

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 for the ongoing story!

The World's End

Phantasia regained her focus. The heavy music was now just a muffled rumble beyond cold grey walls, and the pain in her chest was beginning to ease. Dim lights swung from a stale draft, which blew scraps of paper across the dusty concrete. She was near a junction, each corridor identical to its siblings but for scrawled graffiti, and even that repeated itself.

"What the feck happened to you?"

Phantasia concentrated on the blurry figure beside her. Pale skin and blonde-haired, with tattered jeans and a myriad of bangles jingling as she waved her bony hand in front of her eyes. Lyra was frowning, her eyes scrunched up in concentration as she studied Phantasia's features.

"One minute you're being all unsociable, the next thing you're stumbling round like some crack-head," she said, "You're not on any of that crap, are you?"

"I-I don't know what happened, it was just the feeling. That place," Phantasia steadied herself against the wall and breathed in heavily, "There's something wrong with this place,"

Darkness. That was it. The negativity had overwhelmed her senses. The mana around this area of land was weak, so a place filled with forlorn teenagers drowning their sorrows in a cocktail of drugs was going to be like a heavy weight pressing down on the leylines. She was lucky to still be conscious!

Lyra hummed her disbelief and took a step back, crossing her arms in the process. Her cynical stare made Phantasia feel guilty for concealing her thoughts, but there was no way the human girl would understand what was really going on, was there? She *had* to lie. If only Lyra could understand...

Joel and Kaori came running around the corner. Doyle's long strides followed, and Byron brought up the rear, more interested in smoking than the current situation. Phantasia found herself smothered by Kaori, and strong warmth washed over her, purging the lingering darkness.

"My god, what happened? Did someone spike your drink?"

Doyle raised a glass he was carrying, "She's not had anything. I'd only just brought her one,"

"It's just the atmosphere," said Phantasia, breathing heavily, "I don't feel comfortable around here. All the people and everything..."

"Sounds like the time we brought Dante out," said Joel, "Dude couldn't stand the place. Must've been claustrophobia or something,"

"Nah, he's just a schizo," said Byron before inhaling more smoke, "Hope we haven't got another one of those on our hands,"

Phantasia looked to Kaori for an explanation as to why her taciturn classmate was being brought into the conversation with such spite all of a sudden.

"Don't worry, just some bad blood," she said, her hands still on Phantasia's shoulders. She gave Byron a glare from beneath her dyed fringe, "Best not to get involved in it,"

Phantasia forced a smile. "People have a thing about not getting on with each other, don't they?"

"Boys," Kaori laughed, "You know what they're like!"

She didn't, but Phantasia laughed along with her. Human genders – like many elements of their society – were rather more complicated than what she was used to.

Doyle had sidled along towards her and was holding out the drink he'd brought, waiting like some sort of royal-aide-in-training for her attention and acceptance. The drink -

a black, bubbling liquid - looked harmless, and she gulped it down in one shot. When she saw her friends' expressions, she wondered if they'd realised she wasn't human.

"That... wasn't what I was expecting," said Doyle, who now found himself holding Phantasia's empty glass.

Lyra snorted and began to leave. "Well don't come to me when you start falling all over the place again,"

Kaori giggled and dragged Phantasia aside, along with a surprised and reluctant Lyra. The boys didn't follow them, so Phantasia assumed that this was more of that gender-related behaviour she wasn't used to yet. After a few turns, they entered a small room with mirrors. Kaori began adjusting her appearance, while Lyra sat on a ledge, her feet swaying.

"I can't believe you downed that," said Kaori as she fiddled with the pink ribbons in her hair, "That stuff is vile!"

It only then occurred to Phantasia what she'd consumed. One of those human drugs that changed their behaviour, but did nothing for faeries. If only she'd known beforehand, she could have put on a better act! How was she to know that Doyle would ply her with such a thing? And why was he making her drink something like that in the first place?

"Is it normal for Doyle to give people that stuff without them knowing?" she asked. Maybe it was. Humans had strange behaviours after all.

"For Doyle, yeah, pretty much," said Lyra. She was scowling, her pale hands almost as white as Phantasia's as she gripped the ledge. "Should expect it in a place like this, though. Pretty much all anyone drinks. Especially on a night like this, when it's mostly us teenagers. Gotta have their escapism and everything,"

"Lyra avoids the drink," said Kaori, "That's why she's always so moody and inhibited!"

"Feck off," Lyra snapped back.

Kaori finished playing with her hair and turned around, resting against the sink. "Anyway, Phantasia, about what happened back there. You really didn't have anything to drink? It just happened?"

Phantasia quickly explained, as best she could without revealing her true nature, what had happened.

Lyra was standing by an old machine on the wall, prodding it with her fingers and taking great delight when parts of it made odd noises. "Definitely sounds like Dante. He flipped out in the middle of the dance floor *and* kept babbling on about that bloody mural too."

"It's creepy though, you gotta admit," said Kaori, as she adjusted the tribal markings on her face, "Still; you're all right now, at least. Now, about the thing we told you about..."

"Not that crap," snorted Lyra.

"Yeah, that crap," said Kaori. She examined each of the empty cubicles and then under the sinks before she continued, "I guess I should be honest with you, Phantasia. Joel and I have this pact thing, you see. There's a group around here who, well, this is going to sound a bit silly, but..."

"The twats get them to sign a blood pact," Lyra said, slamming her fist into the wall with more strength than her frame would have suggested, "Part of a 'ritual'. These shamans drain their energy, and all the idiots get in return is a little bit of false happiness. Doesn't even last them the night,"

"It's - it was enough," said Kaori, trying to hide behind her hair, "You know what the world is like. Not everyone can handle it as well as you,"

Lyra kicked a small bin over, stomped towards the exit, and slammed the door open, "Like you'd know what it's like," she snapped, before she stormed out. The rickety wooden door crawled shut after her.

Kaori had returned to the mirrors. Her eyes were starting to water up again. Phantasia, driven by some natural urge, put a hand on her friend's shoulder and tried to comfort her.

"Where does it happen?"

"The chamber is under the club," she said, as she tried to correct the smeared markings on her face with shaking hands, "Oh no, I can't let you get involved any more! Not after what just happened. I didn't think – I'm so sorry – you're so sensitive to everything, and this place is so horrible and—"

It started creeping up on her again, a dark shadow dimming the flickering lights of the room and tempting her to embrace it. Phantasia saw Kaori's broken aura begin to crumble, and a wisp of her life-force began to float away as if enticed by a nearby temptation. She couldn't let her friend face that darkness again! She had to stop it!

With that sudden burst of determination, the shadow retreated and once again she was standing with her hand on Kaori's shoulder, as her friend tried to control her sobs.

"I can't control it," said Kaori, "It keeps coming back,"

"I'll stop it,"

I just wish I knew how...

Kaori looked at Phantasia and her black lips formed a tiny smile. "A-are you sure? Won't it be dangerous?"

"I'll be fine," Phantasia grinned back, "I have to be strong. I know what's coming this time. I've had to deal with worse."

"The shamans aren't very friendly," said Kaori, and without any warning she turned and hugged Phantasia tightly. "Please be careful! Don't get hurt! Take the others with you or something...please?"

"I'll be back in a minute,"

Phantasia waited until Kaori loosened her embrace before she made to leave. She closed her eyes and felt around for a trace of the darkness that had touched her friend. It was faint, but unlike at the school, the foreboding atmosphere had preserved its trail like footprints. She watched as Kaori glided back towards the club with only a hint of alcoholic clumsiness and, when she was certain no one was around, she began to glide at speed through the maze of corridors. With each level she descended, the graffiti edged closer towards gibbering insanity, and the darkness permeating the walls became heavier. Every time it felt like it was going to consume her, she reminded herself of Kaori's warmth, and somehow it shielded her from the corruption.

Just as the poison felt like it was going to penetrate her defences, Phantasia came across a corridor bathed in flickering light, at the end of which sat two large metal doors. Behind them she could feel a nexus of corruption that was emanating through crackling tendrils into the stream of mana. Composing herself, Phantasia made a final dash towards the doors. With inhuman strength, she flung them aside and dived into the darkness beyond, clutching on to her memories of Kaori, now just tiny embers caught in a deluge.

I have to stay in control, she told herself, remembering all she had learned from her people about seeing the truth behind illusions.

She stood before a ring of hooded figures chanting demonic verse. In their circle of power sat various young people locked in trance, candlelight flickering across their pale, withdrawn faces. On the floor, marked in blood, was a complex geometric design.

"A magic circle," she muttered, "How quaint."

There was a muffled sound, then a knife at her throat. One of the shrouded men stood behind her, his stubbled face smiling with arrogance. From the shadows of the hood his eyes glistened in the faint ethereal light from Phantasia's white hair. She felt the knife brush against her skin, but its blade was nothing to a faerie. Only the cold malice that came from its wielder's will had any hope of affecting her.

“How’d you get in here?” he said, “It takes more than a pretty face to open those doors,”

“What are you summoning?” she asked, ignoring his threat. She heard a sob from one of the young boys and dared to open her senses just a little bit more than was safe. He was trapped in a dream-state, locked in an illusion of perpetual fear that corrupted the mana around him as ink would when dropped in water. The circle - and the monotonous mumblings of the shamans – condensed everyone's fear at its centre, an amalgam of negative energy.

The shaman's eyes widened slightly. “Guess you’re one of those witches that’s been snooping around,” he said, pushing the knife against her skin, “Clever girl, but stupid. You shouldn’t have gotten in over your depth.”

As he spoke, Phantasia could feel something forming in the circle. A misty, murky entity made from the corruption. Its form was barely humanoid, like a shadow had been given devilish eyes and a hungry mouth that devoured the weakened mana.

“It’s Fear,” he continued, oblivious to her own knowledge, “They give us their fear, and we give them ecstasy. For a short time they can escape the world they hate. A nice little bargain, as I’m sure they’d tell you.”

Phantasia began to feel something stirring inside of her. The flickering embers of Kaori new-found hope began to glow from its heat. “My friend tried to kill herself because of this. You’ll drive them all to death.”

The man glanced across the youths in the room without a flicker of guilt in his eyes. “They want to die anyway, so who cares? No one will miss them. They have no friends.”

“You’re wrong.”

Phantasia slipped out of his grasp with a twist, taking him by surprise. She stood there and smirked as he slashed his knife across her throat, only feeling a slight shiver as it passed through her ethereal body. He stumbled backwards, pressing himself up against the wall as he began an incantation. Phantasia had to try not to laugh.

He thinks I’m a demon!

The shaman was moving towards her again, but in that pause between his attacks, Phantasia took her chance. Following an instinct, she moved into the circle and reached out towards the people locked in the darkness’s embrace.

Please, let it go!

The shaman stabbed her again, plunging his knife into her back a dozen times. It stung, as the knife had been imbued with his spiritual power, but was still too weak to hurt a determined faerie. Her dress was suffering far more from the attack! Still, if he kept up the assault, her defences would start to weaken, and in such a dark place...

Please...

She thought of Kaori, her eyes smeared with make-up.

Don’t be afraid any more

The circle of power shattered, the candles extinguished, and the victims snapped out of their euphoria. The shamans stopped their chanting in an instant, and Phantasia's attacker dropped his knife as the energies he'd put into the spell snapped back in his face. The shadowy spectre, still half formed, let out a piercing scream and bolted through the ceiling like a wounded animal fleeing its natural predator.

Phantasia followed in a flash. It took effort and energy, but she was able to make herself fully incorporeal, allowing her to follow the creature as it tried to escape. But the more she used her power, the more the atmosphere of the dying land dragged at her, and after only phasing through a few floors she had to stop. Any more, and she wouldn’t have the strength to resist the darkness. The creature, unhindered by such drawbacks, fled to the surface and was soon beyond the range of her senses. Defeated, she shuffled towards the nearest exit and, no sooner had she seen the first signs of the night sky, collapsed against an old wall.

After a short while struggling to recuperate, she heard familiar voices calling after her. She called out, her voice hoarse, and soon her friends came running – or stumbling, in some cases – over. Kaori was the first to reach her, falling to her knees and throwing her arms around her.

“Oh my god, what happened? Phantasia, are-are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,”

“Dude, what the hell went on down there?” asked Joel, “Kaori said you went down on your own. You should’ve got us to help! Those guys are dangerous!”

Phantasia stood slowly, then stared at her friends, her white eyes glinting in the starlight. They fell silent.

“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? Do you realise what you’re getting involved with? Do you know what that thing does? It feeds on your negative energy! Those shamans don’t care if you live or die, they’re just....harvesting you!”

There was moment’s pause, and then Kaori broke down in tears. Joel attempted to comfort her with a drunken arm, scuffed his feet and avoided Phantasia’s eyes.

“We-we didn’t know anything about that,” he said, “Man, it was all just, you know, go there and we’d end up feeling great, you know? Just a bit of escapism...”

Phantasia sighed, and then put her arm around Kaori. “Look, I’m sorry, but whatever made you feel good was an illusion. I want all of you to promise you won’t ever get involved in this sort of thing again. Getting involved with demons and the Underworld will bring you nothing but pain!”

“Why does it matter?” said Kaori through her sobbing, “The world is nothing but darkness anyway! This *is* Hell!”

Phantasia looked down at the scorched, dying earth at her feet. “No, it’s not. Sometimes it might feel like it, but it’s not. Even in the darkest night, there’s always a light,”

“Uh, not that Power-of-Love shit,” mumbled Byron. He took a drag of his smoking herbs and looked up at the sky. “Can’t stand that sort of thing. Reality’s not a fucking fairytale,”

“Well whatever you believe,” said Phantasia, “I know what *I* do. If you want to think the world is all darkness and destruction, all I can do is prove you wrong. And I won’t let any of you fall prey to things like that again. That’s *my* promise,”

Phantasia studied the chimneys and grey blocks of the industrial zone through narrowed eyes. From atop the church spire, she had a clear view of the dead land, a hazed, snarling expanse eating away at the western fringes of the town like a cancer that made even the wastelands beyond the borders look hospitable. The rest of the town wasn’t in much better shape, however. The leylines - streams of mana that crossed through the land - were at the mercy of countless thorns of negativity. Her church, the school, and a few scattered streets and parks, were the only bastions against the looming darkness.

Was this how the world was? Just a few beacons of hope struggling against overwhelming shadow? The Great Cataclysm, the countless wars, demons surging up from the Underworld, and the corruption consuming human hearts – how could the world survive much longer?

Pushing aside such macabre thoughts, Phantasia checked no-one was watching and then leapt down the side of the church, landing in the tall grass where her school bag was waiting for her. It was time for another unpredictable day, and the moment she walked into her form room, Kaori came bounding over, almost tripping over herself in the process.

"You wouldn't believe what happened after we left!" she said, while fiddling with her hair ornaments, "Doyle started hitting on this older girl, not realising she already had a boyfriend! I don't think he's coming in today..."

Joel rubbed his shadowed eyes and yawned. "No way Doyle would've had a problem. The dude could take down a beast,"

"Not when he's drunk," replied Kaori. Joel shrugged and returned his attention to dozing on his desk. He spent most of the morning slumped at his desk, and he failed to contribute in any way to his classes. Phantasia was the only person who seemed to notice or care though. She figured it was a common thing. During their lunch break, however, Joel returned from a long period in the bathroom with damp hair and a renewed light in his eyes.

"I wanna take them down," he said, "Those demon-summoning bastards who're behind all this crap. They're crawling around in those catacombs like parasites, reeling in guys like me who're too wrapped up in their own despair to notice what's really going on,"

Byron looked up from the notes he was scrawling. "Survival of the fittest, man. That's what it's been about in this world for generations. The weak are used by those who want power, and those with power don't have to live in squalor like us."

"You'll get yourself fecking killed," said Lyra, "Those bloody twats ain't gonna be stopped by some ranting teenager for feck's sake. You gotta think of something clever, like... well, something!"

"What's with all this demon crap anyway?" asked Doyle, who had shown up during the break, much to his friends' surprise, still wearing the same – now somewhat tattered and stained – clothes he'd been in the night before.

As much as she wanted to wander around and get to know everyone else, Phantasia watched in silence as the friends debated the topic. When more people began to loiter around the common room, Kaori guided them away to a classroom and shut them inside.

"They'll still be bugging us, you know," said Byron as he perched on a windowsill.

"Nah, they've been watching Shelley for days now," said Joel, before Kaori shot him a glare and he quietened down. After an awkward silence, Kaori was smiling again and turned her attention to Phantasia.

"I know this might be a little abrupt, but there's something I wanted to ask you,"

Did she know? For a second, Phantasia panicked. Maybe Kaori had seen her pass through a wall, or had heard about how she escaped having a knife at her throat... Only two days in and—

"You know, don't you? How the world really ended?"

She relaxed. At least this was something she could tell them about. Mostly. Or maybe she couldn't? What would Queen Thetis say? Would Faye chastise her? Her new friends were all looking at her with eager eyes...

Ah, what does it matter?

"They say there was a great shadow that enveloped the world. It was given many names, but the one my people used was 'Erebus'.

"There was a time when the world was alive, many thousands of years ago. Humans lived in harmony with the forces of nature and there was peace. Then humans turned against nature and tried to conquer it. From the fires of their revolution came sin, and sin gave birth to the demons and the Underworld.

"Over the generations, humanity conquered the planet and bent nature to their will. Then, one day, as they were basking in the glory of their empire, everything fell to pieces. There was too much negativity and it overwhelmed people. There was war and fighting, people were consumed by greed and lust and envy, and everywhere there was death. Demons rose from the Underworld, and humans fell into its allure and embrace. The natural balance of the world was torn asunder and chaos reigned.

“They say that out of that cataclysm rose a great shadow – Erebus – that brought together all the forces of darkness and conquered the world. In doing so, the world was sent plummeting into ruin and decay. Erebus was eventually vanquished, but its legacy continues to this day. The planet is slipping towards its death, and all around you can see the results of what once happened. And even now the fighting still goes on. There was a war not more than fifteen years ago that almost destroyed the world – and another could happen at any time...”

Her human friends looked at each other once she had finished. Byron was the first to comment.

“What about all that crap you were on about last night? You know, power of love and all that?”

“I...” she paused for a moment, “I don’t know.”

A smug grin spread across his face and he looked out at the cloudy skies, “Face it, we’ll all be killed in some final apocalypse sooner or later, we may as well live to the limit now, like I’ve always said,”

Doyle used the opportunity to slide over to Lyra and begin whispering in her ear. Moments later she made an excuse to leave, leaving him sitting dumbfounded. Kaori ignored his antics and came to sit next to Phantasia.

“That’s like Mr Haan taught us,” she said quietly, “He said there were all sorts of myths and legends that he’d heard during his travels as a vagrant. Things about some grand technological empire seeking to rule the world – they said the city of Malkuth down south is one of the last remnants of it. And there was the story about weapons that could wipe out millions of people in an instant, and that they were used to kill almost every human alive at the time.”

“Yeah, stuff about the land turning to ice,” added Joel, “It’s more a desert now though. Stuff about demon wars and demon gods and messiahs and saints and all that too. No one knows exactly what happened, though. Guess even you don’t know for sure.”

“He said there was a shadow demon in most cultures he visited, though,” Kaori continued, “It’s the thing on the mural, isn’t it?”

Phantasia nodded, “Whatever it was, it was imprinted into the planetary subconscious – I mean the dreams of people, their memories and legends...”

“Well, if that is the darkness of humanity, or whatever, we have to do something about those freaks beneath the club!” said Joel, sitting up with a burst of energy, “Our little bit for the restoration of the world, right?”

Kaori patted him on the head and he sat down again, whining softly as she giggled. “I think I’ll just try to be a little bit more positive. Maybe that will help. It’s hard, but I can try, can’t I?”

Phantasia beamed with pride. “I’m happy you’re going to! I know I’m a bit strange, and you might not understand what I say a lot of the time, but I would really like to see you all happy!”

“Yeah, you’re a strange girl all right,” said Joel, “Stranger than we would have imagined. So damned used to everyone being morbid. You’re certainly making things more interesting around here, though, and if it wasn’t for you then...well who knows,”

Phantasia smiled. She had made a difference – Joel and Kaori had been convinced to give up the bad habits they’d acquired and to try and think more positively about life

Hopefully, she thought, it was only the beginning.

The Lost Hawk

The evening was warm and the late summer sky devoid of clouds. Phantasia was half-walking, half-dancing back to the church after an afternoon stroll when she felt the concussive blast of a nearby explosion of negative energy. She was on her guard in an instant, scanning her surroundings for signs of shadowy entities, but the corruption was different to that surrounding the gluttonous autonomy of an emotion-draining spectre. It was alive. Denizens of the Underworld didn't cause corruption, they merely fed off it – it was human emotion that poisoned mana. Whatever was causing the miasma of misery Phantasia was sensing was human in origin.

She followed the beacon of darkness to a derelict street, where houses were decayed wooden skeletons patched together with sheets of dull canvas. The source was obvious: Astrid Garland, daughter of Bishop Wotan, and her ever-present posse of friends: the short, spiteful Vespa, and the tall, extravagant Elizabeth. Vespa, with a cruel smirk on her face, kicked a curled up bundle of white and black clothes. Phantasia steadied herself against the waves of malice coming from the girls, and despair from their victim.

"It won't be long now, *witch*," sneered Astrid, "This time next week, we'll have both of you. You're going to suffer for the evil you bring down on my father's land!"

"I-I..." whimpered a girl's voice from the quivering pile of tattered cloths.

"Shut up, you snivelling little freak," said Vespa, placing another boot firmly into the girl, "Your mummy's a whore. She sleeps with devils. That's where you come from! You and mummy and your demon orgies, you sick bitch!" She kicked the girl again, and she cried out weakly.

"Vespa, there'll be a time for that later," said Astrid, "Once Daddy has the proof he needs, there'll be plenty of exorcism for all of us,"

"That's enough!"

The three girls turned to see Phantasia standing in the middle of the street, her white eyes glaring at them. They looked surprised, but not as much as Phantasia felt herself – how she'd managed to keep herself from confronting the bullies on her very first day, she didn't know.

"How can you do something like this?" she asked, "What you're doing is *wrong*!"

Astrid looked quizzical, hitched her skirt up and walked over to Phantasia. "You're that new girl, aren't you? Didn't anyone tell you about us?" she smiled proudly and waved over to her friends, "We're Inquisitors. We take care of Heretic waste like that thing down there," she motioned towards the girl, who was looking up at Phantasia from behind mangled black hair, "What we're doing is for the good of society! People like her will only bring down the same terrible plague that ruined the world a thousand years ago!"

"You're hurting her!" said Phantasia, "You're not helping anyone, and you're making things worse! How can you be so blind?"

"I knew you would be trouble." said Astrid, her arms crossed as she sized Phantasia up with a single eye, "Most students at that pathetic 'Academy' are. If we weren't around to keep the situation under control, it would be anarchy. You'd better watch your back, Albino,"

Astrid and their friends wouldn't know it, but their feelings toward Phantasia were hurting her far more than any underground nightclub filled with despair. Astrid's growing dislike was like a blade jabbed into Phantasia's arm. That was the way things worked for faeries. That was why they preferred not to get involved with humans.

Astrid turned in a whirlwind of silk and waltzed back to her companions. "Let's not degrade ourselves any further with this filth," she said, and led them away. Vespa lashed out once more at the prone girl, who curled herself up into a sobbing ball as her attackers

walked away laughing. She didn't even notice when Phantasia knelt down beside her, wishing she could heal physical injuries like the Earth faeries could.

After she placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, the girl looked up and Phantasia recognised her. Shelley Edwards was a girl from Ruby House and they had shared some lessons, though Shelley had always remained aloof. She was looking at Phantasia now with wide eyes, as if she couldn't believe someone had come to help her.

"Y-you shouldn't have gotten involved," she said, "They'll come after you. And if, if *she* finds out you helped me, she'll never want to speak to you again!"

"I don't care, you're hurt," said Phantasia. She tried to help Shelley up, but the slight girl preferred to pull herself into a ball and sit rocking, watching the faerie from the small gap between her hair and her knees.

"It doesn't matter," she said, "I'm different, I deserve it. Maybe I *am* a demon,"

Phantasia immediately put her arms around her. She knew that feeling. That thought that you might not even belong in your current world.

"You're not a demon," she said – a demon wouldn't be tainting mana like Shelley was – "I won't let you talk such rubbish! Just because you're different doesn't make you a demon. They're just afraid of you!"

Shelley wasn't convinced however, and continued sobbing. "They're going to kill us," she said through tears, "In a week's time, I'll be dead,"

It was the last school day of the week, and Phantasia's fifth since starting. By now she had met all her teachers, experienced every lesson, and knew everyone in her year by name. Most of them she had first impressions of by now, but the majority she hadn't been able to socialise with, much to her disappointment. Kaori and Joel had adamantly clung to her all week, and she'd had little chance to escape their social circle. It didn't bother her too much, though. After all, they had experienced some bad things, and Phantasia was a ray of hope to them.

That morning there was an assembly for the second year students. The auditorium was the biggest room in the whole Academy, other than the gymnasiums, and filled with far more seats than there were students. The second year barely took up two rows in the middle of the hall, though some of the students had opted to locate themselves elsewhere: specifically, Phantasia could feel Astrid's hateful dagger pricking at her from the back of the room.

The assembly itself felt more like a grandiose lesson than anything, with multiple teachers sitting in a rough line on the stage. Mr Payne began by reading a list of minor announcements, then Nature Studies teacher Ms Chiltern spoke of the forest reclamation project and the Harvest Festival in a month's time. The Haan brothers followed with a story from their travels to further drive home the point about restoring nature, as they recalled how a pocket of humanity had almost died out in the wastelands because they had given up hope of revitalising the planet. Phantasia wondered how much pain and destruction they must have seen during their time as vagrants. Growing up in the fertile paradise of the Innerworld meant she had little idea of the wasteland humans had been forced to endure for hundreds of years. The idea of a descending spiral of negativity breeding more negativity made her shiver, but the determination of the teachers on the stage strengthened her resolve.

Though she was transfixed by the assembly, those around her were obviously feeling restless. Joel was fiddling with his silver pendants and Kaori her earrings, while Doyle sat focusing his attention on whatever girl caught his eye. The teachers were either oblivious to all this, or paid no attention to it. When the assembly was over, everyone left for their lessons, and it was then things began to change for the worse.

Phantasia's first lesson was Science, and that involved being in the same room as the Topaz students, which included Astrid and her entourage. All throughout the morning, Phantasia could feel their cruel stares, and it made it hard to concentrate on the overblown pyrotechnics. At the end of the lesson, after eccentric teacher Ms James had demonstrated the science of kinetics using a shotgun, Astrid gave Phantasia a knowing look.

"Don't let it get to you. They're always like that," said Kaori after the so-called Inquisitors had vanished, "Been after me and Joel for ages. Kinda why we have to be careful what we say. The second they get a shred of evidence of anything occultish, then..." Joel mimicked being hung, but Kaori jabbed him hard with her elbow before he could finish.

In the break, Phantasia noticed the trio of girls watching her from afar, and could feel their continued spite leaving mould-like patches in the mana streams. From an opposite corner, she noticed Shelley sitting quietly, also watching. The girl continued to do so throughout the lesson that followed, and Kaori picked up on it.

"No idea what she's after," she said, as Phantasia winced from a spike of emotion coming from her friend, "You're better staying away from her. She's nothing but trouble."

Joel tried to say something after that, but a sharp look from his girlfriend stopped him. Even Doyle looked uncomfortable with the topic, which Kaori quickly brushed aside when their Music teacher – her mother, Yuki Shimomura – approached their table to check on their work.

Kaori's warning, however, just made Phantasia more curious. Shelley hadn't done anything to suggest she was a bad person – far from it, she had been a victim of malicious bullying! When the lunch break came around, Phantasia found herself with a difficult choice: stay with her established friends, or try talking to Shelley instead.

There was no alternative. She had vowed to get to know each and every one of her fellow students, and this was the perfect opportunity. Besides, she felt a great deal of empathy for the dark haired girl, whose eyes glistened as if they were forever on the verge of tears.

When the opportunity arose, she detached herself from Kaori's circle of friends and wandered the school halls in search of Shelley. She normally appeared and disappeared from the common room on a whim, with few people ever noticing she was there, but once again Phantasia's natural instincts managed to lead her in the right direction. Shelley was outside the Art department in Ruby House, along with a small group of students all wearing the same long, black coats emblazoned with hawk-like tribal designs.

Teenage fashion was yet another thing Phantasia found undecipherable. As a faerie, her natural clothes were as ethereal as her body – all astral manifestations with no material weight, though unlike her body, she could change her clothes on impulse. Since arriving in the Outerworld, she had made an effort to wear human clothes to help blend in, but her haphazard idea of clothing combinations always brought her strange looks. The other day, she had tried to mimic Lyra's battered wardrobe by dragging some of her clothes through the foliage outside the church, only to find herself compared to a tramp. Today she was playing it safe by wearing a t-shirt.

Even though fashion was confusing, there were similarities between faeries and humans though. Just as faeries wore clothes and colours that matched their element, so too did humans wear what matched their personality – or, at least, that was the idea. Phantasia noted that many people wore not what matched who they were, but who they *wanted* to be. In other words it was an unintentional lie, an illogical deception. Faye would be bewildered by such behaviour!

This particular group gave Phantasia unfavourable stares from beneath their over-groomed hair when she approached. Unlike the sneering spite of Astrid, their disapproval was just because Phantasia wasn't like them. It was an attitude she was familiar with from

Fire faeries, who were known for their pride. Shelley, standing apart from the group but still very much a part of it – or wishing she was – perked up when she saw her saviour approach.

“Hey! Just thought I’d come and see how you were,” said Phantasia, remembering to wave to try and put Shelley at ease.

“I-I...” Shelley stammered, glancing over at the looks she was getting from her peers and almost crumbling beneath them, “I’m okay.”

Phantasia turned and smiled at the others, hoping it would diffuse the situation. They stared back at her, and then one boy came forward. Taller than Phantasia, with messy hair that covered his face, he appeared to be the leader of this particular social circle. His name was Vincent, and Phantasia had noticed before that he had some sort of friendship with Byron – but refused to associate with any of Byron’s friends.

“You’re Phantasia,” he said, “Heard about you. Heard you’re a bit of a weirdo,” he looked her up and down from beneath his thick fringe of dark hair, “Sure don’t look like a Hawk to me. What’re you doing here?”

“I’m just being friendly,” she replied honestly.

Vincent continued to stare at her, as if he were analysing her for something. Elone, a girl with crimson hair and intricate designs drawn over half her face, leaned over and whispered something in his ear. Phantasia knew she wasn’t meant to hear it, but they were unaware of her perceptive abilities.

“She’s a freak. Get her away from us.”

Vincent smiled and turned his attention back to Phantasia. “You know what we Hawks are about, don’t you?” he didn’t pause for an answer, “We’re the future of this dump. Those Ravens you hang about with, they’re going nowhere. They’ll be dead before they hit eighteen. We Hawks, though, we’re going somewhere. The future lies in art and music and writing, in the expression of the true emotions we keep locked away inside,” he swept away his fringe and his eyes glowed with pride, “We live on the cutting edge of culture. We’re the ones who will change the world.”

The silence of his peers either meant that they agreed unanimously with him, or were too scared to disagree – Phantasia couldn’t quite tell. Shelley, at the very least, looked even smaller than usual.

“Well...” said Phantasia, searching for some kind of reply, “It’s good that you have an ambition in life!”

He sounds like a Fire faerie, she thought, same self-confidence, same passion, same fiery will...

“Well, it’s probably too much for a girl like you to understand,” he said, “You’re probably better off with the Ravens. They love strange kids like you,”

Then, without another word, Vincent turned his back to her and began talking to Elone and his other friends. Shelley was still at the side looking lost, continually glancing at Phantasia and then looking away before her peers noticed. Phantasia, feeling unwelcome, started to move away.

“The Gallery!” cried Shelley suddenly, “That’s where I’ll be! Tomorrow! At the Gallery!”

In an instant there was a mass of emotional blades levelled at her, and Shelley slipped back into the shadows of the wall, too scared to meet the glares of Vincent and the other Hawks.

Phantasia wanted to lighten the mood, but once again all eyes were on her, and the emotions behind them were less than positive. “I-I guess I’ll see you then,” she said, and skipped off before the corruption made her dizzy.

Kaori was unimpressed. In the space of a day, Phantasia's first human friends had gone from admiring her, to avoiding eye contact at every conceivable opportunity. Gossip had spread fast about Phantasia's attempt at socialising with the Hawks. Nothing Joel said made his girlfriend any happier. To avoid arguments, he would sit there silently under her gaze, unable to divulge anything about why Kaori disliked Shelley so much. When the day was over, Phantasia didn't even get so much as a goodbye from her, and only a rushed, apologetic one from Joel. Their behaviour left her with an uncomfortable twitch in her heart, which wasn't helped when familiar waves of malice came clawing back at her.

"I thought I would give you a warning," said Astrid, framed by her subordinates, "You are new here, so no doubt you are not entirely familiar with how things work. You do, however, know this town is ruled over by the glorious Bishop Wotan Rosencrantz Garland – my father – yes?"

"I thought it was council-led," said Phantasia. Astrid's bared teeth told her that she hadn't meant to answer, though, and she sunk back under the darkening pressure.

"You are impertinent and rude," said Astrid as she pointed an accusing finger, "The Bishop controls the council, and he does not tolerate deviation in his lands. We are well aware there are students – and teachers – dabbling in heresy around here. We will be watching you as we do them, Ms. Celeste. Put a foot wrong, and it will be the last step you take."

Phantasia watched them leave, then clutched her chest. Between them, Kaori and Astrid had drained her of energy. As she walked back to the church, she thought about how easily humans could hurt one another, and, with Kaori's behaviour hurting far more than Astrid's hatred, how much easier it was to hurt their friends than their enemies. For the first time since her arrival, she longed for the tranquillity of the Innerworld.

Chapter 8

Cliques and Outcasts

The blue dolphin swam around the church ruins, taking in every tiny detail with the speed natural to a Water faerie. Stained-glass murals, headless angels and broken alters were all analysed in the space of a few minutes, but Phantasia expected nothing less from Faye.

"Princess, you are privileged to recuperate in such a place," said her lady-in-waiting. Her flat voice was speaking through her totem, an ethereal projection sent from the safety of the Water Queendom. "There exists thousands of year's worth of knowledge in these walls. Currently, I am only capable of reading the upper layers of memory due to the limitations of my astral form,"

"More than I can," said Phantasia with a wry smile. She picked up an old tome, whose battered pages had endured a thousand years of schizophrenic weather conditions. "This is all I've got, and there's barely enough words left to fill a page. I can hardly believe it survived at all,"

Faye's totem swan up to the roof to examine a nest of young birds, chirping in at the dawn light. "It is fortunate that some humans refrained from shutting themselves away from their mistakes, or else we would not have what little remains of the world,"

"They're not as bad as they're made out to be," said Phantasia. It was a controversial subject to raise with a Water faerie. Even Faye, born into a generation of faeries under the reign of human-friendly leaders such as Queen Thetis and Prince Dionysus, would have a hard time rejecting the lessons taught for centuries.

"Your conclusion is based on limited evidence," was Faye's anticipated retort, "Do not forget that the world would not be in the state it is now, were it not for their countless mistakes. From the moment they broke their treaties with our kind and created demons, to

the technological empire that severed them from reality completely, they have constantly abused our world.”

“Maybe if our people hadn't manipulated them so much!” Phantasia shot back. It was turning into *that* argument again. “Every time they rediscovered the world they abandoned, the Seelie came along and erased all memory of it! Humans had no choice but to follow the path they were on, because every time they found another one it was covered up!”

“Princess, you know and understand what happened in the past, and why it happened. I do not understand why you continue to question the logical actions of our people. When the Seelie disbanded, and humans regained their knowledge of our people, it brought a new age of demons to the surface.”

Phantasia picked herself up and began to pace up and down the aisle. “And now look at the world! Now the Seelie Court is formed from faeries *and* humans! Without that co-operation, Erebus would have destroyed the world. Queen Titania believed in humans, I don't see why they're still demonified!”

Though the dolphin was motionless aside from a gentle bobbing, Phantasia knew Faye would be shaking her head with a frown on her face, like a teacher confronted by an ignorant sprite.

“It is only logical to assume that the majority of humans are not as enlightened as those accepted into the Seelie,” said Faye, “You have yourself already witnessed some of the destruction they are capable of, have you not?”

Phantasia averted her gaze to the floor and scuffed her feet. Arguing with a Water faerie without substantial evidence was futile. Of course! She smirked and met Faye's eyes again.

“Then I'll just have to prove it to you, won't I?”

Phantasia rummaged through her wardrobe of clothes, trying on an assortment of mismatching garments until she found one that suited her mood. If she were to spend the day observing the humans as they wandered around town during their weekend break, she thought it best not to draw too much attention to her ethereal appearance. She settled on a thick coat, gloves, scarf and dark cap. By the time she was fully dressed, there was little sign of her elfin features or diamond white hair. No one would give her odd looks now! Proud of her achievement, she strode out into the summer sunlight.

From her nightly observations of the town from atop the church, Phantasia had a good idea of what streets led where, and the best route through to the town centre. Much to her agitation, people were giving her stranger looks than normal. She pulled the cap down to hide her eyes – wearing such dark clothes most certainly meant that her white eyes were more prominent than ever, and that was surely what people were noticing!

She was walking down an empty street, with an old abandoned block of flats marking the border of the ruined territory to the west, when she heard a deep rumble coming from behind. Moments later, a gleaming metallic object came hurtling around a corner. It shot past her, its wheels screeching across the dirt, and then spun into an effortless halt a few meters away. As the dust settled, a face appeared from the side of the device, the boy's shimmering long hair looking as well-maintained as the metal monster he was locked inside.

“Somehow I figured it was the new girl,” said the boy, “As I'm sure you know by now, I'm Chris Shaw, and you look like you're headed into town. Fancy a ride?”

Chris was one of the Topaz Second students whom, until now, had avoided her. According to Lysander and Angelo's guidebook, Phantasia recalled him being described as 'Captain Ego' and 'quite possibly the most underrated, unintentional comic genius of the

31st Century'. He looked at her over the top of his dark glasses and Phantasia could feel his attention groping towards her like a dozen hungry tentacles. As he waited for a reply, his fingers caressed the shiny red metal.

Just another boy wanting my affection. Maybe I should give him a chance, though? Maybe he's not as bad as he seems? I can't go around judging people by first impressions after all, and I've got to prove Faye wrong!

"That'd be great!" she said. Chris nodded in contentment.

"Hop in the other side," he said, thumbing back to the seat next to him, "This'll be the best ride you'll ever have,"

Phantasia walked around the car to be greeted by the sight of the door rising up of its own accord. This was human technology, a soulless machine. The result of trying to conquer nature rather than embrace it. The very antithesis of everything faeries stood for. Still, it was a learning experience, so she hopped into the darkened, plush exterior, paying little attention to the smug look on Chris's face.

"So, where will I be driving you?" he said as he checked his pristine hair in a mirror, "Where does a lovely lady like yourself spend her leisure time?"

"Oh, anywhere's nice!" she replied.

"Well, anywhere it is," he said, checking his reflection once again, "Guess we might as well take a scenic route! Hold on, Miss, you've never been in a baby like this before!"

The car sped forward and twisted around the streets like some sort of demonic monster Phantasia had only heard about in stories. She struggled to maintain her balance and was forced to grip the edges of her seat in desperation as Chris immersed himself in the thrill of high-speed driving.

"I was given this lovely by my parents," he said, as he forced the car around a sharp bend, "It's top-of-the-range, based on the most advanced specifications left behind from the glory days of the Old World. She's the most beautiful beast in the whole of Torsten. Hell, she's pretty much the *only* beast in the whole of Torsten! Everyone knows her. She's a legend, and I'm the only one who has tamed her!"

Then, moments after skidding round another corner, the car came to a sudden halt and if it wasn't for her inhuman abilities, Phantasia thought she would have catapulted through the front of the vehicle. Chris seemed oblivious to this, ripped his shades off and cursed under his breath. Two oddly dressed figures were standing in the middle of the road, mocking him with their mere presence. Phantasia recognised them and waved while Chris grumbled to himself. He then resigned himself to his fate and lent out the window to greet the boys with a sarcastic smile.

"Avast, Capt'n, I think we've reeled in a treasure trove today!" said Lysander. His hair was hidden beneath a flamboyant bandanna, his shirt was several sizes too big, and he waved around a sword cut from dead branches.

"Aye, we be finding ourselves a rare bounty here, sailor!" replied Angelo. He was wearing an odd hat, waved a hook around in one hand, and had a fake parrot dangling from his shoulder. "Aye, this be a fine ship worthy of our flag, it is. Hand over yer ship and treasure, landlubbers, and we'll spare yer lives!"

"Can't you idiots tell I'm on a *date*?" said Chris, his fingers drumming on the dashboard with increasing tempo as the two boys neared his precious car. Angelo sidled over to Phantasia's window and popped his head in, his hat perched precariously on his head. She tried her best not to laugh, while Chris grimaced.

"Would ye be courting Mister Shaw there, Miss Celeste?" he asked, his unpatched eye widening in comical exaggeration.

"Oh, Chris was just taking me into town,"

"For a ride," Chris added, "It's a grown-up thing, *boys*,"

Lysander pulled himself through the opposite window, so that Chris was forced to cramp back into his seat. "Perhaps Miss Celeste would be wanting ta know that the town she seeks is just down yonder street?"

"Arr, just down there," added Angelo, pointing to a road populated with oblivious people, "Can't miss it. You wouldn't want to be staying in this here vessel, believe you me."

Chris pushed Lysander back outside. "Now listen he-"

"Oh, that's great!" said Phantasia. Angelo's face broke into a broad grin and he reached forward to jab a button on the dashboard while Chris was still preoccupied by his friend. As Phantasia's door began to rise, Angelo slipped away and beckoned her out.

"N-now you don't have to leave right now!" said Chris, his hands twitching as if they couldn't tell if they wanted to pull her back in, or grab the steering wheel and make a hasty retreat. Instead, he reached towards the controls and lowered the door back down.

"Thank you for the trip," said Phantasia. Chris grunted dismissive thanks himself, glared at his two arch-enemies, and sent the car speeding forwards down the road and around another corner.

"Now there, Miss Celeste," said Lysander as Angelo paced around her, studying her clothes with his unpatched eye, "It appears to me that you be dressed for the harshest of winter snows, and yet show nary a sign of overheating. You truly be a remarkable maiden,"

Dressed for winter?

Realising her mistake, she tried to hide behind a nervous giggle and pulled her hat off. "I guess I was hoping no one would recognise me!"

"Hey, I've know ya less than a week and I could tell it was you right away," said Lysander, dropping his act, "Lysander's Life Lesson Number One: Always be yourself!"

"I thought I might stand out..."

Lysander struggled to contain his amusement. "You're dressed for winter! That'll make you stand out a helluva lot more than your normal look. And I'm including the albino stuff and pointy ears in that equation," he said with a wink.

"If you wanna blend in, go hang around Poe Street," he added, "That's Raven territory. You know, Kaori and Joel and those lot. Can't move for the hair dye round there!"

He pointed out the location of Poe Street on the crumpled map Phantasia kept in her back pocket, while Angelo pretended to have a dramatic sword fight with a nearby lamp-post. Several passers-by gave him strange looks and one group in long robes even uttered scathing remarks under their breath, but Lysander just shrugged them off.

"Lysander's Life Lesson Number Two," he said, "Never take yourself seriously. That's where grown-ups go wrong, don't ya think?"

Phantasia left the two boys to their games, their behaviour still reminding her of the young faeries from the Wind Queendom. Faye had always criticized her for being irresponsible, but faeries like Princess Titania were more carefree than she could ever be! Phantasia, for all her irrational behaviour, still thought things through. Like her famous namesake, Princess Titania was the sort to jump into a situation and let the winds carry her. It was almost enviable.

Deep in thought, Phantasia almost missed a familiar face across the other side of the street, but her senses recognised his aura just as he disappeared into a run-down shop. It was no coincidence that John Smith, the boy who loved technology, had entered a shop called 'Smith's Electronics', with windows filled with gadgets. Even without the obvious signs, Phantasia's ethereal senses could tell he belonged there. Intrigued by the displays of picture-boxes and flashing lights, she decided further investigation was worth a short detour.

A ringing bell signalled her entrance into an empty shop, thought she knew there were people there before John strode in through a curtain of clattering beads. His cheery,

customer-greeting smile turned into a surprised gape for a brief second, before he immediately regained his composure.

“Hullo, Ms Celeste, you’re the last person I expected to pop in. Are you after anything?”

Phantasia took a look around at the odd devices that cluttered up every corner of the dusty shop. “Oh, not really, I was just curious about all this stuff, that’s all,” she said. Many of the devices looked retro-engineered from the dug-up remains of the Old World’s technology, while some – contained in special cases and not for sale – appeared to be genuine ancient relics.

“You didn’t have this sort of thing where you came from, did you?” said John, “It not really surprising, though. After the Cataclysm, human society was decimated and a lot of technology was lost in time. Even now a lot of people are afraid of it. They think it will destroy the world again,”

“Hmm, that’s funny,” said Phantasia, poking the buttons on one of the picture-boxes, “Everyone blames someone or something else for things that happened in the past,”

John laughed. “That’s because nobody knows how it really happened. If there are historical records, we haven’t found any. There’s no such thing as global communication any more, we just know what we find, and what the Vagrants tell us. Finding out what really happened to the world, I guess you could say that’s our family business. Finding old artefacts, getting them working again, and hoping we can piece together the puzzle bit by bit, that’s what we do,”

“You’re right,” said Phantasia, smiling to herself as she recalled all the apparent-truths about the Cataclysm that the Water faeries prided themselves on, “I don’t think anyone truly knows what happened, just fragments. Maybe if all the pieces were put together... Oh well, no point thinking about it now – what’s this thing do?”

“That’s a television,” said John, moving from behind the counter and collecting a palm-sized card off a shelf, “There are so many different types. Technology evolved quickly back then.”

Phantasia stood back and watched as he inserted the card into the television and pressed a few buttons. After a few moments, a diorama of scenes came to life on the flat surface.

“This was what people used for entertainment,” he explained, “This is a genuine Twenty-Tens film, encoded onto memory card, the most reliable method of data storage humanity developed. It all went downhill after that.”

For a moment, Phantasia wondered if what she was watching was a record of memory from the Old World. Faeries had ways of reanimating memories for others to watch - though not for entertainment purposes - and it wasn't unknown for humans to have used their sciences to create vastly inferior alternatives. It was only when she saw a lone human fighting his way through an army of spear-wielding demons with only a magical sword that she realised it was all an act. After all, the human appeared to be slowing down time, and that just wasn't possible!

John gave her a demonstration of several other devices, again many of which appeared to be poor alternatives to natural faerie abilities. Complex long-distance communication that required giant machines in the sky, when all it should take was a little bit of concentration and some astral projection? That the human world was once dominated and controlled by such odd mechanical devices amused her.

After her enlightening education on archaic human technology, Phantasia left the shop and continued on her original quest. After a few more uneventful streets peppered with shops selling everything from laboratory-grown food to renovated furnishings recovered from abandoned villages, she found herself on a cobbled road leading down a hill. The people loitering around were a world apart from those she had been passing in

the streets before. Their elegant manner of dress, tribal make-up and sexual extroversion recalled the World's End, and Phantasia wasn't surprised to recognise a few faces from the nightclub, and even less surprised to see the desolate industrial district in the distance. Her intuition took her down the hill a short way, where she found Joel and Kaori standing outside a purple-painted shop, dressed in even more outlandish clothing than usual. At first she was afraid there might be some tension, or that Kaori might still be ignoring her, but when Kaori noticed her she glided over.

"Hey! We were wondering what you'd do with your weekend. We were afraid you might end up staying at home!"

Phantasia relaxed, sensing no hostility from her friend's aura. "Oh, well, you know, I don't know what to do around here really! I've just been exploring a bit. It's always fun to look around new places,"

Joel adjusted his top hat and leaned forward with a whisper. "Dude, you haven't run into those bitches, have you? You know, Astrid and that lot?"

Kaori thumped Joel in the arm. "The Godhand Inquisitors are always on patrol. You must have noticed them? Long robes." she waved her hands around in a feeble demonstration, "Too scared to come down here though."

"There's way too many of us," said Joel standing tall and flexing his skeletal arms, "They came down here and they'd get a beating for sure."

Kaori looked at him with doubtful eyes as he attempted fighting gestures with his fists. "I think the second one of them gets beaten up by a Raven, we're all goners. They'd sweep down here and have every one of us executed for witchcraft if they could get away with it." Kaori brushed Phantasia's arm, and she felt her warmth again. "Please, be careful. You're just the sort of girl they'd go after,"

"Well," Phantasia sighed, "I'll do my best, but if someone's getting hurt, I'm not just going to ignore it!"

To diffuse the tense atmosphere that had come from such a brief discussion, Joel and Kaori gave Phantasia a tour around their local haunts. Each shop was straining against society's laws, wanting to burst free and be alternative, yet confined to walking a line lest it was shut down by the ever-threatening Bishop Wotan. From hand-made trinkets to elaborate tattoos to expensive dresses imported from the big city, the street had everything a would-be Raven needed to blend in to the tribe. If Phantasia had any of what Kaori called 'money', she might have acquired some of the objects for further study. Then Kaori emerged from a shop and handed her a gift wrapped in brown paper.

"I hope it's not too much," she said, biting her lip as Phantasia removed the wrapping, "I like collecting them. I thought you might too."

It was a figurine of a beautiful human woman with elaborate wings. Phantasia was immediately reminded of her own kind, and wondered if Kaori had figured her out already. Was it a trick? A subtle clue? A coincidence? Kaori must have noticed the expression on her face, because her aura had retreated somewhat and she was looking down at the floor, hands clasped in front of her as if she had done something terribly wrong.

"I-I'm sorry. If you don't want it, I can get you something different?"

"No! No, it's lovely!" cried Phantasia. She almost dropped the figurine as she rushed forward to hug Kaori in the hope it would ease her unnecessary anguish. Though Kaori returned the embrace, her warmth had dimmed.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, faking a smile, "It's-it's called a fairy. They're like, nature spirits. They look after the planet and..." she paused, eyes fixated on the cobbled street, "I-I'm being silly. I'm sorry."

Joel put a comforting arm around her. "C'mon, Kao, don't worry about it. It's cool to believe in things like that,"

Once again, Kaori was trying to hold back tears and Joel smothered her, as if hiding her from a watching world. He gave Phantasia a reassuring smile as he stroked Kaori's back.

"I should probably get going," she said, acknowledging how her friends' auras were closing like protective shells, "I mean, I did promise I was going to meet Shelley, after all!"

Joel winced and the couple's aura fluctuated like water disturbed by a thrown rock. "Guess you're off to the gallery then," he said through pursed lips.

Phantasia nodded and waited for a response from Kaori, but she had cut herself off from Phantasia entirely. It was as if a wall had thrust itself up between them once again. How could the mere mention of Shelley's name provoke such a reaction? And why would it? Phantasia wanted answers, but Joel was already leading Kaori away. Maybe it was just another one of those strange human quirks she didn't understand yet. Annoyed at both her ignorance, and her own stupidity at mentioning Shelley's name, Phantasia left Poe Street and its colourful collection of Ravens and began the long trek to the other side of town, where the Hawk's held their own territory.

The gallery was the half-renovated wreckage of a large building, whose pillared architecture appeared to date back further than anything else she'd seen so far, while an electronic banner sat dead above the entrance as a reminder of how humans tainted even their most stunning constructions with unnecessary flair. Groups of young people were clustered outside, many on the grey steps that rose towards the building's entrance. Most paid her little attention as she walked past, but one came bounding down the steps towards her. It was Shelley, still dressed in the same uniformed clothing that everyone else around the gallery was wearing.

Shelley flung her arms around her, before pulling away and trying not to meet Phantasia's eyes. "I didn't think you'd come," she said "I-I don't know how the others will take it. But you should come over anyway!" She bounded back up the steps, pausing only to beckon Phantasia upwards.

Shelley's friends – the same ones from the school, with a few others Phantasia didn't recognise – were not thrilled to see the white-haired girl. Shelley attempted to apologise and explain, but Vincent cut off her stumbling sentences before they ever found their ground.

"You know having someone like *her* around us is seriously denting our kudos? Haven't you seen the way Sir Leonardo is looking at us? At *her*? She's cramping our style."

Phantasia followed the group's gaze towards a young man, probably no older than nineteen or twenty, who was standing at the top of the steps surveying the crowds. Unlike the other boys, his black coat was lined with golden thread, and the Hawks' emblem was tattooed across his bare chest.

"Sir Leonardo is so cool," said Elone with a longing sigh. Vincent frowned and Phantasia felt a surge of negative energy radiating from him, which he attempted to hide by changing the subject.

"Shelley, please, could you sort this girl out?" he said.

"I—" she thought for a second, "No! I won't! Phantasia's amazing! She's..." she paused and leaned in towards her so-called friends, "She's better than that old pigeon up there."

"Y-you don't mean?" hissed Elone, glancing up at the girl locking arms with Sir Leonardo, whom she appeared to model her own appearance on, "No way do you think we can replace her with this freak? Sir Leo would never accept her!"

Vincent smirked and Phantasia felt a sudden openness from him, as if he had only just recognised she really existed. "Now you mention it, I kinda like your way of thinking, Shelley. We introduce a new idol, and then we'd be the ones with power! That Leonardo's just there because he knows the leader singer of '*Our Dying Wish*'!"

"I thought they were your favourite band, Vincent?" said Elone.

"Yes, well they are, but that's not the point,"

Elone scowled at him, and he returned the expression.

"Please!" said Shelley, breaking up an argument before it started, "I've been thinking about this all night! I think Phantasia is cool enough to be a new idol! I don't care for the politics!"

Phantasia was as confused as ever. These Hawks were certainly just as volatile and unpredictable as the Fire faeries they reminded her of, but they made her uncomfortable. She wasn't even allowed a say in their plans? Plans that, it would seem, were more about doing what was best for themselves! It was as she was observing the flow of mana around the area, and trying to shield herself from Vincent's envious vibes directed at Sir Leonardo, that she felt something familiar. She scanned the area again, opening her senses up and ignoring the numbing pain from the emotional corruption, and found an all-too-familiar sight: tendrils of tainted mana drifting towards a nearby shadow. Without a word of explanation to Shelley and the others, who were now in a heated – albeit whispered – debate, she slipped off to follow the flow.

The shadow-thing was perched on the roof of a nearby building, overlooking the gallery. It wasn't the same one she had met before, though – it was less vaporous, more defined and monstrous and a red fire burned inside it. When it sensed Phantasia's approach, it fled.

She pursued it down an alleyway, following the trail of the monster in her mind's eye, passing only a handful of people as the streets blurred by. It dived into a wall, and – after checking there was no one around to see her – Phantasia followed. Though pitch black on the other side, Phantasia was a faerie and had no problems following the wraith as it fled through more walls. Finally it came to a stop, in a dusty old ruin on the outskirts of the town. Quite how far the chase had taken them, Phantasia didn't know. She could barely see the outside world through the clouded windows and fallen masonry. The shadow, meanwhile, was watching her.

Phantasia wanted to destroy it. It was manifest darkness, a creature that would feed until there was nothing left. There was no heart, no light within; it was just a stain on the leylines of mana. She had to destroy it before anyone was hurt, or worse, killed. Yet Phantasia just stood there, looking into its infinite void.

She didn't know *how* to destroy it. She didn't know how to fight. No one had ever taught her. Faye would have the knowledge to find a weak point; a Wind faerie could control the flow of life to harness the world around her; an Earth faerie could alter the physical layout of her surroundings; and a Fire faerie could just blast the wraith with magical energy until it shattered.

But what could Phantasia do? She couldn't read the waters, control the winds, shape the earth or manipulate the fire. All she could do was stand there and watch as the creature began to move towards her, hungering for her energy and the sudden envy she had for her faerie kindred.

Under its shadow, Phantasia believed she was powerless to help anyone.

Chapter 9

The Inquisition

She stood on the plains of the Wind Queendom, a cool breeze rustling through her hair. Before her stood the forest heart of the Queendom, a sprawling canopy of green that rolled up the concave surface of the Innerworld. In the hazy distance she could pick out the shape of the Wind Palace, a giant oak structure that towered above its brethren.

“You just need more time,” said the Wind faerie, his long grassy hair rustling in the breeze. Phantasia tried her best to return his smile.

It had been two months since Dionysus had left her. Two months spent travelling across the Innerworld, searching for herself. She'd spent the majority of it in the presence of the jovial Wind faeries, learning about their way of life and elemental abilities.

I don't need more time. I can't do it. It doesn't matter how much you try to teach me, I'll never be able to do it.

There was a sudden gust of wind and the long grass parted, creating a path for a faerie whose elfin beauty was only matched by Queen Áine. Princess Titania was the eldest princess of the Wind Queendom, namesake of Queen Titania, and idol to countless sprites, sylphs and dryads. She ran a hand through her emerald hair – which was feathery short on one side, and long like grass on the other – and looked at Phantasia with her sparkling jade eyes.

“How ya getting on, Tasia?”

Phantasia tried to avoid those eyes. It wasn't like her to be intimidated by anyone, but Titania had a certain charisma, a something that made you want her to like her. Phantasia hadn't achieved anything, and she was ashamed.

I wish I could be as talented as you.

It felt like she was being dissected, piece by piece, molecule by molecule. Phantasia struggled to resist the darkness that enveloped her, but nothing she could think of could push back those thoughts of inferiority. It was as if the demon itself was taking on the visage of the Princess Titania, right down to her irregular hair, almond skin and slender, perfect figure. She stood before Phantasia as an example of what a faerie princess should be: a figure to be admired, a perfect embodiment of her element chosen by the Queen to represent her people. Phantasia, on the other hand, didn't even know where she came from. How could she ever be anything if she didn't even know who she even was?

Then it was all over.

Phantasia fell backwards as the strings of negativity that bound her to the shadow-demon were severed in an instant. As the world began focus, she noticed the creature's size diminishing, as if were sinking back into a corner to hide. It cowered as it was set upon by another power that slashed at it like a dozen knives; an energy that came from strong faith and conviction. Phantasia concentrated on its source, and noticed a group of humans had appeared at the far end of the collapsed building, hidden behind the mass of withered debris, stone and rotting wood that had fallen down from the floors above. She could hear a low, rhythmic chanting coming from their direction, with the words striking in time with the blows attacking the demon. Unable to withstand the onslaught of powerful emotions, the shadow withered into the ground and fled.

On the other side of the rubble, the humans were talking amongst themselves. Phantasia wanted to see who they were, and to ask them about what they had just done, but just as she was about to climb over to the other side she was stopped by a single word:

Bishop.

“I'm sure he will be most pleased,” said a light male voice, “Whatever devilish spirit was hiding in this place certainly won't be coming back,”

“Are you really so sure?” asked a female, “I still don't feel easy. I feel like something else is here. Something altogether different to the usual poltergeists and devil-spawn we deal with,”

Phantasia started to glide back towards the wall as the voices began to move. There was no chance those humans would be fast enough to catch her, but she could sense something about the woman. She could see things better than an average human could.

“He didn’t say ‘bout another force,” said a third, gruff voice, “You sure you not seeing things?”

“What would a blind oaf like you know?” snapped the woman, “There are plenty of things out there that aren’t ghosts, you realise. Mischievous things. Malicious things. Things that denied the light of God.”

The woman’s psychic gaze was like a sweeping light, scanning ever closer to Phantasia’s position. It wouldn’t be long before it found her, but her own curiosity kept her from escaping. Who were these people, and how had they managed to expel the demon? If only she could ask them!

“Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with us,” said the first man, “We were sent here to deal with the devil-spirit. Our orders don’t include involving ourselves in the politics of unenlightened beings. Now let’s be going, if we dally any longer our reputation will be soiled,”

The woman’s gaze drifted away and Phantasia relaxed. The humans were leaving. Then it hit her.

Cool malice. For a brief moment, she was looking eye-to-eye with the mysterious woman, but then the psychic spotlight relented and the humans were gone.

Phantasia found the gallery in much the same way she had left it. The Hawks were still congregating on the steps under the watchful eyes of their superior, who recognised Phantasia's return with a frown. He didn't want her there. She could feel his will creating a barrier, like a glistening wall that expanded around his immediate position (but, Phantasia was keen to notice, not bothering to protect his followers). His followers shared his unwelcoming aura, creating a maze of invisible and ineffective psychic shells. Had they any real bonds between them, they could have combined that strength and kept themselves safe from preying entities, or even prevented Phantasia from approaching them without feeling nauseous. But without that combined power, they were defenceless, just like the Ravens dancing in the underground nightclub with no real concern for anyone but themselves.

Shelley was looking distressed, separated from her so-called friends with her face buried behind her arms and legs as she sat curled up, rocking back and forth. Phantasia skipped up the steps towards her, which earned her a few whispered insults from some of the serious youths.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, kneeling down in front of her, “I remembered I had to go do something. I didn’t mean to leave you like that,”

Shelley looked up from behind her dark hair. The make-up around her eyes was smudged, just like Kaori’s when she was upset. Shelley sniffled, her lips trembling as she struggled not to make eye contact.

“I-I didn’t think you’d come back. Everyone else leaves me alone; I thought you’d do it too...”

The darkness of her despair was powerful, but Phantasia ignored it. “I’m not going to do that, silly! Why would I do that?” she noticed some of Shelley’s ‘friends’ looking at her oddly, which only made her smile broader, “You’ve gotta remember that I’m not like everyone else, after all!”

Shelley hid behind her knees, then glanced over at her peers. They were ignoring her, like she was some kind of disease they wanted to go away. For a moment she

covered under their disdain, but then she broke free of their shackles, dropped her guard and flung her arms around Phantasia. Phantasia was reminded once again of Kaori, and wondered why the two girls were so antagonistic if they were so alike.

Humans really were complicated, she thought.

Phantasia returned to the gallery later that night, once the majority of antagonising teenagers had returned to their homes. A few were loitering around inside the building, but it wouldn't be difficult for her to avoid them, she hoped. If she had been an Earth faerie she could have sensed the physical layout of the world around her and created a complete mental blueprint of the gallery, which would have made her task even easier. There was no point regretting what she couldn't do, though. Focusing on what she could was the priority.

Inside, the gallery was encased in darkness. Though the large entrance allowed some light in, it only intensified the shadows cast by the odd sculptures that sat in the middle of the spacious interior. The ill-treated artworks were faded from centuries of age, while sculptures had been adapted into makeshift tables and chairs. One painting, an image of a beautiful, radiant figure with outstretched avian wings, had a large gash across its face, as if someone had attacked it with intent. The rip itself harboured more emotion than what was left in the painting itself, but Phantasia wasn't capable of deciphering much further.

Elsewhere, the Hawks had begun assimilating the gallery to suit their own tastes. Contemporary pieces sat in stark contrast to those from the pre-ruined world: whereas the art of the Old World appeared to focus on the surreal and conceptual, the art beloved by the Hawks was anchored firmly in reality. Photographs of varying sizes sat in plain frames, depicting stylish young people wearing identikit clothes and posing in identikit positions. A corner was adorned with musical instruments of elaborate design, alongside photographs of groups posing with them like proud warriors. Poems and lyrics covered another wall, and in some places the Hawks' works even covered the ancient pieces, as if they were just plaques to support the works of the current generation.

Phantasia could feel plenty of negative emotions around her, but it was coming from the Hawks' self-centred pride. There was no sign of any jealousy-devouring entity; nothing that reminded her of the suppressive forces at work in the nightclub. Maybe the demon had just been passing, or had somehow latched on to one of the Hawks just as the fear-wraith had latched on to Kaori.

Phantasia descended into the lower levels of the building, taking care not to get spotted by any Hawks who still wandered the gritty corridors, and phased through walls at opportune moments. At one point she found herself in a pitch-black room filled with the scraps of old paintings, their frames torn away leaving the canvases scattered around to gather dust. She found other rooms that housed the remains of sculptures, their bodies picked apart for vital commodities like wood and metal, leaving stone and wire exposed like skeletons.

Phantasia's search proved fruitless and she was about to give up when she found herself in a chamber below the depths of the basement. A cursory examination suggested it wasn't even connected to the rest of the gallery, but was instead part of some man-made subterranean catacombs. What caught her attention, though, was what she found on the uneven stone ground underneath her feet. Etched in red dye, with the markings of the fire element, were the remains of a magick circle. Unlike the one beneath the World's End, this circle was devoid of power.

At the very least, it appeared that the immediate danger was gone. The question now was whether it was by design or defeat. Had the demon been fully exorcised, or had

its creators done something with its amassed power? If only she'd studied such things harder when she'd had the chance, she might have been able to tell! Looking at the passageway to the underground, she wondered if she could follow it for more clues, but then the memory of her helplessness before that lone demon returned.

It's too dangerous. Until I can fight those things, I can't risk it, she thought. At least she had a vague idea of what was going on, though. The idea of a group of shaman creating and controlling wraiths to harvest dark energy – from the town's teenagers none-the-less – made her shiver. How could anyone do such a thing?! But then again, even faeries were not immune to the allure of power, as she had seen in Cecaelia and Ophion. Corrupted mana, she'd been taught, was just so much easier to manipulate and control, and that was why demons relished it.

Phantasia left the chamber in a hurry, unsettled not by any negative energy, but by the thoughts of what that power did to people and where such madness would lead.

Phantasia found Shelley the next day through instinct. The small girl was sitting on a children's swing on the southern outskirts of the town, where the land was parched and the few buildings nearby were crumbling ruins. Shelley sat alone, surrounded by twisted metal frames and torn mesh fences, as she looked down at the stained black tarmac below her dangling feet.

"It's quiet out here," said Phantasia, forgetting for a moment that Shelley had no idea she was there. She winced as the human girl froze up for a second, before relaxing when she noticed who had come to visit her.

"I like the quiet," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Phantasia sat down on the swing next to her and looked out across the dusty horizon. She could sense things out there in the wastelands that, she hoped, Shelley was unaware of. Demons prowled the ruined world, while life corrupted by dark energies sought unwary travellers to prey upon. She knew that there were people – humans and faeries – who were out there doing their best to keep those forces at bay, but now she also knew there were such forces working inside the town itself, corrupting it from within.

"I wanted to..." Phantasia paused, knowing what she was about to say might arouse bad memories, "I wanted to ask you about this Inquisition thing. Who they are, what they want, you know? Stuff like that..."

Shelley shivered slightly and bit her lip, but managed to mumble a reluctant answer.

"Godhand. They're with Godhand. You know them, right?"

"Nope, just heard..." she paused for a split second, recalling that she had heard the name from Kaori, "...someone mention them before,"

Shelley stared at Phantasia with wide eyes. "You really must be from somewhere far away," she said, and for the first time Phantasia caught the hint of a smile from her tiny mouth, "Godhand's some religious cult and their leader, Bishop Wotan, controls the town. The Inquisitors are..." she jumped down from the swing and walked forward a little, keeping her back turned to Phantasia – not that it mattered, as Phantasia could tell she was starting to tear up, "They hunt down heretics. People connected to the occult. That's what they say, but really, it's people they don't like. Like me, and my mum... They said I'm evil, that I'm a demon..."

Phantasia walked over and placed a hand on Shelley's shoulder, ignoring the ripples of negative energies that were beginning to emanate from her. "You're not a demon..." was all she could say.

Shelley began to walk away, shunning Phantasia's empathy. "Then why does that thing keep coming in my dreams? That shadow thing? It keeps reaching out to me..."

The demon, thought Phantasia, *it had a hold on her after all!*

“Maybe,” she said, thinking quickly, “Maybe that wasn’t your fault. What if some other people did it, and they tried to set you up? It could have been someone you know, even!”

“Elone?” she sneered, “Or maybe Kaori? Vincent’s always bullying me. No one cares, they’re all the same. Maybe it’s because I *am* a demon, and they all see it...”

Shelley kicked some stones across the dirt and shuffled away, her hands in her pockets. “I don’t need friends,” she said as she wandered off, “You’re better off without me. Then *she* might talk to you again...” The darkness that was surrounding her had intensified tenfold as her thoughts lingered on her peers and their resentments – things Phantasia didn’t really understand. As much as she wanted to help, she really didn’t know how, and all she could do was watch Shelley scramble over the fence and away into her own self-imposed nightmares.

From the church spire, Phantasia could see the park Shelley had been in sitting on the edge of the town, watching over the ruins before it. She had spent the remainder of the day reflecting on the things she had experienced over the weekend, and speaking with Queen Thetis about them.

“I never fully understood humans,” admitted the Queen, “They can be so abstract, so illogical. That is their strength, though. Unlike us faeries, who are limited to our elements, humans can think in a whole spectrum of ways.”

Phantasia stood atop the spire and surveyed the landscape – the school she would soon return to; the industrial complex where the World’s End sat buried beneath the lifeless dirt; the gallery, nestled behind the shops and streets that had been so busy during the day; and then all the other places she had never explored. One in particular stood out to her now – a luxurious mansion to the far north of town, sitting atop a grassy hill. From its midst rose the beginnings of a tower, its scaffolding reaching high above everything else. Once complete, it would dominate the town’s skyline.

“Humans do not just bring darkness,” the Queen had told her, when Phantasia asked how the humans managed to attack the demon, “Darkness is, after all, just the energies around us that have been weakened by negative emotions. To undo that damage takes an equally strong positive force. Sadly, that sort of power is not nearly as common. Humans are more inclined towards negativity because it is easier that way.”

Phantasia had seen that positive power used by Godhand, a cause that reaped negative consequences. Similarly, she had felt darkness flow forth from her new friends, who were anything but evil! It was a complicated situation that even the cleverest faerie of all couldn’t explain.

“Humans are humans,” Queen Thetis had said with a chuckle, a sign of the effect they had had on a naturally stoic water elemental, “I believe you can find a path in their world. If you want to fight, them I believe you can fight. You are a faerie, and all faeries have an element, something that empowers them. Maybe for you, that element is something we cannot touch...”

As she stood overlooking the world, Phantasia thought of her friends and of the dangers they faced, and the dangers they would face in the future. She thought of Kaori and Shelley and their tears of sadness, and then their tears of joy. Somewhere deep inside, she could feel it pulsating: the power she sought, the power that would help her protect her friends...

Nest of the Leansídhe

A week previously, she had been the new girl, attracting all kinds of attention as she was guided through the school by Mr Payne, but this time when Phantasia entered Sapphire Second's tutor room on Monday morning, she was one of the class. John gave her a cursory nod from behind his laptop; Lysander and Angelo had knowing looks in their mischievous eyes; and Doyle was again oblivious she could see him ogling her from behind. One thing was different about today, though, a void in the threads of friendship that troubled Phantasia as much as any demonic presence could, if not more.

Kaori and Joel had always been the first to greet her in the mornings, Kaori gliding over in one of her elegant dresses to tell Phantasia the latest gossip, while Joel followed like a faithful pet, but now Kaori sat facing out the window, adjusting bows on her corset, while her flame-haired boyfriend hovered nearby, glancing over occasionally. It took him several minutes to pluck up the courage to come and talk to her, an act that Kaori ignored.

"Dude, you really did hang out with those freaks at the gallery," he said, his eyes glazed over as he stared at a blank spot on the wall, "I dunno how you did it. Those guys hate anyone who don't conform,"

Joel toyed with the metal pentagram hanging around his neck as Phantasia explained her experience with the Hawks. When she mentioned Shelley, and the appearance of the envy-demon, Joel's fist tightened on his pendant and he cursed under his breath.

"I'm gonna kill 'em," he hissed through grit teeth, before shuffling back over to Kaori and resuming his silent hovering, this time interlaced with the occasional sound of fist slamming on worktop.

The rest of the class were content to leave him to his devices, though Phantasia wished she could understand what was going on underneath all the secrets. Maybe they knew something she didn't? She had another look at the guidebook Lysander and Angelo had given her, recalling Joel's entry.

'He inadvertently caused all sorts of complicated sexual politicking after transferring his admirable – yet misguided – protectionist urges from Shelley Edwards to Kaori Shimomura. The authors believe such angst-ridden drama to be a primary example of why grown-ups are boring, and why they refrain from such activity themselves.'

Phantasia tried to view the information in context to what she now knew, but still found herself confused. Even if Kaori and Shelley had some form of rivalry over Joel, that was nothing to do with her! Surely it wasn't wrong to try and be friends with both of them? Frustrated by her inability to understand such odd behaviour, she waltzed over to the back of the classroom, where the one student who seemed detached from everything sat, observing the class.

Dante, the quiet boy in the long white coat and black scarf, had always blended into the background, but Phantasia could sense his aura. A thick shell, he maintained his barriers at all times and he was ever-vigilant about the world around him. It was as if he was watching everyone with a cynical eye, observing their patterns and behaviours so he could better defend against them.

"Everyone seems to want you," he said after a few moments' silence, his voice distant as if coming from his own dreams, "Best friend, worst enemy, potential conquest, Queen, hero, rival, mystery..."

Before Phantasia could reply, Ms Thorburn shuffled into the room and ordered the class to make their way to the morning assembly. Dante disappeared before she could reply, as was his nature. She didn't notice him again until the class were settling down in the auditorium: he was seated at the far side of the room, barriers raised.

It was the weekly assembly for Sapphire House students, and the three teachers of the house – Ms Thorburn, Sabeen Haan, and Mythology teacher Mr Barton – sat on stage while Mr Payne gave the usual announcements. This was the first time Phantasia had attended a house assembly and she found herself filtering out the headmaster's news while she looked around for the first and third-year students. There was no way to tell who was in what year, but she figured the majority of Sapphire First were the young students huddled together in a mob at the front of the auditorium. There were a few scattered groups of elder teenagers – some even older than eighteen-year-old Doyle – but they could have late starters. Sabeen Haan helped provide some clarity.

“As you know, most of the Third Years are out on field work at present,” he said, pacing across the stage making exuberant hand gestures while his battered coat swept along behind him. He went on to explain about a recent field trip to town ruins in the east, showing the students some examples of ancient artefacts that had been recovered.

“The group even managed to unearth an old computer, dating back to the early 21st Century, which has been passed on to Mr Smith for further examination,” he said, giving John a knowing look at the mention of his father.

“We're just lucky those Malkuthian vultures haven't picked every corpse clean yet,” added Mr Barton.

A smug grin spread across Sabeen Haan's face. “The Malkuthians avoid *certain* areas out in the wilderness because of their 'unnatural activity'. Things you students will learn to deal with before you're allowed outside the town borders,”

“Of course,” interjected Mr Payne, “We want you to understand that 'unnatural activity' in no means refers to anything of a 'supernatural' nature. It is not in our syllabus to teach such dangerous heresy to such young minds,”

Phantasia heard Joel chortle to himself, and noticed the thumbs-up Mr Barton was giving his superior. She also heard Mr Haan whisper something like “That oughta cover us,” to Ms Thorburn, who was watching the corners of the auditorium with suspicious eyes. John, who was sitting next to Phantasia, nudged her and pointed at the screen of his laptop. He'd written a message:

Place's been bugged again. Godhand. Dad's gotta decipher the code.

After the assembly, Sapphire Second were reunited with Sabeen Haan – and with Emerald Second – for their History lesson. Once again, Phantasia could feel the cold glares of Astrid from the back of the class and could hear her whispering among her friends.

“Albino's working with the Hawks now.”, “Albino is some sort of witch!”, “Albino's the one summoning those demons!”

Phantasia wanted to turn around and confront them, to ask them again why they felt the need to be so cruel and judgemental, to have the rest of the class and Mr Haan back her up and make the bullies realise what they were doing. So what if they didn't agree with her views? Fire faeries and Wind faeries always disagreed on things, but they accepted they had to work together for the greater good! Then again, she thought, human history was defined by repeating disagreements that ended in conflict. Maybe it was just the way their world worked. Who was she – not even a human – to criticise that?

Break arrived and with it the usual gossip and banter that made teenage lives so melodramatic and their bonds waiver and twist like strands caught in a storm. Phantasia hid in a corner, re-reading Lysander's and Angelo's guidebook and pondering how best to avoid creating further conflict.

“*She scares the authors,*” said Astrid's entry, “*Apparently the daughter of Bishop Wotan; she attends school here rather than at that elitist – sorry, privately run – religious school. We tried pranking her once but she didn't appreciate our caper. Currently the authors are listed in her 'black book', though they are hoping for a promotion to the rumoured 'rainbow book of smiley happy faces'.*”

"Ms Celeste, I would be wary of what those boys say," interrupted a haughty voice that Phantasia recognised as belonging to the girl who always answered teachers' questions in class, "They aren't the most impartial of commentators, nor are they the most mature,"

A girl with tanned skin and dressed in baggy clothes was facing her, checking around for signs of possible eavesdropping. She flicked her long, dark hair out of her face and clutched a clipboard to her chest.

"As you should know by now, I'm Phoenie Rogan, Topaz Second. I'm also the editor of *Veritas*, the school newspaper? I'm sure you must have read a copy by now! I heard you're that new girl who has been causing commotion lately. Would you like to talk about it?"

"I-I...? Talk about it?"

Phoenie touched her arm. "Excellent! Our current meeting room is just around the corner."

Phantasia found herself escorted to a small room on the outskirts of Emerald House, looking out over the young forests to the east of town. Phoenie closed the door and sat at the teacher's desk, unpacking and organising her equipment out in front of her with more care and precision than the majority of the teachers had. Phantasia sat crossed-legged on the table in front of her, earning herself a raised eyebrow as Phoenie scanned her clipboard's information.

"We have to change rooms every month," she said, twirling her pen, "John Smith has made sure it's sound and spy-proof, thanks to those snazzy gadgets him and his father come up with. You don't have to worry about the Inquisition in here and whatever you say remains between us, okay?"

Phantasia nodded. Phoenie was staring at her, pen twitching as she prepared to take down notes.

"Right, so you're Phantasia Celeste; Sapphire Second; fifteen-years-old. You recently transferred here from a foreign school," she said aloud, as she read through the details, "Right; we'll skip all the unimportant details about your background for the time being. I'm far, *far* more interested in these rumours I've been hearing."

"Rumours?"

Phoenie nodded. "I know for a fact that you're not affiliated with Godhand. Indeed, I believe you were just this weekend added to their 'black book' of possible heretics. Certain other sources have also suggested to me that you might have had some involvement with breaking up a shady operation underneath the World's End nightclub?"

"Oh, well, no, I'm not doing anything like that. I was just trying to protect my friends from..." Phantasia paused for thought, "...from bad people?"

I've really got to be careful with this girl!

Phoenie wrote down some quick notes then began tapping the end of her pen on the table. "Right, I heard something about that. Bad *people*, you say?"

Phantasia could feel all of Phoenie's senses focused on her, probing her every expression and noticing every nuance of her body language (not that it would do her much good, she thought, her not being human and all).

"They were hurting innocent people,"

"Hurting them? How?"

"Something to do with drugs?"

Phoenie scribbled down some notes. "Hard drugs? It's not unusual for Ravens to meddle with the softer substances, after all."

Phantasia nodded. "Hard drugs,"

Best to play along. She's no Water faerie. She can't tell if I'm lying.

“So, are you suggesting there's no truth to the rumours a cult of shamans had summoned a creature called a 'leansídhe' to feed off the spiritual energy of young Ravens seduced into forming blood pacts in return for transitory moments of ecstasy?”

Phantasia, who had been practising her 'innocent' smile, faltered. Phoenie noticed and a smug grin spread across her face. Her pen clattered to the table and she jumped up, sending the chair crashing into the cabinet behind her. “Please, tell me if you saw any ghosts or monsters or magic! Is there a gateway to Hell beneath the Industrial Zone? I must know!”

“Eh, well, I'm – I'm not entirely sure!” *Okay, this girl knows way too much!* “Maybe if you believe in that sort of thing. I just helped my friends out because they were being used by some bad men. With hard drugs. That's all!”

Phoenie collapsed back in her chair and sighed in disappointment. She picked up her pen and scratched out a half-hearted note, before dropping it back on the table. She looked lost in thought as she rubbed her temple, but then the act dropped and she looked up at Phantasia with a knowing smile on her face,

“What about the weekend? Did you encounter anything then? I heard you were seen around the old gallery? Rumours say there've been suspicious things going on around there too,”

“Well, I saw a friend...” said Phantasia, worried by the look on victory in Phoenie's dark eyes. Her hand had slipped below the desk and was fumbling around in her bag.

“Really? Interesting...” she said, making notes with her other hand, “Ms Celeste, I think we need to talk. Seriously. No more acting innocent.”

She thrust an image in Phantasia's face. After a second, the colours began to form distinct shapes. Blurry auras surrounded the indistinct shapes of dishevelled houses, as if the photograph had been taken through a filter or, rather more accurately Phantasia thought, as if the photograph had somehow taken an image incorporating the lowest levels of the astral plane. One dark aura stood out among the rest. It looked vaguely humanoid, with long arms and legs that were locked in mid-flight. Tendrils of reddish energy trailed from its cruel mouth and eyes, as if it were siphoning off mana from another source. Which, of course, it was. This was the exact same entity Phantasia had chased from the gallery. The same entity that had fed on the Hawks' envy. An entity that was invisible to normal human eyesight.

“This is a 'leansídhe',” stated Phoenie.

That lunchtime, Phantasia sat in a meeting of the school newspaper team, all of whom she recognised from her classes. Phoenie stood at the front of the room before a whiteboard covered in various photographs of the so-called leansídhe, which showed up as an amorphous black shadow in every picture, but there was also another dominant aura in some of them: a shining, winged figure whose identity she was afraid to have confirmed.

“Okay, everyone, I've invited Ms. Celeste along to help us with the investigation,” said Phoenie, tapping a long wooden pointer on her hand, “As you are all aware, thanks to help from Mr Smith, Ms Booton and Ms James, John and Katrina were able to develop a working auragraphic camera! With this technological wonder, we have been able to take photographs of otherwise undetectable phenomena.”

She tapped on a photo of the leansídhe with her pointer. “This is the core of our current investigation. It is an entity Amanda has labelled a 'leansídhe', and is almost certainly a key player in the recent spate of attempted suicides. Katrina's auragraphs show this 'leansídhe' draining energy from people who we know suffer depression or related self-esteem issues. Please examine this auragraph of Kaori Shimomura, taken moments

before her attempted suicide one week previous,” Phoenie tapped her pointer on a photo showing Kaori’s aura being affected by the nearby vampiric entity.

A discontented grunt came from the back of the room. “That’s just some trick of the light,” said Theseus Armstrong. Another one of the older students in the year, Theseus was characterised by slicked back hair, smart clothes and the sturdy aura of a self-assured fighter. “I mean, this whole ‘demon’ thing’s a bit wacko, ain’t it?”

“If you’d be so kind as to hear me out, Theseus, you’ll realise this is no mere illusion,” said Phoenie, before drawing attention to one of the pictures with the glowing figure. “Now here is where things get interesting. You see, Katrina was tailing the ‘leansídhe’ on Saturday and was lucky enough to catch a bonus scoop: an auragraph of someone actually giving chase to the ‘leansídhe’. However, normally a person’s aura is faint and indistinct; a foggy aura surrounding the body,” she motioned towards images taken of the team, displaying split-second shots of the auras that fluctuated around them constantly.

“It’s just some electromagnetic crap...”

Phoenie ignored Theseus and directed attention to the glowing figure in the images. “In this case, what we can see is an exceptionally bright aura, and even more intriguing is that it shows signs of wings...”

“So don’t tell me,” said Theseus, “You’ve found yourself an angel too?”

“Theseus, enough with your flippant remarks, this is a serious matter!” Phoenie looked directly at Phantasia, her eyes piercing, “Ms Celeste, could you perhaps explain why your aura is so...inhuman?”

“I-I’m a psychic!” she blabbered, giving in to a sudden burst of inspiration, “My aura is a representation of the power of my spirit! I stood against that evil monster in an attempt to exorcise it from this world!”

They didn’t expect that. Theseus’s face was screwed up in a cross between amusement and confusion, while John was smiling to himself. Even Phoenie was speechless, though it wasn’t for long.

“W-well! Theseus, would you look at that, we have a genuine psychic and paranormal expert in our ranks!”

“You’re *obsessed*...”

Phoenie skipped over to Phantasia, a giddy look of excitement spreading across her face as plans obviously began to brew in her head. “Ms Celeste, I had no idea. You’re a real psychic!” she said, clasping Phantasia’s hands tightly, “This is amazing! You must help our team, you must! We’re investigators – paranormal investigators! The newspaper is just a front; our true goal is to expose the truth of this world!”

Theseus was shaking his head sadly. “Your goal, girl, *your* goal...”

“We’ve been tracking this phenomenon for fifteen days now,” she continued, “As you are no doubt aware, this ‘leansídhe’ was involved with Kaori Shimomura’s suicide attempt. We also believe these events are related to Godhand in some way. If we could uncover a connection...” she had a pleading look in her eyes, as if her entire world was balanced on this one revelation, “Please, Ms Celeste, would you come with us on an investigation this evening? Your help could make the difference in helping save this town!”

Phantasia shrugged and smiled. It was another opportunity to get to know new people, and at the same time she might be able to investigate the origins of this leansídhe creature. Of course, it was also dangerous for these people to get involved in such things, so maybe she could dissuade them, while helping them out at the same time? Sure, she was stepping dangerously close to revealing her true nature, but pushing the boundaries was her nature after all!

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll do it!”

Phantasia arrived at the designated spot on the fringes of the industrial zone to find Phoenie pacing back and forth, studying notes of her clipboard. Sitting on a wall nearby was Katrina, a tall girl with unkempt hair who was rarely seen without her 'Kit', a plush cat with turquoise fur and a constant expression of contentment in its tiny button eyes. Katrina was focusing her attention on a device she carried around her neck, and when Phantasia arrived she brought it level to her face and pressed a button.

"I hope you don't mind," she said as the device clicked and whirred in her hands, "Your wings are so beautiful,"

My wings?

Phantasia had never seen her wings before, and often wondered if she even had any. They weren't technically wings – that was just human ignorance – and every faerie had them: manifestations of their spirit, which only appeared when they revealed their full power. The design of a faerie's wings was unique to them, and grew in size and splendour as they did.

"Can I see them?" she asked Katrina.

"I have to develop the picture first," she replied, "I hope it comes out. The others were blurred from movement so you couldn't see them very well. I really want to see what they look like properly!"

So would I. Shame it won't work.

Without even understanding her own basic powers, it would be impossible for Phantasia to open her wings and unleash them fully. The hazy light-shadows in the auragraphs were as much as Katrina would ever see.

Phoenie checked a few things on her clipboard, and then scanned the wall of old warehouses and factories. "There's been a lot of activity in the south sector. Given the location of the Raven's territory and that all the recent suicides and suicide attempts have been by members of that subculture, we have concluded that this was the most likely source of these demonic entities known as 'leansídhe',"

Phantasia wondered what would happen if Phoenie and Faye ever met. Then thought of Faye interacting with humans, with her reasoned intellect and penchant for speaking her mind tactlessly, made her chuckle to herself.

"Several people have been disappearing of late," explained Phoenie as she led the way, "It started nine days ago, but stopped last Tuesday for a short while. Saturday night, it started up again. I have been collecting every shred of data I can find on the incidents, openly for the newspaper, secretly because I know what's really behind it,"

She showed Phantasia a sheet of portraits, some of whom she recognised from the ceremony she had interrupted. Underneath each picture was a note on their status, either 'missing', 'attempted', or 'suicide'. One of them was Kaori, who was marked 'attempted'.

"We have to be careful because of the Inquisition," whispered Phoenie, "We can just about get away with it because of the newspaper. That's why we set it up in the first place. Not even the teachers realise what we're really doing, though sometimes I suspect they do. They're an odd bunch, really,"

"They helped with the auragraphic camera," said Katrina, "It was for a science project to take photographs of electromagnetic fields. It was a bit strange that it turned out to take pictures of auras instead, though,"

"I'm pretty sure it was intentional," said Phoenie, "But don't let Theseus or John know I said that. They're sceptics. They don't believe in any of this. John seems to find some kind of wry humour in our investigations, while Theseus is obsessed with undermining me. I'm going to prove him wrong,"

"Just not until Godhand..." began Katrina.

“Indeed. We have to...” Phoenie paused, and her voice became as quiet as the breeze, “We *have* to take them down. The teachers can't do it for fear of reprisals. We're the only ones who can do it!”

With the sky darkening, Phantasia began to feel uncomfortable. Once again she found herself surrounded by the towering funnels and concrete blocks that had once drained life from the planet through the ignorant greed of humanity. It was no wonder that a being born of the darkness would find its home in such a hellish place. Phoenie seemed fully aware of this fact.

“This area is the worst,” she said as they wandered over the dusty gravel towards a collection of ruined warehouses, “They haven't even tried to revive it. Nothing will grow here. It's like a graveyard. That's why I fully believe entities of a spectral nature are concentrated here.”

Katrina, who had been taking photos of the surrounding area as soon as they had stepped over the deathly threshold, voiced her agreement. “The last batch of auragraphs I took of this place were horrible,” she added, “I can't actually look at them again. I have to get John to develop them. He says its all just optical illusions and electromagnetic fields, but I'm sure...”

“There were definite signs of supernatural activity,” Phoenie said, cutting off Katrina as she slipped into shivering thought, “You've heard of orbs? And images of people, too. Ghosts, they used to call them.”

Phantasia chuckled to herself. Humans had a habit of seeing things they wanted to see. She could see those things naturally. ‘Orbs’ were just mana, and the images of people were nothing more than resonating emotions and memories that lingering around like footprints. In a place like Torsten, where the leylines crossed, it was far easier for humans to notice things that were natural to her and in a place like this, where mana was corrupted, it was easier still.

“There aren't many ethereal beings around here,” she said, forgetting for a moment she was talking to humans, “I mean... I mean, it's really lifeless!” She winced as Phoenie stared at her with wide, enthusiastic eyes.

“You can sense it, right? Your psychic powers? You can tell where things are, can't you? You can talk to them, right? Talk to the dead?!”

They had stopped in the middle of a concrete field, surrounded on all sides by crumbling storerooms that had once held the manufactured produce humans valued so much. Twilight reflected in Phoenie's eyes as she clutched her clipboard to her chest and waited for Phantasia's answer.

“I-I can't,” she said, unable to meet the girl's wavering gaze, “This area, though, it's almost drained of energy. It's like a void in the...” she stopped herself saying ‘leylines’, “A void. What energy there is is weakened...”

Phoenie was looking at the ground. “Yeah. That's what they taught us in Environmental Studies. Said this whole district had been raped by people of the past. People did that a lot back then...”

Phantasia nodded. “That's probably why the leansídhe is here. It consumes mana that's been corrupted by negative emotions. In a place like this, it...”

Phoenie was looking at her with those intense, narrowed eyes again, and Phantasia realised she really had said too much this time. She cringed, mentally blaming it on the two girls' insightful knowledge fooling her into thinking she was once again with her stoic lady-in-waiting.

“So that's it!” said Phoenie, clapping her hands together in a decisive moment of realisation.

“It feeds off of 'mana'?” said Katrina, her brow furrowed, “That's what the auragraphs were showing...”

“And those suicides! It must have caused, or at least encouraged them!” Phoenie was jumping up and down now, her voice a high-pitched squeal.

“Suicide, even if it’s just attempted, must evoke a lot of negative energy,” Katrina continued, much to Phantasia’s happy amazement, “So those people were all victims of its hunger...”

“We’re gonna stop this thing, right?” said Phoenie, who had just thrown her clipboard into her backpack and rolled the sleeves of her sweater up. “Kat, you know where it was nesting last time?”

Katrina nodded and pointed to one of the warehouses, “There was a large amount of corrupted mana – that is, what I now assume was corrupted mana – coming from over there,”

Phantasia couldn’t have stopped Phoenie if she tried. The newspaper editor was marching briskly over towards the warehouse, with Katrina struggling to keep up behind her as she fiddled with her camera. Phantasia, worried about what was awaiting them, concentrated her senses on the supposed nest.

It saw her.

Without hesitation, she burst forward, her feet only lightly touching the ground to keep up the illusion of running to the two bewildered girls as she sped past them. She had to stop what was about to happen before they could see it. There was no other choice. Once she was inside the warehouse and safely out of their sight, she phased through the walls between her and her target, ignoring the ominous forces that crushed around her. There was no time to give the darkness any attention, not if she wanted to...

“DON’T DO IT!”

The boy was only about fifteen with pale skin a dark hair, a quintessential Raven. He had seen her appear out of the wall, right in front of his eyes. She didn’t care about the rules any more. He looked down at her from the pyre of broken crates and smiled.

“An angel...”

Phantasia jumped towards him, willing the flame in his hand to extinguish before it slipped from his grasp, falling down towards the petroleum-soaked wood below. He was still smiling at her as she reached out to take him away. He was still smiling at her when the fire burst to life around him, devouring cloth and flesh in a searing column of heat.

He was still smiling as she was flung backwards, back through the walls, by the explosion of dark energy that came with his final moments. It was smiling too. The shadow. The leansídhe.

Phantasia blinked open her eyes to see Katrina looking down at her. Phoenie was staring away towards the warehouse, now filled with thick smoke. As the scent of burning flesh reached her, she staggered backwards and vomited into a dark corner. Katrina, after helping Phantasia to her feet, escorted her friend away from the destruction, her camera lifeless around her neck.

Phantasia looked back into the chaos behind her and felt the same nausea that had claimed Phoenie. One would be here soon, she thought. A Reaper. Best not to be around when showed up; they weren't the most sociable of types, after all.