

Phantasia

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Volume Five

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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!

Machinations of a False Prophet

Amanda could feel the heat of the flame scorching her face, the dancing death threatening to burst free from its torch and consume her. She wished it would. She took a few more cautious steps towards the pyres, looking down at the gravel path to avoid the jubilant faces urging her onwards – and the horrified looks of her friends and fellow students, whose lives she had been ordered to end. Even though she couldn't see him, she could feel the powerful presence of the Patriarch watching down from the balcony above. If only she could throw the fire his way and burn his evil to ash!

But she couldn't, even if he were standing right there in front of her, even if she had a gun and he was on his knees begging forgiveness, because he had absolute power over her. If she refused to kill her friends, he would kill her family. No matter what choice she made, her friends were going to die. All she could do was hope for a miracle, hope that the spitting rain suddenly became a downpour, hope she woke up from the nightmare and could be with her friends again.

Around her the brainwashed masses cheered, like spectators at the football match. Four more steps until the pyres. Hope faded.

"I hope the others are having a better go at this than we are," said Theseus to his companions, sounding bitterer about the situation than he'd intended – not that it wasn't a bad situation to be in! They were trapped in a storeroom adjacent to a hi-tech laboratory, where some armoured knights were talking with Godhand scientists (Theseus still found that idea incomprehensible) and testing a variety of projectile and energy weapons on a multitude of targets. The scene of hefty men in metal plating vaporising mannequins and reducing brick walls to dust in a hail of bullets, all while the crimson-robed zealots of Godhand wrote notes on their palm-computers and scanned damage ratios with complex devices that would have even John baffled was the last thing Theseus had expected to find lurking underneath the manor. He's expected a mystical ark or aged holy books filled with misinterpreted fables!

"At least we're getting to see all this," replied John. Even when deprived of his technology his senses were keen and Theseus could tell he was taking in every little detail for future recall. Andromeda, on the other hand, was still trying to strike up a conversation with their captors. The knights that had been assigned to guard them, however, were so silent Theseus wondered if they were even human. It wasn't like he could see faces beneath those visored helmets, after all.

"I assure you, if we are allowed to go free, this information won't be released to the public," said Andromeda, "As I said before, if our associates do not hear from us at the designated time, they will assume the worst. I am sure you agree that this would not be in anyone's best interest!"

Once again, Godhand didn't reply, though Theseus was beginning to hope they would. Listening to Andromeda repeat the same arguments over and over for much longer was going to be as agonising as any torture these freaks could come up with! He was thankful when a knight in golden armour encrusted with rubies appeared. *Something* would finally happen, he hoped. Unfortunately, it wasn't what Theseus expected.

Nowhere near.

The words delivered by that deep, echoing voice from within the helmet made Theseus shiver as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice over him.

"The terrorists are ready for execution. They are to be burned alive, and their flesh will be consumed in sacrifice. These three will join their conspirators. Strip them, pound

their flesh soft and take them above ground. For their valiant efforts in coming this far they will not receive the mercy of the flames before *their* sacrifice.”

Theseus had never heard John cry before, just as he'd never heard Andromeda panic. He didn't hear much, though, because a moment later he found himself vomiting over the metal floor and his own reflection. If only he'd had the foresight to direct it at the knights, he thought as he gagged.

Phoenie was trying her best to sever her consciousness. She wanted to pass out before the flames got to her, so she could die in peaceful sleep rather than agonised screams. Once again she held her breath, but once again she couldn't stop gasping for air, as if her subconscious wanted her to suffer. The sight of Amanda marching forward without remorse was like Death's final joke at her expense.

All these years she'd struggled. All the time and effort she'd dedicated to her study, all the corners she'd cut and people she'd manipulated and friends she'd deceived: maybe it was karma that Phoenie should die like this. Realising her death wouldn't be painless, she smiled and closed her eyes, knowing well who the last person she should think of had to be.

I'm so sorry I couldn't avenge you.

Phoenie waited, *her* image embedded in her mind's eye. She waited for the fire, for the heat to explode into life, for the pain to tear her flesh and bone asunder.

It never came.

Just the patter of the rain.

And then the shouts.

When Phoenie opened her eyes, she saw Amanda fleeing back towards the church, the flaming torch sitting feet away from the pyres on the gravel. She saw robed figures dive towards the flame with grasping hands desperate to complete the execution, only to be stopped by a flash of lightning. Then there was panic and chaos all around, as the Godhand faithful deserted the courtyard in droves and the towering knights drew glistening swords and spears into battle. Above, the Patriarch flailed his hands around as if he were trying to swat down a cloud of insects. His anger pierced through the storm like thunder.

“Kill them all!”

Theseus was gasping for breath and fighting back the bile in his throat when the murmurs began to spread. He could tell something was wrong because the knight walking towards them faltered, as if he really were a robot and someone had just scrambled his circuits with an electromagnetic pulse. The other knights also looked dazed, while the 'scientists' were mumbling among themselves like gossiping schoolgirls. Then the gold-plated knight shook his head, his armour rattling.

“The Patriarch,” he said. The other knights jerked back to life and began to move towards their leader with awkward steps. “His connection to us has been severed. We must investigate immediately!”

And then the far wall of the laboratory imploded, as if someone had sucked all the substance from out of it. For the briefest moment Theseus could see a long line of leaden spikes floating where the wall had been, and they shot forward like arrows, penetrating deep into the armoured knights and felling them in seconds. The robed Godhand members dived for cover, cowered under tables and hid behind cabinets even though there were plenty of heavy weapons lying around to defend themselves with.

The gold knight was the only one who didn't fall. He ripped out the lance embedded through his chest as if it were only a tiny thorn and then stomped forward towards a group of people Theseus couldn't make out. Throwing desks and cabinets aside, the knight began to draw his sword, but was too late. Another blade crashed against his armour and severed his fighting arm and, before the knight could retreat, the attacker slashed again and decapitated him. Theseus squeezed his eyes shut to avoid the bloody scene – though he'd seen his fair share of gory films and brutal combat, his stomach was too weak to deal with anything besides happy kittens.

After the sound of crumpling armour stopped, Theseus chanced a brief look and had to rub his eyes just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. Andromeda had also noticed and was stammering her bewilderment, while John was scrambling to retrieve his equipment, no doubt to conform everything with his multitude of scanners.

"Our apologies for taking so long," said Azarat Haan, Torsten Academy's survival teacher, as he wiped clean his curved blade and sheathed it next to another, similar weapon at his side.

"Damn Payne should've sent us here months ago," said Lucia James, the Academy's pyromaniac science teacher, as she examined one of Godhand's weapons, a heavy-looking black rifle, "Though this is well out of date, proper scrap metal." The rifle contorted in on itself, the barrel twisting at angles Theseus didn't think possible, leaving nothing but a smooth sphere of metal behind.

Mr Haan pushed his way towards the students, bulldozing through the desks and cabinets and ignoring the squeals of scientists as they scrambled to get out of his way. "You kids should know when not to get involved," he said, his deep voice like that of a father chastising his children. Then he held out a hand, and his scarred face relaxed into an almost-smile. "*But* you did a good job getting this far. Now let us handle the rest,"

Phantasia hurt. Godhand's manor, with its undercurrents of repressed hatred and fear, wasn't a healthy place for a faerie such as herself, but the arrival of the Patriarch had made things worse.

"I'm not sure how to describe it," she said to Katrina, "Before he arrived it wasn't so bad, just uncomfortable. Maybe what it's like for you when you feel cold? It's not a nice feeling and you want to wrap yourself up in something warm to make it go away. But now it's a lot worse. Whatever is going on in that courtyard is corrupting the leylines like..." She paused for a moment to consider all the things Queen Thetis had told her about human experience. "Like sewage spreading down a river."

"And you feel it?" asked Katrina.

Phantasia nodded. "It's like the air you breathe to me. I guess you could say I'm holding my breath?"

At the far end of the room, the Patriarch began another of his long speeches. Both girls were aware their friends were out there being paraded around before their final judgement, but Wotan had asked them to wait just a few more moments – if what he expected to happen occurred, they wouldn't need to do anything, and if it didn't, then he had a backup and they'd be free to do as they pleased. As much as she despised his methods and ideology, Phantasia was willing to give him a chance – something he'd put down to her faerie naiveté.

All of a sudden, Katrina jumped up and took a few steps forwards, indicating Phantasia and Wotan to be silent. The Patriarch was still droning on.

"One who saw through the charade of her school, the lies of her teachers, and the false friends she thought she had made. She has embraced our teaching and stands with us now as an equal!"

Though she couldn't read emotions well, Phantasia could tell Katrina was anxious. Her aura had shrunk, as if retreating inside a shell, and she clasped her hands to her chest as if in prayer.

"Come, Amanda Hartell, show us the glory of redemption!"

For a moment Katrina was more a statue than Wotan had ever been and it looked as if even the mightiest of winds couldn't move her. Then she slowly turned around, a vacant expression on her face. For a moment she stood there, her condensed aura straining to burst free. Then her eyes, lost in silent denial, scrunched up and she clenched her teeth tight. Both Phantasia and Wotan were taken aback by her anger, which came out in a whisper, like the tremors leading up to an earthquake.

"Explain."

Wotan took a deep breath and his knuckles turned white as he gripped the arms of his throne. "Her father is involved with some shady affairs," he said, "Not trivial matters, either: he's in open defiance against the Patriarchs and involved in what they would call 'terrorist organisations'. The Patriarchs themselves put a price on his head and, when they found out his daughter was living here in Torsten they demanded her arrest and execution. I convinced them to let me 'seduce' her into our order, so they might be able to use her against her father. If I hadn't, she would be dead right now."

The Patriarch, oblivious to what was going on behind his back, continued. "Now, Amanda, show your worth as a child of Godhand. Cleanse them."

Katrina was struggling to contain her emotions. Her face, streamed with tears hid itself behind layers of messy hair and her hands shook with raw anger. Before those emotions consumed her, Phantasia took a deep breath and moved to comfort the taller girl, placing a hand on hers and willing what little positive energy she could muster into Katrina's aura. Even so, she shared that same anger: once again, innocent people were used like pawns. She looked towards the Patriarch and weighed up her options. It was time to act.

Then Patriarch roared. "Kill them all!"

Katrina pulled away from Phantasia and ran. With her aura dancing like fire, burning the mana it touched with corruptive emotions, Katrina released her feelings in a scream as she charged towards the man who held her friends lives in his hands. In that moment, Wotan moved faster than Phantasia though possible for a human, discarding his heavy robes with a flick of his wrist and leaping after Katrina. Phantasia caught sight of him making gestures with his hands, noticed him reciting an incantation under his breath and before the Patriarch could react to the emotionally-broken teenage girl screaming towards him a magic seal – just like the one that had trapped Phantasia – sprung up around him and his four bodyguards. Wotan then reached Katrina, clasped her shoulder and held her back. Phantasia was quick to follow, throwing her arms around her friend's waist and willing her to calm down.

"Don't throw your own life away, Katrina," said Wotan.

"Good advice," said the Patriarch, his voice calm, even in the face of Wotan's betrayal, "What a remarkable coup d'etat you've staged, 'Bishop'."

To Phantasia, it was as if Wotan was suddenly alive. The stoic, statue-like mannerisms relaxed and his aura blossomed like a flower that had only just found the sunlight.

"He took the chance then." Wotan sighed in relief. "Trust that Siegfried to try and be the hero." He looked at the two girls and smiled, for once resembling the sort of man who could inspire loyalty from people. "Don't worry; your friends will be safe now."

Katrina sniffed back the last of her tears and brushed hair out of her face. In that brief pause they could hear the sounds of a struggle outside and Phantasia could *feel* the relief, which she passed on to Katrina to help soothe her spirit.

The Patriarch was unfazed by this display of solidarity, his rough lips curled into a sneer. “Don't think your terrorist ways will win. These are nothing but the machinations of a false prophet, a deceiver of fools; Godhand does not tolerate such behaviour lightly. This town will burn for its heresy.”

Wotan laughed, a deep guffaw Phantasia never expected to hear from the manipulative bishop. “You call *me* a 'false prophet'? That little snare you're caught in doesn't work on average humans. It's designed to trap those whose internal chi has been manipulated beyond its natural level, which, I'm sure you're aware, means someone who uses magic. Godhand rejects all forms of magic outside of certain forms of exorcism and prayer. Certainly someone like yourself would not have the chi that you do, if you followed the same doctrine that your preach?”

The two men stared each other down, the formally giant Patriarch receding into his robes as Wotan stood tall with a victorious grin. It had been a clever ploy by Wotan – Phantasia had to admit that – and she had no doubt the Patriarch's aura was as enhanced as Wotan suggested. It was one of those things she could see naturally in a person – Wotan had it, as did Mr Payne and the rest of the teachers (except for Mr Smith, anyway) – and Phantasia had never thought different of it. It was natural, Queen Thetis had told her. Had she known from the beginning it was forbidden by Godhand, maybe things would have been clearer!

“And what do you hope to gain from all this, Mr Garland?” asked the Patriarch, “No one is going to believe a dead man. Soon you will be regarded a fraud, your allies will be dead, and the people here subdued into obedience.”

“I didn't spend all these years in Godhand for that sort of payment,” said Wotan, “Believe me, this marks the beginning of the end for you Patriarchs.”

Then Wotan turned to the girls, ignoring the Patriarch's seething, spitting retorts.

“You girls can go now. Escape through the back door and get as far away as you can. I'm sorry to have put you and your friends through all of this, but you must think of the lives this will save.”

The girls looked at one another. Phantasia could tell Katrina was thinking the same thing she was: why had Wotan kept them here all this time? To hear him explain his plan? He must have noticed their confusion because he jabbed a finger at the camera hanging around Katrina's neck.

“And, before you go, maybe you ought to take a picture of that Patriarch. A little memento for that antagonistic headmaster rival of mine, if you would.”

The Patriarch was consumed with an inner rage when Katrina clicked the camera in his direction – something Phantasia hoped would come out when the image was developed. It wouldn't be as shocking as her wings, but the sheer power of that aura would be enough to condemn the Patriarch and help prove what Wotan had been working for all this time.

The girls ran, leaving the two incognito mages to their verbal conflict, while the struggle outside began to ease.

Chapter 22

Love and Darkness

Godhand had been infiltrated and Phoenie Rogan felt like an ill-behaved child. Rembrandt Payne had agents working undercover inside the cult all along – agents far more effective than Phoenie's equivalent, a traitor whose name she daren't even think of, had been – and they'd waited for an opportune moment to reveal themselves. A Patriarch, one of the ageing leaders of Godhand, was now trapped in the manor and his armoured Crusaders caught off-guard as Mr Payne's agents launched their offensive. It was a far cry

from Phoenie's ill-thought-out rescue attempt, which ended with her 'army' being the ones getting rescued, and from a near-death situation at that! If she'd had any choice, she would have borne the scars of failure for the rest of her life, but Ms Clarke and her medical staff weren't about to allow that.

Phoenie had always had her suspicions that the staff at Torsten Academy led secret double-lives, but this was something else. She still hadn't quite gotten over the surprise of seeing her History teacher, Sabeen Haan, bounding around the courtyard challenging the terrifying Crusaders alongside Mythology teacher Valentine Baudin. Nor could she deny the surreal image of the diminutive Sage Khandro, the old monk who supervised the students' sporting lessons, standing guard over a makeshift camp alongside a contingent of what Phoenie assumed were his apprentices.

The teachers and their allies had formed the camp inside a room near the front entrance of the manor where Ms Clarke – both the Academy's Maths teacher and its chief nurse – took charge of making sure the students were properly treated. By the time Phoenie arrived in the dim-lit former-lounge, Kaori had been cleaned up and covered up in a blanket, while her mother and Joel comforted her. Given the state of their injuries ten minutes ago – both had looked as if bones had been broken – Phoenie was surprised to see Kaori and Joel looking so healthy. Even Shelley Edwards looked perky with bright eyes and a smile as she sat alone in the corner. As Phoenie sat down in front of Ms Clark, she began to feel something herself, as if the room were filled with the calming sound of the gentle ocean and whale song.

"Just relax," said Ms Clarke. A cheerful, round-faced young woman with blonde hair that reached past her waist, the students knew her as the teacher with a formula for most things and a graph for everything else. Phoenie had never needed her medical expertise before but she'd heard stories of her working miracles – Theseus had once had a nasty cold cured the day before a boxing tournament, and his bruised body recovered the day after. As Ms Clarke's fingers brushed against Phoenie's bruised face, Phoenie began to understand just how miraculous her teacher was: the pain faded within seconds.

"You're all healed up now," said Ms Clarke after she'd spent several minutes running her fingers over Phoenie's injuries, as if she knew exactly where they all were. A quick check in a nearby mirror confirmed that, aside from her matted hair, Phoenie was in perfect shape, perhaps even more so than she'd been before the rescue attempt! Whatever strange techniques Ms Clark used, Phoenie would have to research them sometime.

She sat down to ponder the incredible healing power and watched as Doyle and Lyra were treated with similar gentle brushing motions. Both were eager to return to the battle and enact vengeance on Godhand, but Ms Shimomura drifted over to calm them down. Phoenie could have sworn the sound of whales increased as she did.

As Lyra and Doyle settled down with their friends Kaori and Joel, Phoenie began to feel lonely. It was understandable that the Raven friends would support one another, but where were *her* friends? She waited for Theseus to come waltzing in with a brash smile and tales of his victories over the Crusaders, or John to shuffle over to show her detailed schematics he'd compiled, or Andromeda to tell her stories with that hyperactive voice she slipped into when excited. Even worse, Katrina was still missing – had they executed her already? They couldn't have. They would have made a show of it! And what of Phantasia Celeste and Dante Orpheus? Phoenie decided to take action – moping around just wasn't her style.

"Excuse me!" she called out, waving her hand in the air as if asking a question in class.

"What's wrong?" asked Ms Shimomura. Phoenie listed the students that were still missing and asked if they'd been found yet.

"Don't worry. Theseus, John and Andromeda were found beneath the manor by Azarat Haan and Ms James," explained Ms Clarke with a smile, "They're being treated at the scene."

Phoenie breathed a sigh of relief, but it was only a temporary comfort. By the looks on her teachers' faces as they glanced at one another she had a feeling the rest of the news wouldn't be quite as positive.

"We've don't know about the others," said Ms Shimomura, "We think they might be in the church section. The defence there hasn't been breached. Ms Chiltern is looking for them as we speak."

Quite what Ms Chiltern, the fashionable Nature Studies teacher and hyper-environmentalist, could do to find them, Phoenie didn't know, but given what she'd seen from the other teachers she wouldn't be shocked if they told her Ms Chiltern was master thief or secret agent!

A young man came blustering into the room. The teachers turned their attention on him in an instant.

"Report from Commander Haan. The Crusaders have regrouped to protect the Patriarch," he said, panting, "The Inquisitors are helping them in whatever ways they can, but the surprise attack meant they couldn't arm themselves with the weaponry they'd been hoarding underneath the manor."

Ms Clark gasped. "They were hoarding weapons?"

"Enough to supply an army," said the messenger, "Lieutenant James has dealt with the situation."

The two teachers exchanged wry smiles.

"No doubt she's collected a few samples for herself," said Ms Shimomura, "The rest is probably sludge by now. Bet she hated that job."

Then another messenger came bursting in, almost running into the first.

"Chief Payne has given the order to retreat from the grounds!"

"Is he insane?" said Ms Clarke, "There are still students unaccounted for!"

"He says we have to regroup before we decide to attack the Patriarch. He wants to discuss the options before declaring outright war against Godhand."

"But what about those poor kids?" asked Ms Shimomura.

Just then, the two messengers were motioned aside by the staff of Sage Khandro and with respectful bows they shuffled aside to allow the monk in. He coughed to make sure he had the room's attention, then made sure to make eye contact with everyone, from teachers to students, before speaking.

"Payne is right. We cannot just attack a Patriarch openly. If we do that then Godhand will send everything they have on us. Even if we pulled in every cell and every ally we have, we couldn't defend ourselves against the full might of the Patriarchs' wrath."

There was no argument from either Ms Clarke or Ms Shimomura.

"We must continue to believe that—"

A fourth arrival almost tripped over the stooped form of Sage Khandro, who moved aside with the reaction of someone a quarter of his age. This time the newcomer was Ms Chiltern.

"Phantasia Celeste and Katrina Ritches have broken through the church barriers." she said.

Phoenie squealed her relief, then remembered the final missing student. Though she didn't like the boy, she knew what he meant to Katrina. "What about Dante Orpheus?" she asked.

"Dante is..." Ms Chiltern shuffled her feet. "He should be okay. My familiar is leading Phantasia and Katrina to him now..."

Katrina had no idea what they were running after, but she'd reached a point of quiet acceptance: the past several hours had been nothing but the most bizarre in her life! From her initial arrest to Bishop Wotan's questionable motives, to the arrival of the Patriarch and the near-execution of her friends, Katrina had suffered enough of an emotional roller-coaster to last her the rest of her teenage years.

Phantasia – a 'faerie' according to Wotan (something that would be sure to excite Phoenie, no doubt) – was following something she called a 'totem', apparently an invisible-to-human-senses projection of someone's spirit. That this 'totem' had been sent by Nature Studies teacher Ms Chiltern to lead them to Dante would have raised questions on any other day, but Katrina just accepted it with a smile and followed the 'faerie'. The strange girl in question skipped through the corridors in long, slow arcs and Katrina wondered if she was just trying to keep pace with her exhausted sprinting.

"There's something up ahead," said the white-haired girl, "I-I'm not sure if it's Dante..." She went silent for a moment, as if listening to a voice in her head, "According to Ms Chiltern it is. I...don't get it..."

When they arrived at the scene Katrina felt a familiar lump in her throat at the sight. Strewn across the corridor were the catatonic bodies of Inquisitors, their pale faces drenched in fear and their limbs limp by their sides. Some were curled up as if hiding from a terrifying, inescapable beast, while others looked like they'd tried to run away, only to have their bodies give out beneath them. Among the crimson robes, the gloss-black armour of a Crusader laid prone, his sword loose in his hand. At the middle of it all, hiding in a doorway with his knees drawn up to his face, was a shivering Dante. While Phantasia was still surveying the scene like a confused child, Katrina dashed forward to comfort her surrogate brother. She caught him whispering to himself, but he snapped him to attention when he saw her, like a dreamer waking from their deepest nightmare.

"Did it happen again?" she asked, brushing strands of hair out of his face. He nodded, his lip trembling, and she hugged him tight. "It doesn't matter. We're all safe now."

"I wanted to save you," said Dante, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"I know," replied Katrina, holding him tight, "Thank you."

"What happened here?" asked Phantasia, still hovering around investigating.

Katrina looked at Dante for permission and he nodded a silent confirmation. She stood and stepped over the bodies to where Phantasia was brushing her fingers around the knight, like she was feeling the invisible fields that auragraphs revealed.

"He's alive," she said, "They all are, but they were stunned by something spiritually. Like you would be if someone hit you over the head!"

That explained a lot. "Something like this as happened a couple of times before," said Katrina, "When Dante gets stressed or overwhelmed he starts to lose his..." she tried to find the best way to put it that wouldn't offend him.

"My grip on reality." he said, peering over his knees at Phantasia.

"It's hard to explain. I've only witnessed it once," continued Katrina, "But people have said that he, well... That he loses his temper and people get scared and sometimes they faint,"

Phantasia wandered over to Dante, but he shied away when she tried to put her hand on his shoulder. She tried again and he scuttled backwards.

"Stop it!" he snapped.

"I'm just trying to..." began Phantasia.

"I don't care! Just stop doing that!"

Phantasia pulled away and frowned, then walked back over to Katrina. She looked down at the knight and back at Dante. "He did all this just to protect you?" she asked.

Katrina couldn't help herself from blushing. Most people understood but a newcomer like Phantasia could easily get the wrong impression. "We were brought up

together,” she explained before Phantasia could jump to conclusions, “He’s...like a brother to me. I know that might sound a bit strange...”

“No,” she replied, her eyes distant as if she were focusing on her own past, “It’s not strange at all...” For a few moments she stood there in silence, lost in her memories, then she was back again, a look of determination on her face.

“I want you two to escape,” she said, “I’ve decided to go back and help Bishop Wotan.”

It took Katrina by surprise and she had to take a second to make sure she’d heard her right. “Are you serious?” she asked, her hands flailing with the rattling of bracelets – a common sign of her shock, surprise or confusion.

“I am.” She turned to leave and her feet started to leave the ground as if she were swimming underwater.

“Wait.”

Dante was resting against the doorway, his posture slumped and his eyes dark. “Maybe you can use this.” He held out a palm-sized packet he’d been carrying around in his pocket. “It’s the excess explosives. I stole it before Joel could.”

Phantasia floated over, took it out of his hands and turned over in hers, unaware of the spooked expression on Dante’s face.

“This might come in handy!” she said, then smirked, twisted over and swam off down the corridor, leaving Katrina alone with Dante. She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and led him away.

“She’s a faerie,” she said.

“Figures.” Dante stared after Phantasia for a few moments, then followed.

Phantasia wasn’t sure which of the day’s events concerned her more: that Godhand could commit horrible acts with such positive faith, or that Dante could strive to protect his friends with such dark power. The boundaries of good and evil, of light and darkness were starting to blur in her head, forming a misty, impenetrable grey. She had to confront the Patriarch to find out for herself just what the true definitions were, if they existed at all.

There was just a floor left between her and the audience chamber when the atmosphere shifted balance. While she still had the chance, she left the material explosives in a safe place and made herself incorporeal, her physical clothes slipping off to be replaced by what she thought was more fitting attire.

The Patriarch’s malice, sealed tight by the magic seal, burst back to life like a supernova, spreading tendrils of darkness whipping across the streams of mana. Phantasia increased her ascent, sensing the condensing of the Patriarch’s power to a focal point, like a devilish beast breathing in before unleashing a torrent of flames. There was no doubt he was going to attack! Not Wotan, though, but the youthful aura of Apeliotes, the faerie sprite responsible for the magic seal, who was at that second preparing another. He wouldn’t have enough time, the Patriarch was going to...

Phantasia exploded into the audience chamber between the Patriarch and his target, hoping her last minute improvisation would work. The Patriarch’s attack manifested as a beam of black lightning, which crashed against her make-shift astral shield; if surrounding herself with purifying energy had been enough to dissolve the *leansídhe*, maybe it could act as a shield against darkness-fuelled magical attacks? There was no better way to test the theory than this!

It worked. The Patriarch’s attack crackled around her, but Phantasia’s own power subdued it, even as he intensified his assault. As the Patriarch attempted to overcome her defences, she heard Apeliotes’s voice in her head.

Why are you doing this? Why protect someone who isn’t on your side?

I don't care about 'sides', she thought back. Just because we think differently doesn't mean we can't help one another!

The black lightning ceased and the Patriarch withdrew his hand into his gaudy robes. Phantasia could see, now her vision wasn't clouded by his attack, that his appearance had changed: scythe-like tattoos traced along the lines of his face and down his neck like veins and there was a dull light in his eyes, which were now taking on a purple hue. These were the signs of a human who didn't just use their internal chi energy, but embraced the mana around them and allowed it to flow through their body. Signs of someone who stood on the edge of sacrificing their material existence and embracing mana fully. Signs that, like a faerie's wings, reflected the heart of the person.

The Patriarch's markings began to recede into his skin and his eyes returned to their earthy brown hue, but the malevolent smile that split his face in two remained.

"An interesting ability you have there," he said, "From the sudden change of clothes and phasing through solid matter, I can only assume you must also be one of those nasty little nature spirits. Garland certainly has a fondness for loitering around your kind, it seems,"

Apeliotes was standing beside Wotan, who held a protective arm around the boy, but they remained silent, watching Phantasia for her next move. Since one of her so-called abilities had worked, she thought it best to try another and tried to breathe in as much uncorrupted mana as there was left in the polluted manor.

"This fighting is pointless," she said, "What's the point in continuing this cycle of corruption? If you fight each other you just help push the world towards its death! Everyone has a different opinion, so why don't we respect each other and work together?"

The Patriarch's smile vanished, to be replaced with an amused smirk. "I'm not sure I understand you," he said, "Are you suggesting I should forgive Garland his sins and leave the heretics of this town in peace?"

"Yes! What harm can they do you?"

The Patriarch shook his head slowly and struggled to contain his sniggering. "You poor, deluded thing! If I did that, there wouldn't be peace! Garland and his conspirators would continue to oppose us Patriarchs and we would be forced into open conflict! How can you say we should avoid that, when what you're suggesting we do will only lead to it?"

Phantasia scuffed her feet on the carpet as she tried to think of an argument. Only the simplest one came to mind. "Why can't *all of you* just be friends? You, Bishop Wotan, Mr Payne, the Patriarchs – *everybody*?"

The Patriarch was laughing out loud. His knights were laughing out loud. *Wotan* was laughing out loud. Only Apeliotes, her fellow faerie, kept a straight face, his water element showing through.

"I'm serious," she continued, "Why can't you?"

"Humans will never understand one another," said Wotan, "We don't even understand our own selves."

"I will not stand beside one who threatens my power," said the Patriarch, "There can be only one future for this world, and it will be Godhand's."

Phantasia sighed and dematerialised herself, her feet slipping through the floor. "I guess there's no saving you then," she said, "I hoped there was a chance people could help one another, but..."

"Slip away with your dreams," said the Patriarch, "Return to your world and leave the future to those of us with the vision and power to shape it."

Phantasia, now down to her waist, looked up at him with sad eyes, mimicking as best she could the look of child about to burst into tears. "Then you won't let me friends go free?" she asked.

"Their suffering will serve to make me even stronger."

She made sure that, as her face sunk through the floor, the last thing the Patriarch saw was her fake tears. She could see him relishing her sorrow as she fell away into the floor below, and felt his aura shift as his attention returned to focus on Wotan and Apeliotes.

Perfect.

After all, he was only human, and for all the magic he imbued himself with, he didn't have the same senses as a faerie – as Phantasia. When she burst out of the floor behind him, all his focus was ahead on his rival. She caught him mid-sentence as he was drawing his energy inwards for another magical assault.

“...associating with them was your worst mistake!”

Phantasia placed her hand on his back.

She'd done it before with her friends, first instinctively and later, after beginning to understand her abilities, with intent – embracing her aura with theirs, funnelling positive power into their angst-ridden hearts and easing the darkness that consumed them. It didn't always work and she'd only tried it when they were aware – and never when they rejected it – but again there was only one way to test these things!

The knights lunged for her with their swords but were halted mid-attack by Apeliotes, who bound them once again with his sealing abilities. As they struggled to break free of their ethereal chains, Phantasia flipped over the Patriarch and spun to face him, pulling herself free from his aura in the process. His face was frozen, his breathing shallow, and the magical lines dulled. Drained of power, Phantasia staggered backwards.

The Patriarch struggled to speak. “Y-you. I can't...”

He was immobilized. Phantasia had managed to purify his aura of contamination as she'd intended, revealing just how much he had embraced the darkness. All that was left of his spirit was a hard shell, and now he was drained of his chi there was little he could do. For all the advantages a physical body had, it was still useless while it lacked energy.

Until the aura began to grow back.

Phantasia crawled backwards as the Patriarch's aura began to reform. For all her power, there was still one thing she'd forgotten about the complex rules that governed these things, and right now she was cursing herself as she imagined Faye chiding her for such an amateur mistake. The physical body was so coveted by immaterial demons because it gave them an anchor to the physical world, and it was the same with humans. Unlike the immaterial leansídhe, the Patriarch had his anchor, his shield against Phantasia's purification. Physical bodies regenerated mana.

Phantasia, on the other hand, couldn't regenerate without a source of uncorrupted mana, so she was forced to cower as the Patriarch returned to full power in a matter of moments. Another magic shield sprung up around him as Apeliotes attempted to intervene, but the Patriarch smashed the chains without effort, the magic lines throbbing to their full intensity across his face.

“An interesting creature you are,” he said, shaking free the last remnants of purity from his aura, “But still nothing more than a naive child. I could hear you appealing to my heart. Am I capable of 'love', you ask?”

Phantasia grit her teeth, knowing the answer.

“My love – my *faith* – is what gives me power.”

The black lightning exploded from his palm. There was no chance of protecting herself from it this time. It would tear her apart.

You are a strange girl.

Apeliotes took the force of the blast, using a crude sealing method to force the Patriarch from diverting the dark power away. As the black tendrils tore away at his frail body and she struggled to find the smallest ounce of strength within herself to save him, Wotan pulled her away.

Your actions are illogical. I now see what Ophion saw in you.

The childish sprite writhed in pain as his body disintegrated under the force of the Patriarch's hatred.

It's funny I should do this. This is illogical. And I've never found anything 'funny' before. You really are a strange girl.

The attack ceased and the Patriarch lowered his hand. Though the chamber was now filled with the corruption he'd wrought, Phantasia could feel a soothing strength coming from – of all places – Wotan. A man she'd considered an enemy, who had put her friends through so much pain and hardship, was placing his faith in *her*. He leant down and whispered in her ear, his eyes fixed on the Patriarch.

“Hold on. She won't be happy with this,”

The Patriarch raised both hands and his power began to compress to such a degree that it was creating ripples of heat in the air – magic of that magnitude would be enough to destroy both her and Wotan! She braced herself, hoping Wotan's faith would be enough to protect them both, but was confused as to why Wotan wasn't preparing his own defence.

Then the scream came. It shattered the silence like a stone breaking water, and the Patriarch was distracted from his magical preparations. Phantasia could sense the newcomer before the malicious priest could look up and see her. Phantasia could feel the raw power compressing in the mana streams – the power of an adept Fire faerie, an aura she recognised from her visit to the Fire Queendom.

Yokai Kitsune, handmaiden to Princess Yosei Suzaku. Like many of her kind, she had developed signature attacks to identify herself in battle. Once such ability involved her compressing elemental power into a spinning wheel and tossing it at her target.

One such wheel drilled down towards the Patriarch, burning the air with every rapid spin. The Patriarch didn't even have time to divert his own pre-prepared attack to counter it before the wheel exploded into the far end of the room, consuming him, his knights and the whole balcony in searing flames.

Yokai landed in front of the devastation, clicked her fingers, and the chamber collapsed in an avalanche of rubble. In the burning mass of elemental energy, Phantasia could no longer sense the dense shell of the Patriarch's corrupt aura.

“Well, I *did* promise Apeliotes I'd make an entrance,” said Yokai.

Chapter 23

Lingering Sentiment

“Father!”

Astrid struggled against her friends' grip as the heat from the explosion swept over them. It was followed by a deep rumble and then the front of the church came crashing down in an avalanche of rubble. Astrid pulled herself free from Elizabeth, who was too busy gawping at the destruction, but Vespa's grip was as tight as ever.

“We've got to get out of here!” she said, tugging at Astrid's arm. Astrid ignored her and continued to stare at the flames eating away at the masonry as if it were paper. Inquisitors, priests and initiates alike fled from the doors and windows of the attached manor, some crying in fear and others falling to their knees to pray for divine intervention. Even some of the mighty Crusaders were retreating. No one cared for their Bishop, trapped in his chambers as the church collapsed around him.

“But, Father...”

Vespa tugged again, harder this time. “Bishop Wotan ain't no pushover. There's no way a bunch of heretic scum is gonna take him or the Patriarch out. We gotta leave before they turn their attention on us instead!”

Elizabeth had shied away from the destruction – and her friends – and was trying her best to contain her emotions. “I don't want to die,” she said through muffled sobs, “I don't want you two to die, either. We're going to die...” She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. “They'll come for us! We're like princesses, Astrid! They'll kill us for sure!”

Seeing Elizabeth break down caused Astrid's own precarious emotions to overwhelm her too. She pulled Elizabeth towards her and the two girls cried open in each other's arms. Vespa growled her disapproval, but turned away from them as if she too was having trouble controlling her feelings.

“I'm not ready to die yet, Lizzie,” said Astrid, “We can't die here. We can't. We're supposed to be the good side, aren't we? We're supposed to be the heroes! And Father, he's our mentor and guide,” she paused, “Father!”

Astrid pulled herself away and screamed at the destruction, wishing her vocal chords could somehow put out the blaze.

Run.

Was that her father's voice? It sounded like it, but it was in her head?

It won't be safe for us here any more. Get away and I'll find you later. There's a lot I have to explain.

How was her father talking to her? Was it her imagination?

I'll explain everything later, Astrid, just trust me!

“Astrid, are you okay?” asked Elizabeth.

I'm sorry for not being an honest father. I promise I'll make it up to you after this is over.

Astrid watched the fires, the heat drying her tears. A handful of brave Crusaders were approaching the flames, stabbing at the rubble with their swords as if they were searching for something, while a few hapless initiates tried to fight the ravishing inferno with whatever ineffective means they could muster. It was obvious, though, that the fire was beyond anyone's control now – even the drizzling rain couldn't quell it. The manor she'd called home for almost a decade now would soon be nothing more than a burnt husk.

“We should go,” she said, “Let's...let's just go.”

Astrid leant forwards and pulled off her heeled shoes, then tossed them aside, turned from the fires and walked away, her two friends following in silent unison. She knew who she was going to blame for all this, but right now she just wanted to get away from it all. Vengeance could wait until she was safe with her father again.

Rembrandt Payne managed a solemn smile as he watched his students reunite after their ordeal, but couldn't help but feel responsible for their rash actions. Years of pressure from Godhand had stifled the Academy's curriculum, leading to countless students graduating with far-less skills than he'd have liked. Phoenie Rogan, the leader of this minor student rebellion, was seventeen – at fifteen, Payne had completed his education, trained as a soldier and mage and joined SEELIE to fight in the Apostle Wars. At least now, with Godhand in disarray, there was a chance to get these students back on track.

No matter what the circumstances, though, he was still responsible for a crisis that had almost ended in tragedy. He knew they blamed him, and he knew both students and teachers alike would be questioning his leadership capabilities. It wouldn't help for much, but the least he could do was try to apologise. He approached the students and cleared his throat.

"I'd like to have a word with you all, if that's possible," he said, and waited for the teenagers to quieten down. If he could have guessed beforehand which students he'd find here, he would have: the 'school newspaper' staff was always skirting the borders of trouble, while Joel Gibson was as dedicated a boyfriend as there ever could be. Payne wouldn't have guessed Elone Kent or Dante Orpheus would be involved, though, and he could tell that both were still shaken by whatever experiences they'd had inside, as were Kaori Shimomura and Shelley Edwards. For all Laura Clarke's alchemic healing and Yuki Shimomura's psychic empathy, there were still things neither could cure – unless they could invade the students' minds and rearrange memories. If they could, Kaori wouldn't have to live with haunting memories of being beaten by Inquisitors for information she didn't have, while Shelley would be able to let go of the darkness she'd been imprisoned in and the taunts she'd endured. That Katrina Ritches appeared unharmed still confused Payne, however, and he would have to investigate once he'd dealt with the current situation. When the students were paying attention, he continued.

"I know you think I'm going to chastise you for your reckless behaviour – and it *was* reckless – but I wanted to say something quite different. I wanted to apologise." He waited a few moments to let that revelation sink in. "It's my fault that this situation developed the way it did. I refused to act because of politics on countless occasions, and this was no different. I only wish I realised my mistakes sooner, so none of you would have suffered as you have.

"You have all been kept in the dark about a lot of things and I think it's time we stopped hiding behind illusions. Now a lot of the blame could be placed on Godhand for pressurising us, but..." He noticed Shelley Edwards poking the air with a slim finger. "Yes, Shelley?"

"Are we gonna save Phantasia now?" she asked. The other students mumbled their agreement and Payne realised his lecture would have to wait.

"You're done enough," he replied.

"But the Patriarch is some kind of magic user!" said Katrina. She waved her camera around. "I've got the proof on here!"

"Please, you've got to save Phantasia. I don't want her to suffer..." said Kaori. Her voice was trembling and Payne wondered if she was reliving her torture. From the sidelines he could sense her mother extending an empathic shroud to support her. Joel kept his arm around her, but there was no doubt he was ignorant to her true suffering as an idea dawned in his eyes.

"We can take out that bastard Patriarch *and* Bishop Wotan!" he said, "Totally blow the shit outta that place! They deserve it for what they did!"

The rising plume of black smoke in the distance told Payne that they'd been enough destruction for one day – but he wasn't a hormonal teenager.

"Wait!" said Katrina, "Bishop Wotan was *fighting* the Patriarch!"

"The hell?" asked Theseus, echoing in coarser language what Payne had been thinking.

"I don't understand it all myself," said Katrina, "But I think he set everything up to expose the Patriarch as a fraud?"

So that's *what it was all about*, thought Payne, just *typical Garland scheming. Still sees himself as the anti-hero after all these years...*

The students were less-than understanding. Joel was the first to snap with a stream of expletives.

"That bastard! The fuck's he using us for? He..." He glanced at Kaori. "That bastard put Kao through all that shit, just to get at this Patriarch?"

More shouting followed, as Joel, Doyle, Lyra and Theseus led the cursing marathon, but Payne lost himself in his thoughts as he watched the smoke rise into the grey sky.

You planned this all out from the start, didn't you? Joining Godhand, becoming a Bishop, relocating to here of all places. I should've known it wasn't just to antagonise me. You were always thinking ten steps ahead. Now what? You can't go back to Godhand after this.

Yuki Shimomura was calming the students down, while Brian Smith popped up next to Payne.

"You're lost again," he said. Typical Brian statement of fact.

"I'm just wondering about Garland," he replied, "I mean, Bishop Wotan."

"Sounds like he played all of us for fools," said Brian, "But we all knew he was plotting *something*, and that it involved you. Guess we now know why he didn't obey his cult and wipe us all out,"

"We have to help him," said Payne, surprising himself as much as Brian.

"You think he'd want that?"

Payne thought for a moment. *No, he wouldn't.*

"Mate, you go in there and fight that Patriarch and Godhand will come down on us. If he wanted your help, the bastard would've *asked* for it. Think about it."

I am, and I know.

"He's always enjoyed baiting you. We've all seen it, even if you haven't. Right now he's gonna get the kill on this Patriarch knowing you can't do jack about it. And not only that, but he gets to save your ass from Godhand!"

Payne knew Brian was right. If they struck out against the Patriarch, Godhand would blame everything on them. If they left Garland alone, he would shoulder the blame – and become the hero.

"Whatever sentiment you have for that guy, you've gotta let it go," said Brian, "He's given you the chance right now and what's more important: these kids or your own pride?"

Payne watched the manor burn, and found himself willing his old rival to win for a change. He'd never be able to live it down – Garland would never let him forget that Wotan always surpassed Siegfried – but the alternative was a lonely one.

Through the smoke and flames, Phantasia could just about make out what was left of the opposite end of the long throne room. It looked as if the end of the building had been ripped away leaving a crumbling precipice hanging over the church below and a gaping hole in the ceiling above. The deep red carpet, along which Phantasia had arrived in Wotan's company only a few hours before, was feeding the flames, which danced ever closer, as if the carpet were a fuse and Wotan's throne its bomb.

The cause of all this destruction, one Yokai Kitsune, had collapsed on one knee from exertion. Phantasia understood the feeling well: the Fire faerie had channelled a great deal of power – enough manifest a reaction in the physical world – and was now struggling to recuperate in the harsh ethereal environment, tainted as it was by countless human emotions. The lingering sentiment of the Patriarch only served to make things worse – death had such a strong impact on mana that it required special attention from the Reapers, the so-called 'faeries of Death'. It wouldn't be long now before Phantasia and Yokai would be able to sense the chill of their purity descending on the scene. Of all the Fae, the Death faeries were the least sociable and most feared. Able to harness the powers of all four elements, they took it upon themselves to tend to the cycle of life, death and reincarnation that kept the world running. When someone died – be they human, demon or faerie – a Reaper would help guide their spirit onwards. In the case of human deaths, the Reapers would also need to tend to the scene itself, as death could cause a variety of side-effects ranging from feelings of regret manifesting as haunting apparitions to animalistic demons forged from a murder's hate.

As similar as she was to them in many ways, Phantasia wasn't a Death faerie. Death faeries didn't purify corruption. Instead, they would divert the streams around it, and then try to remove the cancer using their scythes. If that wasn't enough, the contamination could be condensed until it took a demonic state that could be killed, exploding the corruption wide into the streams, rather than leaving it to rot. That was probably what would happen here, with the remnants of the Patriarch – unless Phantasia did something about it first. If only she had the energy!

“Phantasia, I was meaning to ask you,” said Wotan, “Your powers aren't like an ordinary faerie's, are they?”

“I purify the Darkness,” she said, “I've not got an elemental alignment. Actually, some think I'm like a merging of the elements, but don't use any of their powers. I can't.”

Yokai picked herself up and wheezed. “Sucks to be you. How'd you think you could kill that geezer if you couldn't blast him with anything?”

“I figured I'd try and purify his aura,” said Phantasia, “I thought it might have the same effect as when I fought the leansídhe. I kinda forgot about the whole physical body thing though,”

The red-haired faerie tried to laugh, but coughed instead.

“It wouldn't have mattered,” said Wotan, “That shadow you purified was just a corruption of chi. It's easy to detoxify the air, but to cure a living being of poison takes something else – especially if the poison is what gives them strength!”

Phantasia felt stupid, like she was back in the Water Queendom listening to a scholar trying to explain how to read the waters. She hadn't really thought her plans through and had acted on instinct. It was hard to make a plan when you didn't understand your own powers! True, if she'd paid more attention in class...

Yokai laughed properly this time. “You mean to say you tried to *heal him with love*?”

Phantasia felt a shiver of embarrassment. At least Wotan was an adult – Yokai was only a year older than her at most! It was worse than having Faye chastise her brash actions. At least Faye was a Water faerie and so prone of tactless, truthful statements. Yokai was a Fire faerie – they were just arrogant.

“It was worth a try,” Phantasia mumbled.

Yokai shrieked with laughter, her strength obviously returning in droves. “As if you think *love* can solve everything! Don't you realise that's the cause of all these problems? And you're trying to *encourage* it?”

Phantasia hid behind her fringe, unable to meet the flaming eyes of the Fire faerie. Yokai waltzed past her and towards Wotan, hands on hips and head held high.

“Yokai has a point,” said the former-Bishop, “Love may be a strong, positive emotion, but like all light it casts a shadow. The stronger a person loves, the stronger they hate.” He took a few steps towards his throne, then looked back at Phantasia. “Godhand itself is proof of that. It encourages devotion from its subjects and its Inquisition practices exorcism magic fuelled by faith – yet at the same time, that power is put to use to discriminate and destroy opposing ideologies. The Patriarchs' shared vision is of a world worshipping one almighty power – a world without war or suffering – and yet you have now seen the corruption one of them is capable of,”

Yokai eased her top up so Phantasia could see her midriff, where the mark of a spider was patterned across her ribs. “You better understand it,” she said. She poked the tattoo with her finger. “Apeliotos sacrificed himself for you, remember.”

“If everything was as easy as 'Light' and 'Darkness'” continued Wotan, “Then the world wouldn't be in the state it is.”

“Like 'purifying' everything will make it better,” said Yokai, “How you gonna purify it? By killing everybody?”

Phantasia still couldn't meet their eyes. They stood on the steps, looking down on her like frustrated teachers. “I just want everyone to be happy...” she whimpered.

Wotan sighed. "One person's happiness is another's pain. Light and Darkness are forever entwined. You'd do best to forget such things."

But it's important! If people are sad then bad things happen!

"First Fae I've ever known to get herself worked up over it," said Yokai.

I'm not! Queen Thetis and Prince Dionysus – they were worried about it too! They wanted to find a way to save the world just as much as I do!

Wotan chuckled. "She is a rather unique individual, though, but still a faerie. Like you, her personality and subconscious goals are as ingrained as her element, whatever that may be."

"Sounds like trouble to me. Doesn't 'purification' sound demonic to you?"

"I'm used to hearing the term from Godhand. 'The Purification of Our World' is a tome by one of the old Patriarchs, I believe. Nasty stuff, too. The moral is very much just 'kill everything that's different to protect yourself from pain'."

"Just like her, then. She wants to get rid of all the 'bad' things without even thinking what's so 'bad' about them in the first place."

That's not true! I just want to protect everyone from getting hurt! That's not a bad thing, is it?

"That's the faerie mindset, though, you have to agree."

"Hey, that's why one reason we abandoned them. Got fed up of all that self-righteous crap from Queen Amaterasu about fighting the evil demons to help secure the future. Like that's helped us in the past!"

Why is protecting people from bad things wrong? What would I do if someone tried to protect me from bad things? Like if someone had saved Dionysus from death? But then...that made me stronger, didn't it?

"It's been the same for too long. An Apostle shows up; everyone fights; the Fae try to kill the Apostle; the spirit lingers; the Apostle is reborn; the cycle continues. That's why some of us stopped trying to kill them in the last war and got into trouble with the Fae. Sealing them away wasn't good enough, apparently. Like the faeries knew any better!"

If I hadn't suffered Dionysus's death, I would never have found the World Axis. I'd have never made it here! And if I'd not been attacked by that leansídhe, I'd not have begun to understand my powers...

"Totally stuck in their routines. They'll only be happy when all humans are dead and there's no corruption. Maybe that's why she's like that – will of the faeries given form, ey?"

No! That's not true!

"Perhaps. But I doubt she would be so inclined to save her friends if she was. At any rate, I'd rather be leaving this place sooner rather than later. There should be a Reaper here soon,"

Phantasia shot up from her introspection, eyes wide as she scanned the chamber and its surroundings. "There're no Reapers around – I can sense them coming before most people, and it doesn't take this long for one to show!"

Wotan still had his back to her – and the devastation – but she could feel the sudden tension in his aura, as if he'd come to the same conclusion she was making.

"Something's still here! The Patriarch isn't--"

Yokai scoffed. "Forget it; I wasted that old geezer already,"

"Quiet, Yokai," said Wotan, "She's right."

There was stillness in the air, like the flames had decided to die of their own accord. Then the voice came, a familiar, yet monstrous voice.

"What a shame. I was enjoying your little conversation."

The ground shook, sending stone raining down on the chamber from above. At the far end of the room, the fires flickered and died as they were consumed by a bubbling black mist that rose through the floor, black lightning crackling along its swirling contours.

The corruption Phantasia had felt before wasn't a remnant of the Patriarch – it was the Patriarch!

He emerged from the cocoon of darkness, no longer human. His body had embraced mana, becoming one with it, shaping him into a new, demonic form. Chitin armour covered his lower body, while his face had contorted to something akin to a skeletal mantis. Insectoid wings unfurled from his back, while his arms had become grasping, spiked pincers.

For the first time since Cecaelia's assault on the Water Queendom, Phantasia was faced with a true, sentient demon.

Chapter 24

Transmutation

The transformed hulk of the Patriarch took a few earth-shuddering steps out of the magical black mist as it began to dissipate.

"Did that old codger just become a demon?" asked Yokai. She was backing away, her pride no doubt battered by the realisation that her dramatic entrance had achieved nothing. Wotan seemed less intimidated by the revelation, however.

"It's impossible to tell," he said, "He could have transcended decades ago and hidden his true face, or your attack could have pushed him over that point of no return. What is important right now is that the thing in front of us is more than human. Our tactics must change."

The two sides stared each other down, like two Water faeries locked in a battle of strategy and wits. Phantasia thought back to her last – and first – encounter with a sentient demon, Cecaelia. The Patriarch's aura was equally as potent as the former-faerie's had been, if not more-so, and she wondered how the three of them could ever defeat such a monster.

Then the first move was made. The Patriarch flung himself through the air in an arcing jump with such speed that they were lucky to evade him – had Phantasia and Yokai not been faeries, then they would have been dead from the opening gambit.

Wotan, on the other hand, was forced to tap into his own magical power. Phantasia noticed tattoos arching across his face and chest just before he leaped to safety, and she could sense his aura opening up like the unfurling wings of a faerie. The magic power could only help him so much, though. Unless he too was a demon, he would end up trapped by the human limitations the Patriarch had surpassed.

While the muscular mantis-demon tried to corner the more agile human, Yokai launched an attack of her own. Phantasia kept her distance, watching as the Patriarch's black lightning held off Yosei's fire, his snapping pincers lashing out as Wotan dove for cover behind his throne. In that moment, the ceiling above came crashing down and Yokai used the brief reprieve to focus her power and send one of her flaming wheels cutting through the floor in the Patriarch's direction.

Instead of the expected explosion, the Patriarch grabbed the spinning disk of energy and flung it back towards the throne and Wotan, who scrambled away before the area exploded into flames. Yokai stood panting, her defences wide open from her attack, while the Patriarch turned to confront her. Realising she had to do *something* Phantasia shot forwards and caught the Patriarch off-guard, using her power to stun him long enough for her to dive at Yokai and tackle the two of them through the floor and into the church below. Powerless, they fell to the ground like lead, phasing through wooden benches with enough force to kill a human, before coming to a hovering rest just above the stone ground. Grunting her frustration, Yokai rolled away from Phantasia, picked herself up and readjusted her ethereal clothing.

“And what the *hell* do you think you're doing?” she asked as Phantasia busied herself with more important matters. Knowing Fire faeries as she did, Phantasia figured Yokai was under the false impression she could overpower the Patriarch without much effort. She knew that wasn't going to happen and had an alternative plan – one the Patriarch wouldn't be expecting. She'd only just gathered the tools she needed when the Patriarch came screaming through a circular hole in the ceiling, his body smashing into the benches below.

Phantasia didn't wait for an opening. She jumped high and dove straight at the demon before he could pick himself up. He noticed her attack and sent a quick blast of dark energy towards her, which she deflected before dropping her secret weapon at his feet. Before he had a chance to react, she pushed the detonator and readied herself to avoid the force of the explosion by phasing through it. The physical shockwave was followed by second, psychic blast as the Patriarch's rage exploded. Phantasia threw herself towards it like an arrow, hoping to break through rather than be tossed aside. Though it sapped at her strength, she managed to reach her target and focused everything she had left on the Patriarch's now-disembodied spirit. His physical shell was now a flaming husk torn apart by the plastic explosives and there was no way he would be able to shield himself against her power.

Only there was. A pincer lashed out from the crumbling ruins of the Patriarch's body with enough hatred behind it to knock Phantasia flying backwards. Yokai caught her before she could pass through several walls and the two girls spun to a halt near a stained glass window. For a moment they floated there, but as their energy faltered they began to drift back down to the ground. As her feet touched the cold floor, Phantasia stumbled backwards against the wall. She felt burning pain eating away at her abdomen and looked down to see her ethereal clothes had been torn away and a scar was developing across her midsection.

Yokai was panting, still struggling to reclaim her strength. “I told you, didn't I? You can't heal him with love!”

Phantasia found it difficult to speak. “I was...exorcising him...”

There was a malevolent guffaw and both girls watched horrified as the remains of the Patriarch's original body crumbled to ash, only to reveal a second body beneath it. Phantasia could feel Yokai trembling, but the Fire faerie tried to maintain her pride.

“Didn't they teach you *anything*?” she asked, “Sure, destroy the body to vanquish the spirit, but you've got to remember that a demon can reform its body so long as it has power!”

The Patriarch was looking at them, his skull-like face broken into a fanged grin. His legs braced themselves to pounce and neither faerie had the strength left for evasive manoeuvres. Phantasia once again found herself cursing her lack of knowledge.

“You've gotta *overpower* it!” continued an increasingly desperate Yokai, “It's all about power. *Everything's* about power!”

The Patriarch was about to attack when a body fell from above and landed in front of the faeries with a grace Phantasia would never have expected from a human.

“This man's power is greater than both of yours,” said Wotan, “But I believe I'm ready to even the field now.”

The Patriarch tilted his head and grumbled. “Are you suggesting you have ascended beyond humanity too, Garland?”

“Unlike you, I have managed to retain my humanity for the most part,” replied Wotan.

The Patriarch relaxed his posture and the muscles of his legs were no longer braced for an attack. “Certainly your powers are greater than I would have expected of a mere mortal,” he said, “The power to atomise physical matter is something I'd expect to see from demons, not a human,”

Wotan grunted his amusement at the Patriarch's odd naivety. "Even in this state you're still just a Godhand devout?" he said, "For someone who has embraced the same heresy they condemn I'd have expected wider knowledge of the magical arts,"

"Our position gives us privileges," said the Patriarch, "But we are as loyal to the true God as any others who follow. Your powers, on the other hand, are the work of heathens and blasphemers. Surely a man like yourself can understand why such power is dangerous for ignorant humans to wield?"

"The nature of the power isn't what's important," replied Wotan. He glanced back at Phantasia, "It's how you make use of that power."

The Patriarch laughed, his gaping jaw opening wide. "Humans are too weak to use such power responsibly! You are living proof that we are right!" He hunkered down, once again gathering strength in his legs to attack, but Wotan was still nonchalant.

"Then I guess if the basic transmutation I used up there was an example of 'irresponsibility', what I'm about to do much be the height of anarchy!"

Phantasia could tell that both men were drawing on a great deal of magical power – the Patriarch from the lingering corruption of Godhand's teaching, Wotan from his own internal control – but neither seemed prepared to unleash it. Any moment now, she could tell, one would make a move and the other would counter. If only she could tell what those moves were and which one would emerge victorious!

The Patriarch narrowed his eyes, his muscles tensing in the remaining moments. "Even if you were somehow to kill me, the other Patriarchs would chase you down until you were torn to pieces. You *and* your daughter! If you value her life, you will die here."

"That was my intention all along." said Wotan, "Death holds no power over me."

"I'm glad to see you have come to your senses."

"Unlike our white-haired friend, here, you don't see *anything*."

The Patriarch lurched forwards, his body crackling with unholy lightning. Instead of releasing his magic in some kind of ranged attack, he was using it to enhance his own physical power! Wotan would have to penetrate both mystical and physical barriers before he could even think of striking the Patriarch's ethereal form!

But Wotan didn't show the slightest concern at the demonic form speeding towards him. He was mumbling an esoteric mantra under his breath while forming a mudra with his hands: the mudra of release. Just before the Patriarch struck out, the mantra ended with a final statement.

"Gotterdammerung."

Gotterdammerung.

Payne froze, the familiar voice popping into his thoughts. His staff and students were in the midst of bundling into vans and mini-buses alongside SEELIE cadets, everyone tired from the day's escalating crisis. If only they realised, as Payne now did, just how it was going to end. He wanted to call out, to cry at Garland to stop and reconsider his choice, but all he could do was take a sharp intake of breath and swivel to face the direction of the manor.

He felt it first in the winds of the world's chi: a calmness in the currents of ethereal matter like the sea before a tsunami. Then there was the flash and a high-pitched screeching, followed by the thundering ripples of distortion that alerted his more sensitive associates to what was about to happen. On the material plane the spell was manifesting as a sphere of growing light consuming the heart of Godhand's base and its half-finished clock tower. It remained for a second, a swirling mass of magical energy as bright as the moon, then imploded with a sudden silence.

Payne felt every muscle in his body tense up. The silence was soon penetrated by the sound of the clock tower collapsing. Several of his staff stood by him, having noticed Garland's final trump card and he felt Amber Thorburn's hand brush against his arm. She understood what had just happened. Twenty years or so ago, she'd predicted it: *'one will sacrifice their life for the other'* or something to that effect. Back then everyone laughed at the idea of Payne or Garland doing anything so drastic for their eternal rival, but Amber's gloomiest predictions always had a habit of coming true, as if the future really was predetermined.

"What the hell kinda power was that?" asked Brian Smith, "Some kind of nuke?"

"That was some awesome destructive alchemy!" said Ms James, herself skilled in the art of altering physical matter, "By the looks of it, all physical matter in that sphere should've been disintegrated; a total transmutational meltdown! Wow, I'm dead jealous!"

Amber's hand tightened on Payne's bicep. His staff didn't – *couldn't* – understand. After all these years, Garland had taken his secret talent for disintegrating matter via alchemy to its human limits. The boy who'd called himself 'Wotan' and Payne 'Siegfried'. The student who had always surpassed him, but never put his abilities to constructive use. The rebel who had abandoned the SEELIE and fought his own war. The man who had embraced Godhand in order to destroy it. A mage who had honed his skills to such a degree that he could perform an incredible form of transmutation at the cost of his own life.

Payne trembled, then turned and continued with the evacuation. The final page had turned and; from here on, a new story would begin.

I'm sorry, Astrid.

Astrid stumbled over a root and caught herself on the nearest branch, before looking back at the manor, now just a cradle of ruins marked by a tower of smoke. Before she had a moment to contemplate what was happening, her eyes began to water up.

"What's up?" asked Elizabeth.

Remember your mother. Become strong, like she was.

A chill swept up through her body and turned her muscles to jelly. Her body collapsed, bare knees scraping against rough ground, and she sobbed into her hands. Elizabeth and Vespa didn't have time to react before the piercing sound came, like all the winds in the world were being sucked to a single point. Between the trees the sky lit up as a sphere of light grew in the midst of the manor before vanishing just as suddenly as it appeared.

Elizabeth gasped. "Oh my God! W-was that a bomb?"

"By the Saint," whispered Vespa, "Divine Judgement..."

Astrid couldn't care less whether it was a weapon or magic or a demon or holy intervention – all she wanted was for her father to speak to her head again. Anything, she didn't care what, just so long as she heard his voice again.

But all she heard was her own sorrow.

Who am I? Where did I come from? What are these powers of mine? What am I meant to do with them?

Phantasia floated through the white light, lost in her thoughts, her senses frazzled.

Is it really the will of my people to eradicate humans? Will I be forced to follow my destiny no matter what I think? Am I really causing my friends more harm than good?

She felt the serpent on her shoulder – the memento of Dionysus – tingle, and she remembered the kind prince with his distant, seeking eyes and sad smile, and some of the things he'd once told her.

"I do not think it matters who you are, or where you came from, just so long as you are you,"

"I will not give up trying to find an answer, but the last thing I want is to lose you, Princess. You have changed me."

"Sometimes I think you're as much a corruptive influence on us as humans are! I wouldn't be who I am today were it not for you,"

What is he trying to tell me? That, after all this searching, it doesn't matter who I am? It doesn't matter whether my powers are for good or evil?

Wotan's words came back to her.

"The nature of the power isn't what's important; it's how you make use of that power."

Why is everything so complicated? I don't know what's right or wrong, good or evil, light or dark! Everyone tells me something different!

More memories flowed through her head, memories of her fears given form by the leansídhe masquerading as Dionysus...

"What's the matter? What happened to that rebellious faerie I knew? The one who was determined to prove herself to everyone? Has she finally been defeated? Has she finally given up, knowing that she is a freak of nature? Has she fallen so far as to associate with mundane humans in the hopes of carving out an identity? Is this all that remains of Phantasia Celeste, the girl I called 'sister'?"

Memories of Faye...

"I find your behaviour illogical and offensive. You eschew conventions and formulate ideals outside reasonable thought. That is why I am intrigued by you. I wish to see where your unique path will lead."

And, finally, the figure who sent her here in the first place: the armoured stranger at the World Axis...

"Go there, and understand everything."

How many people have tried to control me? How many people have tried to tell me who I am? And since when did I let myself be controlled, used and manipulated? I never cared before! I always did things my way! I'm...

The light was sucked away, leaving Phantasia floating in the bleak twilight – everything from the church she'd been in, from the throne room above to the flat ground below, had vanished. A perfect sphere had been carved out of the physical world leaving a smooth crater in the earth and open sections of the manor all around. Above her she could see the magic had dissolved a chunk from the base of the clock tower and, soon after the ethereal light had faded, the physical force of gravity took its toll. The tower creaked towards the crater at first, then came crashing down in a rain of stone and steel. Phantasia shot backwards to avoid the skeletal structure as it piled into the crevice, dragging down the surrounding floors of the manor with it, and escaped to the former-courtyard now turned crater's edge. As the destruction slowed to the occasional cracking of slates and settling or girders she approached the edge of the pit and looked for signs of Yokai or the Patriarch. The Fire faerie had melted her way through the rubble and now stood atop the ruins like a victorious warrior – no doubt, like the rest of her kind, she would take full responsibility for the victory.

The Patriarch, however, was not in such good shape. From her analysis, Phantasia had concluded Wotan's magic had only affected physical matter, leaving herself and Yokai untouched and the Patriarch struggling to maintain a material anchor because – as she was sure he was aware – losing that advantage left him in a precarious situation with someone like her around!

And somehow he had managed it – but only just.

The demonic, muscular mantis-form that had given them so much trouble before had been decimated. The legs, abdomen and wings were gone, along with half an arm, leaving the Patriarch as little more than a breathless chest and head. Had he been human he would have been dead, but his demonic nature meant he would live on. He could gather his strength and regenerate his body, or abandon it and slip into the Underworld to plot to obtain a new one – he would be nigh-immortal. So long as his will maintained its strength. So long as his heart retained his memories. So long as he was never confronted by a being who could attack his ethereal presence. A being like a rival demon, a righteous magic-wielding human, or a faerie.

Unfortunately for the Patriarch, he was faced with two faeries right now, and the remainder of his body was the only thing protecting him from their power. So long as they couldn't touch that, he would survive, but there was fear in his eyes as Phantasia descended on him like a shining, white Reaper.

“Before Dionysus died, I never had a goal; I just lived each day as it came. But when I lost him, I lost myself and became obsessed with trying to find who I was and what my power was about. I came here and thought I could save everybody from the Darkness my people said was rampant. It gave me an identity and a purpose. But then all *this* happened. I came here to try and make peace between everyone, so that the Darkness would stop, but instead, hey, it all went a bit crazy, you know? But I've come to a realisation, thanks to you and Wotan and everyone else. I've discovered who I really am,”

The Patriarch grimaced in pain. “Who do you think you are?” he asked, his voice a harsh whisper, “A heavenly scion sent down to cleanse the world of impurity?”

Phantasia made a face of mock contemplation as she rummaged around in her back pocket. “Nah!” she said after a moment's pause, “I don't care about any of that rubbish! I'm not a 'scion' or an 'angel' or some other kind of heavenly being with a 'great destiny',”

“Then what in God's name *are* you?” The Patriarch trembled, but already he was beginning to absorb strength from the tainted mana surrounding them. She could tell he was gathering it, condensing it for an attack rather than using it to restore his body. It didn't matter, though. In fact, it amused her.

“Simple, really,” – almost too simple, she thought – “I'm Phantasia Celeste, Princess of the Water Queendom! And you, Mr Patriarch, are history,”

She pulled out the remaining, pea-sized glob of putty with its blinking microchip and dropped it. With his one hand, the Patriarch tried and failed to deflect it.

“See ya.”

Compared to her previous attack, and Wotan's own incredible magic, the explosion that followed was anticlimactic, but it was enough to blow apart the remainder of the Patriarch's body. Before he had a chance to latch himself on to the smallest sinew of flesh, she dropped down and threw all her remaining power at his aura. The dark shadow of his will tried to resist, but without a material anchor for protection, it was at the mercy of the ether. With a psychic scream of rage, the Patriarch's spirit dissolved into the leylines to be washed away by the streams of life.

“Next time why don't you try blasting him *before* the unnecessary life-affirming speech?”

Yokai had regained her strength and was watching Phantasia with a narrow, envious eye. With a grunt that almost sounded congratulatory, she skipped across the rubble to the collapsed base of the tower and lifted her arms into the air.

“At least now he's finished I can get on with things,” she said.

Phantasia wondered what the other faerie was on about, but was breathing too heavily with exertion to question her.

Then she shivered, a dread feeling washing over her. Even though the Patriarch had been defeated and his dark power purified, there was still a great deal of negative energy permeating the ruins. Negative energy that was beginning to move in a familiar, frightening way.

A bulbous black mass of shifting corruption seeped from the cracks, gathering form into largest leansídhe Phantasia had yet encountered. Of all the things to be here! Its presence must have been masked by the very darkness it consumed. With her power drained, all she could do was hope for another timely intervention.

But the leansídhe didn't attack. Once it had gathered its full force, it hovered, its irregular form swaying in the currents. Then it began to implode without reason. Something inside was affecting it, but the darkness was so thick Phantasia was blinded to it. The shadow shrank, the corruption compacting to a point that yanked at the leylines like a rock disrupting the flow of a river.

A crystal. A red ruby that glistened with anger and hate, pride and passion. It floated for a second, then fell into Yokai's welcoming palm.

"What're you staring at?" she asked Phantasia, "This was the perfect place to forge a fire-element crystal!"

Phantasia picked herself up and shook her head, white hair flying about her face. She wanted to pretend everything was just some crazy dream or hallucination brought about by overworking herself, or even that she was trapped in a leansídhe's illusion! It would help everything make sense!

"Oh, I get it!" said Yokai, tossing the crystal in one hand, "You wasted the water-wraith, didn't you? Good job we got plenty of back-ups with you around. Then again, he did warn us about you,"

There was only one possible way to explain this.

"You're behind everything!" said Phantasia.

"*Everything?* That'd be nice." Yokai chuckled. "Nah, this place was mine and Apeliotes's joint; I had nothin' to do with those other ones,"

"But you know who did!"

"Oh yeah, sure," She yawned. "I wouldn't get involved, though. Not that you won't. Hell, you're as much as part of the plan as these Godhand idiots were,"

Phantasia felt herself trembling, her fists clenching tight at the thought of another level of manipulators trying to control her actions and the lives of her friends. "I won't let you get away with this!" she cried.

"Yeah. Whatever." said Yokai, before shooting off into the sky, a flaming bolt that vanished beyond Phantasia's senses before she could even think of a reply.

Chapter 25

Children of War

Phantasia's head was filled with questions but, for once, none of them were about her. Yokai's revelations were at the forefront of her thoughts: who was she working with? What were the leansídhe for? How much had Godhand been manipulated? Would they strike again? And, the most pressing question, who was the one who 'warned' them about her?

Wotan's sacrifice also played on her thoughts. The crater of rubble around her was proof his final act was totally out of proportion – couldn't he have focused all that power into something more direct? Something that wouldn't have cost his life? She was glad that, unlike Yokai, Wotan hadn't fled the scene – his spirit still lingered, waiting for the inevitable arrival of a Reaper.

“You did well,” he said, his incorporeal form ‘sitting’ on a lump of stone. Phantasia shrugged off the compliment.

She looked around at the destruction. “Don’t you think you went a bit over the top?”

“There was little choice. I had no idea how strong the Patriarch was, so I had to throw everything at him – including my life! And even that wasn’t enough...” Wotan scowled for a second, but then chuckled to himself, “Besides, I had to show Rembrandt Payne just how far I’ve pushed myself,”

Phantasia was dumbfounded. Of all the things to die for!

“How could you be so selfish? What about Astrid?”

Wotan frowned, his eyes focused on the rubble beneath his feet. “I was never much of a father,” he said, “There was nothing else I could do for her. She is a shining example of my failures. I can only hope she finds the light within that she lost all those years ago.”

Human logic was frustrating. Where was Queen Thetis of Faye when she needed them?

“Because your death is going to help her so much, isn’t it?”

Wotan’s forlorn expression didn’t change, as if he’d resigned himself to failure. “Death changes everything. Her mother’s death changed us both, perhaps mine will remedy that. It’s not like I helped her in life!”

Phantasia clenched her teeth, contemplating whether or not to go over and strike the spirit for his selfishness, but decided to stay her hand. Wotan would carry his guilt, and all the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’, in his heart until he found his peace with them – that would be punishment enough.

Then she felt the cold tingling sensation, the lonely chill that heralded the arrival of a Death faerie. The aura was as potent as the one she’d felt back when Dionysus died, surprising her – she’d not expected Wotan to be worthy enough of a Grim’s attention.

“Thank you,” said Wotan, “For not simply dissolving my spirit into the streams of life as you did the Patriarch’s. I have no desire to become one with the Great Spirit just yet.”

Phantasia turned and prepared to leave, but looked back one last time. “Don’t think that means I forgive you. I won’t forget the way you’ve treated people – and my friends – like pieces of your game.”

“I don’t expect you to understand. I am – as is Rembrandt Payne – a child of war. By the age of your friends, we were fighting horrors. Suffering was part of our lives. If you’re not careful, that same cycle will come around and claim your friends too,”

Phantasia jumped up the edge of the crater. “Then I’ll be there to stop it,” she said, walking away.

With both the leansídhe and Patriarch gone, the dark aura enveloping the manor was diluted. Phantasia cut through it with ease, leaving a trail of purified mana in her wake as she followed the faint astral trails of her friends. She found them huddled together a short distance from the manor, accompanied by Mr Payne and Mr Smith, waiting at the wheel of his grumbling van.

The moment they saw her, there was an outpouring of relief and joy, but even that couldn’t disguise the damage she could sense in their auras. They had all suffered, physically and mentally, to help their friends and Phantasia couldn’t find the words to express how proud she was. Before she had a chance to speak, Shelley threw her arms around Phantasia’s waist, burying her sobs in her shoulder. Phantasia held her for a moment, then prised the frail girl away and moved to greet the others, only for Kaori to shuffle forwards and fall into her arms.

“I thought you were dead...” she said.

“Nah. Takes more than that to finish me off!” Phantasia stroked her hair, sensing the deep scars in Kaori’s spirit and hoping her power could soothe them.

Katrina hovered over. Of all of them, she bore the least emotional trauma, but still looked like she would sleep for days. “What happened?” she asked, “Is the Patriarch...?”

“The Patriarch’s a goner,” Phantasia replied. Joel and Theseus whooped in the background, exchanging high-fives.

“I must say, I am impressed!” said Phoenie, who sidled over as Kaori moved back to Joel, “I’m not sure what happened over there, but it looked like a bomb went off! The others were worried you wouldn’t survive, but I had faith in you until the end!”

“Yeah right, you were practically in tears!” said Theseus, “Say, Phantasia, what the hell was that explosion anyway?”

“It didn’t register on my sensors,” added John.

Would it matter if she told them the truth again? Or would they forget everything like they did the last time?

“It was a bomb,” she said, “Of sorts.” The boys looked disheartened at the lack of elaboration and she left it at that.

“So, Godhand is finished for good, right?” asked Joel.

“Don’t be ignorant, Mr Gibson,” said Phoenie, “Godhand is a world-spanning organisation!”

“Yeah, but who cares about the ‘world’, they’re gone from *here!*” he replied.

Katrina exchanged a worried look with Phantasia. She’d been there, heard the Patriarch’s threats and seen some of the powers at work outside the walls of Torsten Academy. She knew Phantasia wasn’t human, and the doubtful look in her eyes as her friends celebrated said she understood: this was just a brief reprieve until bigger things. Dante, propped against a wall in the shadows, watching everything from behind his face-hugging scarf, looked like he agreed with them. Even when Joel attempted to goad some cheer out of him, the conflicted boy nudged him away. Behaviour they were accustomed to, but which Phantasia now began to see in a new light.

Dante wasn’t the only blip in the shadows that stood out worse than the hormonal zits scattered across Joel’s gleeful face. Phantasia disentangled herself from the commotion and slipped over to where Mr Payne stood, hands in pockets, watching the dying smoke from the manor drift away in the winds. For all her anger with him, she had to be tactful for once. Mr Payne noticed her approach from the corner of his eye.

“Rosencrantz – that is, Bishop Wotan – he...”

“He’s dead,” she replied. No point hiding the truth.

“I thought as much,”

“The Patriarch was a demon. Wotan sacrificed himself to make sure he was defeated.”

“Typical heroics,”

Heroics? There were so many words Phantasia wanted to say right now: angry words about how both Wotan and Payne had let their own personal feud run out of control. She could still feel Kaori’s pain and Shelley’s fear! Had these two grown men behaved like adults, none of this would have happened!

“Rosencrantz and I have – had – a long history,” he explained, “Had he not been here, things would have been worse. I, my staff, and many of my students would have already been put to death. He and I may not have been friends but we had an understanding. Constant clashing of the wits to see who could oust who first, I guess you could say, and I know that it’s all very childish before you accuse me of that too!”

“It wasn’t just your game, though, was it? Everyone was involved, right down to your own students!”

“That was never my intention. Politics prevented me from acting sooner.”

“Who cares about politics and rules?” Phantasia found herself throwing her arms around in flailing gestures. “Ignore them! *Break* them! I Know I won't hesitate to if it means protecting my friends!”

Mr Payne nudged his glasses and his eyes narrowed. He was in Headmaster mode again. “That's what Rosencrantz used to say, and look what became of him. He flouted moral rules in order to achieve the greater good. How is that any different to what you're saying?”

His stern glare weighed down on her and she was reminded of King Nereus who, when confronted about a decision, could use logic and reasoning to turn that person's argument against them. Unlike the Water King, however, Rembrandt Payne had a certain human sparkle in the depths of his eyes.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you,” he said, relaxing, “Maybe you can see now just how complicated the human world is? And none of us humans understand it either. We just do what we can to make the world a better place – and everyone disagrees on what that 'better place' should be. Part of being an adult is...”

“But I'm not an adult, or even a human. I'm a *faerie!*”

“Indeed. And that gives you a unique perspective on our primitive behaviour!” Mr Payne placed a hand on her shoulder and she could feel warmth replacing his cold despair. “I'm from a generation brought up for war, and your generation are the orphans of it. We were forced to grow up young and put our lives on the line for the greater good. Alongside our friends we fought monsters from the Underworld, and we saw our own friends turn into monsters we were forced to fight. As adults the last thing any of us want is to see our children – and their children – trapped in that same cycle of destruction.

“As I said to you the other day, we're only human. We do what we believe is for the best, even if, like the Patriarchs, our beliefs come from a supposed 'higher source'.”

Beliefs from a higher source? Phantasia understood more than humans that the highest source wasn't a creator-being or powerful force (those were frequently just demons masquerading to manipulate humans!) but the glowing centre of the planet, the heart of the world from all life began and all life would eventually return. What did the world *itself* believe was 'for the best'? Were they all just pieces in a heavenly game, as the collective consciousness sought to bring about its desired conclusion? Was Phantasia, a unique being, a key part of that scheme? Those thoughts played on her mind as everyone bundled into the last transport, huddled together in the secure knowledge that Godhand would no longer be troubling them for a while. One by one they were dropped off at their homes: Joel at a run-down house on the outskirts; Kaori at a cottage in the fields near the school; Lyra, Katrina and Dante at the orphanage. Andromeda, Phoenie, Doyle and Theseus all lived in average homes around the town, while Elone was lucky enough to have a family who could afford to live in one of the finer, fully-renovated buildings in the northern suburbs. John was the last to depart, dropped off by his father outside the store they ran in town, and still Phantasia couldn't comprehend the enormity of existence, nor why humans were convinced that they could.

As she slipped out the van and wandered up the path towards the church, she decided there was no point worrying about an answer to such massive questions. After all, the world only told you what the world wanted you to know.

Phantasia spent much of the weekend in the peaceful sanctuary of the church, both recovering her strength and attempting to learn how to control and harness it. If Godhand was just the beginning, she was going to make sure she was ready for whatever came next! According to the *Veritas* cell phone she'd been given by Phoenie to keep her in contact with 'the rest of the investigation team', her human friends had spent their days off

resting too. The weekend's constant drum of rain wouldn't encourage them to leave the shelter of their homes, either. When Phantasia walked to school on Monday morning, the squall had yet to let up. Roads were overflowing, with some derelict streets turning to rivers that some people chose to navigate via small punting boats. As she approached the school, which was on higher ground, the streets were still riddled with puddles and small streams flowing into drains, but all the humans needed to get around were hefty boots and umbrellas rather than boats!

Arriving at the Academy, Phantasia could already feel the vibes she'd been dreading and snippets of overheard dialogue confirmed her fears before she'd even reached her form room.

"I heard it was a *gas explosion!*"

"...took out the entire manor..."

Another false reality. Another set of mind-altering magicks. Another opportunity for Phantasia's existence to cause confusion, disorientation and potential harm. She'd been lucky the last time – Katrina's mind had been unravelled in the relative calm of Wotan's plotting, but had it happened later, when the Patriarch was threatening them...

Phantasia cursed whoever was responsible for the memory-twisting, and vowed to track them down, even if they used those same magicks to hide themselves!

Sapphire Second was empty when she arrived, with the exception of Ms Thorburn, who sat at her desk playing with another esoteric divination toy. She pushed the sticks aside when Phantasia entered.

"Those kids are always late when it rains," she explained, "It makes things easier, though. Sit down, m'love," She gestured to the chair in front of her desk. Phantasia sat down and watched as her tutor slipped her toys into a flayed pull-string bag. "I assume you've overheard by now about the 'gas explosion'?"

Was she under sway of the spell too? "It wasn't a gas explosion..." began Phantasia, trailing off as she wondered just how much she could say before confusion seized the teacher's head. Would she think Phantasia was mad for doubting the 'truth'?

"I know, dear," she replied. Phantasia relaxed. "Someone's been using illusions to keep certain events hidden from the students. The kids don't have the spiritual power or understanding to tell reality from fantasy – not yet, anyway,"

"You're going to teach them now to protect their memories?" asked Phantasia.

"Encouraging inner control through meditation has always been a part of the curriculum, even with Godhand around. Now they're gone, we can encourage the kids to take those basics further and learn how to control their chi."

That would help everyone. Her friends' lack of awareness made them vulnerable – had Kaori and the others a better sense of their internal strength, then the leansídhe would've had a much tougher time manipulating them.

"I wanted to ask," she began, "What this place is all about. Ever since I met Mr Payne I've been suspicious. You're with the Seelie Court, aren't you?"

Mrs Thorburn chuckled. "I love how nothing gets past you, m'love. I remember before you came here, Mr Payne was worried you'd see through the cover we'd put up to deter Godhand and accidentally expose us all! Queen Thetis had to assure him that there were measures in place to protect us." For a moment she was lost in a daydream, a wry smile of her face. Then she took a gulp of coffee and continued.

"This place was created as a gateway to SEELIE, a mercenary force that works as part of the Seelie Court you're familiar with. Academies like this teach students the basics about the world and how to survive in it – the stuff that doesn't get covered in the normal schools because they'd rather kids grow up to be 'productive' members of society. It's not much good being 'productive' if society ends up overrun by demons though, is it?"

That much made sense, but also veered close to Wotan's accusations of the school being a front of military training. No point jumping to conclusions, though.

“So we teach kids how to *survive*,” continued her tutor, “After they graduate, they can go become productive workers or wander the world as vagrants, or they can join SEELIE as cadets. There they're trained in a wider variety of subjects, including magic, and are encouraged to focus on their strengths and cover their weaknesses.”

Phantasia narrowed her eyes to slits, which appeared to startle Ms Thorburn. “So, are you teaching them to be soldiers?” When her teacher laughed at the suggestion, she was caught off-guard and annoyed. Mrs Thorburn couldn't be treating the whole subject as a game like Mr Payne and Wotan, surely?

“No, not at all!” she said, “But we give them that *choice*. Learning the basics of controlling their chi, or understanding how spells work, or simply how to survive when faced with a Shadow or demon – that's not teaching them to be soldiers, no more than teaching them martial arts will make them a street fighter.

“It was different for us. We grew up during the Apostle Wars, so we began our education a lot younger than you. Rosencrantz never agreed with Rembrandt that everyone should be taught the truth, though. He believed most people were too irresponsible to make use of even the most basics of magic, and he abhorred SEELIE.”

She took a long drink from her mug, wiped her mouth clean with a handkerchief and blinked away the daydreams. “I digress, though. No, we don't teach them to be wizards or warriors. Can you imagine some of these kids being soldiers? Lysander? Angelo? Dante? Doyle's the only one in this class who can hold a weapon, and John's the only one with the common sense and responsibility to use magic – but, like his father, refuses to acknowledge it exists! But, now Godhand isn't breathing down our necks, we can at least teach them stuff to help them cope in the world, and maybe unlock some of their latent talents in the process. Besides, some of your fellow students don't even *need* our help. Mr Payne already has some of them signed up as junior cadets, which doesn't normally happen until you enter third year...”

Phantasia wondered who they could be. There were still plenty of students in the second year that she'd not managed to become acquainted with, but none struck her as an obvious choice. At their age, though, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development was in total flux and it was difficult to form definitive conclusions about anyone's potential. Someone like Joel, with poor psychic defences, could develop some over a matter of weeks just as easily as he could grow several inches from a growth spurt.

Ms Thorburn collapsed back in her chair and sighed. “I don't believe we'll avoid another war. I'm no prophet, contrary to what some people suggest – I'm just a seer – but I'm supposed to be good at predicting things. The Apostle Wars ended with an anticlimax, fifteen years ago. The Fae have always said the world can't sustain much more conflict before it dies and want to avoid any further wars, but it just feels like *fate* that we'll end up teetering on the edge of the abyss before things improve.

“I don't know what's going to happen, but I'd rather you were all prepared for it. Mr Payne thinks the same way, as do the rest of the staff. No one *wants* to see another generation turn into children of war, but if that's what fate decrees...”

The classroom door slammed open and Joel's soaking body stomped into the room with heavy black boots. Kaori followed, her face glowing with amusement as she sheathed her umbrella into a cosy purple-and-black case. Deluded by magic and innocent of the wider world, they – like their fellow students – enjoyed life as best they could. It would only be a matter of time before the illusion was shattered and they were thrust into the harsh reality of a world nearing destruction. Maybe it *was* for the best that they were prepared, after all?

During the morning break, the majority of students elected to stay indoors, even though the rain had died down to a gentle veil of mist. Phantasia did her social rounds, chatting with her various acquaintances about their opinion of Godhand's flight and the unsurprising disappearance of Astrid, Elizabeth, Vespa and Amanda.

"I'll never forgive her for this!" said Phoenie. The illusion removed her involvement from the whole affair, but had somehow retained the issue of Amanda's betrayal. Theseus, detached from his girlfriend in a mire of false memories, paced back and forth along the corridor, muttering to himself.

"I can't believe she upped and left like that," he would say, "I never did anything wrong!"

It wasn't the only issue left entangled by the lacklustre spell – Kaori found herself suffering flashbacks to 'nightmares' she'd been having all weekend, and Shelley sat alone in a corner, even more withdrawn than usual. At the rate everyone's minds were struggling to cope, it was inevitable that they'd begin to recall their true memories, but in such a way that would leave them only more confused! Phantasia wanted to dispel the layers of illusions with a click of her fingers, but it would require a Water faerie of some skill to do something like that. Frustrated, she found herself outside, away from the confusion.

"They haven't calmed down yet, I take it?" Dante was sitting on a damp wall, taking deep breaths of the refreshed air, a look of quiet serenity about him.

"Everyone seems a little on edge," she replied. She wandered close, but was careful to avoid his personal space. She didn't want him running away from her again!

"Godhand's gone," he said, "Suddenly we're free to be ourselves."

Phantasia took a few steps closer. "They stopped you before?"

"Yeah,"

She waited for elaboration, but Dante remained silent. "Were they after you?" she asked. It was a risky question but, instead of closing up, Dante laughed.

"I'm a freak. Everyone has something against me."

Phantasia took advantage of the opening and slid herself onto the furthest end on the wall. "I don't think you're a freak!" she said, focusing on his erratic aura. He maintained barriers even Queen Thetis would have trouble penetrating, but there were faint slithers desperate to break through and form worthwhile bonds.

"That's because you're a freak too," he said, making rare eye contact for the briefest moment. Phantasia inched closer.

"So, what's wrong with you?"

Dante noticed her approach and shifted away from her, his barriers intensifying. "Last person I told never spoke to me again,"

"Try me,"

He sat in silent contemplation, then turned his back and got to his feet. "I don't trust you," he said, "Not yet. I'm gonna go to next lesson now,"

His aura was closed as he walked away, but Phantasia was satisfied. 'Not yet' meant there was still hope.

Yokai twirled a strand of her brilliant red hair around a finger as she watched the powerful, handsome Prince Diffaith ponder recent events. Diffaith Tanio was a faerie with a vision, who had shown Yokai the light; shown her a way to escape the self-righteous nightmare of the Fire Queendom, where Queen Amaterasu and King Hachiman tried to rally their people into believing that fighting the 'Darkness' and 'forces of evil' would bring about a better world. In Diffaith's world, there was no 'good' or 'evil', just power. With wild, sandy-red hair and deep, carnelian eyes that always focused on the path forwards, he was

a true revolutionary – nothing at all like that Phantasia Celeste, that curious pet of Queen Thetis and her logic-ridden court of fools.

“Dyfrio believes this is an acceptable outcome,” he said, “That white-haired girl is going to be bothersome, but he tells me she flutters around darkness like insects drawn to fire. Her senses are superior, so all we have to do is watch her movements and let her lead us. That town is filled with corruption and there's a growing belief among certain circles that something is drawing it in – a powerful, magnetic force that grows by the week,”

“Yokai will find it for you!”

Diffaith shook his head. “No, you will be needed elsewhere. Tirio will handle the Torsten situation for the time being,”

She scowled. “Yokai doesn't like Tirio. He's too sensible and boring,”

Diffaith turned away, his wanderer's robes sweeping behind him with a dramatic swish. “But he *will* get the job done. He's the best candidate for dealing with Alastor and the manifestation ritual.”

Yokai growled at the mention of the demon's name. Sitting on the fringes of the Underworld, incorporeal and desperate for a body, the demon Alastor had no interest in their goals! Diffaith understood, though. He held the power to bring the demons in line.

“Don't worry,” he said, “Once we've secured a foothold in Torsten and its Underworld, we won't need the help of such minor demons. *Then* you can do whatever you want...”