

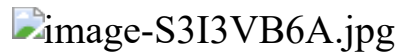
LINDSEY SPARKS

WRITING AS LINDSEY FAIRLEIGH



JUDGEMENT

BOOK FIVE OF THE KAT DUBOIS CHRONICLES



Judgement

KAT DUBOIS CHRONICLES - BOOK FIVE

Lindsey Sparks writing as Lindsey Fairleigh

Rubus Press

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Also by Lindsey Sparks

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Alison

Lex

Nik

Kat

Also by Lindsey Sparks

About the Author

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Chapter One

"What's wrong?" Nik asked, watching me pace. He was leaning against the wall to the left of the door leading out of our cozy little waiting area. And I'm using the words "cozy" and "little" lightly. The private lounge was palatial. Literally, it was a room in a palace.

We were in the old Nejeret Council headquarters in Rome, a relic from days long past, back when Nejerets had been ruled by a patriarchal group of seven men. Heru had been among them, as had my father, Set. But the Council of Seven had gone the way of the pharaohs . . . as had the governing body that replaced it, the Senate. Now we were back to a good old-fashioned feudal monarchy, with Heru as the high king. And in true feudal fashion, war was an ever-burning fire threatening to reduce us all to little more than ash and bone.

Nik and I had been busy little bees the past two weeks, attempting to stave off that dire outcome. Since the shadow souls incident, we'd been spending most of our time gateway-ing around the world, meeting up with small

groups of Nejerets—the good guys who supported Heru, not the asshats supporting the rogue Senate, of course—and addressing live audiences of humans, just like Garth suggested weeks ago to make up for my one-fingered PR blunder. Only now we were attempting to counter something much more devastating, PR-wise—the damage caused by the Senate’s ever-increasing hostilities against humanity. It was why Nik and I were in Rome in the first place. In a few minutes, we would be onstage once again, “the Goddess” and her Nejeret friends, addressing yet another crowd of gathered humans.

The now-defunct Council headquarters was a stunning complex—an old palazzo dating back to the thirteenth century that took up an entire city block in central Rome. It was extravagant, with plenty of lavish marble inlays, gold leafing, and arched ceilings. And, like many an Italian palace, there were frescos for days and artwork galore. It was over the top in a way mastered by the Italian nobles of old. And apparently embraced by the Nejerets of old as well.

The private lounge where Nik and I had been hanging out for the past twenty minutes was toned down from the main gallery by just a hair. Whoever decorated the room had tried to warm it up with Persian rugs and upholstered seating, but no amount of furnishings could dampen the effect of the immense oil portraits of Nejerets lining the crimson walls in their gaudy gilded frames or the enormous, intricate crystal chandelier glittering giddily over the center of the room.

I stopped mid-step under the chandelier and looked at Nik, one arm hugging my middle, the other raised so I could chew on my thumbnail. He looked like he could’ve been posing for some avant-garde fashion magazine. He was leaning one shoulder against the wall by the oversized door, head tilted to the side and fingers tucked into his trouser pockets, his tailored pinstripe suit fitting him just right and tattoos peeking out here and there. He looked damn good—more than good enough to momentarily waylay the worries making me pace, replacing them with more pleasurable thoughts for a few seconds.

Nik raised his pierced brow, the corner of his mouth lifting into a slight but satisfied smirk. He liked that he could distract me by simply sharing the

same space as me. I would never admit it aloud, but I kind of liked it, too.

“Well?” he said, the one-word prompt knocking my thoughts back out of naughty-land.

Right, he’d asked me a question: What’s wrong?

I cleared my throat. “Nothing,” I said, gaze sliding away from his to the small, round table in the corner of the room.

I’d left the velvet drawstring bag holding my deck of hand-drawn tarot cards on the table. They’d been burning a hole in my pocket, so I’d taken them out, hoping that by removing the distraction I would be able to focus on the upcoming address. The meeting scheduled to take place in the ballroom downstairs was the most significant yet, with over two thousand humans slated to attend.

But now, having the tarot deck out in the open was just making the problem worse. I’d taken to pacing around the room, if only to distract myself from the urge to pull out the cards and flip through them in an impromptu reading. This was so not the time. I needed to focus . . . to get my head in the game. I did not need to be preoccupied by thoughts of even more what-ifs and oh-shits. Not right now.

If we could just get the humans to trust us—if we could just convince the governments to agree to work with us—we would be able to launch a coordinated assault on the Senate and finally wipe them off the playing field. But while the vast majority of humans still gazed at me with a fervor of divine adoration, the logical-thinking, slow-moving governmental bodies were harder to sway. Humanity’s growing fear of the Senate and what it might do next overruled their love of me, and no matter how hard I tried, I’d yet to find a way to tip the scales in favor of a full-blown alliance.

“You do seem rather agitated,” Dom said from the little mirror pendant hanging on a leather cord around my neck.

I clenched and unclenched my jaw, then forced myself to look at Nik again. “I’m fine,” I said, both to him and to my incorporeal half-brother.

“Right . . .” Nik crossed his arms over his chest, the fabric of his suit jacket straining oh so faintly at his shoulders.

“Little sister . . .”

Damn it. They both knew me too well to believe my attempted blow-off.

I huffed out a breath, hands falling to my sides. “Alright, fine. You’re right. It’s just that—” I pressed my lips together, inhaling and exhaling deeply through my nose. “It’s going to sound crazy, but—” I shook my head. “I don’t know . . . something just feels off. Like really, really off.”

I raised a hand to run my fingers through my hair, realizing too late that I was messing up Lex’s styling. It wasn’t anything fancy, but she’d given me a super neat left-side part—one she said made me look very respectable—a hairdo to match my respectable outfit and respectable shoes and the air of general respectability I was supposed to convey as the Nejeret figurehead. I was playing a part these days, showing the world that Nejerets were productive, law-abiding, respectable members of society. We had to do everything we could to counter the negative stigma and mistrust caused by the Senate’s seemingly never-ending string of terrorist attacks.

“Damn it,” I said, using both hands to comb my hair back. I pulled the hairband off my wrist and tied my hair up into a ponytail.

Nik’s eyes never left me. “You were tossing and turning all night,” he said.

It was my turn to smirk, though my heart wasn’t in it. “And whose fault was that?”

Nik chuckled, and the wicked glint in his pale blue eyes caused a blush to rise up my neck and cheeks, leaving me on the verge of overheating. “After that, Kitty Kat,” he said, his expression turning serious. “Did you see something in your dreams?”

“Was it another echo?” Dom added.

Chewing on my lip, I shook my head. In fact, I hadn't seen a single vision of the future since vanquishing the shadow souls a couple weeks back.

"No, nothing like that," I told them both. "I don't even remember my dreams from last night." I shrugged halfheartedly, gaze drifting away from Nik's. I looked from portrait to portrait, like the Nejerets captured in oil paint centuries ago might hold the answers. "I just—I don't know. This feeling is . . . I don't really know how to describe it, other than off-ness."

It was like I knew something bad was going to happen. Like I was watching a horror movie, and the suspense was building and the music was telling me to tense up for a big scare. That was it—that was the feeling exactly. Except this wasn't a horror movie; this was real life.

I looked at Nik, a chill creeping up my spine. "Something's coming, Nik," I said with absolute certainty. "Something bad." I could feel it in my bones. In my soul.

Nik frowned. "Any idea of what?"

I gave him a pointed look, eyebrows raised and lips pressed together.

"Right," Nik said. "Stupid question."

"Mm-hmm . . ." If I knew the answer to the what question, I wouldn't have spent the past ten minutes pacing around the room like a caged animal trying to figure it out.

I returned to pacing, making a full circuit around the room and letting my thoughts circulate with me before saying anything more. "Maybe this is a new power manifesting," I finally said as I passed Nik, focusing on the upside. "I could end up with a nifty Spidey sense. That wouldn't suck."

"And it would be nice to know our efforts are paying off," Nik added.

I grunted my assent.

When Nik and I weren't attempting to sway humanity to our side, we'd been spending our time back at Nik's secret cave in Port Madison, working

on training my ever-expanding powers. For months, my magical abilities had been growing in leaps and bounds . . . until I'd started trying to purposely hone and cultivate them.

I'd hit a wall. Sure, I was way better at wielding At and anti-At and connecting with the soul-energy than ever before, and my drawings were so lifelike that they were verging on Peeping Tom territory, but I hadn't had a new power show up in fourteen days, and the universe seemed to have zipped its lips where echoes were concerned. It was beyond frustrating. And also so very typical. It almost felt like the universe was playing a joke on me.

There was a knock at the door.

I froze, heart leaping into my throat. The mounting sense of dread had me convinced that whoever was on the other side of the door was distinctly not good .

Nik stepped away from the wall and cracked the door open, foot lodged against the bottom of the door to keep whoever was on the other side from forcing it open farther.

"We'll be ready for you in five minutes," a woman said from just outside. Her voice was unfamiliar, but then, I'd spent so little time with the European Nejerets until recently I wasn't surprised that I didn't recognize her. At least she wasn't charging through the door in attack mode.

I exhaled in relief. I was probably getting myself all worked up over nothing. More likely than not, I was just battling an extreme case of nerves. I did suffer from mild stage fright, after all. That was probably all it was.

"Thanks, Mary," Nik said. While the unfamiliar Nejeret might've been a stranger to me, apparently Nik knew her.

Tension tightened my shoulders in an instant, and I had to swallow the swell of jealousy that had become all too common these days. Oh, the joys of sharing a soul bond. It brought unimaginable pleasure and a sense of love and understanding I'd never considered possible, but along with that came a

possessiveness so extreme it verged on stalker-level obsession. Sometimes it was a struggle not to let the soul bond overtake me completely. Sometimes it seemed a hell of a lot easier to just give in. But much as I enjoyed being bonded to Nik, I also still kind of liked being me .

I reminded myself not to hate the woman on the other side of the door just because Nik knew her name. He'd probably crossed paths with her at some point during his thousands of years of being alive. That wasn't so crazy to believe, was it? Just because he knew her name didn't mean they shared any kind of a history, sexual or otherwise. They were probably just acquaintances. Little more than strangers. There was no reason to jump to conclusions or believe the worst. No reason at all.

My hands balled into fists. Once I realized what I was doing, I forced my fingers to stretch out and took a deep, calming breath.

Nik started to close the door, then stopped and pulled it open a few more inches. "Tell me, Mary—is Set here?" he asked, referring to my absentee father.

Not that I held our distant father-daughter relationship against my dear old dad—he'd been possessed by the spirit of the mad god Apep when he'd knocked up my mom, and he hadn't broken free of Apep's hold until I was all but grown. Now, Set managed things on this side of the pond, acting as Heru's co-regent in the European arena, so we hadn't exactly had much of a chance to make up for lost time. One day, maybe, when things calmed down. But until then, our onstage appearances would have to pass for father-daughter quality time.

"He is," Mary said. "He's with the princess." I assumed she was talking about Princess Anne, the heir apparent to the British throne and also Set's longtime paramour. "She's rather nervous," Mary added.

We were about to do our thirteenth live town hall-style meeting. As always, Nik was there as both participant and bodyguard to me. Heru and his sister Aset—Nik's mother—would be showing up directly onstage via Heru's sheut power, which enabled him to teleport from any location on earth to any location on earth. A few other local Nejeret leaders would be joining us

as well, most notably Princess Anne. This would be her official coming out; after today, the world would know that the future Queen of England was a young immortal. Not exactly an insignificant revelation.

I couldn't help but wonder if my thoughts had just touched upon the root source of my overwhelming sense of unease. Would the humans react badly to finding out that one of their own future leaders wasn't, in fact, human? Heru and Set claimed they'd accounted for every possible outcome, from rioting in the streets of London and other major cities across the globe to an all-out declaration of war against Nejerets. We all knew this was a risky step, but most of us agreed it was a necessary one, too. Progress demanded it. The only way through our current mess was forward.

I moved closer to the table in the corner, staring at the drawstring bag containing my tarot cards. Hands on my hips, I drew my bottom lip between my teeth. I could just check the top card. Quick and easy.

My palm itched, and I rubbed it against my hip absently.

A heartbeat later, I froze, eyes going wide.

Ever so slowly, I pulled my hand away from my slacks and turned it over so I could see my palm. That onyx and moonstone Eye of Horus inked into my skin glowed with a subtle, otherworldly light. And my skin itched with an all-too-clear warning: something bad was going to happen.

It wasn't just a niggling feeling anymore, and I certainly couldn't write it off as "nerves" about the impending meeting any longer. The threads of At and anti-At lacing through my body and soul agreed—the danger was real. The rise and fall of my chest grew more pronounced with each breath as I stared at my palm and processed what this warning meant.

Nik shut the door and turned to me. "Kitty Kat?" When I didn't respond, he took a step my way. "Kat?"

I raised my eyes, meeting Nik's, and turned my hand so the palm was facing him, giving him a solid eyeful of the glowing symbol.

Nik whistled, long and slow. He knew very well that the ancient protection amulet I'd tattooed on my palm—the symbol that represented our clan—could function as an actual alarm when danger was nearby. He closed the distance between us, reaching out to take my hand in his and get a closer look. “Any sense as to what it's trying to warn you about?”

I curled my fingers into a tight fist and clenched my jaw, shaking my head. “It doesn't work like that,” I told him. And then I frowned. Maybe the symbol couldn't give me more than a generalized warning, but there was another way to find out more specifics. Screw focus; it was time to give in to the urge to do a reading.

I snatched the drawstring bag off the table. I could feel the cards within humming with power even through the fabric. With nimble fingers, I untied the loose knot holding the bag closed and dumped the deck of tarot cards out into my hand. They sizzled and crackled with otherworldly energy. They were charged and ready to go. Whatever was going on, whatever had triggered the Eye of Horus on my palm, the cards would have the answers. Or at least some answers.

I didn't even bother with shuffling. There was no need, not when the power was thrumming through the deck so strongly. Holding my breath, I drew the top card and flipped it over.

The moment I saw which card I'd drawn, I hissed and dropped it on the coffee table.

Judgement .

The scene was much the same as it had been weeks ago: all of my Nejeret loved ones, dressed in rags and scattered across a desolate landscape. The Seattle skyline was visible in the distance, the buildings ravaged and crumbling. More Nejerets were fanning out beyond my friends and family along the decaying earth, unidentifiable where the ink blurred and lines became too close.

But there was one major, glaring difference. I wasn't depicted on the card. The last few times I'd drawn Judgement from the deck, an image of me had

floated above the depressing scene, arms outstretched to either side and back to the viewer, skin glowing with a brilliant golden soul aura. Now, there was no sign of me. I was gone . Vanished.

“Judgement,” Nik said, craning his neck to get a better look at the card. “That looks dreary. What does it mean?”

“Nothing good,” I said hollowly.

Judgement itself wasn’t a negative card, but in its current incarnation, it exuded an almost palpable sense of dread.

Numbly, I set the deck of tarot cards on the coffee table, eyes glued to the only card lying faceup. “Judgement usually means that some decision will need to be made,” I told Nik. “Something about the past—before the subject of the reading can move on to their better, brighter future.” I frowned, eyes narrowing as I studied the card. “Or, it sometimes has to do with a spiritual awakening.”

Considering I’d been present on the card the last few times I’d drawn it, soul glowing a bright gold, and now I was nowhere in sight, I thought it might be closer to the latter meaning.

After a moment, I added, “But it’s mostly about letting go of the past.” This particular scene suggested that the thing from the past that needed to be let go of was me . And that if it didn’t happen, the consequences would be dire . . . for everyone.

That little realization gave rise to goose bumps that started on my arms and worked their way around the rest of my body.

“Huh,” Nik said.

I glanced at him. “You’re telling me.”

BOOM.

My heart stopped for a moment as the room quaked with the force of an explosion.

I steadied myself with a hand on the table, while Nik reached for me, our gazes locked in a shocked stare. A heartbeat later, we both looked at the door, then back at each other.

To shake this building enough that we had to steady ourselves, the explosion had to be either really damn close or really damn huge. Both were terrifying options.

“Must be the fucking Senate,” Nik said, his voice a whiplash. He turned and rushed to the door.

“It’s got to be them,” I said, hastily collecting the tarot cards and stuffing the whole deck back into its drawstring bag. I tucked the deck safely out of sight in the pocket of my leather coat, draped over the arm of the couch and hurried to the door.

Nik blocked my way with an extended arm, his other hand on the knob. “Stay here, Kitty Kat. I’ll check it out.”

I scoffed. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I said. I mean, had he even met me? Stay here ? Not a chance in hell.

Nik laughed a dry, humorless laugh and shook his head. “Fine, but don’t do anything stupid out there.”

Oh yeah, he’d met me. And he knew me well.

As I followed Nik out of the room and into the palazzo’s extravagantly decorated second-floor gallery and was surrounded by the sound of panic and mayhem from below, I thought we had our answer about the weird feeling I’d been having—the something that was coming was here. Except the sense of dreadful expectation wasn’t gone. If anything, it was worse.

This wasn’t it. The explosion wasn’t the “bad” thing setting me on edge. Or, at least, it wasn’t all of it.

More was coming. And soon.

Chapter Two

We raced down the cavernous gallery, our footsteps amplified by the high ceiling and echoing all around us as we ran. The sounds of confusion and shouting from the lower level grew louder as we neared the main staircase.

We barreled down the left side of the imposing double staircase, the slap of shoes on marble drowned out by the noise from below. People pushed their way into the palazzo through the main entrance, fighting to get through. The crowd was bottlenecking at the towering doors. From the wild eyes and frenzied energy, it was safe to assume that the danger was outside and they were seeking refuge within the palazzo.

When we reached the landing where the two staircases converged, I grabbed Nik's arm and pulled him to a stop so we could look out the tall, arched window. It gave us a good view of the Piazza Navona and the chaos filling the elongated space. An ocean of people moved away from the church across the square, but their progress was a slow current. A crowd like that, with everyone fighting to get ahead of everyone else, was downright scary. It was everyone for themselves, and being trampled was a real danger. A few enterprising people had even climbed the Fiumi Fountain, clambering up and over the four river gods to the towering obelisk at the center. At least whoever reached that first would be safe from being trampled.

It was easy enough to figure out where the explosion had originated. The thick plume of smoke billowing up from the far side of the square was a dead giveaway.

"The church," I said to Nik, shouting over the cacophony below.

The church, Sant'Agnese, was to be the secondary location for the day's events, where just Nik, Heru, and I were scheduled to address a larger audience of humans for a shorter period of time after the main meeting in the palazzo.

"I see it," Nik said.

Sant'Agnese was a wide, white stone building with a centralized dome, a couple of towers, and enough other architectural flourishes to make it

impossible for us to tell whether the smoke was coming from the church itself or something behind it.

Until a thick fissure snaked up the front of the church's dome. The sound of stone cracking was so faint I almost thought I'd imagined it.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

I watched in horror, paralyzed as the break in the stone reached the bell tower atop the dome. I held my breath, half expecting the whole thing to collapse in on itself. When ten seconds passed without anything happening, I exhaled in momentary relief and glanced at Nik sidelong.

He was squinting, his focus entirely on the church. "The doors are shut," he said, then closed his eyes and tilted his head to the side, like he was listening really, really hard. After a few heartbeats, he opened his eyes and looked at me. "Can you hear that?"

I shook my head and shrugged. "I can't hear anything over this," I said, gesturing behind me to the sea of people crammed into the lobby of the palazzo. The sounds of their panic echoed all around us.

"It's faint," Nik said, "but I think I can hear people banging on the doors of the church."

My eyes opened wide, drawn back to the church, and my lips parted, my heart dropping into my stomach. "The overflow," I whispered, not wanting to believe that the thousands of people who'd bought overflow tickets, giving them admittance to the second, standing-room-only Q&A session, were still in the church.

From the looks of the fractured dome, the place could become a death trap in a matter of seconds. I gripped Nik's forearm. "If all of those people are still in there . . ." I exchanged a horrified look with Nik.

"We have to get them out," he said.

I nodded vehemently. Not a moment later, a second crack formed in the dome.

We turned away from the window simultaneously and ran toward the final set of stairs. I took the stairs two at a time, but Nik was even faster. “See if you can find whoever did this,” he shouted back to me. “I’ll handle the church.”

“Alright,” I yelled.

With his mastery over his sheut powers, Nik would be far more effective at the church, anyway. With the merest thought, he could reinforce the dome and any other damaged part of the church with At and bore holes through the door and any other blockages caused by debris from the explosion.

And me—I loved a good chase. My heart rate picked up at the prospect, the excitement of a hunt thrumming through my veins, bringing me back to the days when Mari and I had been tasked with tracking down rogue Nejerets for the Senate. We’d been partners for nearly two decades and had worked as a flawless team. The hunt wouldn’t be quite as fun without her. But it would still be fun.

When Nik reached the foot of the stairs, he dove into the anxious crowd, but I paused six stairs up, using the elevation to my advantage. From this vantage point, I could see almost everything going on in the lobby. People still squeezed in through the main entrance, despite the increasingly cramped quarters. There were hundreds of people stuffed in here, maybe thousands, but nothing about any of them suggested that they were the culprit.

I could still feel a slight tingle on my palm, but the itching sensation had mostly abated. Whoever had done this wasn’t close enough to trigger the magical alarm. I wouldn’t find them in the palazzo.

Which meant I had to get outside.

I raced the rest of the way down the stairs and launched into the throng crowding the lobby. They slowed me down, but I couldn’t stop. A sense of

terrible inevitability pushed me onward, making my heart hammer in my chest.

The crowd became denser the closer I drew to the main doorway. I shouldered people out of the way, moving against the stream, and eventually managed to squeeze through the doorway.

I was on the wrong side of the palazzo. The church was on the opposite side, which meant the bomber was probably over there too, and the only way to get to the piazza was to head around the block. That wouldn't be the easiest thing to do, what with the huge crowd amassed on the sidewalk and street beyond, some trying to get up the stairs and into the palace, others throwing caution to the wind for the sake of the excitement and heading toward the square.

"Shit," I said, standing atop the entry stairway and scanning the crowd.

It was much larger now than it had been when Nik and I first arrived. The people of Rome had greeted us by the tens of thousands with handmade signs and shouts of welcome. But this crowd buzzed with anxiety, the raised, panicked voices only building the tense expectation within me.

I had to find the culprit before they could do worse than they already had. The sense of mounting dread all but ensured that this catastrophe was only just beginning.

I wanted to scream at these people to leave. To get the hell out of here, away from the church. Away from the piazza and the palazzo and the bomber. Away from me. They should have been running for their damn lives. But they weren't, which meant I had to stop the bomber before another, worse explosion exploited the human tendency to rubberneck. Before curiosity could get all of these people killed.

I couldn't see anything in this crowd, not from the ground. There definitely wasn't any clear way through the throng. I needed to get higher.

"Out of my way!" I shouted as I pushed between people. "Move, dammit!"

I earned a few angry looks, quickly followed by shocked second glances. I heard the word “goddess” thrown around—and my name, too—my presence distracting the people from the very real and present danger, and an eerie hush fell over the crowd in the immediate vicinity. They finally seemed to realize who I was and that I was trying to get through, and as they made an opening for me, I felt a rare rush of gratitude for my newfound celebrity.

I raced through the crowd, aiming for the blockade that had been set up in preparation for our arrival. I had my eye on a police SUV with garish yellow and blue paint checkering the sides.

Once I reached the car, I leapt onto the hood, the metal crunching under my boots. I climbed up the windshield, using the bar of lights to help pull myself up, then stood and surveyed the sea of people surrounding me. My eyes watered, and the taste of smoke was thick in the air. Hands on my hips and eyes squinting, I scanned the area all around me.

There were so many people. If I was right, if the worst really was yet to come and another bomb went off soon—if it happened in the middle of this immense crowd—the effects would be devastating. So much worse than the destruction at the church.

As my searching gaze swept across a portion of the crowd on the far side of the street, my palm suddenly burned like I’d grabbed a hot iron, and my heart skipped a beat. The universe was telling me that the threat I sensed via the symbol on my palm—likely whoever was responsible for the church bombing—was somewhere in the group of people on the sidewalk across the street.

I honed in on their faces, getting a good look at each and every person. I missed her at first, but a niggling feeling made me do a double take. And sure enough, there among the humans, I spotted a Nejeret. She was a small, nondescript woman with tan skin, dark hair covered by a beige head scarf, and a pinched mouth, wearing a tan trench coat. Her eyes met mine across the crowd, just for a moment, and the searing pain caused by the Eye of Horus inked onto my palm flared hotter.

It was her. The bomber. It had to be.

Target in sight, I crouched down, placing my hand on the edge of the roof of the SUV, and was about to jump down to the street when a horrifying groan rumbled up from the earth. Not a second later, the whole car rattled as the ground shook.

It must have been another explosion, only this time deep underground. Deep under the streets of the city, a warren of ancient catacombs cut through the bedrock. If someone set off a large enough explosion, even twenty yards underground . . .

There was the sound of breaking rock, and the road fractured, a jagged crack running down the center of the cobblestone street, some fifty yards long and widening to several feet across. People screamed and shouted, reaching out for their companions even as those nearest to the crack fell into that growing dark abyss. The crowd went from milling to manic in a matter of seconds.

I watched on in shock, mouth gaping.

More cracks sprouted from that central fissure, and the paving stones on either side crumbled into the opening—as did a few people—giving way to a ravenous sinkhole.

I stood, extending my hands out on either side of me to steady myself as the SUV continued to shake. Nik would've been able to fix this in a heartbeat by covering the whole street with a sheet of At . But he was busy on the other side of the palazzo, helping the people trapped in the church.

All the people on this side had was me.

I just hoped I was enough.

Chapter Three

I jumped off the roof of the SUV and dropped down to one knee, bowing down to press both of my hands flat against the paving stones. I squeezed

my eyes shut and sent my focus inward, toward my sheut , thinking only about the task at hand. Not about the lives that would be lost if I failed. Not about the sense of dread that even now, after this most recent explosion, continued to mount higher.

All of a sudden, a swell of electric energy flooded into me. I spooled that energy in my sheut just like Nik had taught me to do, building it up until I felt near to bursting. When I had enough to make the magic work, I opened my eyes and willed the energy out of me in the form of At . It spread out from my hands and covered the street like ice over a lake, but so much faster. Ten yards . . . twenty . . . thirty . . . a hundred . . . the earth below continued to break and fall away, but everywhere the At covered it, people would be safe from falling in. I left a meter-wide crack running along the length of the fissure with long, icicle-like strings of At extending deep into the sinkhole for any people who'd fallen in to use to climb back out. If any of them had even survived. It was enough—for now. The crisis was far from averted, and so many more lives were at stake. Too many.

I stood, wiped my hands off on my slacks, and climbed back onto the hood of the SUV. I stood there, scanning the place where I'd last seen the female Nejeret, but nearly a minute had passed since I'd spotted her. A virtual eternity in disaster time. She was nowhere in sight.

“Damn it!” I swore as I jumped down from the SUV.

I dove into the crowd, weaving around people when I could, shoving them out of the way when I couldn't. I felt like I was playing a life-and-death game of hot or cold, following the burning sensation in my palm and altering my course when the pain abated.

The sense that something terrible was coming increased with each passing second, urging me onward. Now I really did wish Mari was here with me. She'd be able to come up with a fail-proof plan to track down this murderous bitch in a heartbeat, while without my old partner, I was left to fly by the seat of my pants.

I continued to shove my way through the crowd, scanning every face in hopes that it would be the one to set off the symbol on my palm.

Hopelessness was just starting to settle in when I caught sight of a beige head scarf, and the pain in my hand suddenly burned hotter. I had a lock on the Nejeret.

I just hoped that by the time I caught up to her, it wasn't too late.

The pain in my palm seared even hotter, and I took that as a good sign. I was closing in on the mystery Nejeret. She had to at least have been involved with the bombings. Why else would the amulet inked into my skin be leading me to her?

We'd yet to catch a single one of the Senate terrorists riddling the world with mistrust for our kind, but now that I had what had to be one of them in my sights, so to speak, I was determined not to lose her. I would catch this psycho, and the first moment I was able to, I would transport her back to the Heru compound on Bainbridge Island through a gateway, where she would talk. We would make her.

Then, finally, we would have some understanding as to why the Senate was so hell-bent on destroying the human world. Once we knew their genocidal purpose, hopefully then we would be able to stop them. But first, I had to catch this woman.

For a fraction of a second, I caught sight of the Nejeret. She was rounding the block and disappeared behind the corner of a four-story building. I had the briefest glimpse of her before centuries-old weathered stone and orange-brown stucco blocked my view of her.

I kicked it into high gear, pumping my arms and pushing my legs to their limit. I kept myself in good shape, but I was no sprinter, and my heart and lungs strained under the effort to run at full tilt for more than a short burst. It didn't help that my ballet flats definitely weren't made for running.

I reached the corner of the block maybe fifteen seconds after my quarry, but I couldn't pick her out among the rushing streams of people fleeing from the massive sinkhole that had been swallowing up the street just moments ago. The earth still shook as the sinkhole expanded, but the barrier of At would protect everyone from at least that danger.

I slowed to a walk, breathing hard and left hand pinching my side. Eyes searching, I scoured every potential hiding spot on this side of the street. There was a long string of storefronts, each with a recessed alcove for the door into the shop or restaurant. There were any number of places where the Nejeret could have retreated, but there was only one way to find out where.

Cautiously, I made my way up the street, hugging the building's exterior where a bit of a clearing allowed me to move past the stream of frantic people fleeing the area. There was no sign of the Nejeret, and for a moment, I feared I'd lost her.

But my palm still burned with that telltale warning. I shook out my hand, though it did nothing to ease the pain. Which meant she was close. I hadn't lost her yet.

"Ah!" a woman shouted as she burst out through the open doorway to a bakery, beige head scarf falling back from her hair. She rammed into my shoulder, knocking me off balance.

I stumbled to the side, bumped into a passerby, and spun around, only to trip over a folding sign that had been knocked over by the rush of people. I failed to catch myself and went sprawling to the ground. I grunted, my forearm scraping along loose grit and gravel scattered over the smooth At covering the paving stones. The tiny rocks cut deep gouges, lodging into my skin.

Looked like I'd found the Nejeret. Or, rather, she'd found me.

Unlike me, she was able to maintain her footing post-impact. When she saw me falling, she took advantage of the situation, taking off at a dead sprint.

"Oh, hell no," I said, fumbling with the trick latch on my belt buckle. It was a new belt, a classier, more delicate version that matched my new business-casual public persona, and I'd yet to master the latch.

Finally, I freed the little push dagger hidden in the buckle and rolled onto my knees. I extended one leg, planted my shoe on the ground to give myself

a steady base, waited a half of a second for the perfect moment, and flung my hand out toward the Nejeret, releasing the dagger point first. I held my breath as the push dagger flew through a gap between the rushing people.

The knife hit home, burying its two-inch blade in the back of the Nejeret's thigh.

Her hamstring seized up, and she stumbled forward, tripping over her own feet. She landed on her shoulder on the sidewalk, her long, dark hair cascading over her face. A few of the fleeing people glanced her way, but nobody stopped to check if she was alright. They were too worried about their own lives to concern themselves with the life of a stranger.

I pushed up from the ground and brushed off my hands as I closed in on the Nejeret, my long strides eating the distance between us.

She rolled partway onto her back and pushed herself up onto her elbow. Her other hand slid into the opening of her trench coat.

I was five steps away . . . four . . . three.

She pulled out a Glock from her coat and aimed the gun straight at my face.

I froze, just a couple steps from her.

And, much to my surprise, so did the Nejeret with her gun aimed at me. So did everybody else around me. And not out of fear of the gun.

The world had been muted, and time itself had stopped, holding everyone utterly immobile in that moment between moments.

Everyone but me.

I blinked, breath held. I was afraid to move. I was afraid that doing anything at all would make time restart and leave me with a nice-sized hole in my head. But even as I stood there, frozen by fear, my thoughts were free to spin out of control.

Had I done this? Was this some new manifestation of my powers? Was my unique connection to the universe caused by the threads of At and anti-At marbling my ba and ramping up my magical powers now giving me control over time itself? It wasn't inconceivable; Netjers, the species mine was partially descended from, had that power. It was the greatest, most terrifying power they had. It was the kind of power that could destroy worlds. Or a whole universe.

Not too long ago, it almost destroyed my universe.

I gulped, suddenly afraid for an entirely new reason. I certainly didn't want that kind of power.

"Greetings, Katarina," a familiar voice said from behind me.

I gasped and spun around.

And sure enough, there Anapa stood. The real-life inspiration for the ancient Egyptian god of the dead, Anubis, towered over the crowd of humans-turned-statues surrounding us, his angular, alien features marking him as something not of this world. As something not of this universe.

I was so stunned by his sudden appearance—he certainly knew how to make an impact—that all I could do was stare at him.

Anapa bowed his head in greeting. "I hope you are well."

I opened my mouth, then shut it again and nodded.

"Apologies for the interruption, but I'm afraid I need you to come with me."

My eyebrows drew together. "Come with you?" I said, finally finding my voice. "Where?" I frowned. "Why?" I glanced over my shoulder, just to make sure the Nejeret was still frozen.

She was. And her gun was still aimed at me.

I took a quick step to the side, not willing to chance that time wouldn't restart at any second, allowing her to blow my brains out.

Anapa clasped his hands behind his back. "You must come with me to the Netjer universe," he said. "To stand trial."

Chapter Four

"I'm sorry— what?" I stared at Anapa, pretty sure I hadn't heard him right. He wanted me to come with him to the Netjer universe? To stand trial? Me?

Anapa's expression gave little away—not that it was ever really easy to pick up on emotional cues from his alien facial features—and his polite blandness made my hackles rise.

I narrowed my eyes, watching him warily.

"You must come with me to the Netjer universe," he repeated. "There is no time to waste."

Utterly stumped, I watched him walk over to the bakery and press his hand against the stone wall to the left of the display window. When he pulled his hand away, a silvery disk the size of a poker chip remained stuck to the wall.

"What are you . . ." My words trailed off as the disk began to spin seemingly all on its own.

Anapa stepped away from the wall and headed back toward me.

But I couldn't tear my eyes from the disk and what it was doing to the building's exterior wall. The weathered gray stones shifted unnaturally around the disk, slowly swirling like they were being melted and stirred from that central point outward, turning that part of the wall into a gravity-defying whirlpool. It made a sound like wind rushing through the trees near a raging waterfall.

That gray vortex grew with each rotation of the disk until it was as tall as the door to the bakery and just as wide as it was tall. I couldn't see what lay beyond the surface, but I was pretty sure I was staring at a portal to another universe.

Anapa held his hand out to me. "Come, Katarina," he said, like I was his obedient dog.

I took a small backward step, then another, startling when I bumped into one of the thousands of frozen-in-time people littering the street and sidewalk. I shook my head. "I can't leave," I told Anapa as I sidestepped around the human statue. "I have a shit-ton of things to do here— right now ." I glanced at the Nejeret with the gun, my soon-to-be captive. She was one of those things on my to-do list, and I wasn't about to risk losing such a valuable prisoner.

Anapa clasped his hands together behind his back once more, the corners of his mouth turning down the slightest bit. That minute but monumental change in his expression gave me hope that my words were getting through to him. Might as well keep at it, then.

I pointed to the Nejeret. "Do you have any idea what capturing this chick would mean for my people—for the whole world?" I lowered my arm. "It would be a huge win, not to mention a chance to stop whatever else she might have planned today. Two bombs have already gone off. Who's to say she's not about to detonate a dozen more?"

"She is not," Anapa said.

I blinked, drawing back in surprise and bumping into another frozen person. "You don't know that."

"I do, in fact," Anapa said. And before I could argue further, he added, "I already disarmed all of the explosives set to detonate in this city today."

I sputtered, unable to form a response.

Anapa was always making excuses about not being able to interfere with the goings-on of this universe—it was always observe, learn, and decide with him—but now he doesn't bat an eye at altering the natural course of events and saving gods knew how many lives by singlehandedly putting an end to one of the Senate's terrorist attacks. What was even more irritating was the fact that he'd just left the first two bombs to go off as planned. There was no saying how high the body count already was, but I wasn't holding out hopes for a single-digit number.

My hands balled into fists, and my jaw clenched as I struggled with that rapidly expanding irritation. "That's just a tad hypocritical, don't you think?" I finally managed to say. Maybe I should've thanked him instead of chastising him, but come on—how many times had I asked for his help in the past only to be turned down by his boilerplate it's-against-the-rules response? A few times. Too many.

"Perhaps," Anapa said.

My lip curled in distaste, and I crossed my arms over my chest. Smug might have been an ugly look for me, but gods, it felt good.

"However," Anapa continued, "my interference was necessary. You would not have agreed to come with me if the people of this city were still at risk, and your willing participation in this matter is essential."

I pressed my lips together, processing his words. If he'd broken the rules he seemed to hold in such high regard—and in such a big way—just to get me to come with him, then this trial thing had to be a pretty goddamn big deal.

"Katarina, please," Anapa said, taking a step toward me and extending one hand like some old-timey gentleman. "Come with me. The fate of this universe depends on your cooperation."

I rolled my eyes and let out a none-too-gentle snort. "Like I haven't heard that before," I said. But even through my attempt at making light of the situation, my stomach twisted into knots.

A moment later, I realized that the sense of dread—the anticipation of a fast-approaching shitstorm—had vanished the second that disk started to spin. My heart plummeted. There wasn't a threat on the horizon any longer.

Because it was here.

Where the dread had been, there was now only heart-pounding fear. This was it: the portal, or the trip to the Netjer universe, was what I'd been so worried about. I just hadn't known it until now.

I shook my head and backed up another step. And another. "I can't go with you," I told him again, slowly navigating my way backward through the forest of people. I wasn't refusing to go with Anapa because I had better things to do here—though I did—but because whatever awaited me on the other side of that portal was the big bad I'd been sensing.

"Katarina," Anapa said, taking another step toward me.

"No!" I raised my left hand. My palm felt like it had spontaneously combusted, and a brilliant light burst forth from the Eye of Horus inked into my skin, washing Anapa in a hazy silver mist.

He froze mid-step, hand extended toward me and mouth partway open.

Just like that, Anapa, a full-fledged Netjer, joined the ranks of the people frozen in time all around me. I had no idea how I'd done it, and even less of an idea of how long it would last.

I stared at Anapa for a millisecond, then turned on my heel and ran away from him and his damn portal as fast as I could. Fleeing like this was maybe not the most well-thought-out plan, but then, planning ahead had never really been my strong suit.

I dodged this way and that around the frozen people crowding the sidewalk, moving to the street where the human obstacles were slightly less densely packed. I was about a half a block down the street when logic kicked in.

I couldn't fight off Anapa on my own. I needed the help of the most powerful Nejeret I knew—Nik. Maybe I was technically powerful enough to hold my own against Anapa—after all, he was the one who had told me I had the magical prowess of a Netjer, maybe even more—but my control over my burgeoning powers was still growing and often spotty at best. With Nik by my side, though, my odds were at least slightly better.

I made an abrupt about-face, heading back the way I'd come. When I reached the spot where the portal to the Netjer universe still swirled in the bakery's gray stone wall, I missed a step.

Anapa was gone.

I stopped, frantically turning around and around, searching the immediate area for him. But there was no sign of him.

"Shit," I muttered. My fight-or-flight response kicked in, and I turned toward the plume of blackish smoke reaching high into the sky, leaned forward, and ran as fast as I could. I only made it six steps.

Some hidden force stopped me mid-stride, holding me in place. It was like I'd stepped into a block of cement, only it was transparent and I could still breathe. What I couldn't do was move.

"I truly regret that it had to come to this, Katarina," Anapa said from somewhere off to my right. Based on the sound of his voice, I placed him just beyond the edge of my peripheral vision. "I had hoped my past actions had earned your trust enough that you would accompany me willingly. I am not a fan of threats, especially not threats aimed at one I respect so highly."

He moved into sight, another form following along with him, the only things moving among the forest of frozen people. I recognized his companion instantly, and my heart skipped a beat.

It was Nik. He was trailing Anapa, walking along seemingly of his own free will, but the color of his irises—or lack thereof—suggested otherwise. The pale blue hue I'd come to know and love was gone, replaced by an iridescent shade reminiscent of opals and moonstones I recognized all too

well from the days when Nik had shared his body with another soul—the Netjer, Re.

A sense of cold horror washed over me.

Re, cocreator of this universe alongside Apep, had been invited to cohabitate within Nik's body by Nik himself some five thousand years ago, just moments after Re's former host was murdered. For thousands of years, the two had shared body and mind, and all had seemed well . . . until someone came along and threw a wrench in their happy partnership. That's right, I'm talking about little old me.

Thanks to the anti-At lacing my ba , I'm a bit of an anomaly. According to the rules of this universe, I shouldn't exist—I should have been eradicated from the timeline completely—but thanks to Nik's quick action, here I am. And now, because of the At and anti-At that had come to be as much a part of my soul as my sheut—I'm connected to the universe in a way that makes me a whole lot more powerful than the average Nejeret. Possibly even more powerful than a Netjer. That might have a little something to do with why Re had been so dead set on ending my unnatural existence time and again over the years.

Nik, however, was pretty keen on my life continuing, even back then. We hadn't known it at the time, but his devotion to my continued existence was probably caused by our souls' perfect compatibility and our potential to share the strongest, deepest connection possible—a soul bond. Because of me, Nik and Re reached an impasse that resulted in a three-year coma for Nik and a one-way escorted trip back to the Netjer universe for Re. Or, at least, I'd thought it was one way.

Based on Nik's eye color, Re was back. And Nik wasn't in charge at the moment; Re was.

My gut twisted, horror and rage a living thing inside me. What would this mean for Nik? Would he be damned to spend the rest of his life sharing his body with Re? And what would it mean for our bond? The disturbing possibilities were too plentiful to count.

I stared at Nik—at Re—for a moment longer, then shifted my focus to Anapa.

He'd done this. He'd stolen my bond-mate's free will. It was his fault.

Anger was a wildfire burning through my veins. I felt the familiar swell of otherworldly energy within my sheut, overflowing into my ba and out into my body. It saturated my entire being in a single heartbeat, body and soul bursting with power, demanding release. I let it out, easy as exhaling.

Whatever spell Anapa had cast over me to hold me in place shattered. The invisible restraints disintegrated, raining down around me in a fine, glittering mist before dissolving into nothingness.

My chest rose and fell heavily, and my hands curled into tight fists. "What did you do to him?" I said, more a demand than a question.

I gritted my teeth, my fingers itching for the hilt of my sword, Mercy. Not a second later, an all-too-familiar shape solidified in my grip.

Eyes widening, I glanced down. It wasn't Mercy I was holding but some perfect reproduction of my beloved sword, not only made of crystalline At but marbled with ribbons of inky anti-At as well. With hardly a thought, I'd willed a replica of Mercy into existence. Maybe Anapa was right about me. Maybe I was just as powerful as a Netjer. Maybe even more.

I raised my eyes, meeting Anapa's.

His narrowed the slightest bit. "Katarina, please," he said, raising his hands in placation. "I urge you to cooperate. Violence is unnecessary." There was no hint of fear in his voice. Not even any anger. If anything, I thought I picked up on a thread of disappointment.

I scoffed. Like he had any right to be disappointed in me. Like he had any right at all to expect a single damn thing from me after the stunt he'd just pulled with Nik. "Don't you 'Katarina, please' me." I raised my sword. "Take Re out of Nik, now." I widened my stance, angling my right hip away from Anapa. "Like you said—violence isn't necessary. But so help

me, Anapa, if you make the wrong choice right now, I will hurt you.” I bent my knees, just a little, readying to strike.

Anapa sighed. The traitorous bastard had the audacity to look annoyed.

That pissed me the hell off even more. I was already mad, but that little gesture pushed me into a full-blown, berserker rage.

The air surrounding me crackled with electric energy, making the hairs all over my body stand on end. There was a moment of hushed expectation. The quiet before the storm. I inhaled and exhaled, the rush of air in and out of my lungs all I could hear.

And then I leapt at Anapa, the muscles in my legs reinforced by that otherworldly energy, propelling me through the air with more force than my body alone ever could. I flew at him, a fury cutting through the unnaturally still air. A scream tore free from my throat, a raw, resonant sound not meant to be formed by human vocal cords, echoing among the frozen forms filling the street.

I landed just out of arm’s reach of Anapa and spun around, whipping the unbreakable blade around with me. It was a foot from Anapa’s throat when it burst into a fine, iridescent mist.

I howled, altering my trajectory and tightening my fist just before it reached Anapa. I clocked him under the jaw as hard as I could. Not as good as a sword strike, but with the surge of magical energy coating every single muscle fiber in my body, the blow promised to do some damage.

Anapa grunted, head snapping back, and took a few stumbling steps away from me.

I stalked after him, already forming the next series of strikes in my mind. I could feel the otherworldly energy pouring into me, saturating my physical body and recharging my inhuman strength.

A hand locked around my arm, just above the elbow, stopping me short.

I spun around, attempting to yank my arm free, but the grip was unrelenting. Even with the power reinforcing my physical strength, I couldn't break the hold.

My eyes widened as I stared at my detainer, my lips parted, and for the briefest moment, I lost the grip on my rage. In an instant, the power flooding me sizzled out.

It was Nik, or rather Re wearing Nik like a favorite suit, his eerie iridescent eyes staring out from Nik's familiar face as he used Nik's hijacked fingers to restrain me.

He curled Nik's lip in distaste. "Come now, Kitty Kat , stop this childishness and for once at least try to use some common sense." His voice was still Nik's, but the way he spoke was all Re.

I ground my teeth together, nostrils flaring. I really hated him, and I silently vowed to yank his soul out of Nik if it was the last thing I ever did.

"Anapa could overpower you easily and force you through the portal," Re told me, "but he didn't. Perhaps you could show some momentary restraint and consider the possibility that he might just have your best interests at heart."

"Then why did he go after Nik?" I retorted, raising my eyebrows. "That's not exactly a friendly move, is it?"

Re bowed Nik's head in agreement. "True, but I swear to you, I mean Nekure no harm. You are perhaps the only being in existence who cares for him more than I do. As soon as you cooperate with Anapa and pass through the portal to our universe, I will release him and join you. You have my word."

I narrowed my eyes, studying his familiar features, weighing the truth in his words. "Why?" I glanced over my shoulder at Anapa, who was rubbing the side of his jaw as he watched our exchange. "Why is it so damn important that I go willingly?"

I was expecting Anapa to answer, but it was Re who spoke instead. “To show the High Council that you are reasonable and can be reasoned with.”

I returned my focus to him, eyebrows raising once again. Reasonable wasn’t often a word tossed my way. “Why does that matter?” I scrunched my eyebrows together. “And what the hell is the ‘High Council’?”

“The group of Netjers who rule over our kind,” Re explained. “Led by the Mother of All, the being who created everything that has ever existed. The High Council is on the verge of cutting this universe off—I believe Anapa has explained the dire ramifications of such an action—and the only way to stop the High Council from taking such drastic action immediately is to demonstrate that you can be reasoned with.”

I shook my head slowly, still not understanding. “Why?” I looked at Anapa again. “Why me? Why does it matter so much what I do?”

Anapa lowered his hand, working his jaw back and forth a few times. “Because, Katarina, you are the single most powerful being in this universe, and as such, you have been called to represent it.”

My eyelids opened wide with surprise. He was wrong—I wasn’t the most powerful being in this universe, Isfet was. But, so long as she remained trapped in Aaru , it looked like my unique connection to this universe—and, through it, my connection to her—made me the next-best thing.

“You, and only you, have the power to redirect this universe onto what the High Council views to be the right course,” Anapa continued. “I have convinced the Mother of All to hear your case. You are this universe’s last chance.”

I stared at him, lips parted and thoughts stalled. This couldn’t be happening. Nothing he was saying was making any sense.

“Unless you come with me right now of your own free will,” Anapa continued, “this universe will be severed from the collective, and in time, it will wither and die. There will be no Duat , no Aaru . . . no existence at all.”

I swallowed roughly.

“You,” he said, “alongside everything and everyone you care about, will cease to be.”

Chapter Five

After about fifteen seconds of watching me stare at Anapa without moving—without even breathing—Re leaned in until his borrowed lips were mere inches from my ear. “I didn’t sacrifice my place as keeper of this universe just to watch it rot away once I was gone.”

I pulled away from him as much as I could, eyeing him warily. Heru often pointed out my penchant for self-centered thinking. Re made me look like an amateur in that regard.

The corners of Re’s—Nik’s—mouth lifted in the merest hint of a smile. “This is one of the most unique and fascinating universes in existence . . . so wild and unpredictable . . . so magical . . .” Some deep emotion illuminated his moonstone irises. “Helping to shape this universe was the single greatest accomplishment of my life, and despite our differences in the past, Kat, you are the crowning glory of this universe.”

I gaped at him.

“Don’t fail this universe,” he said. “Don’t fail me.”

Of course he just had to end his ushy-gushy speech with a blinking arrow pointing right back at himself.

I stared at him for a few more seconds, then blew out a breath, laughing nervously as I looked at Anapa. “Is he just blowing smoke up my ass,” I asked, “or is he for real?”

Re and I had a long, colorful past—and not one that had been very conducive to building trust. Anapa, on the other hand, hadn’t crossed me until about ten minutes ago, when he committed the ultimate betrayal by

putting my bond-mate in danger. Even so, in my heart and mind, Anapa's words held a weight Re's never would.

"He speaks the truth, Katarina," Anapa said, nothing but honesty shining in his eyes.

The last flames of anger licking through my veins died out and my whole body seemed to deflate, my shoulders slumping and head drooping. Any way I looked at the situation, I didn't see that I had any choice.

I inhaled deeply, then raised my head. With morose-colored glasses, I surveyed the scene surrounding me. The Roman street was packed with people suspended between one moment and the next. People who would have a very finite number of tomorrows if I didn't go with Anapa right now. People whose souls would never rejoin the vast river of soul-energy flowing through Duat . People who wouldn't just die, when this universe rotted away, but would fade out right along with it. People who would truly cease to be.

Unless I did something about it. Again. Gods, but I was tired of this whole save-the-universe shit.

Seeing that the fight had clearly left me, Re released my arm.

Finally, my gaze landed back on Anapa. "What happens to me if I come with you?"

Anapa and Re exchanged a glance that didn't exactly set me at ease. The tension built, until finally Anapa spoke. "As I have already said—you will stand trial as representative of this universe."

"Yeah, but what does that mean?"

"You will be questioned by the High Council," Anapa said.

I waited for him to say more, and when he didn't, I scoffed softly. "That's all you've got— you will be questioned ?"

Anapa watched me, expression inscrutable.

“And then what?” I asked. “What happens after this High Council questions me? Will I be sent home? Will I be imprisoned?” I swallowed roughly. “Will I even survive?”

“I cannot predict what the outcome will be,” Anapa said slowly. “My control over time does not extend into that universe. But I do know that should you choose to remain here and force the High Council’s hand in severing this universe from the collective, none who inhabit this place will survive for long.”

I stared at him for several heartbeats, gauging the level of honesty in his midnight eyes. There was no hint of deception. “Alright,” I finally said. Like I even had a choice. “I’ll do it. I’ll come to your universe, and I promise to be on my best behavior.”

I hadn’t realized Anapa was holding his breath until he let it out in a massive whoosh.

“On one condition,” I added.

Anapa became very still.

I glanced at Re. “Nik comes, too. Can’t have either of us keeling over because of bonding withdrawals, can we?” I said, raising my eyebrows for emphasis. “I won’t be any good to anybody if I’m dead . . .”

Plus, if the shit hit the fan—which it usually did in situations involving me—I wanted to have my strongest ally at my side. It would’ve been nice to bring Mari, too, since we’d fought side by side for so long and were a flawless team, but you can’t always get what you want . . .

Re looked at Anapa, and the two shared a prolonged stare that seemed to say things I didn’t understand.

“Well?” I asked. “Do we have a deal?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Re nod.

A moment later, Anapa nodded, too. “Very well,” he said. “It is agreed.” He stepped to the side, arm extended to the portal swirling in an endless circle in the stone wall. “After you, Katarina.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. “Oh no.” I held out my arm, mirroring his gesture melodramatically. “After you .” I looked at Re, then back at Anapa. “Both of you,” I said, not feeling overly gullible at the moment. I wasn’t about to step into a portal to another universe without seeing with my own two eyes that my bond-mate was coming, too. I wasn’t born yesterday—although, compared to both of them, I kind of was.

I flashed the two Netjers a too-wide grin. “No, really, I insist.”

After another meaningful look was shared between Anapa and Re, Anapa nodded. A moment later, Re strode past me on Nik’s legs, heading straight for the portal. In a blink, he was gone, the swirling mass of gray stone swallowing him up.

My breaths were coming faster now, my heart beating a steady staccato in my chest. He really did it. He really went through the portal. Re, and Nik right along with him, was quite literally outside of this universe.

I thought I should’ve felt something, like the unfathomable distance that now separated Nik’s and my bonded souls should have pained me. But it didn’t. All I felt was a sudden rush of panic making my stomach twist in knots. There was no turning back now. My bond-mate was on the other side of that portal. And if I wanted to survive for more than a week, I would have to follow.

“Will it hurt?” I asked Anapa. When he didn’t answer right away, I glanced at him.

He was frowning. “I honestly cannot say. You are the first of your kind to ever travel through a portal.”

“But Susie and Syris—”

“Are not Nejeret,” Anapa said, correcting me before I could even finish.
“They are Netjer, through and through.”

“Huh.” I stared at the portal, trying to imagine what I would find on the other side. I had so little to go on that I came up blank.

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath and blowing it out. “Here goes nothing.”

With no idea what to expect, I squared my shoulders and strode straight toward the portal. My heart may have skipped a beat or three when I planted my shoe on the sidewalk a scant foot from the event horizon, but I didn’t allow my steps to slow. If I slowed at all, I thought I might lose my nerve, and then I would never make it through.

I closed my eyes and held my breath.

And stepped through the portal.

Chapter Six

As it turned out, entering a portal to another universe felt a lot like taking a running dive over the lip the Grand Canyon, only to free-fall for what felt like an eternity before landing in an enormous vat of warm, gooey Jell-O. And that was just the physical sensation.

I closed my eyes for the first few seconds—a natural reaction to feeling like I was falling to my death, like that might protect me from the impact of landing. Once I opened my eyes, I was too awed to even blink.

I seemed to be moving through a tunnel of some sort, its walls an ever-changing kaleidoscope of lights and colors and textures and, somehow, sounds . They flitted past, so very different from one another, but not the least bit discordant, like all the instruments in an orchestra playing at the same time—each making a unique sound but still maintaining harmony with the whole.

Beneath it all, there was a steady drumming that reminded me of a heartbeat. I could feel the primal rhythm thrumming through the air all around me, somehow familiar and strangely comforting.

The tunnel curved this way and that, up and down. And then there was a flash, brighter than those flickering along the walls of the tunnel, and suddenly I was falling again. That thrumming heartbeat stopped, replaced by an almost staticky staccato tapping, and the appearance of the walls changed, taking on an oily, metallic look. The surface of the walls still shifted endlessly, like liquid quicksilver, but in patterns and sharp angles.

The journey came to an end just as it had started, with the whole falling sensation. I figured I would be thrown out of the portal into whatever sort of reception area awaited me on the other side. I didn't expect to just step out of the portal like I was completing the motion that had brought me into the thing in the first place. But that was exactly what happened.

The moment the sole of my shoe touched the solid surface on the other side of the portal, my knees gave out. I collapsed onto the floor, head hanging and palms pressed into a smooth, cool surface. I felt like I'd had way too much to drink and was suffering from a bad case of the spins.

"Holy shit," I said, the two words broken up by my quick, heavy breaths.

A hand appeared in front of my face. A familiar hand, one that had spent a lot of time touching my body lately. Nik's hand. I was so disoriented that it took me a moment to realize why Nik's hand was the first thing I saw upon entering an entirely different universe.

Nik was here too. I wasn't alone in this foreign place. That knowledge made me breathe a little easier. If there was one thing I'd learned over the past few weeks, it was that there was nothing Nik and I couldn't accomplish, so long as we were together.

I shifted my weight backwards so my butt was resting on my heels and placed my hand in Nik's. But the moment I raised my eyes and met his, the moment I saw that moonstone opalescence coloring his irises in place of

that familiar, beloved pale blue, I hissed faintly and yanked my hand from his. Re was still in control.

He stared down at me, expression one of utter confusion.

My eyes narrowed to slits. “Think maybe you could turn the helm back over to Nik now?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. “I’m here. That was the whole point of you hijacking his body, right? So why don’t you just let Nik go and skedaddle on into your own body, or whatever . . .”

Re grunted a humorless laugh, then closed his eyes and bowed his head. When his eyelids lifted once more, it revealed that heartwarming ice blue that belonged to Nik and Nik alone.

I blew out a breath, pushing my hair out of my face with a hasty swipe of my hand. “Oh thank God,” I said as I reclaimed his hand and used it to pull myself up to my feet. “Good to have you back.”

The corner of Nik’s mouth lifted, just a little. “Glad to be back.”

My focus slid away from him, and I did a slow scan of our surroundings. “Damn,” I said, voice momentarily stolen by what I saw.

We were in a dome that had to be at least five hundred feet high at its peak, taller than pretty much any building back in Rome. The walls were like quicksilver, rippling and refracting the light that seemed to be shining through it. I glanced down, confirming what I suspected from my less-than-dignified hands-and-knees arrival—the floor was made of the same material.

I lifted one foot and tapped the toe of my shoe against the floor. Ripples spread out from the point of contact like those of a stone landing in water, only this stuff—whatever it was—felt solid. It was like the standard physical states from my universe didn’t apply here. Like solid, liquid, and gas weren’t rules in this alien place.

“I wonder what it is,” I said, more to myself than to Nik.

“Essence,” he said. “It’s the basic building block of this universe, what At and anti-At were modeled off of.”

I looked at him, surprised by his answer. “How could you possibly know that?”

Nik blinked, tension sharpening his features for the briefest moment before his expression relaxed. “Re . . .” He rubbed his temples with his thumb and index finger. “Some of his knowledge always spills over whenever he’s in here.”

“Oh.” My eyes lingered on his face. “I don’t suppose you gleaned anything useful from his thoughts? Maybe some more info about what to expect with this whole trial thing?”

Nik lowered his hand and shook his head. “No such luck. Sorry, Kitty Kat.”

I sighed, lifting one shoulder. “No worries.”

At the faint whoosh behind me, I spun around to look at the portal. Anapa had joined us.

“What took you so long?” I asked. I’d thought he was right behind me.

The corners of Anapa’s mouth just hinted at turning down. “I stepped into the portal immediately after you, Katarina.” He tilted his head to the side, curiosity lighting his midnight eyes. “How long have you been here?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Five minutes, maybe?”

That hint of a frown deepened. “How odd,” Anapa said. “I was under the impression that, besides the Mother of All, all beings traveled through portals at the same speed.” His brows drew together. “I have never heard of any sort of variability.”

“That’s me,” I said, fake-laughing, “the variable one.”

Anapa continued to stare at me, making me more than a little uncomfortable.

“So . . .” I glanced at Nik, flashing him a discomfited smile. “What’s next?”

“Oh,” Anapa said, “yes, right . . .”

He seemed to shake himself out of his momentary trance, then turned around to face the swirling portal. He raised his hand and pressed it into the wall just outside the outer rim of the portal. Ever so slowly, he inched his hand toward the edge of the portal, and just as slowly, the portal shrank until it was nothing more than a small, blackened disk spinning ever more slowly on the quicksilver wall.

Anapa plucked the disk off the wall once it had stopped spinning and curled his long fingers around it.

With the portal closed, the walls and floor were the only sources of light, the Essence showering us all in an eerie, silver glow. It was like the world had been bleached of color, leaving behind only black and white and every shade of gray between.

I laughed under my breath, more a nervous response than one of humor. “We’re definitely not in Kansas anymore,” I muttered.

Anapa stared at me for a moment, clearly not catching the reference. Apparently, his time in my universe had not included much exposure to popular culture.

“Oz,” I told him. “Wizard Of. It’s a classic. You should check it out sometime.”

Anapa cleared his throat. “Yes, well, I would imagine that many things here will look strange to you, but I’ve done my best to add some familiarity to your quarters as well as to the chamber created for your trial.”

“Created for?” I repeated back to him, eyebrows rising. “You created a whole space just for this?”

“Indeed.” Anapa clasped his hands behind his back. “Such is the protocol in cases like this, as so few species can exist purely in energy form. As you are

now, tied to your physical body, you would not be able to survive on our usual plane of existence.”

“I’m sorry . . .” I blinked at him, exchanged a glance with Nik—who, surprisingly, didn’t seem at all affected by Anapa’s explanation—and returned to staring at Anapa. “But, what ?”

“We do not often descend to the physical plane,” Anapa explained further. “And as the Netjer most familiar with your universe, I was tasked with creating the physical spaces required for your stay here as well as charged with your care.”

I opened my mouth and inhaled to ask one of the million questions buzzing around my mind, then pressed my lips together again. “Huh.”

“Come,” Anapa said, raising a hand and waving it to the side.

An opening formed in the wall of the dome, not swirling like the portal from my universe, but still round. Beyond it, I could see what appeared to be my bedroom from Heru’s place on Bainbridge Island.

I stared through the doorway, my mouth falling open.

“Let us get you settled in,” Anapa said. “It should not be too long of a wait until the High Council is ready for you, but I think you should have time to rest, if you’d like. This has been a lot to process, I’m sure.”

Apparently, he’d meant it when he said the Netjers wanted to make me feel comfortable here. I wasn’t sure what to think of it. In the back of my mind, I’d been expecting to be thrown into a prison cell of stone and iron where I would rub elbows with rats and other vermin. But going so far as to create a replica of my bedroom—that was just strange. Why do it? What was the Netjers’ angle, really?

Because instead of setting me at ease, the familiar surroundings were a jab to the heart, reminding me of just how far away home was. An actual, truly infinite distance away.

That realization sparked a hint of panic and infected me with a bout of homesickness so acute and severe that it physically hurt. It felt like my heart was being squeezed, my lungs constricted, right there in my chest.

I balled my hands into fists and straightened my spine, squaring my shoulders. Sure, this was a crazy situation. But it wasn't my first time facing what was, by pretty much any definition, insane, and so far as I knew, there was a way out. So long as there was a way out, I would not panic. I would not give in to weakness.

I would squash that shit and sweep it under a rug. I had to hide it away where nobody could see it. Not even me.

Chapter Seven

Nik followed me into the replica of my bedroom, Anapa right behind him. A quick examination of the space told me Anapa had done an impeccable job of recreating my room from back home. It was eerie to be surrounded by familiarity and to know that none of it was real. A tiny voice in the back of my mind wondered if that was the whole point. Was the High Council's "standard protocol" in place to throw guests like me—if I could even be called a guest—off-balance before their trial? Or did they genuinely want to make me feel comfortable? If that was the case, it wasn't working.

"So, what happens next?" I asked, turning away from the illusion to face the doorway. It was right where a normal, mundane door would have been, but it couldn't have been more different.

Anapa stood just inside the opening. "For now," he said, "you wait. I will return when the High Council summons you. It shouldn't be long." He turned as though he was about to walk right back out the way he'd come in.

I took a step toward him. "You're leaving? Just like that?" I raised my hands a few inches, subconsciously beseeching him to stay. "No explanation of—of anything?"

Anapa seemed to be avoiding meeting my eyes, which set off all kinds of alarm bells in my mind. "You will understand everything soon enough," he

said cryptically, then stepped through the doorway.

I rushed after him but barely managed two steps before the opening closed in on itself, sounding like something being sucked up a pneumatic tube, leaving nothing but a blank wall where the only way out had been just a moment earlier.

I couldn't believe he'd left. He just walked away, leaving us there, none the wiser. I still didn't know what was going on, beyond the supposed trial I would be facing as the representative of my universe. Beyond his claims that my willing participation was the only thing standing between my universe and its complete and utter destruction. Beyond the fact that there was an infinite expanse of time and space between where I was now and where I belonged.

"Oh, come on!" I smacked the wall where the door had been with an open hand, a frustrated growl rising up my throat. "This is such bullshit." I hit the wall one more time for good measure, then turned and leaned back against it, crossing my arms over my chest.

Nik settled in the violet armchair in the corner of the room, resting the base of his skull against its cushioned back and closing his eyes.

"How can you just sit there?" I asked. I wrapped my fingers around my upper arms, digging my nails into my own flesh, hoping the pain would alleviate some of the panic mounting in my chest. "This whole situation is so screwy, and now Anapa . . ." My irritation with the Netjer came out in the form of a growl. "He just left us here. We're trapped, Nik. We're prisoners." An anxious shiver crawled up my spine, and I threw my hands up in frustration. "And it's like you don't even care."

Nik rested his hands on the end of the chair's arms, then raised and lowered his shoulders in an unenthusiastic shrug. "Calm down, Kitty Kat. There's no point in getting all worked up about something we can't change."

I scoffed, hardly able to believe the words that had just come out of his mouth. "Fine," I said, gritting my teeth and shaking my head. I was getting the distinct urge to punch Nik, and I impressed even myself by showing

some restraint and not doing it. “You just sit there,” I told him, a distinct edge to my voice. “Do nothing. I’m sure we can relax our way out of this.”

“Kat . . .” Nik shifted forward in the chair like he was considering standing. Like he might come to me and try to comfort me.

I raised a hand, palm out toward him. “No, don’t. If you get close to me right now, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself from scratching your face off.”

Nik laughed silently, the corner of his mouth rising just a little. “Have it your way,” he said as he settled back in the chair.

I was fully aware that my frustration with Nik stemmed from my frustration with myself. He didn’t need to be here, but he was because I’d demanded it. I’d justified it both internally and to Anapa by claiming that if Nik and I were separated for too long it would mean death for both of us. But the truth of it was that I’d really wanted Nik here with me because I was afraid and because he was the strongest, most powerful person I knew. And he made me stronger just by being here, with me. But at the same time, him being here was a reminder of my own weaknesses, which only frustrated me further. It was so much easier to push that frustration out onto him than to deal with it at the source—me.

Sometimes I felt bad for him that he had to put up with me for the rest of forever. Now was not one of those times.

I glared at Nik for a few seconds longer, then rolled my eyes once more, sniffing as I turned my back to him and recrossed my arms over my chest. I looked around at the familiar walls and furnishings, part of me wishing for the iron jail cell I’d imagined.

The room was perfect—just like my room back on Bainbridge. The bed and nightstands, the dresser, the armchair, the armoire, and the bathroom were all in the right places. Even the standing mirror was there, though this version was just a mirror: no sign of Dom’s name etched around the frame, let alone his ghostly reflection.

Even though everything looked right, it wasn't. It was too neat. Too tidy. There were no bottles of booze on the dresser. My tarot cards weren't strewn out on the nightstand alongside a glass of bourbon. The bed was made, which never happened, and there were no clothes draped over the chairback or piled on the floor near the armoire.

My focus returned to the standing mirror, my thoughts turning to my half-brother, and I touched the mirror pendant hanging on a leather cord around my neck. "Dom, can you hear me?"

There was no response. My heart gave a nervous flutter.

I gripped the pendant, yanking the cord off over my head and dangling the tiny mirror in front of my face. "Dom? Are you in there?"

The thought that he wasn't in the mirror, that I couldn't talk to him—the realization that, for once, he didn't have my back—only fanned the flames of panic smoldering in my chest.

"Dom?" I repeated, a slight tremor in my voice. He would be freaking out right now; everyone would be. To them, it would look like I'd vanished into thin air in the middle of the Rome crisis. Heru and Mei wouldn't be able to find me using their sheuts—they wouldn't be able to sense me at all. My friends and family—the whole world—would think I was dead.

"Looks like he can't reach the mirrors from a universe away," Nik said, stating the obvious.

"Yeah," I said, voice thready as I continued to search the little pendant for any sign of my half-brother. "Looks like it." With a shaky sigh, I returned the pendant to where it belonged, hanging around my neck. I was on the verge of losing my shit, and I forced myself to take deep breaths, hoping it would calm my frayed nerves.

When I turned to Nik, I found that his pale blue eyes were locked on me, his stare intense. It was almost like he was studying me. Like he was waiting for me to break down.

“What?”

Nik didn't respond. He just kept staring at me, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was pissed off that I'd dragged him into this right along with me. Well, he could join the club, because I was pretty pissed off about it too.

His scrutiny quickly made me feel self-conscious, and I turned away from him once more. I moved closer to the nightstand, wondering if Anapa had been so detailed in recreating my room—my prison cell—that he'd included a replica of my deck of tarot cards. They wouldn't work the same way as my actual deck of tarot cards because I hadn't made them, but it would be comforting to feel even a dummy version of the deck in my hands, regardless.

I sat on the edge of the bed and reached for the drawer handle, but when I pulled the drawer open, I found that it was empty. I exhaled heavily. “Of course,” I said under my breath.

“What's wrong?” Nik asked.

Besides everything? I laughed bitterly. “Nothing,” I said without looking at him.

I shut the drawer and stood, moving to the dresser. I ran my hand over the top of the dresser, soothed by the smooth, faintly grooved surface. I trailed my fingertips along the wood grains until I reached the end of the dresser and jumped my fingers to the standing mirror, letting them glide around the top of the frame. It was impossible not to search the depths of the looking glass for Dom, even though I knew I wouldn't find him in there.

As I moved past the mirror, I drew closer to the window. It showed the usual view of the thick forest of pines and evergreens and the Puget Sound beyond. But the view was too static. The blue-gray water was a solid mass, no movement to it all. Just another reminder of where I was. And where I wasn't.

As I stared out the window, a thought struck me. Maybe getting me out of my universe had been the plan all along. Maybe there was no trial, no High Council. Maybe I'd walked straight into a trap, eyes open but sight unseeing.

Without me in my home universe, there was no way for Isfet to break out of Aaru . She would remain a prisoner there for the rest of time, and the Netjers could march right on in to my universe and do whatever the hell they wanted. The threat on the horizon, the big scary thing she'd been warning me about, would happen, and nobody would be able to do a damn thing about it.

Because I was here. Because I'd abandoned everyone in my universe. Because maybe, just maybe, I'd been duped.

I was too frustrated for words. I didn't think I'd ever been so pissed off at myself. With a howl, I slammed my fist into that artificial window. I felt the sharp pain of some of the bones in my hand cracking, but the window didn't break. It didn't even have the decency to crack. It might have looked like a glass window, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. It was a made-up thing. A fake. Everything in here was.

Nik placed his hands on my shoulders, standing behind me. "Calm down, Kitty Kat. There's no need to hurt yourself. We'll figure a way out of this. Trust me. We just need to be calm. To think."

I hung my head, holding my now-throbbing hand to my chest. It would heal, but it would take a while. Besides, that physical pain dulled in comparison to my wounded pride. I hated that Nik had seen me give in to hopelessness like that.

"Maybe you'll feel better if we talk through what you should and shouldn't tell the High Council . . ."

I shook my head weakly. "That definitely won't help." It would likely do the opposite, sending me spiraling deeper into the throes of panic and tossing any chance of level-headed thinking out the window.

“Well then, come on . . . lie down with me,” he said, directing me toward the bed. “Who knows how long we’ll be in here. Let’s get some rest, and then we’ll be able to brainstorm with clear heads.”

All the fight left my body, and I let Nik turn me around. He put pressure on my shoulders, and I bent my knees, sitting on the edge of the bed.

I was suddenly exhausted. I scooted back on the bed and lay down on my side, curling my knees up and hugging them to my chest. The waistband of my slacks pinched my skin, and I silently wished for some sweats and an oversized T-shirt.

As Nik settled behind me, I closed my eyes and focused on taking deep, even breaths, timing them off of the pulse throbbing in my wounded hand.

Slowly, my thoughts settled, and I was able to recognize that Nik was right. There had to be a way out of this. There was always a way out.

We just had to find it.

Chapter Eight

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep.

When I woke, I had zero sense of how long I’d been out. Nik was still behind me, his arm draped over my side. I raised my head to look out the window, but that stagnant view of the Puget Sound was exactly the same as it had been before. I wouldn’t find any clues as to how much time had passed from the scene “outside”—that fake sun glowing dimly behind those artificial clouds hadn’t moved an inch.

I hadn’t dreamed while I was asleep, at least not that I could remember. Which meant no echoes—no visions of what the future might bring. I wondered if being outside of my universe meant I had no powers at all. Was I entirely without magic? I’d been wishing I could go back to being a normal Nejeret for weeks—months, even—but not like this. I hadn’t wished to be rendered utterly powerless. Talk about being careful what you wish for . . . I closed my eyes and focused inward, seeking out that special part of

my soul that allowed me to wield universal energies in a way that could only be called magic.

Sensing my sheut , I exhaled in relief. Even better, I could still feel the threads of At and anti-At marbling my ba . If I could just figure out how to reach out across the vast distance from here to my universe and reconnect with those primal energies, I would be able to shake this powerless feeling. I would be able to take some minimal amount of control back into my own hands. Then, this whole situation might feel a little less impossible to deal with.

Opening my eyes, I craned my neck to get a look at Nik's face. His eyes were closed, and his chest rose and fell with the deep, even breaths of sleep.

Ever so carefully, I slid out from under his arm, tucking it against his chest before moving away from the bed. I needed to think, not sleep. And I always thought best when I was moving.

I started to pace back and forth across the room, stretching out and flexing the fingers of my right hand. I was pleased to find it had healed completely while I slept. My stomach groaned, a reminder that I would need food soon to replenish the energy my body had used to heal itself. Not that there was anything I could do about that now.

As I moved around the room, I couldn't shake the feeling that coming here had been a mistake, whatever Anapa had sworn about my willing participation in this "trial" being the only thing standing between my universe and certain destruction. At this point, I was having serious doubts about there even being a trial. Anapa had never lied to me before, but that didn't mean much. Our history was more like a brochure than a textbook. I barely knew the guy. The god. Maybe he'd made it all up just to get me here. But why ?

My universe had been near catastrophe time and time again in the past, but my sister Lex, who'd been at the center of the last save-the-universe struggle, hadn't ever been approached by Anapa or any other Netjer threatening potential universal destruction. Why now?

It had to have something to do with Isfet and my connection to her. But why did that matter to the Netjers? They'd trapped her in Aaru at the inception of my universe, I knew that much. What I didn't know was why. Were they afraid of her? Was that what this was all about?

I shook my head. It didn't make any sense. All Isfet wanted was to protect my universe. It was self-defense, really, since the universe was technically her body.

I reached the armoire and turned, heading back toward the dresser, letting logic lead my thoughts. If Isfet protecting my universe was the thing the Netjers were trying to prevent, then that meant that, for whatever reason, the Netjers wanted to harm my universe.

I stopped dead, staring at the wall behind the dresser. "Holy shit," I breathed. That was it. The Netjers needed to make sure that my universe couldn't defend itself.

It was a terrifying realization. But it was the truth—it had be—which made the realization strangely comforting as well. I knew what I had to do now. I needed to find a way to get back to my universe and free Isfet, as soon as possible, no matter what. If I didn't, then the Netjers would eventually come after my universe with malice in their hearts. They would attack us, and without Isfet free to defend us, we would lose. The logic didn't lie.

"You're going to wear a hole in the carpet if you keep at it like that," Nik said.

I glanced at him, but I didn't stop pacing. When I reached the dresser, I turned and headed back toward the armoire. "It's not even real carpet," I said. "It's probably made of the same stuff as the dome was—Essence, or whatever you called it." I reached the armoire and turned back to the dresser.

"Yeah, I know," Nik said, moving to the edge of the bed. He swept his hair back with a hand, then stretched his neck, first one way, then the other. "So, what's on your mind?"

I pressed my lips together, frustrated for the gazillionth time about that damn gag order Re and Apep put in place in my universe to keep anyone from talking about Isfet.

And then I stopped and turned to face Nik, eyes opening wide. I wasn't in my universe anymore. Which meant there was no gag order, not here. For the first time ever, I could tell somebody about Isfet. I could tell somebody about everything I'd been dying—literally, sometimes—to share over the past few weeks.

“There's something I have to tell you,” I said as I rushed over to Nik, sitting on the bed beside him and taking one of his hands in mine. “I've wanted to tell you about this for so long,” I said, the words tumbling out as I squeezed his hand. “So much has happened, so much insane, crazy shit—stuff I couldn't talk about until now.”

Nik's eyes searched mine. “Alright,” he said, “I'm listening.”

I took a deep breath. I was so excited to finally confide in someone that I was shaking. “It all started when I died . . .”

Chapter Nine

“So you see,” I said, finally winding down from the whole epic tale of my entanglement with Isfet, “she's our only option. Whatever happens here, she's the only one who can truly protect our universe. We have to get back home ASAP.” I shook my head, exhaling in frustration. “We never should've come in the first place, but I couldn't see it then . . .” When Anapa first showed up in Rome, I'd been too preoccupied by the whole threat of our universe being severed to work through the truth of the matter. Now, it was clear as day.

“Wow,” Nik said, voice monotone and stare faraway. Slowly, he extricated his hand from mine and smoothed back his hair. His expression was absolutely unreadable.

“What? Do you think I'm wrong?” I studied his face, trying to read some hint of what he was feeling. Of what he was thinking. But those perfect,

angular features were truly inscrutable. No raised eyebrow. No smirk or sneer. Not even a mischievous sparkle in his eye. Was he in shock?

Probably. I had just dumped a massive amount of holy shit-worthy information onto his lap.

I touched his shoulder gently. “Nik?”

After a few more seconds, he inhaled deeply and looked at me. “I think you’re right, Kat, but . . . it’s just a lot to take in,” he said. “I wish you hadn’t—” He fell silent, shaking his head.

I tilted my head to the side. “You wish I hadn’t what?”

He looked away, expression returning to that stony, inscrutable state. Finally, his lips parted and he breathed in to speak. But whatever it was that he wished I hadn’t would have to wait.

There was a whooshing sound, and we both looked to the empty wall where my bedroom door would have been. A circular opening was forming in its place.

Once the doorway was fully formed and about seven feet tall and nearly as wide, Anapa stepped through. He was carrying a stack of folded-up clothes, including blue jeans and a black leather coat and what looked a hell of a lot like my favorite pair of combat boots. Had he brought me my actual clothes? Or were these reproductions, too?

I eyed the bundle in his hands for a moment, but I couldn’t suppress the urge to glance at the doorway. It was so close. Freedom was just through there . . . and a universe away.

My longing for home must have shown on my face, because Anapa closed the doorway with a sweep of his hand. In a blink, it was gone.

I returned my focus to Anapa, placing one hand on my hip and cocking it to the side. “I wasn’t going to make a break for it,” I said, and I actually meant it.

I might not have been the queen of planning ahead, but even I could recognize the wisdom in scouting out the surroundings of my artfully disguised prison cell before I just ran out into gods knew what. This cell could've been in a bubble floating along through space for all I knew.

Anapa raised his eyebrows, just a little. "For your own sake, Katarina, I hope you speak the truth. It would be unwise . . ."

"Yeah, I'm aware." I sent a meaningful look to the stack of clothes in his hands. "Are those for me?"

"Ah, yes." Anapa stepped further into the room, making his way toward me. He held out the clothes in offering. "I thought you might be more comfortable in your usual attire."

I took the stack from his hands, frowning. "Yeah, I will," I said, itching to shed my slacks and blouse and don something normal. "Thanks."

I chewed on my lower lip. First Anapa had gone to the trouble of creating a pretty damn perfect replica of my bedroom, and then he'd brought me my actual clothes. He'd traveled all the way back to my universe, rifled through the piles of clean-ish clothing on my bedroom floor, found a pretty good approximation of my usual outfit—from the looks of it, he'd even found my favorite pair of jeans—and then brought it all across multiple universes to me. To make me feel comfortable.

It was like he genuinely cared. Like he just might actually be on my side. Or, at least, not completely against me. My gut told me that was the case, but the circumstances suggested otherwise. Or was this how Stockholm Syndrome started?

I took a single step backward, eyeing Anapa and hugging my things to my chest. "What's your angle?" I asked, eyes narrowing to speculative slits.

I wasn't free to move about on my own, which made me a prisoner. That was very clear. But as far as the accommodations went, I was being treated like a guest. So, which was it? Because it couldn't be both.

Anapa stared at me for a few seconds, then looked to Nik, who was standing on the opposite side of the bed, but he quickly returned his attention to me. “My angle?” He shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t—”

“Uh-uh.” I took another backward step. “Don’t play dumb, Anapa. You know exactly what I mean, so what’s the deal? Where’s your loyalty—with me or with the High Council?” After a brief pause, I added, “What’s the outcome you’re pulling for?”

“I . . .” Anapa turned away from me and made that increasingly familiar hand gesture toward the wall, creating a doorway. “I should leave you to change,” he said, already walking toward the opening.

“Anapa, please,” I blurted, “wait!”

“I’ll return in a few minutes,” he said, ignoring my pleas.

And then he was gone, and the doorway disappeared a few seconds later.

I exhaled in a breathy, humorless laugh. Fat lot of good that had done. I was just as clueless as ever and even more confused. I glanced down at the clothes in my arms. But at least I would look good when I met the High Council. At least I would look like me.

Chapter Ten

“B ummer he didn’t bring anything for you,” I told Nik. I was sitting on the foot of the bed, bent over to tie the laces of my boots.

Shortly after Anapa left, Nik had returned to the armchair in the corner. He now sat with his elbows propped up on the chair’s arms, his fingers steepled together in front of his chin. Not that he needed different clothes. He looked damn good in that suit; he just didn’t look like him.

“I’ll survive,” Nik said, lowering his hands to grip the ends of the chair’s arms once more.

I stared at him, studying his familiar features in an attempt to gauge his current state of mind. I’d found myself doing that a lot here. But once again,

I came up empty.

“What’s up with you?” I asked.

Nik’s fingertips dug into the upholstery. “What do you mean?”

I finished with my bootlaces and sat up straight, patting my hands on my knees. “I don’t know. You just seem . . . different, I guess. Angry, or something.” Cold, was more like it. “Did the things I told you—”

“I’m fine.”

I held up my hands to shield myself from his chilly tone. “Alright. Noted.” I laughed under my breath. “Forget I said anything.”

“You got it.”

I pointed at him. “See. That’s exactly what I mean. You’re acting weird—all cold and quiet and . . . and weird .”

Nik raised a single, pierced eyebrow. “Sorry, Kitty Kat. I’ve just got a lot to think about.” His lip quirked into a faint smirk. “Don’t worry about me. You’ve got your own shit to deal with.”

I narrowed my eyes, scrutinizing his face. Nik was sorry ? He’d never apologized for his behavior before, not even when he broke my hand with his stupid At wall, or after, when he’d nearly killed me. Not even when he’d used his myriad of sheut powers to cloud my mind in an attempt to make me comply with his wishes.

Something was majorly off with him—more than just him being overwhelmed by our current predicament—but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Was Re still in control, just playing it off that he was letting Nik drive?

I dismissed the thought. It was impossible. In Nik’s case, his eyes truly were windows to his soul—specifically, to which soul was in charge. Pale blue for Nik, moonstone white for Re. It was practically a law of physics.

My stomach groaned with hunger. Absently, I rubbed the back of my neck, angling my head first one way, then the other to stretch the aching muscles. “Uh . . . I’m starving. I hope Anapa brings us something to eat before the trial. I think I’m getting a hunger headache.”

Something that looked a hell of a lot like fear flashed in Nik’s pale eyes, and I froze, intrigued by the reaction. It was the most emotion he’d shown in hours. It disappeared almost as quickly as it showed up, making me second-guess whether I’d seen it at all.

Nik leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. “Maybe they want you hungry . . . weakened. Might be part of their strategy to lower your defenses.”

I frowned, thinking his thoughts weren’t totally unfounded. “I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said, letting my hand fall back into my lap. My lip curled into a slight sneer. “I’m already not a fan of this High Council . They sound like a bunch of total douche-nozzles...”

At the sound of that increasingly familiar crackle and whoosh, I stood and turned to face the doorless wall. An opening appeared seconds later, and Anapa walked into the room, accompanied by an unfamiliar Netjer.

I looked at the new Netjer, scanning him from head to toe, then back up. I shifted my focus back to Anapa, raising my eyebrows. “Who is this?” I asked, pointing to the newcomer with my chin.

Anapa glanced at the other Netjer sidelong, only for a moment. “This is Sian. He is here to ensure your safe escort to the trial chamber.”

The trial chamber —so the “trial” was real, after all. Not that that clarified much of anything.

I gulped. My throat felt dry, thanks to the hours I’d gone without access to any food or water. “I’m starving,” I said, succumbing to the sudden urge to put off the trial for as long as possible. “I don’t know how long you plan on keeping me here, but you’re going to have to feed me at some point, and water is pretty necessary for us earthlings.”

Anapa bowed his head. “Of course. I’ll see what I can do.” As he raised his head, I caught the meaningful glance he sent Sian’s way. There was warning in his eyes. He didn’t trust the other Netjer.

I frowned, forcing a quiet “Thanks.” I would have to watch what I said around this new Netjer.

“Come,” Sian said. It was the first time I’d heard him speak. His voice was smooth like velvet and neither high nor low, fitting his androgynous appearance. Had Anapa not referred to him as a “he,” I wouldn’t have been able to peg his sex. “The High Council is ready for you, and it is not good to keep them waiting.” He started for the open doorway, clearly expecting me to follow.

I looked at Anapa, then at Nik, and when neither offered me any guidance, I turned and followed Sian. Nik fell in step behind me, and a quick glance over my shoulder told me Anapa was taking up the rear.

The doorway led into a long, wide hallway with polished pale marble floors and white walls. They were blank, devoid of any doors or windows, but there were benches made of dark wood every dozen feet or so. At the end of the hallway was a single door—the traditional kind, made of wood. Overall, the hallway had a very courthouse vibe, which seemed appropriate . . . but also strange, considering the hallway was in another universe.

When Sian reached the door at the end of the hallway, he gripped the handle and pulled it open, giving me a view of what lay beyond.

My eyes widened as I stepped through the doorway.

The hallway’s appearance made a lot more sense, what with the very legitimate-looking courtroom I’d just entered. It was like something straight out of a movie, with only slight modifications. Row after row of wooden benches filled up the back half of the room, seating for anybody who wanted to watch the proceedings, and a single table with several chairs was set up beyond the benches.

At the front of the room, there was a raised dais for the judge, or in this case the judges, like you would see at a congressional hearing. There were nine chairs in total, eight filled by Netjers, absolutely still and watching me with unblinking eyes, though the center seat—a throne by pretty much any definition—was empty. The Netjer High Council, live and in technicolor and scary as all hell.

Gulp.

Needing some way to redirect my anxious energy, I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my leather coat. The second my fingers closed around a very familiar velvet drawstring bag, my heart gave an excited thud-thump. My tarot cards. Anapa had brought them with my clothes.

The shock must have shown on my face, and I made an effort to school my features. Was this a sign that Anapa was actually trying to help me? Was this his response to my demand that he tell me whose side he was really on? I clung onto the hope that despite the fact that he'd dragged me into this mess, he had my back. That maybe, just maybe, I could trust him. He hadn't lied about there being a trial, after all . . .

Sian led us to the table and chairs arranged near the front of the room. I stood behind the middle chair, and Nik went for the chair on my right, Anapa the one on my left. Sian continued on to the far side of the room, where he took up a stance with his back to the wall, his hands clasped before him in what was very distinctly a guard pose. If I was stupid enough to attack the High Council, he was ready to shut that shit down in a heartbeat.

Before we could take our seats, the Netjer sitting in the chair to the left of the throne stood. At that point, sitting seemed kind of disrespectful. And for once, I was kind of trying to impress. Or at least play the part.

A live wire of tension, I shot Nik a sideways glance, wishing I could reach out and take his hand. But I wasn't willing to give such a blatant display of weakness, so I kept my hand to myself, curling my fingers into a fist instead.

“Katarina Dubois,” the Netjer said, female from the sound of her voice, though much like with Sian, her short hair and elongated alien features made it difficult to tell. “You have been brought here to stand trial as a representative of your universe. Do you come here free of will and in good faith?”

To my ears, the sounds coming out of her mouth were complete and utter gibberish, but somehow my brain seemed to understand what she was saying. It was disorienting enough that it took me a few seconds of staring at her expectant face to remember that I was supposed to respond.

“Uh . . .” I licked my chapped lips, though my tongue was dry and sticky, making the action pretty much useless. “Yeah?” I cleared my throat. “I mean, I do . . . come here of free will and good faith.”

Ish. It wasn’t like I had much of a choice.

“Very well,” the Netjer said. “Let us begin.”

Chapter Eleven

“Be seated,” the Netjer spokeswoman said.

I pulled out the chair directly in front of me, the chair legs screeching on the hardwood floor. The sound sliced through the silence in the room, making me cringe.

My cheeks lit on fire. “Sorry,” I said, voice barely above a whisper. I sat and ever-so-carefully scooted the chair in, managing to achieve minimal screeching. Nik sat on my right, Anapa on my left.

“Sian, please remove the do-not-disturb order on this construct,” the head Netjer said.

The sound of shuffling and whispers filled the room behind me. Dreading what I would find, I turned slightly in my seat, peeking over my shoulder. Behind me, the room seemed to have expanded, gaining a second and third level, like we were in a theater rather than a replica courtroom.

As soon as I saw just how many Netjer spectators this trial would have—a relative shit-ton—I turned right back around, fingernails digging into the underside of the seat of my chair. What was this—the Netjer version of Judge Judy ?

My heart thudded in my chest, and I sank lower in my chair, wishing I could just disappear. But I couldn't. It was pretty clear that all of these people—these Netjers—were here to see me . I could hear them whispering about me. I was a curiosity. An enigma. A novelty. I was a creature to them, not a person.

“To begin,” the Netjer spokeswoman said, addressing the crowd behind me, “I would like to thank the revered Anapa for doing the hard work and research required to create this construct. As you all know, any time the High Council assembles to determine the fate of a troubled universe, we try our hardest to ensure that the representative of the universe is treated justly and fairly. We are, above all other things, civilized and compassionate. Undue suffering is never an option.”

I leaned closer to Anapa and whispered into his ear. “How is it that I understand what she’s saying?” Because the only two languages I knew fluently were English and Middle Egyptian, and the sounds she was making sure as hell didn’t belong to either of those.

“I built a translation mechanism into the construct,” Anapa said, his voice barely audible.

I waited for him to say more, because his explanation was more or less gibberish to me, but when it was apparent that he was finished, I turned my attention back to the Netjer High Council. I supposed the how didn’t really matter, so long as I could understand the Netjers and they could understand me.

“And for the remainder of the trail,” the Netjer spokeswoman continued, “please keep your audio muted. Any disruptions will result in immediate expulsion from the construct. Absolutely no exceptions.” She settled a stern look on the spectators. “The Mother of All intends for this to be an

exemplary case. The decision made here will set a precedent for all such cases regarding unbalanced mature universes going forward.”

Oh, shit . Back on earth, it usually wasn't a good thing for the defendant when a judge decided to “make an example” of someone. I was already nervous, but now I was petrified.

“Those of you allowed admission to this trial should feel honored,” the Netjer spokeswoman said. “You are witnessing history in the making.” She lifted both hands, palms up, signifying for everyone else to stand as well. “Please rise for the Mother of All. May her justice be fair, her mercy deserved, and her wisdom received with an open heart.”

The door at the back of the courtroom creaked open, and I turned to see the new arrival. The Mother of All sounded like kind of a big deal. I'd yet to hear anybody refer to her by anything other than her title—Mother of All—which made me think she thought pretty damn highly of herself. I had the impression that she was in charge around here, even more so than the High Council. If the Netjers were gods to my people, it seemed that this “Mother of All” was god to them. I wasn't sure what that made her to me. A mega-god? Or über-god? Or just big-G God ?

For seconds, nobody passed through the open doorway. The audience of Netjers watched on, attention rapt and expectant.

I glanced at Anapa. He was so stiff and tense that he was visibly trembling.

Jesus . Who the hell was this chick?

Not a Netjer, that much became all too clear when she finally entered the courtroom. And she certainly didn't look like a human or a Nejeret or any other type of life-form I had ever seen in my life. She was generally humanoid shaped, like the rest of us, but there the resemblance ended.

The Mother of All was angelic and waiflike, her skin rigid and glittering like millions of cut diamonds, and her eyes shone with a deep, multifaceted violet that reminded me of amethysts. She wore a gossamer, multilayered gown that floated and fluttered around her as though she were underwater.

Her long, straight hair seemed to be pure, spun silver, and it trailed behind her as she glided up the aisle to the front of the room.

As the Mother of All passed each row of benches, those gathered to watch the trial bowed their heads and covered their faces with their hands. When she reached our table, both Anapa and Nik did the same. But not me—all I could do was stare.

The Mother of All paused at the edge of our table, turning those amethyst eyes on me. “You are Katarina Dubois,” she said, her voice a chorus of whispers and sighs that nearly brought tears to my eyes with its beauty.

“I —” I cleared my throat. “Yes, I’m her—Katarina Dubois,” I finally managed to say, my voice sounding harsh and grating compared to hers.

The Mother of All scanned me, those amethyst eyes trailing down the length of my body, then right back up. “What a curious creature you are. How fascinating . . .” She studied me for a moment longer, then turned away without another word and continued on her way up to the raised dais to join the High Council.

Like everyone else had done, the members of the High Council bowed their heads and covered their faces with their hands as the Mother of All drew near. Only when she was seated in her throne did they uncover their faces.

The Netjer on her right, the one who’d been speaking earlier, raised her arms, palms down. “Be seated, all.”

I started to do what she said.

“Save for you, Katarina Dubois,” she added.

I froze halfway down to my seat.

“Come forward,” she said. “We wish to question you.”

I remained frozen for another second or two, working on getting my shit together internally before facing this panel of imposing figures. I’d dealt with a lot of higher-up Nejerets back on earth, but these people were on a

whole other level. Now that I'd seen her, this Mother of All chick was like—I didn't even know what. Greater than a Netjer, obviously. I'd been right about that. But what did that make her? What was she? What kind of a being surpassed a Netjer?

Isfet, I supposed, but she was hardly comparable to a Netjer; she was another thing entirely.

Ready as I ever would be, I scooted my chair back. The chair legs screeched on the hardwood floor once again. I cringed at the irritating sound but held in my apology this time. I made my way around the table, shooting a furtive glance first at Anapa, then at Nik. Their guarded expressions did nothing to soothe my jittery nerves.

With a deep breath, I turned away from them and made my way forward. I stopped in the center of the open space in front of the table, directly in front of the Mother of All. My hands felt awkward, like I hadn't had them my entire life. I had no idea what to do with them, so I opted for stuffing them back into the pockets of my coat. The familiar feel of the velvet drawstring bag eased my anxious nerves, just a little.

I inhaled deeply, letting out the breath long and slow and only shaking a little. "What do you want to know?"

Chapter Twelve

The High Council wanted to know pretty much everything, it turned out.

They asked me about me—about my childhood, about losing my mom, and about the role I'd played in averting the whole Re-Apep crisis that Lex had been integral to. They asked me about my people, both Nejerets and humans—about our history, our culture and traditions, our current civil war, and what I thought that struggle would mean for the future of Nejerets and humans alike. They asked me about things that seemed so irrelevant to all of this, like religion and technology and my day-to-day life. They asked me how humans were able to survive fully aware of their own mortality.

On and on, they asked me an endless stream of questions, each one seeming more nonsensical than the last. I was hungry and thirsty and tired, and I had to pee. My head throbbed, and my saliva was tacky from talking for so long without anything to drink. I actually wanted water, not bourbon or even Cherry Coke, which was pretty damn unusual for me.

“And when you enter your resting mode—sleep—you have experiences?” the Netjer on the far left asked. “Dreams, I believe they’re called?” If he already knew all of that, why was he asking me about it?

I combed my fingers through my hair, pausing at the base of my skull to rub the ache that was only settling in deeper. “Yeah . . . but why does this matter?” I blurted before I could stop myself. “What do sleep and dreams have to do with anything?” I moved my hand forward to rub my temple. “I thought this was supposed to be about my universe . . . about the imbalance and all that shi—stuff.”

Behind me, Anapa cleared his throat. It was a warning.

Leave it to me to lose my cool at a time like this. I inhaled and exhaled deeply, closing my eyes as I regathered my quickly fraying nerves. “Why am I here?” I asked, opening my eyes and turning my attention to the Mother of All. “Because it can’t be to ask me about things as inane as dreams.”

The Netjer sitting to the right of the Mother of All straightened in her chair. I was no expert at reading Netjer expressions, but my gut told me that she was pissed.

I suppressed a smirk—nervous habit.

A musical giggle filled the courtroom. It was coming from the Mother of All. It was the first sound she’d made since speaking to me when she’d first arrived.

I was so surprised that I took a step backward.

The Mother of All raised her hand, her fingers covering her mouth. “Oh, my dear, you are an amusing creature,” she said, following up with another aching beautiful laugh. “Tell me, Katarina Dubois—as the most powerful being in your universe, why do you think it should be allowed to continue on?”

My lips parted, and I sucked in a breath to answer, but I found that I didn’t really know what to say. Which was why I was pretty damn grateful when the Mother of All raised her glittering hand, telling me to stop before I’d even started.

“You must understand,” she said, “from our perspective, your universe is completely out of control, and it only seems to be getting worse. Ma’at has been left out of balance for far too long. If we allow your universe, a festering wound in the web of all that is, to continue on its current path, it will, in time, infect this universe, the hub of all that is. And through this universe, all other universes will be infected.” She fell quiet for a moment, letting that sink in. “You, Katarina Dubois, are here to help us decide whether or not your universe can be saved . . . and whether or not it is even worthwhile to try. Is there a way for your universe to course correct, returning stability to Ma’at , or will it continue to spiral out of control, no matter what?”

Numbly, I shook my head. How was I supposed to know that? I’d done what I could to bring balance back to my universe, but despite my best efforts, the song of Ma’at hadn’t been doing so hot lately. Much as I hated to admit it, the Netjers kind of had a point. My universe was out of control.

“So, please, tell me,” the Mother of All continued, “how do you, the most powerful being in your universe, plan to fix it?” All humor from her giggle fit earlier was gone, and the intensity sparkling in her gemstone eyes froze any and all wise-ass retorts on my tongue.

I was left with nothing but the honest truth. “I don’t know,” I said. I considered telling her that even though I didn’t know how to save my universe, I knew someone who could—Isfet—but despite being weakened and weary, some deep-rooted instinct told me to keep my mouth shut about her.

“I see,” the Mother of All said. “Thank you for your honesty, my dear. Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we adjourn to discuss the matter privately?”

I pressed my lips together and shook my head.

“Very well,” she said. “Please return to your seat.”

I did, eagerly. I was surprised to find a tall glass bottle of fancy spring water on the table in front of my seat. Anapa must have slipped out at some point during the hours-long questioning and retrieved it from my universe. I hoped he’d brought some food while he was at it.

“Thank you,” I mouthed to him, reaching for the bottle. I was thirsty to the point of it being nearly all I could think about.

The Netjer to the right of the Mother of All stood. “This concludes the interrogation portion of the trial. Please—”

“Actually,” the Mother of All said, her voice quieter than the Netjer’s but its potency drowning out the Netjer’s voice.

The Netjer’s mouth hung open comically for a moment before she snapped it shut.

“There is one other I would like to hear from regarding this matter,” the Mother of All said. Her intense stare was focused on me, but it shifted slightly to my right. To Nik.

“Come forward,” she said, and her next word nearly stopped my heart. “Re.”

Chapter Thirteen

I forgot all about my thirst and the bottle of water on the table. I turned my head to look at the man sitting beside me so slowly that I could feel the individual muscles and tendons in my neck working. My lips parted, but I couldn’t come up with any words to say. I was too stunned.

The corners of his mouth lifted into a faint, hesitant smile that I thought was an attempt at an apology, and I watched, horrified, as the pale blue bled out of his irises, giving way to a moonstone iridescence. His tattoos faded away, the piercings in his lips and eyebrow vanished, and his facial features elongated a little but didn't change all that much. He still looked eerily similar to Nik. Similar but off—how Nik might look if he were a Netjer—making this man's resemblance to the man I was bonded to haunting.

My mind was in a state of shock, my thoughts stumbling around, bumping into one another, trying to make sense of everything. Failing to make sense of anything.

Nik was Re. Not Re possessing Nik. Nik the man—being—wasn't Nik at all. At least, not my Nik. Did that mean that my Nik—the real Nik—was still back in my universe? Did that mean the man I'd been around for the past gods-knew-how-many hours—the man I'd cuddled with and confided in—had been Re all along?

Puzzle pieces started to fall into place, bringing things I'd dismissed as unimportant to light. Nik's behavior had been strange ever since entering this universe. Nik, the real Nik, was prone to moments of unexpected oddness, but his recent behavior went way beyond the norm. I'd chalked it up to the weird situation, but as it turned out, the cause was way more extreme than that—he wasn't acting like Nik because he wasn't Nik at all.

And then there was the headache; I'd thought it was my body reacting to severe hunger and dehydration, but I now recognized the pain in my skull as an early symptom of bonding withdrawals. Because Nik wasn't here at all—he never had been—and I had no soul-deep connection to the being impersonating him. To Re .

Fear sprouted in my chest. The need to get back to my universe was more urgent than ever. If I remained here for too long, the withdrawals would kill me. And back home, they would kill Nik—the real Nik—too.

But why would Re do this? Why would he pretend to be Nik for so long? Why hadn't he revealed who he really was as soon as we arrived in this

universe? That was the whole point of the farce, after all—he'd been pretending to be Nik back in Rome just to get me here, right?

I felt a spike of white-hot anger and clenched my jaw, my fingers digging into my thighs painfully.

Was it a game for him? Had he enjoyed toying with me?

Re stood and lifted his hand like he was going to touch my shoulder. Another attempted apology.

I flinched away. The danger posed by this place was more palpable than ever . . . because of him.

For a moment, he stood there, eyes locked with mine, not touching me and not pulling away.

My stare was a challenge. Touch me. I dare you. I'll rip your face off.

Re sighed and lowered his hand. "I wish you hadn't told me," he whispered so quietly I almost couldn't hear what he said. He looked at me for a moment longer, then made his way around the table to stand before the High Council just as I had done. He clasped his hands behind his back, squared his shoulders, and held his head high.

My entire body went cold as I processed his words. He knew. About Isfet and my half-formed plan to get home to release her . . . about everything. Because I'd told him. Because he'd tricked me into thinking he was the one person I truly trusted. It had been a huge relief to get everything off my chest. But it had been a mistake—an unwitting one, but a mistake nonetheless—and I had a dreadful feeling that that moment of relief was about to be quickly overshadowed by an eternity of regret.

I glared at the back of his head, wishing my anger alone could sear a hole through his skull and boil his brain. Silently, I willed him to keep his mouth shut.

“You have spent some time with Katarina Dubois disguised as one she trusts,” the Mother of All said.

As she spoke, my glare shifted to her. She was the one behind this. She’d set the whole thing up. The Netjers on the High Council seemed just as shocked as I was about the Nik-is-Re revelation. Was it a power play? Was I just here as a pawn the Mother of All was using to make a point to the High Council—that she was better than them?

“Tell us, Re,” the Mother of All said, “to the best of your knowledge, has Katarina Dubois been forthright and honest with us?”

For seconds—eons—Re remained immobile and silent. Until finally, he nodded. “So far as I know, everything she said was the truth.” He answered carefully, seeming to dance cleverly around the question.

Not cleverly enough.

“But was it the whole truth?” the Mother of All asked.

I held my breath and crossed the first two fingers of both hands. Re hadn’t exactly been forthcoming in his answer to her first question. Maybe he wasn’t a fully cooperative participant in this charade. Maybe he would withhold some of what I’d shared with him. He hadn’t really tried that hard to get any information out of me. If anything, he’d been cold and distant, almost like he’d wanted to push me away. Almost like he’d wanted me to keep my mouth shut.

And I’d gone and blabbed everything to him anyway. Gods, I was an idiot.

“No,” Re finally said, and my heart plummeted. “She did not tell you everything.”

I closed my eyes, chin trembling. “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up,” I mouthed, repeating the phrase over and over and over again.

“Katarina Dubois has been in contact with Isfet,” Re said.

Swallowing roughly, I opened my eyes.

The High Council exploded in a chorus of gasps and whispers. But their reaction was nothing compared to that of the Mother of All. She bristled, those diamond facets in her skin glinting as they shifted sharply, her glare moving from Re to me. Apparently, she really didn't like Isfet.

I shrank back in my chair, repulsed by her palpable rage, sinking down a few inches.

It took the Mother of All a few seconds to calm herself. When she was finally able to speak again, she flattened her palms on the arms of her throne and stood. "I had such high hopes for you," she said to me. "What a disappointment."

I was overcome by a whirlwind of emotions, and it was a struggle to stop them from overtaking me. I was still outraged at Re for duping me—and at Anapa, too, because he'd been in on it. I was embarrassed and ashamed that I hadn't seen through the ruse, that I hadn't been able to tell the difference between this imposter and the man whose soul was bound to mine. I was lonely and frightened, all of these alien faces staring at me, these strangers hearing my story and deciding my fate. And now, seeing the disgust and what could only be called hatred in the Mother of All's amethyst eyes, I drowned in a tidal wave of dread. My stomach turned to lead, my mouth to cotton.

What would happen to me now? Would I be sent home? Or would I be held here until the bonding withdrawals killed me?

More importantly, what would happen to my universe? Nothing good, that much was certain.

Desperation flooded me. I couldn't just leave things like this. I had to try to make it better. I had to try . . .

Trembling with an influx of adrenaline, I stood, licked my lips, and cleared my throat. "Please," I said, voice steadier than I felt. "I didn't mean to—"

"Enough!" the Mother of All roared.

I froze, stunned by the hurricane of alien energy coming off of her in wave after wave. Even if I'd had access to my powers here, I wouldn't have been a match for her. Not even close.

"Get out of my sight," she said and flung out one glittering hand.

"No, wait, I—"

There was a flash of brilliant blue light, and then the courtroom was gone and I was sitting on my butt on the floor of my bedroom. Of my prison cell.

And for the first time since coming to this universe, I was truly alone.

Chapter Fourteen

"Damn it!" I shouted, scrambling to my feet and lunging at the empty wall where a door should have been. I slammed my fist against the wall, fully expecting the satisfaction of knuckles breaking through drywall. I was sorely disappointed.

When my knuckles hit the wall, the impact sent out the faintest ripple along the surface, and the force of the impact reverberated back through my hand, grinding my newly healed bones together painfully. Because the wall was made of Essence, like every other damned thing in this hellhole. I wasn't really home. I was a prisoner, and my universe was likely doomed.

Fuming, I marched over to the standing mirror. If I couldn't tear down a wall, at least I could break something big. I gripped either side of the mirror and flung it across the room, howling in anger.

The mirror crashed into the armoire with the sound of splintering wood, then fell onto the floor, glass-side down. The stupid fake mirror didn't even have the decency to shatter, probably because it was made of Essence too. It was a construct, whatever that meant. It wasn't real.

I glared at the mirror, offended by its very existence. And then something on the face of the armoire caught my attention. There was a very distinctive

dent in the right door, and splinters of wood interlocked along the break like tiny, jagged teeth.

I moved closer, intrigued as faint little waves cascaded across the broken door, smoothing the faux wood out until the break was gone. The door of the armoire appeared to be undamaged once again. But it had been damaged. Maybe it wasn't real wood, merely Essence made to act like real wood, but it had been damaged.

I frowned, brows knitting together. So why hadn't the mirror broken, too?

Hands on my hips, I looked down at the mirror. The back of the frame wasn't the original ashy oak as it had been when Anapa first sent me into my artfully disguised prison cell; it was an opaque, almost crystalline material. This mirror looked exactly like the real one in my bedroom, which Nik had transformed into At to protect it from ever breaking just moments after I etched Dom's name into the wooden frame.

I knelt beside the mirror, sliding my fingertips under the edge. The front of the frame was smooth but covered in deep grooves. I could tell just by touching the grooves that they made up letters, and I knew exactly what they spelled out, because I was the one who had carved them.

"What the hell?"

I lifted the mirror by the edge so I could see its face and rested it against the base of the armoire.

"Huh," I said, sitting back on my heels. I was totally baffled by what I was seeing.

This most definitely wasn't the same mirror that had been in here earlier. That mirror had been made to look like it was a creation of wood and glass. But this mirror—it was made entirely of At . Genuine At . I could feel it, resonating with the threads of At marbling my soul.

I reached out with my right hand, tracing the grooves spelling out Dom's name. This wasn't just a replica of the mirror that was in my bedroom. This

was the mirror from my bedroom. It pulsed with potential, the magic I'd imbued it with humming subtly. The charm was still there, even if rendered inert.

Anapa must have brought it here while I was being questioned by the High Council. So, what—he'd gone on a water-and-magical-mirror run? Odd combination. But why bring me the mirror at all? It wasn't like it would do me any good here. Without my powers to charge it, I couldn't reach Dom through the mirror. Without my powers, I couldn't do much of anything.

I touched the right pocket of my leather coat, feeling the outline of the deck of tarot cards stowed within.

He'd brought me the cards, too. Why? Had he brought them because he knew something I didn't? Had he brought me these things because there was actually a way for me to use them?

Hope surged within my chest, and my gaze slid down to the mirror's silvery surface. Maybe I wasn't as powerless as I'd thought.

But Dom didn't suddenly appear there. That surge of hope wilted and died, crushed by my half-brother's absence.

But I wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet. Oh, no. I'd only just begun.

Eyes narrowed and focus razor-sharp, I scooted back a foot or two, making a fairly large space on the carpet between my knees and the mirror. I pulled the deck of cards out of my coat pocket and untied the little string holding the velvet bag shut. I dumped the cards out of my hand and closed my eyes, placing my other hand over the top card.

"Come on . . ." I squeezed my eyes shut, searching for some spark of that familiar, primal energy. "Come on . . ."

Just like with the mirror, I could feel the potential for the magic. My sheut reached out, a dowsing rod seeking the energy it needed to make the magic work. I could feel the threads of At and anti-At within my soul coiling up in anticipation.

But there was no answer from the universe—no influx of electric energy. Because I wasn't in the right universe. So far as my sheut was concerned, the required form of energy didn't exist in this place. I was too far away.

I blew out a breath, arms drooping to rest on my thighs. My fingertips tapped on the top of the tarot deck, and I stared at the wall behind the armoire, thoughts whirling, like the faux drywall might hold the answers I sought. How could I bridge the gap between this universe and mine? The universes were connected—the Mother of All had told me so herself. And Anapa must have brought me these things—these magical things—for a reason. Which made me think there had to be a way.

An idea struck me all of a sudden. My finger stilled, poised above the cards. Maybe these walls did hold the answer.

I set down the deck of tarot cards and stood, making my way around the mirror and armoire, one hand upraised. I pressed my hand against the wall until my palm was flush with the faintly textured surface.

Nik—or rather Re—had told me that Essence was this universe's version of At and anti-At, the base substance making up all things here. Maybe my sheut was the source of my original magic—but it was the veins of At and anti-At permanently embedded into my soul that made me so powerful. Those veins allowed me to tap into the most primal forces in my universe, giving me abilities akin to those of a Netjer.

If I could just tap into the Essence like I did the At and anti-At, I thought there was a chance that I could bridge that unbroachable chasm separating me from my universe. Separating me from my power.

I couldn't sense the Essence like I could the At and anti-At, but I wasn't about to let that reality stop me from trying. I pulled my hand away from the wall and looked at my palm. The Eye of Horus inked into my skin shimmered, moonstone with onyx striations.

Gritting my teeth, I called out to the threads of At and anti-At interwoven into the fabric of my soul, coaxing them to extend out of my body through the ancient symbol on my palm. The Eye of Horus represented protection,

along with proclaiming my clan affiliation—clan Heru, all the way. Beyond those things, it seemed to provide a focus for the unfathomable powers writhing and churning within me. I just hoped it was enough of a focus to make this hairbrained scheme work.

Ever so slowly, threads of At and anti-At sprouted from my skin, inching longer and waving gently as though they were alive. I supposed, in a sense, they really were alive—more so than anything else in existence. They were the building blocks that were there at my universe's inception, and they would be there if and when it ever came to an end. They were more than alive. They were eternal.

At times in the past, I'd sensed that the At and anti-At had something of a mind of its own. I supposed that would make sense, considering it was technically the body of Isfet. The soul-energy was her spirit—her soul—and it was her mind that was trapped in Aaru, leaving the other parts of her being fractured and without direction. Leaving them ripe to be molded and directed by a couple of enterprising Netjers.

Who was to say there wasn't some remnant of Isfet's mind left in those other parts of her. Some instinctive part of it always seemed to know what was going on and what needed to be done. It always seemed to respond to my will like it could truly hear me, sometimes coming up with a solution to a problem that I barely understood. I was pretty sure critical thinking skills were usually beyond the scope of abilities for inanimate objects, making At and anti-At pretty damn animate.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and focused my thoughts, hoping those threads of At and anti-At would understand what I needed now. Hoping that they would hear me, they would listen, and they would know what to do, because I sure as hell didn't. I moved my hand closer to the wall.

In an instant, every single nerve and cell in my body lit on fire. My eyes snapped open, and I sucked in air until my lungs were near bursting.

I stared at the place where the threads of At and anti-At touched the wall. I watched them spread out like ivy over brick, weaving in and out of the

Essence. The farther they spread, the more intense the burning sensation became, until it was nearly overwhelming. It was all I could think about.

The searing pain was so all-encompassing that I couldn't even remember how it had started. All I knew was that if the pain didn't stop soon, it would consume me entirely.

"Little sister." Dom's voice was in my mind. "Can you hear me? Are you alright?"

Dom's voice startled me out of the haze of pain, and I yanked my hand away from the wall, snapping the connection between the threads of At and anti-At and the Essence in the wall.

The pain stopped instantaneously, replaced by a swell of excitement.

I'd done it. I'd forged a connection to my universe. With Anapa's understated help, I'd proven to myself that I wasn't powerless here.

I raised my hand once again and pressed it against the wall.

Now it was time to prove that to everybody else in this gods-forsaken place.

Chapter Fifteen

Tapping into the Essence didn't hurt as much the second time, now that the pain was expected. It was almost as though I was able to regulate the pain, to distribute it out among all the cells of my body even as I channeled that oh-so-potent energy from my own universe into my sheut . The energy poured into me, electric and alive, and I spindled it within my sheut until it was surging with power.

Even so, the pain scorching my soul increased incrementally, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it became unbearable. I wouldn't be able to maintain the connection for long. Maybe a few minutes at a time. At this rate, it would take me forever to figure out how to make a doorway through the alien Essence and break out of here.

Problem was, I didn't have an eternity. I had until the High Council called me back into the trial chamber to deliver their not-so-great decision or until the bonding withdrawals became so bad that I lost consciousness, whichever happened first.

I was racing against the clock, my time ticking down with each passing second. I was looking at a matter of days, a week, max. It was figure this shit out or die. And I wasn't ready to die. Not yet. Not again. Not for good.

I held the mirror pendant out from my chest so I could see it. "Dom? Are you there?" I couldn't see him yet, but I wasn't too worried; last time, it had seemed to take a little while for the power to build up enough that I could reach him through the tiny mirror.

I waited a few seconds and tried again.

Dom appeared suddenly, his expression wild. "Kat!" He leaned in closer to the tiny mirror's surface. "What is going on? Why can I sense you all of a sudden?" he demanded.

"I don't have long," I told him. "I'm in the Netjer universe, and—"

"I know. Re reached out to Nik and explained some of what's going on," he said. "He told Nik everything about the Isfet situation, and the two of them are trying to figure out a way to reverse their connection to bring Nik to you via Re . . . at least in spirit. Re believes it may help slow the bonding withdrawals a bit."

I blew out a breath of relief. I'd been right about Re; not only had he not been a willing participant in tricking me, but if everything Dom said was true, it sounded like he was genuinely trying to help. "Good to know," I said. "This place is crazy, Dom, and I don't really understand what's going on. I think I may have an ally in Anapa, too, so I'll see if I can get him to help me escape. I have to get back there to free Isfet. You're all in so much danger . . ." I gritted my teeth, squeezing my eyes shut to fend off the pain searing my nerve endings.

"What is wrong, little sister?"

Again, I shook my head. “It’s nothing.” I took a deep, shaky breath. “I haven’t seen the twins, but maybe Lex can talk to them . . . see if there’s some way they can help me get out of here before—” I groaned, the pain bringing a wave of nausea.

I took a deep breath, then another, blowing the air out slowly. “Before the bonding withdrawals kill me,” I finally managed to say. I shuddered.

“Kat—”

“I’ll be in touch soon,” I said a fraction of a second before I pulled my hand away from the wall, dragging the threads of At and anti-At out of their entanglement with the Essence. I felt light-headed and slightly sick to my stomach.

After a second, stronger wave of nausea, I realized I was more than slightly sick to my stomach.

Hand on the wall, I stumbled into the bathroom. I just hoped Anapa had included a real, functioning toilet. I’d yet to check, and I really didn’t want to have to spend the next however long I would be here smelling my own vomit. Especially not if this was the end for me.

Thankfully, the toilet worked. Once my stomach was settled via being utterly empty, I made my way to the sink and turned on the faucet. Thankfully, it worked, too. I cupped my hands and slurped down handfuls of water. Thirst finally sated, I made my way out of the bathroom, feet dragging. When I reached the bed, I collapsed on top of the mattress, weak and groggy.

Connecting to this universe’s power source had drained me physically. But at least it had left my magical batteries recharged. I closed my eyes, a tiny victorious smile touching my lips. I could feel my body’s need for sleep, so I didn’t fight it. I would need all the strength I could get.

 image-UULIMNGI.jpg

I 'm standing in the middle of the northbound lanes of Interstate 5, right in the heart of Seattle. The freeway is in a deadlock, people laying on their horns and sticking their heads out of windows to get a better look at what lies ahead holding them up.

It's dusk, the final orange rays of sunset a mere hint glinting off the buildings' glass exteriors.

At the sound of car doors slamming, I turn around.

A family is getting out of their car—a woman, a man, a teenaged boy, a young girl carrying a stuffed elephant, and a golden retriever. They hoist backpacks onto their shoulders and start hiking north, making their way to the shoulder of the freeway.

I watch them walk away until my attention is snagged by the sound coming from the radio of a car nearby. It's the distinctive, chill-inducing tone of the emergency alert system. I tilt my head to the side, listening to the message.

There's an evacuation order in effect. People are ordered to leave all cities associated with Nejerets.

I take a step toward the car, intending to knock on the driver's window and ask for more details about what's going on.

The scene shifts in a blur.

I'm still standing on the freeway, but the cars all around me are strewn about, some resting on their sides or roofs like discarded children's toys. Car alarms blare, a deafening cacophony that makes it hard to think. Smoke streams out of massive holes blown in some of the high-rises west of the interstate, while other buildings look to have been broken in half entirely, their upper floors scattered among the streets of downtown Seattle.

I spot the stuffed elephant the little girl had been holding so tightly, discarded near a hubcap by the median. There's no sign of the girl or her family. There's no sign of anyone.

I'm paralyzed by what I'm seeing. My city lies in ruins. It's like something out of a nightmare.

Off to my right, a car engine explodes, and I stumble away a few steps, hands coming up to cover my ringing ears.

Once again, the world becomes a blur, shifting all around me while I remain in place.

It's pouring down rain now. The abandoned vehicles are still here, scattered around me on the freeway, but now they're rusted and rotted, with green things growing over, inside, and through them. It's quiet, the gentle sound of rain soothing my ringing ears. The buildings are covered in ivy and other vines, and blackberry bushes grow rampant in even the tiniest patches of dirt. A herd of deer meander down the southbound lanes, not a care in the world.

Nature has taken root here once more; civilization is gone.

I take another step, hoping to induce another of those blur-flashes that make time leap forward.

Nothing happens. I'm still here, with the herd and the blackberry bushes and the rain.

There's a tearing sound coming from the sky, like thunder slowed down.

I look up, raising one hand to shield my eyes from the rain.

It appears as though the sky has been torn open, and a darkness deeper than anything—deeper than the shell of midnight surrounding Aaru—peeks through the jagged tear.

I watch as pieces of the sky are sucked into that endless abyss. I watch as the tops of the tallest buildings start to break apart, the fragments flying into the growing patch of darkness. I watch until the first car starts to fracture.

And then I turn around, and I run.

I woke from the dream with a start. I sat up, heart pounding in my chest and stare skirting around my bedroom in skips and starts. Not my bedroom, I remembered. This was my prison cell. And that hadn't been a dream. It was an echo.

I had just seen the future—or a future. And it was worse than I ever could have imagined.

“There has to be a way to change it,” I said, lying back down.

Sleep tugged at my consciousness, and no matter how hard I fought it, I knew I wouldn't win. My body needed to regenerate.

I rolled onto my side, eyelids heavy. “There has to be a way,” I murmured, eyes closing. “There has to be . . .”

Chapter Sixteen

“K atarina Dubois.” I could feel somebody shaking me by the shoulder. “You must wake. The High Council is ready for you.” Whoever it was rolled me onto my back, trying to wake me, but the pull of regenerative sleep was too strong. All I could manage was a faint groan as I curled away from the person, hugging my knees to my chest.

“What is wrong with her?” In the far recesses of my mind, I recognized the voice as belonging to Sian.

“She is primarily a physical creature,” Anapa said. “She must have gone too long without sustenance. Return to the High Council and tell them she will not be able to stand before them for a while yet. I shall fetch food and drink for her.”

“She has access to water here,” Sian said.

“She needs more than water.”

“But the Mother of All's orders were for her to go without—”

“She must be fed,” Anapa snapped, genuine anger sharpening his tone.
“She will not be able to receive the High Council’s judgement until then.”

Their voices grew distant as sleep dug its claws in deeper.

“Very well,” Sian said. “How long shall I tell the High Council to wait?”

But I didn’t hear Anapa’s response. The voices were too faint, and my brain was too foggy.

image-UULIMNGI.jpg

I woke to the smell of toasted bread, grilled meat, fried potatoes, and a very particular, delectable brand of grease. My mouth was watering before I’d even opened my eyes. The echo-dream lingered in the back of my mind, but my hunger kept it subdued. I needed food, immediately.

I could hear another heartbeat in the room besides my own and figured it belonged to Anapa. Who else would’ve known to bring me food from Dick’s Drive-In?

“This doesn’t get you off my shit list,” I muttered. But it was hard to sound annoyed when the scent in the air was literally making me drool. If he hadn’t actually brought me food from Dick’s and this was just another illusion, so help me gods . . . but sure enough, when I opened my eyes, six white bags with the Dick’s Drive-In logo sat on the dresser, stuffed full of food.

Anapa was perched on the foot of the bed, his back to me, hands clasped together in his lap and his head bowed. “That is fair,” he said mildly.

I frowned. It was no fun being pissy with him if he was just going to take it without fighting back. I thought that was maybe my favorite thing about Nik—he always fought back.

I scooted to the edge of the bed and stood, making my way over to the dresser. Along with the six bags of food from Dick’s Drive-In, Anapa had brought in gallons of bottled water, a few liters of Cherry Coke, a family-size bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, and several bottles of bourbon.

Feeling like a dried-up husk, I reached for the logical beverage choice—Cherry Coke. “This gives you some points at least,” I said as I unscrewed the cap on the bottle. I gulped down a full quarter of the bottle, throat burning from the sting of carbonation. It hurt so good, and I would have sworn that I could feel the sugars seeping into my bloodstream, flooding me with cheap energy. I lowered the bottle and pulled it from my lips, sucked in a breath, then followed up with another hearty swig. And another.

“So, are they watching me?” I asked, turning to face Anapa, eyes watering. In other words, could I speak freely?

Based on the fact that the Netjer High Council hadn’t known about everything that I’d blabbed to Re, I assumed Anapa hadn’t included the Netjer version of a camera or a two-way mirror while building my cozy little cell, but I just wanted to make sure.

Anapa shook his head. “It has yet to occur to anyone that you might pose an actual threat here. At present, you have your privacy while you are in this chamber.”

I blew out a breath. That was a relief. It hadn’t even occurred to me that there might be eyes on me when I’d been experimenting with jacking into this universe’s version of magic. I’d been too jacked up on the surge of excitement to fully think things through. “Great,” I said before taking

another swig of Coke. “Time to spill the beans, Anapa,” I said when I lowered the bottle again. “What the fuck is going on?”

Anapa raised his head, his eyebrows climbing higher on his forehead.

“Come on . . . don’t play dumb. You brought me my tarot cards . . . and the mirror.” I set down the bottle of Cherry Coke and crossed my arms over my chest, narrowing my eyes. “There’s no reason for you to have brought either of those things to me, unless you thought I could use them.”

His none-too-surprised expression told me I was right. Gotcha, buddy.

“Which means you want me to use them,” I said. Look at me, using logic like a pro. It didn’t happen all that often. “Which leads me to believe that you were trying to help me,” I continued, “which is the part I keep getting stuck on. You brought me here, Anapa. You trapped me and threw me into this prison.” I speared him with an intense stare. “So why is it that ever since I got here, you’ve been sneaking around, trying to make nice? If you really wanted to help me, you would have explained things from the beginning. Or better yet, you would find a way to send me home.”

Anapa raised one hand, rubbing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “You know, I often forget how exhausting it is to spend so much time in physical form.” His eyes drifted over to the bags of food. “Do you mind if I . . .”

I stepped aside and gestured to the mini feast atop the dresser with a sweep of my arm. “Have at it.”

“I can’t send you home,” Anapa said, standing and heading for the dresser. “Only the Mother of All can create portals between universes.”

“But you brought me here,” I said. “You brought my clothes and this food and—”

“Using one of the tokens she gave me. I have none left. Please, Katarina, think bigger,” he said, opening one of the bags. “I brought you here—need

you here—for a reason. This is about more than just you and your universe.”

The scent of a Dick’s deluxe burger became the preeminent thing in my immediate world, too potent of a lure to ignore. My stomach rumbled, reminding me of the aching void left by my bout of regenerative sleep. I joined Anapa, reaching into the bag after he did.

Anapa took a bite of his chosen burger, chewed, and swallowed. It was somehow reassuring to see him eat like a normal person—or, a normal physical person. He took another bite, then set down his burger. “I brought you here because I am as much a prisoner as you,” he said, “my chains just look different from yours. And I brought you the tools you would need to realize your power here so we would finally be able to fight back.”

I stared at the side of his face, burger in hand, hunger momentarily forgotten.

“We are all prisoners of the Mother of All.” Anapa looked at me, midnight gaze intense. “We live and die on her whim—and yes, Katarina, Netjers can die. Anything can die if the Mother of All wishes it.”

I swallowed roughly.

“I brought you here because she made me do it,” he said. “But that is not what this is about.”

I had the sense that this referred to my tarot cards and the standing mirror. To me realizing that I still had power here.

“This is about every universe that has ever existed,” he continued. “It is about genocide and the sanctity of life.” He placed his hands on the dresser and looked at me, his eyes filled with conviction. “It is about doing what is right, even if failure is almost certain.”

I was captured by his stare, unable to look away. “Well, shit . . .” I searched his eyes, looking for some hint of deception. There was none.

My stomach groaned, and for the briefest moment, my attention returned to the burger in my hands. I brought it up to my mouth, not taking my eyes off of Anapa. “Tell me more.”

Chapter Seventeen

As it turned out, the Netjers were involved in some sick, twisted shit. But it wasn't really their fault. Most of them didn't even know what was actually going on.

It was the Mother of All. She was the root of all the evil. Every heinous atrocity knowingly or unknowingly committed by a Netjer eventually came back to her.

Anapa wasn't sure where the Mother of All originally came from—her origin story was a mystery to all Netjer-kind—but he did know that every single universe that had existed in connection to their central universe had been created by her. But she wasn't in the business of creating universes for the sheer joy of creation. She wasn't in it to foster new life-forms and civilizations, and she didn't give a shit about the beings that lived in those universes, let alone care about the universes themselves. She was in it for one thing—the energy.

According to Anapa, that prized energy took different forms in different universes. In my universe, it was the soul-energy shared by all living things. In this universe, the mother universe—universe zero, I surmised—it was one and the same with the Essence.

After the Mother of All created each universe, it was the responsibility of the Netjers to nurture them, raising them to maturity until they were big, healthy, and bursting with energy. And, unlike the Mother of All, the Netjers actually cared about the well-being of their carefully tended universes. But most of them didn't know that, once the universes were fully mature and ripe with an abundance of energy, the Mother of All slaughtered them like they were little more than livestock. She destroyed every living thing inhabiting those universes with zero regard, harvesting the energy the Netjers had spent so long cultivating.

The day would come when the Mother of All would do this to my universe. It was nearing its prime, on the cusp of full maturity. Soon, the Mother would drain it of all of its soul-energy and discard its wrecked shell. It would be nothing more than a husk left to deteriorate, dust floating out into eternity. Everyone I loved would be dead—truly dead, not just spending an eternity in Aaru .

And that wasn't even the worst part.

After the Mother of All drained the universal energy, she consumed it. It was her sole form of sustenance. She needed it to stay alive, to stay strong and powerful. And the Netjers just kept tending the universes, supplying the Mother with what she needed, either unaware or unconcerned that so long as she had power, she owned them. All that mattered to most Netjers was staying on the Mother's good side. And now that I'd seen her bad side, I could hardly blame them for wanting to avoid it.

Millions of universes had risen and fallen, both created and destroyed by the Mother of All. The destroyer of all. Only a few Netjers were truly aware of the situation, Anapa included, and even fewer were interested in challenging the status quo. There weren't many ways they could die, but going up against the Mother of All was pretty much a sure thing.

As Anapa spoke, my stomach twisted into tighter knots, the extreme hunger caused by regenerative sleep warring with the utter disgust that only grew deeper the more I learned. I had to eat to keep my body strong, but I feared that everything I'd put into my stomach over the past hour would end up in the toilet soon enough. I'd managed to force down a couple deluxe burgers during Anapa's long, eye-opening explanation of the way things were. That combination of bread, ground beef, cheese, and condiments became cement, churning in my stomach.

After I finished off the first bottle of Cherry Coke, I switched to bourbon. The booze would settle my nerves and hopefully my stomach, too.

I pulled out the cork and took a swig. It was rye, and fancy. Just my style. "Why are you telling me this now?" I asked Anapa, offering him the bottle. When he shook his head, I took another swig. "Why didn't you tell me all

of this when I first got here?” There had been plenty of time. “Or before you even brought me here? I would’ve come if I’d known.”

“You could not know before the questioning,” he told me. “I have watched you for a long time, Katarina. I know you better than you think. You would not have been able to remain calm in there, had you known the truth, and you were not yet strong enough to survive any kind of a confrontation with the Mother.”

I frowned, pride wounded even though I agreed with him.

“She needed to see that you were no threat,” he continued. “Not here, and not to her. She needed to believe that you were harmless—powerless. And we needed her to believe that so you would have the time necessary to be able to prove her wrong.” He raised one hand, placing it on my shoulder. “You are not only the strongest being in your universe. You are the strongest, most powerful being to come into existence amongst all the universes created by my kind. None who have come before have been like you. None have had such a direct connection to the universal energies, and none have come close to sharing your potential. It is truly staggering, though it still is not outwardly obvious. The Mother cannot see it yet, though she will be able to in time.”

My mouth hung open as I stared at him. He couldn’t really be talking about me, could he?

“You are the only one who can challenge her,” he said. “You are the only one who can change the way things are, and we must strike before she realizes just how much of a threat you truly are.”

I’d had a lot thrown my way in the past—insurmountable tasks and a shit-ton of responsibility that I’d never wanted—but this was different. Save your brother. Save your species. Save your world. Save your universe—I was still working on that last one. They were all huge things, and I’d failed at some, but I’d surprised myself by succeeding more often than not.

But this—this was so far outside of the realm of what was possible that it made me physically ill. Take on the Mother of All. The creator of

everything that had ever existed. Ever.

My stomach roiled, and I covered my mouth with my hand. Those burgers weren't just threatening to come up; they were on their way. I rushed into the bathroom once more, barely making it to the toilet.

Anapa wandered in between heaves four and five, his footsteps slow and steady. He gathered my hair out of my hands and held it up for me. "I know this is a lot to take in," he said, "but I never would have brought you here if I was not certain that you are our best chance to overthrow her."

I yacked one last time, but nothing came up. I spat into the toilet, flushed, and closed my eyes, focusing on taking deep, even breaths. My abdominal muscles ached from the violent spasms, and tears streamed down my cheeks. I crossed my forearms over the opening in the toilet seat and rested my cheek on the backs of my arms.

"I'm so fucking tired," I said, voice hoarse.

"Ah . . ." Anapa released my hair, settling it gently on my back. "I shall leave you to rest, then."

"No," I said, laughing hollowly. "I'm not sleepy. I'm tired —of everything. Of having to be something to everyone. Of being the last chance. The only hope. The one ." I lifted my head and looked at Anapa. "I'm just tired."

I wished Nik was there. Desperately. And not just because his presence would alleviate the throbbing in my skull. He was the best at grounding me when it all became too much and I started flailing. He could bring me back to the here and now better than anyone else. He could help me see the why when the what and how seemed insurmountable. But he was back in my home universe, waiting to fall victim to the Mother of fucking All, just like everyone else I loved.

Anapa stood in the doorway, compassion shining in his midnight eyes and uncertainty transforming his features from alien to something very human. Or maybe it was just that I was getting used to his Netjer expressions.

I shifted, sitting back against the wall and drawing my knees up. I couldn't get a grasp on the task he'd just chunked my way. It was too immense, filled with too many question marks. My brain could handle big, but it needed some defining elements to transform the task from impossible to just really fucking hard. I needed to understand the scope of what was at stake, because "everything" wasn't cutting it.

I sucked in a shaky breath, then exhaled slowly. "Tell me, Anapa—how many worlds in my universe have some form of life?" I asked.

Anapa's eyebrows rose. "I am not sure. Billions, I think, but that is just a rough estimate. Re would know the exact number."

"Huh." I smiled to myself, shaking my head. Aliens—the traditional kind, not the godly kind—were real. That was kind of awesome. "And how many of those worlds have some form of intelligent life?" I asked.

"Are you speaking of beings who are self-aware?"

I nodded.

"Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands," Anapa said. "And that's just in your universe alone."

Which brought me to my next question. "Right, and how many universes are out there?"

"Currently?"

That single-worded question made my stomach quiver with renewed nausea. It was an unintentional reminder of just how many universes had been created and destroyed before my time. How many self-aware life-forms had fallen when those universes had been harvested, not a hope in hell to fight back?

I squeezed my hands into tight fists. I wasn't just overwhelmed anymore. Now I was angry, too. Good. I could use that anger to fuel what Anapa was asking me to do. What I had to do.

“Just over seven thousand, I believe,” he said in answer to my question.

My eyes bulged. “Seven—” I choked on my saliva and had to swallow several times before I could speak again. “Seven thousand ?” I cleared my throat. “There are seven thousand universes out there right now ? Seriously?”

“Yes,” Anapa said. “I am quite serious.”

“And each of those universes has a pair of Netjer caretakers?”

“Yes. Every Netjer is paired up and given a fledgling universe to cultivate when they come of age.” Anapa looked away from me, focusing instead on the toilet paper holder to the right of my head. I had the distinct impression that he was avoiding making eye contact with me.

I studied him through narrowed eyes. This whole Netjer coming-of-age thing was news to me. And as a Netjer who was very distinctly mature, that meant Anapa had gone through the whole universe-cultivating thing himself. “What happened to your universe?” I finally asked.

“Which one?” he said, gaze growing distant. “I have raised and shaped more universes than any other Netjer alive. I was unaware of what happened to them when—well, I suppose that does not matter anymore. All of my universes have since been harvested by the Mother of All.” He finally looked at me, the sorrow in his midnight eyes giving me chills. “All are dead.”

It was clear that Anapa mourned his universes, each and every one. At some point, that sorrow must have become too great, and he’d snapped. The system of cultivate and harvest didn’t sit well with him. Unlike the other Netjers who were aware of the situation, he didn’t buy into the Mother’s propaganda. The status quo wasn’t good enough for him.

Anapa was ready for a change. I just hoped he wasn’t the only one, because if it was just the two of us . . .

Shit . My thinking had already shifted. I was out of the why-me, this-is-impossible rut and heading straight for let's-do-this. I wish I could've said I was surprised. Nik probably would've been wearing a smirk that screamed I told you so .

I sighed and placed my hands against the wall behind me, using them to leverage myself up to my feet. I brushed a few stray strands of hair out of my face and met Anapa's questioning stare. "So, how do we do this?"

Chapter Eighteen

It took a few hours—or so I guessed, since I didn't actually have access to anything that would tell me how much time had passed—for Anapa and me to put together a plan that didn't sound like straight-up suicide. I would sit tight and hone my power until I was strong enough to cut the ties between universes. Here, or in my own universe—it didn't really matter. I just needed a little more time. I just needed to be a little bit stronger. Whatever the verdict, time was what we needed most. So long as I wasn't executed, the plan could work.

Once I was strong enough, we would strike. While the Mother was off harvesting the energy from some poor, unsuspecting universe, I would sever the connection between that universe and the mother universe, isolating the Mother of All in the very same universe she'd been destroying, totally cut off from everything she'd created. Then, with the Mother out of the way, I would free Isfet, and we would instate her as the new Mother of All...one that didn't devour entire universes just to boost her power.

As the plan stood, it set me on edge, but in a good way. In an excited way. A focused, let's-do-this sort of way.

I was pleased to discover that Anapa and I weren't alone in our rebellion. The spokeswoman of the High Council was a supporter, however quietly, as were a few other, less notable Netjers. Apep, Re's partner in cultivating and caring for my universe, was among them, though he'd been found out and imprisoned a while back. Anapa had only recently let Re in on the plan, once he saw how reticent the other Netjer had been to share the Isfet

information at the trial and realized that my universe was the most important thing to Re. He would fight to save it, no matter the risk.

Anapa sat in the purple armchair in the corner while I paced back and forth across the room, needing the movement to help me think. He nibbled on burgers and fries every now and again, but I'd opted for a single, massive gorging shortly after my vomit-fest. My body had needed the energy desperately, especially after the regenerative sleep. Especially considering what we had planned.

Soon, the Mother of All and her High Council would call me back into the trial chamber to announce their verdict. Either my universe would be allowed to continue on until harvest time—likely with some modifications—or it would be severed from the Netjer universe and left to wither into the thing I'd seen in my dreams.

A seed of dread settled into the pit of my stomach. I expected them to announce the latter, if only because of the dream. The echo. It was a real, horrifying possibility and, according to Anapa, the more likely one. He was even more certain after I shared the dream with him.

But that wouldn't mean the end of the world. At least, not right away. According to Anapa, the Mother was the only one who had the power to excise a universe, and it required a shit-ton of energy on her part. In the past, it had taken her the earth equivalent of a week or two to amass the required energy. Which meant I had that same amount of time to build up my tolerance to the searing pain that accompanied tapping into the Essence and learn to control that wild, alien energy rather than relying on the distant energy from my native universe. Then, I would be strong enough to do the impossible. I would become the champion of enslaved universes, and I would steal them all from her.

Or I would end up dead.

It was kind of a toss-up, and the odds weren't really in my favor. But at least we had a plan. At least there was a chance. It was better than sitting here, waiting for the Mother of All to kill my whole world. My whole universe.

Anapa sat up straighter suddenly, cocking his head to the side like he could hear something I couldn't. "Sian is coming," he said, standing, his focus moving to the wall.

"So soon?" I, too, stared at the wall, though I couldn't hear the doorway forming yet.

We should've had more time. The High Council had granted me a full earth day to recover, and we'd been counting on that time. Anapa had wanted to be out of here before the other Netjer came to fetch me. It would've been best if there was as little evidence of collusion as possible. Too late now.

I heard the crackling, whooshing sound before the doorway started to form. My heart rate sped up, my pulse fluttering in my neck. I took a step backward, feeling the temporary urge to flee.

Damn it, I was acting like a guilty person. To be fair, in the Netjer's minds, I technically was a guilty person. A rebel. I was plotting the downfall of their way of life, after all. But they didn't need to know that.

I straightened my spine and squared my shoulders, crossing my arms over my chest.

Sian walked into my cell, his slanted, too-large eyes widening when he saw Anapa.

Tapping my foot, I raised my eyebrows pointedly, feigning annoyance. "Took you long enough," I said before Sian could ask Anapa any questions or make any accusations. "I've had to listen to this guy lecturing me about the proper way to show respect to the Mother of All and the High Council for ever ." I brought my hand up to the side of my head, two fingers pointed to my temple in mimicry of the barrel of a gun. I made a soft shooting noise, then let my head droop to the side as I lowered my hand.

Sian looked from me to Anapa and back, his expression impossible to read. "The Mother of All has grown impatient. The High Council is ready for you," he finally said. He shot one more look Anapa's way, then stepped back through the doorway.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, attempting to channel the nervous energy flowing through me into focus and determination. It didn't work. After I exhaled, I still felt like a sparking live wire.

"Well," I said, opening my eyes and looking at Anapa. "Here goes nothing." I crossed the room and followed Sian out through the doorway. I could hear Anapa falling into step behind me.

I followed Sian down the long hallway and into the courtroom, Anapa close on my heels. Now that I was in on the subversion, it was easier to temper my anger. Less easy was suppressing the smirk that kept trying to make an appearance on my face every time I glanced the High Council's way. Something about knowing things they didn't added a little pep to my step.

The Mother of All had yet to arrive, despite her being the one who'd been in such a hurry to get things underway. I supposed she liked making a grand entrance. She struck me as a showy kind of gal. But the High Council was all there and seated when I entered the trial chamber, their stares hard and expressions inscrutable.

What had they decided? Off with her universe? Or would they show mercy? Would they just send me home? The last was such a distant possibility that it was verging on impossible territory. I bottled up my hopes and threw them away. They wouldn't do me any good here.

I made my way to the table, front and center before the High Council's dais. There was only one chair there now. Sian continued past the table to take up his guard stance against the far wall. A quick glance showed me that Anapa had taken up a stance mirroring Sian on the opposite side of the room, and I found Re sitting in the front row among the spectators behind me. I was desperate to ask him about Nik. How was he doing? Had they had any luck with the reverse possession? It was sort of integral to the plan, since that was the only way we would potentially be able to slow my impending death-by-bonding-withdrawals and buy me some more time here. But instead of talking to Re, I had to settle for exchanging a minimal nod of acknowledgment.

I pulled out the lonely chair at the table, intending to sit.

“Remain on your feet, Katarina Dubois,” the Netjer spokeswoman said, voice booming.

I froze, fingers gripping the top of the wooden chairback.

Not a second later, the Mother of All appeared at the center of the dais in a glittering cloud of white. The members of the High Council clambered to their feet, bowing their heads and covering their faces with their hands. But the Mother hardly seemed to notice or care about their hasty deference. Her eyes were locked on me.

After a moment of rebellious hesitation, I, too, bowed my head and covered my face. At least hidden like that, I could unleash the full smirk I’d been holding back. It was either that or scream—the nervous energy coursing through my body kept spiking higher, and I was walking on a razor’s edge emotionally. So freaking much was at stake. Literally everything .

I inhaled and exhaled, slowly, evenly. Much as I wanted to freak out right now, it was so not the time. In fact, it was pretty much the worst possible time to lose my shit ever. Like, ever ever.

“There’s no need for that,” the Mother said a solid thirty seconds into our collective benediction. I mentally called bullshit on her claim. She ate this worship shit up like a kid with a plastic pumpkin full of Halloween candy. “Please,” she said, “be seated.”

I lowered my hands and stepped around the chair to sit.

“Not you,” the Mother said, raising a delicate, shimmering hand and pointing at me.

I froze, my butt inches from the seat of the chair, fingers gripping the wooden edges.

The Mother turned her hand over and crooked her finger, sending flashes of light glinting off her multifaceted diamond skin. “Come. Stand before us and receive our judgement.”

Receive our judgement . I had to suppress a sneer and swallow a disgusted laugh. What a piece of work. My fingernails dug into the wood of the chair, and I gritted my teeth. I could see where the council spokeswoman had learned a few of her power trip tricks.

Joints creaking, I stood back up and, channeling the poise and grace that seemed to come so naturally to my sister, Lex, made my way around the table to the center of the floor before the High Council. I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket, only to be disappointed to find the right pocket empty. I'd left my tarot cards back in my cell.

“Your universe is severely out of balance,” the Mother of All stated, “and the near-chaos there is a threat to all.” She paused, her stare never leaving me. She drew out that moment of quiet, no doubt for dramatic effect. She wanted to make me sweat. This was a show to her. The Mother of All may have been the creator of all life and the most powerful being in all the, well, everything , but underneath all of that flash and glitter, she was really just a greedy, power-hungry leech. I could barely stand to look at her.

I clenched my jaw so hard that my teeth ground together audibly. In my pockets, my hands curled into fists. I couldn't wait until I was strong enough to take her down. Even if I ended up failing, I would make sure that I landed at least one good hit across her smug face before she destroyed me.

“But,” the Mother finally said, “we do not believe your universe to be unsalvageable.”

The seed of dread that had planted itself in my stomach the moment Anapa showed up in Rome vanished. The Mother of All wasn't going to cut us off. We weren't doomed, at least not imminently so. It was good news. Great news. Oh, who was I kidding, it was fucking fantastic news. I even allowed a hint of a smile through. I couldn't help it.

The Mother of All saw my teeny tiny smile and reflected it back to me on her own face. But something in her eyes caused my smile to wilt away even as hers widened. “Your universe is sick,” she said, “and through your testimony, the source of the sickness has become all too clear.” She made another of those dramatic pauses.

That seed of dread returned, sprouting and sending out sickening tendrils into my chest.

“Your species is a disease,” the Mother finally said.

My lips parted, my heart suddenly hammering in my chest.

“The Nejerets are a product of my children’s ineptitude. Yours was Re and Apep’s first universe, and when they started to lose control of it, they were too ashamed of failing to return to me and ask for help. Unfortunately, their failure resulted in the creation of a race of abominations—you and the rest of your kind. To save your sickly universe, we must eradicate the disease.”

My mind struggled to process what she was saying. Eradicate the disease ? Did she mean . . .

Ever so slowly, I shook my head. I couldn’t help it.

She couldn’t possibly mean . . .

“We must kill all of the Nejerets,” she said.

Chapter Nineteen

. . . k ill all of the Nejerets . . .

The Mother of All was still talking, but I could no longer hear her. Her words were drowned out by the sound of the blood rushing in my ears. By the rasp and whoosh of air flowing in and out of my lungs. By the thud-thump thud-thump of my heart, breaking in my chest.

I no longer saw the High Council seated before me. The Mother of All faded out of sight. I was lost in my mind’s eye, watching a carousel of all the people I loved. Of all the Nejerets who would soon be dead, sent into Aaru until the end of time. Nik and Lex and Heru and Aset. Mari and Mei. Poor Garth, who’d had the bad luck to have been transformed into a Nejeret barely a month ago. Little Reni and Bobby . . .

“Do not ignore me!” I vaguely heard the Mother of All exclaim.

But I couldn't help it. I was spinning, my thoughts out of control. Would the Nejeret children like Reni and Bobby grow up in the blink between the world of the living and the world of the dead? Or would they be damned to an eternity as children? What about Susie and Syris, who were Nejeret by birth but Netjer by nature?

"What is wrong with her?" the Netjer spokeswoman asked, her voice just tickling the edges of my awareness.

What about me ? If the Mother executed me now—here—would my ba be able to join my loved ones in Aaru ? Or would my soul be trapped in this universe for all time? Or would she consume the energy from my soul, ending my existence by making me a part of her? That would be true hell . . .

"I think I can help," someone said, his voice like a dream in this new, horrifying reality.

Most disturbing of all—when the Mother decided that the soul-energy in my universe was ripe and ready for harvesting, my people would be worse than dead. My gut told me that Aaru and everyone in it would be sucked into the abyss that had been swallowing Seattle in the echo-dream. It would be as though they'd never existed at all.

Someone was saying my name, but I couldn't shake off the fog of despair. Of horror. What the Mother of All was proposing—demanding—was unimaginable, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. Images of my friends and family being hunted down and slaughtered cluttered my thoughts like mental graffiti. I didn't want to imagine those things, all of the horrifying ways my loved ones might be murdered, but I couldn't stop.

The evacuation order in the echo-dream had applied to cities associated with Nejerets. Was this—the Netjers sent to kill my people—the threat that everyone had been running from? The destruction had been nightmarishly brutal. Was this the spark that would set my world aflame?

Whatever the Mother and High Council claimed, they weren't civilized or merciful. They were savage, bloodthirsty beasts. They were monsters.

“Kat,” someone said from right in front of me, the voice cutting through my panicked thoughts. Hands gripped my upper arms. “Kat!” the person repeated, giving me a sharp shake. That voice—if I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn it belonged to Nik. “Look at me!” he demanded.

I blinked, head hanging and chest rising and falling with each gasping breath, and focused on the man standing before me.

It was Nik. He was here, and his face was the most wonderfully perfect thing I’d ever seen in my entire life.

I blinked again, and his features altered, elongating and sharpening. His eye color shifted from pale blue to opalescent white.

It wasn’t Nik after all. It was Re. Had he temporarily put on his Nik mask to get through to me, or had it all been a figment of my imagination? Was I so out of it that I’d seen what I wanted to see, not what was actually right in front of me? Was I truly losing my mind?

My chin trembled, and tears leaked over the brims of my eyelids.

Re leaned in, bringing his face mere inches from mine. “Get your shit together, Kitty Kat,” he said, his voice barely audible even to my hypersensitive ears.

His words stunned me, and my eyes widened. They were so Nik-like, and not a bit like anything I’d ever heard Re say.

Re blinked, his irises flashing to pale blue. When he blinked again, they were back to that iridescent moonstone shade, but I knew what I’d seen.

My brows drew together. Had they done it? Had they made the reverse possession work? Was it possible that Nik was really here—not physically, but in spirit?

“Nik?” I whispered, not ready to let myself believe what I desperately hoped was true.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and I could almost see Nik's pierced lip superimposed over Re's. Because I wasn't just looking at Re; Nik was in there too. I didn't know how they'd made it happen, and I honestly didn't care. Somehow, Nik was in Re's head, just as Re had been in his for so long. I could feel my withdrawal headache slowly lessening, like a vise easing around my skull, which meant Nik's soul really was here, at least in part.

"Thank you, Re," the Mother of All said. She didn't sound all that grateful—pissed off was more like it. "Your assistance has been noted. You may move aside now."

Nik-Re winked at me, and once again it was as though Nik's features were superimposed over Re's. His eyebrow ring glinted, there one second, gone the next.

I loved being able to see him, even in such an insubstantial way; I just hoped it was courtesy of our soul bond and that nobody else would be able to detect Nik's presence too. Especially not the Mother of All.

Nik-Re stepped away, moving off to the side to stand beside Anapa.

I watched him go, my soul longing to follow.

"What say you, Katarina Dubois?" the Mother of All said. "Your universe has been spared. Are you not overjoyed by our mercy?"

I choked on a brittle laugh. I couldn't risk opening my mouth; I was too afraid that whatever I said would make the situation even worse, because there was no way my words wouldn't anger the Mother further. My fists were squeezed so tight that my fingernails were gouging the skin of my palms. Anything to retain at least some small semblance of control over myself. I focused on my breathing, drawing on some of Dom's old-school meditation techniques to keep my cool.

The Mother of All narrowed her eyes. Looked like my act wasn't exactly cutting it. "You will remain here, in your quarters. We will alert you when the cleansing is complete."

“Cleansing,” I muttered, bitterness curdling the word on my tongue. I stared at the floor in front of me. What a crock of shit.

“What was that?” the Mother said.

I raised my gaze to meet hers and licked my lips. “Nothing, I just . . .” Think, damn it! “What about the twins?” I asked. Maybe if I could find them, we could band together and do something. With Re firmly on our side and the twins’ help, maybe we would be able to at least break out of here and get back to our own universe. Anapa’s plan would take too damn long; getting back there and freeing Isfet was our only hope, now. “What will happen to Susie and Syris?” I clarified.

The Mother of All sniffed, pretty, gemstone features twisted in disgust. “Those bastard Netjers were even more of an abomination than your filthy species.”

Were? My heart turned leaden, sinking into my belly. What did she mean by were?

“I’ve already sent them home,” she said. “They’ll be reunited with their dear parents soon enough.”

My brow furrowed. “You sent them home?” Something about what she was saying wasn’t clicking in my mind. Why would she set them free?

“Yes,” the Mother said, a small, cruel smile curving her lips. “I sent them home . . . to Aaru.”

Chapter Twenty

“Did you know?” I raged, snatching a full bottle of booze off the dresser and chucking it at Anapa. “Did you fucking know?”

Anapa ducked, and the bottle smashed into the wall behind the armchair, shattering into a sloppy mess of bourbon and glass shards.

Nik-Re, fully wearing his Nik mask now, stepped away from the wall-without-a-door. I caught his movement in my peripheral vision. “Kat—”

I whipped my arm out toward him. “Stay out of it,” I ordered.

Wisely, he stepped back, his only act of defiance raising that damn pierced eyebrow. He leaned his shoulder blades against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

Of all the terrible news I’d received in the past few minutes, the fact that Susie and Syris were dead and trapped in Aaru for all eternity was the one I clung to. It was the most solid. The most real. The easiest thing to be pissed off about. I channeled all of my anger into that awful truth.

“Katarina, please,” Anapa said, hands raised and head ducked. “I swear I did not know what happened to them. I believed them to be imprisoned, awaiting the Mother’s decision in this matter. I had no idea that—”

“That they were dead?” I finished for him. “That the—” I searched and searched for the right word to embody just how awful the Mother of All was, but I came up empty. She was too evil for words. “That the Mother had them executed just to get them out of her way?”

Anapa lowered his arms, his shoulders slumping.

“They were just kids, Anapa.” My eyes stung, more in outrage than in sorrow, but the sorrow was there, too, deep and aching. Susie and Syris were Lex and Heru’s kids, to be exact. I used to watch them for Heru when they were babies, back before Lex had returned to us. “They’ve barely lived,” I said, voice trembling, “and now . . .” I bowed my head, eyelids sliding shut. “Now they never will.”

“I know, Katarina,” Anapa said. “I was one of their teachers.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him, surprised by that little bit of information.

“They were some of the cleverest, kindest young Netjers I have ever had the pleasure of training,” he continued. “Trust me when I say that their loss hurts me deeply.”

I exhaled shakily, fighting back tears. It both helped and made it worse to know that he could empathize, that this pain wasn't mine alone. "Do you know how it happened?" I asked, voice thready. "How did they—" I couldn't bring myself to say die .

"Nothing so gruesome as what you are thinking," Anapa said, easing his way across the room toward me. "As full-fledged energy beings, they had no need to preserve their physical forms. They were not 'killed' in the conventional sense. They would have been subdued into unconsciousness and brought to the edge of Aaru . Once there, Aaru would have pulled them in."

As he described their fate, I pictured it in my mind.

Anapa reached me, raising one hand and resting it on my shoulder. "They are not dead, Katarina. Energy beings can only die by the Mother's hand, and she did not consume their energy. She sent them away, instead. But they are trapped in Aaru , and there they will remain until the end of time."

I laughed bitterly. "At which point the Mother will suck the universe dry, and Susie and Syris and everyone else stuck in Aaru will cease to be."

"Yes, well . . ." Anapa smiled sadly. "There is no such thing as forever."

Because of the Mother of All. Because every universe save for hers—this one—existed solely on her whim. I stood a little straighter, stare hardening. "But there could be. We could make forever a real thing."

Anapa returned my stare, his expression unreadable.

"We had a plan," I said. "And a good one. We can still go for it . . . maybe with a few tweaks. We just have to step up our timeline a bit." I looked from Anapa to Nik-Re and back. "I mean, now it's even more urgent than ever, right?"

Anapa's eyes searched mine, and he nodded, slowly.

“The Mother didn’t say they would start killing Nejerets immediately, so we may still have some time.” I flicked my hand in Nik-Re’s direction. “And with Nik here in spirit, the bonding withdrawals are lessening.” Really damn slowly, but at least it was getting better. “That’ll make me stronger. If I can get a handle on tapping into the Essence, then I can portal back to my universe, free Isfet, and return with her. Then”—I smacked my fist against my palm—“the Mother’s going down.”

I raised my eyebrows for emphasis. “I think the Mother imprisoned Isfet because she fears her power. She imprisons all of the universal consciousnesses because she’s afraid of them. Because if they were free, there’s no way in hell they would let her snack on their energy, let alone suck them dry.”

Now, Nik-Re was nodding, too.

“And I think the Mother is afraid of me, too, because I have the power to release one of the few beings in existence who can challenge her. That’s why she’s holding me here while her Netjer assassins do her dirty work—because the most dangerous place she can send me is to Aaru.” I paused, taking a play from the Mother’s own handbook for dramatic effect. “What do you say we make her worst fears a reality?”

Chapter Twenty-One

“. . . so they have to hide,” I told Dom. “I don’t know for how long. Who knows if the Netjers will ever give up—maybe not until the Mother is out of the picture. Maybe not even then . . .”

I was sitting on the floor in front of the standing mirror, one hand pressed against the glass-turned-At, the other against the wall, connecting me to the Essence. Nik was sitting beside me, a silent, supportive spectator. It was so strange to see him now possessing Re, just as Re had done to him for thousands of years. The tables had turned, spiritually speaking. I was just glad that they’d turned in my favor for once.

“Tell them to pack only what they need and to go, now,” I told Dom. “Avoid cities. Nowhere openly associated with our people.” I’d already

given him a flash recap of all that had happened here, and he was fully aware of our people's fate. Hiding wouldn't protect them from the Netjers forever, but it would give them some more time. Which meant it would give me some more time—just like Nik's spiritual presence was feeding the soul-bond ever so slowly, adding time to the withdrawal meter—and more time was the thing I needed most right now.

"I understand," Dom said.

A portion of the dream-echo replayed in my mind. "And alert the human authorities," I added. "They need to evacuate all cities associated with our people. The Netjers are going for total genocide here, and they aren't going to be too picky about which kind of humanoid they slaughter."

I closed my eyes, clenching my jaw against the raw, alien energy singeing my soul. It grew more painful with each heartbeat, edging ever closer to unbearable. This was my longest session yet, and I'd connected to the Essence fairly easily. It was the holding on part that remained as hard as ever.

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes, and I sensed that I had only a matter of seconds before the power slipped away from me, chased off my body's own self-preservation defense mechanisms. You know, the kind that listen to survival instinct over kamikaze tendencies. "And don't tell me where they go," I said to Dom in a rush. "No matter what, don't tell me. Who knows if she has some way to compel me to tell her what I know."

"I understand," Dom said again. "Should I—"

But I couldn't hold on any longer. The threads of At and anti-At snapped back into my hand, retreating into my ba , and my connection to the wild Essence was severed. I would have to send the rest of my directions through Nik when he eventually withdrew from Re and returned to his own body a universe away.

A wave of dizziness crashed over me. "Whoa," I said, hand to my forehead and eyes shutting to block out the spinning room.

It didn't help that the bonding-withdrawal headache was still there, lessened but working in concert with the temporary vertigo to make me feel oh so dandy.

"What is it?" Nik asked, fingers curling around my arm to steady me.

It was just the two of us now; Anapa had left a few minutes ago, heading off to search for more information about the "cleansing" that would wipe out every Nejeret life from my universe. We needed to know when it was going to start. I was already operating in high gear, but I could always push harder. There was always overdrive.

"Dizzy," I whispered. "So, so dizzy . . ."

"Here," Nik said, putting some pressure on my arm and pulling me backward. "Lie down." Once I was settled on my side in the fetal position, he let go of my arm. "I'll be right back," he said.

I cracked one eyelid open and watched him retreat into the bathroom. He grabbed the hand towel from the rack on the wall and turned on the faucet, wetting the towel, then wringing it out. When he returned, he settled on the floor once more, one knee upraised, and gently placed the damp terrycloth on my forehead. It was cool and refreshing, giving me something to focus on besides the discomfort in my head.

I sighed, blindly reaching out for his hand. My fingers fumbled around for a few seconds until Nik placed his borrowed hand in mine, lacing our fingers together.

"Thanks," I said, giving his hand a squeeze. The ache in the base of my skull seemed to ease slightly, and my shoulders relaxed, releasing some of the stored-up tension. It was better when we were touching. Not all the way better, but not as bad, either.

"How's your headache?" Nik asked.

I frowned, eyes still shut. "On a scale of one to ten, I'd place it at a five or six. Not bad enough to knock me on my ass, but still distracting." That

frown turned upside down, and I opened my eyes, gazing up at Nik. “It’s better now that you’re here, though. I wish you could stay.”

“Me too,” he said. He genuinely looked like Nik now—actual Nik, not that strange, superimposed version of him from the trial chamber—face, eyes, tattoos, and all. Re had altered his own appearance to strengthen the illusion that Nik was truly here, not just in spirit by way of their strange connection, borrowing Re’s body.

“How’s your head?” I asked.

He shrugged one shoulder lazily. “Maybe a four.” The corners of his mouth tensed, his brows bunching together. “I think it helps that I’m not pushing myself to the point of passing out every half hour . . .”

“Trust me, if this wasn’t necessary, I wouldn’t be doing it. Tapping into the Essence hurts like a bitch.” I gave his hand another squeeze. “So how much longer do I get you?”

“A few minutes,” Nik said. “I need to help the others pack up and move out.”

I stuck out my bottom lip in a pout and made a soft whimpering noise. The melodramatic gesture masked my genuine heartbreak at knowing he would be leaving me soon.

“Don’t worry, Kitty Kat,” Nik said, the faintest smirk touching his lips. “I’ll come back as soon as we’re settled. But to tide you over until then . . .” He withdrew his hand from mine and shifted so he was on his knees beside me. Gently, he pushed on my shoulder, rolling me onto my back.

My heart gave an enthusiastic couple of beats. There was no mistaking the desire glowing in his pale eyes.

Nik leaned over me, closing the distance between our lips. The kiss was light, restrained. He brushed his fingertips across my abdomen, but the touch was so much more than physical. Tendrils of his ba somehow crossed

the immense distance separating us and slipped through my skin, skimming along the surface of my soul like fingers trailing through water.

For the briefest slice of eternity, our souls blended together, and I was both here in my bedroom-cell with Nik-Re and back in my universe, sitting beside Nik on a piece of driftwood on the beach, staring out at the Puget Sound. Our bas merged, and we were one being for a fraction of a heartbeat.

But all too soon, the moment passed, and all that was left was his borrowed fingertips lightly grazing my skin. He kissed me one last time, then exhaled his regret and pulled away.

Gods, I missed him. So damn much. I'd probably only been gone a matter of days, but my soul ached to be back on earth with his, staring out at the restless Puget Sound, shooting the shit and teasing each other with innuendo-laden comments. And then following up all of that innuendo with some seriously lascivious acts. Nik wasn't a perfect person, but he was my perfect person—just as I was his—and it hurt my soul to be away from him for even this long.

“I miss you,” I said, staring up at him.

What if things went seriously south here, and I never made it back to him? What if this was the closest we would come to being together again?

I had no idea what the Mother of All had planned for me once she'd obliterated my species. If I failed to stop the slaughter—to stop her—would I ever be able to join my people in Aaru? If the Mother killed Nik, it was only a matter of time until I died too. He'd bought me some more time on the withdrawal clock by being here, but only another day or two. Eventually my body would succumb to the bonding withdrawals. What would happen to me after that? Would my ba be stuck in this prison cell for all of eternity? Or—

“Stop, Kitty Kat,” Nik said softly, resting his hand flat against my belly.

My brows rose. “Stop what?”

“Panicking,” he said, pressing another, gentle kiss against my lips. “Don’t let this situation beat you. You’re better than that. You’re stronger. You just focus on what you need to do over here, and I’ll take care of things at home.”

I looked away, focusing on the squat wooden pegs at the base of the violet armchair in the corner of the room and fighting back tears. I just hoped he was right. If anybody could protect our people, it was Nik. I may have had the potential to be insanely powerful, but he already was.

“You should go,” I said softly. “Keep our people safe.” So long as they were still alive, there was still hope. Right now, that was the single thing keeping me going.

“Kat . . .”

“Tell Lex I—” I choked back a silent sob, then cleared my throat. “Tell her I’m sorry I couldn’t help the twins. Tell her—” I shook my head weakly.

“Tell her I’ll do everything in my power to keep Reni from the same fate.” I looked at Nik, reaching for his hand and squeezing his fingers. “I love you.” I let out a shaky, breathy laugh. It was either that or start crying. “I love you so damn much.”

“Yeah,” Nik said. “I know, Kitty Kat. I love the shit out of you, too.” His eyes burned with sudden intensity. “So you better get it together and take this bitch down. We need you here. I need you here.”

I lifted my head, stretching out my neck to press my lips against his. “Go,” I said when I pulled away. “Now.”

He didn’t waste any time. His features melted back into their natural shape—Re’s natural shape. His eyes were the last thing to change. Once the final hint of pale blue was gone, I knew that Nik was, too.

“Katarina,” Re said, “I—”

“Don’t.” I turned my head, looking away from him. “Please, just don’t.”

In my peripheral vision, I watched him straighten. “I didn’t understand before,” he said. “I didn’t know the truth about the Mother, and I couldn’t see your place in the grander scheme. But I do now, and I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I asked without looking at him.

“For wanting to kill you.”

I laughed bitterly. “Which time?” When I was eighteen and hunting down those responsible for my mom’s death? Or when his hatred of me sent Nik into a three-year coma? Or a month ago, when he’d tried to convince Nik that killing me was the only way to save the universe?

Re was quiet for a moment. “All of them.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

My hackles rose as Anapa entered my cell through the doorway he’d just created.

I was lying on my back on the bed, my arms tucked behind my head, resting between Essence-tapping sessions. After a half dozen attempts, my ability to wield that alien power was growing in leaps and bounds.

Re was sitting in the purple armchair in the corner, where he’d been for the last hour or so. My ability to channel and wield Essence had surpassed his a few attempts back, and he’d retreated to the chair to spend his time running through the different variables that might affect the execution of our fast-tracked plan.

“What is it?” I asked Anapa. From the set of his features and the wariness shadowing his eyes, I had a feeling we were about to run into one of those less-than-awesome variables. I slid my arms out from under my head and propped myself up on my elbows. “What’s going on?”

Re shifted forward in the purple armchair, roused from his thoughtful daze.

Anapa turned to face the wall for a moment, waving his hand to close the doorway. “The group assigned to cleanse your universe is gathering in the

portal chamber right now,” he said, his back still to me. “The Mother of All will be creating a portal to transport them shortly.” He inhaled deeply, shoulders slumping on his exhale, and turned to face me. “I am so very sorry, Katarina.”

I sat up all the way, heartbeat suddenly hammering in my chest. Nik, Lex, Reni, everyone—they were out of time. Which meant I was too. Only problem was, I wasn’t nearly strong enough yet.

Anapa took a step toward me, hand partially upraised. “This can still work,” he said, a plea in his voice. “You just have to concentrate on the task at hand and build your strength. There is no need for the plan to change.”

“Like hell there isn’t,” I said, scooting to the edge of the bed and standing. The blood coursing through my veins was laced with adrenaline, feeding my muscles and sharpening my thoughts. The whoosh of air rushing in and out of my lungs gave my racing thoughts a rhythm. “Make sure Nik knows it’s starting,” I told Re as I marched toward the wall where Anapa’s doorway had been moments ago.

“What are you doing?” Anapa asked as I passed him.

“What has to be done,” I said, raising my hand and placing it against the blank wall.

“Katarina, please . . . do not do this,” Anapa said. “Do not throw away all we have worked for.”

I shot him a be-quiet look over my shoulder, then closed my eyes and concentrated on a single word: open . I needed to get out of this prison cell, now. If the Mother thought she could just wipe out an entire species without repercussions, she had another thing coming. Specifically, me .

The wall seemed to resist at first, but I pushed those threads of At and anti-At further into the Essence, willing it to do my bidding. The doorway didn’t form smoothly, like when Anapa or Sian made one. The air crackled around me, there was a thunderous crack and a sharp concussion, and suddenly a jagged opening appeared in the wall. A long, featureless white hallway

stretched out on the other side, no doors, just an endless stretch of blank, white walls.

I stepped through the opening and into the hallway without hesitation.

“Katarina,” Anapa called after me.

I paused, half turning so I could see the Netjer out of the corner of my eye. He stood on the other side of the opening I’d blasted through the wall. “This is suicide,” he said. “You are not strong enough to face her and survive. You have to wait until—”

“There’s no more time to wait,” I snapped. “Don’t you get it, Anapa? Those people she’s about to slaughter are my whole world. They’re my everything. Without them, I have no reason to fight anymore. No reason to care about any of this. Without them, this is over.”

“Katarina, please listen—”

I raised a hand, cutting Anapa off. “It’s now or never, Anapa. You can either help me or stay the hell out of my way.”

Sadness shone in his midnight eyes, overshadowed by disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I meant it. “But I have to try to get through that portal. If I don’t . . .”

I waited for him to say he understood, or at least to nod. When it became clear that he would do neither, I took a deep breath and turned my back to him.

Taking that first step felt like walking through cement, but I picked up my foot and did it again anyway. And again I took a step. And again, and again, and again, until I was running down that endless hallway at full tilt.

The Mother of All may have chosen the time and place for our grand confrontation, but I could at least choose my weapon. The threads of At and anti-At sprouted from my palm as I ran, extending out several feet and solidifying into a near-exact replica of my sword, Mercy.

I didn't need to kill the Mother of All. I didn't even need to beat her. All I had to do was get past her so I could pass through the portal to my universe. Then the playing field would even out, and I would have all the power of my universe at my hands.

I just had to figure out how to get to the portal chamber first. I hadn't really thought this part out, mostly because I hadn't expected this all to be happening so suddenly.

Almost as soon as I thought about the portal chamber, a wall appeared about fifty yards ahead, where there had been none before. It started out opaque but quickly grew transparent as I neared, until it was almost as clear as glass. Beyond the wall, I could see the immense, domed quicksilver chamber where I'd first arrived in this universe. A group of Netjers were gathered near the center of the room. There were fourteen of them, lined up in pairs. My people's executioners.

But I only had eyes for one being standing among them—the Mother of All. She stood in the dead center of the room, back to me. A portal swirled in the far wall, and I had no doubt that it led to my universe. A pair of Netjers passed through the portal. Another followed. And another.

There was no room for doubt in my mind. No room for fear. I had to get into that chamber, past the Mother of All, and through the portal before she shut it down. I had to. Period.

I slowed to a jog, raising my sword overhead, tip pointed straight ahead. I shouted out my rage as I rammed the sword into the wall. The impact jarred my whole body, but I gripped the sword handle tight, refusing to let go. A moment later, just after the final pair of Netjers passed through the portal, the wall shattered.

The Mother of All spun around as I exploded through the wall. I slowed, but I didn't stop. I stalked toward her, gathering my strength and reinforcing my muscles with the energy I'd stored in my sheut as I raised Mercy once more in preparation to strike.

A full, victorious grin spread the Mother's shimmering blue lips into a wicked crescent moon. "Ah, Katarina, I'm so glad you could join us," she said, her words and demeanor throwing me off.

I hesitated, just for a moment.

The Mother of All flicked her hand, and that hesitation turned into a full-on pause.

I couldn't move. Mercy was upraised, and my muscles hummed with unspent energy, but I couldn't do a damn thing. I was stuck, frozen in place.

I gritted my teeth, focusing inward on the otherworldly materials lacing my ba and using them to reach out to the Essence. Between one heartbeat and the next, the wild, foreign energy flooded into me, making my whole body sizzle. The replica of Mercy seemed to light on fire as the energy rushed through me and into her long, curved blade.

I roared, and the spell the Mother had woven to hold me in place disintegrated.

The Mother of All took a step backward, eyes widening in shock. "That's not possible," she said, shaking her head. "How did you—"

It was my turn to grin. "I've been practicing," I told her, voice razor sharp.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Maybe," she said, raising her hands. "But not nearly enough."

Chapter Twenty-Three

I rushed the Mother of All, figuring I had just one shot at this. I couldn't afford to screw it up by hesitating. I needed to take the Mother out of play, just for a moment. Just long enough for me to dive through the portal and return to my universe, where the fight would be a hell of a lot fairer. If I managed to get into Aaru and break Isfet free, the two of us together might even have the upper hand.

A flash of bright, blinding light burst out of the Mother's raised hands.

“Ah!” I shouted, closing my eyes and averting my face even as I followed through on the strike. The blade of my sword sliced through the air. And that was all it sliced through.

Unable to see my surroundings, I miscalculated the sword’s position in relation to the floor. The tip of the blade struck an unrelenting surface, screeching painfully. The friction twisted the blade, and the handle wrenched itself out of my grip and clattered onto the floor. I stumbled forward a few steps, blinking to clear my vision, but my surroundings remained clouded in darkness.

I could sense my sword a half-dozen feet away. This version of Mercy was a part of me, the very material making it up pulled from my body and soul, and being separated from it was physically painful—like losing an arm or an eye. All I could think about was curling my fingers around the hilt and feeling the rightness that would come from having it in my possession once more.

I dove in the direction of the sword, rolling over my shoulder as I landed. My fingers found Mercy’s hilt instinctively, and I flipped onto my feet, tension easing by the millisecond. I inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly, eyes searching the absolute darkness surrounding me.

I had no idea if I was still in the portal chamber or not. The floor was hard and smooth, so the Mother hadn’t transported me back to my carpeted cell, but I couldn’t hear the vacuous yawn of the portal anymore, so either she’d shut down my only way home or she’d moved me elsewhere.

Something in the gentle movement of the air told me I wasn’t alone, but I couldn’t tell any more than that. Was the Mother of All still with me? Or was it someone else?

There was only one way to find out.

“What happened?” I asked.

I heard the achingly beautiful, musical laughter that could only belong to one being. “You attacked me, and I defended myself,” the Mother of All

said, condescension thick in her voice. “Don’t worry, the blindness will pass in time.”

So, it was still her.

Raising my sword, I spun around to face her. “How? What did you do to me?” I cocked my head to the side, listening to the silence.

The Mother of All didn’t make any passive sounds—no heartbeat, no rush of air filling and leaving her lungs. No signs of life at all. It was creepy as all hell. It also meant I had to keep her talking—to get her moving. Her voice and the shift in the air caused by her every subtle movement were my only indicators of her position compared to mine.

“The sight of the portal seemed to cause you such distress,” the Mother said, “so I moved you away from it.”

So we weren’t in the portal chamber any more. Good to know. I became very, very still. “The portal’s still open?”

Faint spots of light danced across the darkness. My vision was starting to return. That bright-ass light must’ve damaged my retinas, and they were starting to heal. I couldn’t see anything definitive yet, but I decided to maintain the illusion of blindness. Better to be perceived as weak. Better to be underestimated than over. If I could catch the Mother off guard, there was still a chance that I could get to—and through—the portal.

“It is,” the Mother of All said, emitting that annoyingly joyous laughter again. “I still need the portal. There are a few more souls to send through.” I knew from Anapa that opening a portal expended a huge amount of energy for the Mother; she would need to refuel after this, consuming some of the energy from some ill-fated universe.

I could make out the Mother’s outline now, a hazy bright spot among the mottled darkness. She stood several paces away, moving ever so slowly to the right. It was almost like she was circling me. Smart of her, not to remain in a single spot and not to make any quick movements. Stupid, too, because

now I knew she really was afraid of me. She didn't want me to get a solid lock on her position, which meant I really could hurt her.

I tucked that little bit of good news away, keeping my features blank and eyes mimicking that hapless searching of the newly sightless.

"You won't be passing through, though," the Mother of All added. "You won't ever be going home."

My vision had returned enough that I had a general idea of the shape and layout of the room we were in. Square—a perfect cube, from the looks of it—with white walls, floor, and ceiling. The room was completely empty, no doors or windows. No furniture. Nothing but the Mother of All and me.

"No," the Mother of All continued, "this is where you will spend the rest of your days. And when your body perishes and your ba is free, you will remain here, trapped with nothing but your own failure as company for all time."

It was a struggle to maintain my composure, but my sight was back enough that I felt comfortable redoubling my escape efforts. I needed to keep her talking for a little while longer. So long as she was here, with me, the portal was open. So long as she was here with me, I still had a shot. Thankfully, the Mother of all seemed fully wrapped up in her evil-villain monologue.

"Sounds lovely," I said, deadpan.

The Mother was quiet for a moment. "Not particularly," she finally said, apparently taking my response literally.

I recalled Anapa mentioning once that sarcasm was his favorite thing about my universe, which made me wonder if it didn't exist elsewhere. How sad for everyone everywhere else.

"But," the Mother of All continued, "you have madness to look forward to."

I followed her as she made her slow circuit around me, always keeping my focus slightly off target.

“First your physical body will perish,” she said, “and in time, your sanity will go as well. Then, I think, eternity here shouldn’t be so bad.”

My vision was almost back to normal. Just a few more seconds. “Oh, goodie,” I said, hoping the sarcasm would throw her further off-balance.

It did. She frowned, unaware that I could see her expression and would be aware of her befuddlement. A moment later, she shook her head, her crystalline hair tinkling like wind chimes. “And please do not get your hopes up that one of your accomplices will rescue you. Both Re and Anapa will be sent through to your universe.”

It was my turn to be caught off guard. “What?” I said before I could stop myself. “Why?”

“They will join the rest of your bastardized species . . .” She made one of her trademark dramatic pauses. “In Aaru .”

Her words hit me like a solid punch to the gut. My sword arm drooped, my heart dropping into my stomach.

“Feel free to attempt escape as many times as you like,” she said. “This chamber is attuned to your ba , and every time you try to leave, you will be drawn right back here. But by all means, don’t take my word for it. Trying to free yourself will give you something to do to occupy your time while you await the inevitable.”

She was winding down, getting ready to leave. Some deep, instinctive part of me sensed the truth in her words. I wouldn’t be able to break myself out of this new prison. As that truth settled in, my sword drooped further, stopping only when the nose touched the floor. I bowed my head, brow furrowing. There had to be a way. There was always a way . . .

A faint spark of hope flickered to life in my chest. I wouldn’t be able to escape . . . but maybe I wouldn’t have to. Not if she let me out.

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry that this is your fate.” The Mother of All stopped moving and tilted her head to the side, studying me. “You had the

potential for such greatness.” She shook her head and turned her back to me. “What a waste,” she said, raising her hand and flicking her fingers at the wall nearest her.

An opening appeared in the wall. Through it, I could see the shimmering, quicksilver walls of the portal chamber. Re was there, surrounded by a half-dozen other Netjers. From the way they were all standing, it was more than clear who was captive and who was captor. The Mother hadn’t lied.

In the back of my mind, I wondered if she, like Isfet, couldn’t lie. Perhaps that was what perplexed the Mother so much about my sarcasm. It was basically lies coated in bitter humor. Not that any of that mattered now.

All that mattered was getting out of here.

As the Mother of All stepped through the doorway, I lunged after her. She glanced at me over her shoulder, no hint of concern on her face. There was just that damn smirk. Like she thought she’d won.

I would show her.

She flicked her fingers again, and the doorway winked out of existence behind me.

Miracle of miracles, I made it through. My heart soared.

Until I realized that I hadn’t followed the Mother into the portal chamber. There was no sign of the Mother of All or of Re or of the other Netjers. There was no sign of the portal. There was only me and four white walls.

It was just as she said. I’d passed through a doorway and had ended up right back where I’d started.

I was trapped.

Forever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I stood in the center of the room, turning every few minutes to study a different part of the walls, looking for a weak spot in my prison. I spent a good long time staring at the floor, too, and after a while, I even laid down on my back and stared up at the ceiling. I was looking not just with my eyes but with my soul. With my ba . I tapped into the Essence and, through that combined lens of At , anti-At , and alien Essence, scrutinized every millimeter of my cell.

I couldn't exactly see the intricate web of energy and matter making up the underlying structure of my cell, but I could sense it, which was just as good, so far as my brain was concerned. Not that it did me any actual good. The Essence was woven together in such a complex, fine pattern that I could hardly keep track of the gossamer strands, even with my extremely enhanced spiritual sight. It made the task of escaping all but impossible.

But if there's one thing I'm not a big fan of, it's giving up. I think it's the word quitter ; I really hate that word, especially when it's describing me. Nobody likes a quitter, at least that's what they say. I don't always agree with "them," but I do on this. Quitters suck balls.

Which is why, despite all of the evidence pointing to the conclusion that certain doom was currently in progress—not just my certain doom, but my universe's as well—and that I was just circling the bowl, waiting to take the plunge into eternal misery, I wasn't ready to throw in the towel. Not just yet.

Maybe I was caught up in a pretty epic fucktangle—my worst yet—but I've managed to wiggle my way out of each worst-one-yet so far. Who's to say that this time would be any different? Logic and common sense, probably, but so far as I was concerned, they could go take a flying leap.

I was pissed off. Royally. How dare the bitch goddess damn me like this. I was Kat fucking Dubois. She had no idea who she was dealing with. I was fully ready to let my loose-cannon flag fly, and I would not stop—would not give up—until the end of gods-fucking-damned time.

There was no indication for how long I'd been studying my prison other than the mundane functions of my own body. My withdrawal headache was

still on the minimal side, which meant I hadn't been in my new cell for more than a day. And I'd managed to "hold it" where bathroom needs were concerned, so that shrunk the time window further. If I had to guess, I'd have said I'd been trapped in that white room for somewhere between eight and ten hours.

Eventually, I would have to relieve myself, but the idea was pretty damn unappealing considering I would have to use the just-in-case toilet bucket I'd made out of Essence and stashed in the corner.

Part of me didn't get why preserving the pristine nature of my cell mattered so much to me. If I didn't find a way out of here, and soon, I would die. At this rate, dehydration would kill me before the bonding withdrawals were even that bad. Then, my ba would leave my physical body behind, but both I—in ba form—and my body would still be stuck in here. I'd have to watch my body rot away. There would be no getting away from that smell.

"Aaargh!" I slapped my palms against the floor in irritation.

I couldn't see any break in the web of Essence surrounding my cell. So far as I could tell, the whole thing was one long, unbroken strand of that alien material woven over, through, and around itself again and again, leaving me no weak points to try to wiggle through. Sure, I could pull the Essence into the cell and reshape it—hence the toilet bucket—but I couldn't push all the way through it to the outside. I had no idea what was outside, but it had to be better than this. Anything would be better than this.

After a couple more hours of staring at the walls, I gave in and used the bucket. I sealed it off as best as I could, but my dignity was still the worse for wear. I just hoped nobody was watching me.

I eased down in the opposite corner and leaned back against the wall, drawing my knees up and resting my forearms on top of them. There didn't seem to be any way out, which was frustrating as all hell. I could only imagine what was happening back in my universe. Which phase of the terrifying echo-dream were we in now? How many of my people had been killed so far? How many humans? How many of the people I loved were already in Aaru ?

Up until now, I'd been too afraid of the answers to those questions to check in with Dom. It was time to suck it up and find out.

I closed my eyes and lowered my left hand to the floor, letting the threads of At and anti-At extend out through the Eye of Horus symbol inked into my palm and interweave themselves through the Essence. The alien energy rushed into me, but it didn't seem so painful anymore. Maybe because it had already seared the sensation out of my nerve endings, or maybe because reality itself had become so awful that something as mundane as physical pain couldn't hold a flame to it.

I took a deep breath, waiting for that initial burst of pain to normalize, then opened my eyes and pulled the mirror pendant hanging around my neck away from my chest. I couldn't see my half-brother, but that didn't mean he couldn't hear me. I could sense that the magic was working.

"Dom?" I said. "Are you there?"

He appeared suddenly, and relief flooded my body. I hadn't been sure it would work from in here. "It is time?" he said, not looking at me. "You are certain?"

I frowned, brow scrunching. "What? Who are you talking to?" Not to me, that much was clear.

"But I cannot see her . . ."

"Dom, dude, I'm right here."

"Very well," he said. "Little sister, I am taking it on faith that you can hear me."

"Yeah, Dom, I can hear you."

"Mei assures me that this is the moment when I must reach out to you."

I pressed my lips together and exhaled through my nose. I could hear Dom, but it looked like he couldn't hear me. Apparently the Mother's version of maximum security hindered my ability to communicate as well. It was

distinctly not ideal. But . . . at least I could receive messages. It was better than nothing.

“She has a message for you . . .”

“Alright, I’m listening,” I said, despite knowing full well that he couldn’t hear me. Any message that Mei had for me would be about as important as they came and no doubt would have to do with her knowledge of the future, courtesy of her latent ability to travel through time. She usually kept her lips zipped regarding what she’d seen, so the rare times she chose to pass on a little hint or guidance, we were all always keen to listen. Now was no different.

“You have the power to get home,” Dom said. “You have always had the power to get home.”

“Thanks, Glinda,” I grumbled. But as his words sank in, I sat up straighter, pulling away from the corner of my cell— you have the power to get home . “How?” I asked pointlessly.

“Use the cards,” Dom said.

Unconsciously, I felt for the outline of the deck of tarot cards through the leather of my coat.

“They will show you the way. Listen to the universe, and be patient. When the time comes, you will know what to do.”

I waited a few seconds longer, but he didn’t say any more. “Is that all? Some specifics would be nice . . .”

“I’m sorry, little sister,” Dom said, almost like he could hear me and was responding. “Mei refuses to say more, though I am certain she’s holding back. I’ll try to get more out of her.”

I nodded, having complete and utter faith in him. If anyone could get Mei to spill the beans, it was Dom. He’d spent hundreds of years as Heru’s lead interrogator, after all.

“Everyone is well here . . . or well enough, for now,” he said. “The Netjers have arrived, but they’re focusing on the low-hanging fruit at the moment.”

I figured he was talking about the Senate and their supporters. They hadn’t been warned, beyond the human evacuation orders: a strategic decision meant to give our people as much time as possible to hunker down wherever they were hiding away.

“Mei says this will be the last time we speak until . . .” He trailed off, falling silent for a moment. “Well, until whatever she’s seen in the future comes to pass.”

An unsettling combination of good and bad feelings writhed around in my chest. Whatever Mei wasn’t sharing, she was holding it back for a reason. What was it? And why?

“Be safe, little sister,” Dom said.

“Thanks,” I said, knowing he couldn’t hear me.

“Adieu.”

I lowered the pendant to the floor, severed my connection to the Essence, and rested my head back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling. I had a feeling I was going to need all the energy I could get if I was going to have any chance of getting home. And I would get home.

Or I would die trying.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Isat in the center of my cell, rooted to the Essence in the floor by threads of At and anti-At . Essence burned through my soul, igniting my nerve endings. I held my freshly shuffled deck of tarot cards in my left hand, my right hand hovering over the deck, fingertips almost touching the top card. Energy radiated out of the cards, fuzzy and crackling like static electricity.

Closing my eyes, I focused my thoughts: How do I get out of here?

I inhaled slowly, deeply.

How?

I could feel the charge building in the cards as my connection to the two universes bridged the gap between them.

How do I get home?

The electric charge to the cards made them vibrate with power, and a faint buzzing sound filled the barren room. The cards were ready. It was time.

Holding my breath, I opened my eyes and flipped the first card.

Judgement.

I blew out a breath. “Seriously?” I was pretty damn sick of this card.

The scene was much the same as before, the world in ruin and my loved ones gaunt and scattered on a barren plain. Beyond them, Seattle stood tall, my beloved city’s buildings ravaged, much as they’d been in the echo. And like when I drew the card back in Rome, I wasn’t pictured. There was no image of me drawn floating above the desolate landscape.

Because I was here, and my universe was undefended. Susie and Syris were in Aaru . Isfet was in Aaru . Apep was imprisoned gods-knew-where, and Re and Anapa had to be in Aaru by now. And then there was me, stuck here.

The card clearly represented the present situation. I set Judgement down. I didn’t need to know about the present, I needed to know about the future—specifically, how I would escape from this prison cell in the future .

“Give me something to work with,” I said, tapping the top card with the index finger of my right hand. “Come on . . .”

I drew the next card.

The Hanged Man . The scene was stark, showing only me in a white room, lying on my back, my head near the bottom of the card, my feet near the top. This card traditionally represents waiting and sacrifice, and some sense deep within my soul told me the traditional meaning was spot on. It fit with what Dom had passed on to me about waiting for the right time, but the sacrifice part was a little less clear.

I drew the next card, hoping for a little more specific direction.

Death .

A chill traveled up my spine. I took a deep breath and cracked my neck, reassuring myself that the Death card was almost never as grim as it sounded.

Traditionally, Death represents transformation—the end of one thing, and the beginning of another. It's neither good nor bad. It simply is .

The scene on this particular version of the card showed me sitting in a white room with my legs crossed, my back to the wall, hands hidden behind my back. Clearly, the card was saying that I would transform somehow within my cell.

A little unnerved, I set the card down beside the first two, hoping the next would bring some clarity to the reading. I licked my lips, cleared my throat, and drew the next card.

Five of Swords. Traditionally, this card represents battle and loss. However, it speaks of not giving up—all is not lost. The fight matters, and there's still a chance of victory.

The scene on the card showed eight figures, all wielding a weapon of some sort, be it mundane or magical. I stood in the foreground, the largest of the figures, Mercy raised high and glowing brightly. Isfet stood close behind me, blonde hair floating and hands alight with silvery fire. Farther in the background, I could see Anapa, Re, Dom, Mari, Susie, and Syris, all six of them ready for a fight.

I placed the card on the floor beside the others, studying them as a set, rolling their collective meanings around in my mind. Waiting. Sacrifice. Transformation. Battle. It spelled out a clear, if vague, story. But it didn't tell me the one thing I really needed to know—how was I supposed to get out of my cell?

“How do I get out of here?” I demanded, fingers hovering over the deck.

There was a zap, and a sharp sting stabbed into my hand through the palm of the hand holding the cards.

“Ow!” I yelped, dropping the deck of tarot cards and shaking out my hand.

The deck spilled out on the floor, a few of the cards landing faceup. They were all the same.

Death .

They all displayed the same subject—me—and the scene in each was similar, but with minute differences, like my position in the white room or whether I was standing or sitting.

I reached out with one shaking hand and flipped over one of the facedown cards.

Death .

“Holy shit,” I said, fingers moving to the next card. It was the same, but different. Over and over, I revealed the Death card, and each time the card was slightly different, but one element was always there: me.

I hadn't wanted to see it earlier in the reading. I'd done the equivalent of stuffing my fingers in my ears and saying “blah blah blah blah.” But the meaning was impossible to miss now—to get out of my prison, I needed to die.

Probably for real, this time.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It took me a few dozen heartbeats and a handful of deep breaths to get a handle on the whole death deal. You would think that after having had so many quick dying stints the past few weeks I would have been used to the idea by now. Turned out I wasn't.

"Suck it up, buttercup," I told myself. My thoughts kept turning to Nik and what my death would mean for him, making my heart ache and my stomach knot, but I couldn't focus on that right now.

I forced my hands to resume flipping over the tarot cards. There was more to the story waiting to be discovered. My death was the sacrifice—that much was apparent. But what was the transformation that would follow? What did I need to wait for to make death my vehicle of escape from this cell? Because the Mother of All had made it more than clear that simply dying wouldn't free me from my eternal prison.

It wasn't until I'd overturned a little over half of the deck that I realized my mind needed to switch gears from the creative side of my brain to the logical, analytical side. For once, the cards weren't showing me some collection of symbolic imagery; they were showing me a sequence of events, clearly laid out in pictures. It was almost like a flip-book, with each scene progressing the storyline along minutely.

Once I caught on to the trick, I hastily flipped the rest of the cards over. Every single card in the deck was labeled Death, and each showed an image of me. I just had to match each card up with its sequential siblings and arrange them in order. Then—I crossed my fingers—I would finally know what to do.

Turned out it wasn't quite so easy as dying. Yes, according to the story playing out in the cards, I had to die. There would be a lot of blood, from the looks of it, but I tried not to dwell on the grisly aspects of the plan. The reading earlier had spoken of transformation after my sacrifice and, after that, a pretty epic-looking battle. I would die here, but only to become something more.

My death wouldn't be the end of me. Far from it. But then, I'd already known that. As things stood currently, I was looking at an eternity as an

energy being, trapped within this sterile, white hell. Anything, and I meant anything , would be better than that.

According to the rather detailed story laid out in the cards, I would wait until the right moment, and then I would take my own life. The moment my physical body died, my soul would float out of my body. And—I had to admit, I got a little excited when I saw this part—my ba would float right on out of my supposedly un-break-out-able cell. I would then pass through a portal to my universe, make a pit stop in Duat , and enter the eternal darkness that surrounded Aaru .

That was where my soul's story ended, but it was not the end of the story told by the cards.

In one card, my body was shown in this white prison cell, but in the next, it was gone. Vanished. On card seventy-eight, the last card in the deck, it reappeared on a snowy mountainside, the final frame in a morbidly hopeful story.

My fingertips grazed the surface of that final card. She—I—looked so small. So pale. So broken. So very, very dead. But there was some comfort in knowing that my body would follow my soul back to my universe. I supposed it made sense; the Mother of All had said the cell was made to hold my ba , not my physical body. Once my soul was gone, there was nothing keeping my body from returning to the place where it belonged.

Which meant that, assuming Aset and Neffe could get their healer hands on my body as soon as possible after its return to earth, they might—super long shot—be able to bring me back to life. Then, Nik could yank my ba back out of Aaru —with Isfet, this time. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Only together would we be strong enough to take on the Mother of All.

I shifted my attention back to the part of the story where my soul was able to break free from its eternal prison. And to the one true snag—when I died, my ba would return to my universe through a portal. Which meant a portal needed to be open when I died. The cards literally showed a portal being opened, then me dying, and then my soul going through the portal.

Unfortunately, only one being was powerful enough to open portals between universes.

The Mother of All.

How was I supposed to swing that? I doubted I could just knock on the walls and ask her nicely to open a portal. Oh no, that wouldn't be a dead giveaway that something was up. Not at all.

I stared at the storyboard laid out in the cards. It was so specific. So direct. And so damn infuriating with its specificity. There was one single, stupid way out. One impossible means of escape.

I lay back on the floor and stared up at the ceiling, fuming. Tiny threads of At sprouted from my back, sinking into the Essence beneath me. That alien energy singed through me. I didn't mind the pain so much anymore; it gave me something to focus on besides the overwhelming frustration.

I'd just taken seventy-eight tiny steps forward, and one massive leap backward. I was basically no better off than I'd been before. I was maybe even worse off, depending on how you looked at it. Ignorance was bliss, after all.

A faint crackle broke through my haze of irritation. I propped myself up on my elbows and looked at the tarot cards scattered on the floor beyond my knees. Had they recharged for some reason? Did they have more to tell me?

But the sound wasn't coming from the cards.

A thrumming whoosh-whoosh-whoosh started on the very edge of my hearing and grew louder.

I sat up all the way, recognizing the sound. A doorway. Someone was opening a doorway. Into my prison.

What if it was the Mother of All? What if she saw the cards? What if she figured out what I'd learned? Then the plan would be even more useless than it was now.

“Shit,” I hissed, hands working frantically to gather up the scattered tarot cards.

I was just stuffing the deck back into its velvet drawstring bag when the Mother of All walked through a brand-new opening in the wall.

I scrambled to my feet, shoving the concealed tarot deck into my coat pocket. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

The Mother of All sniffed once, glanced in the direction of my clever little chamber pot, and raised an eyebrow. “I’ll give you a minute to say your good-byes,” she said, positioning her delicate, diamond fingers directly under her pixie nose and turning her back to me to walk through the doorway and out of my cell.

Not a moment later, Anapa took her place. I thought he was a trick of the mind at first. A mirage created by desperation. But after I blinked a half dozen times and he was still standing there, I realized that this was real. He wasn’t in Aaru , not yet. He was here, in my cell.

I wanted to run to him. To hug him and apologize and demand that he tell me everything that was going on. To thank him for being on my side, even if it meant tying his fate to my people’s. I hadn’t known him a long time, but I considered him a true friend. And now, I knew he was one of the few people in the many universes I could actually trust. Too late, maybe, but I had trust issues, so it was a momentous event worth acknowledging.

But my feet were cemented to the floor by shock.

He was still alive. He was still here. I’d written him off hours ago, along with Re and Susie and Syris. In my mind, Anapa was already dead. Already sealed away in Aaru until the end of time . . . or until the end of my universe. After that, he really would die, alongside all of my people.

“Katarina . . .” Anapa paused, just through the doorway, then glanced over his shoulder before rushing to me, arms outstretched. “How are you? Are you well?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head and reaching out to him with open hands. “You’re still here.”

He took my hands in his, gripping them tightly. “Only for a moment longer. You were my last request.”

I hate crying. It’s pretty much the worst thing ever. But damn it all to hell, tears stung in my eyes, and my chin trembled as I stared into his midnight eyes.

“I’m sorry that—” I shook my head, brow furrowed. “I wish it hadn’t ended like this for you.” I squeezed his long, slender fingers. “You’re a good guy—too good for these dickheads.” My nostrils flared. “Maybe it won’t be so bad for you in Aaru .”

“I’ll find out soon enough,” Anapa said. He released my hands, gripping my shoulders instead. “I’ll find Isfet,” he promised, “and if there’s a way to get her out of there, I will do it. I will come back for you.”

His words were lovely. Heartfelt and soul-warming. But my mind didn’t care about any of that. It cared about the soon enough . This was the moment foretold in the cards. This was the thing I’d been waiting for.

I raised my hands, molding them to either side of Anapa’s elongated face. “When?”

His angled brows drew together, and he started to shake his head. He thought I was asking him when he would break me out of this hellhole. I wasn’t. I was asking when he would give me the opportunity to break my own damn self out.

I leaned in, bringing my face within inches of his. This close, his midnight eyes contained a whole galaxy of stars. “When is she sending you to Aaru ?” I whispered, desperately searching his sorrowful stare.

Anapa became very, very still. He must’ve picked up on my mood change, even if he didn’t understand the reason behind it. “Now,” he said, voice

hushed. “As soon as I leave here, she’ll create a portal to your universe and send me through . . . with an escort, of course.”

“Of course,” I said absently, lowering my hands.

A sense of quietness settled over me. I could feel every beat of my heart. Every twinge of my muscles. Every fluctuation of my cells. I’d never been more aware of my physical body. But then, I’d never been so close to leaving it behind for good. Sure, I was hoping Aset and Neffe would be able to revive me—it was an essential step in the destroy-the-Mother plan—but even I knew that death by blood loss wouldn’t be the easiest thing to cure. Maybe I would find another way to break Isfet out of Aaru . Maybe I wouldn’t need my body at all. There was only one way to find out.

I closed my eyes, smiling faintly. “Will you do something for me?” I asked Anapa, opening my eyes and locking gazes with him.

“I don’t know what I can—” But something in my eyes must have cut his words short. He nodded.

“When you get to Aaru , tell Dom to find me.” I leaned in and pressed my lips against his cool, smooth cheek. When I lowered my hands and pulled away, Anapa looked totally baffled. “And wish me luck,” I added.

“Anapa,” the Mother of All called through the doorway, “come. It is time.”

A slight head tilt and glance over Anapa’s shoulder told me she was watching us. I straightened my neck, blocking my view of the Mother of All with Anapa’s head and raising one finger up to my lips in a silent shhhh .

Anapa held my gaze for a moment longer, then bowed his head and turned away from me, making his way back to the doorway. He paused on the cusp of the opening and glanced at me over his shoulder. “Good luck,” he whispered.

And then he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The opening in the wall of my cell didn't close after Anapa stepped through it. Rather, it remained open, giving me a view of the portal chamber and Anapa's death escort. It was almost funny, considering that he was the inspiration behind the original god of the dead, according to Egyptian mythology. The great god Anubis, being escorted to the underworld by a host of other gods. Hilarious.

I could only assume that the Mother of All wanted me to watch. That she wanted me to see my last ally vanish through a portal. That she wanted me to accept that I was truly defeated.

Well, the joke was on her.

As I watched the Mother of All open a portal to my universe, I backed up until my butt hit the wall. Pressing my shoulder blades against the smooth, featureless surface, I slid down to the floor. I crossed my legs in front of me, slouching a little further than was comfortable. Once I felt I was in a pretty sturdy position, I pulled the push dagger from my belt buckle and slipped it behind my back.

Three deep cuts on each wrist should do the trick. Especially with my hands below my heart. I just hoped I would bleed out quickly enough—and that the damage to my body wouldn't be impossible to fix. But speed of death was the more urgent matter; once this window closed, it was over. All of it. My people's future—my sanity—gone. Desperation drove me onwards. Home was calling to me. It was now or never.

Anapa was standing before the portal now. His back was to me, his hands clasped behind him. At least a dozen Netjers crowded around him, ready to drag him into my universe and throw him into Aaru. I supposed their number was a testament to his power; he was among the oldest and strongest of the Netjers.

I made the first cut. Hot blood gushed from the wound, pouring down my hand. The pain was sharp and deep, but it paled in comparison to the agony of tapping into the Essence. It was like a feather tickling my skin. A mere irritation, nothing more.

The corner of my mouth lifted, and I made the second cut.

The Mother was issuing orders, but I tuned her voice out. I needed to focus on me now. On not screwing this up. This was the single most important moment of my life. I couldn't fail.

I made the third cut.

The Mother of All had no idea what I was doing. She understood power. She understood strength and sheer, blunt force. But she didn't know a damn thing about sacrifice. She didn't get that sacrifice held its own kind of power.

But I got it. I'd lived it. It was the final lesson my mom taught me, the moment she died. I just hadn't learned the true meaning until now. I hadn't understood the full, unsurmountable power of sacrifice, until now.

I switched the push dagger to my other hand. My fingers were slick with blood, and the blood loss was weakening me, making the knife's squat handle difficult to grip.

I clenched my jaw, took a deep breath, and made the fourth cut. And the fifth.

Anapa and his escort were moving toward the portal. The Mother turned partway, glancing back at me. She probably wanted to make sure I was watching. Remotely, I hoped my blood puddle hadn't spread out enough that she could see it.

My vision grew hazy around the edges, darkening, and my head drooped forward, but I used every last ounce of strength left in me to hold my head up and glare right back at the Mother of All.

She sneered and turned her back to me. She hadn't noticed the pool of blood spreading out on the floor around me. I had. I could feel it soaking through my jeans, both hot and cold at the same time.

I made the sixth cut. A few seconds later, dark spots closed in until I could barely see. My head slumped forward. And just as the Mother of All had predicted when she first trapped me in this prison cell, I awaited the inevitable.

Dying is hard. Until it's not. Until it's easy.

No matter how ready you are, no matter how much you think you want it, you can't help the part where your body fights it. Where instinct kicks in and claws like hell to hold on to life.

I should know. I'd died a few times already.

But this time was different.

Much as I needed it not to be, this time was probably, most likely, forever.

Alison

It's been four days since the attack in Rome . . . since Kat, the Goddess, my friend, disappeared and the end of the world began. It's been three days since the rest of the Nejerets followed her to who-knows-where . . . since the evacuation orders started. And it's been two days since I went into hiding. Since I became one of the lucky ones. One of the survivors.

The only news of what's going on "out there" comes from the increasingly spotty radio broadcasts. Seattle was one of the first of dozens of cities attacked, and the reports make it sound like it was completely destroyed. Bellevue, Kirkland, Renton—everything immediately across the lake was hit almost as hard, as were Vashon and Bainbridge and the other islands on the far side of the Sound. Collateral damage, they're saying. I have to hold out hope that the reports are wrong . . . that it's not as bad as they're saying.

I'd have been part of that collateral damage if it wasn't for Joe. The evacuation order only applied to Seattle. Nobody knew what we were running from, just that we were supposed to be running. Who knows how many of my students are dead. How many of my friends . . .

I can't think about it for more than a second or two. If I do . . . well, it's best not to find out.

Joe and I are staying in his hunting cabin in Whittier, just over the pass. He has a cellar stocked with supplies, and we're within walking distance of any number of sources of fresh water, so we should be good here for a few months. But even if things somehow miraculously calm down, what kind of world will we have to return to?

I can't help but wonder if—

Alison's pen stilled when the cabin's front door opened and Joe walked in carrying an armful of firewood. She looked up, eyes meeting his.

"Hey, Ali," he said, flashing her a quick smile.

She returned his smile, but hers felt forced and empty. She tried to cover it up by raising her mug and taking a sip of coffee. It was hot, black, and bitter, just the way she liked it.

Joe crouched down by the wood stove, stacking the fresh load of firewood on the few remaining pieces from the previous night. The stove was their main source of heat, and they needed to keep it running at pretty much all hours to hold the mountain chill at bay. Though it was late March, it was technically still winter, as confirmed by the foot of fresh snow that had fallen overnight.

"What are you working on there?" Joe asked, standing and pulling off his work gloves.

"Oh, nothing important," Alison said, setting down her pen and shutting the journal. She shook her head, lips twisting in a self-effacing smile. "It's stupid, really."

She'd first had the idea to start a journal during a several-hour bout of insomnia the previous night. She was making a record of the end of the world. It might be nice to have one day . . . should anyone survive. She was a historian, after all—or a history teacher. Not the same thing, but her love

of history and the historical record wasn't any less than that of someone who spent their days doing research and producing articles for academic journals. Or, at least, from someone who used to do that. She doubted academia would be much of a priority in the new, ravaged world.

"Aw . . ." Joe tucked the gloves under his left arm. "Nothing you do is stupid," he said, making his way across the cozy living room to where she sat at the table. He paused to plant a kiss atop her head.

She arched her neck, tilting her head back and offering him her lips. His were cold, a stark contrast to his frozen cheeks. "There's still some coffee left in the pot," Alison said. "Why don't you pour yourself a mug to warm up?"

"Perfect," Joe said, planting one final peck on her lips. He straightened and headed into the kitchen behind her.

Alison tapped her fingers on the journal's leather cover, watching Joe make his way about the kitchen. He moved with the same efficient purpose as he had in the bar. They'd only been dating for a few weeks, their first hookup happening the evening Alison had discussed the troubles at her school over drinks with Kat. Things were still so fresh and new—they'd yet to even have "the talk." They weren't even a real couple yet, at least not technically.

So far as Alison knew, Joe may very well have been dating a handful of other women at the same time as he'd been seeing her; it might have been sheer dumb luck that she'd been at the bar when the evacuation order for Seattle was issued and had, by default, been the woman he'd swept off to hunker down with in his cabin.

Laughing under her breath, Alison shook her head. She knew she was being ridiculous, letting insecurity and jealousy get the better of her. Joe was crazy about her. He'd all but dragged her out of that bar and up to Snoqualmie Pass, only allowing a quick stop at either of their apartments to gather the essentials—including her Maine coon cat and his elderly pit bull. Watching the two mortal enemies battle it out over their tiny kingdom had been the main source of entertainment in the cabin the past two days.

Joe pulled out the chair adjacent to Alison's, unzipped his flannel coat, and sat, coffee mug in hand. Alison thought that black- and red-checked flannel pattern on Joe's coat looked ruggedly adorable on him, and with his several days of scruff, he was verging on sexy lumberjack territory.

"So," Alison said, leaning forward to rest her chin on her hand, "what's on the docket for today?" Plenty, she was sure. Ever since arriving two days ago, they'd been working nonstop, building up the firewood supply, setting up a snow-capture system to increase their cache of fresh water, and cataloguing their food supply.

Joe set his mug on the center of the place mat in front of him and switched hands, letting the fingers of his left hand soak up the warmth permeating the ceramic. "I was thinking we'd head up to Snowshoe Butte. There's a radio tower up there that goes out a lot during the snowy season—figured it might be worth checking if that's why we can't get a signal."

Alison straightened and nodded. "Sure," she said, glancing at the battery-operated radio sitting in the center of the table. They hadn't been able to pick up any kind of broadcast since the previous evening. They'd been listening to a looping disaster update one second, static the next.

"Do you know how to fix that kind of thing?" Alison asked. Because she certainly had no idea.

Joe shrugged one shoulder. "I tinker."

Alison laughed softly. "Of course you do."

She'd learned so much about Joe these past few days; at times, it seemed there was nothing he couldn't do. She'd definitely ended up with the right guy to stick by while waiting out the apocalypse. Without him, she would probably end up dead in a matter of days.

Oh, who was she kidding—without him, she'd have been killed outright in the initial blasts. Like so many others . . .

Alison cleared her throat, blocking that train of thought. She would not fall into that devastating trap—not again. “So,” she said, “how hard of a hike are we talking?”

“Not much of a hike at all,” Joe told her. “There’s a national forest road that’ll take us up most of the way. It’s maybe a hundred yards from the truck to the tower. It’s rocky, and it’ll be pretty icy right now, but I’ve got some extra crampons for you, so you should be able to stay on your feet.”

Alison frowned. “Can I ask a stupid question?”

“Again,” Joe said, pointing to Alison, “not stupid.”

She snorted gently. “What’s a crampon?”

image-UULIMNGI.jpg

Sitting on the tailgate of Joe’s truck, Alison stared at the spiked metal contraptions attached to her hiking boots. They looked like some sort of foot-bound weapon, or maybe a gruesome torture device. She twisted around when Joe shut the driver’s side door behind her.

“Alright,” he said, hoisting a day pack onto his shoulders, “let’s head up and see what kind of damage we’re dealing with.” He looked right in all of his mountaineering gear—cozy, but practical—whereas Alison felt like a marshmallow.

Alison jumped down from the tailgate, her boots crunching into the snow. She followed Joe to the path leading out of the trees and fell into step behind him. The icy wind whipped and howled all around her, chapping her cheeks and making her eyes sting.

“Just put your feet where I do and you should be fine,” Joe said when the fluffy, fresh snowfall gave way to a sheer sheet of ice.

The ice field spread out before them, reaching almost all the way to the base of the radio tower. Alison’s first few steps were tentative, but she was

pleasantly surprised by how well the crampon's spikes dug into the ice, giving her a decent amount of traction.

Even with the crampons, though, the going wasn't exactly fast. But Alison eventually made it to the base of the tower behind Joe, the rocky outcropping providing a breathtaking, nearly 360-degree view of the Cascade Mountains. Alison could see for miles and miles in every direction. The landscape stretching out all around her looked pristine, a veritable winter wonderland, like the world outside of this wild place wasn't in ruin.

It gave Alison hope that maybe things weren't as bad as they'd seemed. Surely this beautiful scene would have been touched by the violence, marked in some way by the destruction. There was no sign of any of it.

"Looks like the wind knocked some of the antennas off-kilter," Joe said, voice raised to be heard over the wind. He was pointing up to higher parts of the radio tower.

As if on cue, Alison's hood was blown back, and she nearly lost her beanie. She yanked her hood back up and cinched the ties on either side, then looked up to where Joe was pointing. She couldn't for the life of her pick out which antennas Joe was pointing to, but she would defer to him. He was the expert here, relatively speaking, after all.

"You mean, we have to climb up there?" Alison asked, none too fond of the idea.

"Not we," Joe said, lowering his arm. "I'll head up with a few tools. You hunker down here and let me know when the radio is back up and running."

Alison drew her lip in between her teeth. Climbing a radio tower built on a rocky outcropping on the top of a mountain didn't sound like a remotely good idea in even the best weather. With wind like this . . .

"I'll be fine, Ali," Joe said, leaning in to brush his lips against hers. He flashed her a broad grin. "I've got rope, remember? And there's no problem rope can't fix." He set his pack down and unzipped it, then pulled off his

right glove before sticking his hand in the pack to dig around for the supplies he needed.

Alison didn't feel nearly so certain, but she tried not to let on. In her experience, doubt never made anybody perform better. "Just be quick," she said, jiggling her knees to rev up her body heat. "It's freezing up here."

image-UULIMNGI.jpg

"It's working!" Alison shouted up to Joe.

She bit the end of the finger of her outer glove and pulled it off, freeing her right hand to fiddle with the nobs on the handheld radio. She turned up the volume until she could hear more than just the droning murmur of a voice over the howling wind. Tilting her head to the side, she held the radio up near her ear.

. . . taking refuge in the San Juan Islands. There are boats leaving Anacortes, Bellingham, and Edmonds, every hour on the hour between the hours of ten and three today, the twenty-ninth of March. All refugees are welcome, but those bringing surplus food, water, and medical supplies are given priority, as are those with valuable skills, including but not limited to . . .

Alison started when Joe jumped down from the lowest rung of the tower's scaffolding. "What are they saying?" he asked as he crouched down in front of Alison, forearms resting on his thighs.

"They're telling people to go to the San Juans," she said, turning the volume up even higher.

. . . been no word from the Nejeret leaders, but there are multiple reports of Nejerets being hunted down and killed by supernatural beings. It seems that Nejerets are the targets here, not humans, so if you come across any Nejerets, do not give them shelter. It is advised that you get as far away from them as you can. While humans do not seem to be the targets here, the beings hunting the Nejerets are purported to be extremely powerful and

have shown that they have little regard for human life. They will not hesitate to kill you if you get in the way of . . .

The broadcast fizzled out, giving way to seconds of static, and Alison feared they'd lost the signal again. "Come on," she grumbled, shaking the radio and glancing up at the tower, fruitlessly looking for some sign of a misaligned antenna.

Suddenly, the broadcast was back, loud and clear, but the voice was entirely different.

This message goes out to all of humanity.

It was Heru. His voice was unmistakable.

Alison froze, locking eyes with Joe. So far as she knew, this was the first anyone had heard from the leader of the Nejerets since they all disappeared just before the chaos started.

I know that you have suffered great losses during the recent attacks, and you are likely confused and frightened. All of the death and destruction is not the result of the Nejeret war. This foe is not merely my enemy or my people's; this foe is an enemy of earth . . . of our entire universe. Believe me when I say that in time, they will destroy us all.

They are the Netjers, the creators of this universe. Their power is near absolute. And they have abducted and imprisoned the only one who can fight them. The only one who can avenge all who have fallen. The only one who can protect us all. Katarina Dubois.

The Goddess needs your help. She is lost, and only you can help us find her. You must help us find her. She is our only—our final—hope. Without, none will survive for long.

This broadcast will play on a loop until Kat is found. All sightings should be reported to . . .

Alison lowered the radio until it rested on her snow pants. She couldn't tear her gaze from Joe's. For long seconds, she stared, stunned by what she'd just heard.

Suddenly, there was the crackle of electricity, and every hair on Alison's body stood on end. Her brow furrowed.

Based on Joe's altered expression, he felt and heard it too.

"What is that?" Alison asked.

There was a zap and a crack , and a blindingly brilliant flash of light came from the valley between two mountains a couple miles away.

Alison averted her face and raised her arm to cover her eyes.

Joe touched her arm, his grip tight even through the thick, insulated coat sleeve. "Ali, look!"

When Alison lowered her arm, she found Joe pointing to the place where the flash of light seemed to have originated. It wasn't gone completely, but the intensity was greatly diminished, allowing Alison's eyes to pick up on all of the colors writhing and whipping about down in the valley. It reminded her of the aurora borealis. But while she'd never seen the northern lights in person, she had seen this light show before.

Alison climbed to her feet, legs slightly unsteady, and slowly walked closer to the ledge of the rocky outcropping, reaching out to hold onto the base of the radio tower for safety. She almost couldn't believe what she was seeing. But believing wasn't necessary; action was.

Alison twisted to partially face Joe but didn't look away from the diminishing glow. "We have to get down there, Joe," she said. "It's her."

Lex

Lex stood at the glassless window in the bedroom she shared with Heru and their daughter, Reni, and surveyed her new home. Or was it her old home? She supposed it was both, though at the moment, it felt a little like a prison.

The ancient Nejeret Oasis, a stunning city of At built deep in the heart of the Sahara Desert by Re, had been lost to her people—to the world—for thousands of years. Until Lex's impromptu travels through time and the universe's last near-catastrophe drove Heru to rediscover the Oasis's concealed location. To this day, it remained buried under the mountain of broken limestone and the dome of At that had hidden it for so long, turning it into a cavernous, haunting underground city.

Darkness had been the first thing to greet Lex, Heru, and the rest of their family when they'd arrived in the wee hours of the morning two days earlier. Or, at least, when most of their family had arrived. Nik remained on the outside, as did Mari and Mei; they had their own secure place to hunker down and wait out this deadliest of storms.

After Lex had arrived and removed the At wall blocking the one and only way into the Oasis, a seemingly endless stream of allied Nejerets had filtered in through the tunnel. Thousands of men, women, and pre-manifestation children now filled the Oasis, transforming the long-abandoned city into a bustling kingdom of immortals.

Almost all of their friends and allies were accounted for. The few who'd missed the midnight deadline had been sealed out of the Oasis by a solid wall of At—as they'd known would happen. Lex could only hope that they had done as instructed and put as much distance between themselves and the Oasis as possible. Everyone hiding under that mountain of limestone was depending on the city below remaining a secret; if the Netjer assassins found the Oasis, Lex and everyone else down there would be dead.

According to Lex's watch, it was the middle of the night out in the desert, but inside the hidden Oasis, it appeared to be twilight. All of the intricate At bridges crossing the canal that wove throughout the Oasis glowed with a gentle luminescence, a trick Lex had learned thousands of years in the past from Re.

Her current sheut wasn't as powerful as the one she'd once borrowed from the ancient Netjer caretakers of the universe, but it allowed her some control over At, including the ability to make that otherworldly material glow, or even to make it invisible. As such, it had fallen on her to provide

the light that allowed the Nejerets to do more than cower and hide in the unrelenting darkness. Come sunrise, she would imbue the dome protecting them from the dangers outside with a soft light, making it slowly brighter. Next-best thing to an actual rising sun.

“Feeling restless, Little Ivanov?” Heru said quietly, settling in behind Lex. He wrapped his arms around her middle and squeezed her gently.

Lex inhaled and exhaled, slow and deep, and rested the back of her head against her husband’s shoulder. “My brain won’t turn off,” she said, voice hushed to keep from waking Reni, asleep in the bed behind them. “I just keep imagining what it must be like out there.”

According to their latest check-in with Nik, Seattle was a wasteland, Bainbridge included, and the other Netjer strongholds—New York, Cairo, Rome, Udaipur, Beijing—hadn’t fared any better. The world outside of the Oasis had changed drastically in a matter of days. When—if—Lex and the rest of her people ever emerged from their safe haven, there would be no sense of a homecoming. Home was gone.

“I know.” Heru pressed his lips against the top of Lex’s head. She could feel him breathing in and out through his nose, his breath rustling her already-mussed hair. “Me too.”

“What if we never get out of here?” Lex asked, eyes stinging with the threat of tears. She hated the thought that the rest of Reni’s life might be spent underground. That her daughter might never truly know what it’s like to see the sky or feel the sun on her skin.

Heru’s arms tightened around Lex’s body. “Then we make a life here, Little Ivanov. This was home once. It can be again.”

Lex knew he was right—they’d brought everything they would need to create a self-sustaining subterranean civilization with them, should it come to that. When she made the At glow, it emitted the full spectrum of light required by plants to grow and thrive, and the Oasis was fed by a natural spring that had been flowing for well over six thousand years; there was no reason to expect it to dry up any time soon.

Once the tons of ready-to-use food and supplies they'd brought with them had run out, they would be able to grow, cultivate, and create anything they needed. As a result of their long lives, Nejerets tended to be the most knowledgeable and skilled people around; if anybody could make living underground work, it was them.

But that didn't mean Lex was looking forward to spending the rest of her conceivably very long life in a self-contained underground oasis. The prospect was daunting—though it was far preferable to the unknown that awaited them in Aaru . From what little Dom had shared about the land of the dead, it sounded closer to hell than paradise.

Lex had to get her head wrapped around the fact that the world she knew and loved was gone. Whatever happened over the next weeks and months—and even over the next years—life would never return to the way it had been before. She needed to stop romanticizing “out there”; it wasn't her world anymore. The Netjers had assured that.

At the sound of a throat clearing behind them, both Lex and Heru craned their necks to see who had intruded on their moment. Aset stood in the doorway, a sleepy four-year-old clinging to her like a snuggly koala bear. The boy, Bobby, was nearly half her size, making the sight of her holding him almost comical.

Heru released Lex and turned to face his twin sister. “What is it?” he asked Aset.

Aset had been on watch with the Oasis's one and only Dom mirror. Nik had another—the mirror compact—and Garth's family had the last of the three mirrors still remaining in this universe. It was their sole means of communication from within their At -concealed hideaways. Garth's family had been more than willing to take up the responsibility of being their communication hub in the outside world, sorting through all of the tips being called in regarding the whereabouts of Kat's body. If Aset was here now, it had to be something about Kat. It just had to be.

Lex's hopes soared, and her heart was suddenly hammering in her chest.

Aset readjusted her hold on Bobby, shifting the little boy higher on her hip. “It’s Kat—” Her eyes shone with unshed tears and what appeared to be a bevy of emotions. “We found her.”

Lex brought her hand up to her mouth, barely able to hold in a relieved sob. “Oh thank God!”

“Where?” Heru asked, already striding toward his sister.

“The Cascades,” Aset said. “Near Snoqualmie Pass.” She shifted Bobby so the majority of his weight was on her other hip. “Nik and Mei are already on their way to retrieve her, but—” She hesitated, a shadow of dread darkening her amber gaze.

Aset cleared her throat. “Kat, she—her body is in rough shape. The woman who found her said she looks like she’s been drained of all of her blood and that there are deep cuts in her wrists.”

Heru stopped in front of his sister. “Tell me there’s a way to bring her back from that.”

“Maybe,” Aset said. “But we’re going to need a lot of blood donors, maybe organ donors, too, depending on the damage.” Again, she hesitated for a moment. “And . . . we’ll need some specialized equipment—things we didn’t bring with us. Neffe’s making a list right now.”

As she spoke, Lex moved closer, a sinking suspicion turning her insides into a wretched tangle. “You want Heru to go out there and get the things on Neffe’s list, don’t you?”

“More of a need than a want,” Aset said, looking at Lex. “But yes. Mei has her hands full with transporting Nik and retrieving Kat, so . . .”

“Very well,” Heru said. “If it must be done, then it must be done.”

“Good.” Aset nodded once. “I’ll go with you. You’ll never find what we need on your own.”

Lex stepped closer and placed her hand on her husband's shoulder. "I'll come, too. I can shield you both while you gather what we need." When Heru looked at her, she was a little surprised to find pride shining in his golden eyes. She'd expected a fight.

"Neffe should be up with the list momentarily," Aset said, brushing past Heru and Lex as she stepped into the room, heading straight for the bed. "Let me just get Bobby settled in here and I'll be ready to go."

Lex watched Aset tuck the little boy into the bed beside Reni, her hand automatically seeking out Heru's. When her fingers intertwined with his, she turned her head to look at him. There was no need for words. Their soul bond connected them in ways that allowed a far deeper form of communication.

Lex tightened her grip on Heru's hand, and he lowered his chin in a single nod. They had a job to do, and they would do it.

Kat's body had to be retrieved and revived so Nik could drag her ba out of Aaru when the time came—and drag Isfet out right along with her. The fate of the universe depended on everyone playing their parts and making that happen.

Well, the fate of the universe had depended on Lex and Heru once before. They hadn't failed it then, and they sure as hell wouldn't fail it now.

"This is everything we might need," Neffe said, bounding through the doorway and into the bedroom. She thrust a piece of paper out to Aset. "Let me know if you have any questions," she said, then turned to her father. "Aset knows the UW hospital best, so start with that one. If they don't have everything, or if it's damaged, try one of the other hospitals on the list."

Aset skimmed the list and shook her head. "Looks good," she said as she folded up the list. She tucked it into the front pocket of her slacks before striding over to Heru and Lex, holding her hand out to her brother. "Shall we?"

Lex took a deep breath, preparing for the vertigo she knew would follow the series of jumps through space it would take to first get to the edge of the Oasis and then, once they were through the tunnel and out in the desert, back to Seattle.

Not a second later, her world was engulfed in an explosion of brilliant colors, and she was off to do the thing she'd sworn to herself she would never do again. She would risk her life to help save the world. One more time.

Nik

Nik stood by the antiquated vault door, shoulder leaning against the wall and arms crossed over his chest. They needed to be gone—minutes ago. The cold and snow would help to preserve Kat's body for a little while, but they didn't have time to burn. And yet Mei continued to study the topographical map of Snoqualmie Pass, hands planted on the table on either side of the map, almost like she was searching for some miniature version of Kat permanently inked in among the elevation lines.

Nik continued to stare at the back of his daughter's head for what felt like a solid minute before his patience waned to a spider thread. "Mei . . ."

Mei raised one hand from the table and made a sharp gesture—hold on—her eyes remaining glued to the map. "Based on what they told us, there are a few spots where she might be. I want to make sure I'm not overlooking anything," she said without turning. "Better to jump straight to her than slog through the snow for gods know how long. Remember, Father, if the Netjers find us out there, this will all be for naught."

She was right, of course. Nik knew that, but the adrenaline coursing through his body insisted that he be doing something, and waiting didn't count. He needed to be holding Kat in his arms. He needed to feel her . . . to know that she had really returned to this universe. To know that he would be able to see her again—to hear her voice and feel the rightness that came with being in her presence.

It certainly didn't help that the bonding withdrawals were making him irritable and edgy. He'd gone four days without seeing his bond-mate in the flesh, and it had been well over two days since their little spiritual liaison via Re's body. Nik's head throbbed painfully, and a bone-deep ache was settling into all of his joints. In another couple days, the withdrawals would weaken him enough that he would begin to lose consciousness sporadically. In a week, he would be dead. That was the thing Kat was racing against from inside Aaru ; she had to find Isfet and convince her to help without completely taking over Kat's soul before he was too weak to pull her soul out of Aaru and stuff it back into her body.

Normally, Mei would be able to sense the life signature of her target—Kat, in this case—and teleport straight to her. Not this time. Not when there was no life left in Kat's body. No hint of her soul.

Once Mei jumped Nik to the mountains, closer to Kat's body, he would be able to sense the At and anti-At inked into her skin, allowing them to find her that way, but teleporting straight to her was plan A . . . and plans B and C, if she wasn't at the first location. They needed to minimize their own exposure to the Netjers, giving the deadly, powerful hunters as brief of a window as possible to detect them.

According to the couple who'd contacted the Sealths to report finding Kat's body, she was in a valley between three specific mountain peaks. Based on the details they'd given and the estimated coordinates, Mei had narrowed Kat's location down to three spots, all within two miles of each other.

Also according to the couple who'd found her, Kat's body was in bad shape. Dom had passed on word from Neffe that Heru was venturing out to pick up whatever she and Aset would need to treat Kat, but this would be some serious miracle-worker shit.

Nik could feel his muscles tensing as his mind drifted to the very real possibility that Aset and Neffe wouldn't be able to bring Kat back to life. He clenched his teeth, jutting out his jaw. He refused to entertain such dismal thoughts. She would come back to life. Back to him. She had to.

"Alright," Mei said, straightening as she folded up the map. "I'm ready."

“Me too,” Mari said, emerging from the storeroom beyond the kitchen holding a half-open backpack. She zipped up the main compartment and hoisted one strap over her shoulder, then twisted her arm behind her back to snag the other strap. She’d been gathering everything she would need to start a field transfusion as soon as they found her, including several pints of Nik’s blood, donated first thing that morning. The older the donor, the more powerful the blood. Nik was the best source here, but once Kat made it to the Oasis, there were dozens of ancient Nejerets even older than Nik who were ready and willing to donate their blood, too.

Nik pushed off the wall and turned to spin the vault door’s handle. He felt the locking mechanism deep within the heavy iron and steel door unlatch, then pushed the door open. They needed to be outside of the bunker’s protective anti-At shell for Mei to be able to teleport them anywhere.

Nik stepped through the door and out into the dark, musty hallway beyond, the light from the bunker spilling out to reveal worn brick and a scuffed and cracked marble floor—both belonging to the long-gone bank that had first built the vault-turned-bunker.

Mari followed, close on Nik’s heels, and Mei was right behind her, tucking the folded map into an interior coat pocket.

“Deep breaths,” Mei said as she reached one hand toward Mari, the other toward Nik. She gripped their nearest arms, face tensing, and then the world was engulfed in flames of every color imaginable.

There was a flash of darkness, and for an eternal moment, Nik felt like he was drowning. There was no air to breathe. No light by which to see. No sounds, save the thud-thump of his straining heart.

And then the brilliant rainbow luminescence returned, a shock to his eyes. Frigid air whipped all around him, picking up and twisting the long leather coat around his legs. The brilliant light faded, revealing a pristine alpine scene.

“Wrong spot,” Mei said a fraction of a second before jerking them right back out of reality.

This jump was much shorter, a mere hop compared to the leap they'd just made, and Nik barely caught the flicker of darkness before he was back in the mountains. The two back-to-back jumps had left him dizzy and disoriented. His head spun, his brain trying to make sense of the input from his eyes.

Two people, a man and a woman from the looks of them, stood a short way down the slope in a clearing between the pines. To Nik's mind, they moved in and out of focus.

Nik squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. He could only see the couple's backs, but they seemed to be looking down into a hole in the snow.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, her mouth falling open in surprise. She touched the man's arm, then pointed up the slope, toward Nik and the others.

Mei was the first to head down toward the couple, the deep, powdery snow slowing her hurried strides.

"Hey!" Mari said, smacking Nik's arm.

Nik shook his head, trying to clear the confusion from his teleportation-muddled mind.

"Pull it together, tough guy." Mari took hold of his arm and dragged him forward a couple steps. "Kat needs us."

Kat. Nik's thoughts untangled with that single word, snapping into extreme focus. Kat—she was down there, in that hole.

In two strides, Mari was no longer pulling him forward; he was dragging her down the mountain. Nik heard her curse under her breath—something about slowing down—but he couldn't. He needed to get to Kat as fast as possible.

Nik shook off Mari's hold on his arm and bounded down the slope, his longer legs making it easier for him to lope through the deep snow. He

skidded to a stop a yard or two from the couple. Mei was already there, on her hands and knees, easing herself into the hole.

Nik barely caught a glimpse of Kat's pale, porcelain face before both she and Mei disappeared in a puff of rainbow fire. The two reappeared a few feet from the hole not a second later, Mei straddling Kat's body.

"We didn't want to move her," the human woman said, taking slow steps around the now-empty hole. All that remained of Kat in there were crimson stains of blood. "We thought the snow would preserve her, and—"

"You did the right thing," Mari said, finally catching up. She dropped to her knees as her mom moved to the other side of Kat's body.

Nik felt numb as he made his way around the trio. He stumbled the last few steps, collapsing onto his knees near Kat's head. Her raven hair fanned out over the snow in stark contrast, but her skin almost matched the snow for whiteness. Her lips were tinted blue, her lashes dark half-moons above her washed-out cheeks.

Slowly, Nik reached for her, his hand shaking. It was one thing to know she was dead, but another to see her lifeless body with his own eyes. He couldn't sense her soul, and a deep sense of hollowness took root inside him.

"Don't," Mari said, the single word a whipcrack as she caught his wrist before his fingers could make contact with Kat's too-pale cheek. "We can't risk you pulling her back yet. Her body can't support her. Who knows what would happen to her then."

Nik froze. He closed his eyes, slowly curling his fingers into a fist. Every cell in his body was screaming for him to take Kat into his arms. To bring her soul back to her body. To bring her to him .

He opened his eyes, forcing himself to face the harsh reality. Mari was right. That outcome might be as disastrous as if the Netjers had been the ones to find her first.

“Give her time,” Mari said, voice softening. “Trust her. Let us do our work while she does hers in Aaru, and when the time is right, we’ll get her back. Alright?” Mari wove her head from side to side until she snagged Nik’s focus. “Alright?” she repeated, more forcefully this time.

Nik nodded and retracted his hand, and Mari returned to setting up the field transfusion.

Mari connected the tube from one of the blood bags to the IV needle she’d already stuck into Kat’s arm, then held the blood bag out to Nik. “Hold this,” she said. “I need to get something pumping through her.”

He accepted the bag, and after a few seconds, his hands no longer shook. He had a purpose now. A focus.

Mari rose up over Kat and placed her hands on Kat’s chest. She started compressions, and ever so slowly, the bag of blood emptied.

“Once we see fresh blood coming out of her wounds, that’s our signal to go,” Mari said, not letting up on the steady compressions.

Mei gasped suddenly, pulling Nik’s attention to her. Her eyes were rounded by shock, and her hand was covering her mouth. “Someone just teleported in,” she said, eyes meeting Nik’s.

“Heru?” Nik asked, a spike of adrenaline making his heart hammer in his chest. He scanned the woods beyond Mei, then turned partway to look in the other direction behind himself.

“No,” Mei said, voice barely audible. The color drained from her face, and she looked like she was going to be sick. “Not Heru.”

“Shit,” Nik hissed, thrusting the bag of blood at Mei. “Hold this.”

Heru was the only Nejeret besides Mei who could teleport. Which meant that whoever this new arrival was, it wasn’t a Nejeret. And it certainly wasn’t a human. It was a Netjer, and the bastard was hiding. They had the ability to turn invisible. The only clue Nik had to the Netjer’s location was

the fact that it had to have teleported in fairly close for Mei to have sensed its arrival.

Nik thrust his now-empty hands straight over his head. Energy surged through his sheut , and a solid sheet of At and anti-At spread out from his hands, shielding Nik, Mei, Mari, Kat's body, and the two humans under a small, black-streaked dome. He channeled a raging river of the otherworldly energy, making the dome as thick as possible.

But he couldn't reinforce the shield quickly enough. Even as he added layer after layer to the interior, he could feel the Netjer stripping the At and anti-At away from the outside. He couldn't keep up. The Netjer was too powerful. In a matter of seconds, the demon would be through, and then it would all be over.

Suddenly, Nik felt more anti-At reinforcing his dome. It had to be Mari.

A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed his suspicions.

Mari had handed her job over to her mom and the humans, and she'd joined Nik in defending their small rescue party. Together, the two seemed to be holding the Netjer off. They weren't making headway, but at least they weren't losing ground anymore, either.

But Nik knew that the second either of them stopped, the Netjer would tear through the shield and rip them all apart.

"It's time!" Mei called. "She's bleeding again!"

Nik exchanged a glance with Mari. He could see her commitment to the cause—her sheer fucking determination—and suspected what she was going to say before she opened her mouth. He shook his head, even though he knew it was the only way out of this.

Mari's lips twisted into a wry smile. "Go," she said and nodded behind her to Kat's body. "I'll hold the bastard off until you guys can get away."

“Mari, no!” Mei said, stopping chest compressions on Kat and staring at her daughter. The two weren’t related by blood, but their bond was as deep as any shared by a mother and child. “You can’t—”

“I have to, Mom,” Mari said. “It’s the only way.”

“But—”

Mari shook her head vehemently. “Nik needs to be alive to bring Kat back when the time comes, but this—” Her chin trembled. “This is what I can do. This is how I can help. I can make sure you’re all long gone by the time this asshole gets in here.”

Mei covered her mouth with her hand, trapping a heartbreaking sob.

“Besides,” Mari said, bravado masking the fear shimmering in her eyes, “I have a feeling Kat’s going to need all the help she can get in Aaru . . .” She looked at Nik. “Go, now,” she ordered, voice thick. “I’ve got it.”

Nik nodded once, and she nodded back. And then he released the energy flowing through his sheut and lunged across the snow toward Mei and Kat’s body. “Get in the hole,” he shouted to the humans. “Cover yourselves in snow. The Netjer might not notice you’re here.”

The man seemed to be in shock, but the woman nodded, yanking him back to the hole. She jumped in, dragging him in with her, and started clawing at the edges.

When Nik reached Mei, he touched her shoulder. “We have to go, Mei. Now.”

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t even look at him. She just stared at her daughter.

On the next heartbeat, the world fell away.

The trio reappeared in the tunnel outside of the bunker, the light spilling out through the open vault door brightening as the rainbow brilliance caused by tearing a hole through the fabric of the universe faded.

Nik clenched his jaw, fighting the waves of dizziness that washed over him.

Mei stood and shrugged Nik's hand off her shoulder as she stepped away. "I'll be right back," she said, voice barely audible.

"Mei, wait!" Nik said, stumbling toward her, steps made awkward by the disorientation caused by teleporting. "We're not—"

There was a brilliant flash.

"—in the right place," Nik finished, but it didn't matter.

Mei was gone.

She was supposed to take Kat to the Oasis, not back to the bunker. That was where all of the medical geniuses like his mother would be waiting to whisk her body away and spend the next gods-knew-how-many days attempting to reverse her death. But here, there was only Nik, and he had only the most basic knowledge of the healing arts—things he'd absorbed by proximity from his mother over the years. All he could do was sit there and watch his blood leak out of the self-inflicted gashes on Kat's wrists.

If Mei didn't return in a matter of seconds and complete the mission, Nik feared the decay that would set in at a cellular level would be irreversible. There wouldn't be a damn thing any medical equipment could do to save her then, no matter how advanced or specialized. Not even Aset and Neffe with their combined thousands of years of healing experience could cure a rotting corpse.

"Fuck!" Nik turned and slapped his hand against the brick wall hard enough to gouge deep cuts into his palm.

The stinging pain brought sharp clarity to his mind. Maybe he couldn't heal Kat, but he could do the next best thing. He could preserve her.

Nik crouched down beside Kat's body and held out his hands, one over her forehead, one over her heart, careful not to actually touch her skin. He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and once again opened himself up to

channel the primal energy that flowed so freely through the universe. It flooded his sheut , and he used that power to pull At into reality and replace every single molecule in Kat's lifeless body.

It only took a matter of seconds, but Nik felt like he'd just run a marathon by the time he was done. He sat back on his heels, chest rising and falling with heavy breaths and whole body shaking from fatigue. Transformations were always harder than simply creating something out of At . There were so many delicate details locked within each cell of the human body, and every single one had to be exactly right or Kat wouldn't be the same when he reverted her to flesh, blood, and bone. That, on top of the massive amount of energy he'd channeled through his sheut just moments earlier to fend off the Netjer, and Nik was on the verge of collapsing into a deep, regenerative sleep.

He could feel the darkness of unconsciousness lurking around the edges of his mind. It was inevitable. But he couldn't give in yet. Kat's body might not have been where it needed to be for the healing to commence, but at least he could make sure she was safe.

Nik slid an arm under Kat's neck, the other under her thighs, and stood, lifting her stiff, stonelike body off the ground. Carefully, he maneuvered her through the vault doorway and into the bunker. He set her on the sofa in the living area, then returned to shut the vault door, locking it with a turn of the handle.

He barely had enough energy to lean back against the door and lower himself down to the floor. Exhaustion overwhelmed him, and he slumped to the side, succumbing to the darkness of unconsciousness.

image-UULIMNGI.jpg

A deep, metallic gonging roused Nik from the deepest of sleeps. He felt like he'd only been out for a few seconds.

Groggily, he opened his eyes and looked around.

For a moment, Nik didn't recognize his surroundings, and a jolt of adrenaline made his heart flutter in his chest. His mind slowly regained coherency, and he shook his head, throwing off the cobwebs of sleep.

He was in the bunker. Kat was on the couch, her body preserved in At . Mei and Mari were gone, dead, for all he knew.

The gonging came again.

Not gonging, he realized. Knocking. Someone was knocking—banging, from the sound of it—on the outside of the vault door.

Maybe Mei and Mari weren't dead.

He stood and gripped the vault door's handle but hesitated before spinning it to unlock the door.

Or . . . what if it was the Netjer on the other side?

Nik blew out a breath and shook his head. Paranoia was preventing him from thinking straight. If any of the Netjer assassins had found the bunker, they would have torn through the anti-At surrounding it and broken in within seconds. They wouldn't have bothered with knocking.

Hope surging, Nik yanked the door handle, spinning it until the locking mechanism clanged. He shoved the door open, eyes searching the darkness beyond for Mei's statuesque figure.

But it wasn't her standing there. It was Heru.

Did that mean that Mei really was dead? Nik felt a sharp dagger of regret stab into his chest. His daughter—his only offspring. They'd only just begun to build a real relationship. Now they never would.

"Don't look so disappointed," Heru said. "Mei is safe."

Lex stepped out of the shadows behind Heru. "She's at the Oasis. She told us you were still here. We got here as soon as we could." Lex's focus shifted past Nik, searching the bunker behind him. "Where's Kat?"

Nik stepped to the side, letting Heru and Lex in. “On the couch.” He followed them to the living area.

“Oh thank God,” Lex breathed, a hand to her chest. “Neffe’s been in a tizzy thinking Kat’s rotting away in here, but Aset felt certain you would’ve preserved her like this.”

Nik took up a post at the opposite side of the couch from Lex and Heru, crossing his arms over his chest. “She was only out of the snow for a few seconds. Hopefully it wasn’t too long . . .”

Lex crossed the room to place a hand on Nik’s arm and gaze up at him, smile reassuring. “You did everything you could, given the circumstances. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Nik let out a relieved breath. They were in the eye of the storm, the wind howling all around them, but here, now, was a single, peaceful moment of reprieve. “So Mei and Mari made it out of there,” he said, combing his hair back with his fingers. “At least she didn’t leave us here for nothing.”

Lex and Heru exchanged a weary glance.

Nik narrowed his eyes. “What? What happened?”

Lex looked at Nik, eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Mari—” The words seemed to catch in her throat, and she swallowed roughly. “She didn’t make it, Nik. Mei brought her body, but . . .” Lex lowered her sorrowful stare to the couch and shook her head. “Mari’s with Kat now.”

“Shit,” Nik said, drawing the word out low and slow. He genuinely liked Mari. She’d been a big part of Kat’s life, and he could only imagine how devastated Mei must be by her death.

“Yes, well,” Heru said gruffly. He cleared his throat. “It’s a heavy loss, but we’ve got Kat’s body now, and we’ll do everything in our power to make sure Mari’s sacrifice wasn’t in vain.” He, too, looked down at Kat’s frozen body. “Let’s take her home.”



“A lright, Nik,” Aset said to her son, “go ahead and begin the transformation.”

She stood on the other side of Kat’s bed from Nik, the thin plastic tube from a fresh bag of blood—Heru’s own this time—pinched between her thumb and forefingers. She was ready to attach the blood bag to the IV needle still stuck in Kat’s arm the second Nik reverted Kat to her natural, non- At state.

After a quick nod to his mother, Nik raised his hands, once again positioning them so they hovered just over Kat’s forehead and chest. He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and pulled the At out of this plane, leaving behind only organic material.

Once the final particle of At was gone, Nik took a step backward, exhaling heavily. It wasn’t as exhausting as before, but then, he’d had hours of rest since arriving at the Nejeret Oasis.

There was already a flurry of activity around Kat’s bed as Aset and Neffe went to work hooking up the various machines brought in to do the impossible: bring Kat back to life. Within seconds of being unfrozen, Kat was intubated, and Aset and Neffe’s team of highly skilled healers went to work setting her up on the most advanced and invasive life-support machines available.

Someone swapped out the blood bag just moments before it was empty. Someone else pushed past Nik, adding an additional bag of some clear fluid to the IV.

“Come on,” Lex said, hooking her hand around Nik’s elbow. “Let’s get out of their way . . . give them room to work.”

Nik let her pull him away from Kat’s bed, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from the woman who’d shoved her way, kicking and screaming, into his heart.

Lex led him out of the room that had been set up as an emergency operating room in the bottom floor of her and Heru’s home in the oasis and through

another doorway into the dining area. An At table had been set up with a feast in buffet form, there for the medical team to replenish themselves as they worked day and night on reviving Kat.

“Have something to eat,” Lex said. “You need to keep your strength up.” She released his arm and retrieved a plate from the end of the table, offering it to him. “How bad are the withdrawals now?”

Nik shrugged, accepting the plate despite having little appetite. “They’re manageable.”

When he made no move to put anything on his plate, Lex took it back and started loading it up with an assortment of meats, cheeses, fruits, and bread. “Well, don’t be a tough guy, okay?” She glanced at him, empathy shining in her carmine eyes. She knew exactly what it felt like to slowly die of bonding withdrawals. “Keep Aset updated on your symptoms. She may be able to ease them a bit.”

“Yeah, sure,” Nik said. But his mind was still back in that room with Kat—with her body.

Lex handed him the plate full of food, then pointed to a long dining table with benches for seats set up across the room. “Sit,” she ordered. “Eat.” She planted her hands on her hips. “You can go back in there and see her when you’re done.”

Dazedly, Nik made his way to the table and swung one leg over the nearer bench to sit. He went through the motions of eating—picking up food with his fingers, putting it into his mouth, chewing and swallowing—but didn’t feel like he was actually there doing it. He felt numb to his body’s actions, just doing what had to be done to stay alive.

Mei shuffled in from outside, though Nik didn’t really notice her until she sat opposite him at the table. Her presence brought Nik back to the here and now.

He focused on her face, reading the lines of heartbreak and sorrow etched around her eyes and mouth. This was the first time he’d seen her since he’d

arrived at the Oasis. The first he'd seen her since Mari's death. Mei looked how he felt. Worse, maybe.

She rested her joined hands on the table and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry," she said, voice hollow. Her eyes met his, but she didn't seem to be truly looking at him. Her mind was somewhere else. "I wasn't thinking straight," she added, "but I had to try. She's—she was my baby. My little girl."

Nik breathed out, his chest tight. Mei had lost the person she loved most in the world, but here she was, apologizing to him. He reached across the table, covering her hands with his. "There's nothing to forgive." He gripped her hands tightly. "Mari was brave and noble. She still is." He laughed sorrowfully. "I'm sure she's already kicking major ass in Aaru with Kat."

A laugh bubbled up from Mei's chest, and it seemed to surprise her. It stopped almost as soon as it started, but there was a little more life to her honey-brown eyes now. "Yes, I hope you're right. Those two—" Her lips quivered, and she took a deep, shaky breath. "They've always been more like sisters than anything else." Tears welled in her eyes, and her chin quaked. "It somehow feels right for them to be there together."

"Yeah," Nik said, feeling pulled to the cusp of tears by his daughter's sorrow. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, it does."

Kat

The trip between universes was just as psychedelic the second time. The portal spat me out near the moon, and I had a few blissful seconds to stare down at my beautiful blue planet, the loveliest sense of peace washing over me. It had worked. I was home.

And then I was staring down at the earth through a gossamer veil, the vibrant streams of soul-energy flowing past me and the multifaceted voice of the collective a joyous chorus humming all around me. Tendrils uncoiled from the general current of soul-energy, curling around my arms and legs, and as I floated across the streaming energy toward the endless darkness surrounding Aaru, the voices took turns greeting me like a long-lost friend.

Almost there. Almost . . .

The soul-energy coalesced into a distinctly feminine form before me, her hands reaching out to grip my arms, holding me in place. Her face solidified into a recognizable shape with achingly familiar features.

It was my mom. Or, at least, it looked like her. It was just as likely that I was staring down the projection of Isfet; she tended to favor taking on my mom's shape when communicating with me in Duat .

“Kat?!” With the way she said my name, both disappointed and angry, there was no mistaking who I was facing—my mom. “What are you doing here?” she demanded. “I told you—you shouldn't be here!”

“I know,” I told her, smiling sadly. “I didn't have a choice, Mom. This was the only way. I have to go into Aaru and find Isfet or we're all dead—you, me, the soul-energy . . . everything.”

My mom shook her head, her rainbow brow furrowing. “I don't understand.”

I took my mom's hands in mine. “You were right—Isfet can't lie.” I gave her hands a squeeze. “The danger that was coming is real . . . and it's here. We need her, Mom. You have to let me go.”

Still my mom didn't look convinced. Leave it to her to try to save her daughter, even if it meant leaving the whole universe to burn.

“Coming in hot!” a familiar voice called from behind me.

I barely had time to turn and look before Mari crashed into me like a flaming golden comet. She broke my mom's hold on me, knocking me free, and we sped toward the precipice of that eternal darkness together.

“Mars!” I exclaimed, finding her hands. “What are you doing here?” Horror washed over me as I realized there was only one way for her to be in Duat . “You died ?”

She let out a joyous laugh that seemed totally inappropriate. “I couldn’t let you have all the fun!” she said.

“You’re insane!” I told her, and I couldn’t help but join in her laughter. It was infectious. I couldn’t believe she was there, with me.

“Maybe,” she said, then shrugged. “Probably. But I’m here, which means you won’t have to do this alone. I’ve got your back . . . just like old times.”

I did the only thing I could think of doing—I threw my arms around her, hugging her soul for all I was worth. “I’m glad you’re here,” I whispered as we hurtled toward Aaru .

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said.

I closed my eyes, revitalized by Mari’s presence, and together, we dove headfirst into Aaru .

The end

image-UULIMNGI.jpg

Thanks for reading! You’ve reached the end of Judgement (Kat Dubois Chronicles, #5) . Kat’s story continues in Afterlife (Kat Dubois Chronicles, #6) .

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About the Author

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Lindsey Sparks is a bestselling Science Fiction and Fantasy author who lives her life with one foot in a book—so long as that book transports her to a magical world or bends the rules of science. Her novels, from Post-apocalyptic to Time Travel Romance, always offer up a hearty dose of unreality, along with plenty of history, mystery, adventure, and romance.

When she's not working on her next novel, Lindsey spends her time hanging out with her two little boys, working in her garden, or playing board games with her husband. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family and their small pack of cats and dogs.

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Did you love Judgement: An Egyptian Mythology Urban Fantasy ? Then you should read Afterlife: An Egyptian Mythology Urban Fantasy by Lindsey Sparks and Lindsey Fairleigh!

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For Kat Dubois, death is only the beginning... Kat is on a mission, and the fate of the universe depends on whether or not she succeeds. She must journey into the heart of the underworld and track down Isfet before time runs out. Before the bonding withdrawals claim her bond-mate's life and her ticket out of the afterlife vanishes. Before the Mother of All attacks. For once, luck is on Kat's side. Some of her closest friends and most trusted allies have her back, even in the hereafter. The mission should be breeze. But it doesn't take Kat long to realize that the underworld is far more dangerous than she ever could have imagined...

Afterlife is the final book in the Kat Dubois Chronicles, a tough-girl urban fantasy series set in Seattle, WA. If you like intense action, gritty characters, unconventional magic, and Egyptian mythology, then you'll love this unique, fast-paced adventure!

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