

# Phantasia

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Disclaimer

This isn't a finished work, so you might spot some errors!

For printer/e-reader friendliness, all illustrations have been removed.

**Check out [www.phantasiaonline.com](http://www.phantasiaonline.com) for the ongoing story!**

## Prologue

“Dude, that thing’s growing more wings every year!”

Dante grunted a chuckle and pulled the drawing closer to him. Even Joel, his best friend, wasn’t privy to his secret fantasies.

“You should design tattoos,” he continued, “That’d be awesome on your back!”

Dante frowned, thinking of how silly it would look to have a twelve-winged shadow sprawled across his back. Joel would love it, as would Ravens like him, but that wasn’t Dante’s scene. He preferred the silence, those solitary moments when he didn’t have to endure the banal trivialities of human behaviour, when he was the only person who existed and everything else was just a painful memory.

A different type of silence descended upon the cramped classroom. Their History teacher, the rugged Mr Haan, had just walked in, his weathered trench coat flowing behind him. Dante continued to scrawl shadows over the lined page as Mr Haan welcomed the students to their second year, took the register, and then perched himself on the edge of his desk.

“Last year, we concentrated on modern history and the wars of the past century. This year, we’re going back a millennium. To a time of religious persecution and civil unrest. An age of darkness.” he moved to pull the whiteboard down, revealing the large screen behind it, “It just so happens that some of us have had a busy winter holiday, and have cobbled together a bit of a treat for you kids,”

He was smirking. He always made that expression when he had something ‘entertaining’ to show. The rest of the class never noticed it. They would gossip afterwards about how Mr Haan enjoyed his boring presentations too much. Only Dante seemed to notice his self-deprecating humour.

The room darkened and Mr Haan took at seat at the back of the class, where he would watch for signs of inattention. Joel was already passing notes over to Kaori again, while Lysander and Angelo were whispering away. No doubt Mr Haan would pick on them later, when he started asking questions about the presentation. Dante would pay more attention to his imagination than what was going on, but unlike the rumours said about certain other teachers, Mr Haan couldn’t read minds, so he would be safe. As he drew his imaginings under the irregular light of the staccato images and videos, he managed to at least pick out a few shreds of details.

*21<sup>st</sup> Century. Terrorism. Occupation. Economy.*

How boring.

*Environment. Technology. Understanding.*

Just sounds like present day. Nothing ever changes.

*Lunar Colony established.*

Dante stopped drawing for a moment. He was fascinated by the white monolith that swept through the sky, his dreams.

*Lunar Colony sabotaged. Breakout of violence. Violence on the increase. International conflict. Martial law. Civil war.*

And back to the boring stuff. Dante drifted back into his daydreams, where the moon hung low and black clouds covered the skies.

*Tower of Babel.*

His eyes glanced upwards. Though the report was going on about how this tower was the largest structure the world had ever seen, it paled in comparison to the mountainous city of Malkuth to the south. People back then were amazed by such petty things. As the montage resumed its downbeat spiral, Dante returned to his notebook.

*Artists purged.*

Joel nudged him, almost ruining the final wing. Dante was going to glare at him, but as his eyes were rolling from page to lanky, red-haired Raven, they were caught by the

images on screen. For a brief moment, it was dominated by the image of an entity with twelve wings stretching out like grasping fingers, and at the centre of the darkness sat a malevolent face.

*Appearing across the world, religious leaders are calling it demonic propaganda and are warning people to be vigilant of those who may be connected to this "cult of Erebus".*

Then the image flashed away to be replaced with more news reports, scenes of giant craters and mushroom clouds, streets filled with dead bodies, black clouds sweeping across the sky, lines of refugees heading towards the skeletal beginnings of the technopolises built around the Babel towers, grainy, zoomed footage taken by gibbering amateurs of monsters prowling the streets. The growing moon. Then darkness.

The lights flickered back on and a sombre Mr Haan hid the screen away. Dante could feel the fresh ink imprinting on his palm, but he didn't want anyone else to see it. The rest of the class were muttering to themselves.

"And that," began their teacher, "was the end of the Old World."

## Chapter 1

# Phantasia Celeste

Phantasia fiddled with her white hair. Her eyes darting around the classroom for any sign of confusion on the faces of her far-more-colourful peers. But none of them questioned it. They never did. They all sat obediently on their clamshell stools, silently watching as their teacher lectured them on the fall of the human empire. He stood at the front of the classroom, ankle-high in the water that flowed endlessly through the sea-shell corridors and coral rooms of the Water Palace. A tall figure with midnight waterfall hair, he was one of the chief scholars of the Water Queendom, his knowledge rivalled by few.

"The humans of the Outerworld did not help matters," he said, "Their weak hearts were easily swayed by darkness. As they succumbed to their most destructive emotions, they turned on each other, and on the world itself."

She wiggled her toes in the shallow water, rested her hand on her chin, and sighed. Why was everyone so prejudiced? All they ever told her about humans was how bad they were. They ruined the world and caused chaos and destruction with their 'evil' emotions. But like the rest of the faeries around her, Phantasia had never *met* a human. How could she be sure they were so bad if she didn't have any experience of them? If Queen Thetis and Prince Dionysus spoke fondly of them, then surely...

Her teacher was watching her again. His will was reaching out towards her, probing her surface thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she said, rolling her eyes. His will lingered a moment more, then retreated. Even after fourteen years of living with water faeries, Phantasia still hadn't learned to shield her thoughts from them. It was just one of the things that set her apart from other faeries. White hair and eyes were unheard of – their colour should reflect the faerie's elemental composition – and she had always been a tall, slender girl, while others her age had started out as nymphs no taller than her knees. And while they grew through a process of metamorphosis, she had always been the same.

Her teacher continued to drone on about the malicious mistakes of humankind, and Phantasia's mind began to wander again. What would it be like to live on a world where the infinite abyss was above you, rather than below? Where every time you looked up, you saw that depressing infinity, rather than the rest of the world? Was it a dark place, so far away from the Goddess's light? Maybe that was all the humans needed...

“Princess Phantasia, please...” His will was stretching out again. “The humans are the lowest form of life. They live one step above nothingness. The light of the Goddess would blind them,”

*Really? Had he tried?*

“Princess.”

She pouted her lips and began drumming her fingers on her knee.

“It is our nature as water elementals to know the truth.”

*Truth? How could they be so sure? Didn't they ever imagine that...*

“We do not ‘imagine’, Princess.”

*An answer for everything...*

“That is our nature.”

He watched her for a moment more, then turned his attention back to the rest of the class. They were all used to this by now. If they weren't so stoic, they would probably hate her for it. When she noticed a ripple in the teacher's aura, she expected a clever comeback, but then the ripple spread out to all the students. A message, sent through the waters, like a hidden code Phantasia could never understand.

“We shall reconvene once the situation has been dealt with,” said the teacher. Phantasia remained seated as the faeries began to leave. None of them would come and explain things to her, because they didn't see the logic in it. It was a task assigned to just one of them: Phantasia's lady-in-waiting, Faye. Like the others in the class, she was a third-stage faerie around fourteen-years-old, with long, sky-blue hair framing her expressionless face.

Faye remained silent until everyone had left, then glided over to Phantasia and stood, back straight with hands clasped in front of her. In the three years they had been friends, Phantasia had tried in earnest to make Faye relax and open up, but her elemental nature was a constant, ingrained barrier.

“The demon Cecaelia is planning an assault on the Water Queendom,” she explained in her usual monotone voice, “Queen Thetis is arranging a defensive to counter Cecaelia's anticipated attack force. All faeries are to assemble in their troops and await further instructions.”

“And what about us?” asked Phantasia.

“We are to remain in the palace at all times.”

*Typical.*

“Neither of us are required for such an operation. Also, as a Princess of the Queendom, your well-being is of a top priority.”

Phantasia frowned. She wasn't even a *real* princess. She could never succeed Queen Thetis. She had only been given the title 'princess' because the Queen had felt sorry for her! Without that blessing, she would have been abandoned long ago by the water faeries, who feared anything they didn't understand. Some had already tried to depose her, insisting she was unnatural – even a demon! Maybe it would have been better if no one had ever found her.

*Nonsense.*

His voice came to her like gentle waves washing away her doubts.

*I have something for you, Princess.*

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Prince Dionysus was stood at his balcony, looking up at the Innerworld stretching away before him, when Phantasia entered the room. She had known him for as long as she could remember, back from the time the faeries had been fighting a terrible war up in the human world.

Since that first meeting fourteen years ago, Dionysus had metamorphosed from an adolescent to a powerful adult, destined to succeed King Nereus. His hair crashed backwards like waves, but regal robes looked awkward on a tall, slender frame that still bore armour from his past battles. As Phantasia entered, he glanced at her with an aquamarine eye.

“Cecaelia is going to assault the Queendom with everything she has,”

Phantasia sat down on the edge of a fountain and ran her fingers through the cool water, wishing she could read things so easily.

“It will be a suicidal attack. She has nothing else left aside from her hatred for King Nereus,”

“I guess you’ll be involved,” said Phantasia, trying to stop herself from scowling. In a land ruled by logic, emotions were a rarity, and Phantasia’s would betray her thoughts even if she could shield them.

Dionysus drifted over and sat next to her. “I have been asked to join a force consisting of Prince Freyr of the Wind Queendom, Prince Inari of the Fire Queendom, Princess Durga of the Earth Queendom, and our assistants. We are to seek out Cecaelia and destroy her.”

Phantasia sighed and paced over to the balcony. Vast blue oceans spread out before her, dotted with small islands of coral and sand, upon which various faerie villages were situated. Below her, in the palace courtyard, faeries in royal garb swam through the air, no doubt preparing for the coming attack. She looked up at the brilliant light of the Goddess, floating at the centre of the world, and wondered why these things happened.

“It is just the way things are,” said Dionysus, “We must fight to protect our world, before the spiral it is trapped in tightens and destroys us all.”

Phantasia watched the elementals dancing in the lakes and streams. Those simple spirits were oblivious to the suffering of the planet. She wondered why everyone else – faerie, demon, human – couldn’t be so innocent.

“Even the Goddess ages,” said Dionysus. “Anyhow, I have a gift for you. Something you may need one day,”

What on earth could he have for her? Before she could ask, a spark darted out from a raised finger and embedded itself into her shoulder, leaving an odd prickling sensation. When she looked down, she noticed a design had engraved itself there – a twisting serpent etched into her arm as if it were a part of her.

“Knowledge,” said Dionysus, “If something should happen to me, then you can use it to help find your true identity, just like I promised you would,”

Phantasia gingerly touched the tattoo. As much as she wanted to know what secrets were inside, she couldn’t read it. If only she were a Water faerie like the prince!

“It will come to you in time,” he said, “I don’t believe for a minute that you are powerless. Your strength just manifests in different ways to ours. When you need that knowledge, I believe it will come to you of your own will,”

She grasped it, feeling empowered by the prince’s belief, but something wasn’t right. Something bothered her. Even after years spent with humans, being tainted by their behaviours, Dionysus was still a logical Water faerie at heart.

The prince answered her silent question: “As I said, in case something should happen. Now, if you would excuse me, I must prepare for the battle.”

“I want to help!” Phantasia found herself exclaiming, even though she knew his response before it came. She shied away, even as his good-natured laugh attempted to soothe her nerves.

“I would not want to put you in danger,” he said, “Cecaelia knows too much about us and our Queendom. She would target you to hurt our Queen,”

He was right – he always was. Cecaelia had once been a member of Queen Thetis's court, until she betrayed her people and embraced the darkness. Phantasia wondered what she had to gain from such betrayal.

"Some fall to the darkness," said Dionysus, "That is the nature of the dying world we are trying to save. Even the Queen was blind to Cecaelia's ambitions,"

Phantasia, though, had never quite trusted her. There had just been something about her that wasn't right. She always blamed such feelings on intuition or paranoia. Dionysus chuckled to himself again.

"Maybe that's your power?"

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Phantasia paced around her room, staying as far away from the balcony as possible. Watching Queen Thetis and King Nereus marshal their troops, while she was confined to her room was far too frustrating. Faye occasionally relayed news about the situation, but had picked up on Phantasia's mood and remained silent for most part.

"I don't understand it!" said Phantasia, aware that she had been repeating the same statement for a while now, "I don't understand why people want to fight, but at the same time I want to fight myself! If I wanted everyone to get along, then why am I so frustrated? Why do I want to be out there with Dionysus so badly?"

"It is logical to protect your assets," said Faye, "I do not understand your frustration, as it would be illogical for you to fight. Until your abilities are more fully understood, you cannot be a part of any planned strategy."

If only Phantasia could think like the water faeries! She couldn't grasp this whole 'logic' thing, no matter how hard she tried. She kicked some water against the wall and watched it drip down the spiralling patterns, then she disappeared into her rest chamber. A few moments later she re-emerged, having replaced her regal gown for something more casual. The clothes were unlike anything faeries wore, and were more akin to the sorts of fashion associated with humans. Faye gave her a disapproving look.

"By leaving the palace, you are directly ignoring the orders of the Queen," she said, "It will be my duty to inform her."

"They won't have the resources to come after me," smirked Phantasia, "You make sure you tell them that. I don't want them changing their logical strategies because of me. I can look after myself!"

She slipped over to the balcony and surveyed the courtyard below. King Nereus was standing at the crest of the waterfall, Dionysus and his companions at his side. Outside the palace walls, troops of faeries from the other three Queendoms were gathering.

"You will not be able to escape the palace unnoticed," said Faye.

As the king led the water faeries to join the other troops, Phantasia flipped over the balcony. She took a last look back at her frowning handmaiden and gave her a wicked smile.

"I can try."

Much to Phantasia's surprise, Faye was wrong. Though there were plenty of the Queen's guards watching over every spiral and crack of the palace, she managed to pass them by without any difficulty whatsoever. Maybe they simply weren't looking out for her. Maybe they were focused entirely on spotting stray demons. Maybe it was just her unique powers. She didn't have time to ponder the possibilities, as the amassed faerie troops were already preparing for the assault. Phantasia sat on a rock at the edge of the island, the ocean cascading down into the abyss before her, to watch the battle unfold. Now she was out of the palace, she didn't really know what to do except wait. Maybe Faye was right about her uselessness after all?

Then it started. The fire faeries dived towards the lower planes, charging into battle with their characteristic passion and pride. No sooner had they begun, than Cecaelia's island fortress came crashing up from the Underworld, sending resonating waves through the aether. Small island outposts were smashed by the hulking rock, and soon demons were pouring out of caves and crevices that scarred its surface. Minor demons, thought Phantasia, barely worthy of effort. Cecaelia couldn't have had much luck enticing any demons worth their while into her schemes.

The rest of the troops followed the brash fire faeries into battle. As Phantasia expected, the strategy employed by King Nereus was working perfectly. Simply by his presence on the battlefield, he had played on Cecaelia's disgust with her former Queendom, and she had sent all her forces to meet his own. Each element worked together to cover their weaknesses, and without a genius like Nereus to control them, the demons were easily outclassed.

So why was Cecaelia so brazenly assaulting her former Queendom with such a pitiful army? Surely she would have known the outcome? Phantasia didn't like it. This was a battle of minds, not strength. Was Cecaelia bluffing the king? Was Nereus double-bluffing her?

Phantasia didn't want to think about the complex thought patterns of water faeries. All she was worried about now was Dionysus. He had already vanished from the battlefield with his companions. What if Cecaelia knew he was coming? What if he was walking into a trap? What if he was already...?

She stood up and dived off the continent, keeping herself hidden in the rushing waters. Once the battlefield was behind her, she looped around and headed back up towards the rotting island. She touched down at the rear of the fortress without incident, feeling the darkness of the Underworld reaching for her like a mass of hungry tentacles. Ignoring the abyss behind her, and the possibilities before her, she hurtled forward towards the unguarded citadel. Instinct would lead her to Dionysus.

Cecaelia's fortress was a dark twin to the Water Palace, as if her home had been consumed by demons. The water was black like tar, and clawed at her feet the one time she tried to step in it. Whereas her home was decorated with coral sculptures of the various sea creatures of the world, here they were ferocious monsters, their pure nature corrupted by greed and jealousy and hate. Spiralling shells were now spiked and shattered, while beautiful sea flowers had become withered weeds, their roots grasping towards her like the Underworld itself.

*Just follow the light,* she told herself as she danced through the labyrinthine corridors. A moment later, as she was flying through a spiralling passage, she felt a sudden tension in the mana around her. Then the corridor ahead exploded in a pyrotechnic display of sparkling energy. Prince Inari struggled to pull himself up from a crater of rubble as Phantasia sped over to him. He was too weak to speak, but Phantasia could follow his gaze downwards, through the hole his impact had created, into the gaping chamber beyond. Phantasia was at the ruined heart of the fortress, a battlefield torn apart by power she could never hope to wield. Her first instinct was to find Dionysus, but her senses were drawn to the pulsating mass floating at the centre of the room.

The Cecaelia she remembered had been tall and slender, with seaweed hair and turquoise eyes. The monster before her was bloated and slimy, with eight slaving black tentacles whipping the air and a torso drenched in sweat and blood. Cecaelia's hair was now mangled with moss and filth, while her neck had disappeared entirely. Only her turquoise eyes remained, but they were now dark and bloodshot. As Phantasia was drawn in by the monstrous octopian, she realised there was absolutely nothing she could do, and that her arrival had brought nothing but ruin to her Queendom's carefully crafted plan. The only one who stood to benefit was the demon herself, and she was laughing. Phantasia

wanted to find Dionysus, to at least know he was safe, but something came at her. A bolt of black. Darkness.

Before it could strike, something dived into its path.

Then Dionysus's body exploded into a million blue sparks.

Phantasia screamed.

Unable to hold herself back, she leapt towards the dissipating form of the prince, her hands grasping feebly at the fading lights. Then something struck her through the chest, and she looked down to see one of Cecaelia's tentacles wrapping itself around her.

"Well, this is a surprise," said the demon, her mouth unable to hold back a grotesque smile, "What *is* Thetis's excuse of a 'princess' doing here?"

Phantasia winced from the pain as Cecaelia's poison prickled through her body. The tighter the tentacle grasped, the more that negative energy seeped through her spirit, tearing it apart. Cecaelia was slowly slobbering her way over, purring with glee.

"You...monster..." gasped Phantasia.

"Better a monster than one of you weaklings," she spat back, "There's no place in the world for faeries anymore."

As the former faerie's hideously contorted face rose up to meet her own, and Phantasia tried to avert her eyes from the blabbering skin and rotting teeth, there was a flash of something behind the shifting dregs of hair. Phantasia's eyes widened in surprise, as her joy numbed the darkness bleeding into her. In that moment, Cecaelia's tentacle whipped out and dropped her to the floor, catching the surprise attacker at the last instant.

Dionysus hung, struggling with a black tentacle wrapped tightly around his neck.

"Clever," said Cecaelia, sneering, "If it wasn't for your little 'princess' here, I would've been dead by now. I'll thank her with a quick death after I've dealt with both of you,"

Her other tentacle lashed out and plucked Prince Freyr out of the air, his attempt at invisibility faltering before the demon's vision. She held her two trophies high, and smirked down at Phantasia.

"Dionysus and Freyr, the most gifted of you all. Now tell me there is a place for faeries in these dark days!" She looked back at Dionysus, her face cracking open like a rotting oyster as she smiled, "My dear Prince, try not to reincarnate anymore,"

Dionysus gasped, his hand tugging weakly at Cecaelia's grasp. Her dark energy burst to life across his body. Phantasia tried to scream, but the sudden eruption of negative energy numbed every sense she had.

Then the pain subsided. Cecaelia's face had dropped. Standing in front of her, with his hand buried into her flesh, was Prince Freyr.

There was a moment's silence, then a screeching wind shredded through the demon's body. Dionysus was released from her grasp and fell, caught by the agile Freyr and carried away from the bloody mass of tearing flesh. As her material shell fell to pieces, her ethereal, faerie form emerged as if from a rotten cocoon. Though no longer a blob of slobbering meat, but a beautiful faerie, her eyes contained the same calculated malice. Before she could move, though, the wounded Prince Inari struck out. Without a physical body to protect her, and still stunned from Freyr's attack, Cecaelia was powerless to prevent herself melting away into nothingness.

Phantasia leapt over to where Freyr was nursing Dionysus, and soon the other faeries were crowding round. She was waiting for the illusion to end. Any moment now, Freyr would show everyone why his illusionary skills were so renowned!

"You should get going before *they* arrive," said Dionysus. He forced a smile, the lingering corruption of the human world showing through, "Death Faeries aren't the most sociable of types, after all,"

*Just an illusion...*

“I doubt Cecaelia will come back. She was too far gone to reincarnate,” said Freyr, “Just another cancerous collection of memories to add to the spiral,”

Dionysus managed a laugh. Water faeries never laughed. “I also will not be reincarnating,”

Silence.

*Just an illusion. Just an illusion.*

“After all you’ve learned?” asked Freyr, “Dionysus, your whole life, and everything you achieved... You are one of the most gifted spirits left in the world! Are you saying you want to join the Goddess before—“ Freyr looked at Phantasia “—before you found an answer?”

Dionysus reached towards Phantasia and brushed his fingers over the mark he had left her with. She felt a cool prickling sensation, and as she looked into his aquamarine eyes, she realised.

“You knew...” she started.

“It was going to happen eventually,”

“But, if I hadn’t...”

Dionysus exchanged a look with Freyr.

“You were late,” said the wind faerie, “We expected you earlier. Your distraction was all a part of the plan. How else do you think you escaped the palace untroubled?”

Princess Durga scowled as she laid a hand on the shoulders of the young princess. “Never underestimate the plotting of the water faeries, or the counter-plotting of wind faeries. We must leave now. Death approaches.”

“It’s a Grim too,” said Freyr, standing tall, “Quite an honour for you, Dionysus,”

Dionysus rested his head back and closed his eyes. “That it is,”

Durga and the other faeries began to filter out of the room, carrying their wounded with them. Freyr and Phantasia were the last to leave.

“I’m not going to leave you here,” said Phantasia, grasping the prince’s fading hand, “We’ll get you outside. You can recover!”

Then she felt a wind pick up beneath her, and she couldn’t stop herself being pulled along by a sudden force. She took one last glance at Dionysus, before she saw something dark appear between them, and then the chamber passed out of sight.

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She could feel him. Everywhere she went, she could feel him. His hand was always on her shoulder, guiding her, comforting her. He wasn’t going to leave her alone in the world. He was going to fulfil his promise, and help her find her true self. All she had to do was...

“That was his plan,” said Queen Thetis, “He had already informed me about it, and told me you would one day ask my permission,”

The Queen of the water faeries was the most magnificent and beautiful of them all. She sat upon her coral throne looking down at Phantasia with sapphire eyes, her hair cascading around her shoulders, entwined with jewels and shells and other precious things. Around her neck she wore a choker, displaying the image of a whale – the creature that represented her spirit. As was always the case, she answered the next question before Phantasia could ask it.

“I did not know Dionysus anticipated his death,” she said, her eyes travelling upwards to the crystal dome, through which the light of the Goddess could be seen, “Although it is not unheard of among our element. Dionysus walked the wheel of life for longer than many, so it is understandable that he chose this opportunity to return to the Goddess. His gift to you is his legacy,”

“I have to go...”

The Queen nodded. "Indeed you do. But, do you know what it is you are searching for?"

"Myself..."

The Queen lent back on her throne and smiled. Like Dionysus, she too had felt the touch of human 'corruption'.

"Then I will ask Faye to accompany you, in your journey across our world. I will let the other courts know of your coming, and ask them to help you in whatever ways they can. Perhaps I should have seen this earlier, and not kept you here in the palace, but I am as weak to fear as the rest of my kind, and for that I apologise. Dionysus surpassed me in this respect, and I will honour his wishes,"

Phantasia caught a glimmer in those wise, beautiful eyes, and she knew that Queen Thetis was aware she was hiding something. Something that Dionysus's voice was whispering to her, like distant waves.

*World Axis.*

## Chapter 2

### Axis Mundi

The Water Queendom hadn't changed at all when Phantasia returned from her journey across the Innerworld. And much to her discontent, Phantasia herself had hardly changed in that time, either. She was now dressed in an assortment of clothes she had acquired from her travels – a leafy-green cloak from the Wind Queendom, loose-fitting desert-red robes from the Fire Queendom, and a leather tunic from the Earth Queendom – but her lanky stature, foppish white hair, and pale skin were all the same.

But the biggest disappointment was that Phantasia still had little clues as to her origins. All those months spent in the various Queendoms had taught her about the other faeries, but little about herself. She had picked up as many talents as she could along the way, but excelled in none. Faye had been with her through all of it, and knew just what she was thinking as they glided through the waterfall entrance of the palace.

"You have changed," she assured her princess. Though water faeries never lied, Phantasia found it hard to believe her.

The Queen awaited them. She already knew everything there was to know about their journey – the waters brought her just as much information as her ambassadors did – and embraced her princess the moment she arrived.

"There is still much we can do," she said, stroking Phantasia's hair, "Knowledge and understanding come as much from experience as they do from embracing the flow around us. After all, the world only tells us what the world wishes to tell us."

Phantasia found it difficult to return to her old routine, especially without Prince Dionysus around to relieve her anxieties. Faye tried her best to fill his role, but she was young and inexperienced. Unlike Dionysus, she wasn't tainted by the Outerworld.

"You have not failed," she would tell Phantasia, "You have learned much and grown impressively," But still the princess couldn't accept it. There was no proof. None that she could see, anyway. Distraught, she would shut herself away and spend her time focused on the one thing that still motivated her: the mystery Dionysus had left her. The riddle of the World Axis.

Not long after she returned, Phantasia felt something was amiss in the palace. There were more guards patrolling the corridors, and previously public audiences with the Queen and King had become private affairs with tight shielding. Frustrated about being out of the loop, she pressed Faye for answers.

"It was not something that concerned you," replied her handmaiden, after explaining the whole situation.

“Of course it concerns me!” Phantasia replied, arms flailing – sometimes Faye’s dedication to common sense infuriated her – “He was Dionysus’s lord-in-waiting! If he’s been acting strangely, especially with what’s been going on in the other Queendoms, then it’s something I need to know!”

“Are you suggesting that Ophion is involved with the disappearance of Prince Freyr and Princess Titania?” asked Faye with a raised eyebrow. “I do not see a connection.”

Phantasia began to pace around. “I’m not saying they’re connected, no. Well, they might be, we can’t be sure, but if Ophion is acting strangely...” she stopped and looked at Faye, “Don’t you find it odd that a water faerie like yourself would start vanishing from the palace without a trace?”

“I do not. Prince Dionysus behaved in such a manner on a number of occasions,” said Faye, “Both he and Ophion spent time in the Outerworld, and around humans. As you know, such exposure can erode the behaviour patterns of our kind,”

“Don’t you want answers?” said Phantasia quickly, hoping to appeal to Faye’s natural hunger for knowledge and understanding.

“They will come in time,” she said, “I would certainly be interested in such answers, but it is not my duty to acquire them.”

Phantasia stood for a moment, trying to block out the sounds of the waterfall that fell through the middle of her room. A smile crept across her face as she thought of what to do.

“Do you believe involving yourself in this matter is wise?” asked Faye. Phantasia realised how loud her thoughts must have been and quickly shut them away using the training she had received from the wind faeries.

“You know what I’m like,” she said, grinning, “You really expect me to refuse a call to adventure?”

“That would not be in your nature,” said Faye, and Phantasia could swear she almost caught the glimpse of a smile on her friend’s face. All that time spent with the eccentric princess was finally starting to crack the exterior, she thought, making sure that this time Faye couldn’t hear a thing.

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Queen Thetis sat back and rested her arms on the ornate coral throne. She glanced up at the sparking window that looked upon the Goddess, the light shimmering across the dome as if it were the oceans surface, and then returned her attention to the Princess, fidgeting before her.

“I can understand your intrigue,” she said, “You hold the memory of Prince Dionysus in high regard, so the irregular behaviour of his former aide has caught your attention. Especially since it seems so similar to the way Dionysus once acted.”

“I find it strange that he’s doing it alone though,” said Phantasia, “And that you’ve not been able to trace his movements, either,”

“As I said before, the world only tells us what the world wishes to tell us. If Ophion does not wish us to know what he is doing, then we cannot know what he is doing. To force knowledge is against our nature,”

“We have taken steps to investigate,” she continued, after a brief pause, “We do not believe he is doing this alone, and has associates from the other Queendoms helping him – much like Dionysus did. As you know, he had ways of hiding his movements from us. He gained such assistance from the wind faeries, most likely,”

Phantasia chuckled. As she had found out during her travels, the wind faeries were quite the opposite of their water-based kindred. They played with illusions and trickery, rather than truth and knowledge, and were free-spirited and fun-loving, rather than cold and sensible.

“They are looking into these events themselves,” said the Queen, “But it is hard to convince anyone to commit themselves to this cause. A single faerie acting out of character is no reason to be alarmed in this era. Besides, Queen Áine and the Wind Queendom have their own worries, what with the disappearances of Freyr and Titania,”

“Faeries do disappear,” she continued, as her eyes began to focus on saddening memories unknown to Phantasia, “We can change when exposed to mana corrupted by human hearts. Many of us who fought in the Apostle Wars were irrevocably changed by our time fighting alongside the humans, especially those who experienced the human world when they were only children. Dionysus and Freyr were among those, as was Calypso, until she became Cecaelia...”

The conversation trailed off. Phantasia wondered if Freyr and Titania had been corrupted by the darkness. It was impossible, surely? Freyr had been such a shining example of strength when he fought against Cecaelia, and Titania was a happy, over-excitable faerie her own age. She never saw even the faintest trace of darkness in their auras!

“And you say you have learned nothing?” said the Queen, smiling.

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Phantasia still wanted an answer. Even after her audience with the Queen, she was uncomfortable with Ophion’s behaviour. She would continuously bombard Faye with speculation, even though her handmaiden found most of her ideas absurd and illogical without necessary evidence to back them up.

“Fire Faeries would have demanded an answer,” said Phantasia, as she sat outside overlooking the palace, “And the Earth Faeries? They would have beaten him for showing such contempt and disloyalty. I doubt the Wind Faeries would mind, though if they did, they’d just trick the answers out of him!”

“What would you do to obtain your answer?” asked Faye.

It was an interesting question, certainly. She didn’t fit into any of the behaviour patterns associated with the other faeries at all. “I think...” she began, “I think I’d try to talk to him, I guess. Talk to him, be kind, try to open him up. If he didn’t answer, I’d try something more direct. Maybe frightening him into answering!” she giggled at the thought of herself trying to frighten another faerie, “I don’t know,”

“Perhaps then you should try that,” said Faye, “If our attempts do not divulge answers, perhaps yours will.”

Phantasia didn’t know if Faye was trying to subtly encourage her into doing what she really wanted to do, but was afraid to – or if she was simply making another reasoned statement with no emotional attachment. Either way, it was a good idea, and she was going to try it! Faye remained motionless as she jumped up.

“There is no place for me in such anarchic behaviour,” she stated.

Phantasia found Ophion alone in his room, standing at the balcony and overlooking the world outside. There was an eerily familiarity about the whole scene. He turned to face her, his expression blank and eyes cold.

“I have been waiting for you,”

Ophion lacked the spark he once had while Dionysus was around. His eyes had become narrower, his hair was now a navy blue, and underneath the cape traditional for faeries of his position, he was wearing extremely human clothes. He stood with his arms folded, resting against the balcony and watching Phantasia closely. As she studied him more, she began to notice cracks in his aura, like dark veins running across his body.

“Dionysus asked me to tell you something,” he continued, “He told me that you should open your eyes,”

This wasn't what Phantasia had come to hear! She was supposed to be asking questions, not receiving cryptic remarks! She started to say something, but Ophion had already read her thoughts.

"What I do is not important. As I said, I have been waiting *for you*. It was his last request to me, to make sure you understood," he turned back towards the world outside, "He knew you would not understand, that you would be oblivious to your own power. Tell me, what do you see when you look at me?"

The cracks, she thought. The cracks that were growing and expanding and *consuming* him. It was so obvious, so how could no one else have seen it? How could Queen Thetis not see the darkness growing in someone from her own court? It was there, in plain sight!

"Did she not tell you? The world only tells you what the world wants you to know. That is a mantra of water faeries, but you are not one of us. You can see things we cannot. That is what Prince Dionysus wanted you to learn. That is what will take you *there*,"

All thoughts of questioning Ophion about his activities were gone. She didn't need to know his reasons for touching the darkness, or who he was conspiring with in the other Queendoms. That wasn't important any more. What was that tingling sensation on her shoulder was making her shiver in anticipation. All the knowledge Dionysus had gathered was suddenly made clear to her. The mystery was solved. The path was open.

She left Ophion standing at his balcony, watching the world. He'd been waiting for this day, and now he was free. In the past, she would have blamed such an insight on instinct, but now she knew it was something else.

She could see.

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Phantasia's ultimate destination lay at the south pole of the planet, which she could see high up on the side of the world. She swept low over the translucent ocean, underneath which lay a myriad of settlements, faeries and elementals. Islands floated above the dark depths, into which few faeries would ever dare to dive. Phantasia glanced into the shadows and wondered what lay beyond them, in the world between the worlds. There, primordial, animalistic spirits, born of humanity's negative emotions, their very existence a tumour eating away at the world, dwelled. There the demons – the fallen faeries and ascended humans – plotted away in their fortresses and empires, seeking to fulfil their self-centred goals of power and conquest. Phantasia darted close along the shadows, daring herself to stare further and further into their depths, so that she might see the world beyond them, but all she saw were slothful shapes, envious eyes, greedy claws reaching out as if they could penetrate the wall between the worlds and pull her shimmering white form into their lustful embrace.

Feeling herself weakening from such flagrant exposure to the darkness, Phantasia rose up towards an icy island that sliced across the ocean, its massive cliff face looming towards her. As it approached, she rose up the sheer surface, then twisted over and onto the white plains of snow. It was, for all its size, just one of the many rouge islands that floated around the world. A few faeries had made a small settlement near a shrine of ice – some kind of gateway between the worlds – but other than that, there were only the elementals roaming the cold fields. Phantasia continued on her way forward, letting the island glide away beneath her.

Soon the ocean gave way to the rocky peaks of the Earth Queendom, and Phantasia stopped to think. From atop the mountains, she surveyed the vast, shifting lands of the Innerworld that all followed the stream of life that ebbed through the planet. Only at one point did all those energies converge, a point unlike any other part of the world. A

swirling maelstrom of every colour, through which the stream of the Goddess's life energy flowed from the Outerworld into the Innerworld at one end, and returned through the other.

*That is the World Axis.*

She could feel him standing there with her, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. She dared not turn her senses in his direction, knowing that the second she did, the memory would disappear as if cast into the chaotic vortex she was watching.

"I learnt the way," she said quietly. Her body trembled as she looked into the void through which mana flowed. That was where the faeries had found her, lying naked and alone after the decisive battle of the last Apostle War. That forbidden, sealed away place was her only hope of uncovering her true identity.

Focusing her senses once more on the path ahead, she dived into a canyon and then upwards, towards a point in the middle of nowhere. There was a flux there, an unstable point of energy, and as she touched it, everything around her changed – only slightly, but it was still a change. It was as if she was now looking down on the world below through frosted glass, and across the lands she could see the streams of mana twisting around like veins. From the palaces at the heart of the Queendoms, she could see shafts of light connecting to the Goddess above, who now appeared closer and brighter than ever.

This was all eerily familiar for Phantasia. She had seen this sort of place before, when she had once accompanied Faye to meet the Guardian God of the Water Queendom. To reach the higher planes, one had to travel through specific gates in the heights of the palaces, but in this case Phantasia had found one that occurred naturally, unseen to anyone but her.

She moved towards the World Axis, which looked as vivid as it had done before, even while the rest of the Innerworld looked so hazy. With some concentration, Phantasia could make out the translucent shadows of lands above them. They would be the lands in which the Guardians lived, surrounded by the primordial elementals, she thought – lands so close, and yet still so very distant.

She headed towards another invisible gateway, this one leading her downwards. She could feel Dionysus's knowledge quietly explaining everything to her.

*It is a maze no faerie can navigate. I tried, but all I could do was map the points. It would take a faerie who could focus the elements together, blending their powers into a single truth, to unravel. A faerie that could never exist. A faerie like you.*

Down she plunged, through the lands of the faeries until she skimmed along the border of the Underworld. Eyes looked hungrily back, but Dionysus's directions dragged her away before she could be haunted further. With each dive and ascent, she came ever closer to the spiralling World Axis, and the closer she came, the more she could see. No longer just a whirlpool of magical energies, it had become a great cyclone connecting the conflux to the Goddess.

*A conduit that channels the flow of life. Long ago the tower had connected all the layers of the world together, but when humans rebelled against nature and demons were born, it was sealed to protect the inner worlds and the Goddess from corruption. That seal is as weak now as the life force of the planet, and only the hidden knowledge of the World Axis prevents it from being abused. Only the four Queens, and their kings, know of its existence. And now you.*

As she approached the ethereal tower, she began to feel Dionysus's touch weaken, his knowledge fade. The tower reached into the heavens and delved into the darkness, connecting everything along a single axis. How long had it been since faeries had last laid eyes on its frightening splendour? Surely Phantasia wasn't the first?

Nearing the twisting, roaring wall, she noticed an archway leading into the tower. It was conveniently placed in front of her, as if the tower knew she was coming. Faye would have cautioned her about going inside. Phantasia ignored the wary voice of her

handmaiden and continued, knowing how much trouble her recklessness would one day get her into. The chaos before her was attacking every sense, but she pressed on, until she passed through the solitary tunnel and into the World Axis.

Silence. Silence and emptiness. Phantasia found herself gliding into a vast chamber of such size that the spiralling wall behind her faded into the distance. For a while, she floated through the serenity, allowing the purity of the Goddess's blood to rejuvenate her tired spirit. Then she descended, her feet creating ripples as she touched down on an invisible floor. With each step, more ripples spread, as if she were walking over an endless ocean. As peaceful as it all was, and as blessed as she felt for being able to bask in the very life of the planet, there wasn't a single answer for her here.

"Well this is no good," she said, crossing her arms and kicking the rippling floor, forgetting that it wasn't water. She brushed the serpent on her shoulder, hoping Dionysus might answer her, but his voice was long gone, left behind in the twisting maze he had led her through. She hoped he would be proud of her solving the mystery and finding this place, even though she was sure he would have done so himself eventually.

*That is no so.*

The voice came from behind and she instinctively turned. Then she saw reality flicker, and a figure appeared as if it had just materialised out of nothing. Its face – for the voice was strangely genderless – was hidden behind an ornate helmet that sat on armoured shoulders. Below that, an ethereal cloak billowed in unseen winds. Phantasia tried with all her senses, but she couldn't register the stranger with anything other than her sight. It was as if the thing she was seeing didn't even exist.

"Nor are you the only recent visitor to this place," it continued. A visor on the helmet appeared to be looking at her, but for all she could tell, this thing didn't even have eyes.

"However, your arrival was anticipated. It means you are ready for the real world,"

"Who are you?" she demanded, her body shivering slightly from the figure's unnerving non-existence.

"A guiding voice," it said, "Even a genius water faerie like Dionysus could never have found this place alone. You are quite different, however. Dionysus sent you on your journey believing you would one day uncover the strength within to find this place."

Phantasia felt the mark tingle. Was the prince telling her she could trust this person? Even though he had no idea who – or what – it was?

"But I don't have any power!" she said, "I journeyed all over the world and all I learnt was that I was a freak!"

The figure remained motionless except for the gentle swaying of its cloak. "You may not have the obvious powers of the faeries you understand," it said, "But that does not make you powerless, nor does it make the journey you undertook worthless. You have developed powers of your own, blending what you have learned of the different elements together,"

Phantasia looked down at her hands and wondered just what she had really learned during her journey. All she could do was weakly emulate the greater powers of proper faeries! She couldn't create illusions or move winds; she couldn't fight like a warrior or shape the material world; she couldn't control magical energies or manipulate emotions; and she certainly couldn't read the waters or come to efficient, logical solutions to problems!

What *could* she do?

*Find the World Axis.*

"Because of your talents, you were able to come here," said the stranger, "Dionysus rightfully believed that your true power can never be tapped while in the faerie's world. In order to reach your full potential, and understand your nature, you must travel to the other world. To the human world,"

It stunned her. Excited her. Scared her. *The human world!* That secret longing she had always had to go there, had it been a subconscious urge to understand herself? Had the answer been there all along?

“Go there, and understand everything,” said the voice, and then in an instant the figure vanished in the same strange way it had appeared, leaving Phantasia alone in the vast emptiness of the world’s current, without even Dionysus’s knowledge to comfort her.

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The Princess stood before her Queen, who looked down at her with curious blue eyes. Strange things were indeed afoot in the world and even the water faeries were lost for answers.

“The figure you described, I have heard of it spoken before,” said the Queen as Phantasia looked up at her, eagerly expecting an answer to the mystery, “It was during the last war. The humans received help from such a figure, who showed them magicks even we were unaware existed. We do not know who this figure is, or why it would appear to you.”

Phantasia felt downhearted. She wanted to know who the figure was, and why it had told her what it had. The Queen must have picked up on her thoughts, because she came down from her throne and placed her hands on Phantasia’s shoulders.

“So, the human world... Do you want to go there?”

Phantasia nodded, there was no need for words.

The Queen leant down and kissed her forehead. “Then that is where you shall go,”

### Chapter 3

## Induction

Phantasia and Queen Thetis stood at the border of the Innerworld, where the walls between the worlds were weakest. They had just arrived at a forest shrine in the middle of the Wind Queendom. It was the gateway to one of the remaining safe passageways between the faerie’s ethereal plane of being, and the humans’ material one.

The shrine, small enough so that only a few faeries could enter at a time, had been grown out of the trees surrounding it. Trunks created pillars, from which walls of marble leaves cascaded down, and from the gaps between them, golden light filtered down to reveal archaic designs on the gnarled floor. Two young sprites – faeries yet to grow bigger than Phantasia’s knees – circled around the perimeter of the gateway, awaiting the Queen’s presence.

“It won’t be like this on the other side,” she explained to the Princess, “Most of the shrines in the Outerworld were destroyed thousands of years ago. Instead, many humans went and built their own holy places over the crossing leylines, where the path between worlds is easiest. Fortunately, and by coincidence, many of those grounds were adequate enough to keep demons away. However, in the world as it is now, things are quite different,”

Phantasia could only imagine what the world on the other side looked like. Queen Thetis had spent several weeks schooling her on humanity, and it had been much more enlightening than the standard spiel she was so used to. She was fascinated by the concept of a world hanging upside down, above the abyss, where your thoughts couldn’t shape the world, but you had to build things piece-by-piece with your hands.

“But remember,” said the Queen, “That you will not be like them. They are born of the earth, physical beings. All we really are to them are spectres – though we can interact with their world, and them with us, we are still just beings of mana; phantoms with no real

presence, invisible to their technology. That is why you must be careful and not reveal your true identity without just cause: they fear what they cannot truly touch, and that fear will harm you,”

The Queen closed her eyes and held Phantasia’s hands as she concentrated on the journey. After a moment, the world began to distort around her, as she thought of what would happen if she ever fell into the Underworld. The forest twisted into a blur of light, and with a sudden sensation that felt like both falling and ascending, Phantasia was plunged into a painful darkness. For one brief moment she could feel the Queen’s will clinging to her, and then the darkness gave way to grey.

Her destination was old and decrepit. A large building, built from stone and wood, parts of its high ceiling has rotted away, causing a rainbow of light to stream in. Decorated windows lined the walls, and from what Phantasia could make of those that were still in one piece, they appeared to tell legends.

She walked down the central aisle of the building, flanked on either side by the remains of old wooden benches that had failed to weather the world’s ruin. Moss crept up the walls, eating away at statues of human saints, while rodents scurried up and down them before vanishing into the shadows.

“Is this place suitable for your new home?” asked the Queen, after letting Phantasia take in her surroundings.

“It is peaceful,” she said, “There, there isn’t any corruption here, is there? It feels like our world...”

The Queen walked to where some birds were nested in a stone crevice and caressed the heads of the youngest. “Humans have no need of this place in their new world. Perhaps that is for the best, or perhaps not?” She moved over to a dried up fountain and ran her hand over it. “In fact, only three have been here recently, and all for your own benefit.”

Phantasia noticed the Queen smile, and followed her gaze towards the entrance of the human holy shrine. Standing to its side, adjusting the minute details of his clothing, was a solitary human. He wore a smart suit, and had short, foppish hair with a tint of grey. Phantasia felt a memory twitching at the back of her mind as she examined his features.

“Rembrandt Payne,” said the Queen as she glided over to him, “I believe it has been fourteen years since we last met face to face. Do you remember Princess Phantasia?”

The man looked towards Phantasia through small spectacles, “Why, she hasn’t changed at all, Your Majesty,” he said.

“You have grown wiser, though,” said the Queen as she stood next to the man. Though he was taller, her radiance overwhelmed him, his dull colours blending into the wall next to her ocean blues. “I trust she will be safe under your jurisdiction?”

Phantasia traced the lines in the man’s face with her eyes. Unlike faeries, humans had a strange way of ageing. They didn’t retain their youthful beauty, and their growth happened over time, rather than through metamorphosis. Rembrandt Payne was not the young, vibrant man whose face was etched in her most distant memories.

“Everything has been prepared for her enrolment,” he said, “It’s going to be quite a strange thing, having a faerie mingling with humans. Of course no one will know of her true identity, but this sort of thing is rather...unprecedented.”

The Queen looked over towards Phantasia and smiled. “Everything about Phantasia Celeste is unprecedented,”

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Phantasia made her way down from the ruined shrine – called a ‘church’ by Rembrandt Payne. Queen Thetis stood atop the hill, watching as her princess was guided

into her new world. Mr Payne had provided her with a selection of human goods that she would need, and the Queen had helped her adapt to a physical world, such as showing her how to read 'books', wear clothes that weren't mental projections, and emulate the human consumption of material sustenance. All through that, Phantasia still struggled to recall her earliest memories, when she had met a young Rembrandt Payne.

Phantasia was living in a town known as Torsten, which had been salvaged from a settlement abandoned during the Great Cataclysm. In some areas the houses would be bright and stable, while a few streets away the roads would still be parched and cracked, and the buildings husks of overheated stone.

She looked down at her new clothing and fiddled with the tie draped around her chest. The human clothes she had been supplied with felt awkward and nowhere near as comfortable as the ethereal threads of her own world. What was the point of trying to blend in, anyway? She heard (and Mr Payne proved!) that humans looked quite dull, whereas Phantasia so pale as to be glowing in the sunlight, and her hair and eyes weren't natural in any world! The pointed ears and flawless appearance wouldn't help either. Somehow Phantasia wasn't sure the Queen's excuse – that humans accepted minor differences because of 'genetic mutations' – would work for her where she was going.

Mr Payne was taking her to a human school. One he was in charge of, of all things! Phantasia was going to be surrounded by young humans around her age, and would be integrated into the society as if she was just a normal human girl. It wasn't going to work. She knew it.

*I'm not even a normal faerie, so how do they expect me to be a normal human?*

For a moment, she expected Mr Payne to answer. When she remembered where she was, she felt somewhat less exposed. "Don't you think I'm going to stand out a bit?" she asked.

Mr Payne laughed, and ushered down a tiled street. "We have quite a few unusual students. Our school is rather renowned for them, to be honest. You should fit in well!"

Along the way they passed several humans, and Phantasia did her best not to stare at them in awe. Most paid no attention, though one woman did peer at her with narrowed eyes, while her aura fluctuated with crackling resentment. Most people, like her, appeared to be quite young and heading in a similar direction. Some of them acknowledged Mr Payne, though others appeared to be rather more hostile towards him.

"There's the usual politics you get with young people," he said as they passed a group dressed all in black and white. Phantasia wasn't quite sure what he meant, but listened regardless. "Some students are only here to cause trouble. Some just had nowhere else to go. You might get hassle from a few, but all new students do."

After a short walk, which felt more like a scenic tour of the town at times, they arrived within sight of the school. Sitting on the eastern outskirts of town, away from the built up streets, it was surrounded by green fields and a nearby forest of young trees. The building itself was in a state of disrepair, with some sections fenced off, while others were surrounded in scaffolding. The core section of the school, however, looked new.

Mr Payne stood on the edge of the grounds, smiling. "It's still a work-in-progress. The, eh—" he paused and ruffled his hair, "*—ruling body* of the town, if you can call them that, aren't entirely too keen on us, so we don't get much funding. On the other hand, we get a lot of support from nature restoration activists and certain friendly organisations,"

They approached the building and Phantasia began to take in some of the finer details. Unlike the natural, elegant shapes of the palace, the school was rigid and square, built to stand in a world dictated by materialistic laws. Everywhere was covered in the dull pattern of brickwork, and the stony ground was nothing like the shifting patterns of water in the palace. Those places that were coloured by nature's beauty were contained like exhibits, and there were few signs of non-human life other than distant birdsong and omnipresent insects.

Mr Payne gestured towards some fenced off courts where a handful of humans were loitering, some playing odd games. “We do our best to encourage sports,” he explained as they walked past, “It keeps some of them out of trouble. We can’t compete with the big city, though, but that goes for a lot of things...”

Phantasia followed Mr Payne towards the steps that led up to the main entrance, which was overshadowed by a large, dark canopy under which sat several sets of double doors that looked into the building. For an entrance, it was an anticlimactic as it got, but then Phantasia had been standing outside the monolithic gates of the Earth Palace only a few weeks earlier.

The corridor was lit by numerous windows and had a soft grey floor. It was more comfortable on her bare feet than the hard stone had been, though she still missed the shallow waters of her home. There were a few students hanging around a short distance away – they were chancing looks at her and whispering among themselves, but shuffled away when Mr Payne began to approach them.

“I don’t know much about how things worked where you came from,” he said, though Phantasia was surprised that he would know anything at all, “Queen Thetis did give me an overview. I don’t think they’re much different here, but your classmates will be. You won’t be used to quite the...” he paused for a moment and ruffled his hair again, “...*variety* of personalities you’ll have in your classes,”

Indeed, she thought. Phantasia had only ever been taught in single-element classes. Water faeries sat and learned facts, Earth faeries were taught the arts of combat, Fire faeries focused on the manipulation of various energies, and Wind faeries were carefree and preferred fun to learning. The idea of mixing different types and trying to teach them things not of their elemental nature was destined for trouble!

“The school is split into four houses,” explained Mr Payne as he guided Phantasia through the corridors. Passing through another set of double doors, the neutral grey tones changed to yellow and brown hues. “For example, this is Topaz house. Each house is dedicated to one of the four main academic areas that we study – science, art, humanities and nature. Topaz is the science area, and probably our smallest department. The big city down south – Malkuth – is a technological utopia. You’ll see it on the horizon sometimes. It’s a mountain of metal and lights,”

As they moved through the four departments, Phantasia noted how each reflected the same elemental diversions she was used to from her world. Topaz, the science department, felt cold and hard, just like the Earth Queendom. The spirit of wind flowed around Emerald House, with its floral decorations, open areas and gazebos overshadowed by trees. Ruby House, home to the Arts, felt like it was a boiling pot of raw emotion and energy, which reminded her of the volcanic lakes and fiery hearts of the fire faeries. It was in the final house they visited, the blue-hue Sapphire House, that she felt the most welcome, however.

The whole area was built around a courtyard, in which sat a pond and waterfall display. Phantasia felt relaxed the moment she heard the sound of cascading water, even if the corridors were boring and right-angled, rather than twisting passageways of coral. The walls were at least somewhat interesting, though, as they were covered in images of ancient places, of the world before its fall, and from even further back in time. One large wall at the centre of the department was covered in a giant map of the Outerworld that was comprised of tattered hand-drawn pieces, aerial photographs, and parchment charts of the old world.

“Mr Haan – that is, Sabeen Haan, the history teacher, – takes a great deal of interest in piecing together the world,” said Mr Payne, “Along with his brother, Azarat, he has travelled across the world, searching for answers,”

“The lessons here are all about studying the world around us, and the world that used to be,” he continued, “I thought it was perfect for someone who was brought up

around Water faeries, and Queen Thetis agreed with me. That is why you'll be joining the students here. You'll still study in all the other houses, of course, but this will be your home."

Mr Payne stopped in front of the door and turned to face Phantasia. "Usually students start in January, in the first year. But if they have previous educational experience, we allow them to join where it is felt they will most benefit. In your case, you'll be joining the second year students, who are already halfway through their education here. The first year would be too basic for you, and the third too advanced, so it's best to let you join here..."

Phantasia stared at the plaque in trepidation.

#### Ms. THORBURN – SAPPHIRE SECOND

Behind that door lay her new life. Mr Payne smiled, placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and reached towards the door handle.

"It's never easy when a new student joins the class," he said as he pulled the handle down, "But I think even someone like you will find a place in this little menagerie,"

Mr Payne opened the door and strode into the room beyond. She followed behind him, clutching her left shoulder for luck. It wasn't like her to be shy, but her immaterial body was trembling and she tried to hide her eyes behind her fringe. Then Mr Payne stepped aside, exposing her to the classroom and its kaleidoscope of colours.

#### Chapter 4

### Sapphire Second

There were seven of them. Five boys, one girl and an older woman with unkempt hair, who sat slouched at a large desk at the front of the room. She perked up as soon as she saw Mr Payne's awkward smile.

"Ms Thorburn," he adjusted his glasses, "Students of Sapphire class, I would like you to meet your new classmate,"

He beckoned her further into the room. They were all staring at her, not that she could blame them. One of the boys was peering at her over the top of some device his fingers were drumming on. Two others were whispering to each other, giggling. The lone girl was smiling, but gripping the hand of her boyfriend, while his black-rimmed eyes were staring at her. At the back of the room, a solitary figure wrapped up in layers of clothing watched everything unfold from behind messy hair.

"This is Phantasia Celeste," said Mr Payne.

She managed an overenthusiastic wave, but stopped when she noticed the looks she was getting. Mr Payne chuckled and continued.

"Phantasia comes from far away, so I hope you'll welcome her and help her get used to your lively antics."

The lone girl shifted closer towards her boyfriend. "S-so where are you from?" she asked.

Phantasia had to think fast. She couldn't tell them the *truth*.

"The north!" she said, before breaking out into a giggling smile.

As Mr Payne took Ms Thorburn aside for a secretive chat, Phantasia turned her full attention to her new peers. She gathered as much information about them as her faerie senses would allow, and was overwhelmed by the complexity of it all. So many different elements and emotions, running untamed and allowed to intermingle! How these people managed to deal with each other on a daily basis was beyond her. For a few moments there was an awkward silence as she stared at everyone, but then the lone girl came over, dragging her boyfriend behind her. He was a lanky boy with wavy ginger hair, who wore

tight fitting clothes and chains that rattled on his wrists. The girl was shorter than Phantasia, and had dark hair with a red fringe. It looked like it took her a long time just to get dressed in the mornings, what with the amount of straps, ribbons and buckles that adorned her elegant dress.

The ginger boy held out his hand, which Phantasia took, remembering back to her lessons in human etiquette. "I'm Joel," he said, his face split by yellow-stained teeth.

"I'm Kaori," said the girl, dragging her boyfriend back, "Your hair is amazing, I've never seen anything like it before! If you don't mind me asking, where did you have it bleached?"

Bleached? Phantasia thought for a second. She didn't understand what they were talking about. "It's all natural," she laughed, only noticing the couple's bemused looks when it was too late.

"Y-you're albino?" said Joel, leaning forward to study her eyes, "Woah, I thought they might be contacts or something. They're natural too?"

"Guess I'm just one of a kind!" she said, laughing again. Laughing put people at ease, according to Queen Thetis, but Joel and Kaori's auras were fluctuating.

Before she could land herself in further trouble, Mr Payne took her aside. "I had better be off, lessons will be starting soon. Phantasia, if you need anything, don't be afraid to ask Ms Thorburn. We know things might be overwhelming at first, and we'll do whatever we can to make things easier,"

Phantasia nodded and Mr Payne left the room with a cursory wave to the rest of the students, but they were all still transfixed by the new student. Ms Thorburn broke the silence.

"You kids stop staring at her. You're going to make her feel uncomfortable,"

She shuffled a pack of cards, drew a few, and studied them, then she looked up at Phantasia, who was watching with great interest. She had been taught about various ancient forms of human divination used to mimic natural faerie powers.

"Guess they don't need to do things like this where you're from," she chuckled, pushing the cards aside, "Don't worry, it wasn't a bad reading. Come here, I've got something for you,"

Phantasia sat down at the desk. The rest of the class returned their attention back to their own lives, though she could still sense the occasional glance in her direction. Already their auras were beginning to edge towards her, tiny threads seeking to entwine themselves in her life.

Ms Thorburn leaned in and began to whisper. "Problem with these kids is that half of them don't believe in anything, and the other half believes in the wrong stuff. Take John there," she nodded towards the boy hiding behind his mechanical device, "He spends his time beavering away on that laptop, refusing to believe in anything that science can't explain. Joel and Kaori, they're the complete opposite. Doyle just wants to impress the girls, Lysander and Angelo want to make everyone laugh, and Dante..." she became even quieter, and Phantasia was aware the boy at the back of the room was still glaring at them, "Whatever he believes in stays securely in his head."

She then leaned back and handed Phantasia a book from her desk. Phantasia studied the blue cover.

*Phantasia Celeste*  
*Sapphire Second Year*

Ms Thorburn waved towards the book, "You keep note of your homework assignments in that. I'm supposed to check it every Friday, but I usually forget. It'll tell you when and where your lessons are anyway. I hope you'll settle down with these misfits okay, they're all harmless really."

She then began to shuffle the odd pack of cards again as Phantasia walked off, studying her lessons. Some sounded similar to what she'd studied back in the Water

Queendom, whilst others were mysteries. She found the prospect of these lessons the most exciting. As she sat speed-reading through the array of pages, consuming each and every paragraph of information in seconds, two of the boys came over to her. From their auras, they reminded her of wind faeries.

“Well hello there,” said the first. He had scruffy dark hair and was dressed in an odd style, his bright clothes meticulously selected for their colour coordination, if not for their aesthetic appeal.

“You all right?” asked the one with spiky hair, “Heard you were starting today, welcome to the team, I’m Lysander. This cheeky chappie is Angelo,”

The colourful kid saluted. “Hello!”

Lysander handed her a book, its pages sewn together with thick thread. The glossy cardboard cover was marked *‘Lysander and Angelo’s Guide to Torsten Upper School’*. She flipped through pages of scrawled notes, comical caricatures and scrap photos. Lysander was beaming with pride.

“It’s a gift, to get you started in this comedy of tragics,”

“Now if you wouldn’t mind,” said Angelo, as the two parted like a curtain of a play, “Please allow us to acquaint you with the fine fellows you shall be spending your illustrious educational career with,”

“Now that guy is John,” said Lysander, motioning towards the boy still tapping away at his laptop, “He’s a bit of an encyclopaedia, so you ever need to know something about anything, this is who you ask,”

“Moving on,” said Angelo, indicating Joel and Kaori, who were sitting next to the window, “As you’re already aware, here we have Joel, who’s a bit on the scary side, and the lovely, lovely Kaori, who is also scary, but has very nice eyes,”

Joel grinned over at them, while Kaori managed an elegant wave.

“Now over at the back we have Dante. He’s a bit strange,” said Lysander in a hushed whisper, “He keeps to himself, but he can be a laugh if he feels like it. Just don’t—”

The door slammed open, and a boy with long blonde hair dragged himself into the room, slamming his bag on a desk in the process. When he noticed the rest of the class, his face dropped.

“You’re late,” said Ms Thorburn, giving him a stern glare from behind her desk, “Guess you thought there was still an assembly and you’d cleverly miss it by arriving late. Well, sadly for you, it was cancelled because of the arrival of our new student, Phantasia,”

Upon seeing Phantasia, Doyle’s distraught body language changed in an instant and he glided over to her, smiling.

“Cute name,” he said, taking her hand and gazing into her eyes. “I’ve not seen anyone like you around before. Show-white hair, such pale, delicate skin. Your eyes, like stars—”

“That’s enough with the flirting, Doyle,” said Ms Thorburn, “The last thing any new student needs is you trying to worm your way into their affections. Besides, she’s not your type,”

Doyle pulled away from Phantasia, grimacing. “Bloody Thorburn and her zodiacs,” he said under his breath, unaware of Phantasia’s inhuman senses. She was bemused at his behaviour, and the greedy tint of his aura made her shy away further. She crossed her arms and glared at his back for a second, but let the moment pass. Humans and their emotions were such unpredictable things!

At that point the bell sounded and everyone began gathering their possessions, whilst Ms Thorburn appeared to have slipped off into a morning snooze on her desk.

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Mr Haan – or Sabeen as he insisted his students call him – was a weathered man with long brown hair and almond skin. His stuffy classroom was filled with all manner of strange treasures, from tribal masks to stone tablets and jewelled sceptres. As he had explained to Phantasia when she arrived, he had once been a vagrant who travelled the world over, visiting the various tribes that roamed the wastelands and searching for clues to the planet's history. One tablet, which he kept in a cabinet behind his desk, was inscribed with the terrifying image of a spiderous shadow.

"The Devil," he called it, "Though it has a hundred names. It appears everywhere, and dates back to the time of the Great Cataclysm. It's generally accepted to have a direct connection to those events, as much as those holed up scientists in the Seven Cities might rubbish it."

She listened as her teacher recounted the things he had heard, ignoring the gossiping at the back of the room, and the notes Lysander and Angelo was passing around next to her. Then Sabeen's dark eyes settled on her, and with a smile he asked:

"Do your people have legends about it?"

"Erebus," she said, without a pause for consideration, "The force of darkness that enveloped the world. They said it was the negative power of humans given form. A demon god who sought oblivion."

The rest of the class began muttering amongst themselves. For this lesson, the students of Sapphire were joined by those from Emerald House. Most were girls, and a particular trio at the back of the class had been giving Phantasia snide looks all morning. Her talk of demon gods distracted their auras more than anything, and Phantasia was feeling an uncomfortable prickling in her back as their emotions began to bleed into the mana around them.

Sabeen smiled. "Some people do talk about demons. Some say they're just mutants, created by science. There are many myths and legends, but no one knows the exact truth." He turned his attention to the whole class, "That is our job here, remember. To teach you about the outside world you may all have to step into one day, and to help you understand what you may face, be they demons or delusions,"

At the end of the lesson, Phantasia found herself mobbed by her classmates. She felt them baring down on her, and didn't like the pressure, but did her best to endure it.

"Woah, you're really into some cool stuff, huh?" said Joel as he bounded up alongside her, "That whole thing, you know, about demons or whatever it was..."

"Best keep that to yourself," said John, "And you too, Ms Celeste. It's better if you didn't talk about that sort of thing in public. You never know who might be listening,"

Joel nodded, trying his best not to look embarrassed, and glanced back as if looking for someone. "Yeah, you're right. Really pisses me off, this whole heresy thing. Damned Wotan." John silenced him once again and he skulked off, mumbling under his breath.

"Bishop Wotan is the de facto ruler of Torsten," whispered John, "You'll... understand soon enough."

They arrived in the common room for the second years. It was an open classroom filled with cushioned chairs. The corners of the room were decorated with a selection of well-tended plants, while the walls were covered in a variety of works produced by the students. Many of them were there, huddled together in small groups, and a few noticed the arrival of the newcomer. So many different people, with different stories and experiences to share – she wanted to be everyone's friend, and to learn everything she could about them. A daunting task lay ahead of her!

As she was about to start cross-referencing the people around her with the notes in Lysander and Angelo's book, Joel came charging into the room. He kept pulling the hair out of his face with twitching fingers, and his eyes were flickering around the room.

"Where's Kaori?" he said, clutching his side and gasping for breath, "Has anyone seen her? She's vanished!"

The room went silent for a moment as people looked around for the dark-haired girl. "Maybe she's done the decent thing and killed herself," said a well-dressed girl. Phantasia recognised her as Astrid, the girl who had been giving her evil looks in class. The girl's friends snickered among themselves and, had John not been there to hold him back, Joel may very well have lashed out at them. The confrontation was halted by a shout from down the corridor.

"Kaori Shimomura's on the roof!"

Astrid crossed her arms and grinned. "See? She'll be dead before you get there, heretic."

Phantasia winced at the stab of malice directed at Joel, whose own aura was begin to crack enough as it was. Without any kind of acknowledgement, the ginger-haired boy bounded out of the room, followed by several other students. Phantasia decided to follow them. She wanted to let herself go – to stop pretending to be human and fly down to corridors to the odious nebula she was beginning to sense in the distance – but she had no choice other than to keep pace with the flailing Joel. By the time they had reached the entrance, a crowd was gathering at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the canopy overhead.

Phantasia felt Joel's fear like a sudden gust of cold wind. Like everyone else, he was looking up at the canopy, where a shadowed figure in a fluttering silk and lace dress stood against the bright morning sky. A short distance away, a teacher was trying to coerce her away, but his voice wasn't even denting the blackened shell that protected her.

"Kaori, what're you doing?" Joel shouted. She stood there teetering on the edge, her expression like that of someone locked in a terrible dream.

"I'm not perfect enough for you, am I?"

Phantasia could feel it, even without trying. When she looked up, she could see darkness flowing around Kaori, an aura of despair and self destruction. Before she could do anything about it, the young girl stepped forward to embrace the murderous lust of gravity.

## Chapter 5

### **Kaori Shimomura**

The mob of students huddled together, some averting their eyes or clinging on to their friends, while others gasped or froze in shock. To the humans, Kaori was acting in a moment of maddening self-defeat, but Phantasia knew otherwise. She was the only one who could see what lay behind it all: a black stain on the daylight, an amorphous cancer eating away at Kaori and dragging her over the edge. Then, as the darkness began to blind her, it was cast away by a calming light.

Kaori was safe, caught in the arms of a beautiful young girl with shimmering blonde hair. Quite how she'd managed such a feat, Phantasia didn't know. Some of the younger students were chanting her name – Korrigan – in celebration.

Yet as Joel rushed to the side of his girlfriend and clutched her wet face to his chest, Phantasia's attention drifted from curiosity over the rescue to more important matters above. The trailing remains of darkness were fast slipping away, as if scared of the sudden outpouring of joy, and a tendril of corruption fed from that negative space like a straw.

She separated herself from the crowd and extended her senses across the nearby grounds. The trail of darkness was receding down from the canopy and following alongside the gymnasium. Without hesitation, she sprinted off after the deteriorating stream of corrupted mana. If only there wasn't anyone around, she could have leapt into a

glide and followed as it whittled away! But it was gone, washed away in the ethereal currents that were so plain to her, but invisible to the humans.

*At least, she thought, I can do something.*

After all her years in the faerie world, struggling to do the things her friends took for granted, she was in a place where she wasn't helpless. Not even a day into her time here, and she was already feeling positive.

*Now, what would Faye do? Investigate the incident. Ask questions. Find evidence. Conclude a logical explanation.*

She returned to the entrance, hoping to find Kaori and Joel, but the students were already dispersing and her new classmates had disappeared. Rembrandt Payne, however, was waiting for her.

"This is quite an unusual incident," he said, eyes squinted in concentration as he cleaned his glasses with a tattered cloth. "My apology if this has disturbed you. It's not what I'd want any student to witness on their first day here, especially when it involves their new classmates."

"She was sad," said Phantasia, looking up towards the canopy, hoping a trace of dark energy was left for her to study, "But she didn't mean to be sad. Something else did it."

Mr Payne pushed his glasses back on, glanced around, and leant in close to Phantasia. "Well, there are certainly quite a few things out there that could do that," he whispered, "It's not easy to trace, though. Could you help?"

She wondered what she could do. Another faerie would be much better suited for the task, no doubt. Faye would have already known what Kaori had been thinking!

She noticed Mr Payne straighten up and adjust his jacket. He was looking towards a figure walking in their direction. A tall man, wearing white robes, he carried an ornate staff that clanked on the ground with every long stride he took. He was accompanied by Astrid, the girl Phantasia didn't feel comfortable with. She had a smug grin on her face, just like when telling Joel about Kaori's disappearance.

"Bishop Wotan, I see your timing is as impeccable as always," said Mr Payne. He frowned and crossed his arms as the man reached them.

"My daughter tells me that you've been having more trouble with the undisciplined students," said the man, as Astrid stood basking in his glory, "And I also hear you've acquired yet another odd soldier for your ranks,"

His eyes shot down into Phantasia's. She met his stare as best she could, though her white hair fluttered across one eye. She tried to focus on his aura, but it was too blurred for her to make out.

*The world only tells you what the world wants you to know.*

"Phantasia is certainly not just another student for you to chastise as you see fit, Bishop," said the head teacher, gripping her shoulder, "As much as your patronage is appreciated, I would rather you avoided intimidating her,"

Mr Payne looked down at Phantasia and smiled. She felt a warmth that silenced the cold stare of the Bishop. "Now," he said, "I believe Ms Celeste here – and Ms Garland too – have lessons to be attending. Bishop, I think any business you have with me is best resolved in private, don't you?"

Phantasia took the cue to escape. Astrid glared at her for a second before she marched off. Quite who her father was, Phantasia didn't know. Humans were complicated, and she still wasn't sure quite what to make of them yet.

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Phantasia found Joel and Kaori sitting alone in a corner. She wasn't sure how she had found them instead of the lesson they were meant to be in, though. It felt as if her

instinct had guided her here. Without a second thought, she waltzed over and peered down into Kaori's eyes.

"Hi," said Kaori, brushing her fringe out of her face with fumbling fingers, "I-I'm sorry you had to, that this had to happen on your first day. I really don't know..."

"You don't know what came over you?" said Phantasia "Was it like being half asleep, or like you were in a trance?"

Joel and Kaori looked at her and huddled closer together. Then Joel tugged Phantasia towards them. His eyes darted around the empty corridor.

"Do you know something?" he asked, trying his best not to look suspicious. Phantasia wondered for a moment about how much she could tell him. She wasn't meant to tell anyone that she was a faerie – unless they knew already – so she had to keep that part secret at least. But her theory...

"There was negative energy," she said, "I think something was driving her to the edge, feeding on her emotional despair."

"What do you mean, 'something was feeding on her'?" Joel whispered through clenched teeth he pulled Phantasia in even closer, whilst Kaori watched wide-eyed.

"Probably a..." she paused, wondering how much of her faerie schooling she could give away, "...a phantom that feeds on negative energies given off by those in despair,"

Joel and Kaori looked at each other, then at Phantasia.

"Are – are you a witch or something? A psychic?" asked Kaori, her whisper barely escaping her lips as her eyes flickered around from door to corridor.

Phantasia realised this was a perfect diversion and nodded her head. "I can see a few things. Nothing too amazing,"

"Yeah, we know some dudes into that sort of thing," said Joel, his shoulders relaxing and the suspicion vanishing from his eyes, "Just, we gotta be careful about it. Gotta watch out for the Inquisition, you know?"

Kaori's face was still pale, though, and she clung to Joel's arm. "If what she's saying is true. Joel, do you think it could be...?"

He kissed her on the cheek and hugged her tight. "I dunno. Maybe. Best not to talk about it here. Maybe Phantasia can come to the club tomorrow night and see what she finds?"

"Could you?" asked Kaori. She placed her hand on Phantasia's arm, creating a tingling, warm sensation. "Tomorrow night? Will you be free?"

Phantasia nodded. She wasn't sure quite what was going on, but it was making her feel useful. "I'm free," she said, "If you need my help, just ask and I'll do what I can,"

In a sudden burst of life, Kaori threw her arms around her. Her senses were overwhelmed by physical, mental, emotional and spiritual messages, but through the fear and despair, Phantasia could feel a soothing light. That moment confirmed it for her. It confirmed that those faerie stories about humans being nothing but evil, untrustworthy fiends were wrong. She smiled, and hugged Kaori back.

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Phantasia arrived late to her next lesson, though she was excused because of the circumstances. Art was a new subject for the faerie, but within an hour of picking up her first brush, she had painted a diorama of the Water Queendom, showing the shell towers and coral walls of the Water palace drifting under the light of the Goddess. Her teacher – a young woman with pink streaks in her hair – called the image 'surrealist'. Phantasia was more interested in seeing what her fellow students were painting, but most of them were gossiping about the incident. It only got worse when Joel and Kaori showed up halfway through the lesson, both pulling up chairs and avoiding the looks sent their way. When the lesson ended, there was an awkward silence, as some students shuffled by, and others

searched for comforting words. Phantasia watched the kaleidoscope of shifting feelings with interest, and was the last to leave the class. Joel and Kaori were waiting for her, along with their friends, both of whom had been in the previous lesson.

Byron was the first to be introduced. A handsome boy, he clutched his hat to his chest as he took Phantasia's hand in greeting.

"I have seen many a dazzling rose in this withering world, but none so splendid and pure as you," he said. Doyle was grimacing, and she could see the bonds that linked the close friends distort as he did.

The second member of the circle was Lyra. She sat back with her arms crossed, frowning at the two boys. "Fer feck's sake, when will you two learn?" she said, glaring at them from behind messy strawberry-blonde hair.

Byron tipped his hat and sighed. "We have to make the most of what beauty comes our way. It's not our problem if you're too lazy to embrace the opportunities available,"

"Yeah, live in the moment why don't you?" said Doyle as he inched his way towards Phantasia. Lyra kicked him. Given her feeble stature, and Doyle's physique, Phantasia was surprised to see him stumble into a nearby chair.

Joel ignored them as he flicked a flame-producing device in his hand. "No point thinking about a future that probably won't exist," he said with a sigh.

Even Kaori, who was brimming with renewed hope, was dragged into the pessimistic miasma that surrounded the group. Phantasia didn't say anything. She felt queasy from the negativity, but endured it with a smile.

After the break, Phantasia had a Survival class. Their teacher, Azarat Haan, was a hard-looking man with several scars etched across his dark face. Unlike his brother, Azarat spoke with a slow, deep voice, and one hand never stayed far from the sword at his side. He spoke at length about the volatile nature of the world's oceans, and how Torsten had once been flooded, before forcing the students to endure conditions in freezing water. Phantasia didn't understand why her classmates were so reluctant during the exercise, and was the first to slip into the pool.

"Our new student surpasses all of you already!" said Mr Haan, his arms crossed and his brow furrowed as he stared at his reluctant students, "How will any of you survive in the wastelands outside this town? You'll be dead by twenty!"

Joel mumbled something. Mr Haan moved in a flash, and before Joel could explain himself, he found himself flailing into the water. He cursed his teacher under his breath as he clutched himself tight.

"Would anyone else like to raise a complaint?" asked Mr Haan, his narrow eyes sweeping over the downcast faces of his students.

Phantasia trod water as the other students lowered themselves into the pool. It wasn't until Joel asked through chattering teeth that she realised how strange she looked to everyone else. They were all suffering the cold, but as a faerie it had no effect on her, and it was too late to feign an act!

"I had lessons before," she said with a smile, whenever anyone asked.

As the afternoon wore on, Phantasia grew disheartened as her timetable of lessons neared its conclusion. Though her peers were tired and hungry, she wasn't, and was disappointed to learn she was meant to go home for the rest of the evening. To tide her over, Mr Payne approached her at the end of lessons and gave her a bag full of textbooks to read.

Hope, fear, admiration, malice. Phantasia had experienced a lot of different reactions from her first day. There had been so many things going on that she had found it hard to concentrate on anything. It was much quieter, much simpler in the Innerworld.

"Humans are strange creatures," she said to herself as she walked up the path to the church.

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Phantasia's next day at school wasn't as eventful as the first. Her lessons passed by in much the same manner: Maths was new and difficult to her, but she thrived in Culture and Nature Studies, as she had in History. During her breaks, Joel and Kaori gave her directions on when to meet them that evening, marking the point on a map of the town she kept crumbled up in her back pocket. When she had time, she would get it out and stare at the roads and markings, and her eyes would always be drawn back to the old industrial zone to the west, where she would be meeting her friends later. It took all her willpower to stop herself going there straight after school.

Once she was home at the church, she distracted herself with some books, and then began preparations for a magick ritual to speak with Queen Thetis. Sitting cross-legged in a circle she had drawn with a piece of old stone, she focused on sending her thoughts to the Innerworld.

"It is good that you are making connections so quickly," said the Queen, her thoughts reaching Phantasia via an ethereal projection of her totem, a majestic whale.

"Everything is so loud," said Phantasia, thinking of all the things her senses were picking up on, "How did you manage in this world?"

She felt the warmth of the Queen reaching out to her. "For me, and all my water kindred, all there was to see were the thoughts of people. But you are overwhelmed. You must learn to focus on what is before you,"

That evening, after musing over the confusing array of figures that constituted her Maths homework, and breezing through the answers on a test about water pollution, Phantasia began to prepare for the night ahead. Joel and Kaori had called this 'clubbing' and it sounded like something she'd experienced in the Wind Queendom. There wasn't a time in those lands where the music of nature or laughter of faeries couldn't be heard.

As twilight fell upon the old church, Phantasia stowed away her possessions in the remains of a wooden cabinet she had salvaged and began walking towards the meeting point. It was on the opposite side of town to the school, and after passing through a familiar road of renovated houses, she turned into a street where windows were smashed and walls crumbled under the slightest touch. The darkening sky covered the long-dead ruins in night, though Phantasia could still see several rough figures who scavenged for whatever scraps they could find. Small animals skittered about the dusty roads, and shadows watched from the cracks of collapsed windows. Only in a few small places did pure life bloom, and such small amounts gave little comfort to the faerie. The gloom reminded her of the Underworld, and she shivered.

She found Joel and Kaori waiting for her in a circle of light, cast down by a single swinging street lamp above. Alongside them stood Doyle, Lyra and Byron, all five of them wrapped in big, thick coats. When they saw Phantasia, dressed in a pale cotton dress she thought would be appropriate for the occasion, they stared.

"You really don't hate the cold, do you," said Joel, scratching his head.

"Well," said Kaori, looking Phantasia up and down several times with a pained look in her eyes, "You're certainly going to stand out at the club, that's for sure,"

"Oh, is that a good thing?"

Kaori laughed. She was about to take Phantasia's arm when Doyle stepped forward, took off his coat, and offered it to her. Her scrawny frame was lost in the heavy material, but Doyle didn't seem to mind. He kept his hands resting on her shoulders for a few moments, and she began to feel an uncomfortable scratching from their weight. She pulled away from him before the feeling could get any worse. Disappointed, he shuffled off to stand with Byron.

"You came through the slums?" asked Joel, glancing back at the road Phantasia had appeared from, "That's a dangerous area. Roughest part of town, you know? Dude,

you could've got hurt," he paused for a moment and looked embarrassed, "Ah, sorry, I didn't think, I'll show you a safer route next time,"

Phantasia shrugged. "It didn't seem so dangerous. I hardly saw anyone, just traces of people in ruins. It was more a pitiful place, devoid of vitality and hope..."

"Wow, those psychic powers are amazing," said Kaori, looking at Phantasia with awe-struck eyes, "Could you tell all that just by sense? Is it natural? Like sight and smell?"

"Psychic powers?" scoffed Byron as he flicked a lighter in his hand, "You two'll believe anything these days."

Phantasia scuffed her bare feet on the rough concrete and tried not to meet their eyes. Her friends thought far more of her abilities than she did. They were just natural senses, nothing more, and she didn't even understand them! Hopefully they wouldn't expect too much of her.

The group made their way down some silent, dark streets. This was the furthest reaches of the town, a grey wasteland sitting in stark contrast to the lush greens that surrounded the school. Stars had started appearing in the sky, but they were soon obscured by tall, oblique silhouettes and columns rising up from the shadows. As she walked, Phantasia attempted to focus her senses as Queen Thetis had advised.

Mana was weak here, she thought. Whatever this place was, its life had been drained away centuries ago, long before the Great Cataclysm ruined the world. Phantasia felt cold and found her breathing became heavy.

After hearing a quiet, pulsating sound on the dry air grow closer, Phantasia found herself descending cracked stone steps into an underground complex encased in dull concrete. Two hefty men stood in front of a large metal door, open enough so that a sliver of light filtered across the passageway. Above them a sign was marked with the words '*World's End*'. The guards seemed to recognise the group, shared a few quiet words with Joel, and then opened the large door. They gave Phantasia curt nods as she walked past into the dim light. The soft pulsating turned violent the moment she crossed the threshold.

It didn't occur to her at first, but the painful rhythmic noise pounding against her senses was music. It was nothing like the fair, gentle music of wind faeries, but a harsh, cruel sound. Her uneasiness wasn't helped by a feeling of heavy negativity that surrounded every corner of the room, as if it were a tomb of the land's despair. Though uncomfortable, she resolved to follow her new friends as they emerged into a large room, filled with young people jumping around like animals as multicoloured lights blazed across them.

"So, Phantasia, whaddya drink?" asked Doyle as he removed his coat from her shoulders and handed it to Joel.

"Oh, anything really," said Phantasia, knowing it didn't matter to her.

Doyle slipped off to a long counter. There people collected drinks of various sizes and colours, and stood around obscured by a thick cloud of despair that mingled with smoke wafted from the mouths of nonchalant teenagers. Phantasia tried to focus on the bar, but the poisoned streams of mana stung her.

"You ever been to a place like this before?" asked Byron as he sucked on a smoking grey stick in his hand.

"No, never," she said, "It's, well, it's horrible..."

Byron laughed and thrust the stick in front of her. "This'll make you relax a bit more, if you'd like to try it," then, upon noticing her confusion, added "It's just herbs. Perfectly natural, loads of people use them round here. It helps take away those lingering doubts about whether it's all really worth it any more,"

She took it in one hand and studied it. It was difficult to concentrate in the club's atmosphere, so all she could fathom was that it was some kind of drug that people used to alter their behaviour and perceptions. Faye would know the exact name for it, no doubt,

and its various effects. It wouldn't do anything for a faerie, of course, but its effect on humans would be the same as a faerie being poisoned by tainted mana.

"I think I'll be okay," she said, handing it back to Byron with a smile. It took him a moment to respond.

"Hey, are you okay? You didn't burn yourself?"

"I—" she winced. She'd forgotten one end was burning as she poked it around the palm of her hand. "I guess I'm lucky?"

Byron stepped away, his eyes twitching as he looked at her. "Okay, you probably don't need this shit after all. You just be careful, okay?"

It didn't take her enhanced senses to realise she'd made a bad impression as Byron slipped away through the crowd. She shrugged, and then tried to find the rest of her new friends in the murky depths. Doyle was still standing at the bar, but the others had vanished, so she began searching the room for signs of suspicious activity. Given the atmosphere, she was sure the source of Kaori's sudden bout of despair was somewhere nearby.

She twisted her way through the throng of oblivious people, surveying the area one small section at a time, so as not to be battered down by any waves of corrupted mana. She dodged jealous claws and lustful snares as her white form shifted left and right past the young adults in their dark dress, until her instincts brought her to the front of the crowd. Behind the stage and its thumping speakers, the wall was adorned with a mural filled with surreal messages and staccato imagery. Trying as hard as she could to block out the rest of the club, Phantasia tried to sense the energies contained within it: hundreds of people had laid their mark on this wall, infusing it with a small piece of their spirit. That energy, however, was dark and filled with angst befitting the subject matter – across the wall, from end to end, was an image of a ruined world. Humans were shown killing their peers, buildings had been ripped apart by weapons of unnatural power, and nature's beauty was consumed by the fires of war. It was a depiction of legends passed down. Legends of despair and desolation. These people, thrashing around underground, were anchored to that point in history when their ancestors' world collapsed.

Most striking of all, though, was the image that crowned the mural. A shadow. Twelve pitch black wings extending across the length of the wall like long fingers, reaching out to clasp the ruined world. Erebus. The shadow that lingered in the world's subconscious, whose mythic existence defined history, once again made its mark.

Feeling uneasy, Phantasia moved away, back towards the crowd. The image had broken down her barriers, and she could feel its centuries-old decay seeping out of the walls and surrounding her. She found herself stumbling into people, as if in a trance, the despair deep in the hearts of so many eating away her own. The darkness was calling to her, willing her to embrace it. Her vision started to blur and distort, as her senses began to twist beyond her control. She could see the flow of negative energies twirling around; the emotions of the humans tainting the flow of mana they didn't even know existed. All those thoughts and feelings, powerful forces humans didn't even understand, yet faeries feared the most. The power that corrupted them. The power Cecaelia and Ophion had embraced.

Phantasia found her senses flung open to the darkness around her. She couldn't control it. All she could do was let herself go. As it called out to her, she began to crave it, and the world began to fade.