Oh sh—I mean, shoot. I must have lost track of time. I'll go make you something."

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"It's nothing, Kiki. Mama's just sad sometimes. I just needed some alone time."

"What's that?" I pointed at the polaroid that she gripped with her other hand.

She paused, seemingly realizing the inevitability of my uncovering this secret. Glancing between the old photo and me, she held it in front of her, taking another long gaze and sighing. Her bright eyes throughout my childhood, now shadowed by a tinge of longing and regret. She seemed to be lost in thought, choosing to linger in happier memories now lost.

"Mama? Why were you crying?"

"Really, Kieran, it's nothing." She turned to stash the polaroid.

"Is it because of my dad?"

She stopped. The dam broke with a paroxysm of wails that filled the room as Mom shook uncontrollably with her hands covering her face, glossy with tears. I knew I shouldn't have said that, but I didn't know what to do. Ashamed, I lightly placed my hand on my mother's head, its side unkempt and warm. I could do what she had always done for me whenever I woke up screaming and crying from nightmares.

Climbing onto her bed and kneeling beside her, I gently pulled her head and pressed it against my small frame and held her as she sobbed. The deluge subsided with a few snuffles.

"Thank you, Kieran," Mom said, wiping her face with the collar of her dirty work shirt. "I'm sorry, you shouldn't have seen me like this." She sat up and stared at the wall, her thoughts somewhere else. She swallowed and placed a sheet of instant film in front of me. It was a photo of a younger Mom with a taller man, but his face was blurred by a stain.

"You look just like him, you know," Mom said, a slight smile briefly returning to her red face. She lifted me up and sat me on her lap. "I never told you about your father, and I guess now's a good time as any. He left not too long after you were born, Kiki. Your dad came from a faraway place."

"Did he come from China like you did, Mama?"

"No. Andy—your father, came from somewhere that is full of ma—"

The walls around us melt and blur into a concoction of grey and blue swirls. The inscrutable blob of flesh and cloth that was once my mother blends into the background. I scream and reach for her, but her intangible form eludes my grip.

“No no no no no no no!” I plea but everything becomes amorphous. An invisible force pulls me into the nonexistent wall, and I scream louder and louder. Then, a familiar chime rings in my mind. A swirling vortex sucks me into darkness. It drowns out my screams, and I fall into an endless tunnel of—

“Hashatya, hashatya!”

I scream and lunge forward, flailing my arms for Mom. Instead, in front of me is the same soldier who gave me the mask. Anzi. The robed scientists in front of me jump, and the soldiers train their weapons on me.

I do as the attendant says, even though there is a familiar searing that’s wrapped itself around my head. The pounding in my chest softens and I slowly even my breath with a deep inhale. There’s that chime again – I look down at my hand and see that there are four of the Relic’s notches still lit up and my brief fugue state subsides.

Just moments ago, I stumbled into this exact dome-like room through the exact same portal machine. I was cuffed by these masked people speaking a strange tongue before three people with incredible power blew up the door and started massacring everybody here. I bumped into a blue-haired girl, and she screamed, and she did something that caused a crushing pain in my head. Then I was numb everywhere, and things seemed to go backwards in time. Then... I had a dream of some sort, but I don’t remember what I dreamt about.

But was that just a hallucination, like when the Relic first fused itself onto me? I doubt it. This one felt more real, and the details felt much more vivid than the two other visions I had before I blacked out. A chilling déjà vu creeps up my spine.

I look around, and sure enough, I'm not imagining the strange sterile room along with the strange, masked people. The scientists let out a sigh of relief, and the soldiers relax, switching off their humming weapons, the light of their crystals dimming into a dark blue.

The head guard shouts, "*Vizna, slennum firu!*"

My hands shoot up on reflex. The guard shouts louder, our rebreathers gasping while trying to keep him from suffering the effects of the toxic air here. I look back and see the creature recovering from our encounter in my family's cabin. The guards shift their attention to the monster as well. I scramble to the side before the impending monster barbecue.

The creature drops dead, its flesh and sinew sizzling from the powerful beams of concentrated energy that perforated its gangly form. The poker clatters to the ground. Exactly how it happened from the vision. If things are going to happen exactly how I remember the vision, then things are about to get bloody. I need some way to defend myself.

And just like how I remember it, the head guard barks an order at a scientist, who taps on some buttons on a podium. I reach into the closing rift and snatch the molten poker from the creature's cooked corpse, hiding it behind my back.

The head guard with the full white armor and horned helmet turns to face me as the soldiers murmur the word "*Agnavinayts*" amongst themselves. He's going to ask if I'm Agnavinian, and he seemed pretty satisfied that I'm not.

"Uhhh, not of Agnavina?" I blurt out in butchered Agnavinii.

"Not of Agnavina, you say?" The head guard seems surprised, probably raising an eyebrow behind his reflective visor. He crouches in front of me and hums in deep thought,

inspecting me and the Relic on my wrist. “But you possess what they call a ‘Relic.’ Are you not Iskayran, or, how you say, ‘Guardians’?”

I’m stumped. I have no idea what he means. Is the Relic from Agnavina? As far as I know, I’m not a “Guardian” of anything. I have so many questions, but I don’t have the language skills to ask them. I panic and start pointing at the door. Our murderers are about to burst through this door, and we’re going to die if we’re not going to do anything. The head guard turns to look at the door and back to me, his head cocked in confusion.

The head guard laughs and turns to the other soldiers and says something in a different language, but with the words “*Agnavinayts*” thrown around and the ensuing laughter amongst them, there’s no way they don’t think I’m crazy. But the sense of doom overwhelms me, shouting at me that they’re coming.

The doors burst open, and a smokescreen pours into the room. Soldiers leap into formation, their guns drawn at our attackers. For a moment, I’m relieved to know that my vision was right, and that I was prepared for it.

Anzi, who had been sliced in my vision, shouts, “*Zachit Agnavinayat!*” But this time he remains intact. He rushes to a panel and slams a big red button, and a deafening siren blares across the room, accompanied by flashing red lights.

“*Akata!*” The head guard shouts, and his soldiers fire their weapons into the destroyed doorway and at the unseen enemy. He shouts an order at the scientists, who run away to another door. Replacing them is another group of soldiers entering the room through the exploded door, firing their weapons. Unlike my vision, we have backup. Maybe this time we’ll stand a chance against our foes.

Forked beams of light converge into the smoke like a pincer. With a concentrated barrage, there's no way they can survive that, right? But none of us can tell through the smokescreen. The soldiers continue to fire at the smoke, unsure if they've hit their mark. A haze radiates from the pure heat of the barrel of their weapons.

A golden light emerges from the smoke, clashing with the scattered lines of blue that burn the floor and ceiling. I shudder, knowing that the soldiers did in fact hit something, but they aren't hitting their actual targets.

Through the smoke comes our three attackers, and I can see them clearly now. Leading the charge is the golden woman, marching forward with one arm bent forward as if carrying a shield. But in place of that shield is a wide translucent golden screen that's blocking the beams of energy. Her eyes glow with a glorious determination that almost seems heroic, if not for the fact that she's trying to kill us. Behind her is the naked man who had ripped the soldiers apart in my vision. His hair is like a lion's mane, unkempt and flowing with streaks of red, and icy mists and flames coat each of his arms. He glares at us, eager to strike. And lagging behind is a blue-skinned young girl with turquoise hair and shining earrings.

Etoila.

Fear shoots into my body. The phantom pain of my head splitting open returns and I reach to grab the poker. The anguished cries and the following wet pops echo in my mind. I stand behind the soldiers, watching as our attackers march on, impervious to the deadly beams of blue light. The crystal in the soldiers' weapons glows bright with a hazy aura of heat. I can hear the soldiers grunting in pain, their gloved hands sizzling from the overheating weapons.

“*Otan, otan!*” shouts the head guard, and the soldiers cease fire, their weapons charred from overuse.

The golden woman seizes the opportunity, and the barrier disappears into her wrist, illuminating glowing tattoos in her dark skin. Eight individual glowing blades emerge from her back in a wing-like pattern, floating in midair and waiting for her command.

Everyone is silent, save for the gentle breeze from the ventilation shafts.

The golden woman speaks first. “Invaders! We have this facility surrounded. I am Enha of the Akasol Clan, and the Dawn Guardian of the Solatai nation. My people will suffer your invasion no longer, and your cruel experiments end here. Your blasphemous weapons stand no chance against the might of three Guardians. Surrender now or face our wrath.”

The head guard scoffs, speaking Agnavinii with a heavy accent. “Invaders, you say? Our people emerged from this land. We are only reclaiming what is rightfully ours. I sincerely dou—”

With a flash, he is encased in a solid prison of misty, crackling ice. Everybody stares for a moment before the burly man yells with a fierce battle cry.

“Enough talking! Time to die!”

Pandemonium erupts and soldiers fire scattered beams of light before they are burnt to a crisp by the man’s flames. Without a moment of hesitation, Enha conjures another shield and floating blades shoot through the air, zipping through like they have a mind of their own, each lacerating a soldier through their ineffective white armor. They scatter. I follow suit, scrambling to take cover behind a panel while soldiers die left and right. I clutch the poker close against my

chest. A stream of flames roar from above, singing my cover. I'm left alone with my own devices.

My hands are shaking, and my heart feels as though it's lodged in the back of my throat. Soldiers shout orders and scream around me before falling to the ground, singed or cut to pieces. This is too much to handle. I've got to get out of here.

At the corner of the room, I see a group of soldiers surrounding Enha, concentrating their fire onto a golden, spherical barrier around her. She grunts under the strain of holding up the barrier, and the soldiers press on. A crack forms on the barrier. I can't help but smile – we might just stand a chance against those Guardians once we take down the one who can control flying blades.

Enha screams. Then, a familiar roar from elsewhere. My heart drops, knowing what's about to come to those soldiers.

Twisters sweep the soldiers away, and Enha brings down her barrier, panting to regain her composure. The beastly man jumps to Enha's side with a smug grin on his face.

"Now you owe me, Solatai," he taunts, slapping her back with a forceful palm. She returns the favor with a hateful scowl.

"I had it all under control, Angkor," she hisses.

Angkor leaves to fight more soldiers, and Enha growls under her breath, reengaging with the dazed soldiers. She draws a curved blade and cuts one down, then another, giving the remaining two time to get back on their feet. Unlike her summoned flying swords, this one is made of a solid metal, ornate and very much resembling a katana.

The soldiers fire their weapons again, but Enha is fast. Too fast. She dashes in front of one of them, sheaths her blade, and draws it, slicing their arm with a single slash. The weapon clatters on the floor and the soldier scream in pain before falling to the ground, bleeding... dark blue blood?

She walks toward the last soldier, Anzi, who's fiddling with his malfunctioning weapon. His legs are buckling with fear, and though I can't see his face through his visor, I can tell he's probably sweating underneath his helmet. Anzi fires his weapon at her, but Enha summons a shield made of solid light in front of her, slowly and surely advancing towards him.

And what have I been doing here this whole time? Cowered in fear while people were being massacred around me. Even when I knew what was going to happen, I still stood there and watched it all unfold. But what can I even do? Between soldiers with laser weaponry and a trio of superhumans with mindboggling power, I'm just some chump holding a rusty poker and a metal gauntlet.

Enha is several feet from Anzi now, and I'm going to watch him die again. Every fiber of my being screams at me to move, to do *something*. Anzi's weapon malfunctions and Enha raises her blade to strike.

My left arm moves before I can even process what's happening, and the glyphs on the back of my hand glow. I clench my fist and Enha is frozen inside a prismatic bubble of stopped time. My legs carry me into the fray, and I tackle Anzi to the ground, inadvertently releasing Enha from her confinement.

We're both on the ground and I can see Anzi through his cracked visor, and I realize why the other soldier bled blue. There is an uncanniness to his face – his cloudy eyes are a bit too big,

his nose a bit too flat, and his skin is pale white. I would've thought he was an alien. His face relaxes from the shock of brushing up against death. His words are inaudible amongst the chaos, but I can hear a stuttered mutter of what seems to be gratitude.

Both Anzi and I get up and turn to face Enha. We have a second chance to fight back, even though we both know very well that we're outmatched. I turn to Anzi and shove him.

"Go! Just run! Get out of here!"

He stares at me, confused. His eyes dart between me and our enemy before nodding in what seems to be vague understanding before turning to run. A glowing blade from the other side of the room disengages with its enemy and flies towards us, clearly aimed straight at Anzi's back.

Taking the opportunity, I lunge and thrust my poker at Enha, who deflects it and pushes me with a kick. In my fall I see the glowing blade disperse into gold particles. The battle rages on around us. With a poker in one hand and my Relic hand in front of me, I assume a fighting stance, ready to charge to my death once more.

"Stand aside, Verkin scum," Enha says in Agnavinii, "You and your meagre *stick* are of no consequence."

So I really do understand Agnavinii. How, I'm not sure, and there's no way I can form my own sentences, either. The best I can do is respond in English and hope she can pick up my tone that I'm not backing down.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "You've killed enough people. There's got to be another way!"

Enha looks at me with a raised brow. “I know not the tongue you speak, but this is your final warning. Step aside or join your comrades in death.”

“No. Stop it or...” I hesitate for a moment, holding up my only weapon in front of me. “... I’ll have to fight you!”

Not exactly a convincing threat there, Kieran.

Enha frowns, brandishing her sword and assuming a stance. “You dare taunt me, foul Verkin? If death is what you seek, then you shall have it.”

Before she makes a move, I thrust my hand in front of me and clench it. The prism surrounds her again, slowing her into a statue of frozen time. I concentrate on it and hope that she doesn’t break out of it like that teleporting monster. Thankfully, there’s not much resistance, and I can relax a little bit.

It’s clear that this is a “kill or be killed” situation, but I’ve never had to do that before. Even the thought of taking another person’s life makes me sick. The only things I’ve ever killed with my own hands had been pests like roaches and mosquitoes. My mind tries to conjure a flurry of rationales to thrust my poker into Enha’s unarmored abdomen, but a storm of thoughts nauseates my mind. How can I stop her without killing her? What if I just ran, keep her stopped in time?

The battle rages on around us.

I pace back and forth while the Enha’s silhouette shimmers inside the prism. But even if I do escape, where would I even go? I have no idea what part of Agnavina I’m in, nor do I even know where to go.

The room is silent now.

I hear Angkor's bone chilling roar. He's drenched in steaming blue blood, crouching and howling at the sky. Flames engulf him and the blood dries, evaporating into smudged smears across his body.

He laughs. "None of these morons could ever hope to best me! Enha, what's your count? No doubt it's much lower than mine. You Solatai warriors and your hono—"

He looks around and we make eye contact. A sinister grin stretches across his face.

"One more for the tally!" He lets out a menacing laugh and charges straight at me like a bull, ready to gore me. For a split second, I release my fist and aim it at Angkor. The prison disappears from Enha and freezes him, stopping him in his tracks. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Something flashes in my periphery and a sharp searing sensation runs through my neck. The floor tilts sideways and my head hits the floor, but I don't remember feeling anything knocking me down. The air grows cold. So cold. Everything blurs and I can hear a muffled thud with my left ear. I can recognize my puffer jacket. A red pool pours from where my head used to be.

Angkor. Growling. Loud. "His blood...red? Damn... not Verkin..."

Enha. Sword sheathing. "... power... not Source magic... Iskayran... a Guardian? Only one man... Secure... inform Lillianna... Ti—"

"—gic. He used to tell me about all the stories of when he fought monsters and bad guys. He travelled to many places and people used to love him. But something happened, and he left his home to come here. We met and fell in love, and you came to us not longer after."

My father. I knew I had one. Most of the kids in school had two parents, and I had always found it strange that Mom would be the only one who showed up. This was the first time I learned anything about my father. I looked at my mother with amazement. I jumped into my mother's arms, eager to hear more.

"Is he home now? Back to fight bad guys?"

She fell silent. Tears welled up in her eyes and she swallowed a lump in her throat. "Yes, Kieran. Your father had to leave to be a hero. He loves you very much, baby, don't forget that."

"Will he be back soon?"

Tucking away the polaroid from my line of sight, Mom walked towards the door. She stopped, her voice shaking.

"I wish I knew, Kieran."

"Then I hope I can go to see him one day."

"Me, too."

She paused. I was clueless of what she meant, nor would I find out until I reached my teenage years. It was the first and last time we ever talked about my father.

The walls and air distort around me again, and a whirlpool appears to return me to nothingness. A distant memory receding into the deepest reaches of my mind, lost again. I don't scream, nor do I make any sound or movement. The endlessness of the swirling vortex of time drags me deeper and deeper and deeper—

"Hashatya! Hashatya!" I hear Anzi's voice urging me to breathe.

My breathing steadies, and I'm back in the facility. The soldiers kill the creature and in the chaos, I tuck the poker away. Again. The guards point their weapons at me, and I stay still. I say nothing this time.

The Guardians will be here soon. Everybody is going to die. I'm going to die. This will happen over and over again. My heart sinks. There's nothing I can do.

Except to find a way to escape.

My mind searches for a potential solution. Wait—this will happen over and over, so does that mean dying will just bring me back to this point in time? My memory is too hazy for me to recall what happened in between these deaths, but it felt like a dream, like I was an audience of my own story. It felt unnatural, but simultaneously familiar. The past lives, however, were much more vivid and gruesome. The Relic chimes and I look down. A glowing notch fades, leaving three behind. If it's any indication, this means I can die three more times until...

The uncertainty makes me shudder. I don't know what kind of power my Relic holds other than stopping and rewinding time, but I probably shouldn't gamble and throw those three lives away. But the concept of limited lives isn't foreign to me. It's just like playing a video game, except I can really feel every death, and this isn't a game. I don't want to find out what happens when it's game over.

I've died twice so far – both at the hands of one of the Guardians. Even with Etoila standing back from the battlefield, just two Guardians were enough to kill dozens of soldiers. They're terrifying.

Everything plays out the same way. The Harkin respond to the Guardian threat seconds too late, and Enha protects her crew with a near indestructible shield of light. Angkor freezes the

headguard, and all hell breaks loose. Just like my two previous deaths. But this time, I know I have another shot.

I watch Anzi and his fellow soldiers fend off Enha. Dashing into the fray, I extend my Relic hand and freeze her in time. The soldiers look on in confusion, and I stand between them and their enemy.

“Go! Now! While you still can!” I gesture at the exit that Anzi had taken in my previous life.

The soldiers look at each other and fire at the prison, shattering it into millions of shimmering shards. Enha takes the full brunt of several lasers and is knocked back across the floor, her chest seared.

“Enha!” Angkor bellows from across the room. He looks at us and summons a pillar of fire from his left arm and a cloud of icy mist on his right. If there’s a moment to test my new powers, this is one of them.

I activate my Relic again and freeze the time between us and the flames coming straight at us. A wall of blurred, invisible lines form in front of me like cracked glass, and the air around me is tinged with a bluish aura. The hot and cold pillars clash with my shield and branch out into countless other zigzagging, smaller pillars, turning into fractals of white and yellow.

But the force of the blasts is immense. My Relic fist is almost immediately pried open, and I duck out of the way just in time. Angkor’s attack singses and freezes all but Anzi, who had been hiding behind cover.

“Etoila!” Angkor shouts. “Go check on Enha now!”

The young girl lets out a peep and hurries over to the burnt warrior, her tentacled hair flopping around her head. Angkor looks back at me, cracking his knuckles.

“You’ve got some flashy moves there, boy. Let’s see how you deal with my fists.”

He ignites his arm and propels himself with a jet of flames, sending himself into the air. Rocks and debris form around his outstretched leg into what looks like a stalactite, and he raises his arm, igniting it again. Like a human bullet.

I freeze time around Angkor and he is suspended in midair. But the sheer force from his kick almost breaks the prison. I groan under the pressure, putting everything I have in keeping my hand closed. I run to Anzi, herding him to the exit.

We sprint down a hallway flooded with strobing red lights, and my hand is almost fully open. Anzi is in the front now – he seems to know where he’s going, and I follow him to a door. My hand opens up and I can hear the boom of Angkor making impact, followed by an angry, visceral roar. We should be safe, for now.

Anzi bashes the door open with his shoulder and the afternoon sun greets us with a warm glow. In front of us is a thick forest and we duck underneath the brush. With my back against a tree, I catch my breath. I’m finally free from the massacre, and I’ve made an ally in Anzi.

But he gets up soon after and looks straight at me, then back at the facility, seemingly hesitant. Kneeling in front of me, Anzi takes my hands looks into my eyes and speaks in heavily accented, broken Agnavinii.

“Thank you. Savior. Good luck.”

With that, my only companion disappears into the forest.

Chapter 4

I am alone. By the time Anzi's silhouette fades into the trees, I take a deep breath. I take off the respirator around my face, hoping that maybe I've gotten used to my new environment. I fiddle around it and find a switch, releasing the mask with an airy hiss.

A familiar nausea hits me, and dry violent coughs escape from my mouth, and I lose grip of the mask. I try to gasp for air, but each breath speeds up the spinning world. I topple onto the soft grass, searching for my lifeline with frantic, flailing arms that smack it around. My muscles hurt and tears cloud my vision. It feels as though someone force fed me rough sand, and it's sticking to every surface of my airways.

My hand finds purchase and I press the respirator onto my face. I take a deep breath and the nausea leaves my mind. The air in Agnavina is poisonous, but it doesn't seem to affect the Guardians. The Harkin people, on the other hand, need respirators just like me. This reminds me of what Enha said, that the Harkin were the invaders. But how could it be, when the headguard had said that they were originally from Agnavina? I could think about this all day and never come up with a solid conclusion. Not unless I ask the right people.

My heart jumps when I hear marching and jostling in the distance. I duck behind a bush. Dozens of men and women armed with swords and bows march through the path and toward the facility. The man leading the group stops them and points at different soldiers, barking orders at them.

"Amin, take your squad and scour the area for any survivors and capture any you see. You four, stay here and keep watch for any unwelcome guests. Those who can heal, and those who can speak Harkin, with me."

With silent nods, the soldiers disperse into three groups. I watch them through bramble and leaves, not even moving a muscle. Those who are staying outside fan out through the forest, carrying single-handed weapons and an aura of blue volatile energy emanating from their free hands. The energy looks like the same kind of energy from the Harkin guns, though the power seems wilder, as if barely contained within their palms.

I shuffled a little and leaves rustle.

“What was that?” a man blurts out. His complexion is dark, with a golden aura shimmering under his bare chest. He has short yellow hair and pointy ears. Probably the same race as Enha. “Pina, go check it out.”

A young woman, Pina, approaches towards my general direction, nocking an arrow on her bow. Unlike the Agnavinians that I’ve had the misfortune to encounter so far, she looks very human. My age. She’s wearing a set of light leather armor. For a moment, I feel a sense of relief at this familiar sight. Then a thousand thoughts run through my head. Could Pina be just like me, stuck in this war-torn world? Could Agnavinians look just like people from back home? I can never be too sure, but something tells me it’s best not to find out and leave.

But the more I hesitate, the closer she’s coming to my hiding spot. If I stay, she’ll be sure to find me. But if I make a run for it, she’ll open fire on me. What do I do?

I decide to do the dumbest thing and emerge from the bush. She immediately pulls her bow and I raise my hands up. She doesn’t let go of the arrow.

We stand there in silence, her bowstring still pulled back.

“Please,” I say, “Just let me go. I’m just a nobody. You didn’t see me.”

As expected, she has no idea what I'm saying.

Our staring contest continues for what feels like forever. Her arm is shaking from holding the bow for that long. At some point, it's going to give out.

Someone shouts in the distance. "Found a straggler!"

That must have been Anzi. Or maybe someone else? The young woman looks away for a moment. In that split second, I turn around and leg it. A shiver creeps down my spine and I duck out of reflex, and an arrow zips past my face before it's lodged into a tree.

"Got another one here!" Pina shouts.

Soon after, I'm buffeted by a barrage of arrows and blue bolts of energy, as splinters and pieces of bark fly around me. I duck and I duck, staying the course that is the hell away from this place. The barrage stops but I keep running. I don't stop. I can't stop.

I make it out to a clearing and I catch my breath. My knees and calves are burning from my speedy escape, and my heart is pounding in my chest. The last time I had run like this was when I tried out for the track and field team in middle school, which feels like forever. I don't hear the soldiers anymore. I think I'm in the clear. Stretching across the field in front of me is a beaten road leading toward the direction of the mountains. Wherever it leads, it's away from obvious danger.

I walk for a few minutes, admiring the towering mountains in the distance. Nostalgia caresses my mind, reminding me of my childhood, when Mom would take me on a trip to the cabin—

Mom's back in the cabin.

In the confusion of this chaotic day, I had forgotten to scatter her ashes. And once I turn to run back to the forest and remember my current predicament, my heart sinks. And I stop walking.

I'm stuck in Agnavina, and the only way back is riddled with bodies and guarded by an army who most likely would kill me on sight. But how am I going to get home when I know nothing about this world, and how will I even ask around when I don't know anyone in this world?

As if on cue, my stomach growls. My mouth is dry, and my head is spinning a little. There are no other roads on this field, so my only choice is to hope that it'll get me to civilization.

I fish around my pockets and find my phone. The screen is cracked, but it's a miracle that it has survived this long. The screen lights under the seemingly afternoon glow, rendering the 10:34pm on the clock meaningless. It's still got a full charge, and I doubt I'd have anywhere to charge it, so I'd have to be frugal with my usage. Maybe I might take some photos to document my travels.

No connection – as expected. But there's a single notification on the lock screen from an hour ago – it was sent when I had gone outside the cabin before the monster attacked me. It's from Liz.

It's over. Idk wtf is going on with you but you cant just disappear on me. You've been wandering through life like a zombie since Linda was gone. It's been two months and I barely heard from you or seen you. I'll be getting my things from your place tomorrow.

I unlock my phone, ignoring the gut-wrenching message from my now ex-girlfriend. It's not exactly a great feeling to be broken up via text, let alone stuck in a world full of magic and death with no way to return. But instead of tears, a sigh of relief escapes my mouth. I had been struggling to even talk to Liz anyway, and I once caught her lying to me about seeing a "friend." We only stayed together because she promised me that she'd be better. She didn't. But she still didn't deserve a zombie mourning his mother, shambling through life, and neglecting his girlfriend of two years. Who am I kidding? There's nothing I can do to salvage this. An aching sensation creeps into my heart, and I find myself scrolling through photos of me and Liz. Walking through some countryside staring at an obsolete piece of technology. A heartbroken, lost zombie, indeed.

My thumb taps on the most recent video in the "Favorites" tab. It automatically plays, and I'm taken back to a memory I had long since repressed.

It was my birthday. Mom had taken me and Liz to a nice restaurant uptown. Said I didn't have to worry about the price, that she'd saved up to cover however much we ate, despite my initial protests.

"Come on, Kiki, smile, you goose!" Liz said behind the camera. She began singing a birthday song while the restaurant staff came to our table and set down a tiny chocolate cake with a lit candle. I was as red as a beet, my shoulders hunched up with embarrassment. Mom was smiling. Laughing. It was a sight I never thought I would miss.

They finished the song. I took the cue and blew out the candle. Everybody clapped. With the gimmick over, the staff left to continue their jobs, leaving us to our private celebration.

“What’d you wish for?” Liz said in a teasing tone. “I hope you’re replacing that old car of yours.”

I chuckled at the snide remark. “You wish.”

“No, no,” Mom interjected. “His education is important! Weren’t you waiting on a response from one of the colleges?”

Of course, Mom prioritized my schooling above all else. She only wanted the best for me.

“Birthday wish rules, Lizzie,” I said, putting my finger against my lips. “Can’t tell you.”

I wanted Mom to live a long, happy life.

The video stops with a freeze-frame of Mom wrapping her arms around me and planting a kiss on my cheek. I can still feel the tenderness of that moment. Like a warm, hearty soup, it fills the gaping hole in my chest where Mom used to be, but fleeting like sand and dust, prone to being scattered by the winds of time.

I keep walking down the road with my eyes glued to my phone, mindlessly browsing my now defunct apps thanks to the lack of Internet connection. I tap on the compass app, one of the only ones that don’t need a connection.

The compass reorients itself and points north, in the direction of a distant mountain covered in strange looking spires. Okay – so I’m heading northeast, and the Harkin facility, where danger is, is west. From what I can gather, whatever war that’s happening in Agnavina, it’s none of my business and I want none of that.

Past the green hills in the field is a landscape bordered with snow-capped mountains piercing the thick clouds in the sky. Small deposits of blue crystals jut out of the ground,

interspersed throughout the land, but unlike the ones that the Harkin soldiers carried in their guns, these are much dimmer, seemingly inert. Each crystal seems as if they had been thoroughly harvested, their edges chipped and jagged with a thin layer of fine powder surrounding them.

Two celestial bodies dot the Agnavinian sky – a large indigo moon hangs opposite the sun, while its smaller blue sibling a speck near the daylight glow. Islands float lazily among the clouds, seemingly suspended by an invisible force. A bluish tinge bleeds into the edge of the skyline, giving the late afternoon sun a light blue glow, but its splendor is marred by the several pillars of black smoke billowing from amongst the trees. Its rays beam down on the vast land, smudging the clouds' shadows across the waving green grass.

The beaten path continues.

I don't know how long I've been walking, but my empty stomach begs me to walk faster. Where? I don't know, but as the sun sets and dusk covers the land in a growing, serene darkness, I notice sparkling lights in the far distance of the path. Lit by what appear to be houses, a smile stretches across my face, and I pick up the pace. Finally, civilization! Now I just gotta hope that I won't get murdered there.

By the time I get to the town, my legs can barely carry me. But I arrive at the front gate of a grey metal wall, at least two stories tall. Harkin guards stand watch at turrets alongside the wall, with two others standing at each side of the open gate, their weapons standing at the ready. There's a thinning queue of people presenting metallic tablets before being let inside. I approach a guard, hoping he'd let in a starving young man like me. Maybe my mask might let him assume I'm one of them!

The guard notices me. “You there,” he speaks in Agnavinii. “How did you come in possession of imperial equipment?”

I doubt he’s going to understand English anyway, but maybe my tone might help. “I’m starving, sir.” I make a gesture on my stomach, indicating my hunger. “I just need some shelter and food. I’ll be gone by morning. I don’t want any trouble.”

“Whatever you’re saying, hand over the respirator now. Theft of imperial property is a crime punishable by death.”

I protest. “I can’t, I need it to—”

He draws his weapon. “Now!”

I raise my hands up.

The people in the line are looking at me now. Within their eyes lies not outrage nor sympathy, but defeat. Some steal a couple glances before looking away, patiently waiting for this to be over. The guard’s finger is on the trigger – he really means to shoot me. I have to come up with something fast. Even if I have two more lives, how far back will the Relic rewind? Back to the facility, where I have to go through that ordeal again? I can’t waste my lives here, not when there’s something to be done about it. My mind races to find a solution.

If I make a break for the gate, chances are I’m going to be turned into burnt Swiss cheese before I can even make it through. If I take off my rebreather, I might choke to death from the Agnavinian air. And if I freeze him or put up a shield, the guards are all going to attack, and even if I make it into the town, they’d be on alert, hunting me until I’m found.

But if I can freeze other people, can I do that with my surroundings? I notice that when I freeze someone, I unconsciously focus on them and the space around them and activate my Relic. Maybe I can apply the inverse logic – create a larger bubble of stopped time around me. Well, here goes nothing.

I close my eyes, turning my mind to my Relic, searching within it the power over time for the first time. I take a deep breath, quieting my heart. The guard's shouting turns into a muffled whisper, leaving a dead silence only I can perceive. I search the silence and hear a ticking in my mind. The Relic. The clock that turns without bias or thought. I reach into the clock and seize the mechanism. The ticking stops. And so does everything else.

I open my eyes, and everything around me looks as if it's trapped in a time bubble, filtered with a prismatic effect. The guards squeeze the trigger and a beam of energy has emerged from the weapon's barrel, as if the stick of light had been jammed into it. I lower my hands, my grasp on time still firm. Unlike everyone around me, I am free.

An aching sensation shoots through my hand and my fingers loosen. I try to fight it, but it's getting harder and harder to keep my grip on time. It's even harder than holding Angkor or the creature. It feels as though I'm trying to hold a two-hundred-pound dumbbell, combined with a searing headache that progressively gets worse the longer I hold on. Won't be long until I lose it and time resumes.

I sprint towards the gate, past the morose civilians and vigilant guards. With each step, the headache pounds at my skull like a drum, and by the time I make it through, I almost collapse onto the ground.

Scrambling into a nearby alleyway, I release my loosening grip on time. It resumes, and I can hear the guards' confused shouts. The world spins around me with a throbbing pain and I vomit bile all over the cobblestone. I probably shouldn't stop time like this for a while.

I've made it past the walls. What now? I can't just waltz around without going incognito. The townspeople all wear cloaks above their linen tunics and cotton dresses, and the guards all wear white uniforms and helmets. With my plaid shirt, jeans, and the Harkin mask, I'd be too conspicuous to even get a moment of peace.

I sneak through the alleyway like a lost, runaway child, even though there's nary a soul walking about. Metal and technology overshadow the town's rustic, brick and wood architecture, with bright blue streetlights dotting the roads. The rumbling of slow-moving vehicles echoes into the alleyway from the main street behind me and I duck into a smaller path.

My foot bumps into something and I jump, looking at the dark object hidden away in this unlit alley. The object moves, slumping onto the ground before returning to its motionless state. My eyes adjust to the darkness and see the figure of a person, their face shrouded by a cloak, their knees bent against the wall.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I prop the sleeping person back up against the wall.

They're cold.

Dread rises in my body, and I check for a pulse and breath. Nothing. I recoil with a gasp – how long had this person been here? The detective in my mind begins to turn. If this person had been killed, then I might be next.

But there was no blood, nor were there any apparent signs of struggle. I pulled back their hood and find the face of a young man with dreads, facial tattoos and piercings in his pointed ears. An elf, like the ones I've seen in movies and books. And these ears are real, not like the attachable ones that cosplayers use. His cheeks are hollow, his piercings hang loosely from the holes in his dried lips. There was no fear in his face, nor did he seem to have collapsed. It's as if he had sat down and just given up. Considering the dreadful atmosphere of this town and his emaciated form, it's safe to say he'd starved to death.

If it wasn't for his body, I would have thought he was a pile of cloth on the ground. An unsavory idea springs to mind.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to take this," I say to the poor sod. "Please understand." I carefully remove the cloak from his corpse and drape it on my shoulders, covering half my face and the rest of my body. A sharp pang of guilt hangs above me when I fish out an almost hollow pouch of gold coins.

I've done some bad things as a teenager – stealing, shoplifting, fighting, and worst of all, running from the law after beating my stepdad within an inch of his life. I used to tell myself that they were necessary, that I had no other choice. I stole shoes and clothes and money to give back to Mom, and I fought anybody who would say anything smart about her. Looting the dead is a new low, but I can't survive in this dangerous world without dirtying my hands a little. I've made a lot of excuses for my actions, and I don't think it'll stop here.

I take one last look at the poor elf. His bare, hollow chest and limbs are all adorned with beautiful jewelry made from stones and animal bone, with patterned tattoos stretching all over his body, reminiscent of Angkorr, the Guardian who killed so many Harkin back in the facility,

and almost killed me. But this man – no, boy, was much scrawnier, more youthful. I wonder if there is anybody left to mourn him.

I take a moment and stand there in silence, though still wary of my surroundings.

With a cloak concealing most of my body like the rest of the townspeople, I can at least walk the streets without attracting too much attention. If I look suspicious, then I might just lose another life.

Blue lights drench the main streets with their humming glow, drowning out the candlelit windows in the two-story houses that seem to stretch on forever. Empty though the street may be, I hear the echoes of muffled chatter and clinking glass in the distance. Is that... laughing? I pick up the pace, my tattered sneakers thudding against the cobblestone in an allegro. Walking past various closed shops, I zone in on the only pair of brightly lit windows on the ground floor. Imprinted on the adjacent hanging sign is a clear image of an overflowing tankard. Despite the unreadable Agnavinian text, there's very little ambiguity as to what establishment this is. My desperation for food moves my hand and the door swings open.

But before I step into the raucous tavern, a sharp sense of awareness pricks the back of my neck. I whip my head to the general direction of the ominous gaze and find the shadowy figure of a man peeking from an alleyway. I freeze. I blink.

And he's gone.

Memories of the monster rush back into me and I scurry into the tavern, slamming the wooden door behind me. I step away from it in case it attacks, panting for what feels like forever. The chatter of the tavern is inaudible and the cracks and patterns on the floorboards blur in front of me.

The monster doesn't come, and my vision and breathing return to normal. But the tavern is still silent.

Every person sitting at their small round tables guffawing and hollering is now staring at me, their gazes locked onto me. Two hooded people who are sitting in the corner steal quick glances at me before returning to their meal. The hood of my looted cloak has sagged behind my head, exposing my rebreather. Merry faces are replaced by glares and frowns, and some whisper to each other while maintaining eye contact with me. Dead silence hangs in the room like the brass chandeliers in the high ceiling.

I shuffle to the bar and sit on a swivel chair, not making a peep. The husky barkeep, who had been previously cleaning a glass pint with a dirty rag, leans against the counter and whispers into my ear with a low growl.

“For Verkin scum, you’ve got some huge ‘uns comin’ in here.” His voice returns to a speaking volume. “But, this fine establishment serves everyone. I’ve got food an’ ale, if you’ve got the coin.”

Not knowing the prices of food around here, I have no choice but to assume that a coin is equivalent to a dollar. A meal at a fast-food restaurant is usually around three dollars, so...

I place three of the fifteen gold coins from the pouch and set it on the counter. The gruff man scoffs, then chuckles.

“A rich tourist, eh? Hope you’re likin’ the sights.” His voice is full of disdain, coated with a thin lining of anger and pain.

The barkeep takes the coins and walks away, promptly returning with a wooden bowl of aromatic greasy brown slop with chunks of meat and what seem to be carrots and potato. He then fills a tankard with foamy beer, sliding it across the bar. I jump from my seat to catch it. Someone in the background snorts. The fizzling liquid brings back memories of the nights when Paul would come home, reeking of the same stench. My stomach turns, but my dehydrated lips urge me on.

I take a deep breath and remove the rebreather, chugging the lukewarm drink and gulping every last drop. I put the mask back on and let out a loud, embarrassing belch. Probably a mistake I'd regret later, in more ways than one. But I'm too hungry to care.

With the mask in one hand and a spoon in the other, I shovel the brown sludge into my mouth, grateful that I've finally had food, albeit somewhat bland, in my stomach. My messy eating echoes in the silent tavern, and I can still feel the patrons' eyes on me. I silently promise them I'd leave the moment I've finished my food. I ignore the thumping footsteps behind me.

A massive hand grabs my rebreather and yanks it away. I panic and turn around, letting out a stifled "Hey!" with a mouthful of food. I turn to face a musclebound, bald man glaring at me with contempt.

"Well, well, well," he says with a deep voice, "All that propaganda about us being the 'savages,' here you are eating like an animal. Kind of ironic, I'd say."

Examining my rebreather, he notices me holding my breath. "So this is what our invaders look like under those masks. Feels kinda satisfying, looking our enemy in the eyes now. They don't look that different from us, and yet they think us lowly savages." He glances at his three cohorts behind him. "Right, boys?"

A tall lanky man wearing a bandana around his neck, cracks his knuckles. “And we’re fightin’ a war right now. And war don’t care where the battlefield takes place.”

I take short breaths to mitigate the poisonous Agnavinian air. I’ve got to get the rebreather back before the nausea sets in. Before I can aim my Relic at him, the brute slams my head into the wooden counter, pressing my face against the unfinished bowl of warm stew. His calloused hand presses into my face. Just like Paul. How the miasma of his foul breath wafted in the air most nights. It’s all too familiar. Except this time, I can’t breathe. I take my first real breath since I took my mask off and the nausea sets in.

“Oh look,” one of his lackeys shouts, “he’s chokin’! Serves ‘im right!”

The brute slams the side of my head into the counter again. My ringing ear worsens the nausea. He growls into my other ear. “I’m gonna make sure you regret settin’ foot in this town, invader.”

He yanks me off the counter and I crash into a table, still choking. The world is spinning and my fingers are numb. I can’t tell if it’s the beer or the Agnavinian air or both. I vomit on the floor and the crowd erupts into sadistic laughter.

“This is who we’re dealin’ with, everyone! Masked murderers with the gall to show their bloody faces! How many of us have they killed? Persecuted? All because of our connection with the Source? They think they can walk among us in disguise like some sort of tourist attraction, expecting free sightseeing? No. This time, we’ll be taking something back.”

He lifts his knee and stomps on my stomach, forcing my dinner out of my mouth. He stomps again, this time his mates joining him, kicking my ribs, my head, everywhere. I brace into a fetal position, all the while wheezing and coughing from the poisonous Agnavinian air.

Without my rebreather, I can't even function, let alone run. But I need to do something. I can't lose another life like this, not to these thugs.

I whip out my hand and look dead in the brute's eye and clench my fist. His eyes widen in shock before a prismatic prison locks him in place. Unlike the monster or the Guardians, this one is much easier to freeze. I keep my hand shut – still struggling under the nausea, but the lack of resistance makes it more manageable.

His compatriots shout in horror, leaping away from their frozen friend.

“What did you do to him?” one of them demands.

They draw their daggers from their belts and lunge at me. I didn't think this through, and I doubt I can freeze them all at once.

Before I can prepare myself for another reset, several transparent, cloaked figures appear behind them and grab them.

“What the—”

The figures, each identical to the next, knock them unconscious with precision and acrobatic agility, putting each of them in different holds before disappearing into flakes of blue light. All at once, my attackers are unconscious.

There is a silence in the room, save for my incessant wheezing.

A pair of cloaked figures rush toward me. One of them looks exactly like the disappeared figures, except solid. I can only tell those two figures apart by their footwear: one is wearing a pair of split-toe shoes, while the other is wearing dark brown leather boots. The one with the boots crouches to face me, revealing half a pale, feminine face under the dark hood.

“Whatever you did, I need you to free him.” Her voice is soft, yet assertive.

I obey, releasing my grip and the man gasps at the jump in time he’s experienced. The other cloaked figure socks him in the jaw with an elbow and he falls to the ground, limp.

The pale woman pries the rebreather from his hand and places it on my face.

“Breath.”

I regain my senses, and she takes my hand, propping me up against her. I’m still lightheaded, but at least I can stand.

The hooded woman whispers something to her companion, but still somewhat audible.

“Get us out of here, Hava.”

And in an instant, the tavern disappears from around us, away from the unconscious men and the astonished patrons.

Just as quick as we left the tavern, we are now in a spacious room. Quiet, like the tavern, but the atmosphere is much less tense. Two wide, clean beds sit in the middle of the room against the wooden wall, separated by a nightstand with a single candle on it. The woman leads me to a chair, sitting me in it before sitting on her own chair. Her companion leans against the wall near the door.

She takes off her hood and reveals a beautiful face. A pair of striking, violet eyes look at me, their irises shining ever so slightly in the dimly lit room. At the corner of her left eye lies a single dark brown, oval birthmark resembling a feather. Her wavy hair is tied into a ponytail, highlighted with shades of purple and turquoise. I stare back, jaw agape.

“He’s staring. See?” she turns to her companion. “This is what I’d have to constantly deal with if we hadn’t gone incognito.” She turns back at me, snapping her fingers. “Hey, do you understand me?”

I blink my eyes, confused.

“Yes, I’m talking to you. We didn’t save you from those idiots for nothing. Can you talk?”

They probably can’t understand me anyway, but I still let my mouth run. “Yes, yes I can. Can you please tell me who you are? Where I am? I just need to get home. I have no idea what this thing on me, it—”

She shushes me, turning away from me. “It’s not Harkin... then what in the Iskayrs’ name is he speaking? Hava, have you heard of this language?”

Her companion speaks for the first time since our encounter. “No.”

The woman cocks her head, observing the transparent figures around the room, seemingly searching for something in drawers, closets, under the bed.

“What are you looking for? We’re safe, I promise.”

“Safe does not mean secure. Apologies, P—I mean, Lilly, but I must do my utmost to ensure our cover.” The figures fade away. “The room is secure. We were not followed.”

“Of course we weren’t! How can anybody—” The woman, Lilly, sighs before turning back to me. “Sorry, my friend here is a little paranoid at times. They’re burdened with the responsibility of my ‘safety,’ as if I can’t protect myself.” Hava, her friend, returns to their post,

ignoring the snide comment. “You don’t look much like a Harkin, but you wear their masks, so that means you’re not Agnavinian. *Braka nur Khuchti? Kur Sultei?*”

I shake my head, baffled. The language is guttural, almost throaty.

“Oh, who am I kidding, you look nothing like a Greenblood. Hmm...” she leans in close, examining the sides of my neck. She then makes a bunch of sounds that sounds like pops, clicks, and... whale sounds? Before returning to her normal voice. “Thalassi?”

I shake my head again. This time, she’s visibly frustrated.

“Ke’ebche? Gorot-Dhull? Rohan? Damn it!” she throws her arms up. “I have no idea what language you speak.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “You don’t speak any language I know, or at least seem to. Well, I can at least do this.”

She reaches to grab my hand and I flinch.

“Relax, friend. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I hesitate. With everything that’s happened, this seems to be the only interaction I’ve had that isn’t hostile. What’s the worst that could happen?

She holds my right hand with both of hers and her eyes glow brightly. It feels as though a gate has been opened within my mind, or rather, someone or something has entered my brain. A strange feeling to be sure, but by no means does it feel invasive at all. Like if someone had rung the doorbell and I let them in.

Her thoughts reverberate in my head, and I jump in surprise. “*There, this should work.*” I open my mouth, and she places her finger on my lips, shushing me. “*You don’t have to speak at all. Just think what you’re about to say.*”

“*How did you do that?*” Through this strange sensation, I can feel my thoughts echo back, my words made audible in my mind.

“*Telepathy. It’s a skill few people are able to learn in their lifetimes. I was lucky enough to be born with it. Or unlucky, depending on your perspective. I can project my thoughts into your mind, but you can’t with me. It takes practice to do that, so instead what I hear from you is the single word ‘how,’ but with a flavor of ‘question.’ It’s complicated but...*” She pauses.

“*Anyway, now we can speak without the hindrance of language. All you need to do is think. Can you do that?*”

I nod. The closest I can compare to this feeling is if someone spoke into my mind with a high-quality microphone, its audio loud and clear.

“*I don’t know what a ‘microphone’ is, but I kind of get the picture. You’re not exactly wrong. And I apologize for the lack of introductions. My name is Lilly. I understand the trepidation. Not too often do I get to do this with a willing subject. Most of the time my skills are used to gather intelligence from... unwilling Harkin subjects.*”

That’s disturbing.

“*I know.*” Lilly looks down, as if guilt-ridden. For a moment, she’s deep in thought, but then she perks up. “*So, quite the show you put on there, even under duress like that.*”

She looks up and down, examining my clothes. “*You’re certainly no Harkin, that’s for sure. What’s strange is that you speak a language I’ve never heard of before. Where did you say you were from again?*”

I didn’t, but in my mind, I think, “*Charlotte, North Carolina.*”

“There’s no nation called Charlotte, North Carolina. In what land is it? Its leader?”

Uh... I doubt she’d know where the United States of America is, let alone the President.

“Well, the only President that I know of is Pyori Gorodis of the Gorot-Dhull. I’ve never heard of the ‘allied nations of amerika,’ either, but you’re definitely not lying. Strange. So, you’re from this far-off land named Charlotte, North Carolina. How did you get here?”

I explain my situation to Lilly. About the creature that attacked me, about the portal and the Guardians’ assault on the facility, about my arrival to this town. I leave out some details that she doesn’t really need to know. I just try really hard not to think about it.

She leans back, nodding. *“I see. It’s clear you’re omitting some information from me, but I understand the hesitation. Anyway, there are many theories about realms different from ours like the Spirit Realm, but I never would have thought there were ones much like Agnavina. It checks out, though: your need to use a Harkin mask to breathe our air shows you weren’t born here. At least I can verify the part about the assault on the Harkin research facility. Not many knew about that mission, and even if you were a Harkin soldier, you wouldn’t have made it out in one piece.”*

Not exactly...

“Which brings me to this,” she takes my Relic hand, examining it. *“This design is of the Iskayrans, and its power to freeze time has only ever belonged to one other person...”* her face turns grim. *“Where did you get this?”*

Don’t think. Just don’t. She wouldn’t understand, anyway.

“Try me.”

How am I supposed to explain that I found it in—

“Now how did the Time Relic end up in the possession of non-Guardians? Did your parents steal this?” Lilly’s voice is raised now, as if angered by my frantic thoughts. She takes a deep breath. *“It doesn’t matter. I don’t know how you came upon this Relic, but whether you like it or not, you’re a Guardian.”*

I freeze. What is she talking about?

“This is what strikes me as peculiar. You’re not Agnavinian, and only a handful of Agnavinians can wield these powerful artifacts through a grueling selection process. And it’s not a Harkin-banned Sourcestone artifact, either... Does Charlotte, North Carolina have a Nexus as well?”

“The what?”

Lilly waves dismissively at my question. *“Of course not. If it did then you wouldn’t be having trouble adjusting to the magical field now. That doesn’t make any sense. How can a non-Agnavinian wield a weapon made for Agnavinians?”* She shakes her head, and I can hear her voice in mine. *“Questions for later. For now, I’m asking you to join us in our fight against the Empire.”*

“Join you?” I shoot up from my chair, and Hava glares at me from their corner, their dagger half-unsheathed. How do they expect me to join a band of superpowered beings who’s done nothing but kill everything that stands in their path? I’m no killer, nor am I going to fight in something I couldn’t give two damns about.

“You were caught in the crossfire, and I’m sorry it got messy, but the Harkin are the invaders here. The idiot back in the tavern might have been a bit too zealous, but he wasn’t wrong. Scores of people have lost their lives and homes from the Empire’s invasion. Almost half the continent is overrun with their technology and oppression, and they’ve outlawed all forms of magic. We are at war with an enemy who seeks to annihilate any trace of the Source, and we need every help we can get.”

I shift in my chair, my hand still resting on hers. What does she expect me to do, fight in a war and risk my life for some country I have no business being in? I just got here, and now I have to work for the very same people who have killed me several times over! That’s not me. I’m not a soldier. Sure, I might have thought about joining the Army, but that was only to get away from Paul and help Mom get the paycheck she deserved. I would never want to kill anybody at all. I don’t care who’s killing who, I just want to go home.

But before I can protest, Lilly speaks into my mind. I had forgotten that we were still telepathically linked. *“Look, I know this is an unreasonable request, but people are dying. The Coalition needs any help it can get. You have a Relic, which means you’ve been chosen as a Guardian. Besides, if you’re not in a position to refuse, all the better.”* She pauses. *“I shouldn’t have said it like that. Tell you what, I’ll make it worth your while. If you join our fight against the Harkin Empire, I’ll figure out a way to get you home. I’ll be your personal guide to not only Agnavina, but I’ll teach you anything you need to know about the Source.”*

She opens her other hand, and a ball of blue energy materializes in her palm, emanating a similar kind of energy from the Agnavinian soldier from before.

Lilly raises an eyebrow, with an expectant look on her face. *“Well? What do you say?”*

She's right. I'm not exactly in a position to refuse. If I say no, they'd probably just leave me out here, or even just outright kill me. Well, she doesn't look like a murderer to me. And if I take their offer, I might just be able to go home. And while I'm here, I could even find out more about my—

“You have an Agnavinian parent,” Lilly interjects, her face wide with realization. “That makes so much sense now!”

“Please stop doing that.”

“Sorry, I really wasn't trying to. Promise. But there are questions yet to be answered. How did your Agnavinian parent make it across worlds? Perhaps if you found them, you could ask them that, yeah?”

“Wish I could... Look, I'll think about it, alright? This is a lot to take in.”

Lilly gets up from her seat. *“I understand. Hava and I have some unfinished business to tend to, anyway. Feel free to use my bed over there.”* She approaches Hava, placing her hand on their shoulder. *“Oh! I just realized I never asked for your name.”*

Kieran. Kieran Sandar.

“Well, Kieran, I hope you'll consider my offer, because Hava and I will be going to Ereestport tomorrow, and we'd hate to leave you here.”

With that, Lilly and Hava dematerialize from the room, leaving me alone, now sitting on a bed that doesn't belong to me, with a flickering candle and my shadow on the wall to keep me company.

Chapter 5

I'm running through an endless hallway of the cabin, the hairs on my skin standing up. The screech of the creature echoes from every direction, shaking the wobbly carpeted floor. It's dark, but I keep running. I don't look back, but I know it's gaining on me. The exit looks as though it's a few paces away, but each step puts me back to where I was.

The creature appears in front of me and swipes its razor-sharp claws at my face. It does not connect. Instead, it freezes, and its eye sockets gush a deep purple fluid, dropping to the ground. Dead.

I'm surrounded by hundreds of Harkin soldiers. All of them stare at me, with a penetrating gaze through their iridescent visors. They mumble a silent tongue that is barely audible. Etoila's scream fills the room, piercing my ears. One by one, Harkin heads pop like balloons, dispersing a light blue bloody mist, only to be replaced with more Harkin bodies, seemingly unfazed.

The carnage continues, and I am a mere disembodied spectator. Frozen in horror.

Blades of golden light slice through the bodies with surgical precision, dicing them into a mass of white cloth and flesh. Then I hear a roar and the pounding of fists. In the far end of the now spacious room, an unseen, unstoppable force bulldozes through the ocean of Harkin bodies, flinging them across the room and splattering them against the ceiling and walls. My Relic does not exist. I cannot move. He is coming straight at me, and I can do nothing.

The roars turning into maniacal laughter, crazed and ready to tear me apart. Angkorr's face flashes with wide bloodshot eyes and a smile of a killer.

"No!"

I throw myself upwards and protect my face with my arms. By the time I realize that there's nothing in front of me, my left fist is clenched, and a prison of time has appeared at the foot of the bed. A sigh of relief escapes my mouth and I relax my hand, the sphere shattering into fragments as fast as it materialized.

I look at the back of my hand, and a notch on my Relic has relit into a soft glow. The same notch that disappeared after Enha lopped my head off back at the Harkin facility.

I shudder, remembering the sheer pain of the gruesome deaths I've experienced. Funny – I feel like a video game character, dying just to relive the same trauma until I learn from it and live to die again. I remember how vivid each death was: the throbbing headache courtesy of Etoila, Enha's hot blade slicing through my neck... I don't want to risk any more of my lives unless I really need to.

Now I'm sitting upright on the bed that Lilly let me use. The sheets and pillows are damp from the cold sweat that's seeped through my clothes. The candle on the nightstand's extinguished – I hope neither Lilly nor Hava saw me suffer from the nightmare. Not that it matters.

The morning light seeps into the room of the inn through the window shutters, muffling the sounds of people shuffling through the streets outside. My first instinct is to open them, smell the fresh air to clear my head, but then I remember the rebreather on my face. A bummer. But maybe I could acclimate myself to the Agnavinian air, and today might be a good time to start.

The shutters open with a light creak and the cool morning air brushes against my face, and the ambient glow of the rising sun floods into the rest of my room. People are already

walking through the streets, going about their business, and until now I haven't realized how diverse Agnavina's population is.

Among the stream of people walking through the wooden streets are mostly humans of different races and cultures. Nothing I'm not used to back home, except for the medieval peasant outfits. But Agnavina isn't only populated by humans. Small groups of people with pointed ears – I've taken the liberty to call them elves – populate the streets as well. With dark brown skin and hair ranging from red to gold, most of them walk with a cloak covering most of their bodies. I can't really tell from my angle, but their postures are stiff, as if their cloaks are suffocating their skin.

There are other non-humans who seem visibly uncomfortable to be in this town: elves that look like Angkor and the dead young man from last night, each dressed in different clothes but never without their braids and tassels.

On the rooftop sits one of the darker-skinned elves. His orange, curly hair glows in the splendid dawn, his eyes closed and back straight in a meditative pose. Unlike his brethren walking uncomfortably in the streets wearing oppressive cloaks, this man embraces the sun with his bare chest, his arms outstretched with supplication. A golden aura shimmers underneath his skin, as if absorbing the rays of the sun, but unlike Enha's defined tattoos, his aura is like a hazy mist that flows underneath. He's muttering something inaudible, but with reverence apparent on his face, I have a feeling he's chanting a prayer.

The man prostrates to the sun and finishes his prayer. Someone in the street below shouts and startles him. Two Harkin soldiers point at him, yelling something in their language that I can't understand, but the street is filled with murmurs now. He gets up and dashes away, putting

on his patchwork cloak, his golden aura glowing under it. He hops over the ledge, disappearing into the alley below, away from the main street. The Harkin soldiers give chase, and with the commotion over, the people on the street continue about their business, gloom fresh on their faces.

Maybe Lilly was right about the oppression. Those guards were chasing after a man just for praying under the sun, and it wasn't like he was doing anything criminal. I should talk to Lilly.

As if on cue, there is a knock on the door. Lilly opens it and peeks through.

"Kieran?" she says, entering the room, handing me a neatly folded pile of clothes. "I've brought you something fresh to wear. It looked like you were having some pretty bad nightmares last night. These used to be my brother's – he hasn't worn them in a long while. I hope they're your size."

I take the clothes from her hands. It's a white linen tunic, a pair of black trousers, and an olive-green cloak.

"Uh..." I stare at her in an awkward silence, not knowing how to thank her for her generosity. "... Thank you."

She chuckles. "Are you trying to say, 'thank you' in your language?"

I nod, and repeat "thank you" in Agnavinii.

Lilly smiles, her violet eyes shimmering in the dimly lit entrance. "You learn quick. Good. Anyway, get dressed. Don't worry about your clothes – this is one of our safehouses, so

they'll be safe in our care. Oh, and breakfast is ready. Hava and I will be waiting downstairs for you."

I get changed and head downstairs. As I make my way down, I notice that it's the same tavern as last night, except it's empty, save for Lilly and Hava eating at a table. The barkeep steals a glance at me before continuing to clean an empty tankard with a rag. Lilly notices me and waves me to the table.

"I hope you're hungry," she says, placing her hand on my shoulder. *"What do you want to eat?"*

I shrug. *"I don't know. Not sure if the food in Agnavina is anywhere similar to what I'm used to at home. Surprise me?"*

She turns to call the barkeep. "The same!" The barkeep, who seemed to be content with toiling away at his pointless task, sighs before disappearing into the kitchen in the back.

"Have you made your decision?" Lilly asks.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know how you can expect me to fight in a war that isn't mine to begin with. What happens if I can't do what you want me to?"

"Then it's a good thing that you can't really die, can you? At least, not in the way that matters to you. Not much is known about the Time Relic, but its previous user was untouchable – he could predict any attack before it even happened. Until he disappeared."

"But I'm not him. I've only just had this thing for a day, and it takes a lot out of me just to use it for a second."

“I’m no expert on Relics, but I’m sure your fellow Guardians can guide you through it. You might be just what we need – the Time Guardian’s been missing since I was a child, and he used to be one of our most powerful warriors.

“In any case, I can give you my word that you’ll be returned to your home realm once the war is over. While realm travel is only something scholars have theorized about, I must give credit to the Empire for their technology. I’m sure my people can reverse engineer the device.
Oh, that was fast.”

The barkeep’s hairy arm appears between me and Lilly, wordlessly placing a tray of food in front of me. With a single disapproving grunt, he disappears, dragging the stench of body odor away from us, replaced by a wondrous scent of fresh food.

My stomach growls at the medley of breakfast foods. Sitting in front of me is a chunk of dark bread, some red preserved meat, cheese, and a mug of dark steamy fragrant drink with an aroma that penetrates even my rebreather. I wasn’t able to really savor last night’s dinner on account of the rude patron’s violent interruption, but with Lilly and Hava’s hospitality, I can finally eat in peace.

I take off my mask and take a bite out of the dark bread before putting it back on. It’s fresh, with a warm softness that leaves a sweet aftertaste. I sample the red meat – it’s tough to chew at first, but it melts in my mouth with a rich fatty flavor. I combine it with the cheese, which tastes just like a goat’s, and I let out an embarrassingly loud moan of satisfaction. In that moment, I forget that I need the rebreather, and I choke on my food and Agnavina’s poisonous air.

“Well, the air might prove to be quite the inconvenience for you, Kieran,” Lilly says out loud. “Only those with certain deficiencies, or mages who go beyond their magical capabilities, suffer from MOS, or ‘magical overdose syndrome’. Perhaps once you’ve settled in at Erestport, I could help train you to accustom yourself to Source energy.”

I nod, taking a deep breath from the mask while trying to salvage the food I had accidentally spat up. I finish up the food and drink from the mug to wash down my food. My eyes widen from the surprising explosion of flavor – it’s a bitter combination of espresso and freshly ground cacao beans, and I can feel a jolt of energy surge through my head. The grogginess from my nightmare has almost disappeared.

Lilly’s staring at me, expecting me to answer. She’s not giving me much of a choice – I either join this war or be left alone to fend for myself. At least I have a fighting chance if I join Lilly and even the Coalition. But who will I be fighting for? I’ve only just arrived in Agnavina, and I’ve already been cast out as an enemy.

Kiki, I always tell you how much I appreciate what you do for me, but what will you do when I’m gone? Will you still have the same drive as you always have? Who will you live for when I’m gone?

Mom used to say this ad nauseam after her diagnosis. She was already preparing for the inevitable. All my life, I’d been living for Mom. Worked for her, bled for her, cried for her. All to pay for the bills and create a better future for us to live in a country that doesn’t care about us. But since her death, I had been aimless, with my only goal to scatter her ashes. What then? Would I just live in the Appalachians until I keeled over and died? Or Paul finds out about the

cabin and sics the cops on me, and I'd live the rest of my life with a criminal record. What kind of existence would that be?

Whether she knows it or not, Lilly's giving me a second chance, and I'd never hear the end of it from Mom if I turn it down. I look at Lilly in her eyes, our thoughts still connected.

"Okay. I'll help you and your Coalition. Just promise me you'll send me home once it's all over."

Lilly's eyes lighten up, her irises glowing brighter—or is it just a trick of the light?

"Good!" she grips my hand and shakes it. *"Of course, Kieran, you have my word that I will do my utmost to return you home. Welcome to the Coalition, Kieran. You might just be who we need to turn the tide."*

I finish my food and we leave the tavern. It isn't until a few minutes in when I realize that Hava is walking *with* us, rather than using their teleportation to take us to wherever we need to go. I signal Lilly and she places a hand on my shoulder.

"Why can't Hava just take us to the Coalition?" I ask.

"Hava is a member of the Yueno race, who derive their magic and power from Daekami, one of the five moons of Agnavina. But I think this is a question for them to answer." Lilly repeats my question to Hava out loud, who speaks in a slightly muffled voice through their mask.

"The overwhelming presence of the sun makes it difficult for us Yueno to draw power. As such, I cannot always rely on lunar magic during the day. We have no choice but to travel to Erestport on foot."

Lilly interjects. “Which is why we’re smuggling ourselves out of here. With how heavy Harkin security is, we’d be caught, or even shot on sight. And unlike you, Kieran, neither Hava nor I have lives to spare.”

We arrive at what appears to be a stable, with travelling merchants tending to their horses and wooden carriages. Passing by each wagon, Lilly inspects the contents, drawing the annoyance of their respective owners. One of the men, a farmer smoking a foul-smelling pipe, notices her peeking around.

“Oy, what’re you doin’, snoopin’ around?” He stands between Lilly and his wagon, his arms crossed. A puff of smoke escapes from his nostrils like exhaust. “This ain’t a place for a pretty lady like you. This a place for us merchies to rest an’ restock. If you’ve got business to do, wait till tomorrow. Nothin’s for sale here.”

Lilly slips behind the man and peers inside his merchandise, covering her nose and nodding to herself with satisfaction.

“Bugger off! I don’t have time for this.” He rushes to grab Lilly’s arm, who ducks under him and whips out a bag of jingling coins in front of his face. He grumbles, glaring at her.

Lilly raises her hands, trying to deescalate. “Quite the contrary, good merchant. I believe I can make it worth your while. I would like to hire your cart.”

“Yeah? What for? My cart doesn’t come cheap. I need it for make a livin’, you know.”

“Oh, don’t worry! My compatriots and I just require a little bit of discreet transportation amongst your... merchandise.”

“You expect me to smuggle you out the town? And what’s stoppin’ me from alertin’ the guards outside?”

Lilly hums in a faux contemplative tone. “Tell me, sir. How much do you make a day selling your goods?”

The man counts on his hands. “Depends on the yield. Fifty silver, on average. A hundred, if I’m lucky. Damned guards charge me ten per exit *and* entry. They’re bleedin’ me dry, I tell you.” He lowers his voice, just audible enough for us to hear. “It makes business even harder with how bad the Empire’s machines are killing the soil.”

He points to one of the boxes, flies buzzing around rotten fruit and vegetables.

“Now I can’t sell half my bloody stock.” His gaze drifts downward, and he sighs. “Not sure what I’ll tell my wife...”

Lilly nods. “Alright. How about I give you ten gold up front, and I’ll send you twenty more when the job is done for you to buy a new cart and some new equipment. Better yet, maybe some *magical* remedies might sate your troubles.” She brandishes ten solid gold coins in her hand. The farmer takes one and gently bites into it.

“It’s real, alright. But I’ll need a bit more insurance.”

“Of course. Can’t blame you for your skepticism.” Lilly takes off the ring on her middle finger and shows it to him. “Recognize this?”

The farmer’s eyes grow wide with shock. His face lights up from his previously distrustful frown, his tone changing along with it. “Well, why didn’t you say so? If the Coalition

requires my services, then hop on in. Though, I would appreciate it if the offer was still on the table.”

“Naturally,” Lilly says. “We still want to help you, after all.”

We get in the farmer’s wagon. Lilly and Hava dump two barrels full of rotting, grimy fruit out of the cart, and they hide in the stench. I can hear Lilly let out a muffled retch. I hide under a thick tarp and start to get sleepy from the surprisingly comfortable darkness, save for the smell. I breathe through my mouth, and I can taste the sour rot on my tongue. The wagon moves, softly rumbling. We stop. I recognize the voices outside as the same as last night, the same guard who aimed his gun at me.

“... What is your reason for departure?”

“Bad stock. No reason to stay in town when I could be home working with my family.”

“Pass, please.”

“Right, of course.”

“Open your wagon.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Open it up. We had a security breach last night and we simply want to ensure your safety. The intruder may be wearing imperial equipment, though may be Agnavinian in origin. Wears strange clothing, too. This is simply a safety procedure. Now, if you please.”

The farmer sighs, thumping as he steps off the wagon, gravel crunching against his shoes.

“Are you sure? Really there’s nothing to—”

“Open, please.”

“Alright, hope your masks keep the smell out, too.” I can hear the wagon curtain flap open. The guards around us groan in disgust. “Guess not.”

“Regardless... I must inspect your stock. For your... safety, of course.”

“Right, right, well, inspect away!” the farmer ruffles something from the wagon. I can hear even more groans from the guards, and the audible buzzing of flies. “Like I said, bad stock.”

The guard says nothing for a moment. Someone outside pukes. Someone else yells, “Just let him go, already!”

“Fine. Just get it out of my sight.”

The cart resumes rumbling, its rickety wheels clattering on the dirt path. After a minute, the farmer breaks the silence.

“The coast is clear. You can come out now.”

I emerge from my hiding place, throwing the tarp aside. Hava’s already sitting at the front of the wagon, right behind our driver. Lilly, who has just risen from her barrel, lets out a loud groan of disgust.

“Phew! I’ve crawled through sewers before, but this is a new level of rancid!”

The farmer snorts. “Well, my apologies. You hired my cart for this exact bloody reason.”

“How long will it take for us to get to the nearest settlement to Erestport?”

“Wurton’s about two hours away, so get comfortable.”

Leaning against the wagon’s low wall, I take out my phone, unlocking its cracked screen.

“What is *that*?” Lilly asks, lunging in my direction and plopping herself right next to me. She grabs my hands and brings my phone closer to her, craning her neck to inspect it. Our thoughts intermingle.

“It’s a phone.”

“A phone? What sort of device is it?”

I hesitate. I’ve never had to explain what a *phone* was to somebody before. *“It’s something we use to communicate with people from far away, find information, and capture and store images. I guess that’s the best way to describe it.”*

“How does it work without Sourcestone?”

I remember my father mentioned Sourcestone in his journal. Are they power sources that Agnavinians use for their technology? *“I guess they use electricity as power? I don’t really know how it works.”*

“You mean to tell me that your people use lightning as power? Not even the most powerful of mages could harness the storms that easily, let alone condense that kind of energy into a single device. You mentioned it could capture and store images. Please, show me!”

I tap on the camera icon. Lilly gasps, her eyes glued to the screen. I demonstrate the camera function and point it to Hava, who furrows their brows but doesn’t move. I tap on the circular button with an audible *click* and show Lilly the photo.

“Wow! It looks exactly like them, and that took no time, too! Wait, can you capture image of yourself?”

I turn on the front-facing camera, positioning me and Lilly in a selfie. I take the photo, capturing the moment her eyes widen with utter astonishment, and me smiling. I show her the photo, and she stares at it for a while.

“Reminds me of when my mother and I would have our portraits commissioned. Used to take the painter several hours to finish. Damn near broke my back posing. This is amazing stuff, Kieran! What else can it do?”

Since I have no service in this alternate world, calling and surfing the Internet are out of the question. Instead, I show Lilly my camera roll. We browse for a few minutes.

“Is that your mother?” Lilly says, tapping on a photo, magnifying it. “She’s beautiful.”

“She was.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s... no longer with me. Part of the reason I need to go back. It was her last wish to have her ashes scattered.”

“My deepest condolences. Are her ashes back in your realm?”

“Yeah. I left her behind in all that chaos.” I open up to her. About Mom’s sickness. About Paul. About Lizzy. About me dropping out. In my telepathic monologue about my life story, Lilly responds with the occasional nod, holding my hand to maintain our link. Her patient gaze burrows deep into my mind, with a tenderness I have not felt in a long time. Each thought I express feels like digging through my mind, shoveling memories into hers, and she returns the favor by emanating a mix of sympathy and sorrow.

“Oh, Kieran,” Lilly says out loud. *“You’ve suffered a lot in your realm. But I don’t understand one thing: why, after all the pain you’ve endured, that you wish to return, besides scattering your mother’s ashes? It sounds to me that there is nothing left for you on Earth.”*

For a moment, I am taken aback. I should be offended, say something defensive, but I stop to think. She’s right that there’s nothing for me back home—my mother’s gone and neither my girlfriend nor stepfather wants me.

“Because it’s my home. I don’t have anywhere else to go to.”

Lilly leans back with a look of resignation. *“I understand. If I lost my mother, Hava, and my brother, I don’t know where I’d go, either.”*

Neither Lilly nor I say anything for a minute. She finally perks up. *“Well, since you desperately want to return home, I’m sure you miss it quite a lot. Why don’t you show me what it looks like? I mean, images of it, of course.”*

For the rest of the trip, I scroll through my camera roll with Lilly. As we scroll through panoramas of Wilmington beach, photos of our trips to New York and DC, and the snow-covered Beech Mountain, a wave of longing washes through me. Each photo brings back a vivid memory, ones that I never thought I would relive ever since Mom’s passing. But now I get to share these memories with a new friend in Lilly, who’s commentating on every single one of them with the fascination of a bright-eyed child.

“Thank you for showing me your home, Kieran,” Lilly smiles. “Perhaps once this is over, I could come with you and see for myself how beautiful Earth is. But for now, we should almost be at Wurton.”

“Madam?” The farmer calls with a shaking voice. “You might want to look at this.”

Lilly and I part the wagon curtains and the village that is supposed to be our destination is nothing but rubble. Despite the afternoon sun baring down on us, the clouds are thick and dark from billowing smoke. Harkin vehicles, now nothing but burnt scrap metal, dot the battlefield that was probably once a thriving community. Piles of ash and charred corpses, both Harkin and Agnavinian alike, are strewn across the ground. I cover my gaping mouth with my hands, dread suffocating me.

We disembark. Hava seems completely unphased, scanning the area with their piercing glare. Lilly, on the other hand, clenches her fists, her knuckles cracking under the pressure.

“How did this happen? We were just here last night.” Lilly’s voice quivers. “Hava, do you see any signs of survivors?”

“No.”

“Damn it.” Lilly picks up a piece of charred wood. A bright flame envelops her hand and turns the already burnt debris into ash that scatters in the wind. “When the Empire first invaded two years ago, we thought we could negotiate some sort of peace. It wasn’t long before they began murdering mages, stealing Sourcestone, and taking villages hostage. They think themselves to be conquerors, taking back what is rightfully theirs, without a thought of who or what they trample over to get it.”

Lilly grabs my shoulders. Her words echo along with her intent. “*This is the enemy, Kieran. They take and they take and will not stop until they have conquered all of Agnavina. You may not be Agnavinian, but does your realm not have injustices? War? Does this not boil your*

blood, seeing innocents suffer in vain? Our enemy doesn't care what happens as long as they get what they want, and this will not stop until we drive these invaders away."

I stand still, fists clenched and my head hanging low. This shouldn't bother me. The scene before me looks just like the kinds of catastrophic photos I've seen online – war and death and utter destruction have little impact on me thanks to years of unfettered internet access. But I see the charred remains of a mother reaching out to her child, buried under rubble. I see bodies riddled with holes stacked on top of each other, emanating a nauseating, putrid, leathery stench in the air. Whatever happened, it was a massacre. These people were caught in a battle and barely had any time to evacuate. Something swells inside my chest. My heart thumps louder and louder. My fingers whiten under my tightening grip. It's a deep pain that I'm unfamiliar with, one that I don't know what to do with.

Lilly's angry gaze softens, and she sighs, turning away from me. "We continue on foot. Come on, the entrance to Erestport isn't far from here."

After Lilly finishes her business with the farmer and sends him on his way, we spend the next half hour walking eastward, away from the destruction. I can't help but wonder what will become of the ruins—would people try to rebuild? Or will nature take it back? How long will this war last? Would I really turn the tide of the war? The weight of responsibility rests heavily on my shoulders.

Lilly is quiet throughout most of the journey.

We arrive at a thick, dark forest, surrounded by a towering wall of mountains. The trees themselves look innocuous, but there is a creeping sensation of uneasiness, as if there's something uncanny about them. Despite the green leaves and healthy-looking bark, the trees

seem too still, even in the wind, as if they're devoid of any life. Through the thicket, I can see dangerously sharp boulders and craggy rockfaces.

A sudden onset of lethargy overtakes me and I almost trip over my own feet. Lilly catches me and I signal for a telepathic link. *"I'm sorry. Something feels off about this place. Are you sure we're headed in the right direction?"*

"Yes." Lilly motions for us to head in. "Just stay close to us. Hava will lead the way."

With a waving motion with her hand, a ball of bright light appears in Lilly's hand, washing away the fatigue from my body. Taking a deep breath, I ask her, *"What was that?"*

"The Dark Forest and the Wall are the result of the culminating efforts of the Guardians in an effort to make Erestport as impregnable as possible against the invaders. Angkor, whom you have had the misfortune of meeting, constructed the landscape, while the Void and Reality Guardians created the psychic defenses. You've already felt the energy-sapping effects of the Void Guardian's power. We'll come up against Reality's illusions soon. The deeper we are in the forest, the stronger the defenses will be. No matter what you see and hear, stay close with me and Hava."

"What about that light? I have a feeling it's not just to light the way."

"You're right. It's a simple uplifting spell combined with an illumination spell. Doesn't require a lot of energy for any mage to cast, but impossible for Verkin to, since you'd have to have Agnavinian blood to even use magic."

"Verkin, Harkin, what's the difference?"

“I can see why that can be confusing. Verkin is what they call their race, while Harkin is the island nation that they’re from. We use the term interchangeably, since the Harkin Empire is only comprised of Verkin. Unless you’re a traitor or desperate Greenblood, that is.”

A flash catches my eye. I peer through the forest and find what looks to be a pile of gold ingots sitting in a dark clearing among the trees. A deluge of coins cascade next to it, as if enticing me further. The shiny gold follows us deeper into the forest, transforming into wads of American cash, as if adjusting the illusion according to my perspectives. The cash shifts again, turning into thumping briefcases, but like a part of a dream that you just know intrinsically, I just know that these briefcases are filled to the brim with hundred-dollar bills. If they’re real, I’d be able to afford my own house, pay off Mom’s medical and funeral bills, a good attorney to fight Paul in court, and live the life Mom always wanted for me.

The illusion shifts, adding a brand-new hybrid car. Then men and women, all who just happen to be exactly according to my personal tastes. Then a two-story house. Then I’m in there, with a shimmering image of a partner and children and pets. We own a garden. I’m working from home in my dream job. A Pulitzer for my poetry. I grow old with a fulfilling life and pass on surrounded by friends and family who love me.

Mom is there throughout all of it. She is happy. A life where she never met Paul. Living life as the healthcare professional she always wanted to be. My father is there. He’s a nebulous, faceless figure whose voice is unfamiliar to me.

“We’re so proud of the man you’ve become, Kieran. We love you very much,” they both say.

I reach out for them, to embrace them. I welcome the loving warmth of the life I've always wanted to have. My partner, my children, my friends, all chanting my name in unison.

Kieran, Kieran, Kieran...

"Kieran, wake up!" a familiar voice pierces my ears. I blink and see Lilly's lit face in front of me, staring straight at me, her hand gripping my shoulder tight with a spell in the other. She tears me away from the light, from the crowd of people who love me and care for me. She tears me from the comfort of my own home, brick by brick, ripping me away from total bliss. Happiness melts into darkness once again.

I crumble onto the ground and break into a sob. What I saw will never be. I will never have a family. Nobody will remember me. My family is nonexistent, and everything I have ever had has turned into dust.

I can feel Lilly's arms around me. Her gentle hushes comfort me. My tears dampen her cotton shirt.

"Whatever you saw was just an illusion, Kieran. You are here with us. With new friends. Those illusions aren't for you to see. I'm sorry you got caught up in them."

I wipe my eyes and see the reality in front of me. The chorus singing my name becomes silent. We're back in the Dark Forest, with Lilly in front of me and Hava perched on a rock. Lilly motions toward where my dream used to be.

"Are you alright?"

I take a deep breath and nod. Strangely enough, I can't help but praise the Reality Guardian for their impressive illusions.

“Come on,” Lilly stands up and jerks her head to the deeper reaches of the forest. “We’re almost there.”

With the illusion out of my mind, I can now clearly see the victims of the Dark Forest’s psychological defenses. Walking aimlessly amongst the trees are Harkin soldiers and rugged men, their eyes glazed over and their bodies emaciated from starvation and dehydration. A hypnotized man trips over the skeletal remains of a soldier, but continues to crawl, his mouth dripping with strings of saliva. I don’t even want to know what he’s seeing.

“I almost pity them,” Lilly sighs. “Bandits and Harkin try to come into Eretport, confident that they’ll make it through the Dark Forest. But the power of the Guardians comes from the Iskayr, the lost gods who left the Relics for humanity. Utilized properly, Relics can be world-altering. The Dark Forest is only a taste of what Guardians can do.”

We move deeper into the forest. The illusions grow stronger but Lilly zaps me with a light shock from her fingertips every time I succumb to the illusions. If this is what Relics are capable of, then the possibilities of the Time Relic are endless. This kind of power must be intoxicating, but who keeps them in check?

“Themselves.” Lilly says, reading my thoughts. “They were *chosen* for a reason. The idea of a rogue Guardian is almost blasphemy. People’s hopes rest upon their shoulders. Even if there was once a Guardian who was less than noble, history would have forgotten them by now.”

There is a deep sadness in her eyes, as if thinking of someone in particular. I don’t think it’s my place to ask.

“You’re right. It’s not. Just know that I knew him, and history has long since spurned his name.”

Oh.

We walk until we reach the foot of the mountains, we stop in front of a wide cave entrance. I tug at Lilly's shoulder and project my thoughts and anxieties to her.

"No," Lilly shakes her head. "This is where the Dark Forest ends. There won't be any illusions from here on out, so don't worry."

The tunnel is dark, but it's short and there's a clear light at the end. When we emerge from it, I can't help but gasp at the breathtaking view.

What I originally thought was a line of mountains is a half-ring of heavily fortified valleys and mountain faces that stretches across the horizon. The sun shines upon a vast land of small towns and farms, with sparkling rivers cutting through the landscape, irrigating the fertile land below us. In the distance, I can see a coastal city surrounded by towering walls emitting a bluish, transparent dome, much like the hue that permeates Agnavina's sky. Taller buildings in the city jut out from the walls and indistinguishable streets, with a beautiful ocean serving as their backdrop. My jaw drops when Lilly jumps off the cliff we arrive at and floats in front of me and Hava, bluish flames sputtering from her back.

"Welcome to Erestport," she says.