The Portals of Taste

THE LANGUAGE
OF TREES

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THE PORTALS OF TARTAE SERIES

In reading order:

The Portals of Tartae: The Land with the Two Moons

The Portals of Tartae: The Language of Trees

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THE PORTAL OF TARTAR

THE LANGUAGE
OF TREES

PROLOGUE

A blazing light fell over the dark forest, enveloping and blinding everyone. It smelled as golden as it looked. Metallic and cold, and its touch paralyzed all living creatures in those hostile woods that night.

And after that, Lars fled.

Bran, Alegra, and Orion were again running between the trees, retracing Belenos' steps and heading to the circle where the final Portal would be opened. The night was cloaked in deep, dark hues and their footsteps echoed around them, the only sound they could hear. Orion's rhythmic gallop was the loudest it has ever been, sounding like thunder from a tormented sky.

"What happened?" asked Alegra as they arrived at the edge of the circle. Her eyes studied what she found there: Cordella, Alavro, and Belenos were still standing with indecipherable looks on their pale faces. Alavro held the Book of the Portals in his hands, and they seemed too still, as though they had been carved out of marble. The Portal Keys lay on the forest floor looking torched, all bent and worn.

"They're gone," answered Cordella. "The Portals … Olivia and Trevor." She looked into the eyes of everyone and appeared to be taking this notion in herself. The night around them was calm and silent; no crickets, no animals made any noise.

Mourning fell over them like heavy rain, damp, cold, constricting, weighing on their hearts.

"So it worked. There are no more Portals in Tartae," whispered Bran, and these words stabbed him deep in his soul.

"Yes. I believe so," answered Cordella. "And Lars?" She turned firmly to Orion.

"He ran away after the blazing light fell upon us. And so did all his companions," he answered.

The drawings on the forest floor were still there, but somehow, they seemed to have lost their lives. Right now, they were only meaningless symbols, as if they had been drawn by a child who played carelessly with a stick in the dirt.

Every single word they said came out with effort. They were all lost, unsure of what path to take now. This was a night of shift, and the rotten smell of that strange-looking forest reminded them how unwelcome they were in that place.

After a long silence, Belenos spoke.

"Everything is different now." His tone was low, but not a whisper. It was strong and deep, like a forgotten god of the seas, and they all shivered with the sound of his words.

There were no more questions after that. It was time to leave that foul place.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WAY BACK TO TARTAE

The water quickly spread through the white, cold floor of the movie theater's restroom until it touched Olivia's feet, making a chill climb up her body—this was real and happening fast. The smell of the phookas took over the place as they continuously jumped around like giant fleas, laughing in that irritating way of theirs. She missed a lot of things about Tartae—the phookas were not one of them.

"Why does Lars keep sending messengers? What does that guy do all day to prevent him from taking care of his business? Don't you all get tired of doing this for him?" challenged Olivia. In her mind, she tried to make sense of what was happening. Not only she had failed in her mission of destroying the Portals of Tartae, but they were now open, and there were phookas in Leve, ready to kill her and whoever entered that restroom. She needed to be careful and decide fast what her next steps should be to stay alive.

Neither the phookas nor the man said a thing. The phookas kept bouncing around, and this man—or man-like creature—looked fresh out of a grave, with deep dark circles under his eyes, as pale as death itself.

"Why are you here?" Olivia asked, now staring deeply into the man's black eyes. She was more serious now; the energy inside the restroom was palpably changing into something even worse. She needed to prepare herself.

He never answered. He took a moment, standing motionless, as though he were a painting or the photograph of a spirit snapped accidentally inside a haunted house, and then he attacked Olivia. The

man moved his arms fast, making the white and blue tiles in the bathroom break free from the walls and fly in Olivia's direction. She threw herself onto the wet floor and crawled, taking cover under the white porcelain sinks. There was no time to ponder what she should do; the man was again raging in the middle of the restroom, yelling and destroying all that was there. Olivia's mind ran through her options while he marched in her direction. The phookas only watched and hysterically laughed, always annoying and loathsome, and obviously trying to distract her from her way out of it.

Olivia closed her eyes at once and silenced it all. Darkness filled her brain, and she got up with only one thought echoing inside her mind: She wanted to live. The water danced on the floor and stretched all around her until it became a thick, impenetrable wall, separating her from the rest of the room like a shield. She opened her eyes, and her heart ached in fear; she was protected now, but for how long?

The man stood in front of her defiantly and closed both of his fists, gathering strength, to the point that his veins seemed about to burst. He opened his hands in a purposeful movement and everything around them: The toilets, the wooden cabinets, the mirror, everything exploded in a rush of energy.

Olivia shut her eyes instinctively, covering her face with her arms and staying like this for what seemed an eternity. When she was finally able to open them, there was water splashing everywhere; the wall she had created was no more, the bathroom was empty, and she was quite hurt, having bruises and cuts all over her body.

She ran back to the movie theater, dripping water and blood all over the place, leaving a reddish trace all the way to her seat. The lights were out, and the movie was already on, painting the enormous room in its romantic yellowish colors.

"You sure took some time in there—Olie, what happened?" Lara asked, noticing Olivia's pitiful state. "You're all wet and … Is that blood? Are you hurt? What the hell happened in there?" Lara stood and couldn't hold her tone. Fear grew in her voice.

"We *gotta* go," said Olivia, her eyes as wide as they could be. "NOW! WE MUST GO NOW!" she yelled urgently, paying no mind of where they were.

People around them complained and shushed, but Olivia and Lara didn't even hear. Olivia's blood was running fast through her veins, and her mind was somewhere else already. Lara took her purse in a swift movement, and they both ran out of that place, stumbling onto people and yelling for them to clear the way.

Olivia led Lara outside, pulling her by the hand, and headed to the car. She looked around attentively at every second to make sure no one was after them; she looked with suspicion at every shadow, asserting that it wasn't a phooka or any other surprise sent from Lars.

There was an icy wind outside that froze Olivia's heart as soon as the mall's doors closed behind them, and the fact that she was completely wet didn't help with the cold at all.

"We must get Trevor. You need to drive us to the university, Lara," said Olivia as they approached Lara's gray car. A million thoughts danced inside her brain, and she had a hard time piecing them together. *What had just happened? Who was that man? Were the Portals really open?*

"WHAT? Trevor?" protested Lara. "What the heck is happening, and why are you hurt? We must call the police, not Trevor."

Olivia looked around once more, and that cold breeze she knew very well filled her lungs and awakened her skin, reminding her of everything she could never forget. She gazed deeply into Lara's eyes, and sadness filled her heart.

"Get in the car, Lara." She said it softly, a motherly tone in her voice. She was so serious and certain that Lara didn't question and just sat inside waiting. As soon as they were both in, Olivia looked around one more time and continued, "Lara, I don't have time to explain every little detail—and maybe it's not even possible—but yes, I was attacked in the restroom, but I'm fine now. The thing is … What attacked me in there was not from this world. And now I know for a fact that we are in danger, all of us. And Trevor is the help we need."

Lara stared back at Olivia with a puzzled look and seemed to be about to start laughing … or crying. Her expressions were all mixed, and she was clearly waiting for more information, something that could make sense and could make her decide what expression to choose. After a while in deep silence, Olivia spoke again.

"Trevor is who we need now. We've been through this before. Please, let's go, Lara."

Lara sighed and started driving. Olivia could tell that her friend was completely lost, in the same position she had been just over a year ago when she had arrived in Tartae unexpectedly, falling into a hole that had suddenly appeared on a calm street in Leve.

Lara didn't say much while driving to the University of Leve, but she kept shaking her head continuously, like a never-ending 'no'. Outside the car, everything seemed normal. The mid-afternoon traffic was light, and people were strolling up and down the quaint streets of Leve, unaware of anything out of the usual.

As for Olivia, she found a way to clear her mind, and the only thing in it now was to find Trevor. The rest was too much to handle. But every time she touched the tip of those thoughts, every time they unavoidably found a way into her head, she trembled and stopped breathing.

"We are here," said Lara, parking the car right outside the opulent building. The place was like a castle: big, gray, and old. A huge green field filled the front, and many students all around walking in groups and alone, carrying important looking books. Some laughing, others too serious, but none aware of anything strange that was happening in their own world.

"Let's go." Olivia sighed and stepped out of the car. She walked fast, willing her legs not to run. They were already getting too much attention as it was, since Olivia's clothes were still wet and stained with blood. Lara followed, and after going through several long and bright hallways, they arrived at the office where Trevor was working, digitalizing books from the university's library.

Trevor wore a white coat over his clothes and protective gloves to preserve the delicate books and documents he was handling. The whole assembly made him resemble a scientist, an impression even more accentuated by the concentrated expression on his face and the glasses he wore. He stood by a huge table with many books and loose pages laid out in front of him, and he was carefully analyzing every one of them. Olivia banged loudly on the large glass window, until Trevor was taken out of his absorption and looked at her. His eyes faded a bit when they met Olivia's. His face fell as he walked slowly to the office door, dreading his next moments.

"They're here," Olivia said, and her eyes watered. There was an enormous lump in her throat as she mouthed the exact words she knew Trevor was afraid to hear. They exchanged a look that only they could understand.

"What are you saying, Olie?" asked Trevor in a whisper, his voice now trembling too. For a moment that sense of urgency that was weighing the air around them dissipated, and there was slowness, as though everything had paused in order for them to choose their future.

Olivia took a deep breath.

"I was attacked by phookas and some other person, or creature—because he looked half dead—when I was at the movies with Lara. They used magic, and so did I," said Olivia.

Trevor pulled her close to him and hugged her tightly. Words were lost, and only an embrace seemed to speak what they both needed to hear.

"We must find a way to go back to Tartae," said Olivia as she let go of Trevor's arms.

"I know, but how? The Key we had disintegrated on our way back to Leve."

"If phookas can do it, so can we, Trev … We just have to find a way," concluded Olivia.

"What are phookas?" asked Lara, who Olivia had completely forgotten was there. Lara had kept quiet for a while, probably trying to understand and keep track of what Olivia and Trevor were discussing but seeing that she was nowhere near achieving that, she gave up. Her confused look would be comical, if it weren't so understandable.

"Oh, Lara … I'm so sorry," answered Olivia. "We can't explain it all to you, we don't have time. But I can say this: Last year we went to a place called Tartae. It's another world completely, where time runs differently, and they have two moons in their night sky. We ended up there accidentally when we fell into a Portal that opened right here in Leve. So there's also that … Portals between the worlds. We thought we had destroyed all of them and everyone was safe, but as you can see, we were wrong. I was wrong."

"Are you joking? You don't look like you are joking. Is this real? Why are you doing this?" Lara's eyes were now wide in despair and

moving from Olivia to Trevor restlessly, searching for an answer much more ordinary than the one she had received.

"Yes, it's real," said Trevor, resting his hand on Lara's shoulder. "And I felt just like you once. I thought I was having a very bad dream, but at least you were not attacked and almost killed by the phookas. Who, by the way, are disgusting. They look like giant flies and they smell like garbage. You don't want to meet them."

"If the phookas were here, that means that the Portals were opened again. I know something has changed; my magic is different. I was able to connect with the elements in a way that I haven't since we were in Tartae," said Olivia.

"Were you able to do spells after we came back? Have you ever tried here in Leve?" asked Trevor.

"Yes and no. I don't quite know how to explain, but it wasn't magic … almost. I'd do something and then it would go away quickly, as if it had never existed. I don't know, Trevor … I just know that I wasn't feeling very magical, but now I am. Something has woken up all around and within me."

"Guys … This is too much … Magic? What are you doing?" scoffed Lara, her face twitching with the questions she wasn't asking.

"In Tartae, I was able to connect with nature and do some stuff … Magic, as you might call it." Olivia snapped her fingers, producing pink sparks that resembled little fairies. "See?"

Lara's mouth opened, letting out a squeak.

"Trev, I think it's better if we go and try to find a way back to Tartae, and Lara, you go home and just stay safe. Be careful, and don't go anywhere near our houses. I'd say that they are the worst place to be right now," continued Olivia.

"You cannot just dump me and go to Tartae. I *wanna* see this place too and help, if there's a way to help," protested Lara.

"I don't think that's possible, Lara. You should stay here and keep an eye out for things while we are there, and even maybe try to warn the authorities if something else happens," said Olivia.

"Yeah, believe me when I say this: You don't want to be in Tartae not knowing anything about how things work there. You'll be safer in Leve. And also, we don't even know how we are going to go there … So, definitely safer here," concluded Trevor.

"We have to move. I say we start in my house and try to find something there. If they are looking for me, that would be the place to go. Lara, could you give us a ride?"

"Well, yes …" answered Lara, seeming quite unsure of what to do, but then leading the way to the parking lot.

They drove through Leve's calm streets, full of trees and green lawns where evil seemed not to exist, and for some reason, all that peacefulness made Olivia even more worried, as if that false sense of safety would be the doom of the small, quaint city of Leve. She didn't dare to voice those thoughts, especially in front of Lara.

As they arrived at Olivia's house, she said goodbye to Lara and left the car with Trevor. She could tell Lara was uneasy and having a hard time following the orders to stay put, but deep down, she probably knew it was for the best and wanted to avoid an exceptionally weird experience. Lara took a moment, staring at the steering wheel, and then left without looking back.

"Do you have any idea where to start?" said Trevor as soon as they stepped inside Olivia's house. There was no one there. Her grandmother, Mrs. May Halin, was once again traveling around some pacific island and her things were just lying around. "Your grandma has a lot of stuff for someone who is never home …"

Olivia laughed and said, "Let's try to retrace our last hours in Tartae. There was that circle in the forest …"

"There were symbols there. Do you remember what they were? Maybe we can recreate them and open a connection," said Trevor.

"Not exactly. It was all so fast and dark. Alavro had the Book of The Portals, and we had one of the Keys in our hands," added Olivia.

"But it became dust when we got to Leve," said Trevor, sitting down on the couch and scratching his head in a pensive way.

"Yes. I think they all became dust when we *destroyed* the Portals, but even so, Lars managed to come here. I guess there's no need for Keys anymore," concluded Olivia. In her mind, the possibility of Lars traveling through the worlds freely arose for the first time. She wondered if it had become that easy.

"Do you think he can come and go now without a problem?" Trevor asked, as though reading her thoughts.

"I don't know, Trev. Maybe … But once again I think that he was still testing the Portal he managed to open, because he didn't come himself. He did the exact same thing with Baltazar last year, so I think it's a pattern. He's afraid of dying during the trip or maybe losing his powers. But we are still a menace to him; he's out for us once again," said Olivia.

"Why didn't he send Baltazar? He survived his first trip, and he knows us. He hates us. He would gladly try to kill us again."

A shiver ran through Olivia's back, and something fell inside her stomach like a heavy rock. The memory of her sword perforating Baltazar's flesh took over her, but she didn't have the courage to tell Trevor that she had possibly killed him in the room of mirrors on that dreadful, desperate night.

"Did you bring anything with you that day?" Olivia said, moving away from that subject quickly, trying to erase Trevor's question from her mind and maybe even from his.

"No, and I threw all of those clothes away because they were completely ruined. Oh, and I left my bow and arrows there at the circle; I didn't think I'd ever need them around here," said Trevor.

"I left my sword in Lars' mansion, but I still have the clothes I was wearing that day," said Olivia.

Trevor met her gaze and stared at her for a second, and Olivia knew he could read the emotion behind her actions. She had a harder time with the idea that she would never go back to Tartae, so she held on to the clothes, even though they couldn't possibly be worn again. She was clinging to a memory, maybe holding on to some kind of hope.

Trevor was graceful about it and didn't force a conversation on the subject.

"Speaking of clothes, you might need to change," he finally said, laughing.

Olivia had forgotten her clothes were damp and stained with blood. In the rush she was to find a way back to Tartae, everything else seemed unimportant. She decided to quickly change and wash her face, while Trevor continued the search around her house, trying to find something, anything that could give him a clue of how to open a Portal or spark some sort of idea.

Olivia got ready fast and resumed her side of the search in no time. She kept the clothes she was wearing during their last night in Tartae inside a fabric bag, hidden in her closet. She went through everything, looking inside all the pockets and even smelling the clothes, which now only had the scent of the lavender laundry detergent she used.

"Nothing," she said as she came downstairs and met Trevor's eyes. "There was nothing there. No clues whatsoever. I don't see how we can find anything here, Trev … What could we possibly find that would help us in my grandma's mess?"

Olivia sat down on a step, looking around, trying to remember everything she'd learned about the Portals and the way Cordella used to take them to Tartae: They went during the night; time passed differently; they didn't remember what had happened; the friends she made there … Bran, Belenos, Emma… *Emma*!

"Oh! The stone!" Olivia screamed. She stood and ran to her bedroom. Trevor followed her.

In there, resting over her nightstand, there was a small, beautiful wooden box engraved with a tree, which Olivia had carved herself. And inside was a stone that resembled a galaxy.

"Do you remember this? Emma gave it to me when we were leaving Belenos' house so I could remember her and Tartae," said Olivia excitedly.

Trevor studied the stone carefully, a gleaming, small beacon of hope. It sparked in silver and purple, and tiny rainbows formed on its surface when touched by light. Trevor smiled.

"This is it, Trev. This is our way back to Tartae!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE SATYR

They stared at the stone as if waiting for the object to do something. Seconds turned into minutes, and silence brought them no answer.

"What now, Olie?" asked Trevor. His eyes drowned in uncertainty.

"Well, now I have no idea," scoffed Olivia, twitching her lips.

"What if this is just a rock? If that's the case, we're only wasting our time," said Trevor. "Do you really think Lars knows where you live?" He peered out the bedroom window. The light was coming in gently, for the sun was weak and almost setting.

"He knew I was at the movies, and they even managed to portal there. Last time, they knew about Lucent Bookshop … That's where I saw Baltazar for the first time. So let's just assume that they know everything … It's safer for us if we are overly careful," stated Olivia.

Trevor closed the curtains and sighed, visibly worried. Olivia sat cross-legged on her bed, with the crystal in her right hand, shaking it, studying it carefully. The thing was cold and still beautiful, although lacking the appeal it once had. A warmth that was connected to Olivia's memories of Emma and Tartae and had nothing to do with magic or their way back to that place.

Trevor sat across from Olivia, and they both looked at the crystal. At the height of her despair, Olivia just talked to the thing:

"Please, show us the way to Tartae. We need to go back."

Trevor chuckled, but Olivia didn't look away from the stone. Maybe it was a silly thing to try, but she had hope. Her mind emptied, and something clicked inside her heart. All the smells that lingered around the room got stronger: the recently washed linens, the wood from the

furniture, even the grass outside found a way through the walls and windows, as though everything had woken up.

The crystal vibrated subtly but visibly in Olivia's hand. The two friends looked at each other in expectation, barely breathing, and inside the rock, an image took form, but it went away quickly. For a moment, the thing went all dark blue, like a starless and cloudless sky, and then there was a metallic cluster of sparks in the middle that swirled until it burst all around the room.

Olivia and Trevor were petrified, mesmerized by what they were seeing. They were now inside this blue dome, full of stars moving slowly around them.

"This is not our sky, Olie. The constellations … They just don't make any sense," said Trevor, frowning and studying the dots that glimmered around them.

"That's because it's not the sky," said Olivia, her eyes shining with amazement. "This is a map. We must follow it!" Excitement grew inside her.

"But do you understand where it's going? This is not making any sense to me."

"I guess so," answered Olivia, smiling. "Come on!"

They both rushed outside, running down the stairs and through the living room. It was night already. The streetlights were on, and the houses were lit too. Crickets sang, and there was no one around, which was the usual way of things around this time of the day in Leve. Everybody was probably just having dinner and unaware of the peril they were in, of the uninvited guests in their calm land.

"Are we going to walk around in this? Not very discreet, I have to say," said Trevor. They were enveloped in a thin veil that allowed them to see through it, but was undeniably there.

"I don't think anybody can see this, Trev … just us. It's magic, remember?" said Olivia airily.

"If you say so …," said Trevor. He studied his surroundings so much that his actions were almost too slow; he seemed to be having a hard time accepting that this was happening there, in Leve, where virtually nothing ever happened.

"Trevor," said Olivia, gently grabbing both of his arms. "Look at me and breathe. We just have to follow the stars. See? They are shining

for us, guiding our way. We just have to follow them. Emma knew what she was doing, and you know she'd never hurt us."

Trevor still hesitated. His face was heavy with worry and all wrinkled up, like a dried date. "Let's just hope so," he said, a little confidence growing in his eyes.

"Good. You'll have to drive," said Olivia.

Trevor nodded. They headed to his house, walking across the lawn that stretched over every house on that street; it was the quickest way to Trevor's, which was luckily very close to Olivia's. As they reached his place, it was like crossing city limits. The difference was palpable: It smelled like roses, love, and family. Something heavily missing from Olivia's place.

The house was painted light yellow, and its garden was lit by pale peach and white roses planted many springs ago by Trevor's mother. Mr. Meris took great care of them as if nurturing an undying love.

As they neared the garage, the sound of pots and pans got louder: Trevor's father was preparing dinner for him and his son while listening to some old jazz song. The smell of rosemary and sage found their noses outside, and worry grew all over Trevor's face again.

"Maybe it's better if you text him and say you're not coming, Trev. You can tell him that you're with me," said Olivia, trying to avoid a possible problem. Last time, it wasn't easy for Trevor to convince his dad that everything was okay and that he wasn't lying about the true reasons he was missing for a whole night.

"I hate lying to him …" said Trevor with a sigh.

"I know … But you *are* with me. That's not a complete lie …" observed Olivia.

Trevor stopped by his garage door to text his father: *"Something just came up with Olie. Can't make it to dinner… Sorry, Dad. Have to take the car!"*

He then opened the brown garage door and slid inside the car quickly, before his dad could show up to ask questions. They left in a hurry, and he just honked on his way out.

"I just hate that …" he said again, squeezing the steering wheel mindlessly.

Olivia guided, telling Trevor to go left, right, up that street, down the other. They drove around Leve for hours, getting far from where they

lived and still having no idea where exactly they were going. The glistening dots coming from the crystal kept changing, pointing in different directions and reinforcing the hope they had that they were heading the right way.

"Trevor, I think we're here! The stone is glowing," said Olivia.

Trevor parked by the curbside and peered at the crystal that now flashed a bright white light, as though it had become a star itself. The dome around them disappeared and they were now at the struggling art district of Leve—a charming place idealized to resemble a Parisian street, with cozy cafes and beautiful lamplight. But people in Leve didn't really buy art, so it was quite sad, for virtually no one visited the galleries, and they were always going out of business after challenging months.

It was the end of the day, and people were leaving their offices, shutting and locking the doors behind them, and one of the galleries caught Olivia and Trevor's attention. While many of them had big glass windows that allowed customers to see what was inside in the hopes that something would spark their interest, this one had a small blue iron door that was wide open and no windows whatsoever, only two humongous paintings decorating its façade. Its walls were egg-yellow and old, beaten by the weather and the years. Unlike many other galleries on this struggling art street, this one seemed ancient.

Olivia and Trevor stepped inside, crossing the intimidating paintings hanging by the door as if they were guardians of the threshold: The one on the left was of a lady sitting on a chair; she carried a terracotta vase over her head and had a mouth for eyes—it was quite somber. The one on the right was colorful and geometrical, with many triangles filled with different bright colors, and inside the gallery, the walls were fully covered by art in every size, arranged in a Tetris-like concept. There was a style for every liking: still nature, modern, collage, weird ones, paintings too scary to describe, paintings too beautiful to describe. A single blue door was located at the end of the main room; wooden stairs led to the second floor, and an almost overpowering smell that seemed a mix of paint and hydromel lingered.

Olivia and Trevor studied the gallery openmouthed. They walked in slowly, amazed by what surrounded them. This room was alive with art, and it was contagious, like being dragged into a catchy song. Each

painting showed them a path they could choose, a different door into the unknown. It was all strange and intriguing.

And then there it was: a tiny painting of two moons glistening in the sky, casting their light upon a deep valley.

"Trevor, it's Tartae!" said Olivia, pointing to the small painting, which was almost hidden at the top of the back wall.

"Oh, Olie … It could be a coincidence," said Trevor, studying it from where he stood.

"There's no such thing." Olivia shook her head and stared deep into Trevor's eyes. Excitement and fear grew inside her.

"Looking for anything in particular? We have more paintings upstairs if you'd like. A present for Mom and Dad, I'd say, huh?" said the man walking out of the office in the back. As he got closer, the smell of hydromel got stronger, and every single wrinkle on his face became so clear to Olivia that it was like reading a book that told all sorts of stories. His kind black eyes were framed by his round glasses, which rested on top of his large nose. His chin-strap beard was full and all white. He shot Olivia and Trevor a big smile, showing them his crooked teeth.

"Oh, thank you, sir. Can you tell us more about this painting?" asked Trevor, pointing to the one with the two moons.

"I guess you can find something better for your parents, young man. Maybe a bigger one, or more colorful. What do you think about flowers?" the man said, already walking away from where Olivia and Trevor stood and heading closer to a painting of many red roses.

"We need to go to Tartae." Olivia said, resolutely. Her voice broke the energy in the room, as it put all of their intentions and secrets out, open for whatever destiny had in store for them.

Trevor and the man looked at her.

"Olie …" warned Trevor, trying to be discreet.

"No, Trev. We have no time to lose!" she said, urgently. "We know that it's Tartae in that picture, sir. And this stone brought us here, so I guess you know something about it. Will you help us?" Olivia asked while she stretched her arm and showed him the glowing crystal.

The man smiled and, in complete silence, walked to the front door to close it, which made Olivia and Trevor more scared and uncertain.

"First of all, my name is Aeron Dunes. And you are?" he finally said. His eyes gleamed.

"I'm Olivia Halin, and he's Trevor Meris. We need to go back to Tartae, Mr. Dunes. Is there anything you can do for us?" insisted Olivia in a business-like tone.

"Call me Aeron, please," said Aeron, airily, as he observed Olivia and Trevor.

"We thought that the Portals of Tartae were destroyed. But we were wrong," said Trevor.

"And why did you think that?" inquired Aeron, frowning.

"I'm afraid I won't tell you that part," said Olivia. "Can you help us? Please, just say if you're able to, because if you're not, we need to keep trying to find a way back."

"You don't trust me, but you want my help?" Aeron continued, a mischievous look in his eyes.

"We don't have a lot of options," answered Olivia.

"Do you have any clue what we are talking about, Mr. Dunes?" asked Trevor.

Mr. Dunes' lips arched a little, a draft of a smile. "Yes, I know about Tartae. Did someone from the Svender family give you this?" he asked, his eyes fixated on the stone.

"Yes, Emma Svender did. So you know her?" asked Olivia eagerly.

"I knew her family very well; I used to live in Lirianthis too. I moved here a long, long time ago … Things were very different then. May I ask why you need to go back?" asked Aeron.

"The Portals of Tartae are open again, and people are using them who shouldn't be. We must warn the Clan," said Olivia.

Mr. Dunes looked at Olivia while pondering.

"Oh well, I guess it's time to help." He headed to his office, and Olivia and Trevor followed, stopping by the door while the man looked through some old papers. Hanging on the wall was a painting of him as a satyr. "Oh yes, my dear. That's me in my most unearthly way," he said dismissively. "Now, let's go."

Aeron led Olivia and Trevor upstairs; the steps creaked loudly under the weight of their bodies. The second floor was even more flooded with paintings, and a big window let the breeze dance inside,

touching all of them gently and reminding them that the night was getting old.

"A long time ago, I was also protecting Tartae, but I fell madly in love and came here. I like this place, even though some things here seem forgotten. Here, this is your way back." Aeron removed some gigantic paintings that were leaning over one wall, leaving just one of a beautiful, enormous tree. "If the Portals are in fact open, you will be able to go back to Tartae; if not, I'm afraid you'll be stuck in the painting forever, and there's nothing I can do about it. Are you certain?"

"Yes, I am," said Olivia.

"Are we?" asked Trevor with uncertainty, and Olivia just looked in his eyes, twitching her lips and shrugging. What else they could do?

"So may it be. You can step inside the painting whenever you're ready," said Aeron.

Olivia and Trevor looked at the painting awkwardly; the thing appeared too normal to be a Portal, and Trevor reached to touch it.

"No. It doesn't work that way," warned Mr. Dunes, shaking his head. "It will only be a Portal when you step inside with all of all."

Olivia looked at the man and took a deep breath. "It was nice to meet you, Aeron. Thank you."

"Thank you," followed Trevor. "Here goes nothing."

And they stepped inside.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HAWTHORN TREES

Olivia and Trevor were now covered in paint: Yellow, green, blue, red, and black thick brushstrokes everywhere; it touched their skin and enveloped them like colorful dresses, ever-changing, fresh. It pulled them deeper into the white canvas, spreading and dancing in front of them, but never forming a clear image, never painting a picture that they could make any sense of.

The two friends floated like leaves falling from a tall tree with no control of their direction, only sinking deeper into the white void. The smell of paint was so strong that Olivia could taste it in her mouth, and it made her sick. This Portal wasn't like the other ones they had known; it wasn't fast like the last time, and they weren't pushed and pulled around. They were not falling into a dark hole either. This was slow and seemed somehow hopeless; they danced inside the paint to no sound, moving slightly to one side and the other, rocking their way down. But eventually, it ended, and they arrived.

A forest materialized in front of them, at first blurred, and then its image became sharp and real; it revealed itself like when one wakes up and opens their eyes in the harsh light. Olivia's feet met the mossy ground, and she drew a deep breath, taking in the night around her. There was no vestige of paint in their bodies anymore, although Olivia's stomach still turned, and the scent of it lingered for a moment.

"Where are we?" Trevor broke the silence, speaking softly as if trying not to break a delicate spell. "Is this Tartae?" he said, looking at the sky and seeing no sign of the two moons.

"Yes," answered Olivia.

"But do you know where we are?" Trevor asked.

Olivia only shook her head. They had landed in a dense forest, where the trees were wild and emanated ancient energy, revealing that they must have arrived inside an untouched woodland. Here, the scent of nature caressed their noses, sweet and flowery. The night sky was covered by thick clouds, those that hold buckets of rain. And the forest was unusually silent.

Olivia and Trevor chose a direction and walked carefully, afraid of their next steps. The forest floor was dry and cracked as they followed a path chosen by chance, and the night got darker as they went deeper into the woods.

"Olie, I'm not sure if we should be here. These woods are getting denser, and those bushes seem so thick that I don't think we'll be able to cross them. We should turn back," said Trevor.

"I know where we are, Trev," said Olivia. A wall of hawthorn trees stretched in front of them. Their branches were covered in white flowers and formed something of a wild white fence, much different than what one would find in Leve. "We are at the edge of Lirianthis. Hawthorn trees protect the village, look! Even in our world, they're known for their protective powers, some people even call them 'The Fairy Trees' because they believe guardian fairies live under them and can take you to another world. Come, we must find a way in."

It was as though something had lifted from Olivia's shoulders. She now carried a smile on her face and guided their way into the cluster of hawthorn trees—and there were many of them, all very close together, making it impossible to see what was guarded beyond their trunks and leaves. Olivia opened the way for Trevor, pushing the branches carefully away and venturing between the protective plants. As they passed through, the trees seemed to close the path behind them: Olivia and Trevor were being led into Lirianthis.

"I guess that after all this time, you'll finally see Lirianthis, Trev. The forest is inviting you inside, can you see it?" said Olivia, searching for Trevor's eyes and finding two sparkly big brown acorns, gleaming with amazement. "And here we are …"

The trees became sparse. There were still many hawthorns and other trees all around, but they were now scattered throughout the landscape. That beautiful mossy landscape that Olivia would recognize

anywhere. Lirianthis was still pretty much the same: A secluded haven well-guarded by the forest itself, with stairs climbing up the tree trunks, green and blue houses on top of rocks, and the veil of magic blessing everything.

"So this is Lirianthis …" said Trevor. His expression was almost hidden under the shadows of the night, but Olivia could read his voice very well: The wonderment was undeniably there.

"I wish you could see it in other circumstances … But I don't think you'd come here happily or willingly. So this is as good as it gets, I guess," joked Olivia.

Trevor chuckled. "Oh, well. I can barely see it anyways. It's so dark without the moons, and no one seems to be up. There's no light. And this silence … It's giving me the creeps," said Trevor, looking around.

"It wasn't like this last time … It felt secluded, but it was alive and bursting with good energy, people walking around and enjoying themselves. But we don't even know what time it is. Maybe it's late at night and everyone has already gone to bed. Come, let's try to find Emma. If I remember it well—" started Olivia, but Trevor interrupted her.

"Olie … We have no idea how much time has passed or what happened in Tartae while we weren't here. Who knows what could have changed? Do you think … that … they …" Trevor didn't find the courage to finish, and his voice fell to a low whisper. He found Olivia's gaze, somber and afraid.

"Let's not even go there, Trev … Let's just try to find her," said Olivia, being assertive and deviating her thoughts from a possibility she didn't even want to consider. "If I remember it correctly, Emma used some flowers to make her house easier to find, and it should be in this direction. Come."

Trevor followed her, they went on and on through Lirianthis pathways for about ten minutes, passing the giant birch trees with multiple houses attached to their trunks, and then by the clearing where Olivia had attended to the summer festivities what seemed like many lives before. It was still a splendid forest, but it had no sound, and under the heavily clouded sky, they could barely see what was in front of them. Everything around seemed to be asleep: the forest, the animals, Lirianthis as a whole. Plants didn't move at their own will

anymore, not like they did the first time they'd arrived in Tartae. Olivia tried to pay no mind to it, doing her best to ignore what could easily be the truth. Time ran differently in Tartae, and too much of it could have passed. Lirianthis could be full of other souls. She had no idea. Closing the Portals could have destroyed more than what the Clan hoped for. But then again, Lars seemed to be alive. Those thoughts were quickly pushed away from Olivia's mind using the best of her ability; she kept focusing on the moment, on walking the next step, finding the next sign that they were on the right path to Emma's house. They took a right by a fragrant hawthorn tree—the only thing that appeared to be alive in that place, for its smell was potent and followed them around—and there it was, red flowers coloring a window.

"That's a good sign," said Trevor between breaths, trying to appear hopeful and upbeat, almost to the point of sounding fake.

They climbed the spiral stairs that led to Emma's house as fast as they could, hurrying up the narrow steps. But it was hard; not only with as steep and tiresome as it was, but Olivia and Trevor were now half-breathing, as though fear had its menacing hands on their throats. Olivia didn't remember how high Emma's house was. On their way to it, they were met by low clouds that wrapped them in a cold, wet blanket. The wooden steps cracked under their shoes, and the night became heavier as they reached the door.

After knocking three times, Olivia's heart pounded in her chest, finding its way to her throat. Beating like a drum.

"Olie, Trev! You're here!" Emma's hoarse voice greeted them, smooth and warm like a lullaby. "Come inside. Please! Come!"

They walked in between hugs, laughs, and one or two discreet tears. Olivia's heart was like a flower once frozen and now blooming again under the warm sun. For a heartbeat, she wondered if everything she loved wasn't there anymore, if she were about to encounter an unfamiliar Tartae, if the people she loved were long gone and only stories remained. If even that. "Oh, Emma … We're so happy you're here," she finally said, breathing out.

Inside Emma's house, little had changed, which was somehow a comfort to Olivia. There was still a lot of papers spread out, open books and notes about flowers and incantations. Emma looked the same, as though no time had passed since they last saw each other, but

she seemed tired and less energetic than Olivia remembered, with deep circles under her eyes, and there was something in them that Olivia had never seen before.

"How long has it been?" Olivia asked as she sat on a wooden chair, removing a pile of papers and books and putting them on the floor.

"Too long, but not long at all," Emma answered. "And I'm not being poetic or anything, I actually don't quite know. Things have been strange and slow, almost paused for a while. You'll see it for yourselves."

"What do you mean?" said Trevor, his eyes studying Emma carefully.

"I mean exactly what I just said, Trev … You left and things went on pretty well for a while. After, I don't know, a couple of months, time slowed down, and we all lost count of it. Sometimes, days seem to last seasons, nights are too dark to count. I don't know if you noticed, but it's all drying up. There has been no rain since you and Olivia left and—apparently—didn't destroy the Portals … On that note, how did you get here?"

"Using this." Olivia showed Emma the crystal. Its little dots now glimmered like stars in the sky. A calming and assuring sight. "How did you know we might need it?"

"I didn't, but I had a tad bit of hope. Sometimes you just have to cling on to that … I'm glad it worked and that you figured it out!" Emma's face brightened as she smiled. "I couldn't let you leave Tartae without a way to get back … If there were still a way. The stone was supposed to show you a Portal, in case they still existed. I suppose you met Aeron, then?"

"Yes. Interesting guy, he is …," said Trevor.

"Interesting satyr, you mean!" said Emma with a laugh.

"How were you able to open a Portal?" asked Olivia, piecing together the information she had.

"I wasn't …," said Emma. "Aeron was. You are here because of his talents and my guessing. Aeron went to your world a long time ago; he was a friend of my grandparents and they talked about him constantly, for he was extremely talented in healing and loved to experiment with Portals. He went to your world to help cure some disease, in one of the travels organized by the Clan, and fell in love with a woman there,

which led to his decision to stay. He came here once more to say farewell and gifted my grandparents this crystal, assuring them that, if one day the Portals were unblocked and there was no more need for Portal Keys, they would be able to find a good Portal and visit. My grandparents passed away, but satyrs live extremely long lives. I figured if something went sideways and you needed a way back to Tartae, this was it."

"So, you weren't even sure if there was going to be a Portal?" asked Trevor.

"Oh, I was sure … Aeron wouldn't disappoint the Portals. And satyrs were known for having a special way with Portals before Ourivio Brut closed them; it's said that they still carry on those abilities. So, I just put two and two together and hoped for the best." Emma seemed proud of herself; her smile was honest, and she sounded lighter somehow.

"Do other magical creatures live in our world?" Trevor inquired.

"Of course! But not many forest beings find it appealing, at least not after people in your world started to forget the Old Ways. They think it's quite boring and soul-crushing most of the time," Emma explained.

"And how come I've never seen a satyr anywhere? Neither here nor there?" Trevor continued.

"Because they wear pants!" Emma laughed.

"I don't know if this is interesting or scary … or both," Trevor said.

They laughed, which seemed to bring Emma fully back to her old self, bubbly and warm, and that made Olivia's soul at ease.

"But I'm sure you're not here for satyr stories … What happened?" asked Emma, her tone suddenly grave, and a gray cloud back to her face.

"Someone attacked me in Leve. Lars sent them, I'm sure. There were phookas and sorcery, and it was a complete mess. The Portals didn't open only for Trevor and me; Lars is at it again. The Portals are unprotected, and we needed to warn the Clan," said Olivia, her voice firm and contained.

Emma took a moment and looked into Olivia's eyes as if collecting clues of what she needed to do next, or the words she needed to say. "I'm going to let Cordella know of your arrival; you need her. As for

right now, let's go to Diana." She sighed, saying nothing else. She got up at once and walked to a room deep in her home, coming back with a leather pouch that she was now closing carefully. "There, Cordella is aware of everything."

"Medallion messengers, I suppose …" recognized Olivia.

"Yes. And I sent word for Orion too. We'll need the centaurs' fast pace to move quickly," said Emma as she got ready to leave. She belted her pouch around her waist and grabbed a long sword that rested next to the door, and with her sage green pants and dark brown boots, she resembled a warrior elf.

Emma led the way to Diana's house, stepping into the night that was smooth and cold, like velvet. There was no one around; Lirianthis still seemed too quiet, almost abandoned, and everything in Tartae was strange. The place appeared to stand still in time. The trees didn't move even an inch, for there was no wind, and their leaves were in the air as if they had forgotten how to fall. It was all frozen in some moment.

"It's sad. I haven't seen the two moons yet. I miss them," said Olivia, shaking away the thoughts creeping into her mind and peering at the sky, searching for the two pearls that used to show them the way during every journey in Tartae.

"You better get used to it." Emma sighed. "We can barely see them these days."

And for some reason, neither Olivia nor Trevor had the nerve to ask her why. They only exchanged a look that meant a thousand words, all of fear and complicity. The sky was still covered by heavy clouds, dark gray and thick, never moving, never changing.

"Emma, what about the others?" Olivia asked, as she could wait no longer. This pressing question had repeated itself constantly in her mind for the past year or so.

"You can ask me what you *really* want," Emma said with a half-smile.

"I guess Cordella is well—we're going to her and she seems to still be fighting for the Portals. But what about the others?" Olivia repeated.

"They are fine, Olivia. *Bran* is fine," she answered. Her eyes rested on Olivia for a moment. "You must prepare, for things are different here. And I feel that they're about to change even more," Emma said, her face stern, and something in her voice made Olivia think that she

had lost some hope, some innocence. "Come, on. We can't waste any time."

Relief eased Olivia's heart, and her mind cleared a bit after receiving the news that all her friends were well. Bran was well. Knowing this sparked a light inside her, something that made her stronger. The fight with Lars and his lackeys wasn't as fatal as she'd feared, a certainty she'd desired for such a long time, but this warm feeling of relief didn't last long; it was drained away quickly as she remembered the urgency in Emma's voice.

They passed by Lirianthis' trees, through the pathways drawn by stone and dirt, and finally arrived at Diana's house. The charming cabin at the edge of the Lirianthis forest was surrounded by ferns, heathers, and bluebells.

"Look what the Portal brought!" said Emma with an exaggerated tone as soon as the tall, white-haired woman opened the door. The woman's hair was like snow, and her small black eyes studied Olivia and Trevor for a second.

"Come on in," she said, her expression empty. "You can sit down. I'll call Diana." She left, walking swiftly through the hallway door, her slender body moved like a ghost through the ill-lighted room.

Olivia and Trevor stood there, quiet like two standing stones. The energy around the place was unsettling, quite different than the first time Olivia was here. There was a lack of warmth, and of words. She could almost hear Trevor complaining about this trip to Lirianthis being quite disappointing. Not at all what he had dreamed about. The question was: *why*?

After they waited a while in the dark living room, Diana appeared, dressed all in blue, and broke the cold silence with her deep voice.

"So, you returned. Welcome back." Diana smiled politely, no warmth there either. "It's wonderful to finally meet you, Trevor. I'm Diana and this is my wife, Drusilla. Cordella is aware that you are back in Tartae, and I'm afraid I can't do much for you at this time. You must go to her now."

"Isn't it best to wait for the sun?" asked Emma. "I've called the centaurs already, but I'm unsure."

"No. Now is the time," Diana answered softly.

"What's going on here? Is there something pressing Olivia and I should know before going?" Trevor's tone was louder than anyone else's; his voice broke the reverence hovering over the group as though waking them from a dream. "You're all acting weird, and I have to say that I'm afraid. What is happening here?"

Olivia chuckled. It wasn't actually funny, but it was like old times in Tartae, and she knew that only Trevor would be able to bring that exact sensation back.

"I think Cordella should tell you all there is to tell; it's not my place. She was the mind behind it. But not everything had gone according to plan, or to what she had planned." There was bitterness in Diana's tone, especially when she said Cordella's name. She took a while in each letter, as though every part of it made her think of something else, something that was painful or wrong.

"I don't think it's fair to put it like this, Diana," Olivia said, something squeezed her insides with anger and fear. She was unable to hold her tongue, out of admiration and friendship, and like nothing in any world could have stopped her. "Cordella wasn't the only mind behind the plans to destroy the Portals. We were all behind it, if I remember it well, and this time I didn't forget anything … We all agreed that closing the Portals was the best solution. That fighting Lars was what we should do." Olivia's tone was calm and restrained; she didn't want to seem disrespectful to Diana in her own house, but when the woman talked about Cordella with that tone, it hit a nerve.

Diana only smiled in response, barely showing her teeth. A very fake, complacent smile that didn't seem to belong to her face. Silence fell over the room again until Emma broke it.

"Can you hear it?" she said and walked to one of the windows. "The wind is blowing."

Diana and Drusilla walked to the window and stood next to Emma openmouthed. The sound of the wind rushing through the leaves was nothing out of the ordinary, but that didn't seem like the reality for the three women amazed by the sight and sound of the breeze.

"The Portals … isn't it?" said Drusilla with surprise in her voice.

"I guess," said Diana. She stared at the night outside, and then at Olivia and Trevor. "It's time. The centaurs are here; you must leave

now. You know what to do, Emma. Follow the shadows and stop for nothing. With the help of the centaurs, you'll be fast as light."

Outside, Orion, the tall and majestic centaur, waited for them, and with him were Firlo and Arden, a young red-haired centaur who didn't talk much.

Olivia and Trevor ran to Orion as fast as rockets. They held the centaur in a warm embrace, and Olivia's heart slowed down for a bit. Seeing Orion was so calming, and his smile was so honest that everything got a bit more colorful. As if the forest had just received a fresh coat of paint.

"Please, my friend. Just get us out of here! This place is weird …" murmured Trevor as he got closer to Orion, who just laughed and patted Trevor's back.

"Not so fast, Trev," said Emma.

"What now? Can't we just leave?" protested Trevor. "I don't think she likes me very much." He glanced at Diana, who was standing on her porch still as a statue.

"It's better that I do a glamour on both of you."

"A what?" asked Trevor.

"A glamour. A disguise … a concealment spell. You must not be seen—as I said before, things have changed a lot around here. Let's keep your arrival between us, at least for now," Emma answered. She moved her hands in circles, one over the other until a pink sphere materialized between her palms; it became translucent, and white clouds appeared inside, moving like a living rose quartz. She then blew the sphere in Trevor's direction, transforming him in a blond man with long braided hair. Trevor was still the same, but somehow, delicately, his features had changed enough for him not to be recognized easily, especially covered by the blanket of night.

And then Emma did the same to Olivia, who became paler, her hair now short, as white as the moon.

"There you go, now we're ready," said Emma, proud of herself.

As the group galloped fast through the woods of Lirianthis, agony filled Olivia's heart and stole her breath at once. She strengthened her hold on Orion's waist; his body was warm and muscular, and he didn't seem bothered by her. She found Emma's eyes gazing at her and

encountered in them the confirmation for her suspicions: The forest was suffering. Something had hurt Tartae deeply.

The centaurs were as majestic as ever, galloping into the night. They seemed to glow a bit, making the group's way brighter than it would have been otherwise. Their braided hair moved to the wind created by their own swift pace, spreading the scent of wildflowers and earth that brought magic to the air around them.

Their way to meet Cordella was through dark paths in the forest where light, if there was any, didn't find a way between the branches and leaves. The road was so unkept that was probably only used by the forest beings, and the centaurs—of course—knew that place well. Olivia had yet to discover what time it was and there was no sun or moon to give her a clue. Her first hours in Tartae went by much differently than what she had imagined.

The air was cold around them; the mist rose, and they were now passing by enormous trees, all a blur of green and brown as the group rushed through them. Orion led, so Olivia couldn't see Trevor or Emma most of the time during the journey. After a while, the road became larger and the plants scarce. The sky was still dark when they took a left turn into a paved way, reaching the edge of a city. They kept the same hurried pace as they passed through houses and shops until they finally found a street of paving stone, with austere-looking townhouses and commercial buildings on each side. After going up a slight hill, they arrived at a Greystone building that bore that aura official buildings usually do. In the front, it read in big black letters: Official Council of Tartae.

"Do you think we were followed?" said Emma. Her eyes studied everything around the group. She dismounted Firlo and thanked him. Olivia and Trevor followed suit.

"No. I didn't see or feel a living soul crossing our path or lurking. Animal or otherwise," said Arden. His voice was soft and calm, much like the sun and the moon, which seemed to have forgotten how to fully rise.

Emma nodded. "Did you smell it?"

"Rain? Yes. It's filling my nose," answered Orion. They exchanged a look, only clear to them. "Come, let's go inside."

Olivia and Trevor followed them up the large stone stairs and inside the building. As soon as they stepped in, the glamour spell Emma had cast over them went away, and they were back to their usual appearance. It happened fast, as though it had been washed over as they crossed the Council's huge iron doors. And when it did, there was a shiver all over Olivia's body, running from her neck to her feet, lasting mere seconds. She looked for an answer in Emma's eyes.

"Not a lot of enchantments allowed inside," Emma said, shrugging as if saying there was nothing she could do about it. "Especially ones for disguise …"

The place seemed to subjugate Olivia with its high ceilings and gray stone walls. It was uninviting and made Olivia question if this was where she should be. Until now, Tartae was giving them such a different experience that Olivia wondered if all the magic she remembered had really existed, or if she had just romanticized an awful experience due to her eagerness to flee the boring life she knew in Leve.

The lobby had big glass windows on every wall and a number of paintings on each side, displayed maybe to make the room warmer. They portrayed places in Tartae and also some important people in its history. Olivia was able to recognize Cordella, who looked younger and held a black aquilegia in her right hand. The flower was between her long fingers, and her hand rested over her chest languidly. There was also a painting of Belenos, who didn't seem to have changed at all, always glowing and young as a mythical god.

"By Ourivio's socks!" Cordella entered the room through a broad hallway to the left. She walked fast, her usual pace when times were alarming like this, and Atlas flew just above her, making the lady also resemble a goddess of some kind. "What are you doing here? How did you—?"

"Cordella!" Olivia and Trevor said in unison. A happy call followed by an even happier embrace that broke Cordella's train of thought.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you too. To see you all." Cordella looked at all of them over her thin nose. "So, I can see the Portals are open again …"

Olivia and Trevor nodded.

"It changes it all …" said Cordella airily, more to herself than to the others around her.

"How are things, Cordella?" asked Orion, his voice low.

"Not very good, I must say. The Council is in session right now, and I don't think you should come in," said Cordella.

"Why?" asked Trevor, his eyes looking for Olivia's.

"We failed, my dear. If I had a problem before they knew the Portals were open, now … I can only imagine what they are going to say. Our plan failed, and the Council can barely stand the sound of my voice—not that I care—but I hardly think you all should endure the same absurdity I'm having to endure now," said Cordella. "Lars is still at large, a danger to all … and Tartae is hurt."

"So we must do something! We must—" said Trevor loudly.

"Shush. Be quiet!" Cordella interrupted him kindly, but with urgency, turning back.

Freya appeared in the hallway, coming from the same direction Cordella had come from minutes before. Her hazel eyes gleamed like big stars under her thick eyebrows, her aqua dress flowing gently to the movement of her legs, almost dancing down the hallway. She smiled, looking deeply into Olivia's eyes.

"The president wishes to see you all. Cordella, you know you shouldn't do this," said Freya, her tone as empty and aethereal as always. Her words were like an ancient song echoing around the room.

The way Freya spoke fell like a spell over Olivia; everything went numb, and she was hypnotized, diving deep into the sound of Freya's voice as though it were the ocean, as though she were being carried by its waves, slowly, rhythmically, out of control. Freya's voice vibrated inside her. Olivia was only awoken by Trevor's touch on her arm, guiding her down the hallway to the room where the Council was meeting. She then noticed that Freya knew very well what she was doing, for she had a half-smile after Olivia was back to her senses. Once more, Freya's intentions were a mystery to Olivia, and she knew as well as ever before that she had to learn how to shield herself from Freya's influence.

"Be prepared for what you're going to find inside that room," said Cordella, her eyes serious.

"Aren't they members of the Clan?" asked Olivia.

"Members of the Clan, our president, and some other elders. Not many, you'll see. But you must keep in mind that people don't usually

remember when they agree with failed missions. They tend to rebel and forget their place in all of it, and the power of the decisions they made. They are eager to find someone else to blame," said Cordella.

"But we tried our best, and we were the ones out there, doing something. They must know that we couldn't foresee that we wouldn't be successful," said Olivia.

"I know, Olivia. But you're speaking with reason, and here there are a lot of emotions involved … The most composed person can feel lost right now."

"Are all other members of the Clan like Freya?" asked Trevor. "Because then I could understand the amount of trouble we are in."

"Oh, well … There are Guardians and there's Freya. She's … well, something else," replied Cordella, rolling her eyes.

Cordella led the whole group inside the room where the Council was holding a session. The place was lightly decorated, with iron chairs everywhere and some open space in the front, like a stage of some sort. There, chairs were organized side by side, but they were more sumptuous than the rest, made out of wood with black upholstery. There were only two small windows, very high on two opposing walls, making the air inside the place stiff, especially since everybody inside the room was so deep in heated discussion.

As they stepped in, everyone went silent and turned their eyes to them. Freya stood next to some empty chairs located deep in the room, her fingers intertwined. A few chairs down, there was a short, bald man, with the biggest and most impressive mustache Olivia had ever seen: it was white, imperial, and maybe an effort to compensate for the lack of hair on his huge head. He waved his hand, ordering silence and calling for attention, and without further ado, he said, looking at Cordella, "How did you dare to bring them here, when you were under strict orders not to do so?" the man asked. His words were full of anger, his lips trembling with hate.

"She didn't," said Olivia, and every pair of eyes in the room turned to her. She had a sudden realization that maybe she wasn't allowed to talk.

"Did you fall again?" asked Freya bluntly.

"Not this time," answered Olivia, and Cordella waved discreetly at her; she should stop talking.

"The Portals are open … Oh, that much is clear!" said the president with disgust. Outrage broke inside the room; elders, Guardians, everyone was yelling and pointing, and some of them stood in protest.

"Even after we prohibited you from opening the Portals again, you just went there and did it anyway! Against all better judgment!" said a tall man, his hair as yellow as the sun and his formal dress very purple, making him look like a mean clown. "As if we didn't have enough trouble around here! We haven't had any rain in ages because of your doing, Cordella. Most of our elders are under a weird spell, completely disconnected from what is happening. You must be stopped!"

"Mr. Evon, please sit down," said the president. He took a deep breath, waited a moment, and continued in a calmer tone. "Cordella, you know very well that your plan didn't work and now we are living in this … in this *state* of things. Your plan was to destroy the Portals and put an end to Lars; however, you failed at both. You're all forbidden to keep chasing the Portals, to keep studying them, to keep doing anything connected to them," he said, waving his hand dismissively.

Again, there was a murmur in the room, and some people revolted. They all spoke so loudly that Olivia couldn't tell who was with them and who was against them. In their anger, they seemed all the same; it didn't matter where they stood. Cordella stood in front of the mustache man, looking somewhat impatient. After a while in that mess, he continued.

"I'll designate other members of the Council to take care of this matter from now on, and I hope that we can bring Tartae back to its glory. I believe that it's time to redirect the Clan's attention to some kind of celebration, which you seemed to do fine. There's no harm in that. And now, Ms. Halin and Mr. Meris, please leave the room. You're excused, and you will be out of trouble if you just leave this matter to us. You have no business meddling with *our business*, and you'll be notified as soon as possible of your way back to your home. Until then, behave and just wait for our message."

Noise exploded in the room again, and Olivia and Trevor left, walking quickly out of that place and not looking back. Soon after, Cordella appeared, followed by Orion, Firlo, Arden, and Emma.

"Did they say something else, Cordella? Who is going to take care of the Portals now?" asked Olivia.

"It doesn't matter what they said; they couldn't tell the difference between a Portal and a boot, if they had to. This is the Clan's job, it always was," said Cordella. "But then again, Olivia, would it really make a difference?"

Olivia stared back at Cordella, reading between her words. "No, it wouldn't."

"I figured." Cordella smiled.

"What was that about elders being under a spell?" asked Trevor, stretching his neck a little, trying to see inside the meeting room from where he stood in the large hallway.

"Not every elder understands what's happening. Something strange fell over Tartae and its inhabitants when the Portals were destroyed, and not everyone is awake," answered Cordella slowly.

Olivia and Trevor looked at her fearfully.

"Oh, if it isn't the troublemakers!" a familiar voice broke the conversation. Alavro walked to them with his arms open and hugged them, like too much time had passed. He wore a black suit and seemed thinner, but his face was happy as always and his smile very inviting.

"We missed you, Alavro!" said Trevor happily.

"We missed you too, my boy! And you, Olivia. Later today, you must tell me how you ended up here again. I bet you never thought you'd be back, and I bet you never could have imagined such an unhinged reception, and I'm the sorriest for that," Alavro continued, shaking his head in disapproval.

"I don't think you need to apologize, Alavro," said a short woman, dressed in a deep red gown. The hair on her head so white that it could easily be made of clouds. "It's not you who went bananas!" She laughed.

"Olivia, Trevor, this is Adaelta Maelura, one of the Guardians," said Alavro, wrapping his arm around her weak shoulders in a friendly gesture.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you two. I only wish this had happened under better circumstances," said Adaelta. Her voice sounded ancient, and the wrinkles in her face resembled a tree that had seen a thousand winters.

Olivia and Trevor shook her hand and smiled in relief. At least they still had others who believed in them.

"I guess there will be no better time for you to meet all the Guardians, at least the ones that are still around," said Cordella, walking up to other elders and bringing them to Olivia and Trevor. "Trevor, Olivia, meet Genevieve Brandin, Mocer Alba, Fara Slasor, and Cerceluna Kassis."

"Oh, at least something good came out of today. We've been in that room for more hours than I can count, and it was only sadness and stupidity, I might say," said Mocer Alba, a tall, interesting man, with small black eyes so profound that they seemed to have seen too many ages. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes, it is," added Genevieve Brandin, with what seemed like a fake smile jumping out of her thin lips. "But I'm afraid there's not much for you to do around here. I hope we can trust in you, Cordella, and Alavro, to keep things under control. We don't want more problems," She shot a judgmental look at Olivia and Trevor, and quickly, Olivia knew where the woman stood.

Mocer seemed displeased with her addition and excused himself quickly, as to avoid any trouble or hearing anything else he wouldn't like. He pretended some other elder had called him and left the group as quickly as a sneeze. Genevieve followed his lead, excusing herself and finding solace with a group of elders that seemed to agree with her position, since they kept looking askance at Olivia and Trevor.

"Oh, my dears … Most unfortunate time to meet, I'm afraid. But I'm pleased anyway. I've heard of your accomplishments and I admire them, but we all must recognize when it's time to retire … Yes, we must," said Fara Slasor, a short woman who seemed quite tired of it all. She grabbed Olivia's hand with her tiny and fragile one and tapped gently before leaving the group to their thoughts. The other Guardian, Cerceluna Kassis, didn't say anything, only smiled and followed Fara, moving away from the "troublemakers."

Quickly, they all mingled and mixed. To Olivia, they seemed the same at a distance: all confused and blinded by fear of the unknown. There was no difference, from what she could tell, between elders and Guardians, friends and foes. There was this sea of characters, their group of troublemakers, and Freya, who always stood out somehow.

"I told you they were old …" mocked Alavro, waking Olivia from her wonderings.

"I understand now why you didn't call them for the fights," added Trevor, still studying the other members of the Clan while they spread out through the hallway, joining different groups.

"So, the Clan is broken," acknowledged Olivia. Sadness sank her heart and made her limbs weak, almost numb.

Everyone in their group looked back at her, agreeing in silence. After a moment, Cordella led them to the main room of the building, and when they were in the center of all the paintings, she said calmly, "Atlas, please."

The eagle, who was perched on Orion's shoulder, flew high, almost touching the ceiling, and as she opened her colossal wings, a protection rose, and a dark blue circle enveloped them. Olivia and Trevor looked at it, intrigued. All the noise around them, all the voices inside the room and coming from the hallway were canceled, and Olivia figured no one could hear them either.

"What should we do now?" asked Olivia.

"Now we go after Lars," said Cordella. Her direct tone made Olivia and Trevor widen their eyes and skip their breath a beat.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT HIDES IN THE SHADOWS

The world around them stopped, and for a moment, Olivia thought that it was still a result of Atlas' spell until she noticed they weren't inside the magical dome anymore. Everyone remained silent, but in their eyes, there was the confirmation that they were all on the same page.

"You don't think I didn't see that, Cordella," challenged the president of the Council, approaching the group fast. His eyes were on fire, and all the ruffles in his black clothes made a funny sound as he marched quickly in their direction.

"I haven't done nothing forbidden, Thoman," said Cordella calmly. "If you excuse us …" She made a motion to leave, but he went on, stopping her.

"Remember what I said: You are forbidden to chase the Portals, destroy them, or whatever is your idea right now. Forbidden!" he barked, his index finger pointing madly at them, waving uncontrollably in the air.

"I see, Thoman … But, for all that I know, you don't have such authority. Controlling the Portals was never part of the President of the Council of Tartae's responsibilities," declared Cordella, and before the man exploded into a lecture, she continued, "However, you don't need to mind us. We will leave quietly and be out of your sight before you can say Portal Keys. Good day."

The man seemed eager for a fight, and his face fell when he noticed that Cordella's desire wasn't the same. He stood there shakily, mumbling words that no one could hear.

"Thoman Maugre, everyone … Not our best president, I must say," said Alavro with a sigh as they left the building.

Outside, there was no sun, or moon, or stars, even though hours had passed, but the fresh air brought some solace to Olivia. Leaving the Council made things look instantly better, like a rush of positive energy, a waterfall of cold water that had the power to awaken one's body.

They left quickly; Cordella didn't want anyone else to reach her or give them any more time to say their minds. She found her horse and led the group to her house, where they were to discuss the current situation and decide on a plan. The centaurs kept a slower pace, following Cordella and Alavro through the path of stones and charming houses of Victro, and Atlas hovered over them the whole time, sometimes flying a bit higher, probably to scout the place for danger.

Wind gusts made the trees nearby dance from side to side, some of them almost breaking with the violent motion. When they arrived at Cordella's cozy terracotta home, the sky was filled with lightning, and all they could hear was thunder. Everybody stopped to contemplate it, as the lights webbed throughout the whole grayish sky, which was still covered by heavy clouds.

"What's happening?" asked Trevor, his eyes widening, studying the menacing vision.

"Honestly, Trevor, I don't know," answered Cordella. "Come on, let's go inside."

They walked into Cordella's house slowly, still peering at the spectacle happening above them as they entered the small porch. The garden looked wilder than last time, its plants spreading throughout the whole area, but there were no flowers anywhere. Somehow it looked sad.

As soon as Olivia stepped into the living room, it was as though she had crossed another portal: Comfort filled her heart, and the smell of allandrio reminded her of everything good about the last time she was there. It reminded her of Tartae. For some reason, she was sure that this was something that she had to hold on to no matter what; she could never forget this feeling, her friends, the forests.

Cordella went about lighting the place, then the fire, and finally closed the front window curtains. Her house was the same: warm, full of mementos of her life, but now with piles of books resting over every table. Emma quickly sat down by the fireplace and was followed by Atlas, who rested over the top of the couch's back. Trevor stayed close to the window, peering outside from time to time. The centaurs stood by the stairwell, and Alavro sat down on the big yellow armchair. Olivia stood like a statue for a while, rooted to the floor and just taking everything in until thunder exploded outside so loud and strong that it made the house tremble.

"Is this normal, Cordella? I've never seen anything like it," said Trevor, his eyes fixed on the piece of sky he was able to see through the curtain crack.

"Neither did I, Trevor," she answered, walking in his direction and curving her eyebrows. "I believe this is happening because of you."

Trevor's eyes widened. "What?"

"Because of your use of the Portals, I mean. The weather had been strange since a short while after our failed attempt to destroy the Portals, but it was still, like it had forgotten how to pass. Now, what we are seeing is movement. Thunder, lightning, wind, rain … all in motion. Tartae needs the Portals," said Cordella. "But yes, I also think that you and Olivia have something to do with it."

"Cordella …" said Alavro, exchanging a meaningful look with her. He leaned forward, resting his elbows over his knees and rubbing one hand against the other, and then as though he had to explain himself, he continued. "Since the changes in Tartae started to be impossible to ignore, Cordella has been saying to me that we should bring you back to Tartae. But I didn't agree … I thought that you two were safe in your world. It wasn't our place to bring you to this mess again, especially considering that we failed last time."

"We were not safe … Olivia was attacked at the movie theater. There were phookas all around, and who knows what they could have done to others if there was anyone else close by?" protested Trevor.

"That's how you came here?" asked Orion.

"That's *why* we came," answered Olivia. "I didn't see how the phookas and that man got there, they just appeared, and we fought.

After that, we managed to find another Portal, one inside an art gallery in Leve, thanks to Emma and her intuition."

"Aeron …" murmured Cordella, and Olivia nodded.

"We knew we had to come back and help, or at least let you know that the Portals still existed and were opened again … Probably by Lars," added Olivia. "What happened here after we left?" she inquired, finding a place on the couch next to Emma and gazing at everyone in the room.

Alavro took a deep breath and, staring into the fire, he broke into it: "At first, everything seemed better. Victro was full of life again, people were not afraid anymore, and some were even commemorating our accomplishments. There was no fear. The Clan took some time to organize itself again, but there were no more Keys or Portals to protect … We couldn't go on just protecting what didn't exist. Some Guardians wanted to end it all; they were tired, and they felt that there was no point. Cordella didn't feel the same way, and neither did I. In this we agreed. We knew in our hearts that Tartae still needed protection. Lars was still at large and a real danger to all. Who knew what he would do next? How long it would take for him to find a new plan? Cordella could barely sleep. I was very stressed myself."

"What about Freya?" asked Olivia.

"She didn't believe it was the end, and neither did Belenos. They were waiting for something to come, but they mostly kept to themselves during this time. I am pretty sure that they knew that most of the people weren't ready to hear what they felt in their hearts," added Cordella, a hint of worry in her expression. "Things were changing … Freya was aware of that, but right now, even though we believe in much the same things, I don't think she's willing to fight with us anymore."

"We noticed the shift first in the forests," said Orion. His low voice echoed in Olivia's heart. "Tartae fell asleep so slowly that most of the common people didn't even notice it when it started. The birds stopped singing, and later disappeared completely. Then, there was no more rain. And so it began."

Olivia shivered at the ominous sound of Orion's last words, as though he were narrating the end of times. Her heart fell; once more she was broken by the realization that she had abandoned someone of her own kin.

"In Lirianthis, the scenario is somewhat better than in Victro and other cities," said Emma. "Some people actually felt the complaints of the forests and other things changing. They are awake and aware. But even some of those believe that you're to blame. In Lirianthis you'll still find allies, but outside, the scenery is bad … That's why I've cast a glamour over you."

"None of the Guardians and forest beings caught this slowness," said Cordella. "We believe that those who are more connected to Tartae were unscathed, but you heard what Evon said about the elders who are half-asleep … This is happening everywhere."

"They keep on living life but are now much like the time that has forgotten how to pass. They don't see what's happening around them, they don't see danger, they don't protect themselves," continued Alavro.

"And all of this is happening because we failed. The Portals still exist, and Lars is still a threat. All that effort was for nothing," said Trevor, his eyes lost.

"Yes, we failed. We must admit that," said Cordella with a sigh. "This is the first we've heard about Portals, we thought we had succeeded with that at least for a while. But at some point, Belenos, Freya, and I were all awakened by this tremor, and the sudden realization that Lars had started again. He wasn't opening Portals yet, but he was definitely trying. I tried to warn the Council, but they didn't want to hear and—of course—they didn't want to pursue Lars."

"They keep doing meeting after meeting about the state of things but never how to correct it," added Alavro. "That's what we were doing in our last session …"

"I wonder if it's possible to destroy the Portals … Ourivio tried, we tried … Has anyone talked to Belenos?" asked Olivia. "Belenos was never convinced that destroying the Portals once for all was the best solution, and maybe he was right."

"I don't know what to believe myself, Olivia," said Cordella. "All I know is that when we tried to destroy the Portals, we broke something important. We had good intentions in our hearts, but that's what we did. So, in some ways, I can understand people's frustration."

"There's frustration among the centaurs too. And having seen what I saw in the forests and felt in the air, I get Cordella's point," said Firlo,

speaking for the first time. His voice grave as Orion's, but younger. "Some of the centaurs believed that what the Guardians did wasn't right, and they rebelled, disappearing into the woods."

Cordella looked beaten. She kept pressing her lips together, pondering what everyone was saying. Olivia didn't know what to think. The air inside Cordella's living room was heavy, and the rain started to fall outside.

"Rain!" exclaimed Orion, walking to the window and forgetting any precautions. He opened the curtains and stared outside like some happy kid.

Everyone looked out through the window, observing the small drops falling from the sky. The rain seemed still shy, afraid of coming down with the strength it really had.

"What should we do now?" asked Trevor.

"I advise that we go after Lars," answered Cordella resolutely. "I acted with caution every other time and it didn't work. We have too much to discover about the Portals; we have too much to study. We cannot delay dealing with Lars and his lackeys for that long, hoping that we will find an answer fast enough."

"But what about the Portals? There are no Keys … There's no control. Aren't you worried that they might open at will? Or worse?" inquired Emma, anxiety wrinkling her forehead.

"Of course, I'm worried, but one thing at a time. And right now, I believe it's best to go after Lars. Can I count on you?" said Cordella.

Silence filled the room for a while, and only the fire sang its crackling song while the wind still roared outside. A million thoughts traveled through Olivia's mind: every Portal she had seen and remembered to or out of Tartae, the one in the forest, that whole night of fighting there, the fight with Baltazar, the incredible strength of Lars.

After what seemed too long, Atlas flew around the room and landed in front of Cordella, who bowed her head in agreement. Everyone else followed her lead.

Too many hours seemed to have passed while they were in Cordella's living room. Olivia could now understand what Emma had meant when she said they had no idea how much time had passed since she and Trevor had left. It was hard to explain or make sense of it; it was just this sensation of ages dripping through her fingers. But then

again, she wondered if time was always something relative, or if it didn't exist at all. It was a concept created by someone to help society, and maybe there wasn't a point in finding much sense in it.

Later, Orion announced that they had to leave. They would discuss the matter with other allies and meet Cordella and the group at the Forest of Lis using medallion messengers, to keep track of the time.

The group was also to meet Belenos, Alegra, Bran, and Kirk at their hiding spot, which they called Treestone. It seemed to be a place hidden in the Forest of Lis, a shack made out of trees and stones, extensively protected by a number of spells that made the place almost a fortress.

Now, only Olivia, Trevor, Atlas, Alavro, Emma, and Cordella remained, all looking very tired—even the eagle. Alavro and Cordella went to the kitchen for about half an hour and came back with some sandwiches for everybody (a special one made with fish to Atlas); it was only then that Olivia realized how hungry she was and how loudly her stomach was growling.

As always, the food was amazing: homemade sourdough bread filled with herbs and something that tasted like cheese but was lighter and fresher.

They ate while the thunderstorm raged outside. Olivia had no will to talk or ask anything, and she wasn't sure if it were because she was starving or if there was just too much information inside her head already. But after a couple of bites, Emma spoke with a serious tone.

"What's a movie theater?" she asked, frowning.

And Olivia and Trevor broke into laughter. After all they had heard today—a council that was out for them, phookas, traveling through an improvised Portal—this seemed an easy enough question to answer. Emma kept waiting, not quite understanding why this was so funny.

"It's a place you go to watch movies … Uh, movies are stories that you can see on a very big screen. People act the story and you go watch," Trevor explained, almost talking with his hands, trying to draw the image. Everyone else in the room seemed confused, and Olivia almost choked on her sandwich.

"I thought it was something dangerous … Olivia was attacked there, I mean," added Emma, shrugging.

"I'm just glad to see that you were not looking for trouble in Leve," said Cordella, resting her back on her couch.

"I'd like to see a movie theater …" Emma added.

"Maybe one day you will," said Olivia. "It's fun, you'd like it."

Emma had a dreamy expression now, probably trying to visualize how a movie or a movie theater should be. They were all sitting around the coffee table in Cordella's living room: Cordella and Emma on the couch, Alavro on the yellow armchair that he seemed very fond of, Atlas perched over a creepy statue of a faun holding a leaf, and Olivia and Trevor sitting on the floor. For the moment, all seemed normal enough, and Olivia almost forgot to worry. She and Trevor went on and on about their favorite movies, the ones with powerful heroes who saved the world and still had time for romance. The classics, the scary ones. But this didn't last. As soon as they were all finished eating, Cordella got up and announced where everyone would be sleeping, that they would have to be up soon, and that they couldn't be late. And time now was unpredictable, and it was very possible to get lost in it.

To Olivia and Trevor's surprise, their bedroom was still exactly how they left. The navy quilt full of stars, the chests, the books were even tidier.

"She was waiting for us," whispered Olivia, meeting Trevor's eyes.

They walked inside slowly, recognizing the smells and revisiting the first steps of their last—failed—mission. The fear they had of seeing traces of themselves in a place they didn't remember, the constant dance with the unknown, the many discoveries and the strength they never knew they had.

"Aren't you exhausted?" asked Emma, entering the room at once. She'd be sharing it with Olivia and Trevor and was already ready to sleep, wearing one of Cordella's white gowns. "I'm so tired, I think I'm going to faint …" She threw herself on one of the beds, quickly passing out.

"That was fast," said Trevor. "We should just let her sleep here. We can rock paper scissors to see who can get the bed."

"Fair enough," agreed Olivia, already stretching her hand. She won.

Trevor fixed himself an improvised bed on the floor, and Olivia helped with some magic, making the once thin sheet become a very

comfortable mattress. She was proud of herself. Magic came easier this time since she hadn't forgotten anything. That spark was inside her, and just needed a little encouragement.

Cordella's home went silent. Nearby, there was only the soothing sound of Emma and Trevor's breaths, in and out slowly, deep into sleep. Outside, the rain still kissed the windows and the earth slowly, and the thunder rumbled far away. This lullaby put Olivia to sleep without much thought. She rested quickly, just a little bit afraid of waking up in her other home, even farther away than the thunder.

Cordella woke them by opening the door, and the floor cracked enough to bother their sleep, making her job a little easier.

"But it's still dark outside," Trevor complained.

"Yes, it's going to be one of those days," said Cordella, leaving the room.

"What does she mean?" asked Trevor.

"Sometimes the sun takes a while to wake now. Sometimes he doesn't come out at all …" completed Emma; she looked sad as she opened the window and peered outside. The rain was still at it, and the weather overall seemed to be pleading for them to stay in bed.

Trevor didn't argue or ask any more questions; mornings were not his time of day, even if they were disguised as night. They all got ready without making too much sound and went downstairs for breakfast.

Just as last time, they found a bountiful meal waiting for them: apple juice, elderberry muffins, strawberry jam, and many other delicious treats. They all ate, talking lightly about how it had rained all night long, and how rare this had become, but always trying to avoid the most important subjects: the Portals, the dangers, the allies they needed. Atlas ate and quickly became restless, showing them that it was time to go. They all helped cleaning the kitchen and preparing the food they didn't eat for the travel, and as they stepped into the living room, Cordella touched Olivia's shoulder and said, "You need to get your weapons."

"Were you able to …" Olivia started.

Cordella nodded. "They are in the same place as last time."

Olivia and Trevor ran upstairs, and there they were, lying beautifully inside the wooden chests: Olivia's sword and Trevor's bow and arrows.

"Now I'm prepared!" chuckled Trevor, running his hands over the bow.

"I wonder how they found my sword …" Olivia said, guilt turning her stomach as she remembered how she had lost it.

"I don't think it matters now, Olie. Let's go, they are calling us."

They left Cordella's home quickly, looking like seasoned warriors bearing their weapons confidently and out for a mission. To Olivia, it sounded, sometimes, like she was reading a story about herself, this warrior lost in a forbidden land. And it was scary and exciting at the same time.

Cordella and Alavro guided them to some horses just outside her house. Sadly, there was no sign of Myrrh or Lito, but according to Cordella, they would be seeing them soon enough. They mounted their horses and rode into the dark and mysterious morning. The sky was still full of clouds, with no sign of the two moons Olivia missed so dearly and no sign of the sun either.

As usual, the company found a comfortable pace for every member and a formation, which they followed most of the time. Since now Olivia and Trevor remembered everything, it was easier to ride and feel at home, or something close to that. Cordella rode in the front, guiding the way for the rest, with Atlas flying right above her head. Olivia and Trevor were in the middle and Emma and Alavro in the back.

They rode into the Forest of Victro, which began as soon as the houses stopped, where they would gallop to the clear creek in the Forest of Lis. There, they would find Treestone, the meeting point. Something insisted on jumping inside Olivia's stomach every time she thought about meeting the others. Bran's face would pop into her mind, and she was suddenly very unsure of what to expect. So many things happening, and this simple one disturbed her mind …

The rain was still the same, falling faintly. From time to time, Cordella would turn her face to it, to feel the drops on her skin, breathing in deeply the smell of rain and damp earth. That simple sight made Olivia think about things people took for granted. And that resounded in her head for a while.

Their pace was fast, but nothing that Olivia and Trevor couldn't follow. They went through the trails until some pink clouds appeared

in the sky, announcing the sun, and then the wind howled again, blowing strongly as it did after they had arrived. It seemed to follow them, swirling only where they were. Cordella slowed her pace, and Atlas flew very low now.

"Beware!" Cordella whispered. She galloped so slowly that she almost stopped.

"What is it, Cordella?" Alavro asked, getting closer to her.

"Something in the woods," she answered.

And slowly, coming out of the places hidden by the shadows of the forest, shapes formed between trees, revealing a number of centaurs, ogres, men, women, and phookas bearing huge grins. They were surrounded.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOREST BATTLE

Cordella looked from side to side, studying the situation. Her expression remained unchanged, although Olivia caught the despair in her eyes, the many calculations of the different outcomes the situation could have. Every time Olivia looked around, she counted one more person or creature staring at them, drooling for a fight. They all bore weapons of different kinds and sizes: axes, swords, all already in their hands, almost alive with will and purpose. She brought her hand to her scabbard, and Trevor and Emma also reached for their weapons, but Cordella signaled for them to stop. Her right hand paused in the air ceremoniously, intentionally visible to the attackers; she hoped to come out of this without a fight.

Olivia's heart beat scandalously inside her chest, traveling up and down her throat. There were too many of them, and those were only the ones she could count. On a day like this, with a weak sun shining over them, there could be hundreds hiding deep inside the forest, and this would be a massacre. Olivia's heart was emancipating from her, almost creating a life of its own and jumping out of her chest, but her hands were still, and her thoughts gave way to patience.

Minutes stretched even more than what was now normal in Tartae; uncertainty and fear hovered over them, and soon, Cordella's hope crumbled down: coming out of the shadows, on a beautiful white horse, Edmund Lars appeared.

He came out of the woods smiling, his red hair longer than the last time Olivia and Trevor had fought him; it fell down in waves, heavy over his skinny shoulders, and it was darker too, maybe for the lack of light to reflect on it. He showed all his teeth when smiling, proud of

himself and confident of the outcome of this encounter. He was dressed in fancy clothes but prepared for a battle, for he wore a very tight dark purple shirt and pants that matched. His posture, his figure, his confidence, everything about him made him look regal, not so ordinary as the last time Olivia had laid eyes on him.

As he got closer to Cordella and the group, Trevor's horse trotted a little, and the sound broke the reverent atmosphere. Olivia's heart skipped a beat, and Emma looked at Trevor with concern, but Cordella, Alavro, and Atlas didn't look away from Lars.

"You were not being very discreet," he said with a mocking tone, almost singing and pointing to the sky with a dramatic movement. His voice resounded in Olivia's ears, and anger grew inside her. "There's no element of surprise when wind, thunder, and rain follow you around."

No one responded. Olivia was under the impression that his troop was already moving, closing in on them, hardly waiting for Lars' signal.

"Cordella, Alavro, hear the voice of reason. You have no way out and no way to win; surrender and give me what I want. We'll leave without spilling a single drop of blood." He said these last words slowly, a *single drop of blood.* Making it so visual that it hurt.

Cordella's face trembled with anger, and she spoke. "*You* should hear reason, Edmund, and you should remember fairness. I suggest we do this the right way." Cordella's voice was calmer than she herself appeared; it was firm and intense.

"Fairness?" mocked Lars. "The Clan can never preach about fairness. What is fair about stealing the right to power from people?"

His troops cheered in agreement.

"Where is fairness when the strongest and brightest have to subdue to the old and weak?"

Weapons banged on each other—it was clear that they were many.

"You see?" Lars pointed to his troops. "Your time has come to an end. They want change, and the change is *me*."

The crowd now clanged their weapons even louder, and Lars grinned with satisfaction. His power had grown; he took advantage of the confusion that was instilled in the Clan and the Council of Tartae.

He gave voice and hope to those who felt unheard or unworthy, and this had become his greatest strength.

Cordella and Alavro were dismayed. Their faces, for the first time, seemed weak and even far away from that imminent fight. Cordella took a deep breath, put her hand on her sword, and turned from Lars' followers to him.

"And so it is," said Lars. "You choose blood." He gave a derisive smile and reached for his staff, raising it high over his head.

Cordella drew her black sword and looked back at the rest of the group. "Fight for your lives!" she yelled, her brown eyes as wide as they could be, gleaming with focus and courage.

Olivia wielded her sword and looked for Trevor, finding in his eyes almost a goodbye. Olivia shook her head, silently saying that he shouldn't give up; he had to believe even if it looked like they were walking into a lost battle. And, imbued with that notion, she dove into battle.

Phookas came from every side and, by now, Olivia knew better how to deal with them. Those creatures were disturbing but not that smart, and their main goal was always to puzzle their victims enough to make them easier prey to something else.

"Don't be distracted by the phookas!" she yelled, not sure if anyone could hear her.

The phookas resembled shadows dancing around like in a ghost movie of some sort; they jumped on her horse and grabbed her legs, trying to pull her down, and it took Olivia a while to remember how afraid they were of fire and that she didn't have to trust only in her sword—she had another weapon. She closed her eyes to center herself, and something stirred inside her, something luminous and clear, so real that she could taste it in her mouth … magic.

Olivia opened her eyes and grasped the grip of her sword with both hands, setting it completely on fire. She then touched the ground with the tip and made the flames stretch and run through the forest floor like snakes, chasing away the phookas, which ran and climbed the trees. But it wasn't enough; the rest of Lars' troops kept coming, and they were many, and they came from everywhere. This simple sight was enough to make everything much harder. Olivia kept doing what she knew with the best of her abilities. She attacked trolls with her sword,

green blood oozing everywhere; she dismounted her horse and stepped heavily on the ground, making it shake where Lars' lackeys stood so they would lose balance and fall. But all around her was a complete mess. The five of them fought fiercely but were still drowning in a sea of enemies, and everywhere she looked, she was met by a fearful sight.

Cordella fought like she had been blessed by the goddess of war. She used both her black iron sword, which was long and majestic, and her powers as a witch, which were even more interesting to watch. She fought human warriors, trolls, and centaurs, but they kept coming at her like violent waves, barely giving her time to breathe.

Alavro was also deep into the fight, using his silver sword and showing a talent for war that Olivia had no idea he had, but nothing appeared to be enough, and in Alavro's eyes, Olivia saw their last moments approaching. Trevor and Emma fought next to each other, and Trevor's arrows flew all around but were not as precise as they used to be. Emma kept the enemies at a distance, using a lot of magic and her sword to fight, and above them, Atlas, the eagle Guardian, attacked with spells while flying over the others, but even she seemed tired.

That was merely a glimpse of what surrounded Olivia, and the moments kept happening, one strike after the other until the unavoidable would finally meet them. Her friends were all still alive, but the end of that battle was settled if it kept going this way; she herself was already hurt in the arm after a centaur attacked her from the side, and there was blood all over her friends' bodies.

Olivia ran to Cordella, opening her way through other warriors with fireballs and her sword.

"Cordella, where is Lars? We need to take him! It's our only hope!" she said, out of breath. Cordella looked twice at Olivia as if to make sure she was not hallucinating.

"Come with me," answered Cordella, and, turning to Emma, she yelled, "Emma, you know what to do!"

Emma fought so swiftly and was surrounded by so many figures that she had become just a blur to Olivia. Cordella pulled Olivia by the arm, leading her out of the path where the battle was happening, and everything went silent. Olivia looked back, and there was a big cloud of dirt covering it all. People and creatures coughing nonstop.

"A good ol' distraction," Cordella said, running with Olivia into the woods and reaching the trees.

The area, where some of Lars' troops had hidden before, was now empty, but there was still a heavy energy lingering. The forest floor was muddy, marked by footprints of many different species. Inside the woods, the sounds of the battle were lower, giving the false impression of safety.

Cordella walked slowly. After all, who knew who would be in there, behind or up in a tree, waiting for them? But the only one they found was Lars, still on his horse and looking at the direction of the battle, as if he could see it clearly from here, even on this somber gray morning, or was it afternoon already?

He seemed surprised when he finally noticed Olivia and Cordella, although he tried to mask it with a grin. Olivia's stomach turned, not because of fear or anger, but out of disgust. Lars made her sick. So many things were wrong, and he was preaching them all around Tartae, preying on others.

"You sicken me." The words jumped out of her mouth. Lars looked at her with the same disgust she was showing, as if she were a rat invading his party.

"Oh, come on! I have no patience for this. Just get out of my sight!" said Lars, contorting his mouth while he waved his hand, and with a blast of wind, he threw Olivia far away.

Olivia fell on her back in the mud, splashing dirt everywhere. Her stomach hurt as though she had been punched right in the middle of it, and her head was dizzy from the fall. She was now a few feet away from Lars and Cordella, who were now fighting barbarously; he was still on his horse, and Cordella stood on the forest floor but seemed taller than ever before. They both used magic, and being both so talented, their spells always met in the middle. Cordella was able to protect herself every time, creating shields or ricocheting Lars' attempts to hurt her, and he did the same.

Olivia ran to them, already preparing a fireball to throw at him. She figured he would be distracted by Cordella's efforts, and it would be easy, but she wasn't as good or fast as Cordella. He not only protected himself, but he was also able to make Olivia get stuck to the ground,

mud covering her feet and pulling her down like quicksand. Tentacles made of mud embraced her feet and restrained her.

"OLIVIA! DO SOMETHING!" yelled Cordella, looking at Olivia with a desperate expression. Her arms were raised high, and blue light ran through her fingers, creating an ethereal chain that fell all over Lars. He struggled with it for a while, but before Cordella was able to cast another—more dangerous—spell, he freed himself and attacked her again.

Olivia opened her mouth and screamed at the tentacles, annoyed, trapped, desperate. The slimy things stretched themselves and succumbed to little pieces, and then it dawned on her: emotion! She walked out of the mud and in Lars' direction, waving her arms like a maestro, making the tall branches from the trees move and reach for Lars. He tried to avoid them and threw her another blast of wind, which Olivia was able to dissipate only by closing her eyes.

Swiftly, the branches wrapped themselves around Lars' arms and pulled him out of his horse. He landed awkwardly on the ground, fighting the trees. Olivia and Cordella were ready to strike him again when he turned the trees into ashes. He stood up quickly, and in his face, anger took over, making his gray eyes red. He removed a whole tree from the ground with his powers; red and green tentacles of light came out of his hands, and he threw it in Cordella's direction. The motion made her slide backward. Olivia threw a fireball at him. It was robust, the size of a watermelon, but Lars stopped it in the air, halfway to him. He then made it bigger and threw it in Cordella's direction, grinning.

Cordella, who was walking back to the fight, was caught off guard and hit in the chest, flying backward and falling on the ground unconscious. Olivia quickly manipulated the mud, making it cover Cordella to avoid the fire taking over her body. When she turned to Lars again, he was one step away from her, his hand reaching for her neck.

Lars was extremely strong. Maybe it was his magic or just his anger, but he was able to bring Olivia over the ground with just one hand on her neck. She struggled, shaking her body and trying to free herself, but on his face, she found such a strong will and hatred that she knew it would be hard to find a way out of this.

Olivia brought her hands to his face and calmed her mind; a gush of metallic light came out of her hands, like a lightning strike, and Lars lost his grip of her. His face, at first, seemed burned, but quickly it disappeared, and fear took over Olivia once again. He was so powerful, what else could she do?

He sent another blast of wind at her, and this time, he kept pushing her back and advancing with it, until they landed on the path where the battle began. Olivia flew back without control, and when she was finally in the middle of the battleground, she fell on the floor, her stomach hurting as it never had before. All her muscles were sore, and she had a growing urge to puke.

She stood, staggering, with one hand on her stomach and the other one on her mouth; there was blood all over her chin, dripping from her lips. She took a deep breath and prepared to fight again. Everyone else stopped. There was no sound of swords banging against each other; they all paused to witness their fight. Olivia didn't look at them; there wasn't much that could help her now, and no one else should get involved. She got ready to attack again, arms prepared for casting a spell. Lars smiled mockingly, and then it started once more. Olivia fired at Lars the same electric light she had manipulated before, while he gathered all his troop's weapons in the air, to then throw at her all at once. Her lightning-like spell created a sort of web in front of her, similar to what the sky was like the day before. It connected all the weapons like a magnet, and they fell at once on the ground. But before she could take a breath and think about her next move, Lars' face filled with horror, and she had no time. He kneeled on the ground and punched the surface, a punch so strong that the whole forest floor shook, and the trees too; it was as though the strength in his arm had left his body in the form of air and mud, and it traveled underneath the earth through a tunnel until it reached Olivia. The world stopped while she waited, but it was also too fast, and there was nothing she could do. The power of his spell came from under her feet, strong and inescapable, and in a matter of seconds, she was flying in the sky to then free-fall into the earth, diving deep into it until it all became nothing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Soligo grew up avidly reading fairy tales and watching The NeverEnding Story movies. Creating worlds and stories was an important part of her childhood that led to an interest in fantasy literature and myth, which she has continued studying until today. Marcia was born in Brazil and majored in communications and journalism. She currently lives in California with her husband and their dog.

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