

GODDESS

IN

THE

MACHINE

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*For Kelsey, Amanda, Taryn, Nadia, Kailan, Alex, and Bre—
my girl gang of goddesses:
I tolerate you.*



PART ONE

RESURRECTION

When you first awaken, expect some disorientation, sore muscles, shortness of breath, dimmed eyesight, and depression. These symptoms are usually mild. However, due to time constraints, no human trial has lasted the hundred years you will be in stasis. Symptoms may be aggravated by the extended length of time, as well as Mid-Stasis Relocation Disorientation (hereafter referred to as: MSRD). Cryo'technicians and med'bots will be available to assist you after your unprecedented journey. Congratulations. You are making history.

—*Holymyth Colonist Handbook*, page 23

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ONE

wake, n. or v.

Etymology: Anglo-saxon wacan, “to be born”; possible adoption from Icelandic vök, meaning “an opening in the ice.”

Definition: 1. to be roused from sleep; to revive, reanimate; to return to life.

2. the consequences of a body in movement.

3. a vigil by the body of the dead.

WHEN ANDROMEDA WOKE, she was drowning.

They’d warned her this would happen—that her lungs would burn and her eyes would sting and she’d have to fight for that first breath. *But you must take it, they said. If you don’t, your lungs will collapse and we’ll have to put you in a coma and just hope for the best.*

Okay, maybe those weren’t their exact words.

She pulled in a breath, just like they told her. It burned. It stung. She fought. Water flooded her lungs, and the bitter taste of saline filled her mouth. Something was wrong. Something she couldn’t quite place.

Her fist shot out, grasping for help, but it slammed into something solid. There it was—the wrongness. Ten-inch-thick metallic glass enforced with veins of diamond dust. Latched together with hinges of a tantalum-tungsten alloy. Supposed to be yawning open when she woke. But it wasn’t. It was still closed, cocooning her in cold metal and melting cryo’protectant.

Calculations fired in her brain, searching for missing information, evaluating variables, solving for X. She'd just been put to sleep, and now she was drowning. No. It only *felt* like she'd just been put to sleep. It had actually been a hundred years. And now, she was waking up and (oh god) *naked*, but her chamber was still closed.

Something was definitely wrong.

They'd prepared her for this possibility—waking too early or crisis aborts or faulty latches—but it was hard to remember emergency plans in the middle of an emergency.

There was a button somewhere . . .

. . . or a switch?

She was too lightheaded. Her hands didn't work. Her brain was shutting down, synapses sparking, sending a single message:

air air air air air

She struck the glass again. It didn't even crack. It was meant to last centuries, meant to withstand zero gravity and a thousand times atmospheric pressure and two thousand degrees kelvin and zero degrees kelvin. But she kept pounding, each hit a bit weaker, a bit quieter.

She hit the glass until her strength gave out. Her arms fell to her sides. Just before her eyes slid shut, she saw a face above her. No one she recognized. There was no bright light. No life flashing before her eyes. No air. Just water and drowning and dying and water.

Then nothing.

WHEN SHE WOKE the second time, she was coughing up saline. This was an improvement.

Her throat was sore. It ached down into the recesses of her chest. She didn't want to breathe. It hurt too much. But she had to.

Just as soon as she coughed all the water out of her lungs.

At first, her senses didn't extend past *pain*. Then she heard shouts.

Murmurs. Whispers. Syllables that weren't words. Words without meaning. Strong arms held her, a rough hand patted her back. Not the cryo'tech—they weren't allowed to touch. Not her mom either—she didn't coddle.

The water was gone now, but the sting remained, the compulsion to cough. She gasped in a breath, and it dragged through her lungs, her throat, catching and tearing as it went. But it kept her alive, so she pulled in another.

And another.

Shivering. Shaking off flecks of ice.

So. *Cold.*

She thought about opening her eyes, but decided against it. Too much work. So she breathed, and then she slept, and then, for the first time in a hundred years, she dreamed.

Will I dream? she asked.

No, you'll be sleeping too deeply. Like a computer shutting down.

Will I know time is passing?

When they wake you, it'll feel like seconds from now.

When will they wake me?

When you reach the new planet.

So. You're the last person I'll ever speak to on Earth.

Don't be so morbid.

THE THIRD TIME, Andra woke to the tinny whirring of a fan. A blast of air hit her right cheek and shoulder, alleviating some of the oppressive heat. Sticky globs of residual cryo'protectant clung to her skin. She shivered and opened her eyes.

She was *awake*. She jerked into a half-sitting position. This was a

new planet. A hundred years had passed. She had to find her family. She had to tell her mom she was sorry. She—

was in the dirtiest room known to man.

The floors were dirt, the walls crusted with something she *hoped* was dirt. It was like a cave, a single shaft of light filtering in through a high, thin window with no glass or holo'screen, and a plume of sand puffed in on an arid gust of wind.

The room was empty except for the bed she was sitting on, a metal table, and, on top of that, the fan—which looked like it was running on some sort of kinetic energy. It spluttered to a stop, leaving the room silent and stale.

This was no place for medical tests and routines, for purgative baths and reanimation therapy. Andra hadn't bothered to read the manual, but her mother had droned on about it enough that she knew the reanimation procedures by heart: once they arrived on the new planet, robots would wake the head LAC scientists—like Andra's mother—and a skeleton crew of cryo'techs. They wouldn't wake the colonists until mech'bots had constructed the hospitals, until everything was organized and sanitary. Then, after resurrection, there would be sight tests, vocal tests, muscle tests, preliminary physical therapy, a nice hot bath, and finally: reconnecting with family.

The point was, all of this was supposed to occur in a pristine, sterile environment.

The harsh mattress beneath her groaned. The quilt covering it was gritty under her fingers, caked with sand. Without the fan, the heat was unbearable, and she was dripping in sweat and cryo'protectant.

But no longer naked, so there was that.

Her clothes: unfamiliar and uncomfortably hot—loose pants, cuffed at the ankle, and a rough tunic with a cowl-neck rucked around her shoulders. Everything was a little too tight, like the clothes her mom would buy to inspire her to lose weight. Her forearms were covered with a constricting, stretchy material, and her wrists itched where

sweat had gathered under the sleeves. The fabric was handmade; she could tell by the rough weave. These were no LAC-sanctioned medical robes, that was for sure.

On instinct, she mentally reached for her neural'implant, hoping she could use it to switch on an enviro'con, but found nothing. That was to be expected, since 'implants were known to glitch after stasis. She wouldn't be able to access any technology around her for an indeterminate amount of time. Andra hated that word—*indeterminant*. She liked for things to be determined.

She brushed her short, dark hair out of her face. Her fingers caught in the tangles just as the door swung open, and another gust of wind blew in, along with a man, who stood silhouetted in the doorway. A cryo'technician. Finally.

Andra tried to blink away the fuzziness. Right before the cryo'tech had put her to sleep, he'd told her to state her name, age, hometown, and CID as soon as she woke up. *Andromeda Yue Watts. Seventeen. Riverside, Ohio. 32-638-27.* That's what she was supposed to say, but all that came out was, "Huh?"

Because he didn't look like a 'tech at all.

He was young—probably only a bit older than Andra, maybe nineteen, twenty—but he looked . . . rough, haggard, raw. Blond. Crinkled eyes. His angular jaw was brushed with scruff, and his sand-colored tunic was deliberately disheveled. He leaned against the doorjamb, arms crossed, eyebrows lifted in a question.

And he was wearing leather armor.

Definitely not a cryo'tech.

"Show the toe, Goddess," he said, and though Andra understood each word individually, she had no idea what they meant put together in that order.

He pushed against the wall and sauntered over to the metal chair, twirling it around to sit backward. He winked, and Andra realized belatedly that she was gaping at him. Not because he was handsome—

though, he was—but because there was a boy in leather armor saying random words to her in a cave, and this was so not how she imagined waking up on a new planet.

“Evens, then?” he asked. “You slept *forever*. See?” He pointed to his chin. “I grew a beard while I waited. Makes me look charred, marah?” He tilted his head in a few different angles, so she could get the full effect. When she didn’t respond, he patted the bed. “Show the toe. We need to peace. Sun’s sinking quickish.” His voice was richly reedy, and he spoke in an accent Andra had never heard before. It was hard to pick apart the string of phonemes into words. Even once she did, they didn’t sound quite right. Mushy and rushed.

“I . . .” She trailed off, taking in her surroundings again. Dirt, dirt, a bed, an empty cup, more dirt. No clues as to where she was. Holymyth, obviously. That was the plan: to wake up when they got to the new planet. She could *feel* the distance. Like when she’d fallen asleep on the vac’tain to visit her grandmother in the Maylarche and when she woke up, something in her body registered how far she was from home. That feeling—shaking, gnawing, unsettling—was a thousand, a million times more potent now.

She’d fallen asleep in one place and woken up across the universe.

No big deal. That was supposed to happen—waking up a gazillion miles away. But the rest of it—the dirty hut and the cryo’tech who wasn’t a cryo’tech . . .

“Where am I?” she asked, her voice raw. “What’s going on?” Rasping vowels, sticky consonants.

“You’re at luck I speak High Goddess.” He thrummed his fingers against the back of the chair. They were coated in sand. “No one else in this wastehole would reck your speech.” He held out his hand. “I’m Zhade.” The way he said it was halfway between *shade* and *jade*. “Been looking for you for nearish four years. There’s a kiddun’s game called Rabbit Rabbit—where one kiddun hides and the others have to find them, and you would be massive at that game.”

Andra stared at his hand. It was wrapped with dirty bandages. He turned it over and looked at his palm.

“This is something you do, marah? The hand-shaking thing? Fraughted ridiculous custom.”

Andra swallowed, her brain struggling to keep up, as though it were slogging through knee-deep mud. “Four years? What do you mean you’ve been looking for me?” The room grew dark, a cloud passing over the sun. The air didn’t cool. “My family. I have to find my family. Is this Holymyth? Did something happen while we were in stasis? Where’s the cryo’tech?” Again, she reached for her ’implant, hoping to ping her family, but found nothing.

“That . . .” The soldier frowned. “. . . is a lot of words I don’t reckon. I’ll get Wead to fetch you something to eat, but then we need to go road-wise.”

Andra swung over the side of the bed. Her legs ached, but not as badly as her throat. She wobbled as she got to her feet, but didn’t fall. *Minimal muscular atrophy*, her mother would have said—was probably saying right now as she woke someone else up from stasis.

Maybe Mom was waking up Acadia or Oz or Dad. Maybe she was looking for Andra right now. Or maybe . . .

She hobbled to the door, her muscles stretching in ways they hadn’t for a hundred years, even though in her mind, she’d used them just a few hours ago.

“Heya!” Zhade called. “Where are you peacing to?”

She pried open the door, expecting—

well, she didn’t know what she’d been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t *this*.

She stood at the top of a hill, in a village of rock huts. Not huts made of rocks, but huts carved *into* rocks. Enormous boulders, stories-high, with hollowed-out windows and doors and rooms. Dozens of structures sprouted from the ground. And beyond, as far as the eye could see: desert.

They were supposed to land somewhere subtropical. Somewhere lush, with moderate temperatures and low humidity, and enough trees to hide the horizon. Not a barren desert filled with boulders. The whole landscape was wrong.

But not as wrong as the people. Hundreds of them, all dressed like Andra—covered head-to-toe, despite the heat. As soon as they saw her, the crowd instantly quieted, and then, as one, they fell to their knees, murmuring a single word. Over and over. One Andra knew, but couldn't begin to understand. She looked back, and Zhade was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, a crooked smile on his lips. He raised an eyebrow and said the word the people were chanting, once and vivid and burning, and somehow, she knew he was talking about *her*.

“Goddess,” he said.

Then, “How do you like your worshippers?”

Something was definitely wrong.

TWO

hell-mouth, n.

- Definition: 1. used to denote the approach of that which lies beneath.
2. the entrance to Hell.

ZHADE WAS WATCHING her, waiting. Just like the crowd of people who called her *goddess*.

Sweat dripped down Andra's spine, and she pulled at the stiff material of her borrowed shirt, searching the faces, recognizing no one. The Ark held a million colonists, and she only knew a few dozen, but surely there would be *someone* she recognized. Her friends, Briella and Rhin. An intern from her mother's office—Rashmi maybe. *Perhaps Cruz*, she thought with a blush. But there was no one. Just strange, haggard faces, dressed in heavy rags in the sweltering heat, murmuring *goddess* over and over, and staring at *her*.

Andra felt the tickle of nano'bots against her skin. The microscopic 'bots had been ubiquitous on Earth—used to transfer messages from 'implants to tech—and if they were here, the rest of the colonists must be nearby. The nanos were starting to 'swarm and would soon be thick enough to be seen by the naked eye. She wondered if it was because so many people were focused on her—if they were all using their 'implants to try to communicate with hers, sending the nanos to interface with it. But why would they want to?

A lot of things could have gone wrong in the hundred years she was in stasis, but there was no series of accidents she could fathom that would lead her to this:

A desert village. Surrounded by peasants. Who, she now understood, were praying.

To her.

Their *goddess*.

“I don’t understand,” she croaked. It felt like she’d been screaming.

She was considering running back into the hut, closing her eyes, and sticking her fingers in her ears when she saw it—nothing more than a glimmer in the crowd, but it stirred something in her. Something familiar. Something that reminded her of home.

A robot. On the outskirts of the crowd.

It was an info’bot. Class D. She could tell from its humanoid build and white paneling. It probably had a copper core and Corsairs drive, and she bet it was engraved with the Lacuna Athenaeum Corporation symbol—the infinity sign made from a DNA strand. Almost all info’bots were LAC models. Her mother’s company covered the ’bot industry just short of a monopoly. And the med’ industry. And the space travel industry. And the EPA. And, and, and.

An AI would have been preferable, with its brain-like CPU and ability to perform tasks beyond the programming of a standard ’bot, but this dusty model was all Andra had, and she hoped to hell it had at least been programmed to connect to the network.

She ran toward it.

Zhade called after her, but she had already disappeared into the crowd, which she quickly discovered had been a mistake.

Hands grasped her, tugging at her clothes, winding into her hair. People were everywhere, murmuring words she couldn’t understand. Too close. Someone stepped on her foot. Another pulled a chunk of her hair. They were going to crush her, rip her apart. An arm grabbed her around the middle, and she cried out.

Suddenly, Zhade was there, pushing the people back, speaking in a language she didn't recognize. Slowly, reluctantly, the people backed away. Zhade tried to pull Andra toward the hut, but she wrenched out of his grasp.

"I need to get to the 'bot," she gasped.

"The what?"

"The 'bot." She pointed.

"Hmm." Zhade gave a wary look before shepherding her through the crowd, keeping the masses at arm's length with a harsh command.

The words didn't sound like any language Andra was familiar with—no dialect of English, not the bits of Hokkien her grandmother taught her, none of the European languages she learned in school. It was simultaneously mushy and clipped, filled with sounds she doubted she could mimic—and she could mimic a lot. There were hints of harsh consonants, voiced affricates, nasally vowels, some combination of Germanic and—

And it didn't matter. She should be focusing on what the hell had happened, not the architecture of a random language she'd never heard before.

They made their way down the hill, loose gravel shifting beneath them, but Zhade kept her upright while holding the people back. Faces peered through hollowed-out windows, behind stone structures. Whispers followed. Sweat dripped down Andra's back.

She was relieved when they reached the 'bot and the crowd drew away.

"Excuse me," she said. Standard greeting, if you didn't know the 'bot's domain.

It turned. 'Bots never looked completely lifelike—something about the dead eyes and the see-through skull-cap, revealing the wiring beneath—but this one looked especially mechanical, its movements jerky. Its paneling was muddied and scored with what looked like claw marks. Part of its face had been torn, exposing the gears that

controlled the left eye and cheek. It walked with a limp, as though the joint in its right knee was rusted, but it appeared functional.

It tilted its head. “How may I help?”

Yet again, Andra mentally reached for her ‘implant—the tiny piece of tech embedded in her brain. It was habit. She’d been implanted—as most people were—at birth, and she’d rarely used technology without it. Most people didn’t even know how, except Andra’s mother had demanded she have a basic understanding of manual technology and coding. Andra wasn’t sure how long it would be until her ‘implant was back online. Since she couldn’t rely on a neural connection, she asked aloud, “Where am I?”

The ‘bot started to respond, but shorted before it could get out a syllable.

“Switch to holographic display,” she said. She preferred holo’displays to voice interfaces anyway. They were more discreet, and the rules of interacting with a visual interface were more straightforward than the algorithms for conversation.

The crackling of the voice interface silenced, and the ‘bot upturned its hand, a holographic map shooting from its open palm. The data was too corrupted to make any sense of, and what Andra *could* see was nothing more than desert and more desert. A gust of sand scattered the pixels.

The transparent sheen of holo’keys appeared in front of her, and Andra typed her next question.

Am I on Holymyth?

A single word flashed across the screen: *Unknown.*

That was impossible. Or at least improbable. The ‘bot should have known where it was. GPS was part of any ‘bot’s most basic programming, and even if LAC hadn’t launched the satellites yet, it should still be linked to the Ark’s mobile network. A tingle on Andra’s skin reminded her that the air was filled with nano’bots, which typically communicated their location to one another. The ‘bot should have

been able to determine its whereabouts from the surrounding nano chatter at the very least.

What are the coordinates for this planet? she typed.

Slowly, sluggishly, the screen changed.

0-0-0

Andra ran a hand through her shorn dark hair, her fingers catching on the knots. She shouldn't have been surprised the 'bot was glitching. It had obviously seen better days.

Did we crash?

The screen blanked for a moment. *I'm sorry. I don't understand the question.*

You had to be so specific with these models. Andra wiped away a trickle of sweat before typing, *Did the Ark crash?*

No.

"Where is it?" she asked. The holo'display responded.

In geosynchronous orbit.

She took a deep breath. Okay. If the ship was orbiting the planet, she was on Holymyth and the rest of the colonists had to be here too.

The Ark was big. Big enough to hold a million people. Because of its size, it couldn't be built on-planet. It would require too much force to boost through the atmosphere, so it was built in space by a crew of astro'constructionists. After the colonists had been put in stasis, 'bots had shuttled them to the Ark, and then—because the ship couldn't land either—used the same shuttles to take them to the planet's surface once they reached Holymyth. They'd been in stasis the entire journey, so Andra never actually saw the inside of the ship that carried her across the galaxy, but at least it was still in orbit above her.

"The Ark colonists, where are they?" Andra asked.

The holo'display blipped, the harsh sun gleaming off the 'bot's open palm, and she heard the *kachunk, kachunk* of an overheated processor. She just hoped the data files weren't as corrupted as the 'display.

“Where is everybody? Are they still asleep?”

“Is who still asleep?” Zhade asked from behind her, and she realized she’d started speaking out loud. “The other goddesses? You’re the last.”

The *last*? The last what?

She turned to Zhade, narrowing her eyes, and examined him. He was a soldier. She could tell by the way he held himself, the calculating look in his eyes. The armor, of course. He was trying too hard to look casual, comfortable, but really, he was reading the situation, creating contingency plans. *Why would he need contingency plans?*

“Where are we?” she asked slowly. “What do you call this place?”

He shrugged, looking around the village. The crowd still watched, mesmerized. “The wasters call it the Hell-mouth.” He gestured to his surroundings, as if to say *Can you blame them?*

Andra tugged at the too-tight sleeves where sand had wedged against her skin. “Well, that’s ominous.”

“Scuze?” He laughed to himself. “No shakes. Now that you’ve woken, we can convo how you can—”

“You woke me up,” Andra interrupted. She tried to ignore the fact that this random person—not a cryo’tech, not a doctor—had pulled her *naked* from her ’tank and then *dressed* her. She’d come back to that later.

He grimaced, annoyed, and ran a hand through his blond hair. “Certz. I’ve been looking for you for four years, and I had no plans to fork that grave all the way back to Eerensed. Have you tried lifting that thing?”

“You’ve been looking for me?”

He nodded.

“For four years?”

He nodded again.

Just as soon as Andra thought she’d fit all the pieces together, they fell apart in her hands. Maybe . . . maybe her ’tank had been lost

once they reached the colony, and people had been sent to look for her. But how had she gotten lost? And how had she ended up here—in an obviously remote part of Holymyth? She swallowed her panic.

The soldier crossed his arms. “I’ve been looking ever since they peaced me out. You, my reluctant little Goddess, are my mark back acity.”

“Zhade,” a new voice said, a reprimand.

Behind Zhade stood a man dressed just like him—unkempt, sand-stained clothing beneath leather armor. His expression was kinder, though. He had a warm brown complexion, a touse of chestnut curls hanging over piercing black eyes. Dimples beneath a thin beard.

He stood apart from the crowd, as though he didn’t quite belong with them, and bowed to Andra. “Goddess.”

She was really starting to hate that word.

“What Zhade *purposes* to say,” the man said, straightening, “is that your people need you. Eerensed is dying. Without a goddess to sustain the gods’ dome, it will fail. We were . . . sent to find you.” His accent was formal and obviously didn’t sit comfortably on his tongue.

“I don’t understand . . . *any* of that,” she said.

Zhade placed a hand on the other man’s shoulder, pushing him back gently. “Scuze, Wead. Give her airspace. You overwhelm her.” He turned back to Andra. “Soze, we need to go soon and sooner. *Four years*, Goddess. Time runs.”

It didn’t make sense.

Four years.

She’d been missing for four years.

Andra’s stomach dropped at the thought of her family and friends living those years without her, moving forward while she was in stasis. Oz would be thirteen now. He had become a teenager while she was still one herself.

She turned back to the ’bot. “Where are the Ark colonists?”

It whirred, *kachunked*, and the light in its pupilless eyes dimmed as

its humming devolved into a grinding whine.

“Damn it,” Andra mumbled to herself, then turned to Zhade. “Do you have something long and sharp?”

He looked confused for a moment, but then reached for something—a dagger?—in a sheath at his side. Then, he seemed to think better of it and turned to his friend. “Wead? You hold a stick?”

His friend blinked, expression blank. “Neg. I’m not forking a *stick* in the middle of a Wastern village.”

One of the villagers—a woman about Andra’s mother’s age, with stringy hair and paper-white skin—let out a startled cry and ran into a nearby boulder hut. Moments later, she returned with a metal spike. Resting it in her open palms, she bowed and offered it to Andra.

She took it hesitantly. “Uh, thank you?”

The woman beamed. Andra turned back to the ’bot. It was dark and still, but if it had truly died, its working nanos would have been released to find new homes. It probably just needed a reset. She turned the ’bot around, found the port at the base of the neck, and drove the spike home.

The crowd gasped.

“What are you doing?” Zhade demanded, and he sounded offended, maybe even scared.

Andra dug the spike in deeper, waiting for a click. “This is a reset port. There’s a cluster of nano’bots at the base that sort of act as the center to the circulatory system. Stabbing them is like giving it a jolt of robotic adrenaline.”

Andra waited for a click. Ideally, this would be done with a reset pick, which would simultaneously reboot the ’bot while downloading any software updates it was missing. But in a pinch, any sharp object thrust into the port would at least restart it. She finally heard the click, and the ’bot hummed back to life, its hollow eyes flashing a yellowish white. The crowd behind her stirred with frenzied whispers. Andra handed the spike back to the villager, whose wide eyes remained un-

blinking as she took it and backed away from Andra with a terrified expression.

“Where are the Ark colonists?” she asked the ’bot again.

It hummed but didn’t respond. The holo’screen lit from its palm but remained blank. Time to be more specific.

“Where is Isla Watts?”

The ’display blinked before giving an answer.

Dead.

“What?”

The screen remained unchanged. The arid air felt suddenly chilled.

“Elaborate,” she choked out.

The colonists signed up for the generation ship Arcanum, commonly referred to as the Ark, are dead. Isla Watts is dead.

“Auric Lim.” Dad.

Dead.

“Oz Watts.” Her baby brother.

Dead.

“Acadia Watts. Cruz Alvarez. Briella Jackson. Rhin Valentino.”

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.

They were . . . she couldn’t even think it. It didn’t make sense. How could everyone . . . And she . . .

A wave of dizziness hit her. She’d just seen them. Minutes before she was put to sleep, she’d left them in the waiting room. Her dad had mumbled something about being proud of her and patted her head like she was a child, or one of his bichons. Acadia, her older sister, didn’t spare her a second glance, too busy pinging her instructors from her holo’band, making sure her credits would transfer interplanetarily. (They would.) Oz hugged her with tears in his eyes. Mom had given her a tight smile, still angry about their fight. *See you on Holymyth*, she’d said. Then, *You’re going to regret not shaving your head.*

At the memory, Andra almost sank to her knees, but a hand caught her elbow.

Zhade cleared his throat. "Goddess?"

"Stop calling me that!" she snapped, pulling away from him. "I'm not a goddess!"

Rage shot through her, surprising in its intensity. Little realizations burst into her thoughts, faster and faster, like water coming to a boil. *She was alone. There'd been an accident. She'd slept too long. No one was coming to help her. The other colonists were gone. Her mother wasn't coming to check her vitals. Everyone she knew was dead.*

She didn't know how she knew these things, but somehow they felt real. No—they didn't feel *real* at all. They felt *true*.

She screamed, hands clenched at her side. The sound started low in her stomach, clawing its way through her throat and bursting from her lips. It drifted into the desert, falling flat on the wind.

The crowd cowered, and Andra sucked in a breath, taking in the frightened villagers. Sand stung her eyes, and she wiped away tears.

"Sorry," she muttered.

She had never made anyone cower before. She wasn't exactly intimidating. She was chubby and all dimples and too many teeth. But the people looked at her like she could snuff them out of existence with a thought.

"Evens, it's for certz you exist a goddess *now*," Zhade said. He walked over to the 'bot and slung his arm around it. "You just had a full convo with an angel. If the immortality did not convince me, *that* did. Only goddesses and sorcers can talk to angels."

Wherever she was, 'bots were angels and Andra was a goddess and her family was dead.

"You speak with angels. You rose from the grave. Admit it. You exist a goddess."

She gritted her teeth. She knew he didn't mean *grave* or *goddess* in the same way she understood it, but between that and her dead family and calling the planet the Hell-mouth—

She froze.

Hell-mouth.

Holymyth. Hell-mouth.

Maybe the people weren't being fatalistic at all. The villagers weren't speaking English, but maybe that was because English had changed. Words were living things. Shifting, adapting, evolving. Growing and shrinking to fill the space. Rising to meet needs, and falling away when obsolete. How long would it take for English to become unrecognizable to her?

"What year is it?" she asked.

Zhade narrowed his dark eyes. "I don't comp. It's *this* year. The year after last. The year before next, if it comes."

"That doesn't help." Andra turned to the 'bot. "What year is it?"

It groaned. The interface stuttered, a quick blip of data bytes firing, muffled calculations, and the 'display blinked back to life. A date spun in the 'bot's open palm.

3102.

"No," she breathed. "The *Gregorian* calendar. What year is it?"

She waited. The 'display refreshed, but the number remained the same.

"What's your malfunction, you piece of empty? I'm asking for the date." She struck the info'bot. It rang out, tinny and hollow. The mechanics inside whirred as it processed the insult, lights flashing rapidly along the exposed wires under its transparent skull.

I apologize for displeasing you.

But the year is still 3102.

The 'bot was tattered and decrepit, an inch away from a mechanical death, its processing speed slower than the old data'pads in Andra's school library, but if there was one thing a 'bot could do, it was tell time.

She was on Holymyth, the colonists were dead, and the year was 3102.

She hadn't overslept by four years.

She'd overslept by a thousand.

THREE

belonging, n.

Etymology: Middle English *belongen*: to long.

Definition: 1. a possession.

2. *colloq.* a feeling of acceptance in a group or society.

ANDRA WAS GOOD with numbers, but she *loved* words. Numbers were black-and-white, never changing. One plus one would always equal two, from here to eternity, until the end of time, and the square root of 1,764 would never not be 42, and yes, Andra knew that off the top of her head. Words, on the other hand, were amorphous and fuzzy and fickle, and that made them infinitely more interesting. Words were alive. Numbers were tools.

343,568 days since she went into stasis.

987,432 colonists, now all centuries-dead.

8.2 trillion miles between her and Earth.

The numbers fell short of the reality.

The desert felt too large. The crowd felt too close. She broke out in a cold sweat, and sand clung to her exposed skin.

“I need to get out of here,” she gasped.

“Certz . . .” Zhade said. “There’s . . . not many spaces to peace to . . .” He looked around, as if something would suddenly appear.

Andra pushed past him. Her heart was racing, and blackness crowded her vision. Despite the frenzy happening in her mind, her

brain seemed ultra-focused, dissecting and analyzing her new situation with brutal clarity. She ran across the ground of a desert planet, surrounded by people who thought she was a goddess, a millennium after her family had lived and died without her.

“Wait!” Zhade called, but she didn’t listen. She had a singular focus: getting away from the gawking crowd and the stranger who’d woken her. Running from the ’bot that just told her that her family was dead, had been for a thousand years, and Andra was alone.

She was halfway back to the hut when a glimpse of something stopped her. Up on a hill, overlooking the village, was Andra’s empty cryo’tank.

IT WASN’T SO much a hill as it was a dune, and it took all of Andra’s remaining strength to climb it. The sand was dark orange in the late-evening light, and the sky stretched in a cloudless expanse. She collapsed next to her empty cryo’tank, which had been left in a puddle of ’protectant residue, the tubing and life-support systems lying in tangles, spilled intestines of a complex machine reduced to its basic parts. She hauled herself up, examining the open ’tank, running her fingers over the now-warm glass casing.

She touched it almost reverently. It had held her for nearly a thousand years. That was fifty times the longest human trials. Ten times longer than her family had been in stasis. Longer than her family had been dead.

In the distance, children squealed and shrieked as they chased an animal that looked like a cross between a fox and a dog. Colonists’ descendants playing with a space desert fox/dog in a society who worshipped her as a goddess.

She wiped the sweat beneath her eyes and tried to puzzle out what had happened, but she didn’t have enough pieces to create a whole picture. The Lacuna Athenaeum Corporation had put together a plan

to begin colonizing other planets. More specifically, Dr. Alberta Griffin, the founder of LAC and certified tech genius, had instigated everything: from cryonics to shuttles to generation ships to terraforming. To the 'bots and AI that would oversee it all. She was everything Andra wasn't. Tall, thin, blonde, intimidating, goal-oriented. Mom had introduced Andra to her boss a dozen times, and Dr. Griffin had been impressed with Andra's natural abilities in STEM disciplines. She was less than impressed with Andra's disinterest in them.

Words. That's what Andra wanted to study. Words.

Sweat trickled down her back, the heat suffocating, each breath sticking in her throat, right above her sternum.

She was utterly alone—there was no one to tell her what to do, or even explain what was happening. She couldn't rely on her mom to take care of everything, or even Acadia to boss her around. *Because they're dead*, she thought. She couldn't *fix* this; she could only understand, and there was only one place she could think to get any answers.

She bent over the data'screen at the head of her 'tank. If it had kept her alive for the last thousand years, surely it would still have all its data files intact as well. She fought the urge to use her currently useless neural'implant and instead lifted the shield panel that protected the 'display. It blinked to life, and the Lacuna Athenaeum Corporation's infinite double-helix swirled on the screen. Andra tapped the controls until she found the holo'display. Everything was recorded when it came to cryonics. A person in stasis was practically dead, completely dependent on the cryo'techs, which scared people enough to pass legislation that every cryonics company had to keep records of every moment spent in stasis. So there had to be recordings of what happened to the 'tank over the last thousand years.

What happened to *Andra* over the last thousand years.

The records folder was easy enough to find. She filtered through the time stamps, skimming through October 2161, but there, the

files abruptly stopped. No records after the month she'd been put into stasis. There weren't even any spaces where the recordings had been. It was like they had never existed in the first place.

The squeals of the playing children faded, and a buzzing took its place. Andra stared at the empty folder long enough for the 'screen to blank and the now-holographic LAC logo to take its place.

Not that any of it mattered—the missing files, the broken 'tank. It wouldn't change the fact that she'd overslept, that she was abandoned on a desert planet in the future, that her family was dead. Had they lived long, happy lives without her? Had Acadia gotten five degrees and ruled the world? Had Oz grown up to become a drone racer?

Andra had to take deep breaths to steady herself. None of this should have happened. There was no way she shouldn't have woken up with the others, and it was next to impossible for there to be no record of what happened embedded into her 'tank. There were redundancies built into the system, checks and balances, fail-safes, protocols for every contingency.

Except, apparently, for this. Whatever this was.

She'd gone into stasis, flown across the galaxy, arrived at Holy-myth, and then . . . what? *Something* had happened.

The sun was getting low on the horizon. The shadows lengthened. It was still hot. There was a scuffle of sand behind her as Zhade's friend, the one with the kind eyes, made his way up the hill. When he reached her, he sat, cocking his knees and resting his arms on them. She thought she could wait him out, ignore him until he went away. But he sat in silence, watching the children play.

"I never wanted to come," she said, surprised the words were leaving her mouth, that she was divulging this truth to a stranger. "Mom and I had a huge fight about it, and I was tempted to just not go through with the process. What could she do? I'd be dead by the time they found out. And instead, they—"

She cut off, holding back tears.

She'd argued with her mother countless times over joining the colony. To Isla, it was a given. *Of course* they would go to Holymyth. It was, after all, her life's work. But it wasn't Andra's.

She wasn't sure what her life's work would be, but it felt tied to Earth. When she told her mother this, Isla had rolled her eyes. Andra's place was where Isla told her it was. They were a family, and they would stick together. Andra couldn't help but think her mom's adamance was less out of motherly affection and more about her need for control.

Now, here Andra was, on a planet she didn't even want to be on, alone, with no clue as to what happened or what to do next.

She dug her heel into the sand. "They're gone, instead," she finished.

The man beside her looked confused but nodded sympathetically. "Sorries, Goddess."

She winced. "Please don't call me that. It's Andromeda. Or Andra. Everybody calls me Andra."

"Andra," he repeated, misshaping the vowels, stumbling over the string of consonants. "It exists an honor. I'm Lew-Eadin. Wead as a shortcut."

Andra wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, I'm just going to call you Lew."

He laughed, though she didn't understand the joke. "Lew. Certz, then, Goddess." He shook his head. "Sorries. Andra."

Below, one of the children shouted above the rest, a long string of words Andra couldn't understand. She was starting to recognize patterns though, mining familiar syllables from the mush of elongated vowels and clipped consonants. She itched to write down what they were saying, to map it out.

The soldier laughed at something one of the children said.

Andra nodded to them. "How come you don't speak like they do?"

"I do," he said, raking his hand through his dark curls. "But when

I convo with a goddess, I speak High Goddess. I learned it from the First, as did Zhade. As did most of Eerensed, which you will hear if you come with us.”

The children dove for the fox/dog, their smudged faces lit with intensity.

“Come with you?” Andra murmured, but it wasn’t really a question, just an absurd idea—tagging along with strangers to a place she knew nothing about. But on the heels of that absurd idea came the realization that she was low on options.

Lew-Eadin was quiet for a moment. “Firm, come with us. You can save us.”

She snorted. “I’m not a goddess.”

“So you say,” Lew-Eadin said, smiling though he gave her a sideways look. “But, full respect, I can’t say I believe you.”

Andra shrugged, tearing up a tuft of brown, crisp grass. “Suit yourself.”

Lew-Eadin blinked, obviously confused by the phrase, but didn’t comment. There was movement behind them, and Andra turned to see that Zhade had climbed the hill. His hood was pulled over his head, and the bandages on his hands had been replaced with fingerless gloves. He sat, wriggling between them and kicking up a cloud of sand in the process. Andra’s eyes smarted.

“Wead, are you talking gnats with our Goddess here?” Zhade asked, then let out a cheer as one of the children launched himself at the fox/dog and missed, the animal slithering its way through the child’s arms. He turned back to Lew. “She’s had a day and a half. Leave her resting.”

Andra fought back an eye roll. She was starting to make sense of Zhade’s speech patterns, and if anyone was “talking gnats,” it was him. She had the feeling he wasn’t being honest or, at least, wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“You woke me up,” she said. It was an accusation this time. He had no right. And maybe she was still a bit mad he’d seen her naked. The paunch of her stomach, the heft of her thighs. The birthmark she hated—a starburst of dense freckles, like a pointillist painting, just under the left side of her collarbone.

“Firm,” Zhade said slowly, then bit his lip. “We’ve convoed this already. Do you have no memory? We woke you. I’m Zhade, this is Lew-Eadin. You’re the Third Goddess, the one who will save us all, stop the pockets, restore the forests and seas, which personalish, I don’t believe ever existed. Just fishes and wishes. More importantish, you’ll get me back to Eerensed.”

She narrowed her eyes. It shouldn’t have been possible—some random person waking her up. People went to school for years to become cryo’technicians. “You understand manual technology.”

He leaned forward. “I don’t comp what that means, but it sounds full good, marah?”

“How did you know how to wake me up?”

“I’m a sorcer, Goddess.” He grinned. “Best there is.”

“Where did you learn how to open my ’tank?”

He shrugged, his expression blank. “From another sorcer. In Eerensed. Where I once lived. Where I’m taking you now that I’ve found you, Goddess.”

She scratched at the sand crawling down her neck. “My name’s Andra, and I’ve told you, I’m not a goddess.” She paused, cocking her head to examine him. He seemed arrogant and ridiculous, but his brown eyes were clear, sane. “Surely you can’t believe I am.”

Zhade picked up a flat rock and twirled it between his fingers, leaning back on his other hand. “I reckon you were agrave for as long as anyone has memory. I reckon you could probablisth perform magic beyond the best sorcer.” He leaned forward conspiratorially, his blond hair flopping over his eyes. “Which is me, beedub.” He sat back. “I reckon you speak High Goddess full flawless. And I just witnessed you

come back to life. If you're not a goddess, what are you?"

Just Andra. Twenty-second-century teenager and all-around under-achiever.

"I'm from . . . the past," Andra said, wincing. Even to her ears, it sounded fantastical.

Zhade let out a bark of a laugh. "Me too. I traveled here from the moment before this one."

"That's not what I meant."

"I reckon full well."

He watched her for a moment. Andra stared back, tugging at the tight material of the borrowed shirt where it had ridden up over her stomach.

"I'm not a goddess," she muttered.

Zhade waved his hand, dismissive. "Fortunatish for me, it doesn't import what you for true are. It's full good that people *believe* you exist a goddess. The Guv will let me in if I have you with me."

"So I'm a bargaining chip?"

"Neg. For certz not." He paused. "What's a bargaining chip?"

"You're using me to get what you want."

"Oh, then firm. You're definitish a bargaining chip."

Andra stood, beating the sand off her pants. "I'm not going with you to this Ear-and-sand," she said, though she wasn't so sure. What other options did she have? Stay here? In this town where she didn't speak the language, didn't know how to survive?

"Eerensed," Zhade corrected. "And I resurrected you. You owe me."

"She literalish just woke, sir," Lew-Eadin's voice was bored, perfunctory, as though he were used to arguing with Zhade. His accent grew thicker, more natural. "She needs time and a half to adjust."

"Psh." Zhade ducked his chin.

"I don't know you," Andra said. "You could be anyone, and bragging about being banished from your hometown isn't a great recommendation."

Zhade looked affronted, started spluttering an argument, but Andra cut him off.

“I owe you nothing. Thanks for waking me, but I didn’t *ask* you to, and honestly . . .” She took a deep breath. “. . . I probably would have been better off left in that ’tank. I’m not a goddess or a sorcer or whatever, and I certainly can’t *save* anyone. I’m just a normal girl in a—” She laughed under her breath, kicking her foot lightly against her ’tank. “—a ridiculous situation, and all I want now is to figure out what happened to my family and try to get a ride back home—”

Her voice caught. She swallowed, thinking of home. Of Earth.

Earth: the blue and green ball hanging in space, third planet from Sol. But also Earth: the scent of rain in spring and the sound of leaves crunching in autumn. The park where she and Oz would race drones. Her favorite sushi restaurant. Getting hit with a blast of cold water when the shower temp’con glitched. The wall of pre-books in her room. Warm socks.

One thousand years. All of that would be gone now or changed beyond recognition. She didn’t have a home to go back to. She felt the hot smart of tears welling in her eyes. Zhade didn’t notice, and Lew pretended not to.

“I can’t go with you,” she mumbled. One tear slid free and she quickly swiped it away.

Zhade blinked into the desert wind, then nodded seriously. “Certz, certz.” He stood up with a groan, dusting off his pants. “I was hoping, but fishes and wishes, marah? It’s your fate to decide.”

At the bottom of the hill, there was a high-pitched cry. One of the children had stabbed a knife into the fox/dog. The animal whimpered, and the child—a girl of about six—twisted the knife until the animal fell silent. Andra gasped, covering her mouth to hold in a scream. The other children whined words she couldn’t understand.

“I spoze her fam will have meat tonight.” Zhade didn’t look at Andra. Instead, he watched the girl haul the carcass across the des-

ert. “If she were in Eerensed, she wouldn’t have to worry. We have full bars meat. Angels to cook for us. And a gods’ dome to protect us from pockets.”

Zhade turned to go, but one of the words in his strange dialect cut through the fog in Anda’s mind.

“A, uh, gods’ dome? Was it always there?”

On this strange planet where ’bots were angels and a girl in stasis was a goddess, a gods’ dome must be a bio’dome. And this city Zhade talked about wasn’t replete with magic—or gifts from benevolent gods—but with technology.

Zhade shook his head, a ghost of a smirk tugging at his lips, and Andra felt like she’d somehow stepped into a trap. “Neg. The First created it.”

“The First what?” Andra asked.

“The First Goddess,” he said simply. “Did you imagine you were the sole one?”

Andra’s breath hitched, her heart stopped. Other “goddesses”? That could mean other colonists like her, who hadn’t woken with the others. People from her time. From Earth. Too many questions sifted through her head, and she spluttered out the first one she could catch. “How many?”

Zhade shrugged, but the movement was anything but casual. “Three we reck. *The First was the goddess of knowledge and light*,” he recited. “*The Second brought us chaos and fright. The Third—*”

“And the other two? They were like me?”

“Impatient?”

“Frozen. In a ’tank.”

The side of Zhade’s mouth twitched. “Certz. Immortal and unchanging and powerful.”

Maybe Andra *wasn’t* the only colonist left. She didn’t want to hope, but perhaps these other goddesses were women she knew. Whoever this First was, she’d *created* a fully functioning bio’dome. You had to

be a certified genius to do that. There were a handful of people Andra could think of from her time who were capable of something like that. And one of them was her mother.

But the 'bot had said Andra's mother was dead. Maybe it was mistaken, or misinterpreting data. 'Bots weren't omniscient after all; they could only recite the information fed to them. And they weren't AI; they couldn't deduce. *Someone* had sent Zhade to find Andra, and who would do that, if not her own mother? It was too much to hope for—that she had some family left—and she tried to tamp down the thought.

"I'll go with you," she said, and watched Zhade's smile spread.

Something about it didn't seem genuine. Too many teeth.

"But you'll tell me everything you can about the goddesses on the way."

Zhade's smile twitched, showing a single dimple in his left cheek. He blinked slowly. "I'll tell you as much as I can." He gave Lew-Eadin a look Andra couldn't interpret, then started to descend the hill. "Full good. We'll peace in the moren. Decide your fate, Goddess," he called over his shoulder, and then he was gone.

Andra watched as his footprints filled back up with sand. "He's a bit . . . much," she said, but her mind was spinning with possibilities.

"He's intoleristic," Lew answered, but laughter tinged his voice.

The wind picked up and Andra was forced to cover her face or get a mouthful of sand. What little skin she had exposed started to sting, a million tiny pricks.

"We aged up together." Lew's voice was muffled by his sweater. "He's . . . more than he seems." After a moment, he asked, "Why don't you reckon you exist a goddess?"

"The same reason you don't think you're a giant. Because I'm not one."

"Certz to full small creatures, I *am* a giant."

Andra laughed.

“Amid their own kind,” Lew said slowly, “gods might not seem so special, but among mere mortals . . .” He let the implication hang in the air and stood. “I’d best make certz he doesn’t set anything afire.”

Andra eyed the rock town below. If anyone could set fire to stone, it would be Zhade.

Lew bowed slightly, just a dip of his head. “Goddess,” he said, then caught himself. “Andra.”

“Lew.” She nodded back and he smiled before following his friend down the hill.

Andra waited at the top of the dune until the sun started to set. Not the sun she knew. Not Sol, but Andromeda. Her mother had named her after the star that supported Holymyth. With Earth’s resources dwindling, the only option for sustaining the growing population was to spread across the galaxy, to travel to the nearest habitable planet, orbiting a sun not too different from their own. *Humanity’s last hope*, her mother called it. *Andromeda will save us all*. What a joke, Andra thought.

She moved to the foot of the ’tank, where her belongings were kept. She pressed her hand to the scanner, and it beeped as it read her DNA signature. The drawer popped open with a hiss as the tech’s stasis seal was broken. The compartment was the size of a standard suitcase—large enough for all the trinkets and ’bands and memories too precious to be parted from—and Andra had filled it to the brim with tablets and pre-books and clothes and the blanket she’d slept with until she was twelve. She’d filled it with home.

She reached in, her fingers grasping for the blanket, but instead, they met nothing but air. No ’band, no tablet filled with pics and music and books. No dress she was going to wear on her first day on Holymyth. Everything was gone.

“Looking for this?”

Andra whipped around to find Zhade had returned. His hand was held out, and dangling from his fingers was her holocket.

The faux-gold chain glinted in the dying light, ending in a star-shaped charm. It was stupid and pointless and sentimental, and Andra snatched it from Zhade's hands, hanging it around her neck with a sigh of strange relief.

It was a child's toy. Outdated years before she got it. So obsolete, even if her 'implant had been working, it couldn't have communicated with the 'locket. Cheap tech and even cheaper metal. There was no way it still worked.

"Where's the rest of my stuff?" Andra snapped. She thought about her security blanket and the first-edition pre-book copy of *I Think I Speak for Everyone* and the purple holo'band she'd gotten for her sixteenth birthday.

"That was all there was," Zhade said, his expression so disarmingly earnest, she actually believed him.

"Oh," she said. "Thanks."

He nodded. "Firm. Does it import?"

"Yeah," she said, her fist clenched around the 'locket.

She'd kept it because Oz had given it to her. He'd won it at a raffle at school when he was five, and even then, he was enamored with outdated tech. He'd carried that thing around for weeks, agonizing over how to use the memory slots. One day, Andra was upset about something—she didn't even remember what—but Oz had sneaked into her room, where she was curled up in a ball, crying silently, and he slipped the 'locket into her hand.

She didn't have the heart to tell him it was next to useless. 'Bands could store hundreds of petabytes. The 'locket had space for six single-gig memories. But she'd taken it from him, because she could tell he was proud of himself for his generosity. She'd used the memory slots to record random moments. They'd seemed mundane at the time, but now they were all she had of her past. Precious. Cruz was in there. And Briella and Rhin. Oz. Her family.

The wind picked up, almost a cool breeze. Zhade squinted into the sun, his hands in his pockets.

“I reckon what it’s like,” he said, “to lose fam. To lose everyone.” His eyes met hers. “Sorries. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

Andra pursed her lips, swallowing her grief. Zhade nodded once, something serious and reassuring in his gaze, and then, without another word, he sauntered away, humming to himself as he descended the dune.

She turned to watch the sunlight fade to gray across the desert, ’locket clutched to her chest. It wasn’t until her namesake disappeared below the horizon that Andromeda made her way down the hill.

FOUR

THE SOLDIER

ZHADE HATED THE Wastes. At least in Rocco, or any of the other desert villages he'd visited, he could pretend he was somewhere else—some obscure part of Eerensed where nothing grew and everything was falling apart—but once he left the shelter of civilization, it was glaringish obvi he was mereish a small speck in a vast sky of sand. *Oceans* of sand, the First had called the Wastes. Zhade tried to imagine all the sand replaced with water, but it seemed impossible.

Fishes and wishes, the Eerensadians would say. Meaning, *You might as well wish for the ocean*.

Zhade didn't believe the ocean had ever existed.

The desert spread out ahead of them, barren and endless. Nothing for miles except the road they followed, marked by a yellow line in the sand. Heat waves wafted in the distance. Zhade huddled in the back of their (borrowed) cart with the Goddess, while Wead led the (stolen) horse (*don't you dare tell the Goddess, Wead*) at an infuriatingish slow pace. Up and down dunes. Bell after bell. A dense fog of dust billowed ahead. Sandclouds. They were prominent in this part of the Wastes. Not dangerous, but not a piece of cuppins either.

It was a fault of his upbringing that he'd been full unprepped for the Wastes when he was exiled. He'd never been outside of the city

til he suddenish was. He was clever, resourceful, a survivor. But navigating the streets and politics of Eerensed hadn't prepped him for making his march through the Wastes. There was no one to charm food out of, nothing to trade for protection, and nothing—full nothing—he could do to hide from the pockets. He was powerless.

He didn't like being powerless.

Most of his kidhood had been spent in hiding, tossed from cave to cave at the whim of others. His mam's whims mostish. It was full rare he'd had any say in the meteor. She determined where he went and with whom and when. *For your own good*, she'd said. Zhade had yet to see this "good" of his she convoed. Still, he was following her whims, though she was dead and sunk into stardust. It was habit.

Take this, she'd said, giving him the icepick dagger, and he'd taken it. It still hung in a thin sheath at his side.

Find the Third, she'd said, and he'd spent his full banishment searching.

Don't let Maret have the crown, she'd said, and there Zhade had failed.

Maret already had the throne, and the best Zhade could do now was overthrow him.

Fishes and wishes.

At least he had found the Third—a nearish impossible task considering his searching radius was anywhere in the world. The Eerensedi-ans would have called it fate. Zhade wanted to laugh at that. He had his own thoughts bout fate.

The cart rocked beneath them as Zhade looked over at the Goddess—*Andra* she kept insisting. She'd salted him with questions, almost nonstop, since they'd peaced. *Why hadn't she woken earlier? Why did people worship her? Who stole her from Eerensed? What are the other goddesses like?* She got frustrated when he couldn't—or wouldn't—answer, stewing with her arms crossed and brow furrowed.

The Goddess had lain in the Yard for most of Zhade's kidhood—and for hundreds of years before he was born. He had memories of

visiting her a grave, seeing her blurred shape through frosted glass, listening to the prayers and chants of the other visitors—the ones who *believed* in her and *hoped* she would wake soon to save them.

Zhade recked too much to believe or hope. But he'd gone with his mother once a turn to visit the Second and Third. He never prayed or chanted or took part in any of the rituals. Zhade's mam never prayed either, mereish watched, like she was waiting for something, but Zhade never recked what. Then the Second woke, and everything went to sands, and not long after, the Third vanished. Some said she'd woken. Others said she'd been stolen. It had always been Zhade's goal to find her eventualish—he'd trained on how to wake her, what to do after—but his mother's death and his banishment had sped up his plans a bit.

Neg. Not his plans. His *mother's* plans.

After the Third's disappearance, Zhade's memories of the Goddess had warped and faded. Now, faced with the reality of her . . . Evens. He'd always imagined if she came to life, she would be like the First. Wise, brilliant, and intimidating. But this girl—this girl was nothing like a goddess should be.

She was too unconfident, too uncomfortistic in her own skin. Shrewd and calculating, certz. But too uncertz of herself.

Easyish manipulated.

Zhade bit back a smile.

This had happened better than he imagined. Not sole could she get him back acity (he was certz of it—Maret wouldn't pass the opportunity to hoist his own popularity with a newish-arisen goddess), but he could use her to enact his plan.

This time, it was *his* plan, and his plan alone.

Decide your fate, the Eerensedians would say. It was hello and good-bye and the first part of an old saying fewer and fewer people had memory of. *Decide your fate, or fate will decide for you.*

Zhade had enough of fate deciding for him. He was determined to

shape his own future. A future that required the Third Goddess accompanying him back to Eerensed and staying whole and full well til the time came for her to be of further use.

The cart jolted to a stop, and the Goddess slammed against him. He held back what he wanted to say—something bout her throwing herself at him. Flirting was its own kind of magic and there was a delicate balance to it—too much and it lost its power.

She scrambled away from him. “Why are we stopping?” Her accent made Zhade’s stomach lurch. It was exactish like the First’s.

He pushed himself up to see why Lew-Eadin had stopped, and then slumped back down with a groan.

“New one, sir,” Wead said, as though Zhade couldn’t see for himself. A pocket.

“What?” The Goddess scrambled to see over the side of the wagon. She froze when she saw what was afront of them.

A blackened, churning mass swallowed the road ahead, darkening the sky and sand and everything beyond. It reached past the clouds and across the desert, and now that Zhade recked it was there, he couldn’t miss its droning hum. No one was full certz what pockets were. The opposite of existence. Void and fire and nothing. A single monster or an amalgam of roiling cloudlike spirits. The Three’s worshippers believed pockets were a corruption of magic. The sorcers sole recked they were death. Whatever they were, they appeared out of nowhere, with no warning. Living in the Wastes meant living in constant fear that one day a pocket would descend and you would blink out of existence. They always gave Zhade the fraughts.

This particular pocket was enormous. The biggest Zhade had ever seen, as a fact. The yellow road that led them disappeared into the pocket, swallowed by the darkness. It would take them bells and bells to go round.

Andra let out a low curse, voice trembling.

Zhade tried to hide his smile. Not that he hadn’t felt the same

kiddun-like awe and horror the first time he'd seen a pocket, but what was experience for, if not to deride those who lacked it?

He stretched, twisting and popping his back. Sweat trickled down Zhade's spine, and his full body was gritty with sand. He was used to it though. This had been his life for four years.

"Go round," he muttered, gnatted that Wead needed the instruction soon and sooner.

"What is it?" the Goddess asked, her eyes stuck on the seething darkness. That was a good march to insanity.

"A pocket," Zhade answered. "Places nothing can live."

She nodded, but he could tell she didn't full comp.

That was perfect. The less she recked, the more she would rely on Zhade.

Wead urged the horse forward and the cart gave another jolt as they turned off the road. The surrounding desert had grown more craggy and less sandy as they got closer to the city, and the cart jostled as they navigated the rocks.

Zhade saw the Goddess give the pocket one last look before she sat back down. Then her dark eyes met Zhade's, and he felt something most definitish not guilt twist his stomach.

THE WASTES DRAGGED on, a collection of jagged boulders and scragglish flora. Wead resolutish made his march round the edge of the pocket, looking for the gods' road, urging the horse to go as fast as it could, but many laps stood between them and their goal, and the horse was drained, both from distance and the desert heat. It got in their skin, and Zhade felt like goose wrapped in tin and put in the oven.

The night was another meteor. The Wastes grew intolerish cold at night, but over the years, Zhade had learned to tolerate it. The Goddess, however, had not. Where she was from—the land of the

gods or wherever—apparentish did not experience extreme temps. She never complained, but as they huddled together under the bed of the cart, tangled in blankets, Zhade could feel her shiver, hear her teeth chatter.

She didn't sleep. Not full true. She pretended, never admitting she lay awake through the night while Zhade and Wead slept, but she would give herself away by fidgeting with the necklace he'd returned to her, and he wondered why it imported. She snapped it open and shut. Whispered *snick-snick snick-snicks* in the darkness. After several bells, her breathing would finalish slow, her body relax, but then she'd jerk awake, as though something had scared her. Zhade didn't say anything til the fourth night, when the *snicking* of the locket burned his last end.

She lay between him and Wead, who had long since sunk off, full asleep with his head propped on his carry-with. She was shivering especialish hard tonight. He tried to huddle closer, but each time he did, she would shift toward Wead. Zhade tried not to take offense, unsuccessfulish. He was an exceptional snuggler.

snick . . . snick . . . snick . . .

He reached over to stop her. She froze before slapping his hand away.

He bit back his retort when he realized it was dark and they were basicalish strangers and he'd touched her without permission. "Sorries." He coughed. At least the snapping had stopped. "You're still awake, marah, Goddess?"

A night wind fluttered past, and he pulled his sweater tight round himself. He covered his mouth and nose, but still choked on sand. A barn loft, or even a smallroom, imagined awfulish good anow.

After a moment, she shrugged. "I don't feel like sleeping."

Zhade turned toward her, sand shifting beneath him, and huffed out a dramistic long-suffering sigh. "Close your eyes, I'll tell you a bedtime story."

The Goddess snorted. “Oh, this ought to be good.”

“I’m a massive storyteller. What do you want to hear bout?”

She groaned, looking up through the slats in the wagon. Her eyes narrowed, and Zhade followed her gaze. Nothing but a dusting of stars—the sandclouds had finally cleared. She was quiet for a time and a half, and if Zhade hadn’t spent the last several nights next to her, he might have imagined she’d fallen asleep.

“What do people say about me?” she finally asked.

Zhade stretched out, placing his hands behind his head, and held his voice low so as not to wake Wead. “That you’re massive at parties, but not someone you’d ask to care for small kidduns.”

She huffed, but he was certain she was holding back a smile. “Are there legends about me? About me being a . . . goddess or whatever. My powers, my history?”

For a moment, all he could do was watch her. She looked different in the starlight. Somehow both more and less. Her round cheeks were flushed, her dark eyes sharp and clear. She wore her hair short—not as short as Western women did, but much shorter than Eerensedians. It was a black and shiny, like the most expensive armor. He could see the goddess in her, but he could also see the fear. He turned back to the stars. “You’re the goddess of virility, and your powers are—”

“If you’re going to be like that, we can go back to that village.”

He knew she was bluffing. Whatever she was looking for, it wasn’t behind them.

“Why do you want to hear your own story?”

“Because,” she paused. “I don’t know it. I was asleep when my story happened. How on earth did I become a goddess?”

Zhade frowned at the phrase, but he probed her meaning. “Certain, I would march forward with it.” He rolled the kinks out of his neck. “If people want to worship you, I say let them.”

“But it’s dishonest. I’m letting them believe a lie.”

“Who says it’s a lie?”

“Um. *Me.*” She threw up her hands, almost smacking them against the cart, then dropped her voice when she realized she’d stopped whispering. “I do. I say it’s not true.”

“Who are you to decide what’s true?”

“Apparently, I’m a goddess,” she muttered.

“Ha!” Zhade tossed a grin in her direction. When he caught her glowering at him, he shrugged. “You said it, not me.”

The Goddess pursed her lips, obvisly holding in a laugh, and rolled away from him. Moonlight streaked across her hair.

“Once upon a time,” he started.

“Zhade,” she groaned, turning back and nudging him. He wanted to laugh at the way she said his name—like she had the sniffs, or a mouth full of butterjam. He wanted to hear it again.

“Do you want to hear this or not?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “Once upon a time, there were three goddesses agrave. They were charred and immortal and unchanging. For hundreds of years, the world waited for them to wake, and as time ran, humans grew more desperate for the goddesses to save them. Finalish, the First awoke, and with her, the ability to sorcer the angels. She created the gods’ dome and skooled us magic. When the Second woke, she was fiery and fickle and brought disaster. The people waited for the Third, but she vanished, never to be seen again. Evens—” He winked at her. “Til now. And the world grew darker and bleaker and it’s said that sole the Third Goddess can save us from the planet trying to kill us.” He paused, dropping the singsong quality of his voice. “But do you want to know what I imagine?”

“Not really.”

“Stop interrupting.” Another pause. “I imagine we did it ourselves. They blame the planet for not wanting us, but what’s a planet going to do, marah? It’s mereish a big chunk of rock and heat. We’re the monsters. We’re the ones with the power to destroy . . .”

His voice drifted off. *The power to destroy and create*, his mam had

told him, *is a responsibility no one should be burdened with, yet everyone has.* Then she'd given him a dagger and some jewelry and told him to save Eerensed.

That was the last time he saw her. Right before they killed her.

Right before *Maret* killed her.

The Goddess tilted her head, looking up at him under her lashes.

"This is starting to be a bit of a downer."

He almost smiled. She could be funny, his Goddess.

"Who kidnapped me?" she asked, her voice drowsy. "And why?"

"Kiddun's naps? What?"

"Who *stole* me? Why did I vanish from the palace?"

"I told you, I don't reck."

The Goddess let out a long sigh, then stilled, as though she were waiting for something. "That rhyme you said back in the village, about the First and Second . . . how did it end?"

Zhade rolled his shoulders. Sand crept under his shirt. "*The First was the goddess of knowledge and light,*" he said slowish. "*The Second brought us chaos and fright. The Third will rise to save us all, if sole mereish before the fall.*"

The Goddess was silent again, as though she were sorting through his words and choosing hers at care. "The other goddesses . . . they sent you to find me?"

Zhade hesitated. "Firm . . ."

"Does that mean *yes*?"

"Spoze."

"You're useless." She turned toward him, resting her head on her hands.

"Ah. You say that now."

She lifted a skeptical brow. "But I'll change my mind when we get to Eerensed?"

"Certz, probablisch not." He nudged her lightish with his elbow.

"Now go to sleep, Goddess. You'll need all your strength to save us."

She was bareish breathing. He'd grown used to the sound of her breaths.

"Save you? By getting you into Eerensed?"

"For starts," he said.

She huffed and turned away. After a moment, she murmured, "G'night."

"Dream well, Goddess." He smiled in the dark.

One more day, two at most, and he'd be home.

Home.

Listening to the hollow pitch of the time chimes. Walking next to the lazy flow of the River Sed. Eating hot, fresh butterjam dumpings under the shadow of the gods' tower. He would do it all. Then the real work would begin. He had the Goddess, and he had a plan. Zhade would decide his fate before fate decided for him.

FIVE

requiem, n.

Etymology: Latin *re-* + *quiēs*: rest.

Definition: 1. a hymn for the dead, a dirge.

2. colloq. the dreamless sleep experienced by those frozen in cryonic stasis.

NIGHT WAS DIFFERENT on the new planet. It wasn't as dark as Andra thought it should be. The atmosphere on Holymyth must have been thinner than Earth's: the stars felt closer. They glittered, peeking through the slats of the wagon, watching, waiting for her to go to sleep.

They could keep waiting.

She lay between Lew and Zhade—perhaps a bit closer to Lew than Zhade—huddled under a mound of rough-spun covers. She'd heard the desert got cold at night, but this was ridiculous. Even wrapped in layers of knitted clothing, she shivered.

The blanket was rough against her cheek, the night unnaturally quiet. No traffic. No hum of electricity or the whirl of security'bots. Not even animals calling in the distance or the wild moaning of wind as it wound its way through the desert. A soft snore rose from Lew's sleeping form. Zhade had quieted after telling her the ridiculous story of the goddesses, but it was impossible to tell if he was asleep without moving closer.

She reached under her shirt and pulled out the holocket, her thumb tracing the clasp. Its contents were all that was left of her family. Of Earth. She held all of human history in her hand. Six random memories. The 'locket was cold against her fingers.

She snapped her eyes open, not realizing they had drifted shut. She didn't want to sleep. She'd already slept too long. Her body felt weird, tingly, like her soul was too big, trying to seep out. Her eyes tried to close again.

No.

When she'd gone into stasis, there'd been no active nanos in her system. If there had been, her 'implant would have saved her when she woke drowning, collecting nearby nanos into a 'swarm, the sole purpose to protect Andra. But there'd been no nanos to collect, either around her or in her body. Just before stasis, they'd been purged from her, the risks of frozen tech outweighing the benefits. No one had even considered nanos would be necessary to save someone from drowning in cryo'protectant, alone, a thousand years late.

Andra hadn't even been given a sedative. Any medical nano'bots roaming around inside her would have been frozen where they were, their tasks on pause. If she'd gone into stasis sedated, she'd have come out of stasis sedated, and that would have been disastrous. So Andra was awake when they froze her.

She remembered.

Remembered being in a box that looked like a coffin, alone, naked. Each roll of skin, the blotchy starburst birthmark on her collarbone, all on display for the cryo'techs and scientists surrounding her. She felt the saline flood the 'tank. It lapped against her body, higher and higher until it covered her, tickling at first, and then all she could think of was holding her breath, closing her eyes. She was submerged. Then, for a split second, she felt herself freeze.

She felt herself die.

Less than a second later—less than an instant—she was waking

up again. Drowning in the same water that had just killed her. Somebody pressed the pause button on Andra's life, and then someone else started her up again.

But in the meantime, the world had kept going.

Going and going and going without her for a thousand years.

She was dead for a thousand years.

Dead. Asleep. A matter of terms.

'Tank // Grave

Magic // Technology

Hell-mouth // Holomyth

Teenager // Goddess

Andra gasped awake, her heart pounding so hard it hurt. The stars winked at her. The rough texture of the blankets chafed her skin. She didn't move, only listened to Lew and Zhade's slow breaths, relieved they hadn't noticed her wake. The locket pressed into her chest, the metal smarting against her sweat-slick skin. She shivered, blinking, her mind refreshing.

She stared at the sky, picking the sand from beneath her nails, counting her breaths.

SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT. Something was just as it should be.

Andra was at her mother's office. At Lacuna Athenaeum headquarters. The sinking sun shone through floor-to-ceiling picture windows, the last rays escaping through the trees silhouetted on the horizon. Her mother's eyes were glazed as she composed a report using her neural'implant, its attached crown gleaming on her forehead, curved around her ear, wired into her brain. Every once in a while she would correct something using the keyboard. She didn't notice Andra slouched in the ergo'chair, clicking her 'locket open and shut. She didn't even look up when Oz started laughing. He had a high, frenzied laugh. A giggle run amok. It was a normal day, and for some reason Andra couldn't pinpoint, that

fact filled her with relief. Relief and a strange sadness and the anticipation of disappointment.

Just a normal day. Her family was alive.

Of course they were alive. Why wouldn't they be?

"Oz, quiet down," Mom said. "I have to get these files copied."

"The other kids got to go to the Vaults today," he said. It wasn't a whine, and somehow that made it more pitiful. He, out of all the Watts kids, resembled their father the most. Dark eyes, easy smile, round cheeks. It made people love him without exactly knowing why. People had the urge to avoid Isla Watts, but they had the urge to hug Auric Lim—a trait he'd passed to his son. "They said they played old vid-e-o-games." He stumbled over the word. "Like sims, but you have to use a controller. With your hands."

"Mmm-hmm," Mom said, her eyes still out of focus. Her long, faded-red hair had fallen over one of them, but she didn't seem to notice. It hid the jagged scar that ran along her cheek. The one too deep for doctors to remove. That didn't stop her from trying, though she wouldn't even listen to Andra complain about her birthmark.

"One day I'd like to go." Oz slumped into the chair in the corner, kicking his feet when they didn't quite reach the ground.

Mom didn't bother to answer, and Andra suspected there was no real reason Oz couldn't have gone with his friends. No good one anyway. Mom was just too busy. Too busy making final plans for the Ark passengers. Too busy running tests and sucking up to her boss. Too busy thinking of Holymyth. Her body was still here, but Andra's mother had left Earth long ago.

Andra stared out the windows overlooking the Riverwalk. An entire wall of her mother's office was made up of windows with the best view of the city.. She was pretty important at LAC. She had two doctorates: cryonic ethics, and astro-ecological theory. Plus, she was really good at computers. Well. Everyone was good at computers, but not everyone knew how they worked. Andra's mother did.

"And they have one room," Oz was saying, "that's all synth'trees, and an-

other with cos'masks, and you can look however you want, and Raj pinged me a pic of him with a rhinoceros face. Do you know about rhinocerosi?"

"Rhinoceroses," Andra corrected.

"I want to look like the Guardian, from 'Bot Wars." He turned to his sister. "I always play him in the sims. If I had—"

"Isla, I need you to come look at this," a voice interrupted.

Mom's boss, Alberta Griffin—the Alberta Griffin—stood in the doorway. She looked just like she did in the holo'coms, except maybe taller, sharper. Her blonde hair was pulled into a fishtail braid, brow furrowed over her modded left eye. The eye that allowed her to perform calculations and identify variables and foresee probabilities. The eye that lingered on Andra just a little too long.

Always recruiting, Andra thought. Only, Andra didn't want to be recruited.

Dr. Griffin stood tall and regal. Her neural'implant crown was the largest Andra had ever seen, silver and shining along her forehead, glinting from beneath her perfectly styled hair. Most crowns were just a slip of metal-coated tech embedded at the temple—little more than an accessory—but Dr. Griffin's took up an entire hemisphere of her skull. The skin across the left side of her forehead and scalp looked like it was made of precious metal. It was ostentatious, Andra thought. And unnecessary, considering Griffin had an 'implant and it basically did the same thing. Crowns were usually worn by those with religious objections to 'implants or tech allergies, but people like Dr. Griffin and Andra's mom used them to boost their own productivity.

Dr. Griffin waited at the door with a girl with dark waves and a gap between her teeth. Andra recognized her as Rashmi Bhatt, Dr. Griffin's intern, and Cruz's new girlfriend. Friend? Girlfriend? All Andra knew was that Cruz was spending more time with Rashmi, and less time with Andra.

"It's almost time, Dr. Watts," she said, her voice high.

They'd never actually met, her and Rashmi, but Andra hated her on principle. She was living the life Andra was supposed to be living, working for LAC as the perfect golden child, and attached at the hip to Cruz Alvarez, the boy Andra had been enamored with since he started interning with her mom two years before.

Mom got up. "Andromeda, do me a favor. Take your brother home."

“I’m meeting Briella and Rhin. Last time before my appointment. Acadia can—”

Mom was already halfway out the door. “I put credit in your account for a pizza. Make sure Osias is in bed by nine.”

And then, she was gone, following Dr. Griffin and Rashmi out the door.

“Let’s go home, Andra,” Oz said, and this time he did whine. “Piiiz-zaaaaaa.”

Home.

. . . home.

Time skipped forward. Suddenly, Oz and Andra were leaving through the back door of Lacuna Athenaeum, which led directly under the statue of Alberta Griffin. It was built out of glossy white marble, her head gleaming with real silver. Her right arm was pointing to the stars, her gaze following. The statue was surrounded by a circle of pristine Corinthian columns, like this was some sort of national monument. Perhaps one day it would be—when she was long gone with the portion of the population that had made the lottery for the first colony.

“Hey, Andra, watch this!” Oz cried, and she looked up to find him racing across the adjoining park, heading for the hover swings.

Andra laughed and pulled out her ’locket. She pressed play.

ANDRA JERKED AWAKE in a cold sweat, her breathing harsh, her lungs burning. The wagon slats came into focus. The sky was lighter. The sun was coming up. *Andromeda is rising*, she thought wryly.

“Evens?” a voice said, and she turned to see Zhade kneeling, peering under the wagon. His blankets had already been gathered and it appeared he’d just given himself a shave.

She nodded, trying to keep her face blank, her breathing steady. He gave her a look like he didn’t quite believe her, but just shook his head.

“Time to go road-wise,” he said, and patted the side of the wagon before standing.

Andra took a deep breath. There was something cold in her hand, and she looked down to see her 'locket clenched in her fist, chain broken. Her thumb was pressed against the top button—the one designated to play the first memory. She should have been surrounded by the ghosts of her family, cocooned in a holographic rendition of home, reliving her past. Her truth. But instead, there was nothing but cold, hard reality. A pile of blankets, a rickety cart, and sand everywhere.

The holo'display was blank.

The 'locket was dead.

SIX

THE SORCER

THE SUN HAD risen on what Zhade hoped would be their final day in the Wastes. They were almost round the pocket, and the buttery tint of the gods' road glistened in the distance, miraged in waves of heat. The temp rose quickish. The cart rocked, and they sat in silence, the Goddess's bloodshot eyes narrowing on the pocket. Dirt smudged her face, and her black hair was a tangled mess, curling ever-so-slightish round her ears.

"We should convo bout what happens when we get to Eerensed," Zhade said. There were things he had to hold from her, but there were other things she *needed* to reck if they were going to survive.

The Goddess ignored him. "Is it getting bigger?" She leaned up to get a better look, prepping to push herself to her knees. She stuck out a hand.

"Neg, wait—"

She hissed, or her skin did, as it made contact with the burning metal of the wagon rails, and she jerked back.

"God damn it!" the Goddess gasped, cradling her burned hand to her chest.

"Which god? And what is she damning?"

"Your fucking wagon," she growled through gritted teeth.

Zhade's eyes widened. "I'm doing *what* to the wagon?"

She didn't respond, mereish shut her eyes, a single tear dribbling down her cheek, glinting in the sun. Even without seeing the wound, Zhade could tell this was not a bandage-and-goddess-level-healing wound. This was going to require some magic, and there was sole one conduit in his bag that would work.

When Zhade had been banished from Eerensed, he was peaced out with mereish the clothes on his back. Blessedish, the two gifts from his mam had been with Lew-Eadin, because Maret had taken everything from him. His conduits, his armor, his fam. At luck, they couldn't take what he carried inside his head, and he vowed never to be so unprepped again. A week into his life in the Wastes he found a tattered bag, discarded or perhaps carried on the wind from the rotting corpse of its previous owner. He tossed it over his shoulder and filled it with everything he could find—even if he wasn't certz how it could be useful.

He'd been building his arsenal ever since, and as his inventory grew, so did his plan. Finalish, the sole thing he'd needed was the Goddess. Now that he had her, he needed to keep her whole and full well.

He rooted round his bag til he found the wand at the bottom. He called it a wand, but it was bulkier than was typical. It was square and angular and ill fitting in the palm of his hand, but it did what he needed. Or, it would. Eventualish.

The Goddess grabbed it from him before he could explain.

"I've never seen anything like this," she said, her voice strained with pain, but liveish with curiosity. "I mean, it's obviously some sort of med'wand used for nano'plasty and cosmetic restructuring, but—" She held it up at different angles. "—this is incredible."

Zhade smiled, smuggish. "Certz it is. I made it myself."

The Goddess frowned. Her hair fluttered in the desert wind. "You *made* this? How?"

He didn't tell her he'd spent the last four years of his life perfecting it, coaxing supplies from angels at every village they passed,

scavenging parts from discarded magic, and sorcering them together to create what he called a graftling wand, or grafter. He didn't tell her that with a few quick commands, it would release a slipperish sheet of mesh that could alter skin, shift bone, and reshape muscle. He didn't tell her that though he'd used it to heal minor wounds, that wasn't its intended purpose.

"I'm quite talented," he said, winking and taking back the grafter. "Now, give me your hand."

He expected a fight, but to his surprise, she held out her burned hand, eyes wide on the wand. A shiny red mark slashed across her palm. He started to place the grafter on her wound, then hesitated.

Last moon, he'd used it to heal a sun spot that had been giving him trouble. It had worked, but not without a cost: pain like Zhade had never imagined. When it was over, his skin was smooth and flawless. An ache still lingered, but the sun spot was gone.

"This—" He met her eyes. "—is going to hurt."

She bit her lip, then nodded. Zhade drew a few runes on the surface of the grafter, then tapped the wand against her skin, letting it sense her injury. Once it was done, a translucent netting slipped from the top and fit itself over the wound.

Firstish, it appeared nothing was happening. Zhade focused as hard as he could, willing the magic to begin, though he knew his sorcerer abilities didn't work like that. Sole goddesses—and now Maret—could call things from thin air, commanding magic with nothing but a thought. Fishes and wishes. But Low Magic, *Zhade's* magic, needed a conduit like the grafter. He hoped the work he'd put into creating the wand had been worth it, and that its magic would break in soon and now. Perhaps it was already working. Perhaps the pain he'd felt had been a flute—

The Goddess screamed.

It wasn't a sound of pain or even agony, but something more, deeper. And it wrenched Zhade's stolid heart in two.

The wagon jerked to a stop. She scrambled to remove the mesh, but it had already latched on to her skin. Zhade could tell she was trying to speak—plead with him to remove the netting—but her screams didn't form words. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed in a heap against the side of the wagon.

Wead jumped out, reaching over to cushion her head.

“Do something!” he snapped.

Zhade dove for her hand, but before he grasped it, the mesh . . . detonated.

He couldn't comp what he was seeing. One moment the silkish patch was fused to the Goddess's skin, covering her wound with a translucent glow. And the next, it burst into pieces. Pieces so small they were nothing but specks of sand glistening on the wind. They shimmered in the desert sun for a moment, then vanished.

The Goddess's breathing hitched and her eyes fluttered open. She met his stare, face flushed, chest heaving, lips parted.

“What. the fuck. was that.”

Zhade pushed out his bottom lip. “You broke it.”

Andra raised a brow, still gasping for breath. “I'll break more than that in a minute if you don't tell me what the hell you just did to me.”

If she was full bars well to spar, she wasn't too badish hurt. Zhade felt a wind of relief.

“Zhade.” It was Lew-Eadin, pacing. His voice was tight and low, almost threatening. “What was that?”

“I—Sorries,” he pleaded. Both of their faces held matching expressions of anger. “It was mereish something I was working on. Magic to heal, alter flesh. It's painful, firm, but never—I never . . .”

The Goddess cradled her burned hand, squeezing the tips of her fingers til they turned red, as though that would stop the pain. She tilted her head back and groaned, and Zhade was momentarish distracted by the smooth amber skin of her neck.

He shook his head to clear it. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“Destroy the mesh?” He’d never seen magic work like that before.

“I didn’t,” she said, eyes still shimmering in pain.

Zhade recked what he had seen, and he would ferris out her secrets later. The Goddess’s wound needed attention, and it was obvi he needed a more imaginative solution. Evens. There were other ways to tend to the burn without harming her further, and ways to get her to reveal her secrets. He leaned back and ripped off his shirt.

The flush on the Goddess’s face was full worth the sun spot he was going to get.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

He liked how raspy her voice was when she was flustered. And the flush on her cheeks was full charred. “Wrapping your wound.”

He had plenty of bandages in his bag, but the Goddess didn’t need to reck that. He ripped a strip of fabric from the bottom of his tunic. The material wasn’t for true hard to tear, but he flexed a bit more than necessary. Her breath caught. He tied the cloth round her palm, at care to let his fingers dance across her skin. She opened her mouth to say something—a breathless thank-you, a flustered compliment. His signature grin was waiting to break free.

“Put your shirt back on. What are you waiting for? A mirror?”

Wead let out a laugh, then cut off. “Sir.” His voice was tense. “Something happens.”

Zhade followed Wead’s line of vision. The Goddess had been right. The pocket was growing, getting closer, its shadowy mass swirling in agitation. A spark of lightning pierced a jagged path through it, briefish illuminating what looked like a hand reaching toward them.

“Is it supposed to do that?” the Goddess asked.

“I’ve never seen one do that before,” Zhade said.

“We need to run,” Lew added. He turned to jump back in the wagon, but before he could, the churning contents of the pocket shot out and severed his arm at the elbow.