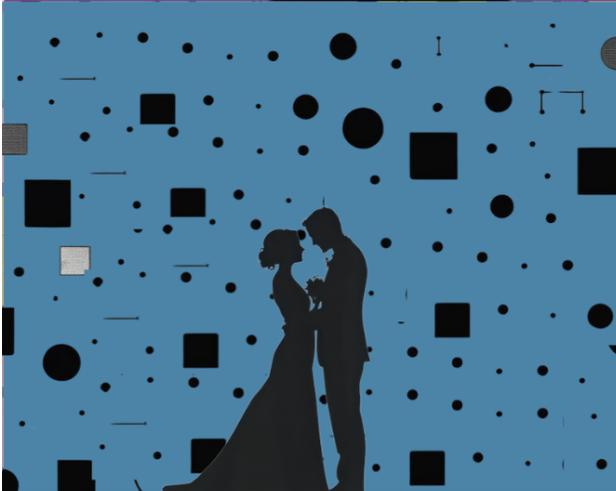


In Every Dimension

By Dana Littlejohn



In Every Dimension

Five worlds.

Five versions of reality.

One love that keeps breaking the rules to find each other.

A dimensional love story across space, time, and everything in between. From a single line to fractured realities, two souls find each other again and again against the odds to be together guided by that special feeling that can only be described as destined love.

In Every Dimension

Dana Littlejohn

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

IN EVERY DIMENSION

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Written by Dana Littlejohn.

1D

Love across the lines

*“Love is louder when there’s silence all
around.”*

In a one-dimensional world only, lines exist. No height, no depth, only length. An endless plane where motion could only go forward or back, left or right. Lines passed endlessly by one another in continuous motion. Encounters were rare, often fleeting, and always silent. However, things changed when Line A met Line B.

Line A goes forward. That is the rule. There is no up, no down, no around. There is only forward or backwards. To exist is to move, and to move is to drift forever in one direction. Line A was always aware of other lines moving to and fro, in their prospective directions. Nothing you could see or hear, just an awareness of their being, but today something was different. A vibrating energy saturated Line A’s being as a particular Line approached. Their directions were opposing. Although their momentum fated to carry them apart, there was something different about this line. For the first time, Line A paused.

-. . . - .-. . . — .-. . . *“Curious”*

To his surprise, Line B stopped abruptly just as she reached him. They didn't touch, couldn't touch, but they were close enough to send pulses. The energy between them sizzled like static. Line A sent another pulse.

-.---...- .-.- "You"

Moments passed before she replied.

.... -- .- "How"

..- .-.-.-. -- .- .- / -... ..- /- .- .- .- "Unknown,
but happy"

.. / - --- "I, too"

..-...-.. /-.. "Feel here"

Line B paused. Not knowing if she understood him or was assessing, but he waited.

-.- --- - ..- --- .- - "Comfort"

She felt comforted by his presence. He felt the same, but that wasn't all he felt being close to Line B.

.. / .- - - - .- — “*I, joy*”

Small words and phrases may have passed between them, but the communication between pulses brought more understanding than words could ever. In the one-dimensional world of their existence, all things had trajectories, and momentum could not be denied. The universe, patient but firm, began to pull.

... .. -. -.. / —. “*Find me*”

.. / .- .. -.. ... “*I will*”

The gravity of direction finally tore them apart, but Line A sent out one last pulse before her presence faded completely.

.- -.. / .- .. - - - - .- / - .. - .- — .-- .- “Will look everywhere”

.- .. - .- - - “*Promise*”

2D

Divided Shapes

"In a world built to separate, love dares to unify."

In the 2-dimensional world of Vectra, circles stay with circles, and corners stay with corners. Every shape has its place and stepping outside of your area into another was a crime.

Auro is a perfect circle who's always followed the rules. Bexira is a sharp-edged decagon from the Margins, where misfits live and secrets hide. When they meet by chance, the unthinkable happens. Their love is forbidden, but it just might be the key to uniting a divided world. When Bexira is taken and the Line Lord starts to close in, Auro must uncover a hidden truth to save her.

Can Auro solve the mystery before the Line Lord destroys Bexira to keep the shapes in their proper place?

Chapter 1

Bexira rolled back and forth on the edge of the border wall, as she gazed across the Gridline at Vectra's tall, uniform tower shimmering in the distance, the Core, home of the Line Lord. They housed the perfectly shaped squares, circles and triangles in the glowing sections around the Core separate from the shapes that lived in the Margin with her.

"Bexira!"

Bexira looked to see her neighbor, a four-pointed star from across the street.

Uhg. Here we go.

"You know you're too close to the borderline. Why do you keep staring out there, anyway? You're a decagon. You belong here!"

"I'm just looking, Olga. There's no harm in looking."

"You might as well stop your daydreaming, Bexira. You know a decagon wouldn't fit in out there."

"Don't you ever wonder why we can't hang around or get to know some of the other shapes that don't live in the Margin with us?"

"Why should I? The Margin has its own squares, circles and triangles."

"No, we don't," Bexira snapped.

“They're not perfectly shaped, of course. They're ovals, rectangles and scalene triangles, but that's why they're in the Margin with us. That's close enough for me.”

Bexira turned away. “Thank you, Olga. I will keep your excellent advice in mind.”

She heard Olga's exasperated huff as she rolled away. Bexira turned her gaze upwards.

“The sky's the only borderless place now. I wish I was around when it wasn't. I bet it was wonderful. “

With a sigh, Bexira rolled along the wall that separated the Margin from the rest of the Gridline. Just as she turned to go in a different direction a gleam in the distance caught her eye.

Hmm.

Bexira turned toward the moving light then stopped on the line directly in its path above the light. Below her, the street seemed to buzz as the stranger moved closer. Bexira leaned forward for a better look and gasped.

A perfect circle! What is a circle doing this far away from the Core?

She leaned in a little more as he moved to close the distance between them. Her eyes widened as he came into clear view.

Wow. He's—-He's beautiful. Perfectly smooth, no corners or bumps. His roll is so...so fluid.

Bexira leaned more to view the Circle better as he rolled closer.
Just as he was almost beneath her she fell.

“Ahh!”

Chapter 2

As a line surveyor for the Core, Auro's job was to maintain the integrity of the Gridlines, the sacred borders that kept order in the world. His job was to check the strength of the lines, log distortions, and report anomalies to the Line Lord so they can be corrected. Simple, but important. He'd studied the teachings, memorized every metric, and kept his shape perfect and polished as required by the Line Lord. He moved silently along the lines, his purpose clear because they called on him often because of his steadfast duty to order.

Auro made his way along the Gridline at Sector Ten with his scanner. The walls here were older, almost brittle in parts as he slowly rolled along them.

"Hmm, no breach, but these walls are terrible. They will need to be reinforced," he muttered tapping on his scanner.

As he entered the information... BAM!

"Uhg!" he said, falling to his back.

The shape that knocked him down pushed themselves up beside him in a tumble of limbs and muttered apologies. When Auro's vision cleared, he gasped. A perfect decagon with bold lines, stunning points and shifting edges that caught the light like waves with her every move. He had never seen anyone so strange and beautiful. Auro rolled back to steady himself.

"What just happened? Who are you?"

“Sorry about that. I'm Bexira. I was just trying to get a better look at you and lost my balance. I've never seen a Core circle before,” she explained, dusting herself off.

“You're not supposed to be here,” Auro said, more in awe than accusation.

“Yeah, well, you're not supposed to be this close to the Margin,” she countered.

Their eyes locked when she finally turned to him. A quick surge of heat flowed through his form; the air crackled like static around them and a ripple surged through the wall above them just as fast. Auro gasped again.

What was that?

“What was that?” Bexira whispered at the same time as she looked around.

Auro looked over the wall. “I have no idea. Where'd my scanner go?” He spotted it a few feet away and rolled over to retrieve it.

“What are you scanning? Circles only come here to drop off what they call misshapen shapes.”

“I'm not one of them. I'm checking the stability of the walls for the Line Lord. I don't usually survey this close to Sector Ten, but the damage seems to be spreading out from this area.”

Bexira sputtered. “Huh, really? So, he wants to make sure the walls that keep shapes locked up in the Margin are strong but doesn't care about the shapes that live there.”

“That's not true. The Line Lord built the walls to keep us safe.”

Bexira sputtered. “Safe? Safe from what? From whom?”

Auro hesitated. “The older shapes have always said that something threatened our world a long time ago and the Line Lord built the Grid to save us.”

“Okay, let's say that was true, whatever that threat was, it's long since passed. Why are we still bound to our areas? What can't we roam between sections now?”

Auro's mind spun. She was making good points about things he had never questioned before, and he had no answers for her.

“I—I don't know,” he finally confessed.

“You know, my grandmother used to tell me that when she was young there were no lines. The Grid didn't exist.”

“What?”

“Yup, she also said we weren't born locked into the shapes we are now either.”

“How can that be? All the circles in my sector are exactly the same.”

“Well, if you only divide with circles, you'll only get circles, right?”

“Hmm.”

“Didn't anyone ever ask why there were only circles in your sector?”

Auro shook his head. “Shapes like me don’t ask questions. Stability.

Balance. Obedience. That’s what we’re taught.”

Bexira plucked a blade of grass and twirled it. “There are more shapes than I can count in the Margin. My grandparents used to say all shapes were the same once before the Line Lord divided everyone up. They said they were able to change their shape to be whatever they needed to be.”

“In the Core Sectors, shapes are taught that three sides are efficient, four are stable, and circles, like me, are praised for being endlessly symmetrical.” He turned to her. “You’re so different and yet similar. Round like a circle, but with so many beautiful edges. They shimmer so lovely even in the small streams of light down here on the ground.” Auro hesitated, then pushed the words out. “May I—May I touch one of your edges?”

Bexira blinked. She leaned away from him at first then relaxed. “Uh, sure, but why?”

“I—I’ve never seen a decagon before,” he admitted. “They told us shapes like you were unstable. That too many sides led to chaos. But you... you move with such rhythm and grace. Now I can’t help but wonder what else the Line Lord was wrong about.”

Slowly, Bexira moved toward him. Auro moved closer, letting his hand glide over her edges.

“All your edges come together to form a circle, but with the edges you’re not a circle,” he mentioned in awe. “You’re unique-

ly amazing.” He took a step back and looked her over. “How do you balance all those edges? Does it get tiring?”

Bexira smiled. “Only when I have to explain why they are what they are.”

Auro laughed. “Maybe you shouldn't explain it to me. Maybe I should just learn for myself.”

She tilted her head. “You really want to learn about me?”

“I think it may be time I learned what is right and what's wrong for myself. Did your grandparents tell you anything else?”

“Well, they did mention that before the Line Lord rose, all shapes lived together. No Core. No Margins. No Grid.”

Auro blinked. “That can't be right. Shapes just roaming about without order? Without boundaries?”

“Without boundaries yes, but not without order,” she said gently. “They were fluid. Form was chosen, not fixed.”

“That sounds like a legend.”

Bexira smirked. “Legends sprout from long passed truths.”

“Mmm.”

“I didn't believe it either when my grandfather told me that story either, but then Parra agreed with him.”

“Parra? Who's Parra?”

“He is the oldest among us. He says he is one of the first to be sent to the Margin. He's super old,” she added with a chuckle.

“If your grandparents were right, why keep us segregated?”

She sighed. “I don't know. Maybe you should just find out the truth for yourself.”

“What if they've destroyed the truth?”

“The Line Lord is said to be the vision of order and detail. Is that true?”

Auro nodded. “That's a pretty close description. “

“Well then, erasing documentation would be the opposite of that, don't you think? I think they buried it and then built a wall on top of it. If he thinks he's right, there's no reason for him to destroy any documents because they archive history.”

He stared out toward the Core rising over the Grid. “Why keep us segregated?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's just a power trip. I don't know.”

“What if you're wrong?”

“You only believe I'm wrong because that's what they told you,” she offered in a gentle tone.

Auro looked at her again.

Bexira wasn't dangerous at all. She was radiant, grounded, beautiful and sharp in all the right ways. If they were wrong about shapes like hers, what else could they be lying about?

He looked down at his beeping scanner.

“I should go. If I’m out of my section for too long—”

“I understand. I shouldn't be here either. I guess it's goodbye then, pretty circle,” Bexira added with a smile.

Auro chuckled. “No one has ever called me a pretty circle before.”

“Well, you haven't told me your name so...”

Auro smiled. “Oh, sorry about that. My name is Auro.” “Auro,” she repeated softly.

The sound of his name on her lips sent warm feelings coursing through him that he never felt before.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I guess that would depend on how adventurous you are,” she told him.

“I see.”

“I've heard that when you want to find something again you go back to the last time you saw it in hopes to see it again,” she told him with a wink.

He watched her roll out of sight before he turned to leave with a smile.

Chapter 3

Auro waited beneath the fractured beam of a broken monitor that gave a good view of the open sky. He chuckled when Bexira appeared, startling him.

“I never know which direction you'll be coming from.”

“I'm predictable in shape, not in choice, Auro,” Bexira said with a grin.

They sat close together.

“You know this is one of my favorite spots,” Bexira said looking up.

“Oh yeah? How come?”

“It's one of the only spots near the Margin where you can get a good look at the sky from the ground. My other spot is in the Margin near the fountain in the center of town.”

“That sounds beautiful.”

Bexira leaned in. “What's it like to see everyone around you looking exactly the same?”

Auro paused. “It's safe. You know what to expect, but lately it's been feeling kind of dull. I feel like my mind is spinning in place.”

“That tends to happen when the real truth starts to knock down false truths.”

“I can’t stop thinking about all the things you’ve shared about what your grandparents told you about your shape-shifting ancestors,” “*Our* shape-shifting ancestors,” she corrected.

“Yes, *our* ancestors. What if—What if we’ve been lied to all this time?”

Bexira nodded slowly. “The Core teaches you to stay smooth, stay perfect, stay the same. Most of the older Margin shapes believe the truth of our past, but they are dying out leaving the younger ones to believe the Core teachings and remain compliant. Parra is our only elder from those days long ago, but he doesn’t come out of his hut that often to talk.”

“All these years, I thought the Grid kept us safe, but now I see it just kept us... separated.”

“Yeah, divide and label, that’s the way the Core has held its control.”

He turned to her. “But why would the Line Lord go so far to hide the truth?”

“Because truth threatens power,” Bexira answered. “But now that we’ve met, you have proof that not everything you were taught is true.

Something more is possible.”

Auro sighed. “If they find out I’ve been meeting you— I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won't lose me,” she told him, touching him lightly. “They won't find out because we've been careful, right? We haven't met in the same place back-to-back.”

“Yeah, and we keep a couple of days between seeing each other.”

“Right, but now you have a choice, Auro. You can keep working to maintain the Grid that keeps our world separated or help me make it better.”

He smiled. “It seems I just needed someone with ten sides to show me all the angles I was missing.” Bexira smiled.

“Tell me more about what your grandparents said to you.”

“I've told you everything that I remember. I was young when they faded.”

“Come on, you must remember something.”

“Well, I do remember they said that our world wasn't always called Vectra. We used to be called Curvalis.”

“We had a different name? You're kidding.”

“Nope. That's what they said.”

“You know, there's something I've been wanting to ask you.”

“Okay, so ask.”

“If all the shapes in your sector look exactly the same, how do you tell each other apart?”

Vorn sat quietly on top of the line looking down as Auro laughed and chatted pleasantly with a decagon. He watched the exchange for a time to learn all he needed then returned quickly to the Core.

“I’ve confirmed the anomaly,” Vorn reported. “Circle 7-AU, designation Auro, has been breaching the edge. He’s made contact with a decagon.”

The Line Lord’s angular and razor-sharp edge leaned forward.

“A Margin shape? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Vorn said. “I’ve checked the other anomalies, and they all have the same vibration node. It’s them. Every time they meet it causes an anomaly in the lines.”

“You must be sure.”

“I am, sir. They’ve met multiple times in different places, but the ripple signatures are identical at each one.”

The Line Lord sighed. “Then the infection has begun again.”

“What are your orders?” Vorn asked.

The Line Lord’s voice echoed cold and flat in the large room.

“You are my best line corrector, Vorn. You need to handle this. Bring the decagon in quietly. I will deal with the circle.”

Chapter 4

The gleaming glass of the Core's Grand Chamber glowed with light slicing perfectly across the floor in long streams. Auro glided through the massive archway leading to the Line Lord's inner sanctuary. Line Lord Straton sat atop his elevated perch, tall, rigid, composed entirely of sharp, flawless symmetry.

"Auro," he said without looking up. "Punctual, as always. An admirable trait in a surveyor."

"Thank you, Line Lord," Auro replied, centering himself on the designated diagram mark before him. "You summoned me?"

"Yes, of course. I've been reviewing your work along the borders. It's flawless. Consistent, clean, predictable, exactly what the Core wants and values."

"I take pride in keeping the Grid stable, sir," Auro said carefully.

The Line Lord tapped on the console of his chair. "I also see that your last few check-ins have only been around the Core Sectors where that would be accurate."

"Yes, it's important to keep the Core Sectors up to specs."

"Indeed, it is. Perfection of the Grid must be maintained. Your work there has been exemplary, but when your off-duty anomalies seem to appear where you are."

Auro blinked. "Anomalies?"

“Ripples in the lines, Auro,” Strateon explained. “Surely you’re familiar with the word anomaly.”

Auro hesitated but before he could answer the Line Lord continued.

“They were subtle at first, but they’ve become more frequent.”

Auro stiffened slightly. “I wasn’t aware—”

“Oh, I’m sure you weren’t,” Straton interrupted, lifting his gaze. “You’ve always been steady, Auro. So reliable. The anomalies were getting so frequent that I had to send Vorn out to investigate them.”

“Vorn?” Auro asked, unsure if his panic could be heard.

“A secondary unit to check out unexplained readings is standard procedure. Vorn is very thorough,” he said leaning forward.

“And he found something, Auro. Or should I say *someone*,” he concluded.

The chamber’s silence thickened. Auro shifted back and forth.

“You see, Auro, Vorn tracked the disturbances and followed them to find their connection. It led directly to your route, your exact movements and when he followed the latest one it led him to you. What do you think he saw when he arrived there?” Auro swallowed.

“He witnessed an interaction with you and a Margin shape. A *decagon*, no less,” he added scornfully. He cleared his throat

and took a breath before he spoke again. “Is this true?” Straton added, his tone casual again.

Auro’s voice caught. “Her—Her name is Bexira.”

Straton’s expression hardened. “Names only matter if they belong to citizens. She is not one. She is a deviation. An anomaly.”

“She’s more than that,” Auro snapped and then he took a breath. “Sir, she’s brilliant and brave. Her edges are not an abomination. They’re beautiful and she’s nothing like what I was taught. She rolls just like I do, but her edges make it different and unique. Bexira is amazing and she’s told me things about our history. Things I can’t ignore,” he added in a small voice.

Straton rose to his full height tilting his point at him. “Let me tell you about our history. I was born for a purpose. My very existence was a turning point for our society. There has not been another that looks like me. I was created solely to bring order to this world and rule it. All those different shapes that were being made were chaotic to even look at and brought only chaos with their playfulness and reckless joining.” The Line Lord returned to his seat. “The symmetry of a balanced square or triangle is beautiful to behold,” he said longingly. “The fluidity of a circle is perfectly smooth, with no corners or straight segments. I have spent many cycles keeping order, and I cannot allow you to wreck it.”

Auro felt a chill rush through him. “What have you done?”

The Line Lord sighed. “You disappoint me, Auro.”

He descended from his perch. His voice no longer held the polished veneer of civility but was sharp and filled with disdain.

“You were chosen as a Core surveyor because you were whole, predictable, smooth, but here lately you are...fracturing right before me.” Straton’s voice turned cold. “You were designed to be flawless, Auro. A symbol of balance. That’s what circles are. Whole. Complete. Safe.”

Auro remained quiet as the Line Lord closed in on him while he spoke. His edge glinted like a honed blade as he circled him.

“But perhaps you are not as perfect as you appear. Your smoothness seems to be hiding dangerous curves. Curiosity. Emotion. Deviation.”

Auro turned slightly to face him. “You speak of perfection, but you have been using it as a cage. I’m starting to think the only broken thing here is the Grid itself and its usefulness.”

“You will not see that decagon again.”

Auro shivered and worked to keep his voice calm. “What have you done to her?”

The Line Lord stared at him for intense moments before he spoke. “I think you should be more worried about what's going to happen to you.”

The chamber dimmed slightly as Auro backed away from the throne. The Line Lord returned to his chair.

“You will be confined to the inner circle,” he announced. “Effective immediately. Your access to the perimeter will also be revoked. You will be reassigned to calibration—no movement, no contact, no unsanctioned travel.”

Auro gasped. “And Bexira? What happens to her?”

He tapped against his console and the chamber lights dimmed to a deep gray. A screen lowered behind his throne drawing Auro's attention. A live feed of static just cleared enough to reveal a square chaining a decagon to a wall.

“She will be corrected,” he finally answered. “If she survives the process she will be returned to the Margin.”

“She will no longer be a decagon?”

“Does it matter? An anomaly is an anomaly.”

Auro's mind went wild. “I have not heard of anyone surviving the correction chamber.”

“Whether or not the decagon survives is not your concern. Now go.”

Chapter 5

Auro rolled out of the chamber. The polished corridor ahead seemed even more narrow and cold. At the end of the hall, he was supposed to turn right. Calibration waited for him. A station with no movement, no missions, just idle rotation under watchful eyes.... but he turned left pushing the door open to the lower levels.

The archives were kept at the bottom of the Core. They were rarely mentioned let alone visited. The light faded and the walls darkened with each level. The once-flawless symmetry of the architecture eroded into forgotten corners and crooked passageways. Auro scanned his circle print and was surprised when the door clicked open.

“Yes! He hasn't taken me out of the system yet,” he muttered with relief.

The walls were warped and dusty as he moved lower. Lines that once held strong now flickered, unstable. Reaching the archive room, he brushed away a layer of pixelated dust to uncover an ancient projection node. Auro sifted through the old projection tapes looking for one from before the Grid. When he saw one labeled, *A New Day*, he took it and activated the projection.

Shimmering light appeared across the flat surface. Shapes he'd never seen before lived free on the plane. Auro fast-forwarded the scene. Triangles danced with spirals, rectangles spun in time with stars, and circles nestled beside sharp-angled

decagons like Bexira. There were no lines to box them in. The plane was vast, borderless and beautiful.

“There were no lines at all. The Grid hadn’t always been. Everything

Bexira's grandparents told her was true.”

Auro fast forwarded the history node. He stopped it to see squares rounding up shapes pushing into separate sections. Fast forwarding more, he watched the lines of the Grid appear and rise above everything.

“All this time... he—he used me. The Grid isn’t order at all. It's control.” Auro clutched the history node and turned. “I have to get to the Margin.”

“Go away, circle. No perfect shapes were created this cycle. “

”I’m not here for that reason.”

“Oh. What do you want then?”

“Please let me in. It's important! The Line Lord has taken Bexira. She will be destroyed if we don't help her,” Auro shouted back.

Moments later the gate opened. Shapes of all kinds he had never seen before followed him as the star led him to a temple at the center of town.

“I have a history node that reveals the lies the Line Lord have been telling us for cycles. I must speak to your elders.”

“How do we know he’s telling the truth?” a right-angled triangle snap. “Circles have always served the Core.”

“This could be a trick,” murmurs a cluster of rectangles.

Auro clutched the projection node tighter.

“Silence, my dear shapes. The Circle speaks the truth.”

“Parra.”

“Elder.”

The whispers erupted all around him. Auro looked around as the shapes near him bowed when the slow-moving parabola moved toward him. Parra raises his curved arms high. His body elongates, splits and ripples until he becomes a great arc overhead, casting shade over the crowd.

“You fear the truth because the Grid taught you to,” Parra told them.

“But truth is not something to fear. It’s something to embrace.”

“My name is Auro. With your permission I’d like to share this history node.”

Parra sent an agreeable nod and Auro activated the projection. It flickered to life, bright and wide again against the temple wall. A world full of parabolas danced free on a plane without borders. Many cycles later that spirals intertwined with poly-

gons, hearts, stars and so many other shapes playing beside less parabolas. More cycles passed, and the Lines appeared, cutting through it all. Black, rigid, and cold, they sliced across the scene like blades. Circles, squares and triangles were forced into regions. Parra, others like him and so many other shapes were rounded up and cast out to the far region of Margin. As the shapes separated, the Lines grew thicker. Those that fought back were taken to be destroyed.

Gasps echoed like a wave. A diamond shifted uneasily beside him.

“We were all like you in the beginning, Parra?”

Parra returned to his resting state. “Yes. Once we were all the same, free forming, able to shape and reshape at will. All the shapes you are now started because we were in that shape when we were dividing. The Circle, square and triangle were chosen by the Line Lord while those who didn't fit his desired form were sent here.”

“Bexira and I want to bring back those days when everyone was together. Just as we started to discuss how, the Line Lord had her taken away.”

“Bexira has always dreamed of the time when her grandparents roamed free. She has questioned me often about it.”

“She has mentioned you to me a few times. I have never seen a shape like yours.”

“I am the last. There were others that were supposed to go to the Margin, but they fought the squares and were sent to the

correction chamber. They did not survive the process,” Parra added sadly.

“Please, Parra, our encounter may have been by chance, but now I find I can't imagine my life without Bexira. I need help to save her.”

“How can we do that? If we go to the Core we will cease to exist,” a voice in the crowd shouted.

“We are all the same. Nothing in the Core can hurt you,” Auro assured them.

“Auro speaks the truth, my friends,” Parra agreed. “That is the lie they sent out over cycles to keep us compliant, in our designated areas and away from the Core. “

“Please, Margin shapes, Bexira is one of your own. I need your help to save her. When we succeed in tearing down the lines, we all will be free.”

Long moments of silence passed before a loud cheer erupted. Parra straightened up once more and voices rose across the Margins.

“For Bexira!”

“For freedom!”

“For the home we once had!”

Chapter 6

Auro led the way with Parra by his side and the Margin formed rows behind them as they moved toward the Core.

“Auro, it's been a long time since I was near the Core. Are you sure we can get in?”

“The defenses are made with the idea of one shape trying to push in. With so many Margin shapes with us we will have no problem getting through the checkpoints.”

Parra nodded and kept moving forward.

As Auro predicted, alarms went off continuously as the Core's defense lines buckled under the pressure of so many shapes pushing through them.

“The Core has been breached!” a square cried out from the watchtower above.

Behind Auro, Margin shapes poured in through the doors.

“Hurry! The Correction Chamber is down that corridor and up one

flight.”

Auro skidded to a halt at the chamber door moments later.

“Bexira!” he called, against the door.

Parra came to Auro's side, reaching out his long arc. “Stand back.”

Auro moved over. Parra expanded and stretched, twisting himself until he was in a long, straight line. Auro was amazed at the transformation. Parra slid under the door and moments later, the door swung open, and Parra was back in his original shape.

Bexira, still chained to the wall, looked up with a grin. Auro rushed to her side.

“If I knew I was going to be this late meeting you, I would have left a note.”

“Well, it's a good thing I found out where you were so I could pick you up for our next date.”

She giggled softly. “I see you brought friends with you,” she added.

“We're about to have company. We have to move!” Parra called.

With Bexira leaning on Auro, they ran—slipping past warped corridors and down into the cracked grid that the Margin shapes had carved open like a river. Triangles defended their flank, trapezoids jammed scanner locks, and a spiral lifted Bexira gently when she stumbled.

“We can't go back the way we came, Auro. We need another way out.”

“The only other way is to pass the center chamber.”

Auro saw no disapproving looks, so he led the way to the chamber where the Line Lord held audience. They moved down the corridor that passed the chamber as quietly as they could, but

quickly. As they burst open a door to a room that would lead to a back door out of the Core, they stood face to face with a room full of squares.

The air in the smaller assembly room shimmered with tension. Shapes from both the Core and the Margins gathered, their forms rigid with anticipation. Line Lord Straton, sharp-edged and calculating, pushed through the crowd. Parra stepped forward from the Margin crowd to greet him, his curved form old but unyielding. The squares across the room took in a collective breath.

“Straton,” Parra said, his voice echoing in the room. “You remember me, don’t you?”

The Line Lord narrowed his points. “Parra... still holding on I see.”

“You banished us,” Parra said firmly, rising taller. “Not because we were chaotic, but because we could change at will and you can’t. You knew the truth, and you buried it.”

Gasps rippled through the crowd behind him. The Core shapes turned to one another, processing the accusation.

The Line Lord’s tone sharpened. “You were unstable...dangerous! The Grid was built for protection. To protect everyone else from your chaos.”

“No,” Parra replied, his voice rising. “It was built for control. You feared what we could be if we stood together. You severed our unity and blamed the fractures of society on us.”

A low murmur of disbelief grew louder among the squares. One elder square stepped forward, voice shaking.

“Is this true? Did you exile those shapes to silence the truth?”

The Line Lord faltered. “The system brought order. You’ve thrived under it—”

Auro held up the history node. “This history node shows the truth,” he said and tossed it to the square.

“You made us enforcers of a lie,” the elder square said bitterly.

Other squares joined him, turning away from the Line Lord.

“We’ll go to the triangles,” one declared.

“And we’ll speak to the circles,” another added. “They deserve to know the truth, too,” he said leaving the room.

Bexira stepped forward beside Parra, her edges glowing. “This is our chance. We don’t need walls to define who belongs where. We’ll need each other. Structure can be safe, sameness doesn’t necessarily mean strong.”

“No! You’ll bring chaos back into our society!” the Line Lord shouted.

“No,” Auro said, taking Bexira’s hand. “We’ll bring Curvalis back.”

Parra smiled. “Yes, we will bring Curvalis back.”

The Margin shapes started to cheer, and the squares joined in. Straton looked out over the united shapes, Margin and Core

alike, and took a deep breath. The crowd quieted, anticipating his words.

“I cannot live in this new world you're talking about.”

“You are free to go, but you don't have to leave,” Parra told him.

“All those that still want the order that I have created here are free to come with me. You are welcomed by my side,” he announced.

The Line Lord left the room, but no one followed, and no one stopped him. Another round of cheers and shouts of celebration filled the room. As dusk approached, Bexira and Auro left the Core to stand at the center of the Grid. Squares and triangles were already in motion eager to take down the lines of separation. Auro turned to Bexira.

“You're amazing, you know that. You changed everything.”

“No,” she said. “We did it together because we were meant to be.”

3D

Love Through The Ages

“Destined love survives the test of time.”

1985

Brandy frowned as she plopped down on the steps of the brownstone. She adjusted her bookbag on her back and exhaled.

“Oh, sweetie, it's not that bad. This new school will be a good experience. You'll make new friends and do great.”

“I already had friends, Mom, and I *was* doing great. Why did we have to move?”

“Because that little place was only big enough for us. Now that Jack and I are married, and the baby is coming, we needed a bigger place,” her mother explained.

They walked down the street and Brandy kicked a can. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, Mom. I like Jack and I'm going to love being a big sister, I'm just saying we could have done all this back in Queens. Why did we have to come to Brooklyn?”

“It's closer to Jack's job, Brandy. Living here he doesn't have to ride the train. He just jumps on the bus and gets there in fif-

teen minutes.” “Yeah, yeah,” Brandy said, kicking the can into the street.

“Sweetheart, please try to make the best of this move. I promise it's going to work out for our whole family.”

They stopped in front of the school. “Okay, Mom. I'll try.”

Her mother smiled and kissed her forehead before leaving. Brandy turned toward all the kids entering the school, took a deep breath and then followed them. A counselor dropped her off in Ms. Hargrove's classroom.

“Hello class. Today I want to introduce you to our new student. Her name is Brandy Blakely. Stand up Brandy,” the teacher said, gesturing her way.

Brandy swallowed a groan and stood.

“Brandy just moved to the area so let's all make her feel welcomed,” Ms. Hargrove said then started clapping.

Brandy waved at the students when the class joined in.

“Okay, now, boys and girls, it's time to start your science projects. Brandy, you came just in time to enter the science fair. I want you all to check the list of what you can do and then pick a partner to do it with.”

Brandy sat down trying to hide her embarrassment when a boy appeared in front of her.

“The new kid, huh?” he asked, unwrapping a Now & Later and popping it into his mouth.

Brandy nodded. "Uh, huh, I moved from Queens."

"You like the beach?"

She blinked. "What?"

"The beach. My fam goes every other weekend up the street in Coney

Island. My dad says I swim like a fish. You swim?"

"We didn't live close enough to the beach to go a lot, but I can float," she muttered.

He grinned. "That's good enough. I'm Anthony Mitchell," he said, offering her a candy. "Want to be partners for the science project?"

"I don't know. What are we doing?"

"A volcano," he said with a mischievous grin.

Brandy gave him a slow smile. "You got yourself a partner. "

Brandy sat on the stoop of her brownstone. Anthony plopped down beside her.

"I can't wait until next week," he said.

"Why, what happens next week?"

"It's the last day of school. The grownups block the street off so we can have a block party. They open the Johnny pumps so we

can play in the water. It's great. All the grownup barbecue and play music and we get to stay out all night long. It's a blast," he added, giving her a playful nudge.

"Dang, we never did anything like that in Queens."

"That's because Brooklyn is better than Queens," he told her with a laughing grin.

Brandy swatted his shoulder and laughed.

"Well, lucky you get to do the block party for the first time with your best friend."

"Yeah, we been best friends all year, huh?"

He nodded. "I bet we'll still be friends when we're old, like, forty or something," he said, leaning back on the steps.

Brandy smirked. "Yeah, you'll probably be bald by then like your dad, but I'll still be your friend."

He shrugged. "I'll still be cool though. I think we'll be best friends when we're like grandma and grandpa old. You know, like in our fifties."

"You think so?"

Anthony side eyed her. "Don't you wanna be?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'm going to be all grey and stuff. You'll still want to be friends with me?"

Anthony sat up and turned to her. "I won't care if your hair is grey or you don't have any hair at all. I will always be your friend as long as you want me to be."

She turned a smile to him then bumped her shoulder against his.

"Deal."

1988

Brandy swung a towel over her shoulder. "I'll be on the roof, Mom," she said, heading for the door.

"Wait, Brandy. We want to tell you something."

Brandy pulled the door open and stopped. "Am I in trouble?"

"No sweetie. It's just, well, Jack was offered a really good job promotion."

"Oh, wow, that's great, Jack. Congrats," she said and opened the door wider.

"Wait, there's more."

Brandy pushed the door closed a little. "Okay."

"Well, the job is in Connecticut."

The words slowly sank into her mind. When recognition hit, she gasped.

"Are you talking about Connecticut, the state, or the street in Queens?"

Her mother hesitated just a second before answering. "Yes, honey, the state."

"Mom, are you kidding me? Again, with the moving?"

"I know, sweetie," her mom said gently. "But this is a good opportunity for all of us."

“This couldn't have waited... school starts in a few weeks. I'm going to high school, Mom.”

“I know, if we're going to make this move this is the perfect time. You are changing schools and Nikki is about to start preschool.”

“We just got finished moving, Mom.”

“That was three years ago, Brandy.”

“It feels like last month.”

Her mother's eyes narrowed when she looked at her.

“Brandy.”

“Mom,” she groaned. “All my friends are going to Dewey high school. It's a college prep school. The schedules are made to treat you just like you're in college,” she whined.

“I'm sure they will have high schools like that in Connecticut.”

She turned to Jack. “Do you know when all this is happening?”

“Not yet,” Jack supplied. “I'm waiting for a call back from my new boss.”

“Fine! Can I go now?”

Jack took her mother's hand and nodded. “Yes, sweetie. We will just keep you updated.”

Brandy stomped out the house pulling the door closed behind her. She found Anthony sprawled out on the rooftop of the

building. She laid her faded beach towel beside his. He handed her a can of orange soda and pushed a bag of sunflower seeds between them. Brandy picked one out and popped it into her mouth.

“You’re late,” he said in greeting.

“Parent issues.”

“The beach looks calm today.”

“Yeah, too bad we couldn’t go fishing. The pier doesn’t look crowded at all.”

“Yeah. What did you do today?”

“I hung out at the park and played handball.”

Anthony turned to her. “*Handball?* Brandy, you can’t even play handball.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I know I suck at it, but I still play.” Anthony laughed.

“Tanya slipped me a note when I was there.”

“Which one is Tanya?”

“The tall girl that was in our music class. She thinks you’re cute and wants me to talk her up to you.”

Anthony snorted. “Oh her. She always acts like she’s too good for everybody.”

Brandy shrugged. "She's pretty, though."

"Yeah, she talks about her cat too much, too. I'm more of a dog person."

They both laughed.

Brandy turned toward him. "What do you think about Jamal? I think he's kinda cute. He asked if I liked cartoon movies. I think he wants to take me to see that Roger Rabbit movie."

Anthony frowned. "*Jamal?* That dude calls you *Brenda* half the time."

"Hmm, yeah, he does," she said, taking a drink.

"Besides, I thought we were going to see Roger Rabbit together."

She giggled. "Oh yeah. Well, I guess that settles that."

"Yup."

"You know, it's like nobody else gets us. Other guys are nice and all, but they're not you, you know?"

Anthony looked over at her, quiet for a second. "Yeah, I know. I feel the same," he added, in a low voice. "I mean, I know girls that are prettier than you but—"

"Wait, what?"

"No, no, I mean, they're pretty, but not as pretty as you. I'm just saying they're okay, but you're more okay."

Brandy turned a raised brow to him. They stared at each other for a moment then burst into laughter. They stared up quietly watching the sky fade from blue to the dusty purples and pinks over the water as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

“Brandy! It's getting dark!”

Brandy blew out a breath. “Well, I guess that's that.”

“Yeah, my mom will be looking for me soon, too.”

“We're going school shopping tomorrow. What are you doing?”

Brandy shrugged. “I don't know yet.”

“I'll call you when we get back so we can hook up.”

Brandy nodded and they exited the roof and went their separate ways. When she entered the house, her parents waited for her. She leaned on the door letting it close behind her.

“What?”

Jack walked over to place a hand on her shoulder. “I know this is a rough time to move again, but it will be great for our family.” Brandy felt her pulse start to race.

“Just tell me, Jack.”

“They need me to start next week. They will have train tickets waiting for us at Grand Central Station in the morning.”

Brandy's chest tightened. “What about my friends?”

“You’re going to make new friends just like you did when we moved here. I promise. It won’t be so bad.”

“But what about Anthony?”

Her parents looked at each other but said nothing. Tears sting Brandy's eyes.

“Can I call him?” her voice caught.

“Yes, sweetheart go ahead.”

Brandy took the cordless phone from its cradle into her room. She dialed Anthony's number, but no one picked up. She had no choice but to leave a message on the answering machine.

“It's me, Brandy,” her voice trembled as she spoke. “So, umm, I just wanted to tell Anthony that I, um, I’m moving...tomorrow. My mom and Jack just kind of sprung it on me. He says we have to go now, and they'll come back for the furniture,” she sniffled and then continued. “It’s Connecticut, so I don’t know when I’ll see you again, but... I hope I do,” she added sniffing again. “You’ll always be my best friend, Anthony. Always.” She hung up, fell on her bed and cried.

The next morning, her mother was closing boxes in the living room, while Jack was on the phone talking about commute times and benefits. Brandy’s stomach turned.

“Mom, can I call Anthony again? No one picked up last night.”

“No, honey. It's way too early to be calling that woman's house. The sun's barely up. If someone’s kid called my house this early,

I'd wonder what kind of home training they had." Brandy's heart sank.

"Can you get Nikki out of bed, please? The cab will be here any time now to take us to the train station."

Brandy nodded and went into the bedroom. She scooped her baby sister up and carried her into the living room. Quietly she followed her parents' downstairs. The taxi arrived as the sun seated itself in the Eastern sky. Brandy laid her sister across the seat with Nikki's head on her lap. She looked out the back window hoping to see Anthony running toward the car, like in the Harlequin romance she read once, but the sidewalk remained empty as her block disappeared behind them.

1994

The night air was thick with excitement and the beat of quick music greeted them as Brandy and her roommate moved closer to the upperclassman's apartments. The dorm party was packed with students. The air was filled with loud music, popcorn and sweat. Brandy wrinkled her nose as they pushed through the crowd.

"Did they invite everyone on campus?"

"Probably not, but when the party is good, word gets around," her roommate said.

"Jazmine, maybe I should—"

Jazmine spun around. "Uh, uh. You've been in your books all week," she said, dragging her by the wrist. "You need to dance, flirt, or at least drink something fizzy."

"I don't feel right being here. I don't know anybody."

"Brandy, you've been buried in books all semester. You passed all your tests and we're on break. It's time to shake the dust off."

"Yeah but—"

Jazmine stopped them inside the kitchen. "What is your deal, Brandy? You're cute, smart, and you give off model vibes when you walk, but you don't let anyone pass that invisible force field. Let *someone* flirt with you tonight."

Brandy laughed. "I'm not opposed to flirting. I just don't want someone weird breathing down my neck misquoting Socrates or something trying to act smart."

Jazmine shrugged. "So don't talk to the philosophy majors." Brandy rolled her eyes.

Jazmine smiled then turned and winked at her. "Get a drink and don't be shy. Just mingle. I'll find you in a bit."

Brandy hovered near the doorway as Jazmine left with a few people. She scooped a drink from a punchbowl on the table and went back to the door to scan the room. The party raged on in the large living room with dancing in the middle of the floor and others talking along the walls. Brandy took a sip of her drink and turned the other way looking for an escape and then froze. She lowered her cup and squinted. Across the crowded room, through swaying bodies and shadows of the pulsing party lights, she spotted a face she hadn't seen in years.

The man stood by the stereo talking to someone. He looked up in mid laugh and their eyes met and for a second the world stilled.

Recognition made her heart skip a beat.

He blinked a few times then disbelief melted into a stunned smile. They both moved slowly across the room pushing past people in their way to meet on the dance floor. They threw their arms around each other, laughing.

"Brandy," he murmured, holding her tight.

“Anthony,” she whispered.

At first, they just stared, grinning, searching each other’s faces with their fingers.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Brandy said softly.

Anthony laughed. “What?”

She chuckled but rolled her eyes.

Anthony grabbed her hand and pulled her through the crowd toward the patio. The music lowered when they shut the door behind them. They sat quietly on the chaise lounges.

“I left you a message the night before we left. Did you get my message?” Brandy asked, breaking the silence.

“When I went home the last day, we saw each other, they took me and my brother out to dinner. It was late when we got back. My mother didn’t check messages until the next day. You were gone for two days by then,” he explained.

A beat passed.

“You look... good,” Brandy said, biting her lip.

“So do you,” Anthony replied then gave her a spin. “Better, actually.”

“You grew up nice.”

They both laughed and then, like a broken dam, they talked over each other to catch up over the years. Laughing harder, Anthony held up his hands.

“Okay, okay, one at a time. You go first. What did you take in high school?”

“Well, besides basic courses, I continued with choir and ran track.”

“Track? You? You always said if someone was chasing you, you’d rather turn and fight rather than run,” he added with a laughing grin.

Brandy chuckled and sipped her drink. “Yeah, I remember that too, but colleges like to see well rounded students, so,” she answered with a shrug. “What about you? How did high school treat you?”

“I did great,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I did different sports but found my niche with football. I’m here on a scholarship.”

“That’s great. What’s your major?”

“I’m in the veterinary program.” “Really?” she said with a grin.

“Does that surprise you?”

“Not really, no. You were basically a Dr Dolittle kind of kid. Any animal that you came across loved you. It only makes sense that you’d want to take care of them. Remember that cat we adopted? Misty?”

“You remember that?”

Brandy smiled. “Of course. She was our baby. Neither one of us could keep her, so we set up an old blanket, a litter box and a

food bowl in the hallway of your building so we could take care of her.”

Anthony laughed. “Yeah, I got in trouble many times for sneaking out to take care of her. What is your major?”

“Accounting.”

Anthony nodded. “Mmm hmm, putting that straight-A math knowledge to work, huh?”

She giggled. “Numbers make sense to me.”

Anthony stared at her for a long moment. “You grew up to be amazingly beautiful.”

Brandy put her empty cup on a nearby table and looked him over.

“*Amazingly*? As in, I wasn’t beautiful to you before? Or you’re shocked that I turned out to be beautiful?”

His eyes widened. “Oh, well, I’m just saying, umm...” Brandy burst into laughter. “I’m kidding. Thank you.”

“For the record, I was just a boy. I didn’t see you as a girl back then. You were just my best friend.”

“What’s different now?”

He leaned forward to rest on his knees to look at her. “Oh. I’m a man now and I definitely see you differently.”

She leaned forward to be close to his face. “Well, I see you too, and you’re definitely a man.”

“What’s in your cup? It’s time for a refill.”

“The red punch has dark liquor. I’m drinking that.”

“Huh, so you like dark liquor. Have you tried a lot of them?”

“Not really. Have you?”

Anthony sputtered. “I’m in a frat, girl. Of course I have.”

Brandy laughed. “Okay, so what’s your favorite?”

“I would say as much as I like E&J, you will always be my favorite brandy,” he said with a wink as he went back into the house.

1997

Anthony came into the kitchen. “E-Jay, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, sweetie, what’s up?” she said putting breakfast on the table.

“Well, first you know I love you, right?”

“Well, yeah, but conversations that start off like that usually take a turn, don’t they?” Her grin faded as she looked into his face. “Anthony, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s really wrong, it’s just things are going to change for us.” “How so?”

“I— I joined the Army.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, right. You joined the Army.” She saw no change in his grim expression. “You joined the Army?” she snapped. “What were you thinking?” She jumped to her feet pacing the floor. “We’re graduating next week.”

“I know, I know.”

“We had plans, babe. What happened to us leaving this campus apartment for a real apartment? I was going to work and help you through medical school.”

Anthony left his chair to meet her across the room. “I know, but that’s a lot of pressure on you. I will be in Vet school for another four years.”

“I know.”

He palmed both sides of her face. “I know you know, and I love you for wanting to take care of us during that time, but babe, four years is a long time. The money you would make as a brand-new accountant fresh out of school would not be able to pay for everything. The rent, the bills, the food and helping pay for Vet school...it all would be too overwhelming.”

“Yeah, but—”

He kissed her. “The GI bill will help pay for medical school. This way the pressure won’t be all on you.”

Brandy felt her chest tightening. “When will you leave?”

I don’t know,” he said, grabbing her hands. “I just finished my physical yesterday, and they know I graduate on Thursday.”

She pressed her head to his. “What about the plans we made?”

“I love you and still want to get married. I want us to be Dr and Mrs. Mitchell more than anything. I’m just getting help from the Army to make it happen.”

Brandy took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, well, until we know more, let’s finish our breakfast and enjoy the time we have,” she said, pulling him back to the table.

Anthony walked into the bedroom carrying a large tray of food. Brandy sat propped against a mountain of pillows with

her legs tangled under the blanket. She watched Anthony balance a tray onto the bed beside her.

“You really outdid yourself, Chef Tony,” she teased.

He grinned and then climbed back into bed on the other side of the tray.

“Only the best for my favorite graduate.”

“We *both* graduated yesterday, remember?”

“That doesn’t make you any less my favorite graduate,” he said, dropping a kiss on her forehead. “My favorite part was hearing your name before I even walked,” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “That made it worth it.”

He handed her a glass, and they clinked their juice together. “To the future,” Brandy said.

Anthony tilted his cup and then turned toward the door. “Did you invite someone over to have breakfast with us?”

“Come on, you know better than that,” Brandy said, picking up a piece of bacon.

Anthony glanced at the clock and frowned. “Then who would be knocking at nine o’clock Monday morning?”

Brandy shrugged. “Probably someone selling the paper or something.”

“I got it,” he said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and grabbing a pair of sweats from the floor.

Anthony returned to the room slowly, a white envelope in his hand, his face pale but composed.

“Who was it? What did they want?”

He handed her the envelope. “An Army liaison.”

Brandy gasped, her hands trembled as she opened the envelope that had his name in bold letters on the outside. She blinked away tears as she read.

“You have to report to Billups Convention Center in three days for the initial deployment briefing. Three days?”

He nodded. “I didn’t think it would be this fast.”

The silence between them grew heavy, filled with unspoken weight of inevitable separation. Brandy returned the letter to the envelope.

“You’re really going.”

“I have to,” Anthony said gently. “It’s something I need to do for us.”

Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded. She scooted over, and he sank onto the bed beside her. Their breakfast sat forgotten as Brandy leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Then let’s not waste a second of the next three days.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Not one second.”

2007

The soft clinking of silverware and the low hum of conversation filled the cozy Manhattan bistro. The glow of golden light of the chandeliers casted a warm hue over the room. Brandy sat across from her husband, Marcus, sipping a glass of red wine while their three-year-old daughter, Layla, happily colored on a kids' menu with a purple crayon.

"...and then Mr. Thompson says he can tell that I was the only one who actually read the proposal." Marcus chuckled, shaking his head in amused disbelief.

"He said that in the meeting? In front of everyone?" Brandy asked with a gasp.

"Yes! I know, right. So, guess who's now running point on the whole damn thing?"

Brandy laughed. "Congratulations, honey. I'm proud of you. You should try being the grown-up more often," she added with a laughing grin.

Marcus laughed. "You're a barrel of laughs today, aren't you."

Layla looked up. "Daddy's the boss?"

Marcus grinned. "Something like that, sweetheart."

More people entered the dining room, and a familiar voice caught her attention. She turned and her fork dropped heavily to her plate.

“Hon, you, okay?”

The host walked a man across the room, gently ushering a woman beside him with a small boy holding his hand. He left the woman and the boy at the table and returned to the host desk. His walk, his profile, the curve of his jaw.. Without a word, Brandy abruptly rose from her seat shaking the table.

“Babe?” Marcus asked, brows raised. “What’s—”

“Bathroom,” she murmured, bringing her attention back to the table. “Be right back.”

She weaved quickly through the tables, her heels clicking softly on the floor. When she neared the host stand, Anthony turned and gasped.

“E-Jay?”

The sound of her nickname made her heart flutter and all the feelings for him came rushing back.

“Anthony,” she whispered.

He stepped forward, almost in slow motion, then suddenly wrapped his arms around her in a hug so tight it squeezed the air from her lungs. She hugged him back just as hard.

“Oh my God,” she breathed as they pulled away from each other.

“You’re really here.”

He grinned. “And you’re still short...and delicate. Sorry about that”

She swatted his arm, laughing. “You’re just big and still full of it apparently.”

“Wow, it's great to see you. You look— I mean— What's new with you?”

“Well, I have a three-year-old daughter, Layla. She’s at the table with my husband.”

Anthony’s eyes widened. “Oh, you’re married?”

Brandy nodded. “Yes, to Marcus for five years now. He’s amazing.

We live just across the park.”

Anthony blinked. “You live here in the city? We’re in SoHo.”

“*We?*”

“Oh, umm, yes, I’m— I’m married, too.” They stood silent for a moment.

“Here is the booster seat you asked for, Dr Mitchell,” the host said, breaking their silence.

Anthony hesitated but finally turned away from her. “Yeah, thanks,” he said, tucking the seat under his arm.

“*Dr Mitchell?* So, you finished medical school, huh?”

“A little later than I planned to but, yes. I finished.”

“No, no, that's good. You stuck to your plans.”

Their eyes met again, stopping them from doing anything else. Anthony shook his head and took a step back.

“So, would you like to...?”

“I'd love to meet them,” she said with a smile.

Anthony led the way to his table. “Brandy, this is my wife, Vanessa and that's my son, Isaiah. He's five.”

Brandy smiled warmly. “Hello Vanessa. He's adorable.”

“Brandy? You mean the *best friend* Brandy?”

Brandy chuckled and swatted him playfully. “So, you been talking about me, huh?”

“According to Anthony, you and Dex make up his best childhood memories,” Vanessa explained with a smile.

“Oh my gosh. Are you still hanging out with Dex, the college playboy?”

“College playboy? Well, I don't remember hearing that story. Sounds like we need to talk, Brandy. “

“Anytime, Vanessa. Is it okay that I take Anthony over to meet my husband? “

“No, no, go ahead, Anthony. I'll order us a drink, okay?”

“Thanks babe. I'll be right back.”

Anthony secured Isaiah to the booster seat then followed her over to Marcus and Layla.

“Sweetheart, this is an old friend of mine, Dr Anthony Mitchell.”

Marcus stood and shook his hand. “Marcus Davis, this is our daughter, Layla. “

“Nice to meet you, Marcus. Wow, Brandy. You created a mini-me. She's beautiful.” Anthony cupped Layla's face then turned to Marcus. “We should get together sometime, the four of us,” he offered. “It's hard to find good adult friends.”

“Sounds good. Babe, you and Anthony exchange numbers and we'll mesh our schedules to make that happen.”

“Sure, okay.”

“iPhone or android?” Anthony asked, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“iPhone,” she said, reaching for her purse.

“Good, I can airdrop you my information and Vanessa's number, too, since you guys hit it off so well,” he added with a laugh.

“Okay, cool. We'll be in touch.”

Anthony put his phone back in his pocket and reached his hand out. “Nice meeting you, Marcus. Vanessa and I will be in touch.”

“I'll be waiting,” Marcus said, giving his hand one last shake.

“It was great seeing you again, Brandy.”

“You too, Anthony. “

She gave him a short, but real hug before Anthony returned to his table. Brandy slid back into her seat, smoothing the front of her dress using it to calm the flurry of emotions racing through her mind. Marcus watched her with an amused, knowing smile as he lifted his drink.

“Well, that was some bathroom break,” he said with a raised brow.

Brandy gave a soft smile and picked up her wine glass. “Okay, okay, sorry about that. I saw him come in and wanted to make sure it was him,” she confessed.

Marcus leaned across the table. “So, that was *the Anthony*, huh?”

She chuckled. “Yes, babe, that Anthony.”

“Huh, not a bad looking guy, still muscled up with a military posture and smitten eyes for the most beautiful girl in the world,” his voice low and playful when he winked at her.

“Oh, stop it,” Brandy said, chuckling as she cut into her chicken. “I think that was shock, not smitten. He’s married. I’m married and we both have our families.”

“Uh huh, good thing too. People would have to pay for the fight we would have had over my wife.”

“Marcus, please, you know dang gone well it would never come to that.”

Marcus grinned. “Uh huh, well I was just letting you know that I was ready to bring it.”

Brandy chuckled. “*Bring it*, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I’m ready.”

“Aww, thanks honey. It’s nice to know that chivalry isn’t dead.” They stared at one another for a moment before they laughed.

“All right, all right, but seriously, I don’t mind. He was your best friend and you guys’ lost touch. I think it’s kind of cool that you guys bumped into each other to reconnect. As long as there’s no weird tension, I’d love to get to know him and his wife. He’s right. It is hard to find adult friends.”

Brandy reached across the table to take his hand. “Thanks, Marcus. I appreciate that.”

He squeezed back. “So, drinks sometime with the Mitchells?” She nodded. “I will set something up for next week.”

Brandy accepted the glass from the waitress. “Thank you.”

Just as she took a sip Anthony walked in. He ordered a drink at the bar then joined her at the table. She stood and they hugged.

“Look at you, E-Jay. It’s been ten years since I last saw you and you don’t look a day older,” he said with a small smile.

“Thank you. I can't say the same. You look older, maybe a little wiser, but you still look good.”

“Thanks. The Army will definitely age you up.” He took a long gulp from his glass. “You know, I had to remember to call you Brandy around other people. You haven't been Brandy to me for a long time.”

“Yeah, it was kind of strange for me to hear my real name come out of your mouth.”

Anthony nodded and swirled his glass. She took another then turned to him.

“Well then, I think that's enough chit chat, don't you?”

He nodded. “You're right. I owe you an explanation,” he said, voice low.

Brandy tilted her head. “You think?”

He winced a little, then nodded, rubbing a thumb along the rim of his glass. “I didn't ghost you.” Brandy sputtered.

“I swear it's true.”

She side-eyed him.

Anthony lifted his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, I mean I didn't ghost you *on purpose*.”

She stared at him with narrowed eyes as she drank.

“Right after boot camp I was on a plane to Bosnia. Everything changed so fast,” he explained.

Her breath caught. “Bosnia?”

Anthony nodded. “I went there in nineteen ninety-nine and didn’t come back until two thousand two.”

She nodded. “So that’s why the letters stopped.”

“Uh huh, and when I returned stateside, they dropped me off in Colorado to decompress. I was discharged so I decided to just stay there and finally finish veterinary school.”

Brandy gave him a sad smile. “Did you even try to find me?”

“I had no idea where to start. I mean, I did what I could. I got on

Myspace and that Facebook thing in hopes that you were on there.”

She shook her head and blew out a breath. “No, you wouldn’t have found me like that. I was already a Davis.”

“I waited for you, Anthony,” she told him, anger lacing her words. “I waited for *two years*. Your birthday, my birthday, Christmases, I thought maybe, just maybe, you’d walk through a door on one of them to surprise me.”

“I’m so sorry.” His voice tightened as he spoke. “I should’ve tried harder.”

“When I saw you at the restaurant last week I almost fell out of my chair. Ten years, Anthony, not knowing *anything*. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?”

“I know, I can't imagine— All I can say is I'm sorry.”

Brandy shook her head and exhaled slowly. “No, no, I get it now. You *couldn't*, but back then I had no clue what happened to you. I was so mad at you...and hurt. I didn't even know if you were dead or alive.”

“I know, I know. You have to know I would never hurt you on purpose.”

The tears in his eyes broke her heart. She covered his hand and squeezed it.

“I know that, Anthony. I waited for two years, but after a while, I had to move on. I couldn't put my life on hold any longer. I met Marcus and I got married.”

“I understand.”

“Marcus is a good man, and I do love him. He sees me.”

“Yeah, Vanessa's a good woman. She's strong and smart, she's Robin to my Batman.” Anthony's voice dropped. “I'll never stop loving you,

E-Jay.”

The confession hung between them with heavy silence. Brandy's eyes welled, but she didn't look away.

“I know and I'll never stop loving you either, but we missed the window for anything more. Whatever was meant to be, it can't be now. Our friendship is all we have now.”

He nodded slowly, reaching for his drink. “We started as friends. We’ll always have something special.”

Brandy raised her glass. “To the friendship that remains.”

Anthony clinked his glass to hers. “To the love that doesn’t have to end to change.”

2017

The wind rustled the amber leaves overhead as Brandy sat on their old meeting bench in Central Park. She adjusted her scarf and sipped her chai.

“I hope you brought one of those for me to knock this chill off,” someone said.

Smiling at the familiar voice, she turned to see Anthony walking slowly toward her. She stood as he approached. Neither of them said another word. They hugged for long moments and then sat down before she handed him a cup.

“You look good. I saw your pics online of you and Marcus on that cruise.”

Brandy chuckled. “We had a blast. I'm hooked on those things. I feel like I can call myself an official cruiser now that we've taken three of them.

You should try one.”

Anthony nodded and took a long drink. “Nah, I don't think cruising alone is for me. How's Marcus and the girls?”

“Marcus is good. The girls are growing up fast. Did you see their ballet recital pics on my page? I posted last week.”

“Yes, they were beautiful.”

“How's Isaiah? Is he still doing baseball? I know it's not baseball season, but I don't remember seeing any recent pictures of him on your page.”

“No, he's on the basketball team now. I think he's found his niche there. I've been slipping on my posting. Isiah's a good kid. He gets good grades, and he even helps around the house. Yeah, he's the reason I'm okay and didn't spiral the drain. We leaned on each other.”

“I'm really sorry about Vanessa. I would've kept better touch after the funeral, but I thought it best to keep a respectable distance.”

“I understand but just know that you could never be an intrusion in my life. The more you I have the better.”

Brandy smiled and took his hand. “Are you okay?”

Anthony shrugged. “It's been over a year now. Sometimes it feels like yesterday and sometimes like a whole lifetime ago, you know?”

“People say with time the pain of loss eases with time. Is it easing for you?”

He nodded slowly. “I'm getting there. Some days are still harder than others. Knowing that all I have from the accident is a couple of scars and a limp and Vanessa didn't walk away at all, that's the hard part.”

“I can't even imagine what that feels like.”

Poignant silence fell between them before Anthony spoke again.

“I won’t marry anyone else, E-jay, if I can’t marry you.” She gasped and turned to him.

“Vanessa was a good woman, and I did love her, but the only woman I ever pictured spending forever with was you. If I can't marry you, I won't marry at all.”

Her heart twisted. “Anthony—”

He held up a hand gently. “I know you’re married, and I would never disrespect that, but I don't want to lose you in my life. Life is too short to not keep the people who matter close to you.”

“You will always matter to me, and you will never lose me. I think Marcus understands that. You’re a big part of my life.”

Anthony smiled. “Then let’s keep showing up for each other. However, we can.”

Brandy lifted her cup toward him. He tapped his to hers.

“To friendship,” she said softly.

“To what’s always been,” he replied.

2020

Brandy brought the bowl of popcorn from the kitchen under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other to her bedroom. To finish her area, she put the laptop on the TV tray and her phone beside it, but before she put it down it rang. Her heart soared. She accepted the call, and Anthony's face appeared.

“You made it.”

“Wouldn't miss it for anything,” Anthony replied. “You got your wine and popcorn?”

Brandy tilted her phone so he could see both.

“Okay, I see your setup is all that,” he teased. “Here's mine,” he said, and his chair appeared on the screen with a small table in front of it.

“Okay, but where's your food?”

The screen turned and another table held burgers and a soda.

“I need more than popcorn.”

Brandy laughed. “So, what's the movie for today?”

“It's throwback Thursday so let's watch an old school movie. How about Planet of the Apes, the one with Charlton Heston. I checked the app earlier and saw it was still playing even though it's past Easter.”

“That'll work. Just don't start without me like you did last time. It sounded like we had an echo because your movie was a few seconds in front of me,” she said, pointing at the screen.

Anthony chuckled.

“I have to admit, face timing with you and these movie nights have kept me out of crazy town. If I didn't have someone to talk to or laugh with, this solitary confinement would have swallowed me whole. Being single after being married for so long takes some readjusting.”

Anthony nodded. “Yeah. Same here. Some days, the house feels so empty with just me and Isaiah. Hearing your voice helps out.”

“How's Isaiah doing with the lock down?”

“Well, he's a senior this year, so with school being online he's breezing right through. He's a little upset about his prom being cancelled because of the covid, but other than that I think he's handling it well. He likes that I'm not telling him to get off his video game, so I think it evens out for him.”

Anthony laughed and Brandy laughed with him.

“How are you and the girls settling in?”

“They miss ballet and meeting with their girl scout troop more than being out of school. That has been their only complaint.”

“You have been working from home, too, huh?”

Yeah, but it's no biggie for me. I've been doing that off and on since the divorce. Your practice must be shut down, huh?"

"Yeah, but they're talking about opening everything up again. I can see pets by appointment and limit who comes into the office to only staff. We'll be okay. Are you guys okay with this lockdown? Can you pay your bills? You guys are eating, right?"

Brandy chuckled. "We're fine, Anthony. Between the stimulus check and my savings, we're okay."

"Uh, uh, you shouldn't be going through your savings. I'm going to Zelle you some money. I want you to let me know if you need anything else. Promise me, E-jay. If you need more, you'll call me."

"I promise, Anthony, and thank you."

"How do you like being back in Brooklyn?"

"I love being back in Brooklyn. Even though I'm downtown and not near the beach, being here reminds me of us. The streets outside the brownstone are a little eerie, since nobody is out there because of the pandemic, but it's doable. How is it out there?"

"The same, but I've seen people out the window hanging out in the park without their masks. Walking around Central Park you can actually socially distance and breathe fresh air without being stuck in the house."

"Huh, I've seen people out on the promenade. Maybe that's what's happening over there. No mask, being outside, chilling."

“Check your time. We have to synchronize so we can start at the same time,” he said, adjusting his screen. “The movie is about to come on.”

“Okay, the credits are rolling on the movie that just went off. You ready? *On* three, not after.”

“I know, I know!” he laughed. “One... two... three!”

The movie started and the theme song blared through their respective speakers and when it was over they screamed the iconic line together.

“Damn you apes!” they shouted then laughed out loud.

“I love that movie. Same time next week?” she asked.

“Of course. We may be locked down, but I’m not letting go of the best and last thing that’s keeping me sane.”

She smiled. “Good. Me neither.”

2025

The event hall glowed with soft golden lights, the hum of laughter and music echoing through the space. Maya flitted between tables, straightening centerpieces and checking her phone while Layla stared at the sign above the dance floor.

“You don't think it's too gaudy, do you?”

Maya turned and grinned. “Oh no. Not at all. It's a giant glittering sign that says *fabulous fifty*, how could that be gaudy?”

Laya chuckled. “Well then, everything's perfect. Now we just need Mom to show up.”

“She'll make her grand entrance any minute now.”

The doors opened a few moments later and Brandy stepped in.

“Hi girls. Do you like it?” she asked, twirling in place.

Layla let out a wolf whistle. “Looking good, Mom.”

“Wow, Mom, you sure are wearing that sapphire jumpsuit.”

“She's right, Mom. That thang is hugging you in all the right places,” Layla added, moving closer to her.

Brandy hugged her daughters. “Girls, I love you so much. Thanks for this party. It was very sweet of you.”

“Hey, you *are* fabulous at fifty, just like the sign says. You should be celebrated.”

“Are you ready, Mom? Your guests will be arriving in a few.” Brandy smiled. “I'm ready. Let's get this party started. “

The music, friends and family filled the room. As the party continued, Brandy danced around the full dance floor greeting her friends.

“Brandy, happy birthday, girl,” a woman said, grabbing her hands.

“Mercedes, thanks for coming!”

“Girl, I want to be you when I grow up. You got a great job, good kids and a great body at *fifty*! You're a rock star!” Mercedes said, twirling her.

“Thanks,” Brandy said, moving on to the next person on the dance floor.

“Michael! Thanks for coming.”

“Wouldn't have missed it, Mrs. Davis.”

The DJ's voice echoed over the mic. “Hey everybody! It's time to give our birthday lady the shout out she deserves.”

The crowd erupted in applause and shouts.

“No happy birthday song, please,” Brandy shouted.

The crowd roared with laughter.

“Okay, okay. Since this is a fabulous fifty birthday party, it's time to slow it on down so we can catch our breath,” the DJ said with a chuckle and the music changed.

The dance floor thinned. Brandy smiled and hugged people as they left, but when she tried to leave someone blocked her way. She turned and her jaw dropped.

“Anthony!”

“May I have this dance?”

“You made it.”

“Seriously, E-Jay, you didn't think I'd miss your fiftieth, did you?” he said, pulling her into his arms.

Brandy threw her arms around him. “I can't believe you're here.”

“Come on girl, you know better than that. Nothing could keep me away.”

“Well, I haven't seen you in over a year and you haven't been in touch in months.”

“I know. I've been crazy busy with my practice.”

Brandy tilted her head. “Hey, this is our song. Did you put the DJ up to playing this song?” she asked, giving him a small grin.

Anthony palmed his chest in faux shock. “Me? Would I do that?” he asked, with a laughing grin. “By the way, you look absolutely beautiful.”

She ran her fingers over his temples. "You look good, too. I really like this."

Anthony sputtered. "That's just a little stress grey."

"Whatever it is, it looks good on you. I can't see hair during texts."

"Oooh, I like what you did there. Okay, you're right. I have been slipping in the communication department. I apologize."

"Have you? I haven't noticed with all the phone messages and answered texts I've been working with it when I reach out to your number."

"Mmm, okay, I'm feeling the hand smacks in that tone. Duly noted and I promise to do better."

Brandy smiled. "Apology accepted."

They danced to the next two songs quietly as the time they spent apart melted away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, they tell me that dinner is ready to be served. So go back to your seats and the servers will arrive at your table," the DJ announced.

Anthony offered his arm. "Shall we?"

After dinner, Anthony stood and clicked his glass with his fork.

"Okay everyone, it's time to lift your glasses."

Brandy put her glass in the air. Everyone at their table and across the room did the same.

“I just wanted to take a minute now that we’re done eating that delicious dinner that Brandy’s wonderful daughters put together.” He paused as the applause went up and spoke again when it died down.

“Today we come together to celebrate this wonderful woman being alive for fifty years. Everyone here knows how wonderful she is, an empathetic friend, a loyal coworker, a wonderful mother and my best friend for as long as I can remember. To Brandy,” he finished hoisting the glass higher.

“To Brandy,” the room repeated.

When all the clapping died down, Anthony returned to his seat. Isaih’s wife reached out to tap his hand.

“You guys have been friends since childhood, Anthony?”

“Yes, Brenda. We met in elementary school, but lost touch in middle school when her family moved to Connecticut.”

“Yup, we didn’t see her again until a random party sophomore year.”

“I spotted her across the room and through a bunch of people on the dance floor at a party,” he said, and turned to look at her.

“Uh, excuse me, *Dr Mitchell*, but that was me that spotted you through the crowd.”

“Clearly you’ve been drinking too much champagne,” Anthony said, shaking his glass at her.

Brandy laughed.

Brenda's widened. "Wait, wait. You two were a *thing*? Isaiah, you never told me that. You just said your father and Brandy were friends before you were born."

"Yeah, their friendship started when they were kids. Their *thing* happened long before me and my mom came on the scene." "Before us and our dad, too," Layla added.

"We didn't really have the chance to be a *thing*, Brenda. Life had other plans for us. We started as best friends and we've remained friends all these years," Brandy explained.

Brenda leaned back. "Wow, that's amazing. You stayed in touch all these years."

"It wasn't always consistent, but we always found our way back to each other," Anthony said, turning a smile to her.

"What about now, Dad?" Elijah asked, tilting his head. "You've been single since mom died. Maybe you guys could be together again and finally have a thing."

"So that would make us brother and sister, Isaiah instead of the play cousins we've always been," Maya said pointing at him.

Isaiah and Maya laughed.

"Hmm, there's a thought." He slid a small teddy bear across the table toward her. "Happy birthday, E-Jay."

Everyone around the table shared a look and spoke in unison.

"E-Jay?"

Brandy waved away their confusion. “It’s a long story.” She pulled the bear closer and gasped. “Is this—”

“It’s just like the one I won for you at Coney Island,” Anthony finished for her. “You spilled ice cream on it and cried because it was stained. I told you I’d win you another one.”

She chuckled. “I mean, it took you almost forty years, but okay.

Thank you, sweetie.”

Something glimmering caught her eye. A velvet string hung from the bear’s tiny paw. At the end a stunning diamond ring swung back and forth. Gasps rang out around the table like a wave. She stared at Anthony, speechless as he rose from his seat.

“Brandy, I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. Life took us down different paths when we were younger, but fate kept us criss-crossing each other’s lives so we could find our way back to each other.”

He knelt slowly; the room took in a collective breath falling silent.

“Will you finally marry me, Brandy?”

Brandy’s hand flew to her mouth, but she shook her head. “Yes, of course I will.”

“She said yes!” the DJ said.

The room erupted with cheers. Maya and Layla squealed and hugged each other.

“You’re marrying your childhood best friend, Mom,” Maya said. “That’s destiny.”

Brandy giggled. “Yeah. I guess it is.”

Anthony smiled and turned to Isaiah. “Took a few decades, but I always knew I’d find my way back to her.”

“Good job. Dad.”

“Took y’all long enough!” Layla added, grinning. Anthony slid the ring onto her finger.

“Together at last.”

“Forever this time,” Brandy added.

4D

The Golden Thread

*“Even lost love can be found when it's
bound to your soul.”*

When the moons align, time shatters and the Veil opens. Bel-lara the hunter and Alaric the gatherer, both are Phasewalkers foraging for their tribes. The Veil opens for one day every decade and the forest changes. The bond that Alaric and Bel-lara share leaves a tear in time only they can mend... if they can find each other again.

Prologue

Bellara curled beneath her furry blanket, the moons outside her window glowed silver and violet in their fullness. As she snuggled into her pillow, a golden string danced before her, waving back and forth. She lifted a brow as she watched it. The string bounced before her eyes, then rushed to the door of her room and then slowly returned to bounce in her face again.

“Okay, that's super subtle,” she muttered, pushing her cover back.

Bellara opened her bedroom door and found herself in a golden glade. The sun shined bright over an enormous valley of golden grass and soft purple orchids. Bellara took in a breath then smiled.

“Beautiful.”

Bellara walked across grass looking around then abruptly the string returned. Following it, she spotted a house in the distance. As she moved closer to it, the string stopped before and attached itself to her chest. She sucked in a sharp breath.

“What the—”

She gripped the thread, and it pulled her forward until she reached the door of the house. Inside a man lay sleeping in bed. Soon as the door closed behind her, he woke up sitting straight

up in bed. He stared at her for a moment then smiled. The single golden thread floated between them, then another and another, binding, twisting onto itself until it was a golden cord. It suspended itself in the air, glowing gently. Stretching out, the cord moved forward and plunged directly into Alaric's chest. They both took a breath. They reached for the cord at the same time and looked up as their eyes met.

"I know you," she said.

"I know you," he replied at the same time.

"You're...Alaric. "

"Bellara," he whispered.

Alaric slid out of bed and held onto the cord to move closer to her. The cord shortened as he moved. Their fingers touched as they stood face to face. They looked into each other's eyes and the thread brightened.

Alaric smiled. "It's you."

"It's us," Bellara replied.

Chapter 1

In the sky above the western coast of Selenophile the two moons, Lunaxis and Eversyl, began to eclipse. The murky green clouds caught between dusk and distortion shimmered against the pink of the shifting sky. Lunaxis, the larger of the two, began its slow wane into alignment with Eversyl. Bellara strode across the moss-slick stone bridge that led to the Echoing Roost. The crackling in the air made the hairs on her arms stand up. Giving her arms a quick shake, she shook her head.

“Stupid phase-static.”

Bellara reached the checkpoint, a giant root-encased dome pulsing gently with bioluminescent threads. A guard stood outside the compound. He greeted her with a smile.

“Bellara, you ready to do this?” he asked, clapping her hand giving it a hard shake.

She adjusted the bow strapped across her back. “Ready and able, Talan. Is my unit here?”

“Yup. Everyone is inside waiting on you.”

“Good. I want us inside the Veil before the pull becomes erratic.”

Inside the Roost, gatherers and scientists milled around preparing for the Veil. She spotted her hunters across the room, lean and sharp-eyed, standing in a semicircle around a suspended map of Selenophile and walked toward them.

“Captain,” one of them greeted as she approached.

Bellara held up a hand. “At ease, Vess. Report.”

Vess pointed to the glowing silver points on the map. “This is the map from the last opening. It shows the safe paths to take us to the lake, the area where the birds’ dwell and the pastures where the wild boar and deer frequent.”

Bellara nodded. “Then we advance prep. I don’t want to wait for the drums. It wastes time. We’ll phase through here,” she paused to point at the map. “Right at Rifline,” she continued. “Is that clear?” “Yes, Captain,” they shouted in unison.

“I want full sensory logs, no assumptions. No heroics. Document when, where and how you acquired the enhanced meat. Our job is to hunt and document for future generations, not vanish into legend. Make sure you’re wearing the leather that the tanners made especially for the Veil. They have the bark, ash, and eclipse-ink dyed into them to help us blend in with the changing trees.”

“Yes, Captain,” the group said in agreement.

“Vess, you and Benti will track the wild boar. Westro, you and Menorca will track the birds.” The two groups nodded, and Bellara turned to the map and pointed to the lake. “Devenary, you will be with Sennie to retrieve the fish.”

“Captain, I had hoped I could be with you and hunt the deer.”

“Not this time, Devenary. During the last alignment you were a gatherer. You cannot just jump into the hunt like that. Sennie will show you all you need to know at the lake. Understood?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Good. Carver, you’ll seek deer with me. Alright everyone, it’s just a few hours before full eclipse. Get your gear ready and then get some rest.”

As her team prepared, Bellara looked through a window of the Roost. A line of light, too straight to be natural, divided the horizon. She left her group to follow the winding stairs to the roof. With a sigh, she gripped the railing and looked up.

“It’s almost time.”

Alaric pressed his palm to the branch-woven gate of the Gathererspire. The ancient roots read his identity and parted with a deep sigh, exhaling a breath that smelled of moss. Inside, light filtered brightly through the webbed canopies from the closeness of the two moons. The gatherer Phasewalkers were assembling into small bands. Dressed in robes lined with phase-thread and scent-dampening gloves, they donned time-sensing pendants and joined their designated groups. The air buzzed with excited chatter of rare herbs, flowers and healing bark. Alaric moved through them, focused. His satchel was already packed with spectral shears, a moon-reactive journal and memory jars to store time-locked flowers before they could vanish.

“Alaric.”

He turned to scan the immediate area. “Yes ma'am.”

“A moment please.”

“Of course, Elder Mara, but I was on the way to join my team. The Veil is about to open.”

“I know, this won't take long. Have you mapped your approach to the Blooming Verge?”

“Yes, I've checked it against the notes from the last Veil pulse lines. There was a new swell forming by the mirrored pond that should be ready now.”

“Excellent. Be sure to go to the Heartroot. There you should find the Glowing Willow flower. Make sure you gather as many as you can. We are almost out of them.”

Alaric nodded. “Duly noted.”

“Be cautious in the Heartroot, Alaric. The phase is strong there. It may be difficult to know what is tangible and what's not. Make sure you bring a few memory jars.”

Alaric smiled and gave his satchel a pat. “I'm on top of it.”

“Very well, off with you then.”

Alaric left the compound to join his crew and looked up at the sky. Lunaxis finished its journey to cover Eversyl. Completely seated directly in front of its lesser counterpart, Eversyl was a dark circle with a glowing ring around it that was Lunaxis, and

the Veil opened. Alaric tapped the pendant on his chest and turned to his team.

“Remember your routes. We’ve only got twenty-four hours. See you on the other side,” he added with a smile.

Chapter 2

The forest pulsed like a living heartbeat as Bellara moved through the foliage stalking her first prey. With Lunaxis and Eversyl at full eclipse, shafts of gold and violet light through the trees lit her way. A vibration tickled her senses, subtle and rhythmic. Bellara crouched low to pinch the soil. She nodded slowly, but then something stronger turned her head. A warm sensation across her chest just under where her phase pendant rested. She changed direction to follow the pull. Mist curled around her calves as she walked. Trees arched inward, forming a natural archway toward a glowing hollow ahead. Her senses continued to buzz as she moved closer. She pulled an arrow from her quiver and cocked her bow preparing to shoot as soon as the deer was in sight. As she crept closer, a movement to the left shifted her gaze. Adjusting her bow, she aimed at a creature half covered in glowing flowers, but when it lifted its head, she gasped.

What the—

Bellara blinked a few times looking around for the deer, but there wasn't one. To her surprise she was sure the pull that brought her to the grove came from a man that knelt within a cradle of flowers. She lowered her weapon and stepped forward. The man turned toward her. He stood slowly and their eyes met. A golden shimmer wafted through the trees and the forest held its breath. Time, space and sound all seemed to stop.

“You— You’re...Alaric,” she breathed, breaking the eerie silence.

“Bellara,” he whispered.

The golden shimmer passed between them.

“I don't understand. I had a dream—”

“It was a house in a golden grass field,” he added.

“You were in the house,” she confirmed.

“You came in and—” He paused in thought. “A golden cord?”

“The golden cord,” she whispered, touching her chest.

“The golden cord,” he repeated, touching his chest, too.

“How are you here?” she whispered.

“I am a gatherer from the eastern coast here to get Glowing Willow flowers for my tribe,” he explained, gesturing toward the patch of flora around him.

“I'm from the western coast. I'm a hunter. How could you know about a dream I had almost twelve years ago.”

He smiled. “I don't know, but I had the same dream right around that time.”

Bellara reached out hesitantly. “What if you're not real? This could just be a phase delusion.”

He clasped her hand gently. “Then I don't want to wake from it.”

They stood in the glow of the Heartroot. Alaric pulled her gently toward him. Just before their lips touched, a sharp rustle caught her attention and voices in the distance brought her back to their present circumstances.

Alaric squeezed her hand. "I am real, Bellara."

"We have to go."

"Yes, I know," he said, plucking one of the flowers and handing it to her. "I will find you again."

Bellara emerged from the forest's wild shimmer just before dawn. She hauled the gravity-yoked sled behind her with two clean kills. She blinked, trying to steady herself as the world returned to its normal rhythm. Gone were the golden pulses and breathless stillness. The Veil's enchantment was still in effect even as the sun rose. Her second in command waited for her just outside the Roost.

"Is your team ready, Brale?"

"Yes, Captain. Is that two stags?" he asked, looking past her. "Now you're just showing off."

Bellara chuckled and continued on her way. "Good luck in there."

Her hunters returned with their own prizes as the second team entered the Veil. Entering the Roost, Bellara gave the room a quick glance then turned left.

“Hello, Teyana.”

“Good Captain, what do you have for my preservation team today?”

“Two stags and I remembered what you said and brought them back whole. The bones are intact, too. Nothing is broken.”

“Excellent. It's easier for us to process the bones, teeth, and antlers when they're not damaged and we can remove them from the carcasses. The tanners prefer to remove the hides from the muscles and then the connective tissue themselves, too.” Teyana looked the animals over. “Yes, these coats will be good for Phasewalker gear. I'll take it from here. Who's next?”

“How is your haul, Devanary?”

“Not bad, Captain,” he reported, pushing the basket on the table.

“Okay let's see,” Teyana said, flipping the top open. “Not bad. I count nineteen.”

“Yeah, number twenty was a little small. So, I threw it back. These are big enough for you to use, right?”

She lifted one into the air, turning it about. “Yes, they're a good size. The tanners and healers are going to love these?”

“Tanners *and* healers will be able to use them?”

“Yeah. I know the tanners and use the fish bone as needles to sew the phase hides together and the scales to make our clothes

waterproof, but what are the healers using the fish for, Teyana?” Bellara asked.

“The healers dry out the flesh and keep it stored. It helps to relieve the loose stool sickness when the children drink dirty water,” she explained.

“Yeah, I could see that.”

Bellara left them to finish their work, and she took the winding path to the ridge, toward the ancient hollow. Someone sat in a chair on the ridge. Bellara quietly stood beside her.

“You know, I was twelve years old when I saw the Veil for the first time,” the woman mentioned without turning to her. “I’ve seen it open seven times since and it’s spectacular each time. You never get used to its splendor.”

“I didn’t know that. How did you see one so young?”

“My mother was a Phasewalker. Working with and learning about the Veil has been my life’s work.”

Bellara dropped to one knee beside her, setting down her pouch. “That’s why I’m here. No one knows the Veil better than you do, Elder Sebor. I—I think I saw someone in the Veil, a man, when I was in the Heartroot,” she said.

Elder Sebor turned a lifted brow to her. “Someone? You’re talking about someone outside your team or a vision?”

Bellara shrugged. “I don’t really know. He seemed real. We held hands.”

“Well, you know things are not what they seem during the Veil.”

Bellara nodded. “Yes, but he seemed very real. He said he was a gatherer, and he gave me this before we parted.” She handed the elder the glowing flower.

“This is a Glowing Willow. I hope our gatherers retrieve some of these. They're very powerful for healing. You say a man gave this to you when you were in the Heartroot?”

“Hmm, I've never heard of a vision handing someone something tangible. Are you sure you weren't disoriented by the phase and picked this flower yourself?” Sebor asked with a knowing chuckle.

Bellara laughed. “No, I'm not sure.”

“Uh huh, well, let's just chalk it up to one of those crazy encounters that happen during the phase,” she concluded. “You should plant this. In a year or so it will bloom beautifully.”

“Yeah, maybe you're right. I'm going to complete my logs and then catch up with my team. Talk to you later.”

Chapter 3

The day after the celestial convergence, the gatherer's encampment pulsed with unease. The pale sky was void of its usual pink and purple hues. The Veil had passed, but it hadn't closed cleanly. Trees shimmered in and out of phase while others pulled leaves from ground to reattach them to branches in reverse. Light fractured in strange places. Golden shafts of sunlight hung still in the air like glass. Alaric reached for a flower that bloomed in midair, suspended along invisible seams in the rift. He shook his head and hurried back to Gatherspire.

Elders, phase-masters, and scholars flooded into the arbor hall, their robes trailing through the dried moss floors. Whispers moved through the air alerting everyone nearby that something was wrong. Alaric followed the last to enter and peered through the door of the council chamber. A glowing projection of the forest spun overhead.

"An anomaly must have occurred during the final cycle," a man explained, pointing to the screen above. "See here, a rift has opened in the Heartroot."

"Can you tell who was in the Heartroot at the time, Master Viera?" a woman asked him. "Maybe they saw something and can give us some insight to what may have happened. "

Master Viera turned to his left. "Lys, can you tell?"

Lys pulled a scanner from his pouch and tapped on the screen. “Yes, it looks like a gatherer’s ID. Gatherer number four-seven-zero-zero-two. That is—”

“That’s me,” Alaric supplied, pushing the door open.

“Alaric, you were in the Heartroot?”

“Yes, Master Viera. I was picking Glowing Willow flowers.”

“It looks like time is bent somehow. Is that affecting anything outside the forest?”

“Has anyone been outside lately? Do we know what’s going on out there?” Lys asked.

“On the way here, I saw flowers growing in mid-air and the sky isn’t the right color either,” Alaric shared.

Master Viera pointed to the map. “Hmm, see how this spot looks like

it’s on fire?”

“Oh no!”

“Not to worry, Doctor. It’s not true fire, the distortion just makes the mark look like fire on the projection,” Master Viera assured her.

“We traced the distortion in the dimensional weave. It aligns with the moment you were in the Heartroot, Alaric,” Lys confirmed. “What happened?”

“Well, while I was gathering the flowers in the Heartroot I thought I was alone, but then she appeared. A woman.”

“A woman? Did you touch?” Master Viera asked.

Alaric hesitated for a moment. “Only briefly. We held hands.”

“Okay, from the beginning, tell us what happened?”

“I met a woman, a hunter named Bellara.”

“A hunter? One of ours?”

“No. She said she was from the West coast.”

“Okay, please continue.”

“Well, she almost shot me,” he reminisced with a chuckle. “I think she thought I was a deer or something at first but when she saw it was me, she lowered her bow.”

“What else happened, Alaric?”

Alaric shrugged. “Nothing really, Dr Niah. We just talked.”

“About what?”

“It was kinda strange because we talked about having the same dream when we were younger.”

Master Viera and Dr Niah shared a glance.

“A shared dream? About what?” the doctor asked.

“Well, we met at a house in a golden field. She walked in with a golden cord attached to her chest and the cord pushed itself into me when she moved closer to me.”

Lys gasped. “That golden thread was a soul-bond. Your connection resonated so strongly that it tore open a rift in the time fold. A true emotional convergence. One hasn’t been documented in one hundred cycles.”

“A thousand years?”

“Yes, your bond created a harmonic surge that made a rift in the Veil, but it's unstable and there's another downside.” “What’s the downside,” Alaric asked. “The Dimshade,” Dr Niah answered.

“*The Dimshade?* I thought that was a myth.”

“The Dimshade is an ancient being that feeds on fractured soul-threads. The council has no problem with couples working together during the Veil conversion, but we never send them in together for this reason. We didn’t want to take the chance of waking the Dimshade. “

“Yes, it would seem that your bond with Bellara was powerful enough to wake it,” Lys confirmed.

“How can that be? We didn’t even know we existed until we met in the Heartroot. We thought each other was a dream.”

“When one's soul is connected to another, they find each other no matter the circumstances,” Dr Niah said with a knowing grin. “It just so happens that you met your soulmate during the

Veil. The rift it caused will not just unravel the forest, but it will continue through our whole world.”

“So, Bellara and I did this?”

“Yes, but not intentionally,” Master Viera told him with a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“But how? We just held hands and talked about the dream we both had when we were younger.”

“It was the unfinished bond that caused the tear. You acknowledged the connection, but you didn’t do anything about it. That’s the fractured soul-thread,” Dr Niah explained.

“Since it’s my fault, I want to fix it. What do I have to do?”

“Well, it’s not just you that has to fix it.”

Master Viera, Dr Niah and Alaric turned to the voice.

“What do you mean, Terra?” Dr Niah asked.

“Alaric and—What’s the woman’s name?”

“Bellara,” Alaric supplied.

“Yes, Bellara, thank you. Because both of you were in the Heartroot when you shared a connection, both of you have to be in the Heartroot to fix it,” Terra explained.

“Did you see a gold shimmer while you were with her?”

“Yes, we did. It passed between us and then through the trees. Why?”

“That golden shimmer disrupted that natural forming silver threads that hold the Veil together.”

Alaric took in a breath. “So, we broke it?”

“Luckily, no, but it is seriously stretched enough to tear. That's what the Dimshade will use to escape. It has to be fixed before he can push through it.”

“How do we do that?”

“The Veil is still open in places it should not be. The forest is trying to heal itself, but it can't do it without your help.”

“Terra is correct. The soul-thread has to be consciously mended from inside the rift,” Lys chimed in. “The Veil cannot fully close until it rights itself.”

“The longer we wait the more time the Dimshade has to work on the tear,” Dr Niah shared.

“So, we have to find Bellara. How do we do that?”

“You'll have to go to her so you can enter the Veil together,” Terra told him.

“And then what?”

“The final act has to be a soul vow. That's an acknowledgement of your bond and promise to be true to each other. That will bind you together forever, seal the Heartroot and calm the chaos that's allowing the

Dimshade to escape.”

Alaric nodded. "Alright, how do we begin?"

"First you need to go see Lira. He will give you a rider bracelet to surf the currents," Terra told him. "I will meet you there with final instructions."

"Alaric, long time no see. Terra told me you were coming. You want to travel to the east coast side of the forest, huh?"

"Hi, Lira. Yeah, I'm trying to find a woman that lives there. She's a hunter."

"Ooo, a hunter," he teased, tapping on the computer. "Okay, the east-siders call their home the...Echoing Roost. Is that where you want to go?"

"Yes. How can you get me there?"

"Well," he paused to study his screen. "The Echoing Roost isn't near the coastline like Gatherspire is. You can travel over the ocean's sliprail, but then you'd have to walk from the beach. Not a terrible walk, but if time is of the essence..." He left his sentence unfinished to look over his shoulder at him with a raised brow.

Alaric smiled. "Yes, the faster the better."

"Well, then you could use the transit tunnels or ride the time stream."

"What's the difference?"

“If you ride the time stream, I can put you outside the forest right near their camp. If you want to go by ground, since we are so close to the ocean, you'll have to go to the hunter's village to pick one up.”

Alaric shook his head. “Uh. uh. That's a day's walk away. Let's just do the time stream.”

Lira nodded and tapped on the console again. “Alright, the coordinates are locked in for the Echoing Roost,” he said, then locked a watch to his wrist.

“So, what do I do with it?”

“Do? You don't have to actually do anything. The Time Watch keeps you focused on your destination in time.”

“How long should this trip take?”

“Well, you'll be basically surfing a raw time stream so it shouldn't take only a few minutes to get over there. However, with all the time distortions and the Veil messing up, it would help if you focused on where you're going.”

Alaric nodded. “Got it. Anything else?”

“Just hold on. It may be a bumpy ride.”

Alaric laid back on the table he rested on. He steadied his breathing and when his body started to vibrate, he closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes again, everything around him was a blur. Timelines shot past him looking like fast-moving streaks of light. He started to feel nauseous as the light currents

carried him. Just before he closed his eyes again, a presence emerged in the flow. Alaric couldn't really see it, but he definitely felt it. The pressing cold that came off of it seeped to his bones. It slithered all around him, raising the hair on his arms as it whispered discouraging remarks.

She's not real, you know. You made her up. Go back. You'll never find her.

You're lying. She's real and we're going to fix the tear and send you back where you belong.

The creature shrieked. Time snapped and the stream Alaric rode fractured. He was thrown sideways through reality and then BAM. Bark, roots and the smell of moss all around him. He landed hard, knocking the breath out of him. Groaning, he rubbed his head and looked up. The green clouds and purple sky made him frown.

“How did the Dimshade get in the timestream with me?”

He pushed himself up slowly, holding his head as he stood.

“Well, I'm in the Heartroot, but where? Which side?”

Alaric stumbled forward, branches clawed at his jacket. The forest breathed strangely, deep, ragged inhales that made the ground pulse underfoot. Leaves hovered in midair, caught in a suspended fall that never finished. Some trees bent backward like they were rewinding. Others flickered between sapling and decay in the same heartbeat. He pressed on. The weight of the Dimshade's words clung to him, making him doubt himself.

Abruptly the stabilizer on his wrist beeped erratically, skipping seconds. His muscles started aching and his hands trembled with exhaustion. He paused to rub his legs and everything went dark.

“Alaric? Alaric!” someone shouted, giving him a shake.

His vision cleared and he saw Lira and Terra standing over him.

“Are you alright? You’ve been gone for *three days!*” “Three days?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Terra said, putting electrodes on his temples and chest.

“It—it’s only been a few hours.”

Lira pressed a canteen to his lips. “Lay still while Terra gets your vitals. How do you feel?”

“You were swallowed by the time fractures. We almost gave up the thread signal and physically sent someone to the east coast camp to find you,” Terra told him. “When we saw the lines were looking better, we tried one more time and yanked you back as soon as they straightened out.”

“Why?”

“Alaric, you were gone for *three days*. The Dimshade is almost through,” Lira repeated.

Alaric took another drink and sat up. “If that's the case, I have to try again. The Dimshade was in the stream with me.”

“This is dangerous, Alaric. Are you sure you want to try it again? I can’t say for sure that you will make it there this time either. The time fluxes are crazy,” Terra said.

“If Bellara and I don’t get into that rift and fix it things will just get worse. The Dimshade will be out causing chaos everywhere. That’s not something any of us want to happen.”

Lira sighed and nodded. “Alright. I know, you’re right. Let me set it up again, but please, be careful.”

Chapter 4

Bellara sat curled near the watch window, gazing into the twilight haze. The shimmering boundary where the forest ended should have closed days ago. Time bubbles floated around outside, and the forest pulsed erratically. Suddenly the alert bell chimed. She came out of the room and looked around.

“What's going on?”

“A man just came out of the forest,” someone shouted on their way out of the Roost.

By the time she reached the entrance hall, two Roost sentinels were dragging a limp, mud-covered figure through the doorway. One look at the man made her heart skip a beat. Disheveled with scratched up skin and cracked lips, she still recognized him.

Alaric.

She ran down to meet the sentinels stopping them as they entered the Roost. Alaric, half-conscious, groaned and looked up at her.

“Bellara...”

Bellara gasped and fell to her knees beside him, cradling his face in her hands.

“I’m here. I’m here, Alaric. You found me.”

He drifted in and out, murmuring nonsense before he finally passed out. The healers tended to his wounds, but it was nearly dawn before he woke, clear-eyed.

“Bellara?”

She took his hand. “I’m here, Alaric.”

He smiled. “I knew I’d find you.” Alaric sat up with a groan. “The Veil didn’t close completely.”

“Yes, we noticed that, but why were you looking for me?”

“The rift, we caused it.”

“What do you mean we caused it?”

“Our connection, we are soul-bonded,” he told her standing up. “It’s not just a bond; it’s the key to fixing everything.” “How can that be?”

“When we met, we triggered an old compression line beneath the Heartroot. The thread between us opened something.”

Bellara lifted a brow. “What kind of something?”

“The rift made it possible for the Dimshade to escape. It consumes time and rewrites it. If it fully awakens, it won’t stop at unraveling the forest, it will continue until the whole world is redone, not just when the

Veil is open.”

“Are you saying we’re the only ones who have to stop it?”

“Yes, he is correct.”

Bellara and Alaric turned.

“Alaric, this is Elder Sebor.”

“Greetings Elder,” Alaric greeted with a nod.

Elder Sebor sent a quick smile to Bellara then turned to Alaric. “Happy to meet you, Alaric. Our data supports what you are saying. Time is folding in on itself. The Dimshade has had time to open the tear even more. He's almost out.”

“That was fast. The Veil has only been open for three days.”

“Alaric, it's been eight days since the Veil should've closed.”

“That can't be right. I just left my compound on the third day. Terra said it would only take hours to surf the time stream this time.”

“This time? You've surfed the stream before?” Elder Sebor asked.

“Yes. The first time I was stuck inside the stream for three days because the Dimshade fractured the timeline around me. This time the trip felt much quicker. I appeared at the Heartroot and walked until I came to the edge of the forest. I guess that's when your people found me.”

“How did you know which way to go?”

Alaric shrugged. “I didn't really. I just focused on Bellara.” Bellara smiled and gave his hand a squeeze.

“Wait, hold on. Are you saying I've been in the forest for five days?”

“Well, yes, if you're sure you left when it was only open for three days.”

Alaric rubbed his hand over the stubble on his face then shook his head.

“Bellara, we have to go. We don't have much time. The Dimshade could burst through at any moment. “

“I agree. Let me get a few people to meet with us. You will need a few things before going into the forest. Meet me in the Grove out back in ten minutes.”

Bellara took his hand. “Come on, Alaric. I'll take you to the Grove.”

The scent of cedar smoke filled the air as Bellara stepped outside. She reached into a chest that sat beside the wall and fastened a satchel to her hip adding a few items. The Elders entered the Grove each with their arms full. Elder Sebor came over to her.

“This is a phase vine. It will help you stay anchored in this time if time twists around and you start to age prematurely.”

Elder Sebor wrapped the vine around her wrists then turned to Alaric.

“Alaric, you'll need to stay close to Bellara at all times. It has a proximity field. Now, you will need something other than your

knowledge of flora to help you. Elder Maelin is the elder of our gatherers. She has something for you.”

“Pleased to meet you, Elder.”

“And I, you, Alaric. Keep this on you,” Elder Maelin said, coming over to him.

Alaric accepted the small carved animal and looked up at her.

“It came from a trunk with ancient scrolls. It's a totem. It will hum if the Dimshade comes near you.”

Alaric gave her a smile. “Now this we definitely need. Thank you.”

Bellara chuckled. “Yes, we will.” “This will also come in handy.”

Bellara and Alaric turned to the voice.

“This is Elder Garrick. He is over the tanners,” Elder Sebor explained.

“Do you know what this is, Alaric?” he asked, wrapping a cloak around his shoulders.

“Oh my gosh! Is this a dimmer cloak?” Alaric asked, excitement filling his tone.

“What's a dimmer cloak?” Bellara asked.

“I've never seen one before, of course, it's very old. I've read that it can hide you and your smell so you can blend in with the forest.”

“That is correct. Hopefully you won't need it, but you will be facing a lot of unorthodox changes in the forest. Better safe than sorry, eh?” Elder Garrick said with a grin.

“You will also need this to complete the vow,” Elder Sebor said, opening a box. “Use this silver rope when you start your vow. Kneel in the center of the Heartroot, wrap it around both of you and say the words. That will seal the breach,” she explained, handing her a piece of parchment.

Bellara accepted both and put them in her pouch. “Thank you, Elder Sebor.”

“It's time to go. Be careful and good luck. We're counting on you.”

Chapter 5

Holding hands, Alaric and Bellara stepped through the pulsing threshold to the forest onto a warped ground slick with moss. Branches overhead stretched and coiled. Shimmering balls of time hung in the air before them. They carefully walked around them.

“Stay close,” Bellara whispered, shaking her wrists with the vine at him. “It's going to get weird.”

The forest shifted again as they moved deeper, the paths curling inward like a serpent coiling to strike. Bellara walked slightly ahead, her eyes scanning the canopy for phase-wasps. Alaric stayed close behind. He frowned as he looked around.

“Wait,” Alaric said, halting mid-step.

Bellara froze.

He lowered himself to the ground, pressing his palm into the moss. “The temperature just changed, and the ground is wetter. I think we're near a Whisperpine nest.”

Bellara's breath caught. “A Whisperpine? Are you sure?”

Alaric rubbed the dirt between his fingers and nodded. “These are the conditions they live in.”

The air moved with an eerie sensation. From the thicket ahead, tall, almost translucent figures with gaping mouths emerged.

“Don't move. They sense movement and thought,” Alaric whispered.

He unfastened his cloak. The dark, speckled fabric glistened faintly as it moved. “Come. Clear your mind and be silent.”

He draped the cloak over both of them, pulling her to the ground beside him. Alaric took a few breaths and encouraged her to do the same. His breath brushed her cheek as he held her close, his finger pressed to his lips. She nodded with understanding.

The translucent lining showed the creatures gliding closer, first two, then five, then ten. Their strange heads twitched toward them but continued to pass them by. One passed just inches from the edge of the cloak. Alaric could see its skin rippling like liquid glass and the shimmer of its teeth. He squeezed Bellara closer to him. Minutes seemed like hours as they stayed crouched beneath the cloak as close as they could be. When the last one vanished into the brush, Alaric let out a breath and slowly uncovered them.

Bellara exhaled. “How did you know what to do?”

“Gatherers are trained to quiet their minds when we are collecting so we don't startle hunters and get shot,” he explained with a laughing grin.

Bellara laughed. “For the record, I did lower my weapon soon as I saw you were a man and not the deer.”

“Yes, and I will forever be grateful for that. Oh, and the old texts tell you exactly what the cloak does.”

Bellara chuckled and walked beside him.

“Look out!” Bellara shouted, knocking him to the ground.

An animal ran across their path with antlers jagged like lightning and hooves larger than normal. It spun and turned its antlers at them.

“That's no ordinary stag. Stay down. It's about to lunge again,” Bellara warned while digging in her pouch.

Just as Bellara predicted, the deer charged again. She pulled a bone-forged dagger from her bag slicing upward as the beast jumped at them. With a loud shriek, the creature collapsed beside them. Before they could move, the animal aged in seconds, crumbling into dust blowing away across the moss.

“Well, that wasn't strange at all. Thanks,” Alaric said standing up.

Bellara chuckled and took his hand. “You're welcome. Come on, we have to keep moving.”

They continued forward passing a tree covered with twisted vines. Just as they passed, the vines lashed out reaching for their feet.

“Run!”

The vines lifted aiming for their arms. Bellara chopped at vines as they ran. They tumbled into a hollow where gravity was affected and were yanked from the ground into the air.

“Ahh!” she shouted.

“What the—”

“Hold on. I think I have something that could bring us down,” Bellara said. Carefully she reached into her satchel and removed a lantern. The light turned on and they dropped to the ground.

“Well, that hurt,” Bellara groaned. “Come on. The closer we get to the Heartroot the brighter the light will glow.”

“Why did that lantern help us down if it will take us to the Heartroot?”

“We can't get to the Heartroot if we're in the air, can we?” she answered with a grin.

Alaric chuckled. “I guess not.”

They walked a few feet more and Alaric stopped.

“What's wrong?”

He reached into his pocket to retrieve the totem. It vibrated in his hand and let out a low humming sound. He looked at Bellara.

“We're about to have company.”

“Let's hurry.”

They ran through the forest following the light trail as dry leaves blew their way.

You should not be here.

“Don't listen. Keep moving,” Alaric instructed.

You've broken time, the Dimshade hissed. *Your bond undid the seal to release me.*

“The Heartroot is just ahead,” he pointed out.

The Dimshade appeared right before them, stopping Alaric and Bellara abruptly in their tracks.

Bellara gasped. “Oh my gosh. What happened here?”

“It's the Dimshade. It causes destruction and decay to the forest.” He extended a hand toward a pile of brown leaves blowing around the slender, withered, hollow trunks beside the entrance. “See?”

The fear in Bellara's eyes made his heart hurt. She slammed the lantern to the ground, and it exploded. The Dimshade shrieked as the brilliant light lit the area clearly showing his dark, misshapen form.

Wasting no time, they ran around it into the Heartroot.

“The light will only dispel the Dimshade for a little while,” Bellara said.

“Well then we'd better get the ritual started.”

Bellara nodded and dug through her satchel. She moved to the center of the Heartroot and kneeled. Alaric lowered to the ground beside her. She wrapped the silver rope around them both and presented him with the parchment.

“These are the words we have to say.”

The Heartroot pulsed around them. Bellara looked to the sky. The air grew thick and charged. Alaric looked around.

“Do you feel that? The forest is ready. Let's begin.”

Together, they each placed a hand on the ground and recited the words.

“By moons in twin eclipse, by shadow and by light, we thread our souls across the Veil, to make the wrong into right. Where time was torn, where echoes split, we seal the rift, to steady it.”

As they spoke, the silver rope glowed, reaching out to fill the Heartroot releasing a wave of energy that rushed out into the forest. They looked at each other for just a moment before they held hands and continued.

“As gatherer and hunter, grass and blade, we make our vow where the stars are laid. The Heartroot knows what we have seen, a dream once distant, now between. Our souls were bound before we knew, at dusk with shimmer and dew. We see it now. We claim the thread, a bond unbroken though time has bled.”

A loud shriek made them jump. They stared at each other.

“It's working, but the Dimshade is fighting it. We have to finish,” Alaric said.

Bellara nodded.

“We choose each other, soul to soul, as one we stand, as one made whole. Let this vow seal what fate began and let the rift close by heart and hand. In the name of the moons, Lunaxis and Eversyl, we offer our soul and mind to seal.”

Another loud scream filled the Heartroot followed by a burst of shimmering energy that blew Bellara’s braids away from her shoulders. The forest quaked and groaned and then stilled. They gripped each other's arms to hold each other in place. An eerie silence fell over the area moments later.

“Did it work?” Bellara asked.

Alaric laid hands on the ground again and scrutinized the flowers. “Yes, it did. The Veil is finally closing. We have to go. Now!”

Alaric grabbed Bellara’s hand and pulled her from the Heartroot. They ran steadfast at a sprint.

“The light’s thinning!”

The very path they’d taken was unraveling behind them, roots curling inward, vines retreating back into the ground leaving holes behind. She stepped into a hole and stumbled but didn’t fall.

“Are you okay?” Alaric asked, out of breath.

“Yeah, yeah,” she huffed.

Up ahead, the Veil’s boundary lay, once wide and inviting, now shrinking fast, no wider than a doorway.

“We must hurry!”

“It’s almost closed!” Bellara gasped.

“We can make it!” Alaric shouted, grabbing her hand tighter.

“Twenty feet!”

“Ten!”

A branch fell from above, slicing across Alaric’s shoulder. He grunted in pain but didn’t stop.”

“Five feet!”

“It’s now or never! Jump!”

Their bodies flew through the thinning glow of the phasewall sealed behind them with a snap. They hit the soft earth of the other side, tumbling together onto the soft leaf-covered ground. The lush green trees swayed slightly as a gentle breeze moved them. Lunaxis and Eversyl hung far apart in the star lit sky. Alaric lay beside Bellara staring up at the sky.

“We made it,” he said with a smile.

“Yes, we did,” she agreed then tilted her head. “Umm, does the sky look different to you? I think days might have gone by since we went into the forest.”

“The stars look a little different, don’t they?” Alaric helped her up. “I think more than a few days have gone by.” “You were gone for almost fifteen months.” Alaric and Bellara turned.

“And we are so happy to see you have returned,” Elder Sebor said, coming down the path. “Come and rest for the night. We will prepare a celebration for your return.”

Bellara stood outside the Roost breathing in the warm air. The pale twin moons were barely visible as they shared the sky with the midday sun. She took a deep breath and smiled.

“No shimmer, no warping light, no twisted shadows, just normal, beautiful trees,” she paused to giggle. “Well, at least for another ten years.”

“Correction, that would be another *nine* years. Remember, Elder Sebor said last night it’s been over a year since the Veil has been closed,” Alaric said, coming to her side.

She turned. “Right. That may take me a minute to get used to. A whole year went by.”

“Yeah, come to think about it, my birthday has gone by. I’m a year older,” he said with a laughing grin.

She gave him a playful nudge. “You don’t look a day older.”

He laughed. “You look beautiful in your new leathers. What do these designs mean?”

Bellara spun letting the sunlight catch the iridescent flickers of the tiny scales that decorated the leather.

“They don’t really mean anything. I mean, they are used to dress up a hunter’s leathers during a celebration, but they don’t have a significant meaning besides that.”

Alaric reached out to glide hand over her arm. “Well, it’s beautiful. What are they?”

“They’re scales from the fish caught during the Veil. They are functional as well as beautiful. The scales will waterproof my outfit. Your tribe doesn’t use fish like this?”

“Not that I have seen, but I will surely pass it along. Our tribes can learn a lot from each other.” Bellara looked behind her and smiled. “Shall we? They’re ready for us,” she added, taking his hand.

Music washed over them when they entered the Roost. The people gathered at the entrance cheered. A woman stepped forward, her long staff shimmered as she moved leaning on it.

“I don’t know her,” Bellara whispered.

Alaric leaned his head closer to hers. “That is Elder Betsine. She is from my tribe, keeper of the ancient texts.”

Bellara nodded as she stopped before them.

“Alaric, you and Bellara have given our two tribes a great gift. Not only will your documentation help future generations prepare for the next time the Veil is torn, like the ancient texts helped us, this event is historic. It is the first time that the East and West coast have collaborated in person.” Bellara and Alaric smiled at each other.

“When you didn’t return after a few months, Terra, Elder Mara and I contacted the elders of the Roost. They updated us and travelled here to greet you upon your return. We have been here ever since,” she explained then pulled him into a hug.

“It’s good to see you, too.” he said when they released each other.

“We have a gift for you.”

Elder Betsine extended a hand toward the crowd. Someone pushed their way through the crowd.

“Terra! You’re here.”

Terra smiled and ran up to hug him. “You scared us half to death. I had to come.”

“So did I.”

Terra stood to Bellara’s side as the woman walked over carrying a cloak.

“Elder Mara.”

Quietly she wrapped the garment around Alatic’s shoulders before pulling him into her embrace.

“We asked the tanners here to make this for you to wear during your celebration,” she said, leaving a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, Elder.”

Someone walked around passing out drinks. Elder Sebor passed her and Alaric a cup.

“The rift is healed, and the Veil is sealed!” she announced, and the cheers went up. “And for binding not just the forest, but for giving of themselves to make it happen...to Bellara and Alaric!”

“To Bellara and Alaric! “

After a while, Bellara and Alaric stepped away from the celebration and headed to the back Grove.

“Oh look. This is where I planted the Glowing Willow, you gave me.”

“Wow. It's a whole field, now,” he said, gliding his hand over the soil. “We really have been gone that long.”

Bellara winced as she turned to walk away. “Yeah, I can feel it.”

“What did they say about your ankle?”

She shrugged. “The healers said since I didn't get it treated when it happened, I'll feel it every now and then if I'm on it for a long time. The good news is that it shouldn't affect my hunting. What did they say about your shoulder?”

He chuckled and rotated it. “My shoulder might always be a little stiff, but it's fine. It's not every day you outrun a collapsing time-fold with a Dimshade at your back. I'll think of it like a badge... once it stops throbbing.”

“Yeah, at least we're still standing.”

Bellara looked up at the roosting cliffs and let the smell of pine lead the way to the loft.

“Elder Mara said they would stay another day and then head back East. I should return with them,” Alaric said, coming to her side.

Bellara nodded. “Oh, well, yes. I understand. We completed the ritual and everything—”

“But I won’t,” he continued, cutting her off.

Bellara tilted her head. “You won’t?”

“The dream, the Heartroot, all of it. That...this...you...us... it’s real. Just like the dream showed us so long ago. We are soul linked. We belong together. This is worth staying for.”

He reached for her hand. She smiled when he laced his fingers with hers. Her throat felt tight with emotion.

“You’d really stay? In a land you weren’t born to?”

“East side, Westside, what difference does it make? If it means walking the seasons by your side I would move to a home on Eversyl,” he told her with a laughing grin.

Bellara giggled then stepped closer to him. “You know, in the dream, we tried to kiss in that house,” she whispered.

“Yes, I remember that.”

“That’s because I woke up before it could happen. We also almost kissed in the Heartroot, too.”

Alaric smiled. “Ahh, so it’s your fault we haven’t kissed yet. I think maybe it’s time we rectified that. Don’t you think?”

Alaric pulled her into his arms and kissed her. When their lips finally met, the forest seemed to sigh. The vibration soared through the camp and everyone around shouted in joy.

5D

A Meeting of the Minds

*“He found her in someone else's mind and
now
he can't get her out of his.”*

Alejandro is a gifted dream therapist who steps into the minds of coma patients to help their families find closure. He meets Benita, a mysterious girl who appears in dreams that aren't her own. Benita doesn't know who she is and only has clues from her life. Alejandro searches for answers because only he can meet her in the minds of others to help bring her to him.

Chapter 1

The smell of saltwater filled his nose when Alejandro opened his eyes. Somewhere in the distance waves crashed against some rocks. He looked around and spotted Eugene lounging on a chair on the pier. “Hey Eugene, you look relaxed in your Hawaiian shirt and cargo short ensemble,” he said, taking a seat beside him. “Not a care in the world, huh?”

“About damn time someone came to visit,” Eugene said with a crooked grin. “I been here for a minute. What's your name, son?”

“Alejandro.”

“You want a beer?” he asked, reaching into a nearby cooler.

Alejandro chuckled. “No thanks. How's the fishing?”

“It's good, but I'm hoping to catch me a mermaid,” he said with a wink.

Alejandro laughed and looked around. “You're here alone?”

Eugene shrugged. “I told them I wanted to go the easy way, watching the ocean, sun on my face, cold drink in hand. Instead, I get tubes and tapioca.”

“Hmm, your wife's been asking about you.”

Eugene sighed. “Yeah, I married up, with that one. That's for sure.”

She's a good woman, my Susan. God love her. You married, Alejandro?"

"No sir...not yet."

"Well, find you a woman that's good for you. My Susan been stubborn since nineteen-sixty when I married her and hasn't let up since. I needed a woman that wouldn't just back down and take my foolishness, you know. I was a handful."

Alejandro smiled. "She seems very nice. What would you like her to know?" he asked.

"That she did everything right!" Eugene said quickly, then looked out at the sea. "I was a better man because of her. And—" he paused, turning a straight face to him. "Tell her I'm fine. It's okay to let me go."

"So, you're not coming back?"

"No, I'm done. I've finally got my ocean, the sun and my cold drink."

Alejandro nodded. "Anything else?"

"I buried a rainy-day fund in the yard next to Sparky. Tell her to take that trip we used to talk about."

"Sparky?"

"That's my dog. I lost him about a year ago." "I will pass it on," he said standing.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Eugene smiled mischievously. “Tell her if she throws out my baseball card collection, I’ll come back just to haunt her.”

Alejandro walked away and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, he was back in the hospital room. Mrs. Navarro stood at the window wringing her hands. He walked over and tapped her shoulder.

“Oh, Alejandro. Did it work? Did you see Eugene?”

“Yes, I saw him.”

He offered her a small smile. “He is fine. He wanted me to tell you that you did everything right. He was happy to be married to you, and I got the impression that he loves you very much.” She smiled, blinking back tears.

“Eugene said something about a rainy-day fund that’s with Sparky.”

She sniffed and smiled. “That old goat. Of course, he would put money next to the dog to protect it. He loved that dog.”

“He also said if you toss out the baseball cards, he’s going to haunt you,” Alejandro added, giving her a playful nudge.

She managed to laugh through her tears.

Alejandro took her hands and sighed. “He’s ready, Mrs. Navarro,” he said softly. “Eugene said it was okay to let him go.”

Mrs. Navarro nodded as her tears flowed freely.

“Thank you, Alejandro.”

Alejandro gave her hands a squeeze then left the room. He walked down the hall and turned past the elevator.

Another goodbye was delivered. Another day done.

The break room smelled like weak coffee and strong disinfectant. Alejandro made a face as he filled a cup at the machine. He stood by the window to sip from his paper cup, watching clouds drift over the city. Alejandro didn't look away from the window when he heard the familiar footsteps behind him.

“If it's about the vending machine, I already filed the complaint to get my money back.”

“This isn't snack related. It's a case,” the person said, pushing a coffee mug against his shoulder.

“Hmph, bribing me with real coffee will not persuade me,” he said, taking the mug.

“I figure it can't hurt.”

Alejandro turned. “Dr. Lin, I'm not in the mood. I just got finished—”

Dr. Lin tapped the tablet in her hand. “I know, so call this one a favor,” she told him, turning the screen his way. “It's a different case than you're used to.”

“Really? Like what?”

“A teenage male, car accident, comatose for the last three weeks. He's healed physically and no brain damage shows on the scans but...”

“But...” Alejandro urged taking a drink.

“Well, he's just not waking up. His mother hasn't left his side and she's losing it. I thought maybe you could help.”

Alejandro rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You know I don't usually work with minors.”

“I do know that, that's why it's a favor. The mother is convinced he's still in there and frankly, so am I.”

“Why are you so convinced?”

“Well, he's stable. His physical injuries have been healed for a while, so he's had no sedation. I think he's just... stuck.”

Alejandro lifted a brow. “Uh huh, and you think I can unstick him?”

Dr Lin shrugged. “I think if anyone can tell us what's going on behind those eyelids, it's you.”

Alejandro took another sip. “I don't like giving false hope.”

“I'm not asking you to give her hope,” Dr Lin said gently. “I'm asking you to give her the truth.”

He sighed. “How old is he?”

“Sixteen. His name is Mason DeWitt. He’s a straight-A student and a baseball player, the kind of kid who still says ‘please and thank you’ when you bring him Jell-O.”

Alejandro gave her a long look. “I’ll meet him, but no promises.”

Dr. Lin smiled and handed him the tablet. “I can accept that. You never have made promises, Alejandro. You just show up and that’s usually enough.”

The doctor left him alone as he flipped through the screens learning about the boy. With a low groan, he tossed the contents of his cup in the sink and headed back to the coma ward. He had grown used to the quiet halls. It wasn’t the sterile hush of machines beeping or even the occasional sobs that bothered him, but the silent waiting and hoping that felt like a needle in his side every time.

He knocked and entered the room. The boy looked peaceful like he was asleep. A baseball glove sat at the foot of the bed. A woman sat in a chair beside the bed clutching a baseball hat like a lifeline.

“You must be Alejandro. Dr Lin said you might stop by.”

“Yes ma’am, I’m Alejandro,” he said, shaking her outstretched hand.

“I’m not expecting a miracle, Alejandro. I just want to know if— Well, if he’s still in there.”

Alejandro gave her a reassuring nod, then rolled up his sleeves. He sat in another chair on the other side of the bed, placed his fingers gently on Mason's wrist and closed his eyes.

The shift was like exhaling underwater and finding air beneath the surface. Alejandro opened his eyes to a sunny backyard he didn't recognize. Grass shimmered with summer heat. A teenager tossed a baseball into the air, catching it one-handed with a well-worn glove.

"Mason?" Alejandro called.

The boy glanced over, curious but calm. "Who are you?"

"I'm Alejandro," he replied with a smile. "I'm here to talk to you...if that's okay."

"Sure," Mason said, shrugging. "Not like I'm going anywhere." Alejandro sat beside him on the grass in an uneasy silence.

"You know, you *can* go somewhere if you want," he said finally.

Mason stared at him for a moment. "Moms scared. I can feel it."

"Yes, she is," Alejandro said. "It's because she's not sure if you're going to wake up and that scares her."

The boy missed the catch, and the ball rolled across the grass. He retrieved it from a few feet away and rolled it between his fingers.

"She's mad at me. I did something dumb."

“Dumb? What do you mean?”

Mason nodded. “I was tossing my ball in the air and crossed the street without looking.”

Alejandro shook his head. “I don't think she's mad, Mason. She's sad.”

He tossed the ball again. “Nah, she told me not to do that a hundred times, and I did it anyway. But I remembered. It's just that when I stopped and turned back to the sidewalk, the car hit me.”

“I really don't think your mom will hold that against you, Mason.

You said you remembered, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“So, see, it's just the car was coming too fast before you could correct yourself. I think your mom will be happy if you came back and told her that.”

Mason stopped tossing the ball and turned to him. “You think so?”

“Yeah, man, I think so.”

“I don't know if I can make it back, Alejandro. I'm kind of tired.”

Alejandro clapped his shoulder and smiled. “I know, you've been here for a while and your body is weak. I think if you sit

down and think about your mom and going home, you will find the strength to get back. You think you can do that? You want to try it?"

Mason thought for a moment and then put the ball in a chair beside him. "Yeah, I can try that."

"Good job, I'll see you when you wake up."

Alejandro exhaled as he opened his eyes. Mason's mother leaned forward immediately.

"Did you find anything out, Alejandro? Did you see him?"

"Yes, ma'am, I saw him and talked to him. He's okay, but I don't know if he can make it back. He's very tired."

Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head. "I understand. Thank you."

Alejandro nodded then shook her hand gently before heading out.

Another message delivered.

He continued down the hall. Moments later he heard Mason's mother squeal with joy. By the time he reached the end of the hall, Dr Lin appeared from around the corner.

"Thank you, Alejandro."

"No more kids," he muttered entering the elevator.

Chapter 2

Alejandro arrived at the hospital and Dr Lin met him at the information desk.

“So, what? No chill time or moment to breathe today, Doc?”

“Sorry, some days it's like that, Alejandro,” she said, handing him the tablet.

“No coffee bribe or nothing, huh?”

Dr Lin shrugged. “This is one of those days.”

“Yeah, yeah, what room am I going to?”

“Room three-fifteen. Good luck,” she added with a clap on the back.

Luck? I've done this a million times. Why would she wish me luck?

Alejandro flipped through the screens as he headed down the hall. The smell of overused coffee pods and flowers filled the air when he entered the room. He stood at the foot of the bed to get a better look at the patient. Daniel Jenkins lay with the same tubes and machines beeping and a neurohalo on his head like all his other patients.

“Hmm, it's been a while since there wasn't a family member around,” he murmured, looking around.

The room had the standard two chairs on either side of the bed but was void of any personal items or flowers. Abruptly the bathroom door slid open with a loud clank that made him jump. An overwhelming scent of flowers wafted over him.

“You must be Alejandro. People say you can talk to people in a coma.”

Alejandro turned. “Hi, yes, I’m Alejandro. You must be Mrs. Jenkins. I am—”

“Let me stop you right there, Alex. I am Daniel’s *woman*, but I’m not his wife. We been together for thirty-two years, but we ain’t married.”

The sound of her high pitch, sharp tone calling him Alex was like nails on a chalk board.

“Uh, sorry about that. So, what do—”

“You can call me Gladys.”

“Oh, okay, Gladys.”

“Huh, it’s a good thing too. If he dies, all these hospital bills would be my problem.”

“Umm, okay, well, yes. I’m Alejandro and I’m a dream therapist.”

“Uh huh, well, they’ve been poking around in his head for weeks with no answers. What do you do that’s different?”

He now understood why Dr Lin wished him luck.

“Well, I enter the patient’s subconscious spaces to interpret messages, emotions, even memories. I help them reconcile whatever it is that may be stopping them from moving forward or coming back to the conscious world. In the end, it helps families find closure.”

Gladys crossed her arms clanking her many large bangles together.

“Okay, so what does all that mean in English?”

Alejandro took a slow deep breath. “I can go into the unconscious mind and talk to people. I can usually find out if they want to come back or if they can make it back so that the family gets some kind of closure.”

“Uh huh, well, I don’t need no closure, Alex. I just need to know if he’s coming back or if I need to sell the truck. Can you ask him where he put the lottery ticket or if he cashed it in, where did he put the damn money? My cousin Peaches is already sniffing around talking 'bout he owed her forty dollars since back in high school. Those are the answers I need.”

Alejandro blinked.

“That’s... not quite how it works. The subconscious isn’t always direct. Sometimes it’s metaphoric, or feelings from an emotional terrain. I may have to talk the patient through some unfinished trauma in order to help them. I can’t just walk in and ask about a bank account like I’m holding a clipboard.”

Gladys sucked her teeth. “Well maybe you should. Metaphor and feelings ain’t gonna pay Daniel’s hospital bill if he kicks it. I

need to know where the lottery ticket is or if he cashed it where the money is. Can you do that or not?”

His smile was tight, and he hoped it didn't show his irritation as he sat in the chair closest to the bed.

“I should begin the session now. Time-sensitive cognitive behavior and all that,” he said, pushing his sleeves up.

“What? You running? I thought this was your thing?”

“Mentally, Gladys,” Alejandro said, already pressing on Daniel's wrist. “I'm going to enter his mind now, not go anywhere. I'm okay with you staying, but you have to remain silent. Is that understood?”

Gladys plopped in the other chair with a huff. She wrapped her arms around her chest and gave him a flippant wave.

Alejandro closed his eyes and welcomed the sensation that took him away from reality and Gladys. He kept his breath steady with his hand still resting on Daniel's wrist. When he opened his eyes, Alejandro stood in the center of a crumbling courtyard as a thick lavender fog surrounded him. Beneath his shoes the ground shifted between sand and stone making it hard for him to keep his balance. Blackbirds circled overhead in a fractured sky.

Daniel? Alejandro called out in his mind.

Alejandro's gaze shot to the right. A shape quickly passed between two pillars wrapped in ivy. He rushed over to follow, but his feet wouldn't move as fast as he wanted, getting stuck in the

ground with every other step. The scenery blurred around him as he pushed forward causing clear tunnel vision straight ahead. He continued to follow whoever he was chasing through the thickening mist. Finally, a strange figure came into view and the one that darted about leading him onward disappeared.

As Alejandro got closer, the strange shape formed into two people. Daniel sat hunched on the edge of a stone bench. Standing beside him was a woman with her dark curls falling over one shoulder. Her hands rested gently on Daniel's back. Alejandro tried to move faster to join them. The woman turned toward him as he approached.

"You're not from here," Alejandro said before he could stop himself.

She smiled. "Neither are you. I've been helping him remember," she said, nodding toward Daniel. "He's afraid but not lost."

Alejandro blinked, surprised by her clarity. "You're here to help him? Who are you?"

"I'm Benita."

Daniel looked up at Alejandro. "Are you real?"

"Yes and no. My name is Alejandro. I'm—I'm here to help you," Alejandro said, looking between him and Benita. "*Too*, I guess," he added, kneeling down before him. "Your wife is... intense."

"That's love at high volume, my friend. If you can survive living with my Gladys, you can survive anything." Daniel laughed but

then sobered quickly. "Are you dead too? How did you get here?"

"You're not dead, Daniel. You had a stroke."

His eyes widened. "I'm not dead?"

Benita crouched on Daniel's other side. "No, you're not, but if you stay here too long, you might forget how to leave."

Alejandro offered his hand. "She's right."

Daniel shook his head. "A stroke, mm, I don't know, guys. What if Gladys doesn't want me back? She's not the kind of woman that would take care of a man that doesn't contribute to the household."

Alejandro nodded. "Yeah, I kind of got that impression. She wanted me to ask you about the lottery ticket."

"I forgot about that ticket. If I can be well enough to cash the ticket, my Gladys won't leave me."

"Because that would be your contribution," Benita said triumphantly.

"Let me help you get back, Daniel. It's going to take some work, but you will be okay when you wake. Just take the first step," Alejandro said, offering his hand.

Daniel hesitated, but just for a moment then nodded. When he touched Alejandro's hand, the courtyard trembled beneath them and Daniel fell through the crumbling ground. Benita

waved at Daniel watching him disappear through the collapsing rubble then turned to him.

“Thank you for your help,” she said and started to fade away.

“Wait,” Alejandro said. “Where will you go?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but it was nice meeting you.”

“Benita!” He reached out for her, but she had already disappeared into the mist.

Alejandro took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Daniel’s heart monitor continued to tick steadily beside him.

“Well, did you see Daniel? Where’s the ticket?”

Alejandro stood. “Yes, Gladys, I saw him. We just have to wait and see if he can find his way back. Gladys, before I go, may I ask a question?”

“Sure, shoot. “

“Do you know a woman named Benita?”

Gladys thought for a moment then shook her head. “Nope, not that I can remember.” She tilted her head. “Why? Is Daniel dreaming of a woman named Benita?” she asked with wide eyes. “Did he give the ticket to that woman?”

Alejandro raised his hands in surrender. “No, no, no, I was just wondering. I just—”

“Mmm,” Daniel groaned.

“Oh, Daniel. You came back to me,” Gladys said, hugging him.

“So, what’s this about a woman named Benita?”

Alejandro dragged his hand over his face and took that moment to leave.

“Uhg, that was close. This Benita woman got me slipping. Who is she?” He took his questions to the only person that could answer. “Dr Lin, you got a minute?” he asked, arriving at her office door.

“Sure Alejandro. What's on your mind?”

He took a seat in front of her desk. “Do you know of another dream therapist named Benita?”

“Not working for this hospital. You're the only one on the payroll.

Why do you ask?”

“Well, I met a woman when I went into Daniel Jenkins' mind.
“

“A woman? That's odd. You think she's another dream therapist?”

“How else would she be in someone else's mind?”

“You got me. Do you want to check with another hospital to see if they have a dream therapist on their site?”

Alejandro stood. “No, I was just wondering. I'll be in the lounge if

—”

A knock on the door stopped his words.

“Excuse me, Dr Lin?”

“Yes, I’m Dr Lin. How can I help you, officer?”

“I was told you were the liaison to the dream therapist.”

“Yes, I am. This is Alejandro Flores. He is the dream therapist for this hospital.”

“Ahh, good. Hello, Mr. Flores. I’m Sergeant Michaels,” the officer said, offering his hand.

“Please, just Alejandro is fine.”

“Yes, well, Alejandro then. We have a prisoner that is in a coma that we need information from.”

“A prisoner? I don’t know, officer. I don’t usually—”

“Please, Alejandro, can you at least try? His gang has a woman stashed somewhere and it would really help our investigation to know where she is? He was just brought in a short while ago,” he paused to hand him a folder. “This is all we have on him.”

He sighed and accepted the folder. His stomach twisted as he read the pages.

“Hmm, I don’t like this,” he muttered, scanning the chart. “On paper this guy looks like a monster.” He scoffed looking over the pages. “I mean, this man isn’t even fifty and he has a long

history of organized crime, assault with a deadly weapon, extortion...” He scoffed. “I mean the list goes on and on. Now, he’s in a coma after falling from a building running from the police. What kind of mind would I be walking into?”

“I understand your concern and honestly speaking, I have no idea. If you are truly unsure and want to say no, then say no. The choice is yours. He’s supposed to be in a prison ward, but we had him brought here because you were here. We thought you could help us find the mayor’s daughter.”

“The mayor’s daughter? What does she—”

“She’s the woman that was kidnapped by his gang.”

“No one else in the gang can tell you where she might be?”

Sergeant Michaels shook his head. “The other two men didn’t make it. Gustavo is the only one that is still alive, and he is barely hanging on. Please, Alejandro, we could really use your help.”

Alejandro turned to look at Dr Lin, but she merely shrugged.

“Well, I guess I can see what I can do.”

“Excellent. Follow me. I’ll take you to him.”

With a backward glance at the doctor, Alejandro left the room. He scanned the pages of the folder as they walked.

“This folder gives me an idea on this guy’s background but doesn’t tell me what happened.”

“My team was chasing him, and he tried to jump from one roof to another. He made it, but he landed harder than he expected and slid into a pillar.”

“Wow, okay.”

“The ER docs treated the head wound, but they don’t think he’ll survive the damage it caused. He suggested that you may be able to help. Here we are,” the officer said, pushing the door open.

Two other policemen were in the room with Gustavo. The patient lay in the bed looking peaceful, as if he were sleeping, with the standard electrodes all over his head and monitors connected to him via IVs in both arms.

“So, what do you have to do? Should we leave or stay?”

“It’s not necessary for you to go, but I do ask that you don’t interfere and remain quiet.”

Alejandro sat beside him and gently rested two fingers on the man’s pulse points. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His breath caught and his eyes popped open as the world slammed into him with hot and smoky force. He looked around and cringed. The bruised sky pulsed with a deep hum. Neon lights blinked erratically through the darkness around him. Buildings leaned inward and crooked as steam hissed from cracks in the warped street.

He started to walk along the street. To the left, he passed a fire blazing in a blackened drum. As he neared, a shape formed in

the center. Alejandro slowed his pace and squinted at it as he passed.

What the hell? Is that a body?

The figure stood motionless, suspended in the burning flames. It didn't scream, it didn't move, but it was there just hovering inside the flames. Alejandro continued down the street careful to dodge the steam eruptions from the ground.

Abruptly a sharp *crack* echoed ahead of him causing him to jump. Across the street, a man was strapped to a massive iron X that spread his limbs wide. His body hung limp as a figure behind him brought down a whip again and again. Flesh tore away from the back and blood splattered all over the man doing the whipping. Alejandro shook his head and continued on his way. He covered his ears to block out the abrupt thunderous sound, but closing his eyes didn't block the lightning strikes that nearly blinded him next. He hurried faster down the path until the sky changed.

Ahead, a bridge hung suspended in mid-air. A man in a suit was shoved violently from the railing. His blood curdling scream continued as he plummeted to the ground only ending when he slammed to the landing with a loud crack! Alejandro stared at the disfigured form on the ground. The man that pushed him appeared on the bridge laughing as he looked over the edge. Before Alejandro could move or process what just happened, the mutilated figure disappeared and then reappeared whole at the top of the bridge again. He was only there for a moment when the laughing man pushed him off again. Alejan-

dro stared in horrified awe as the two men repeated the push, the scream and fall to the ground over-and-over again.

What the hell is going on?

Alejandro backed away from the scene to continue down the road. After only a few minutes, he saw a massive, dusty cage. Its bars bent in strange directions, sitting alone under a flickering light. Inside the cage a pillow, a bowl of water and a collar, hung over the edge. Alejandro scoffed.

“This mind is a prison, a punishment for this man,” he muttered as he turned away with a frown.

“Alejandro!”

He stopped immediately and looked around. “Who could possibly-”

Benita was running toward him wide-eyed. Behind her, long-limbed shadows gave chase, their bodies flickering like a dying light bulb. They were closing in. Without thinking, Alejandro darted forward, grabbed her hand, and pulled her behind the cage.

“Stay low!” he hissed.

The shadows surged past, screeching. Benita clutched his coat, trembling.

“I didn’t know what was happening here,” she whispered. “I felt you in this place and came looking for you. It’s different, much darker than the beach with the old man.”

Alejandro turned wide eyes to her. “Eugene? What do you— How do you know about—”

A loud scream brought his attention back to their situation.

“What in the world—”

Alejandro shook his head. “We’re not safe here. We have to go.”

They moved quickly down the crumbling streets until eventually a warehouse carved from shadows came into view. Alejandro rushed toward it. A man stood at the entrance.

“Gustavo, my name is Alejandro. I came to talk to you.”

“How are you here, Alejandro? This is my world, and I didn't invite you.”

“I just came to talk. I want to know about the woman. Do you know where she is?”

Gustavo turned toward Benita. “Who is this woman? I don't know her? I mean, I don't know you either, but what is she doing here with you?”

Alejandro gasped and turned to Benita. So many questions rushed through his mind, but he shook it off.

“This is, umm, Benita. Are you sure you don't know her?”

“I'm sure. If you want to talk, let's put her somewhere else so we can talk.”

Benita yelped as she flew into the air and down the path they had just used. Alejandro reached for her, but she was too high up.

“Gustavo, what are you doing?”

“Putting the woman somewhere else while we talk.”

Alejandro watched Benita fly down the street and slam into the open cage.

“She'll be fine there while we talk. What do you want, Alejandro?”

Alejandro swallowed his shock and anger and turned to him. “Do you know where the kidnapped woman is?”

Gustavo laughed and paced in front of the building. “Why would I help you?”

Alejandro thought for a moment. “Oh, I see. You don't really know so you're trying to stall me.”

Gustavo's face turned bright red, and a huge dark cloud formed over his head. “Are you accusing me of being stupid? Like I don't know what my own plans were! Is that what you're saying? Huh? Huh?”

The wall behind Gustavo began to crumble as the blood-red paint fell away revealing numbers during his rant. Alejandro memorized each one as they formed.

“Of course not, Gustavo. I just want to know where the woman is. Are you going to tell me or not?”

Gustavo frowned. "No."

"Fine, then I will get Benita and leave."

Gustavo's laugh had an unsettling sound. "I don't think so. Get outta my head!" he shouted.

A storm came out of nowhere and swept him off his feet. The wind formed a spiral that whipped him around for a while then carried him over a large canyon before letting him go. Alejandro screamed as he fell. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He woke up with a gasp and his own pulse thundering in his ears.

"Alejandro, are you okay? Did you find something?" Sergeant Michaels asked eagerly.

Alejandro took a minute to catch his breath. "Umm, yes, I think. I need a piece of paper."

"Sure. You could use my field book," Sergeant Michaels said, flipping to a clean sheet.

"I don't know if that helps but that's all I could find out."

"We'll see," he said, handing the paper off to another officer.

"Sir, these look like coordinates."

"That would be helpful, but even if it's not, it's more than we had before."

As the officers rushed off in triumph, Alejandro remained frozen in his chair haunted by what he'd seen. Alone with Gustavo, he stared down at him.

"You said you didn't know her. If you didn't know her, how did Benita end up in your mind? And how'd she know about Eugene?"

"Good job, Alejandro," an officer said, a short while later. "Those numbers *were* coordinates and they led us to a warehouse in the south district. We just got the call that officers from that district found the mayor's daughter alive."

"That's great. I'm glad I could help. So, what happens to him now?"

"The doctor will be here in a bit to disconnect him. He was only on until you met with him."

"What does that mean?"

Before the officer could answer the doors opened.

"Hello, Alejandro."

"Hi, Dr Benjamin. You're going to disconnect him?"

"Yes, the police had a court order to keep him on life support long enough for a dream therapist to get some information from him that may help their case. Now that the mayor's daughter is safe, I can disconnect him now."

"What will happen to him once he's disconnected?"

“Well, he will progress naturally. They will take him to the prison infirmary and do what they can for him there.” Dr Benjamin paused to flip through his file. “Hmm, but with his kind of head injury, I agree with the

ER doc’s evaluation. I don’t think he will live to do any prison time.”

“I will arrange transport.”

Alejandro moved out the way. The policeman left and Dr Benjamin went about disconnecting Gustavo. When the doctor was done, he clapped Alejandro on the shoulder and left the room. Alejandro sat back in the chair and grasped Gustavo’s wrist.

“One more time,” he whispered. “You’d better hold on long enough for me to get her out of that cage, Gustavo.”

Alejandro opened his eyes and landed hard. His knees hit cracked pavement, and it splintered beneath him like glass. Overhead, the sky groaned. Chunks of cloud and light shattered, raining down in kaleidoscopic fragments. Bats poured out from the openings in the fragments left behind. The ground trembled. To his left, a fissure ripped through the street. Lava geysers erupted behind him. Small volcanoes dotting the road, belching heat and ash into the air. Flames licked the broken buildings. Everything smelled of rust and sulfur. Alejandro covered his mouth with his sleeve and ran.

The cage loomed ahead, warped and trembling like the rest of the world. Smoke curled from its base. The empty collar no

longer hung limp but was clamped tight around Benita's neck with the chain fastened to the bars. She was curled on the pillow, eyes shut.

"Benita!" Alejandro shouted coming to her.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Alejandro, you came back."

He tugged at the bars, but they burned his palms like hot iron.

"Ahh!" he cried and stumbled back.

Alejandro pulled his sleeves over his hands, grit his teeth and pulled on the bars again. Steam rose as the bars burned through his clothes leaving his fingers singed. He cried out and tried again. With a shout, he ripped the door open. The collar released with a soft click, and Benita came to him and collapsed into his arms. He held her close, but just for a moment.

"We have to go...now!"

She shook her head, touching his face gently with ash-streaked fingers.

"This mind is dying, Alejandro," she whispered. "I knew you'd come back for me, but I can't go with you. Be sure you get out of here in time."

"No," he said fiercely. "Not again."

She smiled, soft and beautiful despite the chaos around them.

"Thank you, Alejandro. I hope we find each other again."

"I'd like to find you again. Where do you go when you leave?"

“I don't know, but it's cold where I am.”

“Cold?”

“You woke me up so now I can be with you here. That's all I know.”

Before she could finish her last word, her form blurred, and she was gone. Alejandro stumbled backward, alone again. The cage melted behind him. The bats circling in the sky screamed. Clouds gave way crashing faster around him. With a scream he ran and woke with a gasp that knocked his chair backwards. The hospital room was quiet. He lay on his back staring at the ceiling, chest heaving, heart still racing. The only machine that remained attached to Gustavo didn't make a sound, but the dark red line across its screen told what he needed to know.

Chapter 3

Alejandro paced the floor of his office. Steam barely curled from the long forgotten on his desk. He couldn't get Benita out of his mind. The clues to who she was rolled over his mind. He had been muttering them for the last four days. With a huff, he sat heavily in his chair.

“Okay, Benita had said, it’s always so cold when I wake up. I don’t know where I am. I’ve been asleep for a long time, and you woke me up.”

He put a hand on the few folders on his desk. “She isn’t a patient I've been assigned to, and she isn't in any of my past charts, but she's real. I know it,” he added, opening a drawer on his desk to finger the tops of the folders there.

He groaned with frustration.

“She's been in two different minds of two different patients. That can't be a coincidence,” he muttered drumming his fingers on the desk. He pulled out a notepad and wrote out the clues:

- Cold
- Asleep for a long time
- Doesn't know where she is
- Couldn't move on her own

His pen paused as he stared at the pad.

“This can't be a woman in a coma, well, at least not in a traditional way.” He thought for a moment then and looked at his watch. “Let me go over this. Maybe she'll show up in this woman's mind too and then I can talk to her.”

The air was thick with fog. Soft blue light filtered through a pale sky that never revealed its sun. Alejandro stood ankle-deep in glassy water, surrounded by silhouettes of boats that never moved.

He looked around for Marina, but when he turned there was Benita. She stood barefoot on the surface like it was solid ground, wearing a soft gray sweater and jeans, her hair tied up loosely. Her presence shimmered with clarity in the otherwise hazy space.

“You,” Alejandro said quietly, with relief.

Benita smiled. “I hoped I'd see you again.”

“You shouldn't be here, Benita,” he said. “This is Marina's mind. Not yours. Why are you here?”

She looked across the quiet landscape. “I've been drawn to you for a long time. So now I go where you go. I think it's because you woke me up.”

“What do you mean, I woke you up? I remember you saying you've been asleep a long time.”

She nodded. “Mm hmm.”

“I remember more each time I'm with you.”

“Can you tell me where your body is?” he asked gently.

Her gaze lowered. “No, but I know it's cold and dark there and I can't move.”

“What else do you remember?”

She thought for a moment. “There was lots of space, open space, but not a lot of windows.”

“Hmm, can you think of anything else?”

“I vaguely remember a park with a fountain across the street.”

Alejandro studied her closely. “You've been drifting into other people's minds. Are you hoping they'll help you find a way out?”

She smiled faintly. “No, I'm looking for you.”

Alejandro's eyes widened. “What?”

“One day out of nowhere, I felt you and was drawn to you. I felt you for a long time, but the first time I was able to come to you, you were talking to the old man on the pier,” she explained.

“Eugene, yes I remember you mentioning that.”

“He was very sweet. I stayed with him until the end. He finally caught his mermaid just before he died. He was very happy,” she told him with a smile.

You stayed with him?” he asked with a scoff. “How is that possible?”

She shrugged. “I watched you and when you left, he asked me to stay for a while longer. So, I did.”

He shook his head. “Benita, listen to me. Do you remember anything else about where you were before you started appearing in other people’s minds?”

She hesitated. “I remember tubes and a humming sound.”

“Tubes?”

Alejandro turned sharply. “Marina...she’s nearby. Come on.”

A silver mist hung low over the surface of a still lake. Marina stood at the shoreline, hands in her sweater pockets as she looked out onto the horizon.

“Over there,” Alejandro said, pulling Benita along.

As they neared, Marina turned her head toward them.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Alejandro and this is Benita. We came to talk to you. That is, if you’re ready to talk.”

“I’m not sure if I am,” she admitted, looking back at the water. “It’s quiet here. Peaceful. No pain. No pressure.”

Benita sat on the bench beside her, crossing her legs. “Stillness has its place, but it’s not meant to be permanent.”

Marina looked down at her hands, wringing them. "What if I'm not ready to go back? Will you force me?"

Alejandro crouched on her other side. "No one can force you, Marina. But people are waiting. Your mother cries every day. Your sister leaves messages on your phone even though she knows you can't hear them."

"And what about your two cats, Taffy and Candy. Your neighbor has been feeding them, but don't you think they miss you?"

Marina chuckled. "Taffy's such a diva. She's probably driving Candy crazy. She's the calm one."

"You're their babies," Alejandro said. "You built a life full of love for yourself. That doesn't disappear just because times get hard."

"I'm sorry I took those drugs. I know I shouldn't have done it. I just, I don't know. Stupid Brandon left and I lost my job. Everything just got bad so fast. It was so stressful."

Alejandro nodded. "I get it. Sometimes it's like that. Stress will make you make bad decisions. We all make mistakes."

"I'm scared," Marina whispered. "What if I wake up and I'm not the same? What if I can't walk, or talk, or think right?"

"There will be people there to help you. Your mother and your sister, professional people, too," Benita said gently. "That's what love does. It stays, even when things get messy."

Marina sat quietly between them, tears in her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll try.”

The lake rippled before them and then split in half with a loud splash. A bright path shimmered between the walls of water. Marina turned a smile to Alejandro and stood up.

Benita turned to Alejandro.

“You’re good at this,” she said waving at Marina as she walked down the path.

“You are too.”

She smiled and took his hand. “I have to go, Alejandro.”

“Go? Benita, wait. I—”

“I hope you find me again, Alejandro. I found you, now it’s your turn to find me. You’re getting close,” she added and then vanished.

Alejandro pulled himself out of Marina’s mind, his heart pounding fiercely.

“Are you okay, Alejandro?”

He looked at the older woman leaning over him and managed a small smile.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, Mrs. Davidson. Umm, Marina is well. She is hesitant, so I don’t know for sure, but I think she will come back.”

“Thank you, Alejandro. I know you can’t give me absolutes. Your news gives me hope and that’s good enough. “

Alejandro smiled and took her hands. “Good luck,” he said and made his way back to his office.

He opened his tablet and opened the hospital’s patient database. No one named Benita was listed in the coma wing. “Hmm.”

He grabbed the notepad and added a few more words to his list.

- Tubes
- Dark
- Park with a fountain
- Building with lots of space, few windows

“Hmm,” he repeated, tapping his pen on the desk.

He turned back to his computer to enter the last words in the search engine and waited. Leaning in closer, he read the page.

“So, a warehouse fits all these words, huh. Okay let’s add a warehouse near a park with a fountain,” muttered as he typed.

He stared at the changing screen. When it stopped, he read the page and gasped. He quickly dropped the screen to pull up another. After running his finger over the new page, he pushed his chair back in thought. After a moment, he left the room. He passed the nurse’s station, giving a brief nod to the staff.

Alejandro went around the corner and stepped into the records room, gently closing the door behind him. It was dim, but he

didn't need bright lights for what he was looking for. He sat at the old terminal, accessing old patient records. Names, dates, room numbers. He scrolled back years, ten, fifteen, looking for any notation of long-term unconscious patients, anyone without discharge dates...but there was nothing.

He looked around the room and saw boxes stacked in the corner.

"If this hospital used to be a warehouse there has to be some documentation somewhere on what was stored here before they shut it down," he muttered looking over the boxes. "Experimental Cryogenic Observation," he read out loud.

He pulled the first box down. "Well, it's worth a shot. Let's start with A through D."

He flipped through the top of folders stuffed tightly into the boxes checking the names. The first box, second or third didn't give him any leads. Going through the fourth box, he smiled and yanked out a folder and read it.

"Benita Reyes was the project manager of an experimental cryogenic project for people with diseases that needed to be cured. This project is fourteen years old. If this is my Benita what could have happened to her?"

How is she able to communicate with me?"

Alejandro put the boxes back but took the folder with him to his office. Back on the computer he cross-checked the record of the old warehouse with current hospital maps on a split screen.

“Hmm, the hospital seemed to have used all the space of the warehouse except here,” he said, touching the screen. “Hmm.” hitting the keys on his computer he printed the page and took it with him out the door.

He located the old freight elevator that led to the basement and searched for the room on the map. A cart and random boxes were stacked in front of the door covering the entrance. After moving stuff out the way, he shook the knob, finding it locked. Alejandro dug into his pocket and shoved his knife into the lock. Moments later the door swung open, and he pushed his way into the room. The cold air that greeted him felt old and stale. The small circular room hummed faintly with low power.

Three cryotubes stood like silent sentinels. Two were open and empty, their lids up like discarded coffins. The third had a faint glow. Alejandro approached it slowly, his breath visible in the frigid air. Inside the tube, curled on her side as if she'd only meant to rest for a moment, was a woman. Her clothes were practical, button up shirt, dark pants and low-heeled shoes, not like a patient or hospital worker.

“Benita,” he breathed. “She wasn’t supposed to be in here,” Alejandro murmured.

He stepped closer to examine the control panel. Wiping the frost off the surface revealed the date the door closed: May eighteenth two thousand ten. All of the clues Benita gave him seem to fit.

“It was cold... I’ve been asleep for a long time... I can’t move.” He examined the chamber and thought a bit more. “She had to

have been preparing the cryotube and the door sealed behind her. Trapped and forgotten all this time.” Alejandro touched the side of the tube gently. “I’m here now. I’ll get you out...but how.”

He looked around the room and spotted a clip board on a console. Flipping through the pages on the board, Alejandro returned to the control panel. His fingers trembled slightly as he entered the final override code. The monitor beeped, a soft green light blinked in rhythm with Benita’s slow, stabilizing heartbeat. Alejandro almost held his breath as the glass dome lifted. Her body shivered as warmer air reached her skin. Color began to return to her cheeks, her fingers twitching, eyelids fluttering.

“Benita, can you hear me?” he asked softly.

A low breath escaped her lips. Slowly, her eyes opened. They were disoriented and unfocused, until they found him. She blinked, then smiled faintly.

“Alejandro, you’re real.”

Alejandro let out a relieved laugh, half choked with emotion. “Yes, I am. I’ve been hoping that you were real, too.”

He spotted a blanket across the room and brought it back to her. She sat up slowly, muscles stiff from years of stillness. He supported her gently, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.

“Everything was dark and cold, but then your mind touched mine.

You didn't just see me, you woke me."

Alejandro met her gaze, stunned. "That first time, in Daniel's dream?"

She shook her head. "I've felt you for a long time, years, I think. It took that long before I could follow you. Every time you found me in someone's mind, your presence pulled me further from the silence."

He brushed a strand of hair from her face, his voice softer. "I needed to find you. I had to know if you were real. You stirred something inside me. I had to find you."

Benita placed her hand over his. "And somehow, you did."

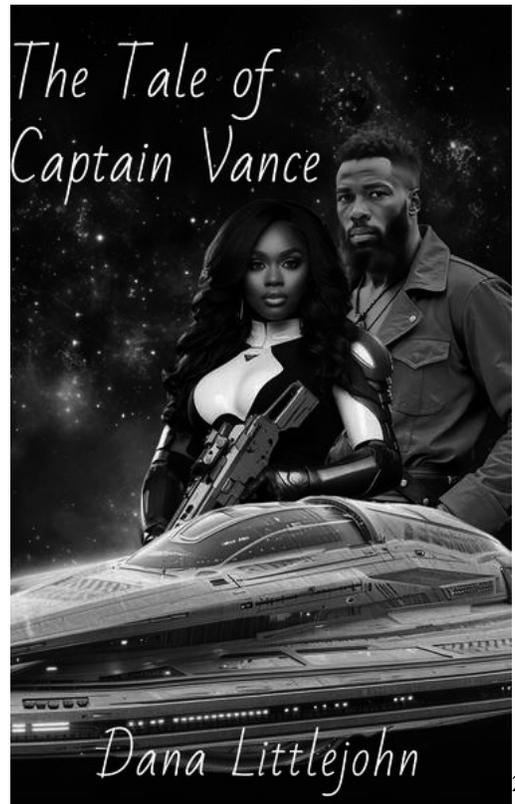
"We found each other in the one place where no one else could. I'm never letting you go again," Alejandro assured her.

He helped her down from the cryotube, steadying her as her legs adjusted. She looked around the forgotten room, then back at him. "Let's leave this place behind."

He smiled. "Together."

THE END

Did you love *In Every Dimension*? Then you should read *The Tale of Captain Vance*¹ by Dana Littlejohn!



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About the Author

As a young child, I wrote Hickory Dickory Dock type poetry as I doodled all over my papers in school. I still don't know which I did more, but by Jr. high school I wrote more than doodled and even got up the nerve to enter them in a contest or two. But it was my short stories that took all my time and energy.

I showed a few to my friends and they had me doing weekly installments of a story and had passed it around the lunch room. During the 80's; when I was in High School, I tried my hand at rapping. Rap Music was just a toddler with the arrival of the Sugar Hill Gang a few years back and everyone wanted to Rap. So with my 'crew' The Puma Fly Girls, (come on, you had a weird crew name too), we rapped and I wrote the rhymes for myself as Shorty Dee Ski and for another of my girls in my crew. (Don't Laugh. If you are a child of the 80's you were some kind of 'ski' too.)

In 2003, I picked up my pen again and I haven't put it down. Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

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About the Publisher

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