Chapter 1

When the camera turned on, it showed the inside of a small apartment. Multiple photographs and newspaper clippings had been hung on the wall in the background, though the details were hard to make out. The remaining onscreen area included a work chair, the edge of what could be a kitchenette, and a window overlooking other apartment buildings. The voices of children playing filtered through it, possibly from a playground or schoolyard. They were soon drowned out by a coughing noise from off-camera. The source, a brown-haired woman in her late twenties, moved around the camera into view, and sat heavily on the chair.

"My name is Petra Hildebrand," she began in a trembling voice, looking as though she might start coughing again. "I'm making this recording partly for you, whoever you are. You need to know what I've seen these past few days, even if you don't understand it yet. I hope that you'll take me at my word, and not assume this is a lie or a trick. Maybe you have the resources to verify it- I don't know."

She coughed a few more times, looking off-screen. "The other part is for me. I can't explain what I've seen, even to myself. Maybe if I lay it out here, on camera, it will make more sense. Besides, one of those unexplainable things attacked me." Petra raised a shaking arm as evidence. "Ever since, I've been all over the place. One second I'm burning up, the next I'm freezing to death. My hands are shaking so badly I could barely turn this thing on, much less put pen to paper or use a keyboard! I can't eat, or sleep, and I can hardly concentrate at all." She hesitated, focusing on the camera again. "I woke up in the ER after it happened, but the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me. He gave me a prescription for an anti-psychotic!" She added bitterly, before scoffing. "For all I know, he was right."

Something changed in Petra's expression, and she seemed more determined. "If I am dying, you need to know what happened. I don't want this to happen to anyone else. I don't know what happened to Didi. I hope she got away safely. And mom, if you're seeing this, I love you." Taking a deep breath, she lifted up a small photo for the camera. "It all started with this."

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There was so much in a photograph. Whether it was an old man feeding some birds, or some kids playing frisbee badly, or a young woman walking her dog. Each photo had its own story to tell: a thousand words in a picture.

Even the bad ones told a story, but those were usually tragedies. Petra sorted through her recent haul in the office darkroom, hanging any ones she deemed acceptable up to dry. Her usual beat was City Hall, or the courthouse, or the police department. Today had been a welcome change to all that, out in the park on a Saturday.

People behaved differently on weekends, but it was even more pronounced in areas like the park. Despite the massive press of humanity all around them, folks could relax in a way. Fall was already in full force, and the leaves had turned a hundred different shades of red and gold. The park was already starting to get a new carpet as a result, giving her a lot of fodder for background shots.

There. That was a good one. Petra leaned back, admiring the elderly man giving directions to some tourists. He was short, with brown hair and eyes, but the wrinkles on his face and hands told a story of long experience. Just as she had when taking the shot, Petra knew he looked familiar.

How did she know him? He certainly wasn't one of the protestors who frequented City Hall- she knew all of them pretty well. Did he live in her apartment building, or work in the office somewhere? Just to be sure, Petra made another copy of his photo to take home.

Vancouver was beautiful this time of day. The sun was just setting over the Pacific, highlighting the clouds all around it in a beautiful halo. The waves on the distant shore seemed to sparkle as they filtered the light. Her apartment wasn't on the water, unfortunately, but she did get a good view during her commute to and from White Rock.

Petra nodded at her neighbor Andrew from down the hall, as she picked up her mail. He looked distracted and sleep-deprived, unsurprisingly. He didn't just have a girlfriend now, but a two-week-old baby as well. Petra had offered to babysit eventually, but only after Tina was a few years old. Petra was no good with babies.

Her apartment was nothing special, considering her modest income. It wasn't a studio, but space was definitely in short supply. The view out the side was pretty good though, overlooking a schoolyard and playground. She knew some of those kids, having tutored them up until last year.

Some of her earlier drawings graced the south and east walls, and they had served as inspiration for her. Before becoming a photographer, she'd tried being a painter, but turned out to be no good at that either. With just pencil and paper though, she had some skill. The other walls sported candid shots she'd taken over the last two years, mostly of people in extreme emotional states. The woman whose son was just sentenced to life imprisonment. The protestor facing his first arrest. The child crying on the street as his house burned down. At least no one had been hurt when she took that last photo.

As her food heated up, Petra took out the old man's photo again and examined it more closely. Despite his wrinkles, his age was frustratingly hard to pin down. Perhaps fifty or sixty? He had no gray hair that she could see, but he had been in the background of the shot. She'd actually been shooting the kids in front of him at the time. She knew it would just eat at her until she figured it out, so she went into the far back of her bedroom closet and fished out a big cardboard box. Inside were the albums her mom had tearfully packed for her, the day before she moved here.

Petra leafed through them one after another, feeling the nostalgia mix with nausea at how awkward she looked in some of them. She may take a good photo, but she certainly didn't *make* a good one. Scores of pictures of her parents and grandparents, and even black and white photos taken before that. Her father's people had moved here from Germany just before the first world war. They hadn't settled in Vancouver initially, but one more generation had seen them move out here to the west coast.

There! There he was, arm around her father's shoulders, smiling contentedly at the camera, which had probably been held by her mom. Petra felt a bittersweet wave at seeing so many pictures of her dad. He had died young, in a car crash just a few days after Petra's fourth birthday. She barely remembered him at all, but these albums were a good way to keep his face familiar.

Blinking a bit, Petra tried to focus on the other man. His hair was a bit longer and he was sporting a mustache, but otherwise he looked the same. She compared it to her own photo several times, but it was definitely the same man.

How could that be? The photo in the album had been taken before she'd been born, at least twenty-five years ago! Petra looked through the other albums systematically, hoping to get more of a look at him. He showed up in a half-dozen other photos, usually with her dad and sometimes her mom as well. His clothing changed, and he'd apparently shaved his facial hair for the later ones, but it was him. According to the names on the back, he was Darius. He hadn't aged a day!

Petra certainly didn't remember any Darius from back then. Her mother had gotten married again, several times in fact, but never to anyone looking like him. It was too late to call her, but Petra resolved to keep looking into this. Something told her it was more than just a lookalike or someone with unusually good genes.

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Chapter 2

Petra didn't usually attend Sunday morning services, but her mother did, so she resolved to wait until the afternoon. When she finally did get some screen time with her mom, Petra was getting a little impatient. She liked mysteries as much as the next person, but this was hitting a little too close to home. This Darius person was at least a friend of the family, but Petra had never heard of him. "Hey, mom."

"Hey, Pebble. How're you doing over there?"

Petra gave a slight smile. Her name literally meant 'rock', so as a child she'd been called Pebble. Old habits did indeed die hard. "I'm okay. Trying to get a ton of shots of people in the fall for my company, so they can set up an album for potential customers. You never know who might want to buy which pictures and why."

"I heard you got some good shots of that town Councilmember, when he was being arrested for that embezzlement thing. Good for you!"

That was a surprise. "How did you know those were my pictures? The editor never put my name on them- just the company name."

"I have my sources," her mom said evasively. "People keep me informed when my daughter's covering someone important."

Petra nodded as the pieces fell into place. Her mother had worked for one of Vancouver's bigger newspapers for almost twenty years. She'd probably kept in touch with some of her old colleagues. "So mom, I was looking over some photos in my old album, and I came across these." She lifted the webcam off the top of her computer and panned it over her desk. There were the five pictures featuring Darius, in order of when they were taken. "This guy was named Darius, right?"

Her mom squinted through her glasses at the screen, and then nodded. "Yeah, he was one of your father's friends. Or your grandfather's actually. I didn't know him that well, but he was living in Manitoba when your great-grandparents emigrated from Germany. He helped them set up shop, and then kept in touch when your grandfather moved out here." She paused for a moment. "Those last two were taken.. about a year before you were born. Darius stayed with us for about a week here in Vancouver, before heading over to New York. I don't know where he went from there, but it has been a long time. I barely remember his face." She tilted her head slightly, as Petra put the webcam back in place. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious," Petra said uncomfortably. It was looking more and more like this was a case of freakish similarity after all. If Darius had known her great-grandparents, this couldn't be the same guy. "You don't remember his last name and occupation, do you?"

"Hanson. That was his last name. And I think he sold insurance? I'm not sure. He definitely went to New York City, though. Your father was worried he might not build a successful business there; I remember that much."

There was a crashing noise in the background, followed by a male voice "Dammit!"

"What was that?" Petra leaned forward with concern.

Her mom looked over her shoulder and sighed. "Mark's trying his hand at gardening and hanging plants. Looks like it's going just about how I expected."

Petra smiled slightly. She hadn't liked her mom's new husband much at first, but Mark had grown on her a bit over the last two years. He wasn't as boring as he'd initially seemed, and he did seem to make her mom happy. He practically worshiped the ground she walked on, too. "I should go. You stay safe, all right, Pebble?"

"Thanks, mom. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Petra leaned back, staring at the blank computer screen for a while and thinking hard. She had always believed that everything happened for a reason. Whether horrible or beautiful, the actions that people took had a purpose beyond what they intended. Who, or what, might be organizing that purpose, was one of the greatest questions in history.

She couldn't just ignore this. That man, whoever he was, could just be someone who looked improbably similar to her father's friend, but she had to be sure. He had walked in front of her camera for a reason. Her mind made up, she pulled out her phone and dialed up an old friend's number. "Hey, Sandy."

The man's voice on the other end sounded surprised, but not unfriendly. "Hey, Petra. What can I do for you?"

"Yesterday I took a picture of a man at about 4pm, on the south end of Port Royal Park. If I scan it and email it to you, do you think you could find out who this guy is? I'd go to the police, but I don't actually think he's done anything criminal yet."

"Uh, maybe. I can run it through facial recognition, at least on public databases." She heard typing on a keyboard over the phone. "Looks like there's a currency exchange just south of there, with cameras. Maybe he showed up on them too. But it'll have to wait a bit. I've got a pretty long line of clients right now. Mostly suspicious housewives looking for evidence that their husbands might be cheating- that sort of thing. It's not exactly edifying work, but at least they pay well."

Petra hesitated. "Sandy, I'm calling in my favor on this."

There was a pause on the line. "Whoa. Ok, then. I'll get started right away."

His surprise was understandable. Petra had been sitting on that favor for almost four years now, ever since she'd destroyed a photo instead of showing it to her editor, who would have taken it to the police and gotten Sandy in a lot of trouble. He might work with a lot of unsavory people, but Sandy was a man of his word, and very good at his job. If there was anything to find on this Darius person, or if that was even his real name, Sandy would find out.

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It actually took a few days before Sandy came through, in spades. He sent a file to her apartment, complete with pictures and a strong recommendation that she drop the whole thing and give the file to the police. It wasn't until she started going through it that Petra understood why.

His name was Daniel King and according to the file, he had a criminal record as long as Petra's arm. They were mostly misdemeanors, petty theft, fraud, identity theft, trespassing, that sort of thing. Apparently he'd moved to Vancouver a few years ago, and gotten involved with a gang called the Independent Soldiers. Petra had heard of them from her work at City Hall and the VPD. They'd been around since 2005, and were known for money laundering, drug trafficking, human smuggling, prostitution, and extortion. It seemed that Darius, or Daniel, whatever his name was, made routine deliveries to some of their members. Whether he knew the full extent of his associates' crimes or not, only he could say.

Petra flipped through the rest of the file, her mind only partially on it. The IS group had been linked to several murders over the years. Sandy had urged her to let the police handle this, and maybe he was right. What was the point of risking her life just to satisfy her curiosity?

Then she came to Daniel's last-known addresses. He'd lived in New York City. Petra's eyes widened at that, and she pulled a box from underneath the bed. She'd visited her mother the other day, and gotten this collection of keepsakes. It included a series of letters between her father and 'Darius', which included the name of Darius' insurance company in New York. And on each letter there was a NYC address: the same address and company name listed in Sandy's file.

Petra suddenly found herself breathing more rapidly. It was clear that Sandy had no idea that Daniel/Darius was.. different. The only photos of the man back then were here in her apartment, and there had never been any copies made.

So she was right after all? She had to find him. Criminal or not, only he could explain this!

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Sandy's file had also included a current address for D/D, which she was calling him in her head for now. Later that evening, Petra was parked on the street about two buildings down from that address, binoculars focused on the front door.

Apparently D/D also lived in an apartment building, but in a much worse neighborhood than hers. The building looked poorly maintained, and seemed to be mostly abandoned. The street lighting was minimal, and Petra could hear sirens in the distance, off and on. She wondered if they were from police cars or ambulances at first, but then decided it didn't really matter. She was trying to stay inconspicuous, for her first-ever stakeout.

Minutes stretched into hours, and Petra's legs and back began to ache. Driving for hours on end was easy enough, because she had to keep her attention on the road and adapt to changing traffic. Sitting in her car alone was turning out to be challenging by comparison. She wished she'd brought an audiobook, or some snacks.

When something finally happened, Petra almost missed it. It was about one thirty in the morning when the front door opened and D/D stepped out. She almost started her car, waiting for him to get into his, but stopped herself. She knew which car was his from Sandy's file.. but he turned away and started walking up the street. Confused, Petra tried to open her door as quietly as possible.

What was he doing? From her own research, Petra was fairly sure there weren't any Independent Soldiers living in this area, or any of their hangouts nearby. Petra followed quietly, hoping not to be noticed. For once it was a good thing the lighting here was terrible.

His stride was measured and confident: clearly he didn't care if anyone saw him, or if he was being followed. Petra tracked him for more than a block before he took a left turn. Careful to put some space between her and the corner, Petra followed his example. Up ahead about forty meters, she could see him meet another man, outside of what looked like some kind of bar or club. They exchanged brief words, and then both moved off into a nearby alley. It was pretty dark all around, so they probably wouldn't see her unless she was up close.

Petra fumbled with her camera briefly. This small one had much worse focus and range, but her full gear would practically be a neon sign pointing her out to anyone in the area. She'd have to make do with this cheap knockoff to get pictures. When she was confident she could take a few snapshots without too much concentration, Petra followed them.

She was almost to the alley entrance when she heard a whisper of movement behind her. She felt a metal circle press against the back of her neck, and a low voice spoke. "Don't move a muscle."

Feeling a chill, Petra came to a stop. Whoever it was reached out and ran their other hand up and down her sides briefly. Then they checked her legs, ankles and waist. It took Petra a few seconds to realize she was being searched for weapons. Apparently satisfied, her 'captor' took a deep breath. "Back up with me inside the building. Don't call out or I'll paint this wall with your brains."

Her breath still a bit ragged, Petra shook her head. "If you do that, you'll make just as much noise."

"Which is why I have a silencer on this thing," the voice retorted softly. "Don't push your luck. Now move!"

Petra allowed herself to be pulled backwards inside the building, thinking hard. Despite the low rasp, the voice was distinctly female. There were other oddities to this situation as well. On her captor's urging, Petra closed the door. She could hear typing on a keyboard behind her briefly, and then a low curse. "He's gone. Thanks to you, I missed my chance!"

It seemed like this was a warehouse of some sort. Petra slowly turned around to get a better look, but her captor closed the laptop, cutting off its light source. The only light in here now was coming through the window, meaning Petra could be seen, but not really see anything else.

"Who are you and why were you following King?" The other woman demanded.

Petra scoffed. "I could ask you the same thing."

"I'm the one with the gun. Answer my questions."

"I don't think so," Petra responded. She still felt nervous, but less so. The details were starting to slide into place. "I've seen pictures of silencers at the VPD. They're long, and unwieldy. There's no way you could have kept that pressed against my neck while you were searching me, not unless you have freakishly long arms. You don't have a silencer, and I don't even think you have a gun! The metal against my neck was warm, not cold. A wedding ring, I'm guessing, which you took off and tried to use to fool me."

The other person was quiet for a few moments, before letting out a soft chuckle. "Not bad." There was rustle as she apparently picked up her laptop. "I'm leaving now. If you're smart, you won't try to follow me."

Whoever it was started moving off, or Petra thought so, in the darkness. Feeling a moment of panic, Petra reached out in her direction. "Wait! I can help you!"

Her potential friend stopped moving, but it was hard to be sure. She was wearing quiet shoes, and Petra felt a moment of shame at that. Her own shoes had probably advertised her presence here more than any specialized camera would. "You're obviously not some kind of bodyguard or you would be armed, and you're trying to stay hidden from Da- from King," she amended quickly. "I doubt you're one of the Independent Soldiers either- they're pretty sexist and would never let a woman gather surveillance for them. If you were VPD you'd recognize me and identify yourself. My guess is you're with the CIA or FBI. You tracked him here from New York, am I right?"

There was just a derisive snort in answer, but Petra wasn't put off by it. "Look. Obviously you're better at this than I am, but I'm going to keep looking into this King guy no matter what you do. I'll follow him and track his associates, and eventually talk to him directly. Think about it: an untrained civilian like me, stumbling all over your investigation. You're obviously not willing to just make me disappear, so your only other option is to work with me! Please. Let's just share information, and figure this guy out together."

Petra was guessing wildly at her potential friend's motivations, but it seemed the other woman was taken aback by what she'd said. "You're very well informed, or you're a very good guesser. Either way you're wrong. I don't work for anyone else. I'd tell you why I'm here, but there's no way you'll believe me." She started moving again.

Feeling triumphant, Petra spoke up again. "Let me guess: you think he might be immortal!" The other's footsteps stopped, dead.

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Chapter 3

After watching D/D leave his meeting and walk back home, Petra and her new associate left the warehouse building together. The other woman identified herself as Dierdre Halstaff, or Didi to her friends. Petra didn't want to presume, but she couldn't help but be impressed at Didi's methods.

"This is my address," Didi said shortly, pushing a scrap of paper into Petra's hands. "King doesn't usually do anything illegal until it's late, so you should drop by tomorrow at four pm. We can do that information sharing thing you wanted." Her tone made it clear she was still skeptical.

Petra made her way back to the car and was relieved to find it unharmed despite its surroundings. Her drive back home was uneventful, but her head was swimming. By all appearances, Didi believed the same impossible thing Petra did!

Someone with Didi's skills wouldn't believe something so preposterous without evidence. The fact that this hadn't made its way into the papers yet meant that either Didi didn't want to tell anyone about it, or she didn't have *enough* evidence to take it public. Come to think of it, Petra wasn't sure what she wanted to do herself. D/D was a criminal, but he hadn't hurt anyone as far as Petra knew. One of Petra's uncles had been caught up in a pedophilia scandal back in Manitoba. Sure he deserved it for what he'd done, but the man had gone from private citizen into a circus animal for the media, overnight! Could she do the same to D/D?

By the time she stopped by the address the next day, Petra was still wrestling with the implications. At least she'd decided to be completely forthcoming with Didi. As observant as Petra apparently was, she was no trained investigator.

Didi apparently lived in a small house about twenty minutes to the east, away from the ocean. When Petra knocked, the older woman opened the door. She didn't exactly smile, but her voice was at least polite when she invited Petra in. Now that Petra could see her in the light, she didn't look so intimidating. Her hair was a dirty-blonde, and her eyes dark like Petra's. Her walk was measured and calm, but it didn't give the impression of confidence so much as tight control.

"It goes without saying," Didi spoke as they moved past the small kitchen towards what looked like an office down the hall, "but I want to be sure. What you see in here *stays* in here. No one can know about this: not your mother, not your friends at in the Vancouver Police, not your PI associate Sandy Webber. No one."

"How did you know about Sandy?" Petra asked, feeling a little nonplussed.

"I did some checking on you this morning," Didi admitted, not looking ashamed in the slightest. "Now, do I have your word?"

"I swear," Petra said after a moment, gaining both a further appreciation and disquiet for Didi's apparently controlling nature. Didi nodded and pulled out a key. She unlocked the office door, and then ushered Petra inside. She didn't get very far in, though.

Pictures and newspaper clippings covered almost every surface of these walls, dwarfing Petra's own collection back home. A blue string had been wrapped around tacks stuck in the pictures. A very long string, actually. It circled the room several times, avoiding the door before turning back on itself again. Each tack was placed next to a date. The most recent date was only a few months ago, and the picture was similar to the one Petra had taken the other day. They were all of D/D.

Didi gave her a few moments before tapping her on the shoulder. "Your turn," she prompted, gesturing at Petra's bag.

Feeling a trifle Lilliputian in comparison, Petra opened her satchel and removed her 'evidence'. "These are letters between my father and.. this man. They were mailed to and from this address in New York City. This picture was taken when I was a child, and he hasn't aged a day since." Petra looked back at the various images on the wall. "But you knew that of course," she trailed off reluctantly.

"What name did he go by back in New York?"

Petra pointed to the signature at the bottom of the first letter. "Darius Fowler."

"That makes sense," Didi said thoughtfully, looking over the rest of the letter. "He's had dozens of aliases over the years, most of which I haven't uncovered yet. About a third of them have his name as Darius, though. I assume that's his real name."

"What.. is he?" Petra managed, still sweeping her gaze across all the pictures. The earliest date on the string was 1804, but it was a drawing instead of a photo and the date had a question mark next to it.

"That's the big question, isn't it?" Didi said, her voice softening a bit. "I've been trying to answer it for three years now. Is he an alien, posing as a human? An android? Some kind of freak mutant able to ignore the passage of time?"

Petra hadn't even been sure he was ageless until just now, so she hadn't put much thought into why or how.

"You're a photographer," Didi changed subjects abruptly. "Does the name Henri Cartier-Bresson mean anything to you?"

"Sure. He was one of the most famous early photographers, over in France. He was known for.. candid shots," Petra finished with surprise. She scanned the blue thread again. Cartier-Bresson had done most of his famous work in the 1920s and 30s. Sure enough, there he was. More than one photo of this Darius guy graced that section of the wall. Petra even recognized his work from some of her earlier studies.

"I thought you might appreciate those," Didi added, sounding satisfied.

Something about this just seemed wrong. "If you've been following him for years, why don't you just approach him? Ask him how this is possible. He has to know, doesn't he?"

"That's what my father tried to do," Didi said, and the hard edge to her voice was back. "He studied history, back in England. I don't know how he got started with all this, but he tracked Darius down in New York, twenty years ago. He brought his evidence- most of what you see here- and demanded an explanation. He'd even planned ahead, waiting until Darius was trapped before confronting him. Darius ran downstairs and out of sight, but there was no exit. When my father followed him down, there was no sign of him! He was just gone."

Petra sighed. "Maybe Darius planned ahead too. Could he have dug a secret tunnel or something?"

"It's possible," Didi admitted. "My father never found out for sure, and he couldn't pick up the scent again either. He died a few years ago, and I promised him I'd keep looking. I'm not gonna make the same mistakes, though. I've been watching Darius carefully, recording his conversations. Eventually he'll slip up and I'll have some idea who or what he really is."

Now that she had a little more time to look, Petra could see the full scope of this timeline on the walls. Most of the Darius sightings after 1930 had been in America, but before that he'd been all over Europe. There were a few possible sightings in China and Japan as well. "How do you know about these earlier ones- the pictures drawn before cameras were invented?"

Didi shrugged. "I don't, for sure. There are some historical accounts from my dad's research, but the idea of immortality crops up in religions and mythologies all over the world. It's hard to tell what's him and what's just a story. Best I can tell, he's over two hundred years old, but there's really no way to know just how far back he goes."

No wonder she didn't want to take this public! If Darius really was some kind of physical and social escape artist, Didi might never pick up the trail again. And if he really was ageless, her lifelong search might all be for nothing. Shaking her head, Petra looked down at the desk in the corner.

One side held camera equipment much like her own. It was of lesser quality, Petra noted with at least a little smugness, but that was about the only thing she'd done better. What might have eventually become an obsession with Petra had already bloomed fully with Didi. This room represented years of work and two generations of interest!

There was other equipment as well. Petra wasn't sure, but it looked like a series of microphones. "Is this how you listen in on him?"

Didi lifted one of them gently. "Parabolic mic. If he's in a room with a glass window, I can point this at the pane, and it'll let me hear what he's saying. There are other versions, for outdoor use or when it rains. My dad was independently wealthy, and I inherited most of it after.." she trailed off briefly. "It's how I've been able to afford all this gear and spend so much time following him. Financially, Darius is pretty well off, too. I've identified several different accounts totaling maybe three million dollars. There could be more."

"You're a hacker, too?"

Didi looked uncomfortable. "Less so. I had to learn it myself, so I'm sure there's a bunch I don't know."

"Still," Petra said, impressed. She got the impression that Didi was proud of that fact as well. The more the conversation had progressed, the more it was becoming clear Didi was enjoying it. Petra was sure she'd feel the same: if she'd been the one pursuing the same goal alone for three years, Petra would enjoy talking about this with someone else as well. Obsessions were lonely work.

"May I?" Didi asked, pointing to the childhood photos. Petra nodded, and Didi sorted through them. She took one of them and carefully added it to the wall, along with one of the letter envelopes. Then she wrote the date, without a question mark, and smiled back at Petra. "I was never sure about New York. Darius Fowler never had any pictures. Thanks for that."

"It's the least I can add to this.. monument," Petra said truthfully. They both stood there for a moment, and Petra felt that she was starting to understand Didi's solitary journey. People who said it was the journey and not the destination might feel the same, even if the journey in this case was one through time. "So, do you know what he's after? Why is he here working for the Independent Soldiers after all this time?"

"That's been bugging me, too," Didi's frustration was evident in her voice. "He's had connections to organized crime all over the world. Most of his previous identities had something to do with gangs or white-collar criminals, but as far as I can tell, his money is legally obtained. He must want something else from them." She paused for a few moments. "I do have one clue."

She unlocked one of the drawers and pulled out a picture. Hesitating briefly, perhaps concerned for its safety, Didi handed it over. It was of another man, perhaps thirty, talking to Darius in one of the alleys. "I took that two weeks ago. I also caught the end of their conversation. That guy said he'd 'keep him updated' and Darius responded, 'thanks, Nick.' Darius kept with his usual minor-criminal routine, but I haven't seen Nick since."

Petra hadn't seen him before. He was a lot taller than Darius in the photo, but seemed somehow less. Was he a subordinate to Darius? No, there was affection in that look as well. At the very least they were friends. "Any idea who he is?"

"None. I'm still waiting back on some of my foreign connections, but so far 'Nick's' face hasn't shown up on any database in the States, Canada or England. It's like he's a ghost. He's definitely not a member of the Independent Soldiers, so he's my only real clue who Darius really is. Or our only clue now, I guess."

That last sentence stuck in Petra's mind. She handed the photo back, and took a deep breath. "Listen, I want to thank you for letting me see all this. You should know how grateful I am that you trusted me. Even if you're only doing this to keep me from messing up your own plans while I try to do it myself."

Didi gave a rare smile, though it looked a little forced. "Listen, Darius is supposed to meet one of the IS upper-management types tomorrow night. I'm gonna be there in case Nick shows up again, but I could use some company. If you're interested, I'll text you the details."

She had changed the subject, possibly because she wasn't comfortable with Petra yet, but it didn't matter. "I'll be there," Petra promised.

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Petra was assigned to the courthouse the next day, for a manslaughter case. While inside the courtroom she'd been reduced to a pencil and sketchpad, drawing the unfortunate defendant as he nervously answered questions. Once the trial had adjourned for the day, she was back in the hallways taking snapshots again. Petra was reasonably sure it had been an accident on that guy's part, but she wasn't on the jury. Most of them looked like they wanted to hang him.

In truth she was having a hard time concentrating on the job. Didi had lent her some reading material that she and her dad had compiled over the years. According to various accounts, Darius had kept to himself for the most part. He'd never married, had few friends, and certainly never adopted or mentored anyone. Aside from the mysterious Nick, he didn't appear to be close to anyone.

Then why had he ingratiated himself to Petra's grandfather and his family? What made them so different from the billions of others populating the earth? Was it the same reason Darius had come here to Vancouver- because the Hildebrand family had moved here? Was it also the reason he'd been in that park for Petra to photograph? He might have been keeping tabs on her.

Didi had made similar speculations, but that's all they were: guesses. The only way either of them could be sure was to keep tabs on Darius. Once again, Petra felt gratitude for having such a dedicated colleague. Friend might be a bit much, especially so early, but definitely a teammate.

When she met up with Didi later that night, Petra was impressed at the surveillance setup. They were on the second floor of a battery-manufacturing plant, overlooking the auto-repair joint where Darius was supposed to arrive. Next to the window was a complicated array of cameras and microphones, all sitting on a table and connected to a laptop. From their design, and the look of the table, Petra guessed most of them were collapsible. They all had to fit into Didi's backpack after all, and probably weighed over ten kilos when fully loaded.

Didi gave her one of those patented not-quite-smiles on arrival, and pointed out the window. "Some of the Independent Soldiers are already down there, waiting."

"I know this battery factory is supposed to be empty right now, but what if someone shows up and turns on the lights? Won't they see us even from down there?" Petra looked nervously back towards the stairs.

"I blew one of the fuses in the fuse box downstairs. Even if they try, this building will stay dark. No need to worry."

That idea never would have occurred to Petra, she realized immediately. Or perhaps it would have, if she'd been doing this as long as Didi. She knelt next to the window looking down, and belatedly noticed another device next to the mics. A stun-gun.

Didi must have noticed her interest. "It's just a precaution," she said softly. "I've only had to use it once before, back in New York."

Not entirely reassured, Petra looked back out the window. Darius had arrived, and the men out front were frisking him. Apparently satisfied, they let him past the outer perimeter to where a heavyset blonde man waited. From Didi's information Petra knew him as Roger Talbot, one of the higher-ups in the IS.

"You've got a flair for the dramatic, I'll give you that," Talbot said, sizing Darius up for a moment. His voice was tinny at first, but Didi made some adjustments and it evened out through the microphone. "Why didn't you run when we found out you'd been playing us? Or go to the cops with a deal for immunity?"

"Because I need to talk to your boss," Darius answered, his voice clearly scornful. Petra tensed. Talbot was like number three in the organization. If Darius had done all this just to go over his head, he was likely to take it personally.

Talbot's expression darkened. "That's not gonna happen. Did you think he wouldn't recognize you, *Darius*? We have no interest in Veil business, and my boss has nothing to say to you."

Petra and Didi shared a confused glance. "They know who he is!" Petra said softly, and Didi nodded. It seemed Didi hadn't heard of this 'Veil' either. From context, it sounded like it might be another criminal group.

Darius sighed. "Listen, I've worked hard to arrange this meeting. I've been undercover with the IS for over a year now gathering information. I could have turned everything I know about you over to CSIS, but I didn't. I could have run, and sold what I know to your rivals, but I didn't! I'm extending an olive branch here."

Talbot paused briefly. "After Lisbon, how are we supposed to trust you? We lost seven people in that firefight!"

Petra mouthed the word *Lisbon* towards Didi, who shook her head, looking astounded. As far as Petra knew, the Independent Soldiers only operated here on the West Coast. Didi tapped her shoulder, and pointed at the camera screen. The device had zoomed in significantly, showing the side of Talbot's head. A black earpiece was clearly visible. Talbot was just a messenger. He was getting instructions from someone else!

Darius seemed to have come to the same conclusion. He looked around for a moment, past Talbot and the other guards. "I know you can hear me, Greed. The Veil had nothing to do with what happened in Lisbon! I would never sanction anything like that, and I think you know it! Come on out and talk to me, just like in the old days. Let's hash this out, one on one."

Talbot held a hand to his ear, not bothering to hide it anymore. Then he pulled a gun and aimed it at Darius. "You were told to come here alone," he said harshly.

Looking confused, Darius raised his hands. "I did. Greed, you know I wouldn't risk the ceasefire by bringing anyone else!"

"Then who's up there?" Talbot growled, pointing his other hand upwards. At the window where Petra and Didi were hiding.

Petra felt a stab of panic, which she saw mirrored in Didi's eyes. "I have no idea," they heard through the mic. It didn't matter though. Talbot had pointed directly at them. They had to go. Didi pointed at the far door in the darkness, and scooped up the stun-gun before heading in that direction.

Loud voices echoed both through the mic and from the street below, but Petra couldn't make out what they were saying. Soon enough, shots rang out as well. Didi held up a hand as they approached the door, and beckoned Petra to move behind her. After a moment Petra could hear why: footsteps were approaching from the other side.

Two men burst through the door, looking around. They had just caught a glimpse of Petra hiding behind it when Didi moved. With a yell she charged forward, jabbing the stun-gun right into the second man's neck! The crackle of electricity sounded and he yelled in pain, but managed to twist away from the attack. He backhanded Didi hard, knocking her to the ground and sending the stun-gun spinning away into the darkness. The other man looked at him in concern for a moment, and then grabbed Petra's arm and pulled her away from the door.

The gunshots outside had faded away by now. Didi wasn't moving. In the darkness, Petra couldn't even tell if she was breathing! The injured man was rubbing at his neck and groaning. After a moment, he knelt down next to Didi and put two fingers to her neck. He nodded up at his companion, and Petra gave a sigh of relief.

It wasn't long before Talbot made his way up to this floor, with two more guards carrying flashlights. He took in the scene as they illuminated it. "Your friend got away, but at least we have you two," he said softly, gazing over at the surveillance equipment. "All that shooting down there got some attention. The cops are probably on the way. Pack all of that up and take it with us," he ordered the guards, pointing at the table. "Well find out how much you two know."

He paused suddenly, with his hand to his ear again. "Or not. Take her with the equipment," he nodded at Didi before turning back towards Petra. "As for you, it looks like the boss wants to deal with you personally."

One of the guards lifted Didi easily and headed for the stairs. Petra tried to go after her, but another guard stood in her way. Talbot grabbed her by the shoulders, holding her tightly and then dismissing the guard, who joined the others. "I don't know what makes you so special," he said conversationally, "but you should feel honored. I've only ever seen him do this twice before."

There was a brief glimmer in the darkness, just for a moment. A figure appeared in front of her: an outline that looked vaguely human. It moved slowly towards her, and Petra tried to shy away, still held tightly from behind.

The thing reached a faint arm out towards her, touching her throat. Pain seared through her neck and chest, burning everything into darkness.

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Chapter 4

"It's been almost a day since I woke up in the hospital," the recording continued, showing a deteriorating Petra. "The mark on my neck where.. whatever it was happened faded quickly, but I'm still showing all kinds of random symptoms. They were running tests, but it was clear they had no idea what was causing this, or how to fix it. I still can't eat or sleep, and I can barely think. I don't know where they took Didi either. I told the police most of what happened to us; obviously I had to leave some things out. From what I've heard they went to the battery factory but found it abandoned. Darius' place is cleaned out- no sign of him either. I.. don't know what to do. Maybe you do." With a despairing look, Petra reached out and shut off the camera.

Nick gave Chuck a concerned look. "Where is this Dierdre Halstaff now?"

"Darius tipped the VPD off, telling them where the Independent Soldiers were holding her. The IS destroyed whatever equipment Petra was using to spy on them, but a police team recovered Miss Halstaff about an hour ago. According to one of our people in the hospital, she's going to be fine. Well, physically anyway."

That was at least one good thing to come out of this whole mess, Chuck reflected. The last thing the Veil needed was more collateral damage right now. Nick looked out the window of their Vancouver base of operations, over the city beyond. It was much better than their usual view, and Chuck was enjoying it too. Even if it was way too cold up here. How did these people live like this?

"What about Halstaff's house, and Hildebrand's apartment? Have they been swept for evidence, aside from what she mentioned on the tape?"

Chuck shook his head. "Darius told the sweeper teams to hold off for now. If these women wanted to go public, they would have done so before now. He's concerned that taking the evidence will just make Miss Halstaff even more of a problem."

"He's probably right," Nick admitted. "What's Hildebrand's condition? With that kind of attack, she doesn't have long."

Chuck paused, confused. "I thought you knew. Darius took her to see Morty about half an hour ago."

"*What*?" Nick gaped at him.

This wasn't going to be pleasant. Chuck grimaced. "It's the only way to save her life- you know that."

"Yes, but the diplomatic fallout will be enormous! We're already walking a tightrope with Fear and Rage; this news will.. well, enrage them. Even Hope and Contentment might take this badly!" Nick started pacing up and down. "We have to get ahead of this. Reach out to Contentment and see if she'll be willing to help with training, and get me everything you know about this Petra woman. Finances, history, training, family, childhood education- if she had a pet in grade school, I want to know its name. Everything."

"It's already being compiled," Chuck said soothingly, "and I already contacted Contentment. She says she'll do what she can when the time comes. I'm sorry, Nick. I know how much this meant to you."

"It doesn't matter now," he responded curtly. "What's done is done, and we have to deal with the consequences before we have the luxury of placing blame."

Chuck resisted the urge to shake his head. Same old Nick. He wore his heart on his sleeve most of the time, and he had to be in agony right now, but as usual the needs of the Veil took first priority. He was a company man through and through. It was a good thing the Veil wasn't financially motivated like other companies though, Chuck remembered gratefully. "How long does the process usually take?" He asked, more to fill the silence than out of actual curiosity.

Nick shrugged. "Usually no more than an hour, but Hildebrand is in bad shape. It might take longer because she's dying. Then days or weeks for her to adjust to her new circumstances. We have to take her to the island as soon as they get back, though. She won't have a moment's peace here in a city like this."

"What about the REMP? Won't it be just as distracting to her?"

"No, we'll shut it off before she wakes up. As the Veil second-in-command, I have the authority to do that without Darius' approval. I doubt he'll be upset though- not in these circumstances. We'll have to turn it back on eventually, but it won't be so bad if she's in one of the upper levels. She should have some time that way."

Chuck nodded skeptically. The REMP was their primary defense and had been for decades, but it wasn't the only safeguard they had. Still, shutting it down just to suit one person seemed a bit indulgent. Even if that one person was as important as Petra apparently was. He raised a hand to Nick's shoulder, but then paused. "I'm sorry Nick," he repeated, realizing how little it must mean to him. "I don't know what Darius is thinking either, but we have to trust that he knows what's right."

Nick's lips tightened and his fists clenched, but he nodded. "Right. Trust is easy when things are going smoothly. It's important when things get rough." He turned away, probably to go back to the island and get things ready, but Chuck noted he hadn't actually agreed with him.

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It wasn't exactly sleep, but Petra was waking up from it.

Her whole body ached, and she groaned softly. Her tremors seemed to have stopped for now, but she had a fever again. Petra put a hand to her forehead, and pulled it away sweaty. Her stomach grumbled and her migraine seemed to be on its way back as well. Most of that was forgotten at least briefly, when she opened her eyes. She wasn't at home anymore!

She was lying on a couch, in a very weird-looking living room. A collection of ancient masks were hanging on one wall, and a sword rack displaying multiple ancient blades was propped up against another. She sat up with difficulty, and could see a kitchen adjoining the other side of the room. The fridge looked old but functional: one of those that had the cooling element on top of the box instead of behind or beneath it. The stove was similarly dated, looking like it might also run on wood as well as gas or electric. There was a wrapped loaf of bread leaning against it- a baguette.

Where was she? The only visible door was closed, and all the windows were completely shuttered. Groaning again, Petra got up and tried to open one only to find it was locked. Despite the electric fridge, all the lighting in here came from three gas lamps equally spaced on the walls. Whoever lived here had apparently readied the house for a storm or something. Strangely, there was a videocamera set up in one of the far corners, pointed down at the ground. It looked modern, in contrast to the rest of this place. From the way it was angled, Petra thought whoever used it was viewing footage recorded elsewhere. Whatever recordings had been on it were gone, though. Someone had deleted them.

At least the door wasn't locked when she tried it. She turned the knob slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible, and pushed it open. Petra gasped. There.. was nothing out there! Ahead, and side to side, was nothing but an empty blackness, stretching out as far as she could see!

This had to be a dream. A fever nightmare most likely. Still, now that the shock had faded slightly, Petra was curious. She almost reached her arm out the door, but thought better of it. She looked around for something she could pick up, and finally settled on the sword rack. She grabbed one of the shorter blades, labeled on the rack as a gladius, and slowly extended it out the door into the blackness. It didn't vanish or anything, so she took a deep breath and reached a leg out for something to stand on.

"What. The. Hell???" She whispered to herself as she left the building. This was so strange! She could stand on.. whatever it was, but she couldn't see it! Before long she was outside, looking back through the open door and wondering what could possibly come next.

She could see the cottage from the outside now, which also appeared to be floating in midair with nothing supporting it. There was another floating object too, just to the right of the door. Petra had missed it on the way out because it had been blocked by the door. It looked like a circular disc of stone, about two meters in diameter. Closer inspection revealed it was covered with tiny script, but in no language she knew. There were also muddy bootprints on one side of it- too large to be hers.

As she made her way around the cottage, hoping fervently that the invisible floor continued outwards indefinitely, Petra could make out voices ahead. She gripped the sword tightly. She didn't know a thing about fencing or swordplay, but hopefully whoever was on the other side of the building didn't know that.

She peeked around the edge and could see two men talking a few meters away. One was Darius, looking angry and determined. The other was a tall, skeletally thin man with gray hair and pale skin. He looked imperiously down at Darius, but he kept his tone hushed as well.

The taller one noticed her immediately, and held up a hand to Darius. "She's awake."

Darius spun, and the frustration in his face instantly transformed into worry. "You shouldn't be out here. You shouldn't even be up and about! We have to get you back inside right now."

He moved towards her, but Petra raised the sword towards him and he came to a stop. "Whoa there. Back off, *Darius*. I don't know what's going on, or what the hell is happening to me, but I deserve some answers!" In the worst possible timing, her tremors started again, making the sword shake as well.

The other man just stayed where he was, and Darius sighed. "This isn't at all how I hoped we would meet again. I'm sorry about all this. Let's just go inside, and I'll explain what I can."

"This isn't a dream," Petra insisted, knowing that for sure now. "It can't be some kind of virtual reality, or a sensory deprivation chamber," she tried to stomp the ground with her foot to make a noise. There wasn't any. "Where on earth are we??"

"That's just it," he said gently. "We're not on earth."

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"Another dimension," Petra said skeptically, back inside the impossible cabin within the impossible black void.

"That's right. This one neighbors our own, but it doesn't have any stars or planets."

On Darius' insistence, Petra was lying down on the couch again. She felt ridiculous, but it was probably for the best. Right now she didn't trust her legs to hold her up. The tall guy, Morty, was out of sight in the kitchen, and Darius was sitting in a chair across from her.

Petra was no physicist, so she couldn't tell if Darius was telling the truth, or if she was just slipping into madness. "If there aren't any planets here, how is there air to breathe?"

Darius smiled. "Morty did that. He arranged all of this to be suitable to humans: air pressure and contents, temperature, a floor to stand on. It's all earth-standard here, but if you go too far out, you'll suffocate."

"I take it you're not human, then," Petra said wryly, peeking over the top of the couch at Morty. He gave her a level look, and shook his head.

"There is no word for what Morty is," Darius explained. "Suffice it to say this entire dimension is his domain. He has complete control over what matter exists and doesn't exist here. Except for that videocamera over there and a few other odds and ends, he willed all of this into being. He took on that appearance as well, so he could interact with humans like us."

Petra shook her head, and winced as the migraine shook back. She had about a billion questions now, but her tremors were back as well. "How- no, *why* did you bring me here?"

Darius looked down for a moment. "The creature that attacked you in the battery factory was called a fade. It disrupted the electromagnetic field running through your body and damaged your hypothalamusm among other things. That's why your temperature is all over the place. No one at the hospital has even heard of a fade or what they can do, so they couldn't help you. Morty can."

"Wait a minute," Morty cut in, coming out from the kitchen. "She was attacked by a fade? You brought her here to save her life? You said you chose her as your successor!"

"And I did," Darius replied. "Why I did it doesn't matter. The result will be the same."

"It's not the same at all! Your successor was supposed to go through years of training for this. She didn't even know I'm not human! You can't just.. select some injured person off the street and expect me to go along with it!"

"The right to choose is mine, Morty," Darius said flatly. "You gave me that right. Are you disputing it now?"

Their gazes were locked in some kind of mental battle for a few moments, before Morty looked away. "Stupid, stubborn humans. No, I'm not disputing anything. But you aren't doing her any favors by choosing her. She might be better off just dying in peace."

His words rattled around in Petra's head for a moment. Ever since the attack she'd been afraid of that possibility. Propping herself up on one elbow, she looked between the two of them. "What the hell is going on here? So I am dying?"

Darius sighed. "Yes. The EM disruption is starting to affect your involuntary functions. Before long your heart won't beat regularly anymore. Actually, I'm surprised you made it this long. Most people attacked like that don't last more than a day."

"But you said Morty can help me," Petra glanced up at the old man. Or alien. Whatever he was.

Morty growled in frustration and moved around the couch. "Enough, Darius. Since you're apparently too thickheaded to change your mind, we might as well get this done right now." He reached out to Darius with one arm, and Petra with the other, but Petra shrunk away from him.

Darius also grabbed Morty, stopping him. "Wait. This has to be her choice as well. Like it was for me."

"Again with the false equivalencies!" Morty threw up his hands. "You made an informed decision! You knew what you were getting into. It could take *days* to tell her everything she needs to know!"

Ignoring him, Darius took Petra's hands. "Yes, Morty can save your life, but you should know that this is a one-way trip. You've barely scratched the surface of the world I live in but if you do this, you'll have to join the Veil. You'll be a part of this world forever. You'll never have anything even close to a normal life again. The vast majority of people out there, like your friend Didi, have no idea what we do or why, and it has to stay that way. You'll be forced to keep that secret as well. Are you prepared for that?"

Petra could feel her heartbeat speeding up. But it was getting irregular, too. She didn't have much time.

She had no idea what Darius was doing, or what this Veil group was. If she went ahead with this, it would be like diving into a pool before checking if it had any water! Plus, Morty had said she might be better off dead. Keeping secrets from her friends, from her mom, might become torture for Petra.

But hadn't she crossed that bridge already? Her mom knew nothing about Darius' apparent agelessness, or Petra working with Didi to find out the truth. Petra's very job required her to put a barrier between herself and people, even if it was a camera meant to capture their appearance and personality.

Finally, she looked up at Morty and nodded. Looking sour, he placed one hand on the back of Darius' neck, and the other on hers. Like it had back in that factory, energy pulsed through her, and she passed out again.

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Chapter 5

When Petra woke, she was in yet another strange room. This one was much more modern, except for the lighting. A single gas lamp flickered at her from next to the door, illuminating the white walls. The room was square, about five meters on a side, and utterly empty except for the cot she was lying on.

Anxiously, she got up. At least her headache was gone, and she wasn't trembling anymore. So far so good. When she tried to gauge her breathing though.. she realized she wasn't breathing at all!

Hastily, Petra put two fingers to her neck. She didn't have a pulse either! After a moment she willed herself to breathe, and took in a long, ragged sequence of air. Then, torn between horror and wonder, she held it. She had no watch, and there was no clock in here, but she could tell the passage of time. The lamp continued to flicker as she kept going, feeling no pressure at all to exhale!

"What have I gotten myself into?" She asked herself, finally letting out a breath. At least she could still speak. Apparently the urge to inhale before speaking was still inside her.

That brought up another question, and she looked down at her arms. From the outside, she didn't look any different. She had no pulse, but she could still see veins in her hand. Her hand was still warm to the touch. The blood was still there, but it wasn't flowing. What the hell had they done to her??

This door wasn't locked either. She opened it slowly, and saw a long hallway to her left with other doors on it. There was a man sitting on a chair in the hallway, looking across at her curiously. She recognized him from Didi's photos.

"Morning," he said with a smile, getting up from his chair and putting his book down on it. It looked like an old copy of Don Quixote. She could also see a flashlight on the ground next to the chair. "You're Petra, right? I'm-"

"Nick. Yeah, I know." Petra cut him off, glancing both ways down the hall. It looked like she was on the outside of a large square shape of rooms much like hers. From their organization, they could have been anything from a barracks to a monastery to a prison complex. Strangely, more lamps had been hung on the walls. There wasn't a fluorescent light to be seen.

He chuckled a bit at that. "I forgot you know more about us than most people. How are you feeling?"

He wasn't armed, and he didn't look particularly threatening, but Petra was still having a hard time feeling secure here. "I'm pretty weirded out, actually. What the hell happened to me? And where am I now, anyway?"

Nick nodded slowly. "Right. I'll try to explain."

"Mr. Kasunis? Mr. Kasunis!" The voice was coming from the right, behind the door, and Nick let out a noise of exasperation. Petra opened the door further and could see a shorter man, somewhat overweight and anxious, trotting towards them.

"There you are." He stopped, took a few deep breaths, and then glanced at Petra curiously for a moment. "I was looking over the schedule Andy left, and the REMP restart sequence hasn't been penciled in yet! If we leave it off for too long, it'll need a full recalibration, and that's at least two more hours we're defenseless! She said I should do a maintenance check on it while it's down, but I don't know the protocols for that, and I'm afraid I'll damage it if I try! Aside from Andy, you're the only other person who's done a maintenance check, so I figured she wouldn't mind if I-"

"Doug!" Nick said loudly, finally getting a word into the man's nervous monologue. "Doug, we've been over this. I left you in charge of REMP control for a reason. Firstly because I feel you've earned a little more responsibility, and secondly so that *I wouldn't have to do it*! You don't have to bother me or Andy with the little details. There's a full set of manuals in the server room. Go there, read up on what you need to do, and take care of it. Now." He made a shooing gesture at Doug, who nodded obsequiously, and backed away while apologizing.

Despite her situation, Petra found this amusing. She'd never been in charge of any employees at her job, but she'd heard similar conversations between her coworkers.

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Sorry about that. How about we talk in there?" He gestured at the room, grabbing his chair and book from the hallway. "Maybe if he comes back he won't know I'm still here."

Once they were situated inside he asked if she wanted the door closed, but Petra shook her head. "All right. Darius said you spoke with him and Morty. Did he explain how Morty is not human?"

"Barely," Petra said, thinking back on the conversation. She hadn't been that lucid for most of it. At least she could think straight now.

"Well we're still trying to figure out exactly what Morty is, but as far as we can tell, he's an energy-based life form. He has control of a kind of temporal power that's native to his dimension. A long time ago he transferred some of his own energy into Darius, which is why he's been around for so long. Your injury was caused by a fade, and it couldn't be treated by anything we've got, but it could be put on hold. Morty transferred some of that energy from Darius into you, which stopped the degradation."

Petra tried to wrap her brain around all of that. "So I'm not actually dead?"

"No, but you're not really alive either. You're just sort of.. stopped. Your body has been separated from the normal flow of space-time, just like Darius," Nick said, looking sympathetic.

Images of poorly-written horror movies came to mind, and the idea of being some kind of zombie neither dead nor alive wasn't exactly appealing. "How long will this, uh, temporal thing last? On me, I mean."

"From what Darius told me, three or four months," he said, looking to the side uncomfortably. "Long enough for you to get acclimated and trained. Think of it like an orientation."

But what happened after that time was up? Did she go back to how she'd been before? Petra wanted to ask that, but Nick seemed hesitant to discuss it, so she switched questions. "An orientation for what, exactly? Darius said I'd have to join the Veil. Is that what I'm training for?"

"Yes, but you're gonna need to know a lot more about your condition before I can get to that. The energy in your body has a bunch of advantages, as you're probably figuring out. You don't need to breathe, or eat, or drink. Your body doesn't need rest anymore but you will sleep, because your mind needs it. You can get hurt, but your pain threshold has jumped way up. Someone could shoot you in the shoulder, and you'd feel something like a bee sting at most. There is one obvious downside, though."

Hesitantly, Nick reached down for the flashlight. He pointed it away from her, and then turned it on. A piercing light emanated not just from the end but the whole thing, and Petra raised a hand to her eyes before Nick shut it off again. "Ow. What kind of flashlight is that?"

"A normal one," he said, handing it to her. Petra examined it briefly before bracing herself and turning it on again. Once again the whole thing lit up like a beacon, causing her to squint and turn it off. It hadn't even been pointed at her.

"Most people can only see a tiny fraction of the EM spectrum, but you and Darius are different. Anything that generates or uses electricity will be that bright to you, now. From what Darius tells me, power lines are a real pain." He tilted his head slightly. "You look like you have normal vision. Have you ever had to wear glasses or contacts?"

Petra shook her head. The gas lighting in here and in the corridor was starting to make sense now.

"You're going to have to get used to wearing them, I'm afraid," Nick went on. "Cities are filled with sources of electricity, so you'll go blind if you don't have the right protection. Darius told me he had to wear sunglasses for months when electricity came into common use back in the 1920s. He was also pretty surprised when he started seeing fades as well. That was much much earlier, though."

Petra handed the flashlight back. "So these fades.. they're electromagnetic creatures of some kind?"

That seemed to catch Nick by surprise. "Yeah. Good deduction there."

"It wasn't that hard. I'm still getting used to the idea that humans aren't the only intelligent beings around. Still, the way that thing hurt me and the fact that I could only see it for a second in that factory, only make sense if it's something like that."

"Well you're right. They're sentient, EM-based lifeforms. They've been around for at least as long as we have, existing alongside us throughout history almost completely undetected. Only you and Darius can see them in their normal forms but they can, with a lot of effort, be visible for just a second or two if they try hard enough. That's what you saw. Greed thought you were working for us, and that we'd betrayed him, so he wanted you to die slowly."

Petra remembered Darius and his conversation with the unseen foe. "Greed? That's really his name? And he's a he?"

Nick chuckled. "Fades don't actually have a gender. They don't reproduce the way we do. I can give you some reading material for later, but Greed started a faction of fades based on the emotion he feels is most valuable. There are a few dozen more factions, led by fades like Joy, Contentment, Rage, etc. All of them seem fixated on human emotions, and tie up their identity in one of them."

"Sounds like the worst therapy session ever," Petra grumbled.

Nick smiled at that, too. "Most of the fades are like us. They live their lives in peace, and let us do the same. This place exists because of the fades who aren't so easygoing." He stood and gestured to the door. "Here, let me give you the grand tour of this place. It's long past time we welcomed you to the Veil."

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As Petra had suspected, this Veil building was mostly underground. She hadn't seen any windows, and the air flow seemed to be very well-maintained. Nick led her upstairs first, insisting that their first tour stop was the most important one.

"This will be a bit bright for you at first," he said apologetically, as they reached the top level. Sure enough there was a shining electric light coming from the end of that corridor up ahead. It looked like a dead end, from what little she could see. Nick hurriedly moved to the end of it, and hit a few keys on the pad at the end. There was a grinding noise and the top of the corridor lifted away, replacing the weird electric light with sunlight.

Now that the gears were no longer using electricity they were normal to her eyes, but Petra looked up the stairs that had been revealed. Was that a palm tree out there? Nick led the way upwards, onto a sandy surface underneath a clear sky.

She had wondered why it was so much warmer than usual down below. This late in the year, her home town was already starting to get chilly, but it was clear she wasn't in Vancouver anymore. "This is Kiri Atoll," Nick explained before she could ask. "A few hundred miles southeast of Hawaii."

Petra turned around slowly, taking in the whole view. It was an island all right, and a small one at that. She could see the white line of breaking waves from her current location, which looked like it was only a few meters above sea-level. That line wove its way in both directions, before looping back behind them. This whole landmass couldn't be more than four or five square kilometers. "You brought me.. to a tiny island in the middle of the South Pacific? How long was I out?"

"Only a day or so."

"What, did you fly me out here? I don't see an airstrip anywhere."

Nick laughed at that. "No, we have.. other ways to get around."

Petra guessed that made sense. "Yesterday I didn't believe it was possible to travel to other dimensions. I suppose this is no more strange. So why did you set up shop here in the middle of nowhere? Do your people just have a thing for beaches?"

Nick shook his head. "No, that's just a perk. Darius started moving people here about seventy years ago, when it became clear that human expansion would just keep going across every major landmass. Normally, fades can only move at about a walking pace, but where humans live, electricity is set up. For a fade, a power line is like a highway. They can ride along it almost instantly. When humanity started building an electric infrastructure for our nations, it turned a journey of months or years to the fades, into a journey of seconds."

"Which is why you don't have any cables running out here," Petra nodded. "Do the fades know you have a base here? The hostile ones, anyway."

"They've probably figured it out by now, but we're safe regardless. Even if a fade wanted to get out here the slow way, or hitch a ride on a ship, our facility is protected. Have you heard of a Faraday cage?"

It sounded familiar, but Petra didn't know for sure. "I don't think so."

"It's a metal mesh, with an electric current running through it. It stops all radio and wireless signals in their tracks. We tested it years ago, and it stops fades, too. There's a massive Faraday cage surrounding our whole facility down there, and another smaller one protecting our server room."

"Sheesh," Petra said in a quiet voice. "You don't mess around, do you?"

"Not when it comes to protecting our people," Nick said. "Most of the fades don't care that much about us, and we're on speaking terms with most of the major factions, but there are some individual fades who would like nothing better than to kill all of us. Our organization exists to keep the peace between humanity and the fades, and we can't do that if we're all dead."

She supposed that made sense. "If the whole thing is surrounded by an electrified mesh, how come I didn't see it on the way up? It should have been blinding." Petra said thoughtfully. She was starting to get used to her new circumstances and drawbacks. If something as simple as a flashlight was painful to look at, how was she supposed to catalogue her photos on the computer? Even her cameras themselves had small batteries inside!

"The top portion of the Faraday cage is actually a few levels down from where you woke up," he clarified. This whole place is camouflaged after all. We're hiding from humans as well as fades. We can't keep the peace if we're outed to the world either."

"Nick?" Another voice echoed up the passageway from below. A tanned, brown-eyed man wearing a cowboy hat came up after it. "There you are." He wore an easygoing smile as he approached, but his left hand was concealing something behind his back.

"Petra, this is Chuck," Nick introduced him. "He's been working here since well before my time. Chuck was one of the people who found you in your apartment and got you to Darius in time."

"That means I owe you my life," Petra said gratefully, shaking Chuck's hand. "Thank you."

"Anytime, ma'am." Chuck turned to Nick for a moment. "Darius is on the line from Bangkok. He wants to talk to you."

"Then I guess my part of the tour is over," Nick concluded. "Unless you want to take over for me?"

"Happy to," Chuck agreed, but Petra was still focused on what he'd said earlier. Not the part about Darius- she'd see him again eventually- but about the call.

"Wait, you get *cell service* out here?"

Chuck and Nick exchanged an amused glance. "Not exactly," Nick said evasively, but then he paused. "Chuck, while you're on the tour, why don't you tell her what you do here?"

Chuck's eyebrows rose noticeably. "Are you sure about that? On top of everything else already?"

"I'm sure. It's a sink-or-swim thing. Have fun," he added to Petra. She swore she could hear mischief in that voice. He beckoned at Chuck, who handed whatever it was he was hiding over to Nick. Then he hurried back down the stairs and out of sight. Petra could see a scar on the side of Chuck's head as he turned, just in front of his temple. It looked like it had been a deep cut, and a recent one.

"So," Chuck said offhandedly, closing his eyes in the breeze for a moment. "You've been having quite a day, huh?"

Petra cracked up at that. She laughed for a few seconds, and Chuck joined in. "Yeah. Yeah, you could say that."

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Chapter 6

They walked underneath the palm trees for a bit, enjoying the sun and the sand before Petra steered them down towards the beach. It was usually too cold to swim at the beaches back home, but this water looked like it might be warm enough. Petra hadn't actually gone swimming in ocean water since she was a kid.

She hadn't counted on the trash littering the beach, though. There were plastic bottles and packaging materials all over the place. They couldn't walk five meters without coming across some new undegradable material sitting here or there. Based on how far up the beach they were strewn, it looked like it was low tide right now.

Petra gave Chuck a baleful glance. "Really? All the way out here in the Pacific?"

"Unfortunately," Chuck said, his gaze sweeping up ahead. "This is clean compared to the other side of the island. There's a massive drift of trash here in the South Pacific, and parts of it get washed in our direction. Some of us wanted to start cleaning it up, but we have to stay hidden, and that means even from environmentalists."

Reflecting sadly on that, Petra turned around and went back towards the retractable entrance with Chuck following closely behind. As depressing as the plastic buildup was, it provided a welcome change to her recent discoveries. "So in the past few days, I've learned a few mind-blowing things," she said, raising her hand and ticking off fingers one by one. "Finding out that immortality is possible. Finding out that teleportation, or interdimensional travel- whatever you want to call it, is possible. Finding out that there is nonhuman intelligence out there. That's quite a lot of food for thought!"

"You might want to leave room for dessert," Chuck said softly, and Petra came to a stop. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear any more, but gestured him to go on.

"You mentioned teleportation and you're right about that," Chuck went on, fishing something out of his pocket. "But Morty used his own power to bring you and Darius into his realm, and to send you back to earth. Getting you out to this island was done by this." He held up a small key. "Let's go back down and I'll demonstrate."

The concealed entrance was still open. Once they were inside Chuck typed in a command on the control pad, and there was a blinding flash again as the servos closed the door. From the outside, it must have looked as though there was nothing here. Chuck led the way down the hall, and then put the key into one of the storage room doors. Based on the door and number, it was similar to the room she'd woken up in.

"Try not to freak out," Chuck said, his tone halfway between concern and amusement as he turned the key and opened the door. Behind it was another hallway, just like the one they were in. Chuck removed the key, but stayed where he was.

Petra looked at him curiously. It was weird that they would have two identical hallways running parallel like this, but not scary. Chuck gave her a mischievous look and stepped through. Once on the other side he looked to his left, and said, "over here."

Petra heard his voice twice, actually. As if she was talking to someone in person and over the phone at the same time. The second voice was coming from her left. About three doors down.. was Chuck!

She looked between them rapidly, but they were the same person! The guy through the door was looking to his left, and the guy down the hall was looking right at her. "Good God!"

Now he was smiling openly. Or rather, both Chucks were. The one through the door reached back and closed it. At the same time, the other door closed as well. Now she could see only one Chuck, striding down the hall towards her.

"How did you do that?" Petra demanded, moving to meet him. He extended the key towards her and she took it, briefly wondering if it might be radioactive or something.

Chuck smiled again. "Magic. Here, you try it. Put the key into this door here," he pointed at yet another storage room. She did so hesitantly, and then he pointed down to the door he'd just left through. "As you turn the key, try to picture that door in your mind. Then just open it."

Not knowing quite what to expect, Petra tried to envision the other door before opening this one. They both opened simultaneously!

"This is.. unbelievable!" She leaned forward through the open door, looking to her left. As she moved ahead, she tried to keep a leg planted firmly on the ground, and soon she could see her own leg.. from behind!

"Yeah, it's pretty trippy," Chuck said lightly. "The key basically links the doors together, making them into one. The connection lasts for as long as the doors stay open. You want to take the key out before closing the door though. Otherwise if you go through, you might leave it behind and get stuck on the other side."

Petra backed up immediately, and tried to look casual as she removed the key and closed the door. Again, the other door closed at exactly the same time. She tried to think about the implications. "So, distance isn't even a factor? We're not talking going from door to door here. If I used this key and envisioned a door in, say, Belgium, I could go there??"

Chuck nodded. "Yup. You'd have to have been there before, to know what the door looks like, but otherwise yeah. This is how we get around. The Veil has facilities in every major city all around the world. The fades can travel almost at the speed of light, using power lines and internet cables to get around. The keys are how we keep up with them. Without this," he reached out and reverently took the key, "we'd be reduced to air travel like the rest of the world."

After examining this door and the one next to it briefly, Petra started thinking aloud. "If I use that, and connect two doors together, I can take the key out again and they'll still be connected?"

"That's right. The key will fit any door, skeleton-key style. You can even use it to get into a locked room, but you have to get there from another door, is all."

"But what if the two doors are different sizes? Or worse, what if someone connected to a door that was underwater, or.. in deep space?"

Chuck grimaced. "Thankfully we don't *have* any doors floating out in space or on the moon, but there was an incident using these keys back in the 30s. From what Darius said, some idiot newbie Veil agents flooded several buildings in London before the reservoir was low enough for them to close the door again. Apparently it was a drunken prank between them. We've kept a close watch on these keys ever since." He shrugged. "As for different door sizes, all Veil facilities have the exact same door dimensions on for that very reason. Still, if we're using other doors, we stay as far to the left bottom side when going through. It's the top and the right that get cut off if they're different sizes."

Petra looked at the key with a little more respect. "How did the Veil stay hidden after something as starting a flood in London?"

"Darius keeps connections with press and law enforcement all over the world. Fortunately the area was right next to the Thames river, so he spun it as a flash flood. Still, it was a near thing. We have a few dozen keys worldwide, and I even built two of them myself," he added proudly.

Suddenly Petra remembered Didi's tale of her father finally confronting Darius, and of his seemingly impossible escape. He must have had one of these keys. Anywhere with a door- even a bathroom or closet door- could be escaped as easily as walking! Or anywhere there was a door with a keyhole, anyway. "When you said magic, you meant that literally," Petra said softly.

Chuck nodded. "We're just called magicians," he put in, almost in the tone of an admission. "There have been a few of us working for the Veil in every generation. Darius planned it that way, in fact. Back in the old world before America was conquered, he was friends with some of the most powerful magicians out there. My order.. was actually founded by Merlin from Camelot. Or Myrddin as he was known back then. Apparently he and Darius were friends."

Despite the gravity of this new information, Petra had to smile at Chuck's attitude. The Americas had indeed been conquered, though most people living there thought of it as colonizing and taming the wilderness. Chuck's accent was vaguely southern, but his viewpoint was unusual for that area. The way he spoke of his order was definitely filled with pride. "Are you saying that Merlin of Camelot was a real person? Are you one of his descendants?"

Chuck gave an uncomfortable shrug. "..Maybe? They didn't exactly keep accurate genealogies back then. Some of his descendants were part of our order, at least."

"Wow. So magic is real." Petra shook her head. "You were right about leaving room for dessert. This definitely fits in with the other three." Her head spun briefly, and she leaned against the wall.

"I got you," Chuck reached out to her, and Petra let him help her briefly. "You don't need physical rest anymore, but your mind is processing a ton of new information, and that can be exhausting. I'll get you some glasses that can protect your new 'second sight', and then use the key to take you back home."

Petra only nodded, feeling a little better. "I take it I'll be coming back here regularly?"

"Probably. Your training will take a few months at least. Nick and I will be handling it mostly, but Darius will be dropping in from time to time as well."

Petra wanted to ask more about Darius specifically, but she yawned as she opened her mouth. It was probably best that she was going back. "At least you're taking me home with a normal-looking key. I've never had the ankles for ruby slippers."

Chuck gave her a wan look, and gestured around the halls. "This place might as well be in black-and-white anyway."

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Almost a full day later, Petra knocked on Didi's front door. There was no response at first, so Petra knocked again.

She was wearing those special contact lenses Nick had given her after Chuck's initial glasses, and they seemed to be working. Getting them on had been a challenge, and keeping them in place had been both physically and mentally irritating. She'd wanted to wear the glasses instead, but she had no way of explaining them. Coming back to Vancouver had been like transporting herself to the surface of the sun. All electric lights had been twice as bright, each car shone like a spotlight, power lines left behind horizontal afterimages that seemed burned right into her eyeballs- Nick hadn't been kidding.

When Didi finally opened the door, her face transformed from worry and doubt into relief. "Oh thank God!" She rushed forward and embraced Petra, lifting her off the ground briefly. Surprised, Petra did her best to take it in stride. She'd only known the woman for a few days, most of which she'd been missing.

"I thought you were dead!" Didi said breathlessly, after letting her down, and then bringing her inside. "The police found me a few hours after we were taken, but they didn't have any idea where you were! They said a woman matching your description was brought into the ER, but then checked herself out again. I went to your place but there was no one there. I even filed a missing persons report two days ago!"

Petra smiled slightly. She should have known Didi would know where she lived. The older woman had done her research after they'd first met. "I'm sorry to just drop in like this. I would have called, but I don't actually have your number. And I'm fine. After I woke up in the hospital, I checked myself out like they said. I've been staying with a friend of sorts ever since, for my own protection. The Independent Soldiers might have wanted to go after me again, so it was safer that way." Technically true, if only barely scratching the surface of what had happened.

"It's fine," Didi assured her quickly. "You look well enough, considering what we've both been through. I'm a wreck: I keep expecting thugs with guns to show up at my door, even though the police promised to keep an officer out front to keep an eye on me. There he is," she pointed out a car down the street.

Didi insisted on taking Petra over there to clear up the missing-persons situation, and the officer promised to call it in and let his superiors know. After that, she brought Petra back inside for some tea.

"I've been trying to track down Darius again," she explained as she prepared it. "He vanished without a trace just after we were caught. His apartment is cleaned out, his bank accounts emptied. There hasn't been any sign of him at any airports, docks or bus stations, so he probably left by unlicensed boat. If so, he's somewhere in the Pacific right now."

She was probably right, but for the wrong reasons, and Petra was forbidden from explaining them. Before she'd been sent home, Nick and Chuck together had spoken with her, re-emphasizing the essential importance of keeping the Veil organization secret.

It was especially frustrating with Didi. She and her father had spent years tracking Darius' movements, without knowing that he could teleport all over the globe just by stepping through a door. The Halstaffs had made an impressive achievement, and one that would probably never be made public. Didi would never get credit for all her hard work.

"I did some checking on Lisbon, after what we heard at the battery factory," Didi went on unknowingly. "That Greed guy, whoever he was, said he lost seven people in a shoot-out. I looked up news reports and found seven people killed in a shooting six months ago, in the Lisbon's Avalade district. The police said it was gang-related, which fits with the Independent Soldiers. We heard Darius say he wasn't responsible, but clearly code-name-Greed thinks he was. I've got a friend in the PSP overseas who said he can get me the incident report in a few days."

Petra leaned back a bit. "You've got friends in Portugal's police force?"

"Well, more like a friend of a friend. One of the advantages of inheriting a ton of money is that over time you can cultivate relationships with Interpol. They're pretty handy when you need to investigate things happening overseas." She poured the tea slowly, and then went back into her evidence-wallpapered room. After a few more moments she unrolled a map on the kitchen table. "This is where it happened in the Avalade district. Thing is, there was a pretty big explosion just after the shooting stopped. It turned this warehouse here," she pointed to a red x drawn over one building, "into a smoking crater. The police recovered a few bodies from the wreckage, but they're assuming there are more still buried inside."

Petra realized she could probably get a lot more information from Kiri Atoll the next time she visited, and maybe fill in some of the blanks for her friend. If she could find a way to do it without compromising the Veil, anyway. Now she was starting to feel those restrictions Darius had mentioned back in the empty black dimension. "I'm glad to see you're still on task," she said, trying to get back on track.

Didi shook her head. "I have to be. I can't even think about what happened in that factory, or what might have happened." She put a hand to her head, where that thug had clocked her, and winced. "I'm lucky the police got a tip where I was. I still have no idea why they let you go. Did they just leave you for dead?"

"They probably assumed I wouldn't make it," Petra said truthfully. "Listen, I'm not giving up on the search. I'll stick with you, for what little I can do to help. If you'll have me."

After a few seconds Didi gave her a wavering smile, and reached out to squeeze her hand. Petra felt guilty about having to deceive the poor woman, but she had questions of her own concerning Darius. He still hadn't told her why he'd chosen her, or even *spoken* with her since their conversation with Morty. Besides, this way Petra might be able to protect Didi from the fades, as they continued the search.

Of course she'd have to figure out how to do that first. As they conversed over tea, Petra put that on the top of the priority list.

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Chapter 7

"Why did we have to come here, of all places?" Petra asked irritably, as Nick led the way into BC Women's Hospital, in the middle of town. She hated hospitals, going back into childhood.

"We're here to meet someone associated with the Veil," he responded evenly, moving out of the way of a passing gurney. "She insisted that we come here. Given how far she's come, accommodating her is the least we can do."

"How far has she come?"

Nick gave her a sidelong look. "I'm not sure, exactly. It varies, day to day."

That made sense. If this person had a key as well, distance didn't really matter. Or maybe she didn't. Was she a fade?

Petra was wearing her more-comfortable glasses, now that she was away from Didi. They'd been framed to fit her specifically, and fit pretty well. Petra could still see electrical sources, but they weren't a threat to her eyesight. She was supposed to see fades as well, glasses or no, but hadn't caught sight of any yet. Based on how long she'd been back in the 'real world', Petra had assumed she'd see one or two by now, but apparently not. Were they pretty rare or something?

Nick took a sharp right down one of the far halls, to the maternity ward. As they approached the far hallway, Petra's anticipation was realized. There was a.. figure there, hovering in the air outside one of the rooms. It was amorphous, about a meter across, and light yellow in color. It looked like a concentration of gas until she got closer, and it literally turned to face them!

As she watched the gas cloud changed shape, taking on a roughly-human appearance, in the upper half at least. A pair of arms delineated themselves, and two tiny lights appeared where eyes might be on a person. The figure looked back and forth between them, before giving her an abbreviated nod. "Good evening Petra," a female voice intoned. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Not knowing quite what to think, Petra nodded in return. "You too." She looked around briefly. There were infants in rows in an adjoining room, and down the hall were expectant mothers each in their own room, but this hallway seemed clear for now. "Can you see and hear.. her?" Petra asked Nick.

He shook his head. "Because of what Morty did to you and Darius, you can both interact with fades like you can anyone else. The rest of us need technology to do the same. Or the use of Chuck's little trinkets." He pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and put them on, before placing his phone on the windowsill outside of the infants' room, and turning it on.

The fade reached out to the phone and it flickered on briefly. "Hello, Nick. How have you been?" Petra heard two voices saying that, actually. One was the female tone she'd heard earlier, and the other was a monotone electronic voice coming from the phone. Fortunately the electronic voice was much quieter.

"I'm just fine, Contentment, thanks," Nick responded. "Figures you'd bring us here," he added wryly, looking down the hall at the mothers' rooms.

The fade, Contentment apparently, gave a human-style shrug. "I might as well be comfortable while we talk."

Petra was getting the hang of this. "So you can't hear her normal voice- just the one coming from the phone?"

"That's right. Chuck made these sunglasses so that we could see fades too. It looks a little out of place, but better than a crazy person talking to open air."

Contentment chuckled, a sound the phone was apparently programmed to ignore. "You humans and your vanity. It was amusing at first, but it got old very quickly."

Nick seemed a bit taken aback by that, but recovered quickly. "I'll be up in the waiting room if you need anything," he told Petra. "Be sure to use your phone while talking to her. They frown on obviously crazy people in maternity wards." He gave her a smirk before heading upstairs, and Petra resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him.

"So you're the new immortal, eh?" Contentment said after he'd gone. "I imagine you're feeling a bit overwhelmed right now."

Petra had to concede that one. "Maybe a bit. But all of this is fascinating, too. Take you and the other fades for example. Are you.. aliens? Ghosts? Humans who've evolved into pure energy?"

Contentment laughed again, the sound cascading like a waterfall. "Darius said you were inquisitive. Yes, we are aliens, but not from any other planet. We're extradimensional creatures. From Morty's realm, actually. All fades originated there before spreading out to other dimensions like this one."

"So Morty is a fade too? He looked human."

Contentment hesitated there, and looked nervous, or as much as a cloud could portray. "Morty is.. complicated. We're not actually sure what he is. Most of us didn't even remember he existed until a few hundred years ago. A lot of us resent him as well." She turned slightly and began moving down the hall. "Come along. We're not here to talk about him after all."

Since Morty apparently had the ability to grant immortality, Petra was more than a little curious. She didn't want to rock the boat though; she'd have more opportunities later. She hurried after her guide. "Nick said that all fades have an affinity for a specific human emotion. Based on your name, I'm surprised you'd feel comfortable in a hospital. Most humans here are either sick, dying or dead."

"Not in this ward," Contentment responded, gesturing into one room. Through the pane Petra could see a pregnant woman resting, her eyes closed.

Contentment's 'body' language changed completely, from conversational and amused, to utterly relaxed. After a moment her human form wavered and went back to being an amorphous cloud. Petra could hear a deep sigh come from the cloud, and felt like she'd walked in on a deep-tissue massage or something. "Are you all right?"

A nurse had recently left a nearby room and gave her a curious look, so Petra hastily raised her phone. Contentment retook her humanish shape, and looked back at her. "I'm fine. It's just.. well, you can't know true contentment until you're near a child in the womb. Such peace and serenity they feel! I'm always drawn to areas like this in every city I visit."

Petra raised her eyebrows. "So you can actually sense emotions from people?" That was a disturbing thought. Petra liked her thoughts to stay in her head if possible.

"Only at close range," Contentment explained, glancing back through the door. "My whole group feels a drive to cultivate contentment in humans. Others.. have their own priorities. We've been known to compete with each other from time to time, trying to generate our preferred emotion in as many humans as possible."

That disquiet from earlier was getting louder. "So we're like farm animals or crops to you? You harvest our contentment for nourishment or something?"

Contentment rocked backwards a bit, clearly disturbed. "No. Nothing like that! We don't need anything from humans in order to survive. Our interest in your species is purely aesthetic. We've had a fascination with human feelings ever since you first started having them. Think of us like moths, and human feelings are akin to an open flame."

Feeling a bit better, Petra nodded slowly. "So if your name is Contentment, what are others in your group called? How do you tell each other apart?"

"Heh. You catch on faster than Darius did. Of course that was about two thousand years ago, so education was a bit more primitive. No, names are just an abstraction to us. I don't really have a sound or word that signifies me as a person. We tell each other apart just by long experience. I'm only called Contentment because I'm currently the most dedicated one in my group. Eventually another will take that role, and I'll take on less essential duties. That's how it works for all fades."

No names? And apparently fades were also ageless? She was about to ask more when she became aware of someone approaching from down the hall. It was probably another nurse, and from what Petra remembered of the hospital layout, she was coming from one of the delivery rooms. Petra stepped to the side to let her pass, but the woman stopped right in front of her. "Hey, Contentment. And you must be Petra. It's so good to finally meet you!" Without warning she grabbed Petra in a tight hug. Just after letting go, she kissed Petra once on each cheek, French-style, and then stepped back while shaking her hand.

Two fierce embraces in as many days. Petra was beginning to feel a bit used, as she tried to come to terms with what had just happened. The woman was black, only about one and a half meters tall, and grinning widely. She was dressed as a nurse, and had apparently just taken off surgical gloves, from the mugginess of her hands. "Hi," Petra tried not to sound bewildered. "Who are-"

"I'm Elle," the woman cut her off. "I'm sorry. I get a bit carried away. When Contentment said she'd be meeting you here, I had to come. I just got a bit distracted helping with a delivery back there." She looked apologetically at Contentment, too.

Elle was a French name, and her accent was right as well. "You, uh, can see her?" Petra managed.

"Bien sur. Oh, right. I forgot you're not used to this yet. I'm also an," she paused and looked around briefly. "An extradimensional creature. I know all about the fades and the Veil."

Petra slowly circled Elle, who had finally let go of her hand. "You look pretty human to me."

Elle grinned again. "I spend most of my time in France, so it helps to look like one of the locals."

"So you're like Morty, then?"

"Oh, pas du tout. Morty just looks like that because I like him that way. I've always had a thing for tall men," she added in a conspiring tone.

Contentment twitched, and Petra decided to put a pin in the Morty talk for now. "Wait, you don't work here? I thought you just delivered a baby down there."

"I helped," Elle said easily. "I mostly try to keep the mother calm, if there's no friends or family in there with her. In fact, there's another one who went into labor a few hours ago. I better go soon."

The surprises were just coming too fast for Petra. "So a total stranger was willing to let you sit in on the *birth of her child*? And another will do the same?"

Elle gave a smug smile, and shrugged. "I have an effect on people. They trust me naturally for some reason. Maybe it's because of where I'm from. Tootles!" She left as abruptly as she'd come, waving at them on the way. Petra did feel like she was on the level, though. Whatever trust-inducing effect she had was noticeable, if it wasn't all in her head.

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After apparently reveling in the contentment of unborn children for a bit longer, Petra's guide took her to another part of the hospital. Unfortunately it was the morgue: the very last place Petra would have wanted to go.

It was one of her first memories. Her mother crying into her aunt's shoulder, as the doctor said things Petra couldn't understand. The words 'car crash' had left an impression on her four-year-old mind. She'd wandered away while her aunt and mom stayed in the waiting room. She'd wandered.. into the morgue. Perhaps she'd been too small to be easily noticed, but Petra could vividly remember the body she'd seen there. And the unnaturally twisted head belonging to her father.

It hadn't been this hospital or morgue, but the effect was the same. Even Contentment seemed to notice. "Are you all right?"

"No. Why are we here?"

The fade stared at her for a moment, before apparently deciding to let it go. With an arm raised to one side, she indicated a relatively recent corpse. Petra started when she noticed another yellowish cloud move out of the wall and position itself next to the body. "That's my friend Tiss," Contentment said quietly. "Watch closely."

Amazement cut through her depression, as Petra saw the yellow cloud reshape itself just as Contentment had. It reached down to the body's right hand, and seemed to pull on it. Rather than move the hand, the fade seemed to pull another fade out of the unfortunate man's body. Or not a fade actually, now that Petra could see it more closely. It was a ghostly figure, dressed like him and looking like him- minus the broken spine.

The human figure stood slowly, looking amazed at Tiss. When he saw the body, he gasped and flinched away. Petra assumed she would have reacted the same. Tiss leaned closer and said something, and he seemed to calm down a bit. The fade led him out of the room, nodding briefly at Contentment as they passed.

"What did I just witness?" Petra asked, moving away from the morgue, which was certainly off-limits to hospital guests. She was starting to think that nothing could surprise her anymore. "Are ghosts actually real?"

"No. When a human dies, the EM energy in their body persists for a few hours. Tiss, or Satisfaction as he's known to the Veil, has taken it upon himself to help the recently dead. He takes them to see their friends and loved ones. To say goodbye, if they died in an accident like that man did."

"That must be the basis behind the human myths about ghosts," Petra said after thinking about it. "Can they show themselves to humans, like Greed did to me?"

Contentment shook her head. "They don't last long, but it is a chance for them to gain closure before they go.. wherever is next."

"Closure? What about justice? Some of those people might be murder victims! If they have a few hours, they might be able to identify their killers. Do any fades help in that way?" Petra took in a reflexive breath as she thought about seances. "They could use mediums and other paranormal grifters to help people." Petra had never believed in what those people claimed they could do, but perhaps with help from the fades, they could actually reach the 'other side'.

"Some of us did," Contentment said, and the sadness was clear in her voice. "About a hundred years ago there was a Justice faction. It was an offshoot of Rage's people: righteous indignation and the desire to settle the score. I'm afraid they didn't last very long- they all eventually split up and joined other groups. There just aren't enough humans who care about justice to make such a group viable."

"Hey," a voice put in from behind them, and Petra turned to see Nick coming down the stairs. "It's getting late."

"How did you know we were down here?"

"She told me," Nick nodded at Contentment. "This is the last stop, at least as far as her faction goes. Others will want to meet you, but that can wait."

"He's right," Contentment said after a moment, reaching out to Nick's phone so he could hear as well. "I should go. I'm sorry to leave things on such a dour note."

"It's all right," Petra assured her. "I've learned a lot today. Thank you."

Contentment bowed and moved backwards, forming into an undefined cloud again before passing through a wall. Petra shook her head at that. "We ran into a woman named Elle upstairs. Do you know her?"

"Oh, yeah. Did she hug and kiss you the moment you met?" Petra nodded, and Nick grimaced, taking off his sunglasses now that they were no longer needed. "It's her thing. I think she'd hug the fades too, if she could."

"Just how many extradimensional creatures are there anyway?"

"Aside from the fades, just Morty and Elle. At least as far as we know. There could be many more out there, but we haven't had contact with anything else."

Petra knew she should head upstairs, but something was keeping her. Had her father's electromagnetic ghost been one of Tiss' beneficiaries? Given how many people died every single minute, it seemed unlikely. "I last saw my father in a room like this," she said softly.

"I know," Nick said gently. "It's not an easy thing for a kid to bear. My parents were killed when I was six, along with my two brothers."

That snapped her out of it. "I'm sorry," she said, realizing how much worse this must be for him. "If I can ask.. who did it?"

"No idea, really. It was a gang shooting in Zagreb, Croatia, where I was born. A bunch of people were killed. My full name is Nikola Rukavina, by the way. I've just spent most of my life around Americans. Anyway, Darius thought that the gang war might have been instigated by fades, which made it his responsibility. He made sure I was adopted in the States. When I was old enough, he offered me a job with the Veil. I've been working with him ever since." There was regret and pain in his voice, but no bitterness that Petra could hear. If he blamed the fades for his lot in life, Nick was hiding it pretty well.

It seemed Petra wasn't the only 'ordinary' person Darius had protected over the years. Was that why he was interested in her family? Had the fades threatened them in some way? If so, it was probably Greed. Petra had only skimmed the reading material Chuck had given her, but it seemed that organized crime was pretty solidly Greed's territory. None of the other factions had much interest in it. As she pondered that, she caught sight of something by the door to the morgue. Nick wasn't wearing his sunglasses; he hadn't seen it.

"We should go," Nick said after a few more moments. "The hospital's open all hours, but there aren't any fades here. I doubt Elle's still here either. She uses dimensional travel to get around, so she's probably back in France by now."

"I'm gonna stick around, actually," Petra said with some certainty. "I've got some thinking to do."

"Are you sure? We didn't exactly come here by car, remember," Nick raised his key for emphasis.

"Go on. I'll call someone for a ride when I'm ready."

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Chapter 8

The fade waited until Nick had left before approaching. "I wondered if you would want to face me alone," it said in a raspy male voice.

Petra wasn't concerned about being attacked again. From what she'd read, now that Morty had altered her body's EM field, she wasn't in direct danger from any fade anymore. If one of them tried what Greed had, it would have no effect. "Who are you?" She asked, more curious than afraid.

"I am Rage." The electromagnetic cloud, which was purplish in color, formed into a similarly vague human-shape and bowed.

"What, did Contentment invite you to 'view' me as well?" Petra was starting to feel a bit like a zoo attraction.

Rage shook his head. Apparently like Contentment, he'd picked up human mannerisms. "No, my sister and I rarely see eye to eye. I have resources inside CSIS. Facial recognition picked up you and Nikola inside this hospital, so I decided to come here myself. I gambled that you'd want to talk to one of the fades who isn't a Veil lapdog, alone. Looks like I was right."

There hadn't been much about Rage's faction in her reading material. This was a good opportunity for Petra to get a better understanding of the fades. That was if they really were alone. Greed had humans working for him, and Rage might as well. "If Contentment and her group like to help dead folks find closure, what do you do? Taunt them with their failures?"

Rage waved an arm at the morgue. "I have no interest in the dead. The living are much more angry. My brethren and I spend most of our time on the internet." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "There's nothing quite like anonymity combined with white male fragility to set the stage for anger. Throw in some disadvantaged people simply asking for equality, and it's like a match in a pool of gasoline. Fury, all over the internet. It's delicious."

"What about those disadvantaged people?" Petra countered. "I'm sure they've got plenty of anger to throw around."

"Oh yes, but their anger doesn't last. Whether they succeed or die, it passes far too quickly. But for the average internet agitator, fury is a staple. As soon as one target becomes less threatening, they switch to another. Rage is the only thing keeping them from facing their own fears, and I love every second of it."

"Then why are you here talking to me? I'm not about to help you stoke anger in anyone, but I'm also no threat to you. I couldn't stop those small-minded people even if I wanted to."

Rage let out a growl. "Because like my internet pets, I also know fear. You represent a threat, not to my work, but to my very existence. I'm sure you know I can't hurt you directly, which is why I'm going to convince you."

That sounded ominous. "Convince me of what, exactly?"

The fade paused, looking up for a moment at the ceiling, and then chuckled. "Follow me." He started to move straight up, and then adjusted course towards the stairs.

Petra knew that directly above them was the main waiting room. Cameras were all over the place, so it seemed unlikely there would be any danger. Wondering what he was up to, Petra went after him.

There was a full-blown argument in progress up there. Two men and a woman, all in their thirties, were speaking loudly and animatedly. "I can't believe you'd say that!" One of the men said, turning red. "She's your own mother!"

"It's what she wanted," the woman insisted. "She's in there, breathing through a tube. Her brain is mush. We can't just leave her like that!"

"You haven't even seen her in two years," the other man interjected, in a calmer but still strained voice. "You have no right to say what she would want. Neither of you do!"

"You're one to talk!" The first man said immediately. "We've both got families at home, but your precious career is all you care about! Sure you set her and dad up in that fancy house, but that doesn't mean you have the right to speak for them."

The doctor near them looked extremely uncomfortable. The others in the waiting area had moved to the side, pretending this wasn't happening. Next to her, Rage was in rapt attention. It was exactly the same pose Petra had seen Contentment take on, back in the maternity ward. "You're getting off on this!" She accused quietly.

"Yes," the fade hissed, "but more on how it started than the results."

The three of them had apparently realized what a spectacle they'd become. They lowered their voices and moved away. Wishing that she could still feel ill, Petra followed suit. Over in a corner, she pulled out a phone so that she wouldn't look crazy. "What do you mean?"

"This whole argument was triggered by ignorance and stupidity," Rage explained. "The children are ignorant of the mother's wishes, and the mother was stupid for not making them clear ahead of time. This family is at risk of being torn apart because of that. Just as the fades are at risk because of you!"

Petra shook her head, uncomprehending, and Rage growled again. "Well not you precisely, but it's your relationship with Mortemer that concerns us. He's not happy that Darius chose you, and that endangers all fades, everywhere!"

"How?" Petra asked, bewildered. "I know that Morty and the fades all came from the same dimension originally, but that was thousands of years ago. What does he have against you now, and what do Darius and I have to do with it?"

Rage sighed. "Very well. I'll give you.. a colorful analogy of what went on. Imagine you had a brother. A very large family, actually: brothers and sisters. One of them was a real bad apple. He liked to kill, say, ants. He would fry them, crush them, force them to fight other insects, all for his own amusement. None of the family liked him, but he was still their brother."

Petra wasn't sure where he was going with this, and his condescension was getting a bit irritating, but she listened patiently. "One day this brother of yours stomps a series of anthills flat, killing a bunch of them. When asked why, he said many things. Perhaps he was curious about how they'd survive, or rebuild. Maybe he wanted to see which were the toughest, or where the survivors moved to. Or he was just bored. Any or all of those might be true. Then the next day, he just drops dead. Without any warning or anything. Just gone."

As far as storyline twists went, it wasn't bad. "What killed him?"

"No one knows at first. Before long, all of you get a message from someone you've never even heard of. It says your brother was executed in retribution for all the ants he killed. The message is from someone who apparently could just *will* him dead, in an instant. Someone who could do the same to any of you, or your whole family, anytime he wanted to!"

Rage stopped briefly, his purple eye-light-things darting back and forth as he looked in her direction. "Imagine how that would make you feel, Petra. Of course you would treat ants with kid gloves from that point on, but wouldn't it also instill fear in you? It certainly did for me. For all my brothers and sisters."

The abstract analogy had suddenly become very real, as Petra tried to reconcile it with the existence of the fades. "Morty is the executioner in this story, isn't he?"

Rage nodded. "And my brother was Despair. He was a downer, and a real sadist, but I loved him all the same. There are no fade children, you see. We don't age or die naturally, and we don't procreate. So when Despair and his two hundred and eight kin were eliminated in an instant, it left an impression on us."

Petra could imagine that would make some waves. Ageless creatures, suddenly realizing they could be killed? She went on for completion's sake, though. "I take it the ants in your story were human beings?"

"Primitive ones. Fourteenth-century Europeans."

She took a deep breath. "And the anthills that your brother and his faction smashed flat?"

Rage was quiet for a long moment. "I'm sure you've heard of the Bubonic Plague."

Petra gasped. "Fades started the Black Death??"

"That's right. Despair and the others possessed a group of humans. They loaded ships with diseased rats, and sailed them to Europe in 1347. Over the next four years, nearly half of the population died. Later outbreaks lifted that number to over a hundred million people."

This was unbelievable! Covid had killed millions of people worldwide. Petra had read up on previous pandemics because of it, including the Spanish flu in the 1900s. Then there were yellow fever, polio, AIDS, zika and malaria outbreaks, but none of them could hold a candle to the Black Death.

"I'm not trying to excuse what he did, Petra," Rage went on, his voice more intense than before. "I just don't want to share his fate! In 1918, many of us feared that Mortemer would blame us for the Spanish flu as well. Those fears resurfaced when Covid made its debut. Mortemer obliterated almost a thirteenth of our population with a *thought*. If he has even a mood swing, he could do the same to the rest of us! We have to keep him happy, and you being the next immortal is making him quite unhappy."

Petra closed her eyes, and tried to will herself to breathe normally. Or to breathe at all. "What do you want me to do?" She asked quietly.

"In a few months when your training is complete, Darius will transfer the rest of his power to you, officially making you the new leader of the Veil. At that time, I want you to transfer your power to Nikola. He's been Darius' right-hand-man at the Veil for over ten years. He's spent more than twenty working at your sites all over the world. All of us assumed he would be Darius' choice, until you came along. And most importantly, Mortemer likes him and trusts him."

As an ageless being, Rage might not be aware of the implications of his request. "Rage, this energy from Morty is the only thing keeping me alive! If I give it up, I go back to the way I was. My body's EM field was disrupted. My brain, heart, lungs, all my major organs were failing. I'd be dead within minutes! Unless.. you're saying you can undo that." Her hope was faint, but it was there.

Rage shook his head. "I'm sorry. What Greed did to you is irreversible. I know very well what I'm asking. I'm asking you to help me keep my species alive."

"Why should I?" Petra asked angrily, getting up quickly. "One of your 'siblings' tried to kill me!"

She was attracting some strange looks despite her phone, so Petra decided to step outside into the night air. She was peripherally aware of Rage following in her wake. "You just likened my whole species to ants. If you don't value us, why should we care what happens to you?"

"That was seven hundred years ago!" Rage protested, and she was rewarded with a note of desperation in his voice. His shape dissolved for a moment, as he apparently got ahold of himself. "Our opinion of humanity has evolved since then. You've developed technology which has both aided and threatened us. You can now detect us if you want, and wall us out of certain areas. You can even kill us if necessary, one at a time. Trust me, we no longer see your kind as ants. Contentment should be proof of that, at least."

Rage sighed in the darkness. "We still have some time. You can verify what I've said with others. You can think on the possibilities. Please don't dismiss my suggestion out of hand just because I represent anger. We don't choose what we like, after all. Some humans like rice, and some like sauerkraut. One person's weird sexual fetish is another person's normal life. In this respect I'm just a fade, and that's all I'm speaking as."

He gave another abbreviated bow, barely visible in the night, and floated away.

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"So I heard you ran into someone unexpected at the hospital," Chuck said, sidling up next to Petra.

"What?" She asked hurriedly, trying not to look suspicious. Fades didn't show up on camera, and she'd kept her phone up the whole time, so no one should know she was talking to Rage. Unless they had her phone tapped!

"Elle," Chuck said with a smile. "What did you think of her?"

"Oh. Yeah. I found her.. a bit overwhelming actually."

"She is a bit much sometimes," Chuck admitted, his admiration clear. "She may not be French by birth, but she acts a lot like it. I heard she-"

Petra partially tuned him out as he went on extolling Elle. It had been more than a day since the hospital, and she was back on Kiri Atoll, heading down into the underground Veil headquarters. One of the Veil people had picked her up with one of his special keys. Petra didn't remember his name, unfortunately. According to the reading material, there were over three hundred of them, with about fifty of that total living full-time on Kiri Atoll.

A moving wall of light seemed to pass up from the ground, rushing through the floor, her, and the ceiling in an instant! It was gone just as fast as it had appeared. "What was *that*?" She asked loudly, looking around. Fortunately she was wearing her new contacts, or.. whatever it was might have blinded her.

Chuck looked confused at first, and then comprehension dawned on him. "Oh. Yeah, that was an electromagnetic pulse. I forgot you can see them now. We have an EM generator in the middle of our headquarters. It sends out a pulse every thirty seconds or so. If any fades made it past the Faraday cage on the outside, the EMP would stop them."

Another burst of light passed through her. She couldn't feel a thing physically. Petra doubted she'd be able to get much sleep here, though. "Does this pulse kill fades?"

"No, it just pushes them away. Like a leaf in a strong breeze. The repeating generator, or REMP as we call it, makes sure our lower levels are safe. We've only turned it off a few times, like when you were first brought in, so that it wouldn't hurt your eyes."

"It's appreciated," Petra said wryly. "I was brought here a bit early today, but I wasn't told why. Some kind of meeting downstairs?"

"I was called to it too. No idea what it might be about," Chuck responded easily.

They continued downwards for a bit. Petra had wondered before, why this place had stairs instead of elevators. If an EMP swept through the building every half minute, it made more sense. This headquarters was mostly housing actually, for all the Veil agents when they weren't on various continents keeping track of the fades.

"What's the deal with Elle and Morty anyway?" Petra asked, glancing at Chuck as they descended. "I know that Morty and the fades are native to the same dimension, but she's not?"

"Nope. She's from a different one. It's kind of a weird thing, actually," Chuck said with a frown. "We only have theories about Morty, even after all this time. My favorite one is that he's a fade himself, but like an air-traffic controller for the rest of them. They spread out into a bunch of different dimensions, and he uses the temporal energy in his own realm to keep them from getting lost or whatever."

It was as good a theory as any. "And Elle?"

Chuck shook his head. "I have no idea what she is. I assume that whatever her home dimension is, it's pretty devoid of life. That's why she spends so much time on earth. The trick is, Elle told us she's still tethered to her own dimension. She can only move one over. So she can visit earth if she wants, but she can't enter Morty's realm. And Morty can summon people to his realm using that transport disc, but he can't or won't leave. So their love is of the forbidden kind, I guess."

Petra stopped. "Wait, they're lovers?"

"Long-distance lovers, but yeah. Morty's been interested in humanity ever since we started walking upright. When some of the ancient Romans started talking about a beautiful woman not of their earth, he used them to send a message to her. The two of them have been corresponding since, oh, 100 AD or so?"

"Wow," Petra thought about that. She'd had her own relationships, mild and spectacular, which hadn't worked out, but at least she could be in the same room as her exes.

"That's why Morty made Darius immortal in the first place," Chuck explained. "He was tired of his human messengers dying off so quickly. Darius doesn't talk much about those early days soldiering for the Roman Empire, but from what I've heard he was also kind of a herald. He sang, and played the panpipe for both Elle and Morty. Ever since videocameras became a thing, his role between them has been more ceremonial than anything else. You won't be expected to entertain them when you take over."

"That's a relief. So Darius was a Legionnaire? That explains a few things." Including why he hadn't spoken more than five words to her since that encounter in Morty's realm. Ancient Rome had been highly patriarchal, with women having little or no power. Maybe Darius had adapted with the times, but he grew up back then. The earliest habits were often the hardest to break.

"Yup. Darius Benedictus, born in Lugdunum in about 200 AD. But don't let his soldier-boy history fool you. He was quite the romantic actor for Morty and Elle, back in the day. I've heard some recordings of what he used to perform. He's got a hell of a singing voice. I heard he even studied with Willian Shakespeare for a time."

"Sheesh. Merlin, Shakespeare. Who else did he know? Charlemagne? FDR? Ghandi?"

"Before the 1300s, maybe he knew a bunch of famous people, but afterwards it was just people he needed to help the Veil. The Black Death was a body-blow to the whole of Europe, and it took centuries to get over."

Petra nodded. "No kidding. I heard fades were responsible for the plague. I assume that's why Darius started the Veil. To keep it from happening again?"

Chuck gave her a sidelong look. "That wasn't included in the reading material I gave you."

"I heard two agents talking about it in the hall before I left," Petra invented quickly.

He seemed to be satisfied with her answer, and continued down the stairs. "After the plague started, and Morty struck back at the fades, Darius felt it was his responsibility to act as a go-between. He had a connection to Morty, and he could see and hear the fades. He was uniquely suited as an ambassador of sorts. With his help, both sides eventually came to terms. As long as the fades never commit genocide again, and never directly possess humans again, they're safe."

"But they can manipulate people, right? That's what Greed was doing with that gang back home. I saw one of Contentment's group taking a recently deceased guy for a tour as well."

Chuck nodded. "As long as our free will remains intact, yes. Ever since the internet came into use, it's become a lot easier for them to pull human strings, though. They've learned to affect the internet directly, without needing a computer or anything. If not for Morty's ultimatum, they could do a lot of damage. Overloading power grids, shutting down hospitals, launching nukes." He chuckled. "If humans weren't so self-destructive already, I'd be worried about the fades."

Petra gave him a concerned look, but he didn't seem depressed. Rage's pleas to her made a lot more sense now. He might be content manipulating online trolls and agitators for their anger, but if there was anything like a Hate faction out there, they could cause a lot of problems.

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Chapter 9

When they got to the briefing room near the geographical center of the building, Petra was surprised to see that it was pretty full. Somehow she'd thought this would be just her, Nick, Chuck, and perhaps a few others.

Some of them were armed, too. Petra could see Chuck's look of surprise at that, as one of the guards approached them. "Your key, sir?" He held out a hand to Chuck.

Chuck seemed even more taken aback. "Why?"

"Darius' orders. We're collecting all the keys. I don't know why."

Chuck handed it over reluctantly. The two of them spotted Nick on the other side of the room, and wove their way through the crowd towards him. "What's going on?" Petra asked him as soon as they were close enough.

Nick looked just as perturbed. "I don't know. Darius has been downstairs in Analysis with data collection teams all morning. Then he called for this meeting, which apparently includes the entire staff of Kiri Atoll. This place is going to get pretty full."

His prediction was already proving accurate. Petra noticed Doug among the growing crowd. He was the heavyset man who had been so anxious when Nick was first getting her acclimated to this place. He seemed to have noticed her too, because he turned red and looked down at the ground.

Nick and Chuck were throwing theories around, but it was pretty clear they were just speculating. On a whim, Petra went over to Doug. If possible, he seemed even more shy as she approached, with his eyes locked onto his feet. "You're Doug, right? I'm Petra. We met a few days ago, upstairs."

"Yes ma'am, I know," he mumbled. "Everyone knows you."

It seemed he was right. Everyone around her was giving her sidelong glances and whispering to each other. It wasn't rudeness exactly, but it wasn't far off. "Are you ok, Doug? You seem uncomfortable." She kept her voice low.

"I-" he paused, still looking down. "I just want to apologize, ma'am. When we first met, I didn't know who you were. I just assumed you were another trainee. I'm sorry for not showing you the proper respect."

What did that mean? Petra hadn't noticed any strict pecking order among the Veil operatives working here. Maybe Doug came from somewhere that prized open respect, such as Japan. His name didn't fit, but it was possible he'd just been raised there. "Look at me," she ordered, and waited until he hesitantly met her gaze. It was a good thing she'd graduated to contact lenses, because those ridiculous glasses would have undercut her point slightly. "You had no way of knowing, and I wasn't offended. Don't put any more thought into it, all right?"

He nodded right away, his eyes still darting downwards, but Petra held his gaze. Eventually, he offered a tentative smile. "Yes, ma'am."

This was good. If she was supposed to be in charge of these people someday, Petra would have to engender trust in them. They had to see her as a person, not as just this creature Morty had turned her into. Her two other Veil friends were looking at her: Nick with curiosity and Chuck with amusement. Petra merely nodded at them and stayed where she was.

There was a projector on the table in the middle of this briefing room, and it was displaying a map on the far wall. It showed Munich, and a good portion of southern Germany. There were four red dots displayed, one of them in the city itself. "What's going on there?" She asked Doug, trying to get him more comfortable with her.

He still looked a bit tentative, but launched into an explanation anyway. "For a few months now, we've been having trouble in and around Munich. That bottom dot on the map was a data farm operated by the Veil. It was firebombed about six weeks ago. No one was killed, but we lost years of data we'd been collecting on fades operating in the area." He pointed to the dot which was farthest to the west. "That was a safe house for Veil agents. Ten days ago, it was compromised. We got word through some of our fade sources that Greed had been told where it was. He sent some of his goons in there, but we'd already gotten everyone out. It was a close thing, though." Doug sighed. "I don't know what the other two dots are. Other incidents, I guess, that haven't been shared with the rank-and-file."

Petra looked at the map with new concerns. She had assumed the Veil was the only human organization that knew about the fades, but in retrospect that was a foolish notion. If fades like Greed were influencing criminal organizations worldwide, it stood to reason that there were other humans in the know. "Who's doing all this? Some kind of rival to the Veil?"

"That's the current theory," Doug confirmed. "I think it started in Lisbon, four months ago. You heard about the explosion there?" Petra nodded. "We lost four of our best people there. Chuck was there too. He barely made it out alive. If you ask me, it was the same people. We don't know who they are, or who's in charge, but I've heard rumors they're also reaching out to the Fades. Contentment is still with us, but if these guys can influence fades like Contempt, or Excitement, or Greed.." He trailed off ominously.

Petra glanced at Chuck again. None of her reading material had included recent events. She'd learned more about the incident in Lisbon from Didi than she had from her friends here. That scar on the side of Chuck's head- had he gotten that in Lisbon? It looked fresh enough.

She didn't have time for further speculation, though. Darius had arrived, and was at the door talking to the guard from earlier. "Did you get them all?"

The guard nodded. "Yes, sir. All twenty-eight keys are accounted for."

"Good. Keep a close watch on them." Darius stepped up to the front of the room. "Good morning everyone. I won't keep you longer than necessary- I know how busy you all are. However, there have been developments on the situation in southern Germany."

He looked up at the map. "As you know, we have very little information on this group, and we've been trying to identify them as a first step. Yesterday, Veil agents conducted a raid on a facility we believed to be one of their staging grounds inside Munich. Just as our people moved in, a massive fog cloud appeared over the building and the surrounding blocks. The targets in the building used that cover to escape. We didn't even catch sight of them."

The assembled group gave a murmur at that. Doug gave her a concerned look as Darius went on. "The fog dissipated almost immediately. We swept the whole area, and found no devices or water sources that could have caused it. The Isar river is over six kilometers away from that site, and the local weather reports predicted clear skies for at least two days." He looked over at Chuck, expectantly.

Virtually the entire room had done the same. "What is he talking about?" Petra asked Doug in a whisper.

"Magic," Doug said just as quietly. "The same stuff Chuck and the other magicians use to make things like the keys. Sometimes it can be used to affect the weather."

"I don't understand," Chuck said, clearly agitated. "The Covens would never risk breaking the Pact like that. They'd never use their powers publicly, either. It would risk exposure to the rest of the world. Whoever did this wasn't working for them."

Petra had read about the Covens. Apparently, magic-users worldwide gathered into close-knit groups that were akin to the wiccan faith. There were several hundred groups spread across the globe, but they mostly kept to themselves. Like the Veil, these groups were concerned about the truth getting out, and them being harassed and killed for their abilities. Chuck and his possible ancestor Merlin had been part of a Coven that had eventually joined the Veil. The Pact had been a simple agreement between Merlin's descendants and Darius: as long as the Veil never tried to figure magic out for themselves, the Covens would never use their magic against the Veil. That agreement had held for centuries now.

Darius nodded in response to Chuck's assurances. "Local informants told us that the group's leader was in the building. Nearby security cameras should have seen him despite the fog, but the footage was corrupted in real-time."

That caused another stir. Petra gave Doug a confused look, and he leaned in. "Only a fade can do that in real-time. Human hackers would have to take the camera offline, or corrupt the data after the fact."

"Fortunately, one of Contentment's people was in the area at the time. She was able to reconstruct some of the images." Darius pressed a remote control, and the projector switched from the map to a photo. He kept going, and the photos showed four people running out of a building and down an alley. He paused on the fifth one, and a number of people in the room gasped.

The last shot showed one of their faces- presumably this leader Darius had mentioned. Petra didn't recognize the man, but a bunch of others apparently did. "That's Colin Larson!" Doug said, not really to her anymore, as he'd said it loud enough for the room to hear. He wasn't the only one to make that exclamation, either. Low voices whispered across the room.

"He's a magician," Doug lowered his voice and clarified for Petra's sake. "Chuck trained him. He was Chuck's right-hand-man until.. four months ago."

"As far as we knew, Larson was killed in Lisbon four months ago, along with Hewell, Ortiz and Chandler," Darius continued evenly. "We never found any remains. If they did survive and started this rival organization in Germany, Colin would know everything about our security, and our procedures. It would explain how this group has been able to outmaneuver us so easily thus far."

"Sir," Chuck spoke up, and the room fell silent immediately. "The man I knew would never break the Pact, or betray the Veil in any way! I swear to you that Colin Larson is dead. *That person*," he jabbed a finger in the direction of the photo, "is an imposter!"

Darius stared at him evenly for a few seconds, before speaking. "I've already reached out to the Covens, but haven't heard back from them yet. From what you've told me, there is no magic that allows people to take on the appearance of others, but that man may have been wearing a detailed disguise. Have you heard of any magic that allows you to call up fog when you need it?"

"Well, yes."

"As far as you know, does Mr. Larson know how to alter the weather?"

"He did." Chuck's tone was starting to get angry. "But he's dead."

"Did you teach him how to make transport keys, too?" Darius glanced over at the guard carrying all the keys.

The crowd had gone, if anything, even quieter. Chuck looked pale. "I didn't teach him that.. but he may have figured it out on his own, like I did."

Noises of dismay erupted from multiple people. "Then they could be anywhere!" One man objected, looking at the door. "They could walk in and out of here without a trace!"

Darius raised a hand to quiet them, but the noise continued. "We trusted you magicians!" A woman from the far side of the room said. "My partner nearly died when that data farm was bombed!"

"That's enough!" Darius called out loudly, and the voices subsided. "We have enough external problems already- I will not have us turning on each other!" He took a deep breath. "Chuck Saunders has been a Veil agent for eight years. He says he has no knowledge of this, and I believe him. Magicians have worked as a part of the Veil for centuries, and I trust them. However, it seems clear that the Pact has been broken by at least one of the Covens. Given the evidence, I have no choice but to confine all Veil magicians to this base until we can get to the bottom of this."

During this exchange, a group of people had clustered behind Chuck- the other magicians, Petra assumed. There were only eight of them. They didn't look happy at Darius' pronouncement, but Chuck reached out to them encouragingly. "We understand," he said loudly, to the whole room. "And we will cooperate. Hopefully when we prove that this guy isn't who he looks like, everyone here will realize we're all on the same side."

At Darius' urging the guards dispersed the crowd, sending them on their way back into the facility. The nine magicians stayed in the room, under guard, and Darius took the bag of keys. It was clear now that he'd taken them to keep anyone from running during this meeting. The head of security, Andrea Kipping from her badge, whispered something to Darius, and he nodded. "Proceed as we discussed, Andy. I want things underway when I get back."

"Keep the magicians here for the time being," he ordered the guards. "I'm taking Nick and Petra to Vancouver to meet with Contentment. If we're lucky, she'll have information we can use to clear all this up," he added with a sympathetic look to Chuck.

Chuck's features were angry and set, but he nodded stiffly.

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The Veil's Vancouver 'office' wasn't what Petra had expected. It was a coffee shop. At this time in the morning it was packed, with at least forty people in three different lines. Darius led the way past them, into one of the back rooms. He pulled out a small mirror as they moved. It was the Veil's alternative to cellphones, because they worked on the island despite the repeated EM pulses.

This was yet another device that Chuck and the other magicians had created. Petra still couldn't believe that he was, effectively, under house arrest! She didn't know him that well, but had enjoyed his company, and liked to think she was a good judge of character. While they waited for Contentment, Darius moved to one side of the back room, chatting with other agents over the mirror. Like the keys, it allowed him to contact people based on his thoughts.

"Was locking them up like that really necessary?" Petra insisted quietly to Nick. "Taking the keys was one thing, but we wouldn't even *have* those keys without Chuck and his friends!"

"Darius had no choice," Nick responded. His voice was calm, but his expression was troubled like hers. "Contentment knows what was on that picture, and that Colin worked for the Veil. She'd feel compelled to share that information with the other factions. Darius believes that Chuck is innocent, but he still has to show the fades that we take this seriously. We can't have even the appearance of favoritism."

"But why is Chuck being blamed for this at all? I know he trained this Colin guy, but he's been on Kiri Atoll with you, or training with me, for the past few months. He hasn't been in Germany or anywhere near it!"

"It's more than that," Nick glanced at Darius for a moment. "Chuck wasn't far from the warehouse in Lisbon when it exploded. He was knocked unconscious- that's where he got that scar on his face, by the way. He says he doesn't remember anything that happened just before the explosion, and then he woke up a few minutes later. But then, he also said Colin died there."

"You don't believe him?" Petra didn't like where this was going. Chuck and Nick had both trained her, and had been kind and reliable while doing so. They had different methods, but she considered both of them to be friends.

Nick was very still for a moment. "Chuck and Colin were very close. He took Colin's 'death' very hard. If those four men did survive, and went rogue, Chuck would have a reason to keep it secret."

"A reason that was more important than the Veil itself? A reason so important he just let himself get arrested with no direct evidence against him?"

He nodded. "It's possible. Colin was Chuck's prize pupil- his most gifted trainee. They worked together closely for more than two years. It might have been more than that; I'm not sure."

Petra took a moment to parse that last sentence. "They were together?"

"I don't know," Nick repeated. "Chuck never talks to me about that sort of stuff. If so, they didn't have anything to hide, not from us. Despite how old our leader is, the Veil doesn't hold onto old prejudices. But Colin is from England, and has a long military background. Both of those organizations have pretty old-fashioned views." He sighed. "I want to believe Chuck, but I don't have that luxury. I'm Darius' second-in-command, and soon I'll be yours. Like him, I can't afford to show any favoritism. We just have to follow the evidence, wherever it leads."

A week ago, Petra might have found all of this overwhelming. She'd just been a photographer, with a small life and very little influence over the world. This kind of dilemma and suspicion should have scared her, but Petra was realizing that it didn't. Maybe she'd been exposed to so many terrifying things by now that normal conflict wasn't that big a deal. She stayed with Nick, talking through Colin's actions and motivations until Contentment finally showed up.

Darius and Petra both turned towards the light switch when the yellowish cloud started pouring out of it. Nick grabbed for his sunglasses so he could see as well. "Sorry I'm late," Contentment said as soon as she was out of the wall. "Contempt had a few choice things to say and wanted to make sure I heard them all."

"Thank you for meeting with us so quickly," Darius moved towards the fade. "I assume you've told the other fade leaders about Colin Larson?"

She nodded. "They took the news well, but there were some.. concerns." She hesitated for a moment, and Petra could tell that it was a massive understatement. "However this was not the first time my siblings have heard of this man. He has met with several of them in secret over the past few weeks."

Darius and Nick shared a confused glance. "This is the first I'm hearing of it."

"It was a surprise to me as well," Contentment admitted. "Apparently Colin has been claiming that the Veil is unreliable, and fracturing from within. He offered his own services in your place, saying that he will happily use magic to our benefit, which is something the Veil would never do."

"I can assure you, he's lying about the Veil," Darius said firmly. "We remain as strong and steadfast as ever in our determination to keep the peace between your people and humanity."

"This man is one of yours, though," Contentment pointed out. "Or he was anyway. That alone lends some credence to his claims."

Nick spoke up from the side. "We're not convinced he is the real Colin Larson. He could be an imposter."

"If so, I suggest you find out the truth quickly. Many of my siblings don't have the same patience that I do," Contentment warned him, and then bowed to Darius. "Until we meet again." She went amorphous again, and seeped back into the light switch.

She was probably right, Petra reflected bitterly. She had sounded rattled, and if someone named Contentment could be put on edge, there was no telling how upset the others might be.

Nick reached out to the bag on the table, and retrieved one of the transport keys. "I'll get out to Munich right away and help the team canvas the area. The fades might be able to scramble security cameras, but they couldn't do the same to people. If there are any witnesses, I'll find them."

"No you won't," Darius cut in. His voice was stone-cold. "I can't have you anywhere near this investigation, Nick. You and Chuck have been friends for a long time, and people know it. I'll handle it personally. That should reassure some of the fades at least."

"You don't think I can stay objective with what I find?" Like Chuck before, there were traces of anger in Nick's voice.

"I don't want to put you in that position. For now, your responsibilities are training Petra, maintaining the Atoll, and keeping in contact with the fades if I'm unavailable. Understood?"

Nick's expression went blank, and he nodded curtly. "Understood."

Darius gave him a faint smile, as if realizing he never should have doubted Nick's dedication. He nodded at both of them, and then used a key on the backroom door, disappearing from sight.

Petra let the silence linger for a bit. "Could you send me home for now?" She asked softly. "My training can wait until tonight or tomorrow, and I have to get to work soon anyway. Besides, you have a few things to take care of yourself."

He nodded, obviously a little distracted, and opened the door for her. "I'll.. keep you updated on Chuck's situation."

"Thanks."

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Chapter 10

Didi dropped by the next morning, with several boxes full of paper. Petra helped her haul the boxes, one by one, into her small apartment. Once they were situated, Petra put some coffee on for later.

"What makes you think Darius is a Roman? Or was, I should say," Didi asked as she carefully unpacked them in the living room.

Petra stifled a yawn. This was pretty early for her, though apparently not for Didi. "His name originated in Roman times, didn't it? You've tracked him back to the 1800s, but you haven't found any record of his birth yet. For all we know, he dates back to the origin of his name. For all we know, he *is* the origin of his name!"

Didi looked troubled. "Good point."

They got to work on the documents she'd brought, spreading them out through the living room. Before long Petra's place was unrecognizable. Birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, census surveys, and older forms were littered everywhere. "Are you sure we can get a lead on Darius by looking up your ancestors?"

"No," Petra admitted, "but until your friends catch sight of him somewhere else, I don't have any other ideas. Darius spent almost ten years with my father's family, for some reason. Your own research suggests he was a bit of a lone wolf before that, so there must be something special about the Hildebrands. Besides, I think it's more than just a coincidence that he set up shop here in Vancouver, of all the places in the world. I'm guessing it's because I live here."

Didi shrugged. "Well, let's see what we can dig up."

Once again Petra marveled at Didi's resourcefulness. The internet could cover recent family history, but somehow she'd gotten hold of- or printed out- records from before Petra's family had moved here from France! Petra regretted keeping Darius' true location and nature from her friend, but at least this way she could figure out *why* he was so interested in Petra's family. He was still stonewalling her on those kinds of questions, and given the recent mess with Chuck and the magicians, she didn't exactly want to press him for details.

Over the next few hours they pored over birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, census surveys, and older forms. Apparently Didi could read French, German, Italian and Latin, which some of the oldest documents were written in. At first they made very little progress, because even after a few generations the number of ancestors started getting unmanageable. Didi decided to focus on firstborn children after that.

Petra was an only child, as was her father. Her grandfather was the oldest of three, and his mother was the oldest of two. So on and so forth, back through the ages. Finally, they managed to track Petra's ancestry back to the French 1600s, to a minor noble in Provence named Luc Caillat.

Unfortunately there was no record of Caillat's parentage. "I think we've gone as far as we can go," Didi concluded, and Petra was forced to agree. "If Darius did know Caillat, there's no way of verifying it. Frankly, we were lucky to get as far as we did. I just wish I knew where Darius is right now, so we could just ask him!"

*Try Munich,* Petra thought bitterly. "From what I've read, there wasn't much migration happening into and out of France from before that point. It's likely my ancestors were from Gaul at least. The closest major city at the time was Lyons, or Lugdunum as it was called back then. Could there be any record from that area during Roman times?"

Petra was speculating madly, but Didi had no way of knowing that. This seemed like the best way to connect her search to Lugdunum, where Petra knew Darius had been born.

The older woman looked at her thoughtfully. "Maybe. I'll put out some feelers to French historians in the area." She glanced up at the clock. "I should head home soon. My home internet is down, and I need to be there when the service people drop by to fix it."

"I need to go too," Petra responded, surprised. She remembered making sandwiches for them as she worked, but the amount of time that had passed was startling. She'd eaten alongside Didi for appearance's sake, but without a body clock it was pretty easy to lose track of time now. Someone from the Veil would be dropping by soon to bring her in for training. "Let me help you pack all this up first, though."

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The last time Petra had come to the Veil, she'd stepped through a door just around the corner from their control room. This time the door was in the middle of an unknown room, and there were half a dozen armed guards in front of her, and as she looked, twice as many behind!

Doug was there, and he called out for them to let her through. Just as he did, the usual blast of EMP energy passed through her, but this time from above. This room must be much further down than she'd been before.

He looked haggard and worn. Petra approached him cautiously, after closing the door behind her. "Hey. Are you all right?"

He glanced downwards out of habit, and then caught himself and looked her in the eye. "Not really. It's been a rough couple of days." He gestured towards the doorway out of the room. "See for yourself."

The door was missing. It looked like the hinges had been removed, and recently. Once they were in the adjoining hallway, Petra could see that every other door in the area was gone as well. "I thought Colin didn't have any transport keys," Petra asked, disturbed. "Is all of this really necessary?"

"Just because he hasn't used them yet doesn't mean he can't make any," Doug said sadly. "Darius isn't taking any chances with our safety. Chuck says hi, by the way."

Petra had been wondering about him and the other magicians. "How is he doing?"

"I think he's ok, but that's just a guess. You should ask him yourself- he and the others are in temporary barracks two levels above us. I bet seeing you would be good for him."

She wanted to do just that, but she had another appointment. "Nick's expecting me. I don't want to keep him waiting."

Doug shook his head. "He's meditating right now. You can be a few minutes late and I doubt he'll care. Just go upstairs for a bit. I'll be right here with a key when you want to go to Nick."

The floors and counters in Chuck's temporary home looked much like Petra's apartment had this morning. Every surface was covered with papers and lined script, all in Chuck's handwriting. He was actually laboring on one, in what looked like the eye of a paper-storm, when Petra cleared her throat. "Hey."

He looked up, and his eyes brightened. "Hey! How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, for the most part," Petra stepped inside and to the right of the door so she could close it. This was pretty much the only place where she could stand without disturbing the paper maelstrom. "Just juggling work and training." *And Didi,* she added silently.

Chuck nodded. "Sorry about the mess. Let me clear the way for you."

He stood up precariously, but Petra held out a hand. "Don't worry about it. I have to get going soon anyway. I just wanted to check in on you."

"Thanks." His face was deadpan, a typical male show of bravado, but at least his voice sounded sincere. "All nine of us are restricted to the island, but we can move around mostly freely while we're here. They won't let us near the door downstairs, though." He gave a frustrated grunt. "Not that I can blame them. I've been working on a magical solution to this whole Colin imposter situation, but so far without luck."

Petra took in her surroundings with some reverence. It was all Greek to her, but she tried to put herself in Chuck's shoes. "That's what all this is about?" She gestured to the multitude of papers.

He nodded. "Assuming that fog in Munich was actually the imposter using magic, I may be able to track him the next time he uses it. It's about the most I can do while I'm stuck here- Darius forbade me from using a key to go to the site itself."

"I'm sorry," Petra put in softly. She hesitated, and then glanced at the walls and ceilings. She couldn't see any cameras, but that didn't mean there weren't any. "Can we.. talk openly here?"

Chuck looked startled, and then smiled. "Yeah. The REMP makes video surveillance here a real pain. These barracks are clean." He paused. "Let me guess. You're going to ask me if I really am the traitor a bunch of those people out there think I am."

"Not at all. I just wanted to say I'm sorry your friend was killed. I'm just starting to realize how close you all are, here at the Veil. This is more than a peacekeeping agency- it's almost a family."

He looked uncomfortable, but nodded. "I still don't know why it happened like that," he said slowly. "Colin and I were sent with Ortiz, Hewell and Chandler to keep track of one of Greed's gangs in Lisbon. It was simple surveillance at first. We followed a few of them to that warehouse, where they met with another gang. I thought it was a simple drug exchange at first, but then everybody started shooting! I ordered us all out of the building- but then I must have blacked out or something.

"The next thing I remember was waking up on the street a few hundred feet away from the warehouse. Or what was left of it." He touched the scar on the side of his head. "Memory loss is a common side effect of concussions, but that was months ago. I should have remembered something by now! Anything to help figure this imposter out!"

Petra couldn't sympathize much. She actually wished she could forget what Greed had done to her. "I know you worked with the other three before, but you trained Colin personally, right? Were you two close?"

Chuck glanced at her wryly. "You mean were we involved? No. I was interested, but he made it clear he wasn't. I think he just wasn't ready to admit it yet, to himself or to anyone else. I kept things professional after that, and we developed a good friendship at least."

Petra wanted to ask him if he was sure this guy wasn't Colin, but it seemed like stepping over the line. Maybe Chuck wasn't ready to admit it to himself yet either. "Well, whoever is sullying your friend's good name, we'll find him eventually. Darius is leaving no stone unturned, and Contentment will help on the fade end of things."

It was a platitude, but a comforting one. She chatted with him about her work and family for a bit longer. Apparently he was from Atlanta, originally, but had gone to school in Liverpool. That explained why his accent was unusual. At least he looked a bit more cheery when she was ready to leave.

The armed guards in the room downstairs seemed much more interested in people who were incoming, but they took careful aim as Doug inserted the key and opened the door. Hot, humid air blasted in through the door: much more so than the usual environment on Kiri Atoll. The roar of a waterfall also inundated the room. Giving Doug an encouraging glance, Petra went through.

The other side was inside a forest, she thought at first. The door was standing in the open, on what looked like an island in the middle of a river. Both sides of the river were dotted with trees, but a closer look revealed that they didn't extend very far away. They were clustered on the shore or near to it.

The door closed behind her, and Petra moved to the other side of it. There, Nick sat on a large slab of rock overlooking the river. Ahead of him was the waterfall, which was almost deafening at this distance. Hundreds of meters across, and at least a hundred meters tall, the curtain of descending water gave rise to huge clouds of mist and fog. If it weren't for the steady wind coming from the left, Petra doubted she'd be able to see anything at all.

It was doubtful he'd hear anything quieter than a shout, so Petra moved up and put a hand on his shoulder. He started at first, and then looked up at her. Nodding, he stood and led the way to the left. A makeshift stone bridge was spanning this side of the river, and as soon as they crossed it the noise became much less intense. The trees probably acted as a dampener.

"Welcome to my meditation area," Nick said after a few moments. "Can you guess where we are?"

That was a good challenge, actually. The keys could take her anywhere in the world. It felt tropical, but that could just be the humidity from the nearby falls. There wasn't much grassland past the trees. It was mostly just dirt and rock, at least in one direction. The air was warm, as the sun was still arcing its way down towards the horizon.

The sun. It had been less than an hour since she'd been home. Based on its position in the sky, and the time of day.. it could at least give her a time zone. "Africa? West Africa I'd guess."

Nick's eyebrows rose. "Very good. This is the Gorgol river in Mauritania. Most people guess Central America their first time out."

"Oh, so you bring a lot of women here, do you?" Petra joked, and he smiled slightly.

"No, I was just trying to get centered," he pulled out a key. "We're actually headed to Colorado next."

"Aren't you worried about some Mauritanian local seeing this door here, or you and me passing through it and vanishing?"

Nick shook his head. "The tribes here are nomadic. We won't see any locals coming back into this area for another few months at least. Actually we won't see them at all. Darius lets me set this door up here every year, but he wants us to avoid contact with people living in these areas. It would invite too many questions. So when their migration season ends and they start coming back this way, we pack up the door and ignore this place for the rest of the year."

"Sounds reasonable."

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The door they exited was actually onto a tarmac. From the signs, it was a small airfield in Colorado Springs. Petra could see more than a dozen airplanes, ranging from two ultralights on one side, to four multi-engine twelve-seaters on the other. One of those was actually revving up, with a pilot and another passenger visible from their location.

Nick walked towards them purposefully, and Petra hurried to keep up. Were they going somewhere without any doors? Petra had only flown twice before during a school trip to Ontario, and it had terrified her. She couldn't feel the heart-pounding sense of fear from before, but the emotion was still there.

The pilot shook Nick's hand briefly, exchanging words with him that were drowned out by the engine, and then gestured to the plane's side door. Petra reluctantly followed the rest as they went inside. As it turned out, the passenger was actually a copilot. It was just her and Nick in the back. The cockpit was closed off from the rest of the plane, and most of the seats had been removed. With a sinking feeling, Petra realized this plane had been outfitted for skydiving.

Nick must have seen the growing concern on her face. "It's fine," he assured her. "I've been doing this since I was twelve. It's a piece of cake. Darius taught me, actually. He's been doing this since.. they invented parachutes."

Darius was a skydiver? That seemed a bit out of place for someone as reserved as him. Was this a sort of therapy for him? Nodding nervously, Petra strapped in as the plane started moving. Nick smiled as they moved onto the runway and started picking up speed, his worries forgotten for a time.

It was a few minutes between takeoff and cruising altitude, which couldn't have been very high up. Nick got up and checked the cockpit door. Then he called out. "You're clear."

Petra wasn't sure what he meant by that, until he pulled out a pair of sunglasses and put them on. At the same time an orange cloud began spilling out of the side of the plane into the cabin. It took a mostly human shape just like the other fades, but for some reason it kept one appendage on the plane wall.

"Petra, this is Thrill," Nick introduced them, moving back over.

"It is good to see you again, Mr. Rukavina. And to meet you, Miss Hildebrand," the fade said stately, belying his name. The voice was a tenor with a pleasant tone. "Excitement wanted to be here, but was held up working with Contentment. He sent me in his stead."

"A pleasure," Petra responded, nodding in his direction. "If I can ask, how are you able to stay on this plane? Fades have no mass, so gravity can't really affect you. This plane is going at least a hundred kph, so why weren't you left behind on the runway?" She paused. "Come to think of it, how come fades aren't left behind as the earth spins its way through space?"

Thrill chuckled. The sound was translated through Nick's phone, and he raised his eyebrows. "I'm connected to the plane's electrical system," the fade explained. "Think of it like an airplane seat, keeping me anchored to the rest of the plane. If I were to let go, I really would be whisked right out the back of this thing. The rest of us are connected to the *planet*'s magnetic field, so we move along with it. Good questions, though. Contentment said you were inquisitive."

She didn't have much choice in that, Petra reflected sourly. She was playing catch-up on thousands of years of history here! "I take it you ride along on skydiving trips all the time?"

The orange eye-lights moved to examine the sky outside. "Oh yes, we all do. The combination of fear and exhilaration is quite seductive to us."

"Here, let's get you geared up," Nick said, ushering her further to the back of the plane. One of Thrill's eye-lights lifted above the other, but he stayed put.

"Nick, I'm not sure this is such a good idea," Petra said urgently, but quietly. "I don't have any skydiving experience. I don't even like roller-coasters!"

"It's easy," he repeated from before, but then his voice became a little more serious. "And it's required of you. Each of the factions needs to get to know you, and in an environment comfortable to them. Excitement wanted to start you out with bullfighting, but I talked him out of that. Skydiving is a good intro to the life of an adrenaline junkie, and like it or not, that's what these fades are."

"But my body doesn't even use adrenaline anymore. What's the point?"

"You can still feel the emotion," Nick pointed out. "That's the important thing to them."

It was a fair argument, Petra realized as he helped her with the parachute backpack. "This is a starter pack," he said once she was situated. "It has a sensor that registers air pressure changes. Fifty seconds after you jump out, it will give you an audio warning and then automatically deploy. If it doesn't for whatever reason, just pull this tab," he pointed to the orange handle on the left side of her chest, "to open it manually. After that it's smooth sailing and wonderful views all the way down."

"Wait, shouldn't I be getting some kind of specialized training for this? You know- on the ground?"

Nick shook his head. "We have about twenty minutes in the air for me to show you how to set down safely, but Excitement insisted you go up without the usual training. It can be risky, but it definitely improves the experience. He insisted the same thing for me when I was twelve. Though at that age I didn't even know fades existed. Back then, Darius was just a friend showing a kid how to fly."

Petra didn't like that answer, but she was much harder to injure now than before. "I assume that means you're jumping with me?"

In answer, he pulled a much more elaborate backpack from the storage compartment and put it on. "This is a custom model I had specially built. It has multiple canopy options, a redesigned RSL, and I designed the backup unit myself." He paused. "You probably shouldn't ask how much it cost."

"Don't worry, I wasn't going to," Petra said wryly. Boys and their toys.

They spent the rest of the trip to the drop zone familiarizing her with good ways to set down. Theoretically, it seemed pretty easy. She had trained in basic CPR as part of her job requirements, and that had seemed easy as well: until there was an actual health emergency. Petra hadn't frozen, exactly, but she hadn't been a hundred percent either. Hopefully she'd make a better showing here.

A few minutes later the moment was nearly on them. Thrill gave her a passable imitation of a thumbs-up, Petra moved to the now-open side door, took a deep breath, and jumped.

The roaring wind drowned out everything at first, but Petra got used to it quickly. She spun around several times in a three-sixty turn, before spreading her arms and legs properly to level out, like Nick had shown her. From behind, she could hear a *whoop* of joy as he followed her down.

After a moment Petra realized she hadn't been counting down! She had no idea how much time was left on her starter pack's release. It didn't matter much because the process was automatic, but it still bothered her.

Nick had been right; the view was incredible. She could see the mountains rising off to the south: Pike's Peak, if Nick was right, and vast tracts of land. Colorado Springs was off to the southwest, assuming she was looking in the right place. Her goggles were keeping her eyes clear, or she would have been concerned about her special contacts.

Then she heard a repeated beeping noise from her pack, and braced for sudden deceleration. Off to her right, Nick threw his chute, and disappeared above her. When the beeping stopped, her backpack disconnected from her entirely! It floated off to the right, getting her spinning again!

Petra yelled frantically, trying to regain her previous stability. She yanked at the manual release, but it wasn't connected to anything! The harness was all she had left.

At this altitude, she wouldn't have long before the ground gave her a violent greeting. Petra finally leveled out, just in time for something heavy to strike her from behind! It felt like she'd been hit by a train at first, but then she realized it was Nick. He efficiently wrapped a line around her waist and chest, and then gripped her firmly before reaching for his own manual release. The freefall ended with a gut-wrenching pull downwards, but Nick wasn't fazed. He held onto her with both hands as they made a rough, but successful, landing.

Petra felt trembling all over, as she realized what had just almost happened. Even up there in the air, it hadn't seemed quite real, *as it had happened*! It took her a few more moments to realize that it wasn't actually her body shaking. It was Nick.

He let go of her slowly, and took a shuddering breath. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." She should be terrified, but wasn't. What a difference this change to her body had made! "Are you?"

He nodded, looking pale. They both looked up at the sky, but the plane was small and had already gone out of sight. His face twitching, Nick moved around her and examined the harness she was wearing. "There are multiple safeties on parachutes like yours. They make it almost impossible for the parachute to get stuck, unless it's tampered with. But detaching the chute entirely? This was no accident."

That felt much more real. Ever since Rage had said she was a threat to fade existence, Petra had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Literally, in this case. "Who had access to that chute, and knew I'd be the one to use it? Thrill, obviously, but he couldn't have sabotaged it himself. Who else could have done it?"

Nick didn't answer for a few seconds. The paleness in his face had gone, replaced with anger. "I don't know, but it will be a genuine pleasure finding out."

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Chapter 11

There were no doors in the open field where they landed, but Nick used a mirror to contact the Veil. It was only a few minutes before two Veil agents showed up on motorcycles, with two spare helmets for them. Petra was confused at first, but quickly realized that bikes were about the only fast vehicle that could fit through a normal door. She held on for dear life as her driver and Nick's sped back towards the door.

The plane landed safely back at the Colorado Springs airstrip, but Nick didn't want to go out there, or to let Petra. How could they explain how the two of them had beaten the plane back here? His people investigated though, finding no sign of Thrill or any other fades on board. "It was a long shot anyway," Nick had said, looking dejected.

Fortunately they had other options, which they exercised over the next two days. Nick and Petra met with Excitement himself briefly, and he had claimed ignorance of the events themselves, much less who was responsible. Thankfully Veil agents had been tracking his group for a long time now, and they knew Thrill's schedule. So by the end of the second day they were near a cliff in southern China, waiting for him to show up.

"I still don't get it," Petra said thoughtfully. Even with her condition, the skydiving details were still sharp and clear in her mind. "You said I can't be killed like this. Even if someone put a bullet through my heart, it wouldn't matter because I don't actually need blood anymore. What was Thrill hoping to gain by doing this? If it was really him, that is."

Nick shook his head. "I don't think it was your death they wanted so much as your removal. As long as you're not the immortal anymore, they probably don't care what happens to you. It's true your vital organs are a lot less vital now, but they also don't grow back. They want to force you to choose another immortal the same way Darius chose you. If you won't cooperate, then they have to destroy your body completely. I don't know if smashing into the ground at terminal velocity would do that, but they obviously thought it would."

"Sheesh," Petra looked up at the sky nervously. Rage's threats were starting to sound a lot more plausible now. As disturbed as she was though, Nick looked even more so. "Are you all right?"

"Everything is changing," he said in frustration. "First there was the Lisbon disaster, and then you showed up. Then we found out Colin went rogue, and Chuck might be behind it. And now an assassination attempt? I'm good at dealing with unexpected situations, but these are unprecedented! The Veil has always been able to deal with problems peacefully and quietly. I was proud to be a part of that- to help keep the peace. Now, I just feel.. lost. Up is down, and I have no control over where I'm going." He paused. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring back any trauma from the skydiving thing."

She waved his apology aside. "There's nothing to bring back. Sure it was unforgettable, but hardly scarring. And I get it. Stuff like this has never happened before, in either of our lifetimes. Everyone's nervous right now: you, me, the fades, the Veil agents; I bet even Darius is a bit uneasy. We just have to take it slow- one problem at a time. When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I find it helps to focus on the little things. The clay sculptures I made as a kid, or my favorite photos at home. Things that bring me joy."

Nick chuckled briefly. "In that case, I miss my chute."

Petra looked at him curiously, and he pointed a finger upwards. "It's the one I ditched in midair so I could come after you and use the backup chute. It sounds silly, but it meant a lot to me. I painted it myself."

"It's gotta be in that field in Colorado, right? You can just go back and look for it."

"No, it was fully deployed," Nick said glumly. "It could have blown anywhere. Even if I had the time to go looking for it, I wouldn't know where to start."

"Could Chuck find it? I bet there's some magic way to track down lost items."

Petra regretted it as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Nick still wasn't convinced Chuck was innocent. Sure enough, he grimaced at the thought. "He's hard at work tracking Colin, or saying he is. No, I'll just get a new one for my next jump. I'll paint it later."

Petra started to offer her help, but Nick's posture changed, becoming more alert. He leaned forward a bit. "Here we go."

There was a small shack near the top of this cliff, connected to the rest of China's power grid by a single power line. Petra could see a familiar orange figure squeezing its way out of the shack's external outlet. According to Veil intelligence, this was where Thrill came regularly, just before a squad of Chinese base-jumpers showed up at the shack. Nick had already arranged for their activity to be delayed, and apparently Thrill didn't know that yet. From behind the rock outcropping, Nick reached down and touched the mirror lying on the ground. The Veil head of security's face appeared on it, and he nodded to her.

Andrea confidently stepped out from behind the cabin and swiped a.. blade of some kind through the forming ball of energy. Its edge cut evenly and cleanly through the uneven sphere, separating about a fifth of it from the rest. Thrill kept pouring out of the electrical outlet, but when he was done he just floated there. Petra heard a choked gasp, but from the distance she couldn't be sure if it was Thrill or someone else making the noise.

Nick rose, a smile forming on his face. "Good work, Andy."

She nodded at him appreciatively, and stepped aside as he approached. Nick stopped in front of the fade, eying him critically. "You're a creature of habit, Thrill. Saved us the trouble of tracking you down and ambushing you in a populated area. I would thank you for making it easy on us, if you hadn't tried to *kill one of my friends* first!"

Petra followed him at a distance, unsure of what else Thrill might have up his proverbial sleeves. She spared a look at the sword-ish thing in Andy's hand. It had a short, serrated edge, and was attached to a small but powerful-looking battery. Seeing her interest, Andy raised it and turned it on. "We just call it the Cutter," she explained. "We've only used it once or twice before in the field. It immobilizes fades, assuming you can catch one dumb enough to be hit by it," she added with an insulting look at Thrill. "Fades are only vulnerable when they're transferring energy, like when they're leaving a power conduit."

An electrical charge ran down the edge, insulated from Andy's hand by the rubber hilt. It looked terrifying to Petra, but she had to admit it was effective. Thrill was definitely groaning at the sight of it.

"What's wrong with him?" She asked, refocusing on the fade. "Why doesn't he just pull himself together and leave?"

"He can't," Nick said with dark amusement. "Fades need a certain amount of energy to change their shape or move around. If even a part of him is separated from the rest, he's utterly immobile and helpless without a fresh infusion of energy. And he'll stay that way," Nick took the sword from Andy and poked it into Thrill several times, "until he tells us what we need to know."

He glanced back at Petra through the sunglasses. "He can't connect to my phone in this state, so I won't be able to hear him. You'll have to translate."

Petra nodded, feeling sick. It must have been a mental thing, at what she was witnessing. From her studies, she knew that Fades couldn't feel pain. They didn't have any nerves or sensory bundles. However this did feel dangerously close to torture, and she did have an objection to that.

"So, what'll it be, Thrill?" Nick went on, circling the damaged creature. He pulled a small box from his pocket and opened it. "This is a rare earth magnet. We've found it repels fades. We don't have enough of it to build an effective barrier, but a few of us have boxes like this out in the field. If I put it next to your severed.. part, it'll push it towards you. You'll have enough energy to put yourself back together and escape. Or I could just leave you like this. Eventually your energy will drain away and you'll die."

There was nothing an ageless being would fear more than death, Petra realized. Thrill's groans faded, but he spoke up after a moment. "What do you want to know? I'll tell you anything! Why are you doing this?"

Petra shook her head. "He says he'll tell us anything, and he's claiming ignorance."

Nick paused for a moment, looking him over. "You invited us onto that plane. You told me that the starter chute was safe. I know you didn't cut that cord yourself, so you must have manipulated some human into doing it. I want to know who, and why!"

"Someone cut her chute cord? I don't know, I swear. I had nothing to do with it!"

"He says he doesn't know anything."

"Yeah, that's how people usually start. In this respect, you fades are very similar to us. You always begin with denials." Nick looked at the shack door they'd all come out of an hour ago. "I suppose I could go back and get an EMP generator. If I press the button it'll blast you away, but since you can't move, it would just kill you. That's too quick, though. Attempted murder merits something a little more.. creative, I think."

He lifted the tiny magnet in his hand and approached Thrill. As he extended it towards the orange cloud, the shape was pushed away from it. He positioned his hand so that it pushed the two parts farther away from each other, though. "I bet the farther apart your pieces are, the faster your energy will drain. How long do you have now? A few hours? And you'll never get that energy back again. How long will it be before you're just a drained husk, even if I did put you back together?"

He pushed the magnet forward slowly but inexorably, and Thrill cried out. "Stop! All right! I'll tell you."

Petra raised a hand, and Nick withdrew the magnet. "Go on," she told Thrill, trying to keep her voice cold and hard.

"I was just supposed to get you on the plane," he said pleadingly. "I didn't know about any tampering, but it must have been Greed who arranged it. He must have paid one of the prep crew to replace your gear."

"Did Excitement know about this?" She asked harshly.

"No, Greed approached me himself. He.. offered me a place of power at his side if I would help him. Excitement would never go along with it."

Petra looked over at Nick. "He says Greed bribed him to lure us onto the plane. He claims Excitement had no idea."

"Well, he did seem pretty surprised when I told him," Nick admitted. "All right, Thrill. Now the least important, and morally the most important, question: why? Why does Greed want Petra dead?" He hefted the magnet again as a threat.

Petra was pretty sure they both already knew the answer, but Thrill confirmed it. "He's terrified that she'll mess up Greed's relationship with Morty!" He said frantically. "He wants you to be the next immortal in charge of the Veil. He thinks you'll do a better job as a liaison than she ever could!"

So there it was. What Rage had hinted at weeks ago was now out in the open. Petra's heart felt heavy as she translated for the unfortunate prisoner. He was probably right, she thought to herself. Nick would make a far better leader of the Veil. All of this was happening because Darius had saved her life. Actually, all of it was happening because she had been overly curious in the first place!

Nick's lips tightened. "We've got maybe half an hour before those Chinese base-jumpers arrive," he said shortly. "We have to be gone by then. What'll it be, Petra? Should we push him back together, or further apart?"

Petra was surprised at the question. After a moment she beckoned him away from Andy and Thrill, to the side. "Why are you asking me?" She said in an undertone.

"You have to get used to these kinds of decisions," he said just as quietly. "If you decide to kill him, I'm sure Excitement will back your play. A direct attack on the Veil would allow such a permanent response. We've never had to kill a fade before, but it would send a strong message to Greed especially."

"What if I let him go, or lock him up. Can we even lock a fade up?"

Nick shrugged. "Releasing him wouldn't ruffle any fade feathers either, but it could be seen as condoning his actions. The same would be true for putting him inside a Faraday cage. No matter what happens to him in the end, it would be a sign of weakness."

Petra sighed. "I don't suppose there's any legal infrastructure in place to cover this? Something I can point to as a precedent?"

"Only the Black Death itself, and Morty's response to it," he pointed out reluctantly. "I doubt we want to do things *that* old-school."

That figured. Petra reached out for the magnet, and Nick put it in her hand. It was surprisingly light, given the gravity of what it was about to be used for.

She went back to Thrill. "I've decided to spare you," she said immediately, not wanting to keep anyone in suspense any longer. She raised the magnet to one side, slowly pushing the two pieces of Thrill back together. The instant they came in contact, Thrill reformed himself, shying away from the magnet and moving towards the power outlet again.

"Before you go, there is one thing I want to say," she added quickly. "Since his assassination attempt failed, I don't know if Greed will offer you that position in his group or not. Or if he ever intended to offer it at all. Whether you go to Greed or back to Excitement, I want you to spread the word of what happened here. Tell them that I'm not like Morty- I don't believe in an eye for an eye. Or in two hundred and nine for twenty-five million. All sentient lives are equally valuable, fades and humans alike." She nodded at the plug, and Thrill started moving again.

He paused just before going through it. "I did overhear something," he put in quietly. "Greed was talking to Resentment, one of his people. He said humans all have pressure points, and if he couldn't get to you, he could always get to the people closest to you." At that, he slipped into the plug and vanished.

Petra felt a stab of fear. Her mom and Mark were the closest people to her! "He said Greed might be going after my family," she told Nick quickly.

"Then you don't need to worry. Darius stationed Veil agents outside their house the day he brought you in. We've had people keeping an eye on them in shifts ever since. We have an EMP ready to blast away any fades in the area, and we're monitoring the house's electrical use so we'll know if they come in through the power lines."

That was a relief. With a certain amount of chagrin, Petra realized that of course they'd have people watching out for her family. One day she'd learn to stop underestimating the reach and dedication of this organization. After all, they'd been doing this for nearly seven hundred years now.

Nick used his transport key to open the door to Kiri Atoll. Andy went through first, to give her report to Darius directly. Petra put a hand on Nick's shoulder though, stopping him from following. "I.. never thanked you for saving my life," she said quietly. "Especially since it cost you your favorite parachute."

*And since you would probably be next in line if you'd let me fall*, she considered adding, but thought better of it. "I think I'm starting to understand now, just why the fades are so scared. Thank you, Nick."

He shook his head. "Darius chose you for a reason. I trust in his judgement, and I'm sure any other Veil agent would have done the same. I did the only thing I could under the circumstances. But you're welcome."

That was another thing she was just starting to understand. "Wow. You really do love him, don't you?"

Nick hesitated for a moment, looking back at her. "I don't really remember my biological parents after all this time. Stan and Sheila were great, and they raised me well, but they were only ever just caretakers. It was Darius who was always looking after me. He was the one who first took me skydiving, though it scared the crap out of me at the time. He taught me all those languages so I could fit in overseas. He gave me this job- an important and valuable thing to do. He's the closest thing I have to a father.. and I'm going to miss him."

That sounded particularly ominous. "What do you mean?"

"When your training's done, and Morty transfers the rest of his energy from Darius into you, Darius will die."

Petra stared at him. "I.. thought when the transfer is complete, he goes back to the way he was before it started. He's no spring chicken, granted, but he's got another twenty or thirty years. Right?"

Nick shook his head. "Normally yes, but Morty took him from a battlefield. He had a sword in his gut when he was infused with that energy. And he's taken a lot of injuries since then. No, this is how it works. When a new immortal takes over, the previous one dies."

He sighed. "He says he's fine with it, and I believe him. I suppose after seventeen centuries I would be too. I guess I always knew this would happen eventually. It's just rough, you know?"

Petra nodded, still distracted by the seriousness of this news. She'd been looking forward to getting to know Darius better, too. She had tossed around the notion that he might actually be an ancestor of hers, explaining his interest in her family. She'd considered introducing him to her mom and Mark, perhaps as a friend from work, just so he could meet them. That wasn't going to happen now.

She cast about briefly, trying to distract herself and Nick from this suddenly-depressing topic. "If you do get a new chute, do you want any help painting it? I have some artwork experience, and it is the least I can do to help."

That triggered a slight smile at least. "Well, that would be fitting, given that it was Darius who helped me paint the first one. All right. Should we say.. Thursday night? I should be free by then."

Petra nodded. "That works. I've got some painting supplies at home that might be useful." She made for the open door, but this time it was Nick who stopped her.

He pressed the key into her hand. "I spoke with Darius after we got back from Colorado. He agrees that you should have one of these. And you should hold onto that magnet, too. Greed and the others can't attack you directly, but there's nothing stopping him from hiring a human to go after you again. If that happens, you can use the key to escape quickly." He held her hand tightly for a moment, and then let go and stepped back onto the island.

Petra looked down at the small piece of metal resting in her hand. Suddenly it felt a lot heavier than before.

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Chapter 12

Petra knocked on the door carefully, trying not to betray her nervousness. She was about to lie her butt off, and that was well outside of her comfort zone. Didi welcomed her inside with the usual pleasantries. They had their standard coffee-vs-tea debate, which Didi won. She put a pot on to boil, before finally getting down to business. "What brings you by?"

"I think I found some documents from Lugdunum that might be relevant to Darius," Petra explained. "The journal of a legionnaire named Torius Horatius. He was the son of a noble, and one of the few legionnaires who could read and write. According to what I've been able to dig up, he wrote about a fellow soldier named Darius Benedictus. That could be our guy!"

Didi nodded. "Yes, I've heard of the journal. It's one of the few surviving records from the time. But it's priceless. It belongs to a French collector, and is in a museum in Marseille. I reached out to him when we first started looking into ancient Rome, but the only response I got was a form letter." She sighed. "I can get you a flight out to France, but it would be a waste of time. I doubt very much he'd let you take a look at the journal, even if I paid him for the opportunity."

"Not me, *us*." Didi gave her a curious look, so Petra went on. "It's written in Latin, right? I certainly can't read that, and I doubt any kind of translation program could do it justice. Besides, the original journal was copied! According to my friend, the Byzantines copied a bunch of their records before they were conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. The original was taken by Turkish forces, but the copies were shipped to England before Constantinople fell! It's a good bet Torius' journal was one of them."

Didi gave her a suspicious look. "Who is this friend of yours?"

Petra hesitated. This was where her lies had to really take off. There was no friend, and no copy, as far as she knew. "It's better if you don't know. He's a businessman.. of the extralegal variety. That's why you've never heard of him. He definitely doesn't work with Interpol or any other law enforcement agency."

"Even so, you believe him?"

Petra could only shrug. "He has no reason to lie. Aside from us, there's not many people interested in this stuff. According to my friend, the copied journal is owned by a man named Alex Selter. The good news is that he lives in Seattle, and apparently has a massive collection of documents there, in an underground archive. The bad news is, he's currently negotiating for a new property to start up his own historical museum. When that happens, he'll get a bunch of new security, and probably get a lot more tight-fisted about his property."

"How long until his negotiations are done?"

"A few weeks, maybe. Seattle isn't that far away. I was thinking we could leave today or tomorrow, drive out there to take a look, and then be back by day's end. Best case: my friend is right, and we get a look at some very rare and valuable information. Worst case: my friend is wrong and we spend a few hours in a car together."

Didi crossed her arms. "There's more to it than that. How much does this Selter person want for the privilege of looking at his most-likely-counterfeit documents?"

"Yeah, that's the other problem. Selter isn't willing to admit that he has any archive room or documents. It's part of his negotiating strategy. Once he's got a deal on paper, he can publicly reveal it to advertise his new museum, but until that happens he won't let anyone in there. Fortunately my friend knows his schedule and his security arrangements. He'll be in Los Angeles for the next two days, and this," Petra fished out her transport key, "should let us in to the archive room."

"You want to break in??" Didi's voice suggested she wasn't sure Petra was serious about this plan, despite all the information that had just been dumped on her.

"Well technically not, since we have a key.. but yeah. Basically." Petra looked out the window for a moment. "The risk is minimal. My friend gave me all the security protocols. There are only two guards in the building, and we can avoid both of them easily." Didi still didn't look convinced, and Petra sighed. "If you don't want to do this, I understand. I was planning on going alone anyway. I wanted to scan the journal pages and bring them back to you, but the room is huge. I'd be looking for a needle in a haystack. Filled with straws written in Latin! At least with you there, we could narrow the search down."

Didi was still hesitating, and Petra habitually held her breath. The lies were really piling on here. She had been to the archive room underneath the museum in Marseille, during business hours. Thanks to the key, Petra had taken the tour with a bunch of other French locals. Now that she knew what the inner archive door looked like, she could return there whenever she wanted. There was a real Alex Selter living in Seattle, with a comparable underground room. It was empty, though. The real Selter was a businessman, but it was doubtful he was planning on opening any museums anytime soon.

"All right. I'll do it," Didi finally said, and Petra almost wilted with relief. She tried to keep it off her face, but it was pretty clear she'd failed. "I promised my dad I'd keep the search alive, and that includes breaking laws. Some laws, anyway. There are some lines I won't cross."

"Sounds, good," Petra said, trying to limit her smile. "Should we head out tomorrow, or today?"

Didi also looked outside. There was plenty of cloud cover, but the light was getting brighter by the minute. "We'd better do it today, I think. Besides, if we get there and something goes wrong, we may get a chance to try again tomorrow before coming back. I'll pack some things for the road."

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The trip to Seattle took two and a half hours, and included a border crossing. Border security had been upped in the past few years, as apparently some of the Americans had been taking advantage of Canada's cheap pharmaceuticals and other goods. Petra endured a basic search of her vehicle and person, before they were waved through. Aside from that one speed bump, it was a pleasant journey for the most part.

Petra had never been comfortable with long silences. Even alone in her apartment, she was prone to turning on the tv in the background, or listening to music. She would have gotten a pet, except for her building's restrictive policies about that.

By contrast, Didi was as calm as a mountain lake. The first half hour she just sat in the passenger seat. She didn't object when Petra turned on a news station, or when she turned it off again. Finally, she looked over with a wry expression. "Are you nervous about this heinous and terrible crime we're about to commit?"

"What? Oh. No, I'm just thinking. It's a work thing." That was partially true. Petra would be putting in her two-weeks notice soon, and the Veil would be her new occupation.

"Do tell." She leaned back, with her eyes closed. "I don't really care, personally, but it sounds like the kind of thing you want to talk about."

Petra stared at her briefly, before chuckling. Despite her words, Didi obviously did care. The hug Didi had given her moments after she'd gotten back the first time was still vivid. Shrugging, Petra explained. "I sorta lucked into a position of importance at work. I could turn down the job, but it might cause a lot of chaos at the company if I did. So I've been training for my new duties. The trouble is, the guy training me was next in line for the job before I came along."

"Ouch. Is he making your life difficult now?"

"That's just it. He took it well- much better than I would have. And he's *good* at it! He knows the work, the people, the nuances of negotiation. He's totally devoted to our boss, too. Thinks of him like a father. Unfortunately Da- uh, Dan, is dying. He's only got a few weeks left at most, and everyone at work has known for a while, but I just found out a few days ago. I don't know him that well, but I would have liked to."

Didi rolled her head to the left a bit. "I had no idea photojournalism was so filled with intrigue and politicking."

"Well, this is upper-management stuff. I wish I could just keep doing snapshots of life, but that's not really an option anymore." Petra was careful not to give too many details. "Dan's condition is really weighing on Nathan," she substituted Nick's name as well. "He doesn't let it affect his work as far as I can tell, but there are problems there, too. Corporate espionage of a sort. We don't know who's in on it and who's not."

Petra sighed. "I've got a sort of art project with him tomorrow night. I'm just wondering if I should try and get him to open up about Dan, or his suspicions at work. Or if it's too early and I should just leave it alone."

"Interesting. This art project. Is it work related?"

"No, why?"

"Was it your idea, or Nathan's?"

"Uh, mine, I guess. He was going to do the painting himself, and I offered to help. What are you getting at?"

Didi only gave her a sidelong look. Petra didn't get it at first, but then it hit her. "No, you're wrong. It's not like that."

"Not like what?"

"I'm not interested in him, all right? Sure, he's kind and professional, and easy on the eyes. But I don't dip my pen in the company ink, ok? I never have. Those kinds of relationships never work out."

"If you say so," Didi responded, her tone carefully neutral. She closed her eyes again, her head rocking slightly as they drove.

It was a ridiculous idea. Petra didn't feel that way towards Nick, or Chuck, or any of the others at the Veil. But why not? In the past, she would have at least considered it. She'd had relationships with men that had started based on nothing more than looks. Nick definitely had the criteria covered.

Of course. It was her own condition. She no longer felt a rush of endorphins or hormones associated with seeing a really hot guy. Even her scream while free-falling had been reflexive and not the result of any biological cause. She couldn't appreciate a fine behind anymore, or a chiseled jaw. Only personality traits and actions mattered now.

Petra knew she should feel sad about that, but it seemed that was another benefit to her condition. Maybe it was a good thing. She'd never even tried to separate the emotional from the biological in her previous relationships. Even the ones who'd turned out to be total jerks still had their upsides in her memory. Maybe she'd been missing out on something critical all these years, and Morty's 'bio-ectomy' had forcibly opened her eyes.

Was this how Darius felt? He'd spent the last seventeen centuries or more with no appreciable sex drive. Did that make his relationships deeper and more meaningful? None of her Veil colleagues had said anything about Darius' love life. If he didn't have one, was that to be Petra's fate as well?

Her stepdad Mark was certainly no looker, and her mom was devoted to him. Given how smart she was, she'd probably figured this out for herself a long time ago. It was something to think about.

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Chapter 13

There was a parking structure a few blocks from Selter's 'archive room'. Petra paid for a few hours- thankfully she'd been able to get some US currency at the border- before leading the way down the street.

To her credit, Didi seemed quite calm, considering their imminent foray into criminality. Petra supposed that it had to do with her long experience in surveilling people. She had tailed Darius for years, and while her equipment had been taken and later destroyed by Greed, Didi knew how it all worked. This would just be sneaky dealings of a different kind.

The facility itself had once been a skate park, with a large underground storage area. The park had gone out of business years ago, but Selter apparently didn't want any squatters, so he'd brought in security. Getting into the upper area was easy, but Petra held out an arm to stop Didi at one point, keeping her from being seen by the guard down the hall.

Once they got downstairs, Petra pulled out her key and fitted it to the door. She envisioned the door of the archive room in Marseille, and then opened it.

France was nine hours later than Seattle: it was already after dark here. However because they were indoors, there was no indication of that. Petra closed the door behind them carefully, hoping it would stay that way. She wanted to keep the door open, maintaining the link between Marseille and Seattle, but it was too risky. For all she knew, it might open some kind of accidental trans-continental media firestorm! When Petra finally turned around, she could see Didi staring with awe.

It was a readily shareable feeling. Rows upon rows of shelves lined the massive room, each one stacked with artifacts and documents from European history. "You weren't kidding about Selter's collection," Didi said softly.

"Let's just find what we came for," Petra reminded her gently, pointing towards the section marked Early Rome.

They had to go about a hundred meters down that row before reaching the right time period. Didi's eyes looked like they might pop out of her head as she read the passing labels. Despite their surroundings, Petra smiled. If it hadn't been for Didi's father, and his crusade to track down Darius, she might have made a fine historian.

"Here it is!" Didi reached out to an old, leather-bound tome. "The journal of Torius Horatius." Almost reverently, she gently opened it, but then frowned. "Paper from that time would have crumbled into dust long ago, no matter what means were used to preserve it. This is a copy of a copy of a copy most likely. It's a pity. I would have liked to see his actual handwriting."

Petra nodded impatiently. "Are there any references in there to Darius? I don't want to stay here any longer than we have to, and we can't take it with us when we leave."

"No, I suppose not," Didi said regretfully, flipping forward in the journal. "He talks about Darius pretty early on. Torius and Darius were both from Lugdunum, born in 246 and 247 respectively. He was the youngest son of a regional governor, and Darius was the son of a stable hand. They joined up at the same time, and became close friends," she translated slowly, "but were sent to different provinces."

"Here. The Battle of Naissus in 268." She traced the script with her hand, mouthing the words as she went. "They were twenty-one: full grown adults for the time period. It says, 'Here it was that I met my brother Darius Benedictus again. It was only when I saw him fight that I knew how much he had changed.'"

She flipped the page. "'The battle went ill for us at first, and more Scythians crossed the Istrus to surround us. We were cut off from the Emperor's forces on the hills north of Naissus. It was there that Darius stood his ground. We both fought bravely, but no man can take the wounds he did and remain among the living. I saw soldier after soldier pierce his flesh, only to be cut down thereafter.'"

Didi gave Petra a startled look. "I guess he's more than just ageless. At least according to this guy." This wasn't exactly news to Petra, but she did feel a slight rush of excitement. It was looking more and more like this journal was about the real Darius after all.

Didi went on quietly. "'When the remaining Scythians fled to the north, the Emperor returned with his elite soldiers. They commended us for our bravery and skill, though I could not tell them of all I had seen. Later, when he was alone, I spoke to my brother, who thanked me for holding my tongue. "Jupiter himself must have smiled upon you!" I exclaimed, but he had no cheer. "Not Jupiter," he said, "but Pluto have I to thank for the power over death," and dismissed me from his sight.'"

"Pluto. As in Hades? The original god of the underworld?" Petra asked as Didi leaned back again, and nodded. "Are you sure about that translation? I mean the 'power over death' bit."

Didi looked back over it. "Potestatem super mortuo. Sounds about right."

"Morty," Petra said, barely above a whisper. So that was where he'd gotten his modern name.

"Sorry?" Didi looked at her curiously.

"It's nothing," Petra said quickly, and looked back at the journal. "Did they fight together again after that?"

Didi took a few moments flipping through later pages, but shook her head. "There were more battles, but they weren't stationed together. They stayed close, though. Torius had a wife and son back home, but Darius didn't. According to this, Darius swore to look after them if something happened to Torius." She looked back at the shelf, to the historical information collected by other scholars. "Torius died in an ambush outside of Nessos the next year. There's no record of what happened to Darius."

He must have gone home after that. To care for the family of his brother-in-arms. This was all a bit too much, and it got Petra's mind spinning. Her ancestors were from southern France, or what had been Gaul back then. Was Torius her ancestor? It would explain why Darius was so interested in her family. He hadn't been able to keep his friend alive, but he had saved her a few thousand years later. It was all speculation of course, but it fit what she knew about the man.

A distant speck of light swept across the room. It was a flashlight, being held by a guard. Petra gripped Didi and held a finger to her own lips before pointing in that direction. They tried to stay as still as possible.

The flashlight bounced a bit as the guard got moving. It didn't look as though he was particularly alert; this was probably just a patrol route for him. As he made his way down one line of shelves, Petra and Didi quietly slipped past him towards the door out.

Petra tried to stay in front of Didi. If her friend reached the door first, she wouldn't use the key and she'd walk out into a museum in France. Petra had to make sure that didn't happen. Their near-silent retreat went well, until they rounded the first row of shelves again. Didi's shoulder caught a roll of scrolls on one edge, and they fell to the ground with a *thunk*.

The flashlight immediately darted in their direction. Petra froze for a moment, but could hear footsteps from down that way. "Run!" She urged, suiting actions to words. Didi followed, accidentally banging her head on a particularly ill-placed stone bust. She kept going, despite looking dazed.

Fortunately the guard had closed the archive door before heading down the row, so Petra pulled out her key and hastily fitted it to the lock. As she concentrated on the doorway in Seattle and opened it, the guard shouted at them "Arrête!"

Petra yanked the key out. Pulling Didi through the door, she slammed it shut with relief. They kept running up the hallway in Seattle, though. There was no more danger- the guard would just open the door and find no one there- but she had to keep up the show for Didi.

Except that Didi was injured! Petra could see a line of blood on her forehead, no doubt from her encounter with that statue. They ran out into the alley and around a nearby corner before Petra slowed down. Didi was breathing heavily, but aside from that and her head, she seemed all right. "That was too close."

Petra nodded, not sure she could trust her voice yet. She examined Didi's forehead briefly. There was a nasty bruise forming, and a cut in the middle of it, but it didn't look too bad. There was a lot of blood, but head wounds always bled like crazy.

She looked around. The alleyway behind them had been abandoned, as was this small street. From what she'd read, Seattle was going through some economic hard times, and there were a bunch of these unoccupied and defunct businesses. No one had been around to see their mad dash. The parking structure should be a few minutes north of them.

Petra stiffened as she saw something else. Seeping out of a light fixture on the wall up ahead, a fade came into view. And then another behind it, and another. She turned quickly, to find two more fades on the other side. They were surrounded. Didi looked at her curiously. "What is it?"

All five of them moved forward in unison. They were blue-tinged, a faction Petra didn't recognize. She grabbed for the magnet in her coat pocket, just in case. "You can't hurt me," she said, raising it in front of her. At this distance it probably wouldn't do much good, but it was better than nothing.

"We're not here for you," the closest fade hissed at her, not slowing down. Petra's memory clicked. Rage had arranged to threaten those closest to her. Not her family as it turned out, but her friend! She should have seen this coming!

She grabbed Didi's hand and ran back down the alley, and the fades sped up after them. "Petra, what's going on?" Didi insisted, but Petra shook her head.

"Just trust me. This way!" In a few moments they were back at the door to the 'archive room'. Petra fitted the key again, looking back over her shoulder. They were still following, and she had no choice. If one of those fades even touched Didi, she was a dead woman! Petra concentrated on Didi's home, and opened the door. Without waiting, Petra pulled her through and then slammed the door shut, breaking the connection.

Didi gasped, suddenly being back in her own living room. She looked around in stunned awe, and Petra grimaced. How on earth could she explain this without telling her everything?

She did look faint, at least. Petra hurried towards her. "Are you all right? You don't look so good."

Didi backed away from her, slipping slightly and fell onto the couch. "How did- What? What just happened??"

Petra stopped, not wanting to get any closer. Didi looked frightened enough as it was. "You.. fell asleep on the way back. Don't you remember? I didn't want to wake you until I could drop you off at home."

If anything, Didi looked even more confused. "We were in an alleyway, in Seattle. You were talking to someone; I didn't see who. We were running, and then we were suddenly back here! I.. don't even remember the drive home!"

Petra grimaced, affecting concern. "I guess you hit your head even harder than I thought. You might be concussed. Do you want me to call for medical services?" She held her breath. The last thing she needed was for EMTs to be examining this place. All of Didi's research was just in the next room, and she might have some unfortunate things to say if the medics had any questions.

Fortunately, Didi shook her head. "No, my head hurts, but it's no concussion. I played lacrosse for years- I know what that feels like. I just need some rest, that's all. I've got some band-aids and painkillers in the bathroom there," she pointed past the kitchen.

Petra retrieved them, and carefully cleaned and bandaged the cut on Didi's head. "Do you want me to stick around? I can make you some tea, but it probably won't be very good."

"No, you should go. I'll be fine. That dream, it just felt so *real*, you know?"

Petra nodded understandingly. The soap bubble keeping her secret was very thin, but so far it seemed to be holding. She just hoped Didi wouldn't look out her front window in the next few minutes. Petra's car was still in Seattle.

She made sure Didi was comfortably arranged on the couch, and then said her goodbyes. It wasn't until she was out on the porch that she realized.. the transport key had still been in the door when she'd closed it! It was still in Seattle too!

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Petra's mind raced as she tried to figure out what to do. Because of the constant EMPs, no Veil agent had a reliable phone. Even if Petra had Nick's number, she couldn't call him. She also didn't have one of those magic mirrors they used as a substitute.

She could just go home and wait for them to contact her, but that would leave a freaking *transport key* in an alley in Seattle just waiting for anyone to find! And there had been fades in that alley. If they contacted some of their human puppets, they might be able to steal it before anyone in the Veil could get there!

Then she remembered. Her mom's house was under Veil surveillance, meant to keep her family safe. The trouble was getting there without a car. She had her keys and some money, at least. It had been some time since she'd used the bus system in Vancouver, but there were regular stops out there. Petra ran for the nearest one.

Almost twenty agonizing minutes later, she was at her mom's house. The next bus wouldn't have arrived for another half hour, and calling for a ride would have taken at least that long. Luckily for her, there were no shortage of helpful drivers in the area. One had been heading towards Sunshine Hills, and had given her a lift. Petra thanked him profusely, left him some money, and sprinted towards the two-story abode.

At this time of day her mom would be at work, and Mark would still be in physical therapy. Petra couldn't see any people watching the place, but that was no surprise. Surveillance was only effective if it was concealed.

That left one option. Petra cut around the house, to the back yard. There was a hidden key under a few flagstones outside the rear gate. Petra had to hunt around a bit to find it again after all these years, but then she let herself in. She located the fuse box on the far wall, and then tripped them all.

There. Nick had said they were monitoring the house's electrical usage in case the fades tried to get in that way. This would definitely raise some alarms at the Veil headquarters in Vancouver.

Sure enough, the door onto the rear porch opened and a Veil agent stepped out, looking at her curiously. "Ma'am?"

Petra had seen him before, but couldn't remember his name. She flipped all the fuses back to the 'on' position and closed the box. "Have you ever seen any doors in Seattle?" She asked quickly.

"No ma'am."

"Then I need you to take me to Kiri Atoll, right now!"

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Chapter 14

By the time Nick got back to Kiri Atoll, Petra had the situation mostly in hand. He glanced at the flurry of activity surrounding her with suspicion, but politely waited for her to be finished.

Petra handed her car keys to a young man. "It's on the ground floor of the Olympic lot in downtown Seattle," she told him. "White Honda Civic, license plate E07 FFJ. You'll need a picture ID and proof of vaccination to cross the border. You already have my home address; just drive it there. Understood?"

The young man nodded and stepped through the door. She finally turned to face Nick, expecting him to look angry, but he was just smiling faintly. Petra took a deep breath. "So, there was a situation, but it's mostly handled. Didi and I were on a road trip to Seattle this morning. It was nothing fancy, just some sightseeing and shopping," she explained uncomfortably. He would be upset enough at what she had to tell him already. There was no point in explaining everything.

"Greed threatened the people closest to me. I thought that meant my mom and her family, but he was after Didi! On our way back, we were surrounded by fades. There were five of them, blue-tinged. I told them to back off, but they said they were after her, not me. I knew the magnet wouldn't be able to keep them all away, so I.. took her back to her house in Vancouver." Hesitantly, she held out her key to him. At least she'd been able to recover it safely.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion, before widening completely. "You used a transport key with a civilian??" He exclaimed loudly.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," she assured him quickly. "She took a hit to the head while we were running from the fades. I was able to convince her that she was just dreaming. That she'd fallen asleep on the way back home. She's there now, resting."

"What if she didn't buy it? Or decides later on, that what she experienced was real? This is a risk to Veil security, not to mention the fades in general!" Despite his words, his tone was more worried than angry.

"I know. I wish there had been another way, but you know how deadly fades can be! They had us surrounded, and the only way out was by using the key." She sighed. "All they had to do was touch her once, and I doubt Darius could pull off another miracle to save her, too."

Nick's expression was tight and strained, but he nodded eventually. "What about now? The fades probably know where she lives."

"I know. I asked Andy to put some of her security people on Didi's house like they did my mom's. So far there hasn't been any activity."

He still looked unhappy, but Petra was reasonably sure he would back her play. "So Darius finally let you in on the hunt for Colin?" She asked, more to distract him than anything else.

He nodded. "Apparently most of the fade leadership is holding off on judgement. They're just standing back and waiting for us to resolve it on our own. Darius figured I'd be more useful in the search than cooling my heels here. Chuck's still working on his 'magic solution', but there's no telling if it will work, or if it's genuine," he added untrustingly.

Petra had already explained why she still believed Chuck. Why she was sure he wasn't responsible for any of this. It wouldn't do any good for her to repeat it now. She could only hope her beliefs were proven true, and soon. For now, she was just grateful her little field trip hadn't blown up in everyone's faces yet.

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At least the rest of the evening had gone well so far. After dealing with the 'Didi situation' as Nick called it, they finally had a chance to get to that art project he'd mentioned earlier.

If anyone needed a distraction it was Nick, and Petra threw herself into the work gladly. She'd done some research on the right materials to use, and looked up a few photos of the last chute while it was in use. He had a pretty good eye for artistic detail, for someone who spent most of his time as an administrator and field agent. Apparently that hadn't been his first painted chute, either. The pictures showed his earliest work depicting a flaming cannonball streaking towards the ground. "What do you want?" He asked, sounding a little uncomfortable. "I was thirteen."

Petra shrugged, suppressing a smile. "No judgements here."

His later work with Darius had been more detailed. The pictures were of two people, one on each side of the chute. Their arms were outstretched, and adorned with feathers allowing them to soar through the air. One was slightly smaller than the other- a clear analogy to Daedalus and Icarus.

It shouldn't have been surprising, not after everything she'd learned about Darius and Nick, but Petra did find it disturbing. Icarus had died in the story- flying too close to the sun and burning up. Did Nick see himself like that? Reaching for some achievement or accomplishment too dangerous to obtain?

"I know it's a sad story," Nick said, gazing at the pictures. It didn't look like he'd seen Petra's expression, so this was most likely self-reflection. "Icarus' problem was that he was trying to do *more* than Daedalus wanted; trying to outshine his father. To me, this is more like Icarus and Daedalus as they should have been. Father and son in coordination. Not always agreeing with each other, but always on the same side."

"I can see the appeal in that," Petra acknowledged, thinking back to some of her own disagreements with her mother.

They spent the next half hour or so trading ideas on the next subject. Nick had his heart set on another flying theme, despite how meta it was. His interest in Greek myth was strong as well: probably because Darius dated back to those times. In the end they settled on a more ambitious project.

Ancient Greeks had believed in four winged demigods named Boreas, Euros, Notus and Zephyrus. They were literally the North, East, South and West wind in order. They didn't really have a story, but no story was better than the previous one. Or at least more uplifting.

Drawing two men wearing feathers on their arms had probably taken a while. It didn't take Petra long to realize this new depiction would take days to get right. It seemed a shame as well, given that people would only see it when the chute was deployed, and then only when Nick was close enough to the ground to be seen.

The wings were the trickiest part to get right, and Petra took her time with Zeph's, while Nick was on the other side working on Boreas. Faint classical music emanated from a stereo on the other side of the room. These were Nick's chambers here in Kiri Atoll, but he lived a pretty spartan life. There were a few photographs of him and his Veil colleagues sitting on the desk on the other side of the room. As one of the higher-ups he had his own private kitchen, and Petra could see that it was both well-used and kept clean.

Finally they agreed to take a break and leaned back on the small couch. They couldn't get internet on the island due to the REMP, but Nick had found a way around that. Apparently he'd taken one of the magic mirrors and placed it in front of a tv in the Veil building in Vancouver. He pulled out the other one here, and they watched some late-night comedy and relaxed.

"Is this a date?"

His question came totally out of the blue, and Petra didn't know how to respond at first. She tried to compose her thoughts clearly for him, but couldn't even really do that for herself. She was still holding the paintbrush from earlier, which had dried out somewhat.

"I've only been this way for about a month now," she began slowly. "Even before, I wasn't exactly active in the dating scene. It's just, when this happened to me, it changed more than just my physiology. My mind and my perceptions changed as well, and I'm still getting used to that."

His glance faltered for a moment. "So you're not sure."

"I didn't say that," she tried to put a trace of admonishment in her tone. "I don't know how these changes will affect my future. I don't even know if I have a future, romantically speaking, but I want to explore this new.. perspective."

Now they were getting to the real issues. "I can't tell anyone from my old life, or anyone who isn't in the Veil. Doug isn't an option, and Chuck definitely isn't. Darius might be able to give me some advice, but nothing more. That leaves you."

He snorted. "You're really making me feel special here."

She twirled the paintbrush briefly, with irritation. "My *point* is, you are literally the only person in the world who can share this with me. That would be important on its own, but you're also the only person I want to share this with. So, yes. As far as I'm concerned, this is a date."

"Good," he said, and leaned in close.

He just stayed there for a moment, studying her face. Torn between curiosity and hesitation, Petra made the rest of the journey. The paintbrush slipped to the ground, forgotten.

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It felt like only seconds later, but probably had been a few minutes, when a faint chime emanated from the magic mirror in front of them. Sighing, Nick reached out and tapped it twice on the corner. An image of Andy, who was upstairs currently, swam into view.

They were still on the couch, snuggled up next to each other. Petra wasn't sure how the people in the Veil might react, but Nick didn't seem embarrassed at all. To her credit, Andy didn't even bat an eye. "We just got word from Munich. Darius will be downstairs shortly, and wants you both there with him."

Nick grimaced, and started to untangle himself and get off the couch. "Right. What's the big news?"

Even Andy couldn't keep the triumph out of her otherwise-professional tone. "He caught Colin. He's bringing him in."

Half an hour later they were all down in the detention area in the sub-basement of this place. It was still within range of the REMP and inside the massive Faraday cage, so it was safe. Petra, Nick, Darius, Andy, Doug and Chuck all looked through the one-way glass at their restrained prisoner, Colin.

He didn't look so threatening this close up. Somehow Petra had built up an image in her mind of a radical terrorist type: small in stature, but determined and willing to die. Colin matched the photos she'd seen of Chuck's colleague and friend. He was average height and thin, with red hair and dark eyes. His hair was a bit longer than in the photos, and his skin slightly more tanned, but it was him. He just stared passively ahead at the glass, heedless of the restraints keeping him in his chair.

"How did you catch him?" Nick asked Darius, admiration clear in his voice.

Darius only shrugged. "It was an accident, best I can tell. I wasn't there myself, but Henderson, one of our field ops who used to work in Stuttgart, basically just ran into him on the street. He thought quickly, and had Colin in a choke-hold before he could say a word. Fortunately no one saw him, so he was able to get him out of the street.

"That seems a bit convenient," Andy said suspiciously, and Darius nodded.

"That's what I thought too, until I saw the footage from Henderson's body cam. Colin was just as surprised as Henderson, from the looks of things. He even tried to run for it. I guess we just got lucky this time."

"I want to speak to Henderson anyway," Nick said automatically, "and to get a look at that footage. There may be clues to the rest of Colin's organization on it."

Darius nodded at Andy, who left the room to arrange it. Chuck moved towards the holding room door, but Darius stopped him. "You're not going in there- either of you," he glanced at Nick, too. "I'll conduct this interrogation personally."

"You still don't trust me?"

Darius gave Chuck a hard stare. "I said earlier to everyone that I believe you, Chuck. I still do. But even you have to admit this looks bad. If I let you in there with him, people will say you had the opportunity to send secret messages to each other. The fades already think we're conspiring against them because of Colin! I can't risk giving them any more ammunition to use against us."

He smoothed his features, visibly trying to control himself. "You can both watch from in here, at least. You might be able to see something I miss. It's the best I can do."

Both Nick and Chuck looked like they wanted to argue the point, but Petra stepped up between them. "They'll take it," she assured Darius, pulling the two of them back a step.

Darius nodded and went through the door. "You said you were working on a magical solution to the Colin situation," Petra said to Chuck before he could say anything. His face turned a bit red, and she raised a hand to forestall his objection. "I know, that's not Colin. What would your magic solution look like?"

Chuck paused for a moment, his eyes darting back and forth between Petra and the imprisoned man. "There's no way to track individual people using magic, but there is a method of tracking the use of magic itself. I was trying to pinpoint where he was exactly every time he used magic to hide or to flee. I was in cooperation with the Covens worldwide, just to make sure I didn't end up tracking them instead."

"How close were you to being able to do that? Could you finish it?"

He looked confused. "I was only a few hours from having a working spell, but there's no way of knowing how effective it'll be. Besides, why bother with it now? We have the imposter in custody." He gestured at the holding cell.

"Could you finish it anyway?" Petra requested, trying to keep her voice mild. "I don't know if Darius will be able to get anything out of that guy in there, but even if he does, we won't know if it's the truth. It would help if we could tell where he's been these past few months."

Chuck hesitated, still obviously wanting to watch the interrogation. He seemed to take the man's presence here as a personal insult, given who he was mimicking. Petra still wasn't sure it was an imposter, but she wasn't about to say that to Chuck. Eventually he nodded, and went upstairs.

"Do you have some task for me as well?" Nick asked quietly, and she could see a trace of amusement in his expression.

Petra flushed a little at his tone, remembering what they'd been doing just a little while ago. She shook her head, trying to stay focused. "Ever since I first heard about this rival group, it hasn't made sense to me. If that really is Colin in there, they could have done a lot more damage to us."

Nick nodded slowly, moving away from the one-way glass apparently to avoid distractions. She moved with him. "I've had my own questions about that. Colin knows, or knew, every one of our procedures and security measures. We thought he was dead for months on end. You're right: if he really did betray us completely, he could have killed dozens of our agents in that time. He might have even toppled the Veil as a whole, or at the very least revealed our existence to the world."

He looked haunted at the very possibility. "That in itself would have been catastrophic! It would be virtually impossible to prove the existence of fades without their cooperation, but if he'd told even one nation's Intelligence community about us, they would have hit us like a tsunami. We'd all be in federal custody by now, and all of Chuck's little toys would be in a lab being turned inside out."

He was on the same page- that made things a little easier. Petra pondered the results aloud. "Instead, he damages our ability to gather information on some of the fades. He compromises a few safe houses, and disrupts some of the Veil's plans. That's it. No one killed, or even hurt. At first I thought Colin was working for one of the fades, but that doesn't make much sense either. Even aggressive fades like Greed and Rage know that the Veil is essential. Harming us is only harming them in the long run."

Petra trailed off, trying to get into the head of her opponent. Whoever it might be. "I could have destroyed them, but I didn't. The Veil is not my enemy," she said aloud, her eyes closed. "I've used my time and energy to distract and disrupt them, and to make them look bad in front of the fades. But why? I don't care about money or power as people know it, or I would have used magic to get those things."

"I spoke to some of the fade leaders, trying to convince them that the Veil was weak," Nick's voice continued in her place. "I even hinted that I could replace the Veil with my own organization. But why?"

Petra's eyes snapped open. "Morty. It has to be about him. The Veil is his connection to this world. He's the one thing that we've got, which Colin's rival organization didn't."

Nick thought about it for a moment. "Ok, say you're right. If I'm human and I know about Morty, I'm probably in awe of him. He has the power to make someone immortal, and he himself has been around for basically as long as time has existed. If I'm a fade, I'm probably terrified of him. He has the power to obliterate me with a thought! It's his power that has kept the fades at peace since the dark ages."

They both stood in silence for a bit longer. Eventually, Nick sighed. "I've got nothing. We can speculate until the sun burns out, but it won't do us any good without proof."

Petra wasn't so sure about that. "If it was a fade behind Colin's group, how would he control them? I know they won't possess anyone out of fear of Morty's WMD-like power. Would they bribe the humans, like Greed did when he tried to have me killed?"

Nick nodded. "Most likely. Usually fades influence human society using the internet. They can transmit messages invisibly and directly to any computer, anywhere in the world. They don't always use money, though. Greed has been known to use footage of compromising stuff to blackmail some of his Wall Streeters and gang members to do what he wants."

"It's just a hunch at this point, but I think that we are dealing with a fade. I doubt it's anyone we've met before, though. All the fade leaders seem intent to stay neutral when it comes to Veil matters. Those blue fades who attacked me and Didi in Seattle- I assumed they were sent by Rage or Greed, but what if it was this mystery guy instead?"

That itself was a painful thing to consider. Didi had nearly been killed, regardless of who was behind it. Petra had kept a safe distance from her friend for a few days now, relying on Andy's security to keep her safe. And because she wasn't all that sure Didi would buy the cover story about her head injury.

Nick raised his eyebrows. "What are you getting at, Petra?"

She wasn't sure, truthfully, but her instincts had come through for her before. "This fade may not think of himself as our enemy, but he's wrong. We need to know our enemy, and I'm going to need help to draw him out."

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Chapter 15

A day later, Petra and Nick made their way back to Didi's house. She was driving her own car actually; the plan required that they not use a transport key to get there.

Unfortunately it seemed that Darius was getting nowhere with Colin's interrogation. Petra had been relieved to hear that the man wasn't being tortured. Chuck was still working on tracking down 'the imposter's' magic use, and Andy and Doug were running things at Veil headquarters. Despite the capture of their rival organization's leader, the Veil was still spread pretty thin, so it was just her and Nick here right now.

The only way those fades could have known Petra and Didi would be in an alley in Seattle was if they had been listening in on Petra's plan from the start. And the only way they could have done that was if they had bugged Didi's house, or had a fade in there listening while Petra had explained it. If she was right and they were still monitoring Didi's home, the Veil could use that against them.

Nick had assured her that Didi wasn't home, so Petra parked the car in front of the house and walked up to the front door. Veil agents had already searched the house, so it was unlocked. Petra stepped inside, looking around. "Where do these electrical buffers need to go?"

"One in each corner of the ground floor, and a few more upstairs. I'll show you," Nick said, following the script they'd written together.

As a pretext for returning to Didi's house, they were here installing anti-fade devices in the wiring. It made for a good excuse, given the recent attack. "Are you sure Didi won't be back before we're done? I'd hate to try explaining this to her."

"I'm sure. This shouldn't take more than a half hour, anyway."

Something in his voice caught her attention, and Petra moved back into the kitchen, where he was examining the far corner. "How are you so sure Didi isn't going to be here?"

He paused and looked sideways at her. He seemed to be gauging her determination, and Petra refused to look away. Finally, he sighed. "Yesterday morning, Miss Halstaff checked herself into Timber Creek Tertiary. It's.. a mental health facility a few miles away."

Petra gaped at him. "What? Why would she do such a thing?" Her mind spinning, Petra thought back to the last time she'd seen Didi. Her head injury hadn't been that serious, and she was just resting, or so Petra had thought.

"Well, you did transport her over a hundred miles in an instant, using a magic key she'd never even heard of." Nick sounded apologetic and resigned at the same time. "If that had happened to me, I might think I was a little crazy."

He moved a bit closer. "We have people watching Timber Creek, and we put a person on the staff as a temporary care worker. According to the files he recovered, your friend has a family history of mental illness. Her grandfather on her mother's side suffered dementia for years. Apparently so did *his* father before him. Some forms of dementia have a genetic link. It's possible your friend feels the same thing is happening to her."

This was terrible! If it hadn't been for Didi, Petra would never have gotten close enough to find out about Darius or the fades. "Then we have to tell her the truth. Let her know she's not crazy!"

"Absolutely not," Nick said flatly. "The secrecy of the Veil is paramount. Besides, even if she does believe you, she's still safer where she is. The fades are after her, and we can keep her safe as long as she stays in Timber Creek. We can't guarantee that, if she goes back to her normal life."

That still didn't make it right. And even if it did, the decision had to be Didi's, not hers or Nick's. "Why didn't you tell me this as soon as it happened?" Petra demanded.

"Because I knew how you'd react. And while we're talking about keeping secrets, why didn't you tell me she was still looking into Darius?" He responded, his voice betraying a little anger now. They were both going way off-script, but the plan had been to stage a fight for whoever was listening, so Petra didn't care.

Nick gestured around the room. "This whole place is evidence," he said bitterly. "After you made that recording in your apartment, we knew that Miss Halstaff wasn't just an innocent bystander. When you were both taken by the Independent Soldiers, I assumed she would stop investigating him, or you would convince her to. After the two of you were attacked a second time, we searched this house and found out she hasn't stopped at all! She's close to discovering the truth about the fades and the Veil. Why didn't you mention that to us?"

Petra grimaced. "This is a family legacy for her, Nick! She won't stop, *ever*. At least as long as we're investigating Darius together, I can make sure she doesn't find out about the rest! Besides, if Darius won't give me a straight answer about his connection to my family, what other choice do I have? He picked me to run the Veil, but he won't even tell me why!"

"You have to trust that he knows what he's doing," Nick said evenly, "just like the rest of us."

"Well I'm not willing to take it on faith like you are!" Petra bit out. "He may be centuries old, but he's still just a person, and people make mistakes like anyone else. When I take over the Veil, I'll damn sure run it differently than he does!"

She moved towards the door. They were more or less back on script now, so Nick called out. "Petra, we have to finish installing these. Where are you going?"

"I'm sure you can finish on your own. I'm going to the park, to take pictures for my job before my last day at work. If you're smart, you won't follow me!" She closed the door hard, stalked out to the car, and drove off.

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Her anger hadn't all been for show, nor had her frustration. Didi had institutionalized herself? And Nick hadn't stopped it, or even told Petra at first! As she navigated the roads, Petra tried to marshal her thoughts.

On the surface, his reasons made perfect sense. Only a handful of humans outside the Veil knew the truth about the fades, and they had good reasons to keep that secret. Even the humans working for hostile fades like Greed and Rage mostly thought that those two were just enigmatic, computer-using humans. The secrecy of the Veil was instrumental to its survival, but Didi could keep that secret, too! She wouldn't need to be locked up for her own safety if she knew the score!

Petra resolved to go visit her, after this was all over. She might not be allowed to tell Didi the truth, but she could at least keep her company. As far as she knew, Petra's own family history was clear of genetic tendencies towards mental illness. She had no idea what Didi must be going through right now. The worst thing she'd ever experienced was seeing her father's mangled body in that morgue.

She reached the park without incident, and spent the next hour or so taking shots of people, just as she had before all this started. Part of her wished she hadn't looked into that photo of Darius in the first place. It had brought her wonder, sure, but it had also brought pain, fear and enormous pressure! In some ways her life would be much better if she was still just a normal photographer living a normal existence. Didi's might be as well.

The park had no camera coverage except for the traffic lights on the corners. That meant that whoever was surveilling her would have to do it directly. She could see fades clear as day, so it would probably be one of their human servants. Sure enough after not too long, Petra got a text from an unknown number. "It's done," was all it said.

Petra smiled and left the park. She drove her car back home, and then used the key to get to the Vancouver office used by the Veil. Upon arrival, Andy greeted her with a smile. "Score one for simple plans, ma'am."

It hadn't been meant as an insult, despite how she'd phrased it. Petra nodded. "We may be a diplomatic organization, but in a lot of ways we act like a spy agency. Sometimes spies get too into convoluted plans and strategies. I just dangled some bait. What did we end up catching?"

"A human; Canadian by his accent. He's over in one of the interview rooms." Andy led the way down the hall.

"He spoke to you?"

Andy nodded. "I was surprised too. He claims he's a PI named Trevor Angler. Unlike Colin, this guy is more than willing to spill his guts. I've got people checking his ID now, but it's unlikely he lied. He'd have to know we could confirm it pretty quickly."

Trevor seemed quite uneasy in the closed room. He paced back and forth, muttering under his breath. When Andy went in with him, he looked genuinely distressed. "Look, I want to know who you people are! Am I under arrest here?"

That was a good question. The Veil didn't officially exist, so they had no legal authority. Andy took out a badge, though. "I'm SO Helen Marks, with CSIS. No, you're not under arrest, or in much trouble at all. We just need to know why you were conducting surveillance on one of our operatives."

So now Petra was a Canadian Intelligence operative? She smiled. Apparently she'd been promoted in the last few milliseconds.

"She works for you guys? I had no idea." Angler seemed relieved at first, and then concerned again. "Wait, if I stumbled into a CSIS operation and messed it up-"

"You didn't mess anything up, Mr. Angler. We got to you before you could blow her cover. All the same, we do need to know who hired you, and when." Andy made her voice the perfect blend of sternness and professionalism.

Angler hesitated. "Normally I don't talk about my clients with anyone else, but in this case there's nothing to tell. I don't know who hired me, or why. They gave me a burner phone, and used a voice disguiser every time we spoke! I was just paid to follow her around town and take pictures, whenever she wasn't in an area with cameras. I would get a text every time they needed me to go somewhere and keep an eye on her. That's why I went to the park today!"

"How long has this been going on?"

"Just a few weeks now," he insisted.

"Do you often work for anonymous people for no stated reason?" Andy asked, her voice growing hard.

"They paid a lot," Angler said reluctantly. "Work hasn't been great recently, and I needed the money. Besides, I did look into them. I couldn't get a name, or even a company, but I did dig up a bank account number. If I give it to you, will you just let me go?"

Andy glanced at the one-way screen briefly. She extended a card to him. "I doubt your employer will contact you again, but we'll need to examine that burner phone. If you do get another call, contact me immediately at the number on that card." She gave a remarkable impression of someone dealing with a minnow while wanting to deal with a shark. "Now, give me the account number and you'll be free to go."

He assented gratefully, and wrote down the number for them. Andy ordered his equipment examined, and then set him loose. After he was gone, Petra stepped up next to her. "Are you sure your CSIS credentials will stand up to scrutiny, 'Helen'? Nice bluff by the way."

Andy chuckled. "They will, but people almost never call to confirm." She held up the paper. "Let's see who's using this account."

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While they had been busy with their little sting operation, it seemed Chuck had made some progress on his end. He had pinpointed a location outside of Augsburg, Germany, as the probable site Colin had used while running his own organization. Darius organized a raid on it and Petra asked to be brought along, but was denied. She was up to speed on the fades and the politics, but she still didn't have any combat training at all. That would come in time, he assured her, but it was still too dangerous.

Fortunately, she had her own 'mission' of sorts. The person who opened that bank account had been fictional, but the money spent had been very real. In addition to being used to pay that PI, it was also being used to rent a storage space in Oxford, England. Using her own authority, Petra organized her own raid and brought Andy along for security. This was twice today Doug had been left in charge back at Kiri Atoll, and he seemed to be loving it.

Unfortunately, both missions were very brief. Darius and company came back right away, having found no one but recovered a bunch of materials. Including Colin's body cam, thankfully. Similarly there had been no one in the storage compartment, but a lot of pictures and drawings dotted the walls. All high-profile members of the Veil were depicted, including Petra. There were more boxes in there, all filled with pictures of other Veil agents. Andy had looked quite distressed at that- it seemed they'd identified almost all of the Veil's membership! Even worse, the storage space had pathetic security and no camera system, so they couldn't even see who'd rented it.

Some of the pictures had a strange drawing on their backs: three medieval ships sailing in a black circle. Andy didn't recognize it, but it looked old. It had been drawn, not stamped. Whoever did it knew the symbol by heart and had probably done so many, many times.

That would have to wait, though. Darius, Nick, Petra, Andy, and Chuck all gathered together in one of the Kiri Atoll conference rooms to watch the body cam footage from Lisbon. Chuck had been there, but his own camera had been destroyed, and the other three were still missing. This was the only visual record of what had really happened.

There were hours of footage before the incident, when Chuck, Colin and their team had been waiting outside that warehouse in Lisbon. Darius fast-forwarded to the gunfight itself. As Chuck had said, it looked as though the gangs they were observing had turned on each other, and Chuck's team fell back to the rear entrance. Petra could see Chuck and Ortiz running in front of the camera, with the voices from the other two behind them. Then Chuck came to a sudden stop and raised his fist, stopping the others. He turned, as if hearing something faint, and then beckoned at them. "This way!"

The modern day Chuck shook his head. "I don't remember any of this. I know I got out, but that's about it."

In the recording, Chuck led them down an alley across the street, and then hunkered down. A moment later there was the sound of the explosion, and Colin's camera swung over to look at it.

"Good God!" They heard Colin say, surveying the damage. The whole building had been gutted. Flames were issuing from the west side, but massive clouds of smoke were rising from the rest. Even as they watched, the distant sound of sirens began.

"So the others did make it out," Darius murmured, and Nick nodded along with him.

The five of them just stared at the destruction for a moment, before the camera version of Chuck reached out to the rest. "Listen. That bomb.. was meant for us! We were all supposed to be in there when it went off! If I hadn't been warned at the last moment, we would all be dead now."

"I never said that!" Chuck protested. "I just woke up on the ground after the blast. I thought they all died!"

"We have a traitor in the Veil," the recording continued, the image of Chuck looking dead serious. "I've been trying to figure out who it is for weeks now, and they must have gotten wind of it. They know I won't stop, and that you would all back me, so they tried to get rid of us!"

The camera shook briefly, and Petra realized it was Colin. "How many people knew we would be here? A dozen at most?"

"All of them higher-ups at the Veil," camera-Chuck nodded. "For all we know, it could be Nick himself! Or Darius, for that matter!"

That seemed to stun the depicted group, and Colin's camera wavered again. "It can't be."

"And we can't be sure, either," camera-Chuck insisted. "We have to take desperate measures. I'll.. go back to the Veil. I'll claim you all died in the blast. That way you can keep working while I cover for you."

"While we do what?" Ortiz demanded suddenly. "If we do have a traitor in the ranks, we can't find out who it is unless we're there with you!"

"I'll figure out who the traitor is," camera-Chuck assured them, while real Chuck was shaking his head even more intensely. "The five of us here are the only ones we can be absolutely sure of. You four will have to carry on the Veil's mission. If the organization we all swore to follow has been compromised, then you have to replace it!"

"You can't be serious!" Colin's recording objected. "You want us to.. go rogue? Interact with the fades ourselves? Negotiate with them on behalf of humanity?"

"I don't see any other choice here," Ortiz put in. "If he's right and the Veil can't be trusted anymore, then it's our duty to hold the line, as it were."

Camera-Chuck nodded. "Use what you know of the Veil's procedures to stay ahead of them. Colin, use your magic if necessary. Break the Pact if you have to, to keep from getting caught, you hear?"

Real Chuck was staring open-mouthed at the recording. He seemed to be completely at a loss, as did the rest of them.

"How will we keep in contact with you? How will we know when it's safe to come home?"

Camera-Chuck hesitated. "Use Hart's Blood protocol for now. I'll try to stay in regular contact. If you don't hear from me for more than two weeks in a row though.. assume I'm dead, and keep going."

Both groups real and recorded were grasping what had just been said, when the sirens on the recording grew louder, and the voice continued. "Now go! Don't tell me where you're going, just disappear!"

The four of them stood in unison, and ran down the alley. As they moved, a hand reached down from above to the camera, shutting it off.

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Chapter 16

"That wasn't me, I swear!" Chuck said from inside the interview room, across to Nick, who looked just as upset. "Think about it! Why would I help you find that recording if I knew what was on it?"

"To clear your name, obviously," Nick growled. "What better way to throw us off the scent than to lead us to such overwhelming evidence? We would have to assume you were being framed!"

"I *am* being framed!"

Disgusted, Petra turned away from the window. All this time she had been hoping they would find something to exonerate Chuck and the other magicians, but this seemed like the final nail in his coffin. Veil technicians were examining the footage right now, but so far it looked genuine.

If there was any good news to this nightmare, it was that Colin was now free of suspicion. He and the others had been acting under orders, and his associates could now be brought in out of the cold. Darius recognized the Hart's Blood protocol, which was apparently a very old way for Veil agents to send secret messages. He could now reach out to them and tell them the truth, but there was no guarantee they'd believe him! Until they could explain this footage, it seemed as though trust would be impossible to build for either side.

"What if Chuck was possessed?" Petra theorized aloud. "He lost time, and from what I've read that's one of the signs of possession. At first I thought it was Colin who was taken over by a fade, but now it's looking like it all started a bit earlier."

"That's impossible," Darius said predictably. "Morty would know instantly if any fade possessed any human. He wouldn't wait for permission or even consultation. He would blast that fade into nothingness, and then probably do the same to a bunch more."

"How does he know? Does he watch every place on earth at the same time?"

Darius shook his head. "No, but he is aware of exactly how many fades are on earth at any given time, because of their energy signatures. When a fade possesses a human, that signature is muted. Diluted, I guess you could say. The fade's body remains, but part of its energy is now controlling some poor person. Morty would notice the number of fades go down by one, and immediately take action." He growled loudly. "What did you and Andy find in Oxford?"

Petra was thrown by the sudden change in topic. She glanced at the window hesitantly, but he shook his head. "I could use the distraction. Go on, tell me."

Andy had gone back upstairs, so Petra opened up some of the boxes they'd retrieved. They both knelt down next to the boxes to get a better look. "It's photos, of everyone associated with the Veil. Or nearly everyone. I can't be sure yet. There's this strange mark drawn on some of them. Here, see for yourself." She presented one of them.

Darius' eyes narrowed and he took the picture away, fixated on the mark. He obviously recognized it, and Petra followed him, tiptoeing to get a better look at his face. "What is it?"

He let out the faintest of noises, and his voice flattened noticeably. "It's the symbol of the Ordos Desperandum. They were a secret society in Europe, back in the middle ages. They worked for Despair's faction."

Petra grimaced. Now it was starting to make sense. "Despair is gone, but his human followers must have stuck around. They can't take revenge on Morty directly, but they can hurt *his* humans. It's revenge again, and this week's flavor is generational."

Darius shook his head again. "No, the Ordos Desperandum was pretty hard-hit by the plague. They fell apart after Despair and the others were killed; I'm sure of that much at least. But that symbol was drawn recently." He slowly stood up, and Petra followed suit. He knocked on the glass door separating them from the combative Nick and Chuck. Nick glanced at the window angrily, and then left the room.

Darius turned to him. "Petra found some evidence that, and I say this very tentatively, *might* exonerate our people. Keep Chuck and the other magicians on base as usual, and keep Colin isolated as well."

Nick nodded curtly, still glancing back into the interview room, but Darius went on. "You told me about Petra's theory that a fade is behind all this trouble. I think she's right, but there's only one person who can confirm it. We're going to pay Morty a little visit."

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According to Darius, people could leave Morty's dimension whenever they wanted, but he only brought people or objects into his dimension once a week. Luckily for them, the next crossover event was later that day. Usually it was just Darius who went, most often carrying a cd or thumb drive with a message from Elle. Back in the day, it had been him carrying a love letter, and even further back, he would sing or recite the message directly.

This time Petra was tagging along, and she had to admit a certain anticipation. Before, her heart probably would have been racing at the thought of dimensional travel. She really did miss those physiological responses. Now she had all the time in the world to experience things, but that experience was hobbled by that same gift.

Darius also took one of the pictures recovered from Oxford. Evidence, he claimed, that might interest Morty. He pulled out a transport key and fitted it carefully. When he opened it, stars shone down over a gentle sloping hill.

Petra followed him out, of what looked like a shack. She had no idea where they were, but if the sun had already set, it must be somewhere in Europe or Asia. The shack was next to a graveyard, with several dozen tombstones in rows on the hill.

"We're about two miles outside of Terni, Italy," Darius explained. He went around behind the shack and Petra followed. Not far away on the ground was a stone slab, circular in shape. It was about two meters wide, and had unusual symbols carved into it. Petra recognized it as the stone circle she'd seen in Morty's realm the first time around. Or at least a near-perfect replica. "We have to stand in there," he said quietly, taking his place and checking his watch.

Bemused, Petra stood next to him inside the ring, and they waited for a minute or so. Then the starlit night vanished into empty blackness. They were standing on the stone circle she had seen the last time, badly injured and dying.

As before, the rustic cabin stood next to them, suspended above the infinite abyss all around. Darius stepped over to the door and knocked twice. From inside, they could hear a muffled voice. "Come in."

Morty was standing up from a chair on the far side of the cabin. The last time Petra had been here, she had been too sick and distracted to pay that much attention, but she could give him a closer look now. He was the tall, thin and pale man she remembered, but his face was also weathered underneath his cap of white hair. His wrinkles suggested more than just age, and his bearing as he moved towards them gave the impression of weight on his shoulders.

From what she'd been taught about this.. creature, he had the ability to change his form at will, just like the fades. The only difference, other than sheer power, was that he could make himself look entirely human, whereas fades could only assume the general shape. That meant that each of these physical affectations were intentional. He had chosen every single wrinkle, every strand of hair. Even his footsteps were selected to show his age. Did he do all this for Elle's sake alone, or was there another reason behind it?

Darius stepped up to him and handed him a thumb drive. "Elle was in Monaco for most of this week, attending a local festivity. I don't think you'll like the background music very much, but she sure did."

Morty thanked him briefly, but then his eyes flicked over to Petra. "Hello again. What brings you to me this.. balmy evening?" He gestured out the now-open windows into the complete blackness outside.

Petra smiled slightly at the absurdity of it. There was no humidity here she presumed, not that she could have felt it even if there was. "We wanted to consult with you, about the fades." She looked at Darius expectantly, but he shook his head.

"You have to get used to speaking with him eventually. Why don't you do the honors?" He prodded her verbally.

"Right," she said, discomfited. "Um, has Darius filled you in on the Colin situation? The rival organization we've been dealing with?"

Morty nodded. "As I understand it, you're still looking for him and the other three Veil agents who went missing."

"Actually we caught up with Colin a few days ago, and he's in custody now. The reason we came to you is.. we found evidence that at least one of our people was possessed by a fade. He lost time, and he has no memory of the event," she went on quickly, as Morty gave Darius a startled glance, "which are both symptoms, right?"

"They are, but I certainly didn't sense anything like that," he said, sounding puzzled but not angry. Morty glanced around the room. "No, there's too much light in here for me to show you. Come with me outside for a moment, would you?"

They followed him out into the blackness, and Morty stepped a few meters away from the door. Without any warning, an image sprang up around them! It was a hollow depiction of the earth, from the inside: about twice as wide as that stone disc of his. Petra could see through the translucent edges of the globe, to the continents beyond. Europe, Africa, the Americas. There were cities in evidence too, but they were just dots on the map.

"There are two thousand eight hundred and fifty-five fades on earth," Morty went on, and a collection of bright lights appeared on all continents, dotting the globe. "There have been exactly that many since 1347 when I struck down two hundred and nine of them. I am constantly aware of both their numbers and their locations. When did this alleged possession occur?"

Still marveling at the beautiful projection, Petra answered automatically. "About four months ago, in Lisbon."

The projection changed, and suddenly the three of them were looking at a city map. "There were only twelve fades in all of Portugal for most of that month, and none were in Lisbon," Morty went on. "The closest was Glee, one of Joy's contingent, but he was two cities away. I'm afraid you're mistaken. There was no possession."

Darius looked resigned at his pronouncement, but Petra wasn't going to just take it as gospel this time around. "How exactly did you wipe out Despair's faction back in 1347? I mean, how did you know it was Despair and his people, and not someone else you eliminated? From what Darius has told me, you can't see Earth in real-time."

"That's where I came in," Darius said, looking pained at the memory. "The plague started in Messina, Sicily. People were falling sick and dying at terrible speeds, and the infected had fled to the mainland, spreading it to other cities. Local soldiers were ordered to kill the infected, but they couldn't even do that without getting sick themselves. It was chaos, and before long most of southern Europe was overrun!"

He let out a faint noise of distress. "I was immune because of Morty, but I can never forget what I saw. My reports to Morty were grim, but I don't think I ever truly did it justice."

"I was afraid humanity might become extinct," Morty went on for him, and the map changed to show the Europe of the time. As the timeline extended from 1347 over the next five years, a field of red expanded out from major cities, blanketing most of the continent! "Twenty-five million people, from what the history books say. I couldn't see it or hear it, but I felt it all the same. My people. My only link to my beloved, were being wiped out!"

The image disappeared entirely, and Morty turned away. "I couldn't stop the plague, but I could punish those responsible. I informed Darius where Despair and his ilk were gathering, and he went to confirm it. It was a celebration, he said, of their success at spreading despair across the known world. That's when I struck. I nullified the whole area, wiping them all out at once. I took no pleasure in it, I assure you, but at least it had the desired effect. Thanks to my action, and Darius' later negotiations, the fades will never possess any human again. Nor will they commit genocide. That peace has held ever since."

Petra tried not to think about the horrors of that time. "You keep track of how many fades exist now. Did you keep track before the plague?"

Morty shook his head. "There was no need before. There had never been an existential threat to humanity, nor any reason to harm the fades."

This was it- the key to her whole theory. "You said you targeted an area, and wiped out all the fades in that area. What if one or more of them was possessing a human at that time?"

Morty frowned. "They weren't. Fades don't enjoy possessing people. They only did so when they needed to manipulate something physically. They certainly wouldn't have had any reason to do so during a celebration."

"Just bear with me on this. If a fade had been possessing someone when your, uh, thought bomb went off, what would have happened to it?"

"Well, its body would have been destroyed along with the others." He paused for a moment. "I suppose a fraction of its energy could have survived within the human, but not enough to ever take fade form again. It would have been trapped within its host, and died when the host died."

So much for that idea. Darius spoke up, though. "Could it have transferred to another human though? Electricity sparks between people often enough. That little energy would have been impossible to detect, even for you. If she's right, the fade could have jumped from person to person through the centuries, until electricity came into use. Then it could have used the cables to get around instantly just like the other fades!"

Morty's increasingly skeptical impression showed what he thought of that idea. "Theoretical, and farfetched at best. However it is an intriguing idea. I'll put more thought into it."

Petra gave Darius a concerned look. "If I am right, how do we stop it from possessing our people again?"

"The REMP will protect Kiri Atoll. If it possesses a human and they get within range, the EMP will blast them away. Without a fade body, this one will be destroyed." Darius thought about it further. "You and I are safe as well. The energy Morty gave us makes it impossible for us to be taken over by fades. He told me as much, centuries ago. We'll have to take some security precautions for our people in the field, though. In fact we should take care of that right away, and update the others. I don't know if it will be enough to clear Chuck's name, but it should at least raise some doubts." He sounded encouraged for once, and Petra noted that it might be the first time she'd ever seen him that way.

He said his goodbyes to Morty, who stepped back into his cabin. Then he moved towards the disc, but Petra stopped him. "If it's ok, I'd like to stay a while. There's still a bunch I need to learn about Morty."

Darius nodded. "I figured you would. When you're ready to come home, just touch that dot in the center," he pointed to the disc. "That'll transport everyone and everything above the disc back to the circle on earth."

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Chapter 17

Petra approached the cabin door hesitantly. Morty was an alien after all. Not in a directional sense perhaps, but he was alien enough to her. He spent all of his time here, in this dimension. His only connection to earth was through his long-distance lover, Elle. His only concern for humanity was because they were his link to Elle. He had more in common, physically, with fades, but he didn't even care that much about them! What drove this being?

Once she knocked and had been admitted, Petra could hear faint classical music coming from the far side of the cabin. It was *Clair de Lune*, actually. As a child Petra had played the piano on her mother's insistence, and that was one of the tunes she remembered best.

Morty smiled at her as she got closer. He was sitting in front of a full-sized grand piano, his fingers choreographing the melody. That piano had definitely not been in here a few minutes ago.

Morty trailed off and stood up. As he did the whole thing vanished, leaving just an empty space in the corner of his cabin. He seemed to be watching her closely as it happened, and smiled at her surprise. "Well, you took it better than Darius did. That's not all that surprising, given your different education and background."

"Just how much of this stuff is real?" Petra asked, looking around.

"All of it. You could take a baseball made here and throw it, or play a set of drums I conjured up. Just because I shaped it with my mind doesn't mean it isn't real."

She opened her mouth to clarify her statement, but Morty just raised a hand. "I know what you meant. Here, let me show you. These are all the objects originally from your dimension."

In another instant the walls, floor, stove, fridge, windows, ceiling, were all gone! The cabin itself had disappeared entirely, leaving only a few objects just floating in the darkness. The stone disc outside was still there, as was the videocamera and tripod in the corner. There was a stack of black boxes next to it, which had previously been inside the wooden cabinet. On closer examination, Petra decided they were external hard drives, meant to store a lot of data.

That meant there had to be a computer somewhere. She turned to where the kitchen had been, and there was a laptop folded up in one of its former cabinets. But how could he use it without a power source?

Then she nodded. "You can generate electricity yourself, can't you? Enough to keep that thing going."

"That's right. I wasn't keen on the idea of computers for a long time, but Elle insisted I keep current, and they do make excellent libraries."

Petra kept looking around, and saw a collection to the other side. They were apparently keepsakes from throughout history. One was the gladius sword she'd seen the last time she'd been here. There was a clay figurine of a cross-legged man, several rolls of parchment, a brass medallion with a hole in the middle so it could be worn around the neck, and a bunch of other collectibles all laid out in a row. There was no air or humidity here to degrade these items, not when she and Darius weren't around. For all Petra knew, these could date back to the earliest days of humanity!

Petra continued her tour, and caught sight of a white dress hanging in midair, complete with undergarments. It was hard to remember exactly where it would have been in the cabin, but she guessed in a closet in one corner. She looked at Morty. "Do you moonlight in drag?"

He chuckled. "They're Elle's things. The first time I tried to bring her here, I only got her clothes. I'm told it led to a scandalous story in ancient Egypt."

The dress did look very ancient- a simple white affair with few frills or adornments. "It's been bugging me ever since I first heard about you two. If you can never leave here, and she can never come here.. how did you even find out about her?"

Morty gestured to the couch, which had reappeared along with the rest of the cabin. Petra spun, trying to get her bearings again, and then sat with him. "I never really had much interest in your dimension at first. I knew fades went there from time to time, but I never really cared why. There are a great many other interesting dimensions out there. I kept track of their movements, as I'm supposed to, but they didn't really move much for thousands of years."

He leaned back, sipping a glass of iced tea, and Petra found another was in her hand as well. She tasted it, and it was good, even if she wasn't thirsty. "Then the fades started spreading out from each other. Microscopic distances, in galactic terms, but still much farther than they'd ever gone before. I was curious, so I started to take samples from your dimension. At first it was soil and air, and water. I was quite surprised when I found lifeforms. Even something as simple as bacteria is rare in the multidimensional space." He smiled. "I snagged a boar once, too. I had to wrangle it back to where it came from, and clean up the mud everywhere. Then.. I got a human."

How long ago had this been? Humans had looked different early on, due to diet and environment.

"It was a little black-skinned girl; no more than ten or eleven years old. She was terrified at first, naturally. I took her shape so that I could relate more easily, but that just scared her even more. At first she wouldn't leave the fetal position, huddling in a ball."

There was a note of regret in his tone. "I sent her back, but apparently her disappearance and return were witnessed by her tribe. She told her story, and the next time I pulled in a human from that location, it was an elder of her tribe. He was just as frightened, but at least he would look me in the eye. Or his eye, I guess, after I took his form too. They were bushmen, from what's now South Africa. They taught me how to speak their language, and I found it all fascinating!"

So did Petra. From his name, she'd gotten the impression that Morty had only been interacting with humans for the last two thousand years or so, but the bushmen were much older than that. In college, she'd learned they might be the oldest race on earth.

"From them I got a basic understanding of your carbon-based life and geography. I started expanding my search to other locations, further north. I learned more languages, and gained a greater understanding of your culture and mythology. Unfortunately, I also influenced some of your history, giving rise to stories of primitive gods. It's possible some of the earliest African human sacrifices were based on people 'disappearing' into my realm. When I realized that, I became much more selective of my targets. That's when I chose my first immortal." He gestured at Petra.

"Darius is actually the fourth immortal, and you'll be the fifth. It was easier to learn about humanity without influencing them, if I had one person who could live long enough to get me a steady stream of information."

Petra wanted to ask about the other immortals, but he was already going on. "By that time I had heard that I wasn't the only ageless being in your mythology. Elle was also interested in humans, in pregnancy and birth especially. Her species is constantly reproducing through an energy native to her dimension. The concept of individual sentient beings being formed one or two at a time over the course of nine months was quite a shock to her. I used Taan to reach out to her. We've been corresponding ever since."

"A love story literally for the ages," Petra said softly. She doubted any human could have maintained a long distance relationship for even a fraction of that time, but then neither Morty nor Elle were humans.

He nodded. "Taan eventually grew tired of it and passed his power on to Sukkal, a Sumerian woman. Then she chose her successor. Each one would carry messages between Elle and me, and each was an accomplished musician. Then your people developed video and audio recording, and *everything* changed!"

He grinned, looking over at the camera and tripod. "I can change shape at will, but for Elle it's a much more gradual process. It took her years to appear human, but on video I could finally see what she looked like! I could hear her approximation of your voice, and the real voice underneath it for the first time! It was glorious." He gestured over at the stack of hard drives. "I also gained access to your data recording methods. In the 1970s this space was packed and overflowing with VHS tapes. Every movie and song ever recorded. Books from every known author on earth. It was a warehouse such as your planet has never seen."

Out the window, Petra could suddenly see the stacks upon stacks of books and tapes and paintings and sculptures. Then Morty sighed, and the stacks vanished again. "I sent it all back to earth, as your data storage methods improved. I have my favorites of course, but I would still trade everything I've learned just to spend a few seconds with Elle in person."

He looked over at her sadly, and Petra felt a sympathetic twinge. She still didn't know how her feelings for Nick would shape up, but she had been in love before, or thought she had been. Long distance relationships were always tough, but interdimensional ones? Ouch.

Morty didn't look like he was dwelling on it right now, though. "Your job here is now ceremonial, Petra," he went on. "You won't need to sing or perform for either of us. I would like you to be friends with Elle, but that isn't necessary either. By all rights, I should have taken all of my energy back from Darius twenty years ago. Any human can pass video files between us as easily, but you humans are also deeply mired in tradition. Tradition states that the next immortal will lead the Veil and like it or not, that's you."

Petra thought back to Torius' journal. "Darius still refuses to talk to me about the past, but maybe you will. Am I Torius' descendant? Was Darius there in Lugdunum in the third century? Or is it something even more basic than that- for all I know, I'm actually a descendant of Darius himself! If anyone would know the truth, it's you."

Morty sighed. "I regret that Darius was unwilling to tell you himself. Most of your history is rigidly patriarchal, with little or no agency or power given to women. Darius is the oldest human alive, and those traditions are hard to break. Yes, Torius was your ancestor. And yes, Darius was his friend. He's never admitted it to me, but I believe he feels responsible for Torius' bloodline, including you. Elle has educated me on how brutally women have been and still are treated, just because they are women. She has faced some of that herself, and she had to keep pretending to be human as it happened. Darius' attitude, despite being well-meaning, is still rooted in that bigotry and inequality."

He looked over at the gladius, sitting with the collection of other weapons against the wall. "He is my friend and I love him deeply, but I wouldn't mind in the slightest if you behave differently when you take his place."

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They were still debating when Petra got back to Kiri Atoll. Based on their recent find, Andy was insisting that Colin and Chuck be released, while Nick was still resisting. Darius looked torn, but unwilling to just let them go.

"Nine of our people have already been locked up for weeks!" Andy said heatedly, looking as if she was about to start tearing her hair out. "How much longer do you plan on keeping them? Another month? Another decade?"

Nick shook his head. "You think I like this? I want Petra's theory to be true just as much as you do, but there's just no way to be sure! I'd like nothing better than to let them both out right now, but all we have is a theory. Not even Morty could confirm it!"

"What if there's some kind of test we could perform?" Petra cut in, and they both looked at her curiously. She swallowed under the sudden scrutiny, but then continued. "My speakers at home are always putting out strange noises, even when they're not connected to a radio. Sometimes it's clicking, or static, and sometimes even voices, though I can never make out what they're saying. Those are EM signals, right?"

Petra looked from one to another. "Look, the last time we know for sure fades possessed humans was in the 1300s. That was way before anyone had even heard of EM signals. What if there's some kind of detectable signal coming from someone who's possessed? Something we can pick up on that body cam footage?"

Andy gave her a cautious smile. "You may be right. I'll get a tech team to look over the footage and see if they can find anything beyond normal human hearing and sight range."

"And I'll talk to Chuck again," Nick followed up. "I'll have him repeat the lines we heard on the body cam footage, so we can play them side-by-side for comparison."

Darius went next. "Good idea. I should continue the hunt for Ortiz and the others. Until we can prove things one way or another, the Veil has to keep searching for them as if nothing has changed."

In a few seconds they had all taken off, leaving Petra alone and looking at an empty interview room. "I guess I'll just stay here," she said to herself. Then she felt for the key in her pocket. Actually, she did have something to take care of, and sooner better than later.

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Chapter 18

In her mind, Petra had envisioned Timber Creek as a grim and terrible place. Its walls and floor were worn with age, and dotted with the occasional bloodstain. Its staff was abusive and vulgar, shoving mentally ill people from useless therapy session to shock treatment rooms, to a pharmacy where they were kept in a drug-induced haze. Didi was no doubt trapped, not just by her own fear of delusion, but in a hellscape shaped like an insane asylum.

The fact that Timber Creek at least looked like a civilized place did little to allay her fears. After a Veil operative opened the door for her to come here, Petra looked around with increasing anxiety. Where was Didi? Was she all right?

When she gave Didi's name to the front desk, the woman behind it asked her relation to the patient. All Petra could say was that she was a friend.

"I'm sorry," the young woman said after looking over the chart. "Miss Halstaff isn't allowed visitors at this time. I can take a message for her if you want."

Petra shook her head after a moment. "Could you just tell her Petra stopped by?" She tried to give the impression of a friend who was concerned but unwilling to press the issue, and asked where she could find the bathroom.

On her way down the hall, Petra caught sight of a hallway door, thankfully with a lock on it. It was probably just a janitorial closet or something, but it would be enough. She made sure the receptionist saw her leave through the front door.

A few minutes later she stepped out of that janitorial closet and retrieved her key. It was business hours during the day, so it was unlikely another woman walking around the place would draw much suspicion. Petra conducted her search systematically, going up floor by floor.

She found Didi on the second floor, near the elevator. When Petra slipped inside and closed the door, the older woman sighed at her. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you could get in here despite my instructions."

"I'm just worried about you, Didi. That's all. What are you even doing here?"

"I'm the one who's worried," she sounded resigned. "I went almost three days without seeing you, and now here you are again. I was hoping that meant I was making progress."

"Towards what? Keeping your friends out of your life?"

Didi wasn't even looking at her anymore. She was just staring out the window over the miniature park encircled by the building. Petra moved over to her, and put a hand on her shoulder. "Talk to me, Didi. Why did you check yourself into this place?"

That got a response. Didi glared at her, standing up from her chair and moving away. "You want me to spell it out for you? Fine. When we were in Seattle, before I lost time, I heard the guard. He saw us and followed us, but he didn't say 'stop'. He said 'arrête'. That's French."

"So? Maybe he's French."

Didi grimaced. "I called my Interpol friend the next day. He said there was a break-in at the museum in Marseille, in the archive room underground. At the exact same time we were in Seattle. Two women were spotted there by the night shift guard. They got away without a trace, but nothing was taken. That's when I started to realize just how bad things have gotten. Things up until Seattle were implausible, but not impossible. After that point though, they went straight to crazy-town. And so did I."

This was the worst part. Petra couldn't tell her the truth, not without putting the Veil at risk. "You're not alone," she said softly, trying to be comforting.

"But that's just it! I thought I was hallucinating the guard, and the journal, and the whole Seattle trip entirely, because of how impossible it all was. Then I realized I've been sick for much much longer. I am alone, because you're not real either!"

Petra didn't know what to say at first. It was natural for Didi to feel like she was seeing things, but to include Petra in that delusion? "Of course I am." She reached out and grabbed Didi's hand, holding it tightly. "Does that feel fake to you?"

Didi shook her head. "People can hallucinate touch just as easily as sight and hearing. No, it's the only explanation that makes sense. Here I am, investigating a seemingly impossibly old man, and then suddenly this woman stumbles into my path. Someone who's doing the same investigation, and actually *believes* what I have to say? Someone who helped me run down other possibilities, and never expressed doubt in the idea? Obviously I was lonely, and I dreamed you up to keep me company."

This was worse than Petra had feared. Not knowing about the Veil was one thing, but questioning the reality of people in your life?

"I should have known I'd end up like grandpa," Didi went on wistfully, looking back out the window. "He lived with dementia for years, and mom insisted we take care of him instead of sending him somewhere. You know one day he was nearly hit by a car in the street in front of our house? He said he was chasing down Tyler, his dog. He did have a dog named Tyler, but it had died almost forty years earlier!"

"I'm real, Didi. I'm here with you." Petra held onto Didi's arm, even as she tried to pull away.

"No you're not. You're just my loneliness cropping up again. These past few years looking into my father's theories, I've sacrificed my chance at a normal life. I should have been working, meeting people. Maybe starting a family. I wasted my time, and now it's too late. Even their anti-psychotic drugs didn't keep you away, did they?"

Petra started to object but then her fingers felt something strange, and she looked down at Didi's arm. Previously hidden by her sweater were long, red lines on her wrist, parallel to the bones. There were more on the other arm! "What the hell is this?" She demanded, lifting Didi's arm up to her face.

"That was attempt number one. I can't afford to stay here much longer, and I won't be a burden on my mom and sister, the way grandpa was on us. Don't worry. It didn't hurt much."

Those marks were only a few days old! "Why would you do this? If you thought I might be gone for good; if you thought you were getting better, then why did you try to kill yourself!?"

"Because you're not my only delusion." Didi pointed over at the lamp next to her bed. "The lights started flickering as soon as I got here. I told the nurses, and they said nothing was wrong. It only flickers when I'm alone, anyway. I didn't know what it was at first, but then I realized: it's grandpa. He taught me Morse code when I was little, so we could flash messages to each other. This is him, telling me that I'll be seeing him soon."

No! It was the *fades*, messing with the electrical system! Why bother just killing Petra's friends when they could torture them into losing their sanity? Petra didn't know if this was Greed, or Rage, or the Despair fade who survived, but it didn't matter. The effect was the same!

"I think I'll try pills this time," Didi went on conversationally. "I made a new friend down the hall who said he could help me. He's not on suicide watch, so he can get all the meds I need to do it."

"Stop this, please!" Petra said desperately.

"Don't worry, I set my affairs in order first. I even wanted to put you in my will, but that wouldn't make much sense. You're a good delusional friend, Petra. I just wanted you to know that."

To hell with this. She couldn't let a good woman just throw her life away, no matter what the reason. "Listen, you are *not* crazy." Petra held up her transport key. "I can prove it!"

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It was several hours before she got back to the island. Petra felt drained beyond reason, though obviously not for physical reasons. At least Didi was doing better now. She could take comfort in that.

Petra had told her almost everything, including a primer on the fades themselves. She had demonstrated the key's uses as proof, and made damn sure Didi understood that all she had seen in the last few months was because of the fades and not some predisposition towards dementia. She'd hedged around the Veil itself, making references to 'people who deal with fades'. Hopefully that would be enough for Nick and Darius, when she told them what she'd done.

The control room was mostly empty at this hour, but Doug waved at her from the far side. "Hey," he said happily as she approached. "Where have you been? A lot's been going on here."

"Hi," she said suspiciously. "I was just back in Vancouver, taking care of a few things."

"Darius told me about your idea. Turns out you were right. There was a measurable change in Chuck's voice on the recording. When we compared it to his voice in person, the audio analyzer could tell the difference. We can now tell if someone is possessed by a fade, just by hearing them speak! It was enough proof that Darius finally let Chuck and Colin go."

"That's great! I'm so relieved." Petra had been wondering if Chuck or any of the other magicians would ever see the outside of this facility again.

Doug nodded. "Yeah, we've been busy making contact with Ortiz and the others using that Hart's Blood protocol. We explained things to Colin, who explained things to them. As of about an hour ago, the 'rival organization' is gone. The Veil is whole again!"

"I'm glad. The last thing we needed was for this controversy to continue." Especially given the new controversy that she had just added to the mix.

"Anyway, Nick wanted to see you as soon as you got back. I was told to bring you to the analysis room where they're coordinating the, uh, reintegration I guess you could call it."

Doug led the way downstairs, to a section of the Atoll Petra had never actually entered. Data analysis from sites all around the world was a massive undertaking, especially without reliable computer access due to the REMP. There were stacks of boxes filled with files lining one wall in the room, and a bunch of people surrounding a table in the middle. Darius and Nick were on one side, talking with Chuck and Colin further down. Andy had her usual place next to the door, but even she looked uplifted.

Petra rounded the table and hugged Chuck tightly. "Congratulations on your name-clearing," she said into his shoulder, and he shook a little as he laughed.

"Thanks. I hear I have you to thank for most of it, actually," he said after letting her go. "Good catch with the recording idea." He stepped back a pace. "This is Colin."

The thinner man gave her an apologetic smile, and shook her hand. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused, ma'am," he said with a soft British accent.

"Don't worry about it. You were acting under orders, and neither of you are responsible. I'm just glad you're out and about."

He gave her a stately nod. "As am I."

"I know we're all feeling relieved about this turn of events," Darius cut in from his end of the table, "but we still have work to do. About an hour ago our office in Vancouver got a message over their secure internet line. It was text only, without an email or messaging header. It could only have been sent by a fade."

Everyone looked at him curiously, even Nick. Apparently this was news to him as well. "The sender wants to meet with us, tonight," Darius went on. "He claims to be Despair himself, and says he wants to discuss terms."

Petra looked at Nick. "Darius and I didn't tell anyone but Morty what we had discovered. There's no surveillance that works here on the island. The only way this fade would know to use that name is if he has outside information. Is it possible this is actually the same Despair from back in the middle ages?"

"Doubtful. It's more likely one of his subordinates. Fades gain the title of their superiors when those superiors lose interest in being in charge. Or are killed in this case," Nick added thoughtfully.

"Regardless of who it is, they know a great deal about us," Darius said grimly. "The message said to bring a portable EMP generator, so we don't have to worry about being attacked by other fades, and to bring a willing human host. Apparently this fade can't take normal shape like the others, and needs someone to talk through." He nodded at Petra, who felt a moment of pride at her accomplishment. Morty had hinted that a fade in that condition might not be able to survive for long outside of a human.

The whole room was quiet for a short time. Petra doubted anyone here wasn't curious about what this Despair fade had to say. "Would it be safe for the host, though?" Nick filled in her thought before she could say it. "We can use the EMP to send other fades away, but for all we know it could tear the human up on the inside before leaving!"

"When it took me, I only lost a few minutes of memory," Chuck said slowly, and Colin looked sick at the thought. "If this fade wanted to cripple the Veil, wouldn't he have harmed me physically before leaving me? If he could, I mean. If there is a risk, I think it's minimal."

"I volunteer," Doug said from the door.

Petra turned to face him, but he continued before she could ask him why. "I know I'm a screw-up here," he added quickly. "I overthink things, and make mistakes. I'm not good at making snap judgements and deciding what to do quickly like the rest of you. I'm just not that useful to the Veil, but this is something I can do to help."

"You're one of us, Doug. That's all that matters," Darius answered. "Unfortunately, you can't help in this case. The message specifically asked for a woman as a host. Apparently this fade is female. I never spoke to any of the Despair faction back in the day," he shrugged, "so I can't confirm it."

"Darius and I can't be possessed, because of what Morty did to us," Petra added, and looked back to the door.

Andy looked a little pale, but she nodded tightly. "I would never order any of my security people to do this, regardless of gender. I volunteer, but if you see *any* funny business at that meeting, you hit that EMP and blast that thing out of me, got it?"

"We will," Nick assured her, and the rest of the room made noises of assent as well.

"Very well," Darius said to the room. "The meeting is set in that battery factory where you were first attacked, Petra. It's possible this fade was responsible for the attack as well. We have ten hours to make all the arrangements and scout the area. Chuck, I want you to keep working on your magic detection device. I know Colin and the others have already told us about the magic they used during their 'mission' in Germany, but it's possible Despair uses her own magic and it might be helpful tracking her down. Nick, Andy, I want you two to work with Colin and finalize the reintegration of the Veil. Doug, get back to the control room and keep an eye on things up there. Petra, come with me."

The others got to work immediately, as Darius led her down the hall. As soon as they were out of easy earshot, he turned to her. "I won't be attending that meeting. I want you to go in my place."

Whatever Petra had been expecting, it wasn't that. "I don't think that's a good idea. You know a great deal more about Despair than I do. Everything I've learned has been from history lessons!"

"That's part of the problem. Despair knows me as well. She knows I was there when her faction was destroyed. I may not have pulled the trigger, but I might as well have been aiming the gun. We don't need my presence there, not when you're available to take my place. I'll stay in the Vancouver office, listening in on coms and watching if she tries to pull anything."

His logic was pretty ironclad, but Petra still didn't like it. He looked determined though, and she doubted she could change his mind. "All right, I'll do it. Andy has to be there too, but I think Nick and Chuck should come along to advise me. In fact I insist on it."

"Agreed. After the meeting, we'll need to speak to some of the fade leaders and tell them what's happening. If they don't know already. Then, in a few days, we'll go to Morty's and he can complete the transfer from me to you."

He said it matter-of-factly, as if he was just making a haircut appointment, but Petra couldn't ignore the statement's importance. What *was* it with her and suicidal people today, anyway? "No way," she grabbed him by the shoulders. "You have at least two weeks left, old man. Maybe more. You're not checking out early, do you hear me?"

"It's time, Petra. The most important parts of your training are done. The rest is procedural, or operational, which Nick can help you with. You've met the fades and interacted with them as equals. The leaders did have fears about you, but those fears are dissipating. Your instincts about Chuck's innocence, and who our enemy really is, were spot on. Most importantly, you've earned the respect of the Veil personnel. You encouraged Doug when he needed it, and worked with Andy professionally. You stepped in when Nick and Chuck couldn't trust each other. Even Colin, who until recently saw you as an enemy, looks up to you now!"

Petra wasn't sure about any of that really, but he was just standing there, looking at her with pride. "I'm.. not ready, Darius! I don't think I can do this job like you do!"

"Of course you won't. You'll have your own way of doing things: your own style distinct from mine. I didn't think I was ready either, back when I started the Veil. There were so many different factions each with their own agenda. They all had so much fear of Morty and by extension, me. I could never have predicted that we would forge a lasting peace at the time, nor that the Veil would become such a useful tool in keeping that peace." He put his hands on her shoulders this time. "We aren't called upon to do the tasks that we can, Petra. We do the tasks that we *must*, so that we grow as we succeed."

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Chapter 19

The battery factory overlooking the alley wasn't in use this late at night, but it was guarded. Nick had made a call to the guard's superior, getting him transferred off-site for a few hours. Apparently the Veil had a lot of pull with companies world-wide. Either that or he'd impersonated some law enforcement or military agency to get it done. It was most likely the latter, given how secretive the Veil had to be.

Petra climbed the stairs up to the second level with the others, not at all glad to be back here. The first time around, she had been filled with curiosity and adventuresome excitement, as she and Didi had followed Darius. Now all she could think about was the metaphorical weight on her shoulders. Darius wasn't even gone yet, and she felt it already. When he did.. die, she'd probably feel it even more.

Andy was in the lead, armed and sweeping for danger. She had two of her security people along, one with her in front, and the other taking up the rear. No one was expecting any trouble, but Andy didn't believe in taking unnecessary risks. Nick and Chuck were flanking Petra in the middle, flashlights out. They hadn't used any of the building's lighting for secrecy's sake, and also because manifesting fades were easier to see in the darkness than in a well-lit room.

Petra couldn't help but be reminded of Didi blacking out the place as well, the first time she was here. She would be here in spirit, if not in body.

When they reached the large room, Andy had her people spread out and check the rest of the floor. Chuck examined the exposed power line near the window, which was apparently where Despair would be making her appearance. Nick tapped her shoulder though, and beckoned her away from the window.

They were still a little exploratory in their relationship, and Petra was wondering if he wanted some time alone with her, but apparently this was all business. "I got a call from our guy in Timber Creek today. Your friend is apparently doing much better. According to her file, she's responding well to the meds, and might be ready for release in a few weeks."

Petra wasn't surprised, but she did try to give the impression of relief in the darkness. "That's good to hear."

"Is it?" Nick went on flatly. "I was told she had two visitors since she got there. The first was her mother, the day after she arrived. The second was another woman two days after that. She had tried to kill herself and was on suicide watch, so the second woman wasn't allowed to see her, but she did give the name Petra to the receptionist." His tone got even flatter, if possible. "Then, miraculously, Miss Halstaff started getting better. Should I state the obvious part out loud?"

Petra glanced over at Chuck, who wasn't looking their way. "I was going to tell you after this meeting. I didn't want to distract you, given how important this might be!" She kept her voice low.

"I can't believe you told her!" He whispered furiously in her direction. "You know how important it is to keep the secret- these rules exist for a reason! If there's one rule you don't break, *it's that one*."

"She tried to kill herself, Nick. She'd found a way around the suicide watch, and would have tried again. It was either tell her, or let her die! And even if she hadn't found a way, that's no way to live. I broke the rules and I'll accept whatever punishment that calls for, but I don't regret helping my friend."

He growled. "But the punishment won't all be on you, Petra! This has happened before. Sometimes Veil operatives feel guilty keeping their work secret from friends or loved ones. Sometimes they talk in their sleep and invite questions. The last time was forty years ago, before I joined up. The agent was punished, but so was the person he told!"

Petra hadn't expected that, and felt a knot form in her stomach. "What will happen to Didi?" She asked as calmly as she could manage.

"I don't know. Darius has always dealt with this on a case-by-case basis. Early magicians working for the Veil tried to erase memories, but that never worked out. I know of at least two cases where Darius had to execute the people involved!"

He paused, looking pained. "She's already in a mental health facility, and that's a good thing for her. I have to talk with her and gauge the risk involved. Unless you plan on running out the clock and dealing with it yourself," he added sardonically.

It was clear what he meant. Until Petra was officially in charge of the Veil, Darius and Nick ran things together. When that happened she'd have the final word, and could effectively pardon both herself and Didi. Selfishly, Petra wanted to do that, but what message would it send to the rest of the Veil? "She won't tell anyone. She doesn't even know anything about the Veil! I only described the keys and the fades to her."

Nick only shook his head, and the disappointment in his eyes was like a physical blow to her. "We've got work to do," he said, turning back towards the window.

Andy had completed her sweep and was standing at attention next to the exposed power line. She'd put on rubber shoes, just for protection. Her second-in-command Simon Trent had taken her weapons, and set up the portable EMP generator a few meters away. Chuck joined Petra and Nick as they approached, and frowned at her. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," she said dismissively, and nodded to Andy.

"Remember, don't hesitate if she tries to do anything stupid," Andy said, both to Simon and to Petra. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and grabbed the cable with her left hand.

There was no danger of electrocution, not unless she was somehow grounded or touching another cable, but it couldn't have been comfortable for her. Andy bore it well, and then opened her eyes.

She smiled, looking around the room. "It's good to finally see your faces," she said with the self-satisfied tone of a well fed predator. "I feel I've gotten to know you all very well over the past few months. Especially you, Chuck. How is my dear Colin, anyway?"

Chuck's lips tightened, and his hands balled into fists. "Pissed."

Petra put a hand on his shoulder, and he relaxed a bit. "What is it you want, Despair?" She tried to sound fair.

The fade shrugged, looking noncommittal. "Just to have a friendly conversation. To let you know why I've suddenly stepped forward, after staying hidden for so long."

It was very strange. She was speaking with Andy's voice, using her body, but Despair had none of her mannerisms or word choice. It was a different person in there right now! Petra looked over at Simon, who was also monitoring the voice feed, and he nodded. He had detected the same signal on top of Andy's voice that had shown up on Colin's body cam footage.

"Are you the same Despair who orchestrated the Bubonic Plague?" Petra asked. She wanted to get the fade talking, hopefully enough to slip up and reveal some information they could use, but also because she really was curious. This fade was at least different than all the others she'd met so far.

Despair shook her head. "No. As you've probably guessed, that was my brother. I never wanted to be in charge, but now I am by default. I'm sure you know how that feels."

Petra glanced to both her sides. Nick and Chuck both looked angry and indignant, and she could feel some of that herself. "Why did you manipulate the Veil into fracturing? Why cause us so much trouble? The Veil didn't even exist back when your people were killed!"

"I don't blame you for Mortemer's actions," Despair said softly. "I don't even really blame him anymore. I just had to keep the Veil off balance long enough to make contact with the other fades. Once you were selected as the next immortal, I knew they would be upset. Concerned at the very least, and open to my proposal."

"And what proposal did you make to them?"

Despair held up a hand. Her right hand though; her left was still on the cable. From what Darius had said, a fade could transit into a cable instantaneously. She was no fool. If they set off the EMP, she would be on her way well before the blast could hit her.

"I'll get to that in a moment. First, you need to understand where I'm coming from. What we did in 1347 was an atrocity. There is no other word for it. We only started the first of over a dozen plagues, but we were the ones who tipped the first domino. When my brother ordered it, there were some of us who were hesitant, and some who were all for it. We should have stood up against it. If we'd stood up to him together, we *could* have stopped it! But we didn't. Instead we committed an atrocity.

"But what was done to us was also an atrocity! I'm not trying to defend our actions: there is no defense. But by the same token, you can't defend Mortemer's! He attacked us without warning, and wiped us out in an instant! We were never told not to interfere with the humans, nor to abstain from possession. If he had put those rules in place, we would have obeyed them! If not out of respect for humans, then at least out of fear of reprisal."

She trailed off at that, her face set and angry. Petra glanced at her friends, seeing some surprise and thoughtfulness. "Rage told me that no one knew exactly who had killed the Despair faction, or how. You only found out later, when Darius tried to open negotiations with the fades."

Despair nodded. "And he was mostly right. Mortemer is the first fade to have ever existed. He's more.. energy than person. He created us all, in his home dimension, an unfathomable time ago. After that we spread out to various realms including this one. We were here for so long that we eventually forgot all about him! Then he killed us- his own children- for breaking a rule we didn't even know existed! Parent of the year, that one."

She looked down for a moment, and her voice cracked as she went on. "He didn't just kill my family, though. He absorbed them. Their personalities died, but the energy making up their forms- *our forms!*- went back into him! He fed on them, like some kind of animal consuming the flesh of its offspring.

"I survived, barely. You've probably guessed how. I had to stay hidden, inside human after human throughout the years. I never enjoyed it. The humans I possessed had no memories of the time I spent inside them. I couldn't risk being alone, either. If one of them died, and no one found the body within a few hours, I would have died as well! Even after you built electrical cables and fiber optics, and I could use them to go anywhere in the world, I still had to end up inside a human body. I could never be free, as my surviving brothers and sisters are."

"Some people might say it's a fitting punishment," Chuck put in. "After all, you did kill twenty-five million people."

Petra gave him a harsh glance, but he didn't seem to notice. And Despair did give a mirthless chuckle. "Maybe it is. But this is bigger than me and my punishment. My brother and I, and hundreds more of us, committed that crime together. It took us weeks of effort to arrange it, to find the sailors and make sure they were infected, and send them off to die on those plague ships. Weeks of us all working in concert. It took *effort*!

"What Mortemer did took no effort at all, and only a whim and an instant. He killed us in a flash of anger! No one person should have that kind of power. No one should be able to end hundreds- or millions- of lives just with a thought like that."

"I take it that's what you were talking to the other fades about?" Petra said, finally seeing where this was going.

Despair focused on her. "Yes. I've been living in terror for centuries, but they have been almost as afraid. Perhaps they could convince themselves they were safe for a time, but when you were chosen as the next immortal, it brought all those fears back into their minds. We're all dancing at the whim of a madman, Petra. Every time you humans get involved in a world war, or set off an atomic bomb, or start a global pandemic, we get twitchy. He could blame it on us, and finish what he started!"

Despite herself, Petra felt a stab of sympathy. Not for Despair necessarily, but for all the fades here on earth.

Despair smiled again, but this one was satisfied and not predatory. "As of last week, the leaders of the fades have reached a concordance. For the first time in history, we are all agreed on what must be done. Mortemer must give up his power. He must transfer it into others, as he has done with you and Darius, so that he is no longer an existential threat to us."

Wow. That really was something. For the first time ever, fades were issuing an ultimatum to Morty, rather than the other way around? Petra couldn't be sure of it, though. "Are we just supposed to take your word on this?"

"Not at all. Contentment will be along within a day or so to confirm everything I've said to you. You will see our determination then."

"What if Morty refuses?" Nick asked, finally speaking. "You have no power to force him, and no way to stop him."

"That's true," Despair admitted, "but we do have the power to affect his pets. If he refuses to give up his power, fades everywhere will start possessing humans at will. We will use you to kill as many humans as possible. The most likely outcome will be global nuclear devastation, and human extinction. Even if you are willing to give up the Veil's anonymity and warn the world, you could never protect enough people to keep it from happening."

"That's insane!" Petra cut in. "Morty would retaliate, and kill all of you as well!"

"A person is only insane if they're not aware of it. This is the insanity borne of desperation, Petra. We've decided that it's worth risking our lives- everyone's lives, actually- if it means we won't have to live in fear anymore. It's easy for you to live in fear, because your lives are so brief. Ours are endless." She sighed. "We have had this sword suspended over our chests for hundreds of years now. Mortemer will remove it, or we will take hold of it and impale ourselves on it."

That last metaphor was particularly striking to Petra. She had studied the Sword of Damocles in school, but never really understood it until she'd been put in a position of authority. With difficulty, she kept her voice neutral. "If, somehow, we're able to convince Morty to give up his power, what happens then? What's to stop you from going all Black Death on us again?"

Despair shrugged. "The Veil, of course. You have the technology. You can repel us using EMPs and Faraday cages. You can kill us, individually, using electrified blades. But you have no reason for concern, Petra. Thanks to your internet, we have no need to possess humans anymore. And we've moved past the whole 'genocide for fun' thing. The other factions will keep following the rules. I'll follow the rules too, if you can get Mortemer to do one thing for me."

"I'm afraid to ask," Petra said darkly.

"Oh, it's not much, considering everything else. You see when Mortemer absorbed my family, he killed them. They're gone, and nothing can bring them back. That energy is still a part of him, though. He can restore me to my body, making me a 'real boy' again. I would be able to survive without possessing people, and I could start recruiting for a new Despair faction."

That was a disturbing notion, and apparently Chuck felt the same. "You don't really expect any fades to join up, do you? The last time, you ended up being nothing more than a death cult!"

"Why not? Thanks to human stupidity, there's now more than enough despair to go around. Your cultural and religious conflicts, for example. Your gleeful willingness to inflict suffering on others for financial reasons. Your hilarious refusal to do anything about the impending destruction of your ecosystem. It's an all-you-can-eat buffet for despair right now! I anticipate a great many fades will join my cause. I'll play by the rules, though. If you can get Mortemer to restore my body."

Chuck's face flushed, and he opened his mouth to say more, but Petra held up a hand. "We'll.. consider what you've said, Despair. At the very least, we'll tell Morty that you're still kicking. I'm sure he'll find that interesting." She was about to ask Despair to leave Andy's body, when she let go of the power cable.

"Ok," the woman said shakily. "That was weird."

Petra nodded down at Simon, who set off the EMP just to be sure.

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Chapter 20

A few hours later, Contentment verified most of what Despair had told them, and then the debate began in earnest. Petra was back on the island, with Darius, Nick and Chuck. With the confirmation of Chuck's possession, his rivalry with Nick seemed to be at an end. Petra had found that both frustrating and amusing. Sure, they had ended their feud, but if both had shown a little patience, maybe she would have been able to find the proof exonerating Chuck *before* there had even been a conflict.

"How realistic is Despair's threat?" She asked Nick and Darius. "If Morty refuses, how much damage can she do, with the support of Contentment and the others?"

"A lot," Nick said grimly, pulling a sheet of paper from the recent reports and positioning it on the table. "I had our analysts write up a basic prediction for a worst-case scenario. It would only take twenty-five or twenty-six fades possessing officials in the US and Russia to start a nuclear war between the two. Another fifteen for China, and about the same for India and Pakistan. We have no idea how operational North Korea's missile program is, but the number of officials there can't be too high. There are *thousands* of fades out there. If they're all working together, they could wipe out over 90 percent of humanity in a day or so! The last time, it took Morty several weeks to figure out which fades were responsible for the plague and kill them. Even if he strikes within minutes of the first possessions, it could still trigger another world war."

Chuck brought his fists down on the table. "But we can keep these people from being possessed in the first place! EMPs to push the fades away, and Faraday cages to keep them out. Magnets even, in a pinch! If I had a few days, I could whip up a protection spell that could be used at a distance. With help from Colin and the others, though. It would be a bit much to do alone."

"How?" Darius asked. "Even if we told them the truth and used magic to prove it, it would be months before any of these world leaders would even let us close, much less set up equipment to protect them. The fades would see what we were doing long before then." He grimaced. "If I'd come forward with the Veil hundreds of years ago, maybe we would be common enough by now that they would accept our protection, but I insisted we stay in the shadows."

"You had no way of predicting this, Darius. No one knew Despair was still alive," Petra reassured him. "Besides, I refuse to believe the entire fade community would be backing this idea. Contentment, Joy, Excitement.. what would they have, in a world devastated by nuclear weapons?"

"It's a gamble," Nick said slowly. "They don't want that outcome any more than we do, but they're sick of just waiting for Morty to axe them. I would be, too. Despair wasn't wrong about him having way too much power."

"Don't tell me you agree with what she's done!" Petra gave him an incredulous look.

Nick shook his head. "No, but I do know what it's like to have your whole family wiped out without warning or provocation. She's suffered just like I have, and for much longer. At least I had an adoptive family, and then Darius and the Veil. She's had to go it alone."

"In a way, this conflict was inevitable," Darius said softly, commanding the attention of the others in his usual, quiet way. "I felt sick, despite my body's state, upon seeing the devastation wrought by the Black Death. I felt Morty's response was entirely justified, and gladly helped him verify who had done it. But after he struck back, I started to wonder if we had gone too far. Human population recovered after a few hundred years. We have children all the time, and we're used to the idea of death. For the fades, death is the ultimate horror. They have no offspring, and no expiration date. We didn't just cross a line, Morty and I. We shredded that line."

He looked away from the group, clearly ashamed. "I thought that the Veil might serve as some kind of poultice, to heal the wounds dealt to humanity and the fades, but I can see now I was just being naïve. I may have delayed the confrontation for a few hundred years, but as soon as humanity developed world-ending weapons, nothing could stop it."

There was a long silence running through the four of them. The sound of the REMP going off just two floors above them was a distant thrum. Petra had gotten used to the usual flash of energy passing through the room, just as she'd adapted to wearing contacts. "All right, then. I guess we just have to hope we can convince Morty. If we can't, the best we can expect is that he wipes out all the fades before they can do any damage." She gave a bitter chuckle. "Maybe in the next life, we'll be forgiven for abetting genocide!"

Chuck drew in a sharp breath. "That's it!" He smiled out of the blue. "I've got an idea! An.. incentive, I guess, for Morty. Nick, you've been to London, right? I need you to send me there, with a transport key so I can get back. I need to visit an old friend."

Nick blinked at the sudden change in tone. "I take it whatever your idea is, you can't discuss it because of the Pact?"

Chuck nodded, and Nick asked no further questions. After getting a nod from Darius, he went over to the conference room door- one of many which had been replaced following Chuck's exoneration- and used his key. Once he'd opened the door, he put another key in Chuck's hands. "Good luck." Chuck gave him a grateful glance, and then vanished into England.

Darius tapped Petra on the shoulder. "Tomorrow at noon, island time, you and I will return to Italy. We'll present the fades' demands to Morty, and then regardless of his response, we'll complete the transfer." He hesitated. "The last time we did this, there was very little ceremony involved. It was just me, my predecessor and Morty. If you want to bring someone from the Veil along though, for moral support, I understand. Someone to help you bear the burden, as it were."

His meaning was clear: someone to help her carry his body back to earth. He had been a Roman soldier; no doubt he'd dealt with many bodies in his time. Carrying the body of his predecessor would have been no big deal. Petra hadn't even been able to attend her father's wake. She nodded, realizing that help would be necessary.

"Actually, Nick and I need to get to Vancouver," she said after a moment. "There's a friend *we* need to visit, and I'd rather do it before tomorrow."

Darius nodded sedately, and went back to the papers arrayed on the table. Petra shook her head. There was that trust again. He didn't know she'd told someone about the fades, and he didn't care. Darius knew, heart and mind, that she was the right person for the job, and that was all that mattered to him.

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Fortunately, Timber Creek was still open when they got back. It was hard to fathom just how big the Pacific really was, at least for Petra, until she started thinking about the time zones. It was a three hour difference between Vancouver and Nova Scotia, where one of her old pen pals lived. It was three hours *earlier* on Kiri Atoll than it was even in Vancouver!

They exited one of the doors in the basement next to the boiler room, where people were the least likely to see and ask questions. From there it was just up a few flights of stairs to the main visiting area. Didi smiled at Petra, and then her eyes grew concerned as she saw Nick. She recognized him of course; she had taken photos of him back before the first fade attack.

Petra steeled herself. Nick was right: she could very easily just keep this quiet from everyone until she was in charge tomorrow. He would back her play, no matter how risky he thought it was. But he was also right in another way: Petra had flouted the rules by telling Didi. She had to answer for that, and Didi had to be interviewed and observed to make sure she wasn't a threat to the Veil.

That was, if the Veil even existed tomorrow. Petra introduced the two of them, and then stepped away. Nick sat with Didi in the open courtyard, and Petra took the opportunity to record a message on her phone for her mom and Mark. If.. the worst should happen, she wanted her mom to at least hear her voice before the end. Petra would send the message off as soon as she got back from Morty's, if he refused. Somehow she doubted she'd get cell service in Morty's domain.

At least the discussion between Nick and Didi looked like it was going well. For some reason it was Nick who looked surprised and not Didi. He grew a little animated after that, but it wasn't much by normal standards. Petra had spent a little more time alone with him since her breach of protocol. He forgave quickly, when it came to her keeping this from him. It was her harming the Veil he couldn't get past. He really was a company man, through and through. Petra hadn't even thought about introducing him to her friends yet, and here he was interviewing- or perhaps interrogating- one of them!

After another ten minutes or so, Didi extended a hand to Nick. He hesitated at first, and then shook it. Petra figured it was time, and went over to the two of them tentatively. Didi smiled at her. "I don't know if it's appropriate for me to give my blessing here, but this one definitely has potential," she nodded at Nick.

Petra was confused. Had the conversation even been about Darius and the fades? "I'm glad you approve," she said evasively, before taking a sip of water she'd gotten earlier.

"Anyway, I'll be going with you two to Italy tomorrow," Didi said conversationally, and Petra almost choked. "I'm not going to any island in the middle of nowhere, or to some freaky other dimension, but I do want to be there for you."

"You told her about the transfer?" Petra asked Nick raggedly, when she'd coughed a bit. The water had been more for show, and for something to do, but it still impeded her speech slightly.

"She already knew most everything else," he said mildly, though surprise still lingered in his expression. "It was either remand her to custody and lock her up on the island, or trust her to help you through this. Given what we might be facing tomorrow, I figured this was the better way."

"Besides, I've always wanted to go back to Italy. I haven't been there since I was a kid," Didi continued, clearly enjoying Petra's confusion.

Nick seemed to have really leaned into disclosing secrets, at least to Didi. If he weren't such a straight shooter, Petra might have thought he was doing it just to impress his girlfriend. He was right, now that she had a little time to think about it. Petra would need moral support tomorrow, and this way she could have a friend there without having to tell anyone else. The damage, such as it was, was already done.

"All right, then," she finally answered, looking at Didi. She looked much better than before, as was to be expected now that she knew she wasn't losing her mind. "I'll pick you up here just before three pm tomorrow. That'll be noon, island time. We'll go to Italy, but you'll have to stay there during the transfer. I doubt Morty would like non-Veil people to be present."

Didi shrugged. "Sounds good to me. I like travelling, but I'm kind of attached to this dimension anyway."

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Ever since he'd gotten back from England, Chuck had been nervous. Not about what he'd heard there, but about what he had to do now. When someone knocked on the door to his quarters, he stood quickly. "Come in."

Colin opened the door and stepped in, nearly cracking his head on the low-hanging light fixture. He wasn't as tall as Nick, but everything in here was placed with Chuck's limited height in mind. "You asked to see me?"

What they had to discuss was semi-private, but Chuck didn't want to close the door. He didn't want Colin to feel trapped in any way. He did look different since getting back, though. His time in Germany had mostly been outdoors, it seemed. He was weathered and tanned, and his hair had retained a wild appearance in the last few days. "Yes. It's about your uncle, Lord Harmon."

Colin took the seat offered to him, and looked over at Chuck searchingly. "What about him?"

"I went to Bristol this morning, to look at the historical archives in the borough record office. I was looking for this," he held out a picture of a red circlet meant to be worn around the neck, about as wide as a man's hand.

Colin recognized it immediately, and nodded. "The Ruby Torc. It's Celtic, according to Uncle Tristan."

"Yes. According to the records, he bought it from another collector twelve years ago. Do you know where it is now?"

His brow furrowing slightly, Colin nodded. "It's in his estate in Bristol, along with the rest of his collection."

Now for the tough question. "Do you think your uncle could be persuaded to part with it?"

Colin let out a strangled cough. "Uh, *no*. He would never let it out of his sight. It's priceless- dating back to Arthurian times!"

"It's even older than that, actually," Chuck qualified. "It's a magic artifact, built by Merlin. Even I wasn't sure about that until I contacted my friend in the Gloucester Coven. Have you ever been to Lord Harmon's estate? To where the collection is kept?"

"Not since I was a kid. Wait, you're not thinking of stealing-"

"We don't have much choice, Colin!" Chuck cut him off desperately. It would only be a few hours now, before Petra and Darius spoke with Morty. He had that long to get the Torc to them. "It's the only thing that might convince-"

Chuck bit his tongue and looked away briefly. He wasn't allowed to tell Colin, or anyone else, what Despair had said back in that factory. Everyone present had been sworn to secrecy, on Darius' orders. If the Veil found out that the world might be ending tomorrow, it could cause chaos. They would want to go and be with their families, at the very least. The fades watched them as well, and might decide that the change in behavior meant Morty had already refused. No, Darius had good reasons to want to keep this under wraps, but it didn't make Chuck's job any easier right now.

"Look, I'm not allowed to tell you why, but we need that Torc. Darius and Petra need to take it with them into Morty's realm."

Colin stood suddenly, and started pacing by the door. He always did that when agitated- it helped him think. "You're asking me to trust you. To steal a priceless artifact from my uncle for you, and you can't even tell me why? The last time I took you at your word, I committed treason against the Veil!"

"I'm not possessed this time, Colin. I know you're still sore about what happened. It's not something that people can just get over in a few days. But Despair used *both* of us to achieve her goals. You're not the only one who feels guilt and rage over what we did." He resisted the urge to stop Colin's pacing. "You know I wouldn't ask this unless it was important. You're the only person who's seen the door in your uncle's estate. Using one of the keys, you could be in and out before anyone knew what was happening. Please. We only have a few hours."

Colin scoffed briefly, probably at the gall of his request. Chuck couldn't blame him. He'd spoken about his uncle repeatedly over the years. Tristan Harmon had sponsored Colin's application to the British SAS, risking his own reputation that his nephew would do well. He'd been devastated when Colin had dropped out after only a few years to join the Veil, especially since Colin couldn't even tell him why. It was ironic, given the current situation.

When Coin finally nodded at him, Chuck let out a relieved breath. "Thank you. I promise I'll tell you everything as soon as Petra gets back. You'll see that it's worth it."

After he left, Chuck felt drained, as if he'd just gone ten rounds with a heavyweight champion. He tried to distract himself by continuing his magic-tracing spell. According to Colin's initial debriefing, another agent working for Chuck had made contact with him a few months after Lisbon. She had borrowed the transport key he made for his group, and then returned it a few hours later.

Colin had given a description of the woman, but sketch artists could do only so much. She was black-haired, mid-thirties, about five feet tall. She'd most likely been a temporary host: someone Despair had possessed long enough to interact with Colin's group, and then abandoned once she was done. If that was the case, tracking her down would be pointless. Possessed people remembered nothing of their time as a host.

However, his spell might be useful. If she had used the key she'd borrowed from Colin, it might leave a trace. Chuck just had to isolate that particular signal from all the others in the area. That was no easy task, given how often the Veil used the things. Perhaps he should recommend essential travel only, when things calmed down.

He took a break a few hours later to bid Darius and Petra farewell. They'd drawn quite a crowd actually; Darius had founded this place after all, and he wasn't coming back. Chuck tried not to get choked up about that. Darius had been his boss for a long time. They'd never been very social, but he did respect the old man a great deal.

As Darius, Petra and Nick all used their keys and left, Chuck could see Colin from down the hall. Apparently he'd come through: Petra was carrying the Ruby Torc. He didn't look at Chuck for long, though. This was just another wound in an already deep cut left by Despair.

Sighing, Chuck went back to work. His spell went off, thankfully without a hitch, and began spitting out coordinates into his mind. He used the mirrors to contact Andy upstairs, and she helped him cross-reference known Veil activity with the numbers he was getting. Together they eliminated most of the travel as mundane.

"Here's one," he said after a moment. "Someone used a key to get to the island eight weeks ago, stayed for a few minutes, and then used the same key to leave. That's not on your list, is it?"

"No," Andy's voice came through the mirror. "It couldn't have been Despair. The REMP would push a normal fade away, but it would kill her. Does she have any human minions she could have used?"

"Not that I know of," he said distractedly. Something about this particular trip seemed important, though. "Wait.. that was the day we first brought Petra to the island! The REMP was shut off for a few hours so that she wouldn't go blind! Despair must have known we would do that. It was the perfect time to sneak in here and back out again!"

"Where did she go?"

Hastily, Chuck scanned over his list of coordinates, and then rattled off longitude and latitude for Andy. There had been a fair bit of travel between Vancouver and Kiri Atoll, so he recognized the general area as Vancouver, but this wasn't the Veil office used downtown.

"Hang on, I'm looking it up now," Andy said, the sound of her fingers on a keyboard following her voice.

"At least Despair doesn't know when or where Darius and Petra have to be, to go see Morty," Chuck said into the mirror. "Even if she did break in here, none of that information was stored anywhere on the island."

"It's not the Veil office," Andy said unnecessarily. "It's a private residence. Registered to a Diedre Halstaff."

Chuck felt like the floor had dropped out from under him. Halstaff was Despair?? And just yesterday, Nick had told Chuck that he was going to go see her in that mental health facility, along with Petra! If they had told her where they were going..

"Chuck? Are you there?"

Chuck vaulted to his feet and ran over to the door. He wrenched it shut, fitted his own key to it, and thought hard about the graveyard in Italy. A moment later he was out under the open sky, searching for the stone circle on the ground. There was a woman lying on the ground outside the shack, apparently unconscious. Chuck put two fingers to her neck, and could feel a heartbeat. It was Halstaff. Despair really had been possessing her.

The stone was just on the other side of the shack, but there was no sign of Darius, Petra or Nick. "Good God," Chuck breathed, as Andy's voice continued to echo through the open door. Darius and Petra were immune to possession, but Despair must have jumped into Nick!

And Chuck had no way of warning them.

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Chapter 21

The four of them enjoyed the late Italian evening, next to the graveyard outside of Terni. Didi seemed to have adapted well to key travel, but she did have a lot of international experience before this. She embraced Petra briefly, and then asked Nick to discuss some 'arrangements' out by the shack. It was pretty clear she meant funeral arrangements; Darius politely ignored that.

That left just Petra and Darius. "There's something I wanted to tell you for a while now," Petra started, and then paused. "Before you.."

"Before I die," he finished for her. "Go on."

"I know why you saved my life. I read Torius' journal, and I know you two were friends. It's not much of a leap to assume he's buried in this very graveyard, or near enough to it. I just wanted you to know that."

In a rare display, Darius looked ashamed. He glanced over at the rows of headstones. "I admit I chose you for the wrong reason. You were dying, and I couldn't allow that. I wasn't there for him, but I could be there for you. It was selfish, and shortsighted. Even so, I'm still convinced you're the right person for the job. You've proven that to me, and to many in the Veil. I made the right decision for the wrong reasons."

"Now I just have to prove it to myself," she said wryly.

Nick came back around from the other side of the shack. "She'll wait there for us, however long it takes. Then you or I can transport her back to Vancouver."

He sounded a bit strange, though that was probably because his friend and mentor for decades was about to die. He was carrying a camcorder, which was meant to replace the one in Morty's realm. It was much larger, but apparently had more resolution and power.

Petra was also carrying that strange ruby circlet that Chuck had given her. His explanation for what it did sounded ridiculous, but then so did keys that linked doors across the world. She'd learned to take at least a few things on faith. The three of them stood inside the stone circle and waited for a few moments. Then everything around them went black.

As before, the cabin stood out against the inky darkness that made up this dimension. Faint trombone music echoed from within, as Petra moved up to the door and knocked. The music cut off, and a voice bid them to enter.

From his usual music corner, Morty lowered his long brass horn, and it vanished as he did so. "Come in, come in," he welcomed them. "Nick, long time no see! How have you been, son?"

Nick twitched a smile. "Just fine, sir. Keeping busy. You?"

"Oh, business as usual." Morty's glance swept over Darius, and his expression faltered slightly. "Right. Should we get on with the transfer?"

Darius nodded at Petra, and she shook her head. "Actually, there's something we need to tell you first, Morty. The fades have reached a concordance, and it's about you."

He listened politely as she outlined Despair's survival, her words to the Veil members, and her collusion with the fade leaders. He did seem surprised at parts of it, but in no way did he look upset or offended.

Even after months of getting used to the idea, Petra was still impressed by it. Here she was talking to an immortal being of energy, with supreme power and the ability to exercise that power on earth. He was omniscient, at least when it came to fades. Basically to them, he was God Himself! And here she was, presenting terms to him. Either she'd lost her mind, or the fades had.

He seemed particularly interested when she described Despair's request. The idea of spending his own energy to restore a fade, one whom he had tried and failed to kill, must have sounded like the height of arrogance to Morty! Nevertheless, he heard the whole request without interference.

"The rest of the fades insist that you give up your power, Morty," she concluded bluntly. "The same way you gave power to me and Darius." Petra looked over to Darius.

"Based on our rough estimate, you have enough power to alter twenty-eight more people the same way you did me and Petra. That should dilute your power enough that the fades won't consider you a threat anymore." He lifted a binder he'd brought with him from the island. "We have dossiers on every Veil employee worldwide. Hopefully you'll be able to pick a few dozen of them who meet your standards. I can personally vouch for all of them, when they're not being possessed, that is. Chuck and the other magicians declined to be included, for fear of risking the Pact."

Morty glanced at the papers, and then over at Petra. "All fades are made up of energy; mine is just a bit stronger than most. If I give up my power- my energy- I will die. It's that simple. Besides, the fades have no means of compelling me to do anything."

"You're right," Petra spoke up again. "There isn't a stick big enough to convince you. Which is why we brought a carrot," she lifted the ruby circlet. "According to Chuck, this was made by Merlin himself, back when he was living among the Celts in ancient England. Using this, you can live a human life on earth. With Elle. Imagine it; being able to see the face of your beloved for the first time ever!"

"That would make me human?" Morty eyed it skeptically.

"That's what it was made for," she said confidently. That was partly for show, actually. Chuck had seemed confident in its uses, but his source material had been ancient folklore. "It wasn't meant for you specifically, but Merlin did design it for a fade who had fallen in love with a human. She died before he could complete it, but Merlin kept the circlet anyway."

"To see Elle for myself.." Morty said softly. "It is a tempting offer."

He stepped over to Petra, and ran his fingers along the ruby surface. The usual hardness behind his eyes seemed softer for a moment, but then he turned away. "I have a message for the fade leadership. Tell them I said no, categorically, to their demands. I hear their concerns and I understand them, but we have had a stable peace for almost seven hundred years now. They know the rules, and that if they don't break them, I will have no reason to harm them.

"Their threats are a meaningless bluff. They wouldn't harm humanity, even if they could do it before I strike at them. They enjoy your species even more than I do! However if you're still concerned, I can arrange another demonstration to remind them that humanity is not to be touched," he looked expectantly at Petra.

Morty's demonstrations only came in one form: mass murder.

Petra shook her head, trying not to display the horror she felt at his offer. "That won't be necessary."

Morty shrugged. "As you wish. I wouldn't be concerned about the new Despair, either. I've been fine-tuning my detection methods. It's only a matter of time before I pinpoint her location, and then that problem will vanish as well."

"Please, Morty," Nick stepped forward, speaking for the first time since their arrival. "For the first time in our history, every fade is in agreement on this. They made it pretty clear to us that if you refuse, you'll effectively be declaring war on them! Besides, think about what a nuclear war would do to Elle. She'd survive, sure, but her favorite species would all be dead or dying! What kind of life could you have with her after that?"

Morty's face might as well have been carved from stone. "The idea of living a normal human life with Elle is tantalizing, but I'm afraid I must decline. I will not bow to threats, real or imagined, from anyone."

So that was that. Petra hoped to God that Morty was right, and that the fades had just been bluffing. He was gambling with everyone's lives. Maybe if this had happened a few centuries ago, before he could trade video messages with Elle, his decision might have been different. But now, he just didn't need humans anymore.

"Shall we get on with the transfer?" He asked, and at least his tone was a little more sour now. They'd had some effect, if not enough.

He vanished the couch in the middle of the room, giving them space. Then he reached out to Darius on one side, and Petra on the other, and took both their hands in a vise-like grip. Petra braced herself. If this was anything like the last time, she was in for a wild ride. Nick moved around behind them, apparently not wanting to disrupt the moment.

When it started, Petra felt as if she'd taken hold of a full-sized power cable. Her back arched and her neck strained. She couldn't tell if she was screaming or not, as every nerve in her body seemed to fire at once! Dimly, she was aware of motion behind them. The videocamera in Nick's hands fell to the ground, splitting open to reveal an empty space within. Then suddenly, the energy was gone, and Petra was herself again!

She looked to the right and saw Nick there. Hidden inside the camera had been a Cutter- one of those electrified blades Andy had used against Thrill! Nick had swept it through Morty's upper arm, severing it entirely! As she watched, Darius fell to the ground. Even Petra could see that he'd died instantly.

"That was for my family," Nick whispered fiercely into Morty's ear. Petra watched in complete shock as he stepped around from behind them. Morty's arm just floated there in midair, and she could see white light seeping out of both severed ends. Morty seemed completely immobilized, just as Thrill had been back in China. Petra remembered what Nick had said back then: fades are at their most vulnerable when they're transferring energy.

"What are you doing?" She demanded, trying to pull herself free. Despite his condition, Morty's grip was still iron, and she couldn't get away.

Nick ignored her. He leaned in towards Morty's frozen form. "Not so tough now, are you? You should know I actually planned to spare you, if you accepted our terms. Despite everything you did to me and mine, I would have let you live. I was really hoping you'd refuse, though. This way I get to have my revenge!" He dropped the Cutter and reached out to the severed arm, which was still floating in midair.

Nick seemed to convulse for a moment, as a red shadow left his body. It connected with both severed ends, and the light pouring out of them began to float up into the shadow instead. Nick stepped back, disoriented, and the fade that had been inside him slowly took shape in front of him. It must have been Despair. She'd been possessing him!

"Nick!" Petra called out, still struggling to free herself. She could try to reach for the electrified blade herself, but doubted she could swing it far enough. "You were possessed! There's a fade right in front of you. You have to pick up the Cutter and use it on her. Come on, snap out of it!"

He took a deep breath and his expression cleared. After a moment, Nick pulled a pair of sunglasses from his coat pocket and put them on. He focused immediately on Despair in front of him, and took another step back.

"Grab the sword!" Petra repeated urgently. "You have to use it on her while she's still transferring energy!"

"Sorry, but that's not the plan," he said quietly, and Petra felt a cold suspicion run down her spine. Nick pulled his phone out and put it on the kitchen counter.

He moved over to her side, still looking at Despair's rapidly growing form. "I wasn't possessed against my will, Petra. I brought her here willingly, so that she could do what needed to be done. I smuggled the sword in here for her to use. She'll drain enough energy to regain her body, and then she'll return to earth. Morty will die, and the fades will be free."

Petra couldn't believe what she was hearing. "We came here to negotiate with him, not kill him! That was Darius' plan. What would he think of this?" She asked sharply, jabbing her free hand at the body on the ground.

"Darius was wrong!" Nick shouted, his voice thundering in the enclosed space. "He was selfish, and short-sighted, and wrong!"

Nick shuddered, and clenched his fists. When he went on, it was in a normal voice again. "He was supposed to choose me. I wanted it. I was the most qualified. I worked *so hard* for it, for so long! The whole Veil respects me because of that. No one can do the job like I can. No one is as dedicated as I am. The Veil is my whole life!" He shook his head bitterly. "But then he chose you, just because you happen to be a descendent of his best friend."

Despair reached a tendril out to the phone on the desk. "I believe that's called nepotism," the electronic voice translated for her.

That brought a mirthless chuckle from him. "When Darius carried you to the island, I told myself that we just had to trust in him. We had to believe that he was doing the right thing. I trained you. I tried hard, to see in you what he did. I even let myself get.. close to you, so that I could understand you better. But there's nothing to see. You're insightful, intelligent, considerate, but nothing more than that. You'd make a good Veil agent, but you could never lead them. I'm sorry."

Petra felt like the world was collapsing in on her, crushing her. If she'd had any need to breathe, she'd be suffocating!

"I was going to be one of the twenty-eight, you know," Nick went on after a moment. "But thanks to Morty's stubbornness, there won't be any more immortals. Darius is gone. Morty will be too, in a few minutes, but you don't have to die with them. You're still connected to Morty. You can drain energy from him- enough for fifty or sixty years at least! You'd live a long, good life, free of disease and infirmity! It might not compare to running the Veil, but I'd say that's a pretty good consolation prize."

She was still connected. What had Nick said back in China? If a fade was cut in two, it couldn't move unless it was put back together, or got another source of energy!

Despair finally disconnected from Morty, moving back to the table with Nick's phone. She touched it and said, "I'm done here, Nick. Thank you for helping me with this. I will honor our agreement and support peace, once my faction is strong again."

Despair started moving towards the door: it was now or never. Petra gritted her teeth and focused on Morty's hand, still holding hers. Instead of draining energy, she poured all she had into him!

Morty let go immediately, and Petra fell to the ground. She realized she was breathing again, raggedly. Her head swam and she felt sick to her stomach! As she looked up, Morty's arm reconnected to his body, and he reached out to both sides as if stretching.

Despair let out a gasp and darted towards the exit, but quick as lightning a.. cage of sorts formed around her! Another cage, also seemingly made of metal, appeared around Nick at the same time. Morty let out a roar of anger and pain.

"You dare to attack me?" He shouted. "Dictating terms to me was bad enough, but trying to assassinate me in my own home? You will die for this! You and all other fades who backed you!" Morty's hand clenched into a fist, and both cages began to shrink in size.

Despair contracted, trying to shrink away from the edges of her confinement. Nick yelled in pain as the cage touched his skin and hair, burning them. The cages were electrified, and that current was arcing through both of them!

Petra tried to sit up, but her arms refused to respond. From the ground, she called up weakly. "Morty. Stop this, please! You can spare them. You can show mercy."

"They don't deserve mercy," Morty growled, inexorably closing his hand into a fist.

"Think about how you felt just a minute ago!" Petra went on desperately. "You've never felt that way before, have you? Helpless, and afraid. Unable to defend yourself or even to run! That's how the fades have felt for *centuries* now! You don't have to kill them. You don't have to kill anyone!"

Petra felt a strange tightness in her chest, and instinctively knew what it meant. Her heart had stopped. She tried to call out again, but her voice didn't carry. For some reason she thought of her mother, before the darkness took her.

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Chapter 22

At first, Petra wasn't sure what was going on. She was awake, but still in darkness. She wasn't breathing again, but she was aware. Was she dead?

She sat up in the darkness and looked around. There. Morty's collection was behind her, and Elle's ancient dress suspended next to it. She was still in Morty's realm, but his cabin had vanished completely. There was no sign of him or Despair, or those creepy cages, but Darius' body was still lying on the 'ground' nearby.

Nick was there too, sitting cross-legged a few meters away. As she stood up he followed suit, but didn't speak. His face and hair were burned with horizontal and vertical stripes, but he didn't seem to be seriously injured.

"What happened?" Petra thought about it for a moment, and felt for her own pulse. Still no life signs. "Why am I even alive?"

"Long story short, you got through to Morty." Nick shook his head. "You saved my life, and Despair's life, and probably every other fade on earth. You're a hero."

Funny. Being a hero still felt like being normal. "Where did he go? Where's Despair?"

"She went back to earth after Morty let us go. He told me that you were right. She was just afraid. They all were. There was no reason to punish them, even after they approved the plan to kill him. He just needed time to realize that."

Petra felt very strange. Not at all like the last time she'd been altered. She was used to no life signs, but now it felt like her whole body was tingling. No, more like thrumming. "What did he do to me?"

Nick hesitated. "He realized the fades would never stop hounding him, so he took the deal. He transferred his energy- all of his energy- into you, and then ended up in this thing," he lifted the ruby circlet.

Petra closed her eyes and tried to remember. Behind her eyelids, flashes of light repeated. Then they exploded outwards, brighter even than the electric flashes she'd endured in Vancouver and the island! Songs flew past her, their tones shifting as they sped up. Then books, pages shifting in her mind. Then datastreams, millions and billions and trillions of symbols all intermixed and intermingling. It was an explosion not of light, but of information.

Petra staggered backwards, opening her eyes again. Only they weren't really eyes anymore, were they?

"Petra?" Nick stepped forward, concern etched on his face.

"I'm all right," She assured him quickly. "It's just all the information hit me at once. It takes some getting used to, that's all." Being told what Morty had done, must have unlocked it somehow.

She smiled at his confused look. "Now I understand why Morty refused to give up his power! It wasn't greed, or imperiousness, or stubbornness. He was doing his job. Our dimension-" she cut off briefly, realizing the implications. "*Your* dimension, is just one of many realms that Morty was keeping track of. Chuck was right: Morty was kind of like an air traffic controller. He monitored fades and other creatures over multiple dimensions. I guess that's my job now."

"You're the new Morty," Nick whispered, but it was as loud as a shout to her. Petra could hear his breathing, his heartbeat, his digestion. She could hear the ant moving around in his jacket pocket!

Petra thought about it for a moment, and then changed her form. Her eyes changed into pinpoints of light, and her body became amorphous and tinged with many colors.

"Whoa," Nick said, his eyebrows shooting up behind the sunglasses. "Petra the fade."

Satisfied with her little test, Petra retook her old form. All of that information, including instruction manuals apparently written by Morty in the seconds before giving up his power, was hers to access. It was all in her head. She knew how to make that stone slab out there now. She knew exactly what fades were made of, and how they had come to be.

"I'm sorry," Nick said, cutting into her thoughts.

"For what?"

"It's a pretty long list, actually," he admitted. "For doubting you: you really were worthy, just of a different job than the one I thought. For letting my pride and disappointment in Darius blind me to what you could do. For lying to you about my motives. Most of all, I'm sorry that you can never leave this dimension. You're stuck here now, partly because of me."

Petra nodded. "It's not so bad, really. I have the knowledge of dozens of dimensions in my head now, so I doubt I'll get bored. And when you think about it, my time on earth wasn't all that rosy. I had a job, but it kept me at a distance from people: always looking at them through a lens instead of connecting with them. I had a friend, but it turned out she was just using me to get to Morty. I never knew the real Didi- I can see it now. Despair possessed her just to use me. Didi won't even remember me when she wakes up. The last two months will be a big empty space to her. I had a boyfriend too, but he was just evaluating me for a job that he wanted, and that I never asked for. I'm breaking up with you, by the way."

Nick chuckled. "That's fair."

Petra gestured at the Ruby Torc in his hands. "Can that thing really turn Morty into a human being? None of the information up here is about earth, so I can't be sure."

"Well, yes and no. When I take it back to earth and shatter it, Morty will be released. Then he'll be born, grow, live and die. Reincarnation-style. He'll get what we offered: a human life on earth."

Petra frowned. "How is Elle supposed to know which kid is him?"

Nick lifted the Torc. "I'll give the pieces to her. According to legend, they should lead her to him." He looked around. "Morty's collection should go to her too. When Morty's old enough, she can give them to him and explain what they are."

"Sounds like a good idea." Petra wasn't sure which of them she felt more pity for. Elle would have to wait a few decades before she could tell him everything, but Morty would have to deal with all the baggage from a previous life he knew nothing about. At least if what she'd heard about reincarnation was accurate. Petra shook her head. "I take it you'll be running the Veil, like you wanted?"

He hesitated. "At least until I can set up some elections. We've never had a change in leadership before, and there are hundreds of Veil agents, support staff and analysts. I owe them a chance to choose who's in charge. I think even Darius would agree to that." Nick looked sadly over at Darius' body.

Petra wasn't sure that was the best idea. "Elections? Really? Modern democracy is starting to get a bad reputation, you know."

Nick nodded. "Agreed, but I think we can handle it. Having a college degree is a requirement for Veil membership, so at least they have a chance to make an informed decision."

"Now for the big question: What about the fades? Their big problem was that all this power was in the hands of one person. Morty is gone, but I have all of his power. Will they accept that?"

"Well, you've never committed genocide, so there's that. Also, you risked your life to save a fade- arguably the worst fade ever. That'll probably win you a few points." As usual, Nick had a gift for seeing the details Petra often missed.

She smiled. "Just the same, I'm going to do something for the fades. It's been bugging me ever since I first started learning about them." Petra closed her eyes, partitioning off the energy that Morty had taken from the Despair faction, and then released it. "There. I've sent the Despair faction's energy back to earth. They all have access to it now."

Nick looked confused. "So.. every fade on earth just got a little bit stronger?"

"No, but they can use that energy to create new fades. Before, only Morty could do that." She shook her head. "It always bothered me that fades could die, but they couldn't be born. There's only so much energy to go around, so they can never go above a certain number, but at least they can feel what it's like to procreate now. Maybe that will make it easier for them to relate to humans."

Nick crossed his fingers. It seemed like they'd done most of the housekeeping conversations, and now were down to the goodbyes. "Will you bring people in weekly, like Morty did? Just to keep in touch I mean."

Petra thought about it, and a timer appeared in her mind, counting down from seven days. "Done. I.. wish I could be there for the funeral. Could you say hi to Chuck and Colin for me? Tell them they're free to visit any week."

"Will do." Nick went over to pick up Darius' body.

Petra felt a pang of sympathy. "Allow me," she said abruptly, and gave it another thought. In an instant Nick, Darius, and almost all of the earth objects in here were gone, sent back to their home planet. Petra sighed, having willed herself into having life signs again.

Epilogue

She hadn't sent everything back to earth, though. In the corner, Morty's videocamera was still standing on its tripod. Petra knew that she had other tasks, but most of Morty's jobs were running on autopilot for now. She had time to do at least one personal task.

In another moment her apartment back in Vancouver was here, perfect to the last detail. Her photos covered the walls, and the sound of children playing in the nearby schoolyard filtered in through the windows. Her fridge even made that weird dripping noise.

Petra sat on her couch and directed the camera down to look at her. Feeling a mixture of excitement for the future and regret for the past, Petra turned it on. "Hi, mom."