

# Phantasia

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## Volume Six

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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.

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## A Mysterious Tome

Darkness consumed Phantasia, but curiosity had the young faerie in its grasp. Not that the dark bothered her like it did humans. If one of them tried to explore the crypts and catacombs entombed in the hill, they'd need all sorts of strange equipment just to navigate! For all the disadvantages of being a faerie in the human world – the vulnerability to emotions and magical forces, the inability to engage in social pleasantries such as eating and drinking, the strange looks received when walking down the street in underwear – not relying on some unreliable piece of inanimate, insentient technology made up for a lot.

She shuffled through the spiralling passageway, hunched down to avoid the low ceiling, until she came to a second crypt. Antechambers lined the walls, each one home to stone coffins inscribed with the names of wide-spread origin and all listed as having 'died for the Birth of Torsten'. At the end of the crypt, the shape of an arched door was carved into the stone wall, a magic circle filled with enchantments on its face.

It was the second sealed door she'd found. The first, on the floor above, connected the cobwebbed, rodent-infested church crypt to its lower, air-sealed twin. The faded magic would trick a person into thinking there was no door there, but Phantasia was immune to such archaic diversions. Ignoring the spell, she stepped through the wall and into the chamber on the other side.

It was a new chamber with walls hidden behind bookshelves filled with books and grimoires, preserved for centuries by the vacuum. A wooden desk sat at the centre of the room, its surface a patchwork of burns, ink spills and notches. There were memories and stories contained in that old wood, but nothing Phantasia could read. She'd have to convince Faye to visit, perhaps by playing on her stoic handmaiden's curiosity.

Books, however, she could read. She lounged in the chair sitting discarded by the desk and began to examine the tomes around her. Pages flashed by, her pale eyes devouring every word, diagram and illustration in seconds. Many books turned out to be records of supernatural activity and the measures taken to combat demonic forces; located at the heart of crossing leylines, where the route between worlds was easiest, the church would have been a bastion against the Underworld. One leather-bound volume in particular made references to 'another side' but, just as Phantasia was getting intrigued by reports of human excursions into 'the demonic realms', the pages turned blank. The text was still there, along with accompanying illustrations, but Phantasia couldn't read it, as if she'd lost her ability to process basic information. A quick glance at another book confirmed that she could still read, which meant the troublesome book was safe-guarded. Long ago, a spell had been cast – an enchantment spell – to prevent beings like her from perusing the data at their leisure. Only a human would be able to unlock the tome's deepest secrets. Someone with an understanding of archaic languages. Someone like Ms Anderson, the school's English teacher. Happy with the morning's revelation's, Phantasia gathered the mysterious tome and several other books together for later reading and prepared to leave.

The first time she appeared on the other side of the wall, she was bookless – those physical laws had bested her once again! She observed the spell-sealed door for a minute, then tapped the stone with a finger, disintegrating the entwined threads of magic and allowing physical access to the room beyond. It would destroy the sealed atmosphere, but opening the door was the only way to take the books out – if only physical matter could be made as incorporeal as a faerie!

On her way back to the surface she had to unseal the first door too, breaking the time vacuum for good. As the stone door slid open, air from outside world forced its way into a world that had spent so long apart from the corrupted outside. A shame, but they

weren't doing any good hiding down there, were they? And these strange books could contain incredible secrets or details on potential threats the town could face from the Underworld! The thought that, somehow, she may have broken a seal on some trapped demon lord or another did play on her mind a little, but she ushered it away with Water faerie logic: if an entity had been trapped down there, she would have felt it.

Noticing the glow of sunrise creeping through the cracks in the church, Phantasia dumped her discoveries alongside her school books and scrambled up the wall. Phasing through everything got boring fast, so she'd taken to physics-defying feats of athleticism whenever the opportunity arose – it was good practise too! With an arcing leap off the wall she sailed over one wooden beam and propelled herself off another, through a hole in the sloped ceiling and onto slates of the church roof.

Every morning, as the sun came up, she made sure to ascend the spire and watch as the human world stirred to life. A cool autumn breeze rustled her hair as she took in the sights of the silent, sleeping world, now freed from the tyrannical regime that held it in a strangle hold. She could see the ruins of Godhand's manor on the north-eastern outskirts, the remains of its twisted tower jutting out like long, bony fingers grasping for life. A week before, the area stuck out of the town's aura like an infected wound, filled with malice and self-righteous affirmation, but now the grit in that wound – a shadow-demon gorging on the worshipper's emotions – was gone and the order scattered. Without them, the stain on the leylines had diminished, but other blots remained: to the south-west, past a river of derelict streets, the chimneys of abandoned industry rose up to challenge the height of the church, their lands a mire of weakened, corrupted mana; to the north, a stream of contamination spread from the centre of the town, flowing through the gallery appropriated by the Hawks and spreading out through suburbs of rich, white houses with solar-panelled roofs and tendered gardens.

The east side of Torsten was the least intimidating. An arc of houses running around to the southern side were in a state of constant renovation, connected by arid, cracked roads and separated by the occasional strip of green park. Torsten Academy sat on the far east border of the town, a short distance from an ocean of trees reaching back for miles. In contrast, to the west, nestled between the Industrial Zone and the former territory of Godhand, sat the Academy's less-eccentric equivalent, Torsten High School, before rolling plains of parched, brown wastelands that led into the depths of the continent. She couldn't spot any sign of human civilisation in that direction – that was where the vagrants and wandered and demons prowled – but there were several settlements to the north, among the swamps and mire of flooded land, and the roads leading south passed through distant spots of life on their way towards the murky metal mountain some hundred miles away – the city of Malkuth. Five miles high and ten miles across, Malkuth were where the majority of the continent's population gathered to shelter from the harsh realities of the world.

As the sun emerged over the forested hills in the east, Phantasia jumped down from the spire, touched down on the sloping roof below, and swung herself into the church rafters. The rats didn't pay any attention as she flirted across the wooden beams and dropped down into the aisle below. The sunlight was already filtering through the eastern window, its stained glass filling the dusty chamber, its fallen columns and decaying benches, with a rainbow of vibrant light.

For a human, it would be a decrepit, unwelcoming place with no heating, no electricity and no bathroom, but to Phantasia it had become a home. Moss-covered cupboards salvaged from antechambers held her collection of human clothes, while a table formed from remains of benches made the perfect study desk. At least for a faerie.

As the birds began chirping, she slipped outside and began to tend a small garden, using water from the nearby stream to nourish the flowers and earth she'd gathered. Several small animals potted their way through, some of them bearing scars of corruption,

such as a three-headed rat with identity issues and a colony of schizophrenic ants that'd been twisted into believing they were avengers of God. The power of Darkness – spiritual energy tarnished by emotion – had a weird effect on animals that humans were forever ignorant to. Millennia ago, the Seelie Court had dealt with such things behind humanity's back, but in this era they were left to be – or at least until Phantasia had become involved. She'd taken it upon herself to rescue those tainted, mutated animals and help them recover from the corruption eating away at their simple, elemental spirits. It was better than letting them be because, not only were they likely to spread contamination themselves, few things were worse than an animal-turned-demon unleashed in the middle of a populated settlement. She heard the stories, from both faeries and her new human teachers.

A flock of birds flew overhead, their retreat a sign the human world was beginning to stir from its slumber. Phantasia often wondered what human sleep was like as she sat overlooking the town at night. What *were* dreams? And why did they happen? And did humans ever regret wasting so much of their lives sleeping?

After admiring her natural, ethereal clothing, she changed into some clean, human clothes. The human concept of 'fashion' was still alien to her, and although her friends had tried to help her find interesting clothes, all they really wanted was for her to copy their own fashions. Phantasia didn't like copying other people. She pulled on some shorts, a t-shirt she'd borrowed from Joel that was marked 'Death Bastard: Apostle Holocaust', and a waistcoat that sparkled with purple sequins.

Finally she gathered together her school materials and the sealed tome in her bag.. While some her friends would still be dragging themselves through that dissolute, twilight world between sleep and school they always complained about, Phantasia skipped down the stony path from the chapel and down onto the road that ran alongside the hill.

Ten minutes later Phantasia arrived at the Academy, but she wasn't the only one who'd arrived early. Phoenie was early as always; Chris and Lance were loitering around the former's car like spiders, trying to snare any girl that strayed into their territory; Hermia, Korrigan and their athletic friends were playing tennis in the courts, and had probably been there an hour already; and Dante was sitting alone, sketching, paying no heed to the world around him. So many people and so many stories. Every day was a new start and every new start brought with it the possibility of new adventure – Phantasia kept that hope alive as she made her way inside.

She was the first to enter her tutor group's classroom, which was a common occurrence. The room was dedicated to Culture Studies, the class taught by Phantasia's tutor, Ms Thorburn. The walls were plastered with posters made by students old and current, based around the sort of coursework the class involved, such as the study of social groups and society's norms, and how culture had changed since the old world (and, in many ways, not changed at all!). A separate corner of the room had been set aside for the tutor group itself, however, and was littered with all sorts of random things:, announcements from members of staff, a list of holidays, festivals and examinations, and maps of environmental revitalisation projects were joined by Kaori's drawings of her classmates, Joel and Doyle's song lyrics, photographs of everyone taken by John, and an assortment of bizarre works from Lysander and Angelo that were, she was told, 'affectionate parodies of Torsten Academy Life'. Absent – not that it was surprising – was anything from Dante.

Dante had himself entered the room whilst Phantasia had her back turned, though she could still sense him looking out the window at the school's playing field. She had come to accept Dante's odd ways by now. He was a chameleon, blending in with the background noise and refusing to draw attention to himself. His flow of thought was unpredictable, but there was *something* behind them, as if he was being random to take his mind – and the attention of others – off something else.

John entered next, saying a cheerful hello to both his classmates before sitting at a desk and fiddling with another gadget from his family's collection of old relics. Phantasia watched him, fascinated as he pulled out wires and rearranged them, his nimble fingers picking up the right tools as if on instinct, as his eyes focused through hi-tech goggles into the heart of the device. She dared not break his concentration, even though she wanted to know what he was working on and why – there would be a chance to ask questions later, as there usually was, and the answers would threaten to consume her entire break!

Joel and Kaori arrived, inseparable as always. Kaori's fringe was whiter than usual and she was wearing a tight corset and frilly shirt, while Joel's velvet top caught the light in odd ways. So far, there hadn't been a single day where they'd worn the same clothes – in contrast to John and Dante with their predictable choices – and it was a wonder where the couple found the space to keep so many outfits! Kaori waltzed straight over to Phantasia, while Joel engaged Dante in some random banter about 'zombie squirrels'.

"I started making your dress last night," said Kaori, her WHAT-shaped eyes gleaming with happiness. "I know the Yuletide Ball isn't for another three months, but better to start sooner rather than later, right?"

Phantasia smiled and nodded. Kaori was making the dress as thanks for her friendship and support – even though the illusions prevented her from knowing *why* they were close in the first place.

The serene atmosphere was shattered when Lysander and Angelo burst the room in their usual melodramatic fashion. Angelo was dressed in a suit and tie today and sported a tall top hat.

"Today, I am the Gentleman of the House," he announced, standing at the front of the classroom and bowing deeply. Lysander stood back with a smirk on his face. While he wrote the script, Angelo performed, though the flamboyant boy's tendency to improvise often caught his less extroverted friend off-guard. Without their innocent light, the Academy would be a duller place.

The morning bell rang over the speaker system and soon after Ms Thorburn blundered into the classroom. As always she looked like she had just woken up from an unintended nap, with her black curly hair falling tangled on her shoulders and her teacher's uniform creased like it had just been pulled out of a pile and tugged on without a care. She collapsed on her chair and looked over the class with glazed, dark eyes.

"Everyone's here," she said, ticking through the register with quick strokes. Doyle wasn't, but he always arrived late and a few minutes later he slinked in through the back door, looking pleased with himself – no doubt he'd been using his charms on younger girls again and basking in their adoration. Once he was seated, Ms Thorburn read out the usual notices and warned Doyle that he was risking detention because of missed Engineering homework – he then slid over the desks to John, son of Engineering teacher Mr Smith.

Phantasia decided to bide her time by examining the heavy tome again and, no sooner had it clonked down on the table and opened with a thud, she found herself surrounded by curious onlookers.

"Dude, that looks awesome!" said Joel, sailing across the desks to reach her. Kaori hovered after him in a more refined manner.

"It looks really old," she said, craning in to examine the mellowed pages. She noticed an illustration of a magic circle and jabbed her finger at it. "That looks like the sort of thing these shamans I know use! Is it the same?"

"That's like, a summoning circle," said Joel, "There's tons of different designs, right? Like, one for every demon or type of summoning?"

"Something like that," said Phantasia, aware that everyone was watching. Already Lysander and Angelo were prepping a comical display in the corner of the room, with the former scribbling a chalk circle on the carpet and the latter pulling an old curtain around his shoulders like a cape.

“WHY HAST THOU SUMMONED ME?” said Angelo in the deepest voice his juvenile vocal chords would allow.

“Dude, I'm like, totally wondering if you can teach me how to play guitar? I totally suck, dude!” replied Lysander, putting on his best impression of Joel's guttural accent.

“THAT YOU DO. I SHALL GRANT YOUR WISH...” Angelo's eyes widened in comical effect. “FOR A PRICE.”

“Dude, totally name it, I'll do anything!”

By this point, Joel had realised what was going on, the corners of his mouth twitching from smile to frown as if he were struggling to determine whether he was offended or amused.

“I DESIRE...DOUGHNUTS”

“Dude, can't you, like drain my blood or something?”

“DOUGHNUTS.”

Joel made his choice and picked up the nearest object – a stray notebook – which was lobbed towards Lysander's head. As expected from someone as brash as Joel, the lightweight book didn't make it more than half way across the room before flapping open and crashing into a desk. He cursed and tried to reign in his frustration.

“That shit's not funny, dudes,” he said, “You could accidentally summon a demon! Or something!”

“They're just figments of your imagination,” said John, looking up from his tinkering with the bored expression of someone who'd argued this point more than they'd have liked.

“No way, we've dealt with this shit before, right Kao?” Joel turned to Kaori, who blinked her surprise at the question and ran a hand through her spiky hair.

“We have?”

“I'm sure we did? Those shamans, right? Wasn't there a ritual?”

“It kinda reminds me of a dream I had,”

“Dammit, I'm sure it happened...” Joel slammed his fist on the worktop, ignoring the looks his peers were giving him. “Or maybe it was a dream? Like, shared or something?”

Ms Thorburn watched the debate with a pained expression. Was she feeling the same as Phantasia about the truth? Did she want to blurt out that they were all under an illusion and that Joel and Kaori really *had* been mixed up with demons before? That all these things people thought they remembered, all these dreams they thought they'd had, were real events that were being hidden from them? Lysander and Angelo were laughing at Joel again, who stood grimacing in a corner as Kaori tried to calm him down. The truth would settle things. If only it wouldn't get covered up again.

“Where'd you find that book, anyway?” asked John. He had shuffled his chair over and was analysing the pages with his glasses, tapping microscopic buttons on the rims for various vision-enhancing functions and correlating the data on his laptop. “It dates back about five centuries, but it's in amazing condition for its time,”

Phantasia explained about the sealed catacombs and the library, replacing the magic doors with devious locking mechanisms she'd managed to hack her way into. John looked sceptical, however.

“I don't know much about that era of history – it's hard enough finding out what was going on a hundred years ago, let alone five hundred – but I'm pretty sure the whole area was fairly inhospitable back then, and the only people around were wandering tribes who wouldn't have had the technology to vacuum seal underground chambers!”

“Oh, I don't know much about these things!” she replied, “Maybe someone else sealed it afterwards? Or re-sealed it?”

John dropped his face so close to the page his nose was almost touching it. “Nope,” he mumbled, “This was definitely sealed in a vacuum for five-hundred years. Molecular scanning doesn't lie.” He lifted himself up and scratched his head. “Maybe it was *magic!*”

Phantasia tried to laugh at his humour, but it must have come out wrong as John avoided making eye contact and shuffled back to his desk with flushed cheeks. As soon as he was gone, Doyle sat himself down next to the book, his body stretched across the desk like a statue.

"Byron would love this shit," he said, "Dude loves this sorta thing. Old stories of demons ruining the world and all that."

"*Mutants*," corrected John.

"Yeah, whatever."

"What're you doing with it, anyway?" asked Joel, who had calmed down from a bout of existential angst.

"I'm lending it to Ms Anderson," said Phantasia, "I was hoping she'd be able to translate it,"

"Man, Ms Anderson..." Doyle slipped into a daydream state, "What I'd give to have some private tutorials with her. Maybe I ought to go digging for some old books too..." With a hint of embarrassment on his cheeks, he turned his back to Phantasia and slouched off.

"Boys," "Men," Kaori and Ms Thorburn commented in unison.

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A small woman with sing-song voice and Gaelic accent, Ms Anderson was the youngest staff member at the Academy at twenty-one years old. According to Phantasia's fellow students, she was a new teacher, having replaced the ageing Mr Hainsworth, famed for his drawn-out lectures in a monotone voice. On the contrary, Ms Anderson's lessons in ancient literature and languages were the only ones Doyle paid attention in. Sitting at the front of the class, he would always be eager to answer questions and request assistance with his work.

"Which of the Cataclysmic poets did you read for homework?" she asked him. Doyle took a second to answer and Phantasia, with her extraordinary perception, could hear Byron whisper 'Kent' under his breath.

"Kent," Doyle replied. Ms Anderson smiled and tilted her head, clutching the book she was holding closer to her chest.

"And tell me, Doyle, what did you think of her poem 'End'?"

"Deep,"

"In what way?"

"Well, it were about people dying, weren't it?"

"T'was about a *whole city* perishing, Doyle. *Millions* dying."

"Exactly, millions dying. That's deep,"

Ms Anderson smiled again, then moved over to Byron. "And what about you, Byron? Who did you read?"

"Delaney," he replied. Ms Anderson gave him a quizzical look. "He's a *post-modern* poet," Byron explained, "Contemporary, you know?"

"Ye were *meant* to be reading the Cataclysmic poets, Byron,"

"Sorry, Miss, but I just find them out-of-date. Those poems are from a bygone era, hundreds of years ago, when the world was a different place. There's no room in the present for their kind of self-satisfied thinking. There's no time left to waste on over-analysing the past. We have to live in the *now*. True expression, true *emotion* is transitory."

Ms Anderson's eyes were narrowed, her jaw tight. Before she could lose her temper, Lysander pulled himself off his seat, his hand waving. "Miss! Miss! I read *The Hungry Dinosaur!*"

Angelo was quick to continue. "Why, I had the pleasure of reading that fine poem just the other day. I must say, I never once anticipated that a dinosaur could be quite that hungry!"

Ms Anderson's sour face broke into a fit of giggles, which she tried to hide behind her book. "You boys can't take *anything* seriously, can you?" she said.

"But Lifante *was* a Cataclysmic poet, wasn't he?" said Lysander.

"He was indeed," replied Ms Anderson, "A surrealist who dealt with the horrors the world was suffering by satirising them into children's poems."

Byron turned around in his chair and glared at the two clowns from beneath the rim of his hat. He took a breath, as if he were about to say something, but Doyle nudged an elbow into his side. Phantasia could hear him whisper, "Man, stay cool okay? Those kids aren't worth it."

The self-proclaimed 'Poet Laureate of Torsten' kept quiet from then on, but Phantasia could see the disturbances in his aura and way his bonds with Lysander and Angelo were like rotting vines somehow kept alive from a balance of their mockery and his hatred of it. If they couldn't get on as friends – as much as Phantasia wished everyone could – couldn't they just *ignore* one another?

Once the lesson was over, and the class filtered out, she approached Ms Anderson, who had begun to pack things away into her desk.

"Is there anything I can do for ye?" asked the teacher, putting aside the books she'd been organising.

Phantasia pulled the book from her bag and placed it on the desk. "I found this old book. I thought you might be able to look at it?"

Ms Anderson ran her fingers over the cover, then flicked through a few pages and picked it up, cradling it in her gentle hands as she turned each page with care. "Why, Phantasia, this is gorgeous! It's, oh my, how old? But so well preserved!"

"It was sealed in a vault beneath the church. There was a small library down there. Stuff about combating demonic invasion. I looked through a load of the books, but this one has an enchantment to stop it being read by us, eh, *magical* types,"

Ms Anderson held the book under her desk lamp, then examined the spine. "Looks like an anti-magic enchantment. Ye can only physically read it, not with magic senses like you have. I'll have a gander at it tonight, see what secrets I can unravel. Ah'll let ye know how it went in tomorrow's lesson,"

But tomorrow was a long a wait – at least for someone who didn't sleep. Phantasia spent the rest of that day sitting atop the church, flicking through the various books she'd recovered and reliving the tales of five-hundred years ago. Vagrant tribes, settling in the ruins of a dead town to ward off the demons pouring from the gates of Hell so that, one day, people could return to the land their ancestors built. It was the sort of thing some of her friends would love, but most of them would never believe and, until the source of those illusions was dealt with, no number of magic circles or demon summonings would convince them.

## Chapter 27

### Physical Education

Twice a week, Physical Education brought together all the students in the year but, when they were gathered on the playing field in their tattered, house-coloured sashes, some shivering from the autumn cold and the others doing pre-emptive warm-up exercises, it was obvious their numbers had dwindled.

"Emerald House is looking a little under-represented," said Sage Khandro – Astrid and the other Godhand girls, including Amanda, were part of Emerald Second and hadn't been seen since the incident. "Though I doubt it will make any difference," he finished, chortling.

Of the remaining four members, three were the top athletes in the year: Korrigan Wedekind, Horatio Stark and Sports Captain Hermia Adelheid. Horatio and Hermia were stretching every limb and muscle to their limits, Korrigan, on the other hand, was busy gossiping with her best friend and final member of her class: the purple-haired, emerald-eyed Ceres Mendoza.

Every lesson began with warm-up exercises, followed by a jog around the pitch. For a man of advancing years – the old Sage had lived beyond the average human lifespan of fifty – Khandro had no problems keeping pace with his more limber students. Not that some of them were putting much effort into it – by the time Phantasia finished, in the middle of the pack, Joel and Dante were still on the other side of the pitch, jogging for a few paces then stopping to walk a while. Khandro used the opportunity to explain the rest of the lesson.

“Last week was hockey, so this week we'll be having a football tournament, as I'm sure Lysander will be happy to know,”

Lysander gripped his fist on a victory pump, while Hermia could be heard mumbling displeasure while she stretched her calves at the back of the group. Khandro chuckled, a warm smile spread across his monkey-like face.

“But be prepared for your next lesson tomorrow. We'll be continuing to practise Wuxia, but Mr Payne has asked me to increase your training output!” He chuckled again, this time at the audible groan. “Now Godhand has relinquished its grip on our throats, don't expect us teachers to be going easy on you!”

Once Joel, Dante and the rest of the stragglers had finished their 'warm-up', the team selection process began. Straws were drawn and the captains were decided: Hermia, Theseus, Korrigan and Deneb.

“I'll have Lysander,” said Hermia. No surprise there, since Lysander was the sporting star of Sapphire Second and the year's best footballer. Theseus followed by picking out Horatio, who looked disappointed not to have been picked by Hermia.

“Oh, this just isn't fair!” said Korrigan, “You're all such wonderful people and I'd hate to choose! Can't we just play as one big team? Then we wouldn't have to—“ Hermia elbowed the tall girl in the side. Korrigan blushed and hid behind her blonde hair for a moment, as she always did after realising she'd been talking too much. She emerged after a moment's contemplation, eyes closed, and thrust her finger in a random direction. “You!” she called, too much sniggering. Blake mumbled lazy curses under his breath and shuffled towards his new captain, his long, greasy hair flapping about in front of his eyes like oversized curtains.

“Doyle,” said Deneb. He swaggered over with a smug grin on his face and went to shake hands with his new captain, but Deneb's eyes were flickering back and forth across the crowd. Phantasia didn't know her very well, but she was famed for her sharp mind and was no doubt analysing the situation and her potential choices.

As expected, the next round saw Hermia and Theseus pick out the next best students, Angelo and Lyra. Korrigan chose at random again, landing herself with Andromeda. Deneb chose Lance and was now flanked on either side by hormonal blond boys vying to see who could get the best view down her t-shirt.

Ceres and Elone were next, while Korrigan jabbed her finger at John. Deneb grumbled Chris's name. Shelley and Katrina joined Hermia, Vincent and Joel found themselves with Theseus and Korrigan picked Tennyson and Dante. Deneb once again put sporting ability over personal preference and chose Byron, and in the next round Phoenie. Kaori and Phantasia were the only students remaining.

Phantasia wasn't surprised she was left until last. During her previous PE lessons she'd done her best to look unfit and uncoordinated. It was better than getting into the game and forgetting to keep her true nature secret! There had been an embarrassing incident in her very first week, too, when Shelley struck a hockey ball at a bad angle and

sent it flying through Phantasia's neck. By some strange twist of fate, no one had noticed at the time, but it left Phantasia wary of getting involved. Even if she could get away with it, it wouldn't be fair on the other students, anyway – they couldn't fly or pass through matter, after all!

With only two students left, Khandro had the four captains draw straws. Theseus gained Kaori, putting her on the same team as her boyfriend, while Phantasia was with Hermia. After a bout of vest-swapping, so everyone was wearing their team colour, the tournament began.

The first match was between Hermia's blue team and Theseus's red. Both captains were quick to assign positions to their players, but few understood the technical terms they were tossed around like professionals. Hermia instructed Phantasia to 'play midfield' without any further explanation, but Lysander was on hand to help.

“Pass the ball to me, and don't let the other team get it!”

Hermia retreated to the goalposts to bark orders from her position of keeper. Given that this was her best subject, it stood to reason she knew what she was doing, but when Phantasia glanced at her fellow midfielders – Katrina and Shelley – for reassurance, they looked as anxious as she felt. Ahead, Lysander and Theseus, the opposing forwards, met at the middle of the pitch for the kick-off.

“You freaks are going down,” said Theseus, thrusting his thumb towards the ground.

“We'll see whose talking big after time's up, Fleecy,” retorted Lysander.

Phantasia's first game of football was over before she knew it, and she only ever kicked the ball once! Lysander, Angelo and Lyra had done all the work, twisting their way through the red team's concentrated attack and slipping through a lacklustre defensive line consisting of a gossiping Joel and Kaori, and a determined but outnumbered Elone. Vincent, their goalkeeper, made only the slightest of moves to save Lysander's shots, whereas Hermia ended the game with muddy knees from the times she'd taken Theseus on head-to-head.

The two teams stood on the sidelines to watch the green and yellow teams play. Lysander slinked over to Phantasia, Angelo in tow, to explain the situation.

“Korrigan's an athlete, not a player. She's just not the competitive type. Deneb, on the other hand, is some kind of master strategist.”

“I believe the odds are WHAT three-to-two in Deneb's favour,” quipped Angelo.

Lysander clapped his hands in approval. “An excellent deduction, my betting companion!”

Korrigan's mismatched team struggled against Deneb's quiet strategy. Even the star athlete's deft agility failed to make an impression because of her team's lack of effort.

“I can not believe what my eyes are seeing!” cried Lysander, “Chris Shaw and Lance Algar have just scored *another* goal! What *is* going on?”

Deneb had been clever enough to use their hormones for the team's benefit. The lecherous twosome were on top form, following their captain's orders to a tee while Doyle backed them up in defence, flashing his white teeth in her direction whenever he made a successful tackle.

“Oh dear, Korrigan hasn't even positioned her team,” wailed Lysander in melodramatic fashion, “They're all over the place! In all my years I have never seen such a farce! Look, half the team has taken a break in the middle of the match! Dear-oh-dear, this can't possibly end well!”

When Khandro blew the end-game whistle, Deneb's team had won nine goals to one. The two captains congratulated one another and Deneb ushered her team off the field so Korrigan could play Theseus's team to decide third place. Lysander and Angelo were quick to retain commentator duties.

“Something tells me we're in for an unpredictable game, Angelo,”

"I have calculated the chances of a penalty shoot-out and have deduced that only the intervention of zombies could swing the game in Korrigan's favour,"

"Looking at her team, I'd say half of them already *are* zombies!"

Theseus wasn't a strategic whiz like Deneb, but it didn't take much effort to subdue Korrigan's players. Korrigan herself seemed more interested in cheering both teams on than trying to compete, and ten minutes later left the field congratulating everyone on playing a great game, even when most of her team had loitered around talking.

Lysander leaned over to Phantasia and whispered in her ear, "Best look lively before Queen Hermia whips us into line!" Moments later, their team captain was calling a strategy meeting.

"Team, we're against the cleverest brain in the school now, but that doesn't mean we can't win!" she said, standing with hands on hips and trying to hide the fact she was shorter than most by standing on her toes, "Our weapon is *teamwork*! So long as we combine our strengths, nothing can penetrate our defences! Look lively, Katrina and Shelley, because I'm relying on the two of you to keep Lysander up field," Both girls nodded, vacant looks on their faces, while Hermia continued. "Lyra, Angelo, excellent work last match! You'll be up against the Chris and Lance this time, so eh..."

"You knock 'em down and I'll kick 'em" said Lyra. Angelo replied with wide eyes and a big grin, but it was anyone's guess as to what that meant.

"Let's *try* not to get ourselves disqualified for foul play," said Hermia, giving Lyra a stern glare, which the strawberry-blond girl ignored.

"Guess I'll have to handle Doyle by myself then," Lysander sighed. Given that Doyle was twice his size, it wasn't a fair match-up and the frown on Hermia's face suggested she agreed.

"We'll need a distraction..." she said.

A few minutes, after some cunning strategic decisions from Lysander and Angelo, Phantasia found herself acting as that 'distraction'. "Keep the ball," Lysander had told her, "Doyle'll never tackle a girl, and neither will the other guys. Just watch out for Deneb and pass to Shelley or Katrina if she gets close,"

The plan was for Lysander to score an early goal, and then maintain a defensive formation for the rest of the match but, with the draws nil-nil at the halfway point, it needed changing. Deneb had figured them out and was leading a counter-attack, ordering her team to stalk the opposing girls so they had little room to manoeuvre. It was an order Chris, Lance and Doyle were more than happy to oblige.

Phantasia found it frustrating, however. Their game of strategy, of move and counter-move, reminded her too much of too many annoying things, like King Nereus marshalling his forces against Cecaelia or Mr Payne and Bishop Wotan manipulating everyone around them for their own ends, or like Yokai, insinuating that Phantasia herself was being used by others.

Enough was enough! She'd had it with these rules and orders! She'd do things the way *she* wanted to do them, and play no part in the scheming of others! In a burst of near-inhuman agility she twisted around Lance's lecherous marking and propelled herself into the fray. Deneb had just claimed the ball from Shelley when Phantasia careered towards her, twisting the ball away from her feet in a display of graceful athleticism that left everyone in awe. While they were trying to fathom out what had just happened, Phantasia dribbled the ball down the pitch, vaulted over Doyle's shoulders as the ball slipped between his feet, and smashed it towards the goal. Phoenie was too startled by the gymnastics to move, and the game ended one-nil to Hermia's team. It was only after that final whistle that Phantasia wondered if she'd pushed things just a little bit too far.

"Never seen moves like those in a game," said Lysander, "Makes everyone else look a little boring, ya know?"

"An elegant angel of the game!" added Angelo.

Hermia was equally impressed and slapped Phantasia on the back at the end of the match. "You've been keeping *those* talents hidden, haven't you?"

"I didn't want to draw attention to myself," said Phantasia. Her 'innocent' smile wasn't working. "I kinda...got lost in the game?"

Hermia clapped her on the back again. "You're gonna go far, girl!"

In the girls' changing rooms, Hermia enthusiasm didn't dwindle. As the rest of the girls pulled off their kit, she leapt atop the abandoned desk in the corner.

"Great game, everybody!" she said, clapping them all by herself, "I saw a lot of untapped potential out on the field today. I hope that won't be the last time! The Winter Games are only a few months away and we've got a lot to prove against those other schools!"

The other girls didn't share her enthusiasm, though, and began to mingle in the showers, a bizarre ritual that still fascinated Phantasia several weeks after her first experience. She didn't need to wash, what with her body being ethereal and all, so she put on an act and used the opportunity to study everyone's behaviour. Some girls were shy – Shelley washed herself in a corner, away from everyone else, Deneb and Andromeda rushed to get out, and Kaori fumbled around with several bottles of shampoo – while others, such as Ceres, Lyra and Hermia, stood around chatting without a care. Phantasia also had the chance to compare her pale, porcelain-like body with the variety of tones and curves of normal humans, and there was always the odd envious glare her way. It wasn't like she *chose* the body she had! It was just the way things were: all faeries conformed to the human perception of beauty. Something to do with the Goddess and the collective subconscious, according to lessons she'd not paid enough attention to back in the Innerworld.

Aside from subtle and not-so-subtle body comparisons, the changing rooms were also the venue for gossip. Separated from the boys and gathered together, the girls couldn't resist the allure of rumours and probing questions. This week things had taken a darker turn, however, with recent events overshadowing the usual debates on who was what and with who where and why.

"I just can't believe Amanda!" said Korrigan, "Those girls were always mocking her! Of all of us, Amanda's the last you'd expect to follow them, right? Well, now I think about it, I don't think *any* of us would! Those three girls were horrible bullies and I--"

Ceres cut her off before Korrigan flustered on through break. "Ey, Phoenie, what's up with her? You lot were best mates and all,"

Phoenie mumbled under her breath, then looked up and caught everyone's eye with an expression of quiet rage. Pulling a towel around her, she stomped out of the showers, grabbed her clothes and disappeared into the toilets next door.

"Now that's not like Phoenie at all," said Hermia.

"Yeah, Kat, what's up?" asked Kaori, "She's usually gossiping away, not angsting!"

"You don't work with her," said Katrina, "Phoenie can get...angry, at times. Especially because, well, Amanda, she..."

"She what?"

Katrina shrugged. "...don't know. I can't remember very well. Ann?"

"I'm not too sure myself," said Andromeda, who was already dressed, "Amanda was investigating Godhand, then she disappeared when they fled. I don't see why Phoe would get so angry because of that, though,"

"Is she just jealous because of Theseus?"

"I always thought Phoenie had a bit of a crush on him,"

"Like Phoenie would ever crush on someone,"

"I'd be jealous of Amanda!"

"Nah, I heard Theseus is totally self-absorbed,"

And so the conversation continued, only dying out when they left the changing rooms and rejoined the boys outside. Phantasia could see the bonds that linked all those separate, competing auras together, but not what emotions those bonds consisted of. Only by taking into account the things they said and the ways their bodies reacted could she Phoenie's secret crush on Theseus, or Deneb's for Doyle. So many complicated, interwoven threads; a complex map of relationships, emotions and hormones, like a net that encapsulated all of them. If only she could understand her own place in it, but Phantasia found herself blind to the bonds connecting her to others, as if she were surrounded by a brilliant light that overpowered them.

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As promised, Ms Anderson had spent the night before analysing the tome Phantasia had recovered, and cornered her at the end of the lesson once the other students had left.

"That book was amazing. I was up most of the night trying to get through it. There was way too much to translate in an evening, but I think I got the gist of it. It's a journal regarding excursions into another world parallel to our own. A Hell Realm, they call it."

"The Underworld,"

"Aye, that was my guess. The part you couldn't read is about an evil castle that acts as a passageway between 'our' world and 'their' world. There's something about fighting going on, demon-worshippers trying to use the castle to call upon a powerful entity, all that sort of boys' stuff."

It was nothing out of the ordinary, really. Leyline crossings were rife with this sort of thing, from what Phantasia could remember, and during the Great Cataclysm many human holy places had fallen to demonic invasion as human faith faltered and their defences lowered.

"That castle must abandoned by now, but you never know what might pop out of a gateway if someone reactivates it, so I'd stay away from the ruins if I were you,"

"You're not me, though!"

"Seriously. Leave it to us. I'll have Mr Payne send someone to take a look at it. I don't want you getting hurt,"

"I won't!"

Ms Anderson tried to look disapproving, but could hide the upward curl of her lips. "There's no stopping you, is there?"

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Phantasia sat through her History lesson thinking more about the underground ruins than she did about Mr Haan's talk of vagrant tribes and he must have noticed because he called her over as the other students hurried home.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, "You've not been the most attentive of students this afternoon!"

He wasn't angry, but Phantasia still felt unable to meet his eyes. "I'm just...preoccupied? Sorry,"

"Don't worry about it. It's those ruins beneath the church, right? Tes was talking about them in the staff room earlier. I had a feeling you'd be gallivanting off down there ASAP,"

Phantasia grinned. "I'll be fine!"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Not that I ought to be encouraging second-years to embark on such capers, but you're not like the rest of 'em. You handled that Patriarch pretty damn well; you can hold your own against whatever's down there,"

“You know, with the Godhand thing, I didn't really do much...”

“Silence! I won't have my students belittling their own achievements! Just don't push yourself too far, okay? Don't end up like that brother of mine, all obsessed with honour and courage. Escape is often the key to victory! Speaking of which, I myself have to escape before that aforementioned brother appears,”

Mr Haan hurried off, a blur of earthen tones and flowing coat. With nothing else to distract her, Phantasia pulled her rucksack over her shoulder and made her way out of school, saying quick goodbyes to any friends still lurking around. She was almost free when a familiar voice echoed down the empty corridor.

“Phantasia, I was looking for you!”

It was Hermia, clad in her sports gear, racing down the corridor towards her. Phantasia stopped to wait for her. “The way you played earlier was,” Hermia continued, hands on hips, “Far beyond what I'd given you credit for.”

Phantasia grimaced, eyeing up the exit that was only a few metres away. A slight twitch towards it, and Hermia moved to cut her off. There was no escape. “I think I just got too into things,” she said with a false giggle.

Hermia waved a dismissive hand. “Oh no, not at all! You got into the *spirit* of things! That's the mindset you need to cultivate—” she leaned forward “— If you're going to win anything at the Games,”

A series of sports for local schools held in the weeks before a solstice, 'The Games' were Hermia's obsession and the 'highlight' of her year. Phantasia was less enthused, though. “I don't know if that's really my thing...” she said, careful with her words so as not to offend Hermia's overactive sense of honour.

“Of course it is! I saw the passion in those, eh,” Hermia focused on Phantasia's eyes, “...*white*... eyes?” She shook her head and blinked, but couldn't shake the slight twitch in the corner of her eye. “Anyway, when you played – *really* played – you were like fire! I want to see those flames again. We're having a quick game of netball after school, if you'd like to join us?”

*No, I just want to go and explore the church!*

“Well, it's not my kinda thing really,” she found herself saying, “But I'll give it a try!”

“Excellent!” Hermia grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her outside and towards the courts that sat outside the front of the school. There were some first years playing tennis, and what looked like a couple of third years practising Kendo in a corner – Hermia's clique was gathered together in a tight-knit group, waiting for her return. Horatio, Korrigan, Deneb and Ceres made up the core members, with a small pack of first years hanging on nearby, watching their seniors with eyes shining with admiration.

“Ooh, you found her!” said Korrigan, skipping over to Phantasia, “I've been saying to them all day that we need to get you involved in the team. You are, like, easily the most amazing talent I've ever seen!”

It was too late for Phantasia to pretend her gymnastics earlier were a stroke of luck – not that these people would believe her – so she played as best she could without making it obvious she wasn't human. At first she was worried she might outperform the accepted masters, but Hermia, Horatio and Korrigan upped their game to equal hers. A simple game of netball soon turned into a ballet, with the first year students backing out to watch in awe as the second years took it in turns to impress one another with their acrobatic feats. Sensing things were getting out of hand, Phantasia grabbed the ball and tossed it into the net rather than let the show continue.

“Well,” she a breathless Hermia, “Your reflexes and agility are certainly upper tier, but...” She crossed her arms and looked at Phantasia with the sort of stern expression she'd expect from a teacher, “One thing I have picked up on is your lack of teamwork! Acting on your own impulses is no good when you have others to help and support you!”

“I'm kinda not good at doing what I'm told...”

Hermia stamped her foot. "That's no good if you're going to compete in the Games! You have to do what you're told, or else *everyone* suffers! Are you so arrogant you'd ignore your companions just because you thought you knew better? How---"

"Gee, give the girl a break, Mia," interrupted Ceres before Hermia's face could turn an even brighter shade of red, "We're not all such rigid do-gooders as you, ya know? A little rebellion's good fer ya,"

"This isn't some tree-hugging, sociological babble, this is serious sporting business!" Hermia huffed and pouted her lips.

There was another of those awkward human silences Phantasia had grown accustomed to. Her instinct was to try and remedy the situation – and Hermia's flaming aura – but Korrigan chirped in before she had a chance.

"Oh! We have got to get you on the course!" she said, "You'll love it! It's this totally amazing race we devised in the forests where Ceres lives, you know? And we practise on it all the time so---"

"Ah, yes, a real test of your athletic skills!" said Hermia, her flames subsiding, "We'll work on your teamwork later,"

*Another* distraction? "I've kinda got stuff to do..."

Again, Hermia wasn't about to accept defeat. "Homework can wait!"

"But..."

Korrigan fluttered over, her hands clasped and green eyes wide, pleading. "Please? Just this once?"

Ah well, those buried secrets had waited centuries for someone to find them – they could wait another hour! And it was a chance to socialise with a new group of people.

"Oh, okay, you win,"

## Chapter 28

### Hermia's Trial

Phantasia had seen the forest during her night time vigils atop the church, but this was her first true encounter with it. A testimony to those who sought to restore life to the wastelands, it spread towards the horizon, its heart a dense – almost tropical – shrine to nature.

"It's called Torhout Forest," said Korrigan, balancing on a moss-covered rock and gesturing with wild sweeps of her slender arms, "One day, like three hundred years ago, this tribe called the Donara abandoned the Neon City and brought with them secrets of restoration, which they used to create the forest and help it to grow, totally brining back life to the wastelands! Awesome story, huh?"

"Ain't just a story, though," said Ceres. She prodded her chest with a prideful thumb. "I just so happen ta be descended from that tribe. Pure-blood Donara an' guardian of the forest, I am!"

"Ceres has lived in the trees all her life!" said Korrigan, admiring the purple-haired girl with puppy-dog eyes, "She's some kind of crazy awesome tree spirit! You should see her home, it's amazing! It's built between these three great pines and there's this really elaborate pulley system for getting up there, and a zip line for getting down, and its all really dangerous but so cool and I'm really jealous and want a—" Ceres slapped her on the back and her stern glare caused Korrigan to blush and hide behind her blonde locks.

Phantasia wanted to tell the girls about the forests of the Wind Queendom, which she'd been reminded of by the wall of woodland in front of her. The trees here paled in comparison to the giants from the Innerworld but, unlike their ethereal equivalents, they had a strong impact on the flow of life. The mana flowing from the east was the strongest in Torsten, and it said a lot about the town that by the time those streams left to the west

through the old industrial sector they were weak and corrupted. Unlike its parched opposite, the forest reached out to embrace Phantasia's spirit with soothing energies uncorrupted by human intervention.

They entered through a archway formed from two sloping birch trees, which was enchanted with a form of protective charm Phantasia's ethereal senses could pick up on.

"Always remember to enter the forest through this door," said Korrigan, "It's a special gateway put here to protect the forest from intruders and evil spirits! Ceres, tell her about the magical gate!"

Ceres's face flushed with embarrassment. "Korrie, you know I don't like talkin' 'bout that stuff,"

"But it's so cool! Phantasia, don't you want to hear about it?"

"Sure!" she replied, wondering how much – or little – these girls knew.

Ceres winced and took a deep breath. "Well, it's not a very exciting story, but basically the gate is the only way to enter or leave the forest without – I know this'll sound weird – without setting off an alarm. A magical alarm that only a few people can hear. I know, it sounds stupid..."

"It's not stupid," said Korrigan, "It's *awesome!*"

At least that explained the charm. Faeries used similar enchantments to protect their most precious secrets from unwanted attention. A barrier around the Water Palace would alert the Royal Court if an unidentified intruder penetrated it, and there were stronger barriers still in the palace itself. Given that the barriers were cast by the Queens themselves, only someone of greater power could sneak through without detection – and there was no one more powerful than the Faerie Queens.

They delved deeper into the wood. Pine and birch trees mingled with young oaks, all growing in size as stature as they walked further along the trodden path, the only break in a sea of wild flowers and shrubs. When the group emerged into a green clearing, Ceres skipped forward and fell into a pool of grass with her arms outstretched, emerging with daisies cupped in her hands.

"Don't mind her," said Hermia, as Ceres began to plait the flowers into a chain. She then looked Phantasia up and down. "You want to change into your PE kit? We built a changing room..."

"Oh, I'll be fine," said Phantasia. She tugged on her brown waistcoat. "I've gotten comfortable. I'm sure it won't make much difference what I'm wearing!"

Hermia looked bemused, but Korrigan was giggling. "You're strange," she said, "I like that! Hermia takes this whole thing really seriously! Wear what you're comfortable in, that's what I say!"

Hermia shrugged, but there was a half-smile on her face as she turned away. "Phantasia, if you'd follow me," she said, "I'll take you to the observation deck and show you the course,"

Hermia led her to a thick pine tree. Some four or five metres off the ground, a circular platform had been built around the trunk, supported by beams and cables. Hermia scrambled up a rope ladder hanging from the platform's edge and waited for Phantasia to do the same. She tugged at the rigging – what strange contraptions these humans devised! – and then pulled herself up.

"Your feet barely touched the rungs!" said a flabbergasted Hermia once Phantasia was standing next to her, "And you're not even out of breath?"

"I...lived in a forest once," she replied, putting on her best innocent smile. It wasn't a lie – she'd spent some time in the Wind Queendom after all. Faeries didn't need strange climbing devices though.

"Well good for you," said Hermia, "Maybe you'll be prepared for *this*," – she swept her hand across the forest panorama – "We'll start down there," she said, pointing to some white lines painted on the dirt near the base of the tree, "We work through the course in a

*clockwise* direction, but it's signposted in case you get confused. You need to pass all ten obstacles to qualify." She motioned towards the scrambling form of Horatio, fighting his way through foliage while grasping a collection of primary-coloured tags in one hand, "Each obstacle has a tag – yellow for me, green for Korrigan, blue for you. Collect all ten or else you'll fail to qualify. The start line also marks the end of the course, and is where Ceres will be waiting to record your time. Horatio will be keeping track of the race from up here to make sure there's no cheating. Not that I'm suggesting you'd cheat, of course,"

She cleared her throat, then took a harness hanging from the truck and strapped herself in. "Zip-line," she said, clicking belts into place, "It'd take too long to explain, so you're better off taking the ladder back down," With a flick of the wrist, she connected herself to an overhanging cable and then threw herself into the air. Phantasia watched as she accelerated towards a sand-stocked landing zone, where she landed with as much grace as a human could muster from such a stunt. Phantasia looked over the edge of the platform and pondered for a moment if she could get away with jumping – it was unlikely, though, so she clambered down the ladder. Hermia was soon back and performing a set of warm-ups by the starting line.

"I've never understood all that silly exercise business," said Korrigan, "It's so totally overblown. If you look after your body you don't need to prepare it for anything!"

"You're. Just. Lucky." Hermia grunted between push-ups.

Once she was finished the three girls gathered at the starting line. Ceres pulled an old pocket-watch and plastic whistle out of her patchwork jacket.

"Al'right, on the first whistle you get ready," she said, "On the second, you go. Got it?"

Phantasia nodded. Hermia and Korrigan were hunched close the ground, like animals ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey, so she copied their stance as best she could. At the first whistle, the human girls lifted themselves up on their fingertips. On the second they bolted. Phantasia almost propelled herself forward with inhuman agility, but held her instincts back and stumbled into a simple jog.

The two girls were ahead from the start, feet gliding across the dirt with practised precision. It would be easy for Phantasia to run through the air, unobstructed by the roots and pits littering the path like intentional traps, but she knew Horatio was watching from above with eagle eyes focused on her alone. Ahead, both girls leapt in unison and grabbed their tags from a low-hanging branch – a simple obstacle that wouldn't defeat even the laziest of students, though Phantasia had an image of Chris or Lance trying to show off and face-planting into the tree instead.

The second obstacle was a series of hurdles built from fallen branches. The uneven ground made timing the jumps difficult and Hermia had trouble navigating a short downward slope, giving Korrigan the lead. When Phantasia grabbed her second tag, the gap between her and Hermia stood at a few metres. After the next obstacle – a bold leap across a small stream, with the tag suspended above – the distance had closed further. Up ahead, however, Korrigan was struggling to climb one of the ladders leading to a platform high in the trees. Hermia passed her on the way up and bounded across hanging platforms with little concern for her own safety, claiming another tag and taking the lead. Phantasia and Korrigan approached the platforms together, but the blonde girl stepped back and allowed Phantasia to pass. In a few long strides, she cleared the trial and twisted around the tree-top platforms to reach her next target. As Hermia was writhing around as she tried to untangle herself from an oversized net, Phantasia grabbed a rope and swung herself into the entangling mesh. Korrigan was right behind her, but once again she had difficulty climbing. Phantasia was the first to grab the fifth tag, but her lead was short lived.

Tags six was at the end of a short zip line. Phantasia struggled with the crude instructions nailed to the tree on how to attach the required harness. In the end, she shrugged it off and improvised only for the harness to come loose the moment she

propelled herself forwards. It took both luck and a little bit of faerie talent to make it appear to Horatio and her competitors that everything was fine, and she was so engrossed in putting on such a good display that she almost crashed into the ground at the far end of the line. She righted herself before the others reached land, then grabbed her tag and pushed onwards towards the next obstacle.

It was the seventh and eighth obstacles that defeated her. The first was of a strange wooden construct of bars and platforms that she had crawl around like a snake. By the time she emerged, Korrigan had taken the lead and Hermia was a half-second behind. The eighth obstacle was another net, only this time on the ground. Phantasia found her waistcoat entangled while Korrigan and Hermia slithered through with ease. They passed over the stream again – this time via a series of rope swings – for the penultimate tag.

The final tag was at the end of a long straight carved through the undergrowth and Phantasia could see the finish line in the distance. Korrigan was in her element now, sprinting forward with long, slender legs, while Hermia kept pace behind with her muscular thighs. If she darted forward in flight, Phantasia would pass them before they reached the halfway mark, but limited to her feet and wearing trousers impractical for sprinting, she found herself forced into a jog. It would be easy for her to leave it at that – winning wasn't important, after all – but she'd come this far, and wasted enough time, that it seemed silly not to compete until the end.

Her trousers fell into the grass as she phased out of them and, free from their constrictions she dashed forwards. She knew she'd never catch the others, but by the time she crossed the line she'd gone from being half the stretch behind to only a metre. Ceres's averted gaze when Phantasia came to a halt told her she'd made another one of her unintended blunders. Korrigan sauntered over, giggling.

"I'd never have thought you were the type to run around in your underwear!" she said.

Hermia had only just regained her breath when she noticed what had happened. She spotted Horatio hovering next to her, his face bright red, and thumped him hard in the shoulder. "STOP LOOKING, you pervert!" She slapped her hand over his eyes and dragged him away as he stammered protests.

"Poor guy," said Ceres.

Korrigan appeared next to Phantasia and waved the now-battered trousers in her face. She put them back on, trying her best to laugh off the incident.

"I needed the extra speed," she said.

"It's awesome you could think that quickly!" said Korrigan, who showed no sign of the discomfort. Hermia, on the other hand, was still giving Phantasia a suspicious glare when she returned.

"How fast *was* she?" she asked Ceres.

"Nine minutes fifty-one," replied the purple-haired hippie, checking the time against a list in her hand, "That's faster than your first run!"

"Figures," Hermia scoffed, "And look, not a bruise or scratch on her. She's worse than Korrigan,"

Korrigan pouted. "Hey, that's not fair!" she said, lifting her top to show her waist, "I've totally got scratches! *And* my hair is a mess!"

Hermia ignored her and walked over to shake Phantasia's hand. "Well, at least we know you're cut out to be part of the team," she said, "Still gotta work on your team skills and you've got to get some proper sporting wear. We can't have you stripping down to your underwear every time you get uncomfortable. I *did* say you should have changed,"

"So, what'cha up to now?" asked Ceres, breaking Hermia's teacher-like frown.

What she'd been planning to do all evening! "I'm going to do some exploring," she said, "You know, poking around old ruins and stuff. Nothing too exciting!"

She didn't expect those emerald eyes to light up so bright, or for Ceres to stagger through the long grass and grab her hands. "Where're you going?" she asked "I love exploring!"

Warning bells were going off in her head, like she imagined they did for Queen Thetis when someone unexpected entered the Water Palace. "Just... around the church," she said, avoiding eye contact, "Catacombs and crypts. Not a pretty sight, really!"

Ceres clapped her hands together and did a little jig. "Awesome! I explored them about a year ago. Maybe I could show you around?"

*Should have seen that coming.* "Well..."

"We should have a look!" said Korrigan, dancing over, "That old church on the hill is a right spooky place. People say there are *ghosts* living there! And I heard the other day that Aurelia Estelle in the first year saw an *angel* standing on top of the spire! We're totally got to check that place out!"

Hermia crossed her arms and bore the sort of cynical expression Phantasia had gotten used to seeing from Theseus. "You've got to stop these delusions of grandeur," she said, "What do you think people will say if they find out famous singer-athlete Korrigan Wedekind believes in angels and demons? I've told you before: it's all just science gone wrong!"

"Aw, people won't mind," said Korrigan, "After all, I hang around with the great Ceres Mendoza, the Emerald-Eyed Dryad! Ooh, maybe we should give *Phantasia* a title!"

Ceres looked flustered again. "Korrie, she's not a--"

"Oh, come on, it'll be fun! We've got Hermia the Swift-foot over there, and *she's* not one off us!"

"True, I guess it'll do no harm but..." Ceres turned back to Phantasia and examined her with those namesake eyes, "Whadda we going call her?"

"I think we ought to go explore these caves with her," said Korrigan, "I'm sure we'll get some awesome ideas down there!"

The embarrassment drained from Ceres's cheeks, replaced with a mischievous grin. "So, what'cha say?" she asked Phantasia, "Can we come with?"

There was no harm in it, was there? It wasn't like she'd be phasing through walls in front of them! Hopefully they wouldn't take a wrong turning and end up on the fringes of the Underworld, though. Phantasia may have survived several demonic encounters before, but her powers were still weak and ineffective against all by the weakest of adversaries. If they ran into a monster there would be no scheming Bishop around to 'save' the day.

"Okay," she said, "But if we run into horrible monsters down there, I'm not saving you!"

As Ceres and Korrigan danced around and cheered in excitement, Hermia shook her head and let out a resigned sigh. "Not *another* one..."

## Chapter 29

### Secrets of the Church

Phantasia wondered how long it would take them to realise after entering the church. It took Korrigan four seconds.

"Oh! Oh! You *live* here!" she said, "That's your flowery shirt! And your velvet waistcoat! And that gorgeous dress you looked really uncomfortable in! And boots? You have boots? But you never *wear* boots And-and-and you live *in a church!* That's so awesome! Ceres, this is even more awesome than your place!"

"A church," said Hermia, shaking her head in despair, "Do you *really* live in a place like this?"

Phantasia tried to hide behind a nervous giggle. “I try!”

Hermia rolled her eyes skyward and marched over to Horatio. “No peeking into a girl's home now,” she said as she dragged him outside by his belt. He looked downcast, his face flushed with embarrassment, but didn't protest.

As Korrigan skipped into the ruins, poking around every cupboard and corner she passed with associated ooh-ing and aah'ing, Ceres examined the plant life that sprouted through the cracks and ran up the walls.

“It's a pretty place,” she said, “If it weren't sacred ground, and I weren't who I was, I'd sure be living 'ere meself. It ain't been messed around with for centuries – well, until...” her voice trailed off and her eyes narrowed on Phantasia.

“I-it was Mr Payne's idea!” she said, “He said I could live here!”

The forest-girl's eyes widened in surprise. “Well, I guess if *they* said you could live here, it must be alright!” She turned her attention back to a tree that had burrowed through the stone. “Sorry. It's just me being a bit protective an' all that, yanno? This being sacred and all,”

“It's just an old building,” said Hermia, who had returned from lecturing Horatio, “You're too sentimental!”

An awkward silence was broken by Korrigan's cooing. “Ooh, *this* is a bit kinky!” she said, holding a lace corset Kaori had given Phantasia to 'help her blend in' the next time she went to the World's End.

Hermia strode forward and raised her hand, but stopped short of slapping her friend. “Korrigan! Stop snooping around other people's private property! I thought you came here to investigate some old crypts, not Phantasia's personal possessions!”

“But-but-but look at wh—”

Hermia's hand struck like a whip, lashing across Korrigan's face. The blonde girl slunk down and hid behind her hair. Hermia left her wallowing in pity and walked over to Phantasia.

“I am so sorry,” she said, “Korrigan may be our top athlete, but she lacks basic social skills and manners. I really am truly, truly sorry.”

“Ah, ain't your fault,” said Ceres, “We should've said something beforehand. Korrie's always pokin' round other people's stuff when she gets a chance,”

“I just wanted to get to know her better,” said Korrigan from behind the curtain of hair. Ceres moved over to comfort the socially eccentric student, who whimpered into her shoulder like a wounded kitten. Phantasia didn't know what all the fuss was about.

“It's okay,” she said, “I don't even know what 'kinky' means!”

Hermia, whose eyes had blazed with fire, was taken off-guard. She looked at Phantasia, her mouth attempting to form words before they finally came out. “Why is everyone at our school such a freak?” she said, her voice a shrill cry, “I'm fetching Horatio – *put that corset away before he sees it!* And then we're going to look at these 'crypts', or whatever they are.”

After she disappeared outside, Ceres and Korrigan relaxed. The red mark Hermia's hand left on Korrigan's face had already faded away.

“Don't mind her;” said Ceres, “She ain't the most tactful of types. Guess we're quite a bunch of characters, eh?”

“Oh, I've known worse,” said Phantasia.

Korrigan's face lit up with glee. “Ooh, gossip? You hang around with...with *everybody!* Oh wow, I've never noticed that before! Guess we're the last ones on the list, huh? Well, I guess there're a couple of the boys I've not seen you around with, but they're the anti-social guys like Tennyson and Blake and Dant—no wait, you even hang around with *Dante!*”

“When he lets me,”

“Oh, that is so unlike him. I tried so hard to get him to talk, but he's so totally besotted with Deneb that he tries to hide whenever we're around,”

“Who *ain't* besotted with Deneb?” asked Ceres, “She's clever, pretty, polite – poor Dante don't stand a chance,”

“It's really sweet though! You know, I heard he tried writing her a love letter once! Can you believe that? *Dante* writing a love letter! I so wanna read it!”

“Are you girls finished gossiping about boys yet,” said Hermia, Horatio at her side like a loyal pet, “I'd like to get home before sundown, if that's okay with you?”

*It's about time!* Phantasia moved towards the aisle. “Well, the stairs are over--”

“Don't worry!” cried Ceres, “I remember where they were!” She darted past Phantasia, a blur of purple hair and earth-tone clothes. “It's right 'ere!” she said, standing by an archway leading deeper into the church. Korrigan and Phantasia ran to meet her, while Hermia and Horatio were content to walk until the last few paces. Once they were all gathered, Phantasia and Ceres lead them through the antechambers to the stairway, the humans taking out torches to light the darkness, which they'd picked up en route to the church.

“Why are do you want to poke around such a grotty place, anyway?” asked Hermia, “There's not going to be anything down here,”

“Well, there're rats,” said Ceres, “An' I remember there being this massive spider when I came down here. It was as big as my face!”

Horatio stopped and took a nervous step back up the stairs. Hermia grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. “There's no way you're getting out of this,” she said, “If I have to go down there, so do you!”

They emerged into the church cellar. Ceres and Hermia swept their flashlights around, illuminating walls of dust-covered webbing and the remains of wooden barrels eroded away from a combination of harsh weather and nesting rodents. The humans broke into a fit of coughing, which Phantasia tried to politely imitate.

“This place smells like death,” wheezed Hermia, “*Why* are we down here?”

“It wasn't this bad a year ago,” said Ceres, who had pulled her bandanna down to cover her mouth.

“Just follow me,” said Phantasia, “It'll get better soon!” Or at least she hoped it would. Unlike the cellar, the crypts had been sealed in a magical vacuum for centuries, so there'd be no stale stench of ammonia from the bustling community of rats she'd been cultivating. She led the group through the wreckage gathered over the centuries, doing her best to emit a calming aura that would keep the rodents from reacting to their intrusion. A broken wall led through to a claustrophobic crypt stuffed with more nests, burrows and death.

“This place is creepy,” said a shuddering Hermia.

“This place is *awesome*,” replied Ceres, daring to poke some thick webbing with her finger.

Phantasia waited a few moments while the purple-haired nature-lover traced her light over the decomposed remnants of empty wooden coffins and shattered alters, then urged the group over to where the first of the formally-sealed doors was located.

“This certainly weren't here last time,” said Ceres.

“Secret entrance,” said Phantasia, “You just gotta know what to look for,”

“This is so awesome,” said Korrigan, “We're like vagrants exploring the uncharted reaches of a lost civilisation!”

“Hundreds of years ago this place might have been flooded,” said Ceres, her voice filled with wonder, “Maybe even frozen. It's amazing to think what the world has been through. About all the environmental changes and the way people have adapted to them. There's so much history in these walls...”

"Torsten was flooded," said Horatio in a rare moment of speech, "You can see the water line on the stone,"

"All I see are bugs," said Hermia with a grimace.

The stairway turned into the long crypt. A few rats had scurried down here in the past day or so, but for the most part it was how Phantasia left it. The air wasn't fresh but it wasn't the stench from the ruined crypt above, and the humans found themselves able to breathe freely again. Ceres and Korrigan danced into the nearest alcove to examine its tomb, while Hermia and Horatio lingered around in the open, torchlight swooping across the majestic columns and architecture that had slept inside the earth for centuries. Korrigan, as usual, was the one to break the silence.

"Ceres, what's wrong? Have you found something scary?"

Hermia and Horatio froze, their light fixated on the two girls dwarfed by the large tomb. Ceres was straining to read the markings that adorned the side of the monument.

"It's nothing," she said, "Just...legends..." Her voice trailed off as she ran her fingertips along the stone plaque. "I heard about the founding of Torsten from my tribe's elders. The legends say this land was overrun with demons until a brave warrior tribe drove them back into Hell. The warriors sealed themselves away underground, along with the demonic gateway, leaving Torsten to their descendants."

"You always have to bring silly things into it, don't you?" said Hermia, "The land was plagued by animals and mutants, left behind by the Old World, aren't I right, Horatio?"

He nodded. "The end of the ancient civilisations left deep scars on the planet. People fled into the cities to survive, but those who remained outside were corrupted by the world that remained. After hundreds of years, people left the cities to explore the outside world again, and that's when they came into conflict with the mutated descendants of those left behind."

Phantasia knew of Horatio's gift for history from their lessons with Mr Haan, though he rarely spoke in class. After he finished his short lecture he backed down, a sheepish grin on his face. Whether his version of history or Ceres's – or John's or Mr Haan's or anyone's for that matter – was the correct story or not, no one could tell. Phantasia knew what the faeries had taught her about the Primordial Darkness, Erebus, but spending time with humans had taught her there were many different answers – and no one could agree on the truth.

"Well that's *your* story," said Ceres, "You two got taught that in that city, right?"

"Can we not discuss the city?" asked Hermia, "In fact, let's just drop this whole thing. Let's take a breather and change the subject. Phantasia," she looked at her with pleading eyes, "I was wondering if you lived here all by yourself?"

"Sure do,"

"You don't have a family?"

Phantasia wanted more time to think of an answer, but Hermia was watching her with inquisitive eyes. "I, well...no, not any more. Just a...Queen..." she said, blurting out the truth and hoping she could cover it up later. Hermia looked puzzled.

"A *Queen*?"

"You from some kinda tribe too?" asked Ceres.

Phantasia nodded. "It's something like that. It's very damp where I come from. Lots of water."

"So I guess we're all orphans here..." said Ceres, "Hermia and Horatio live in the Orphanage, along with a load of the others, like Byron and Dante."

Any vigour that was left drained from Hermia's face. "Horatio and I, we..." She chewed on her lip, her hand tightening around the torch, its light dropped to a patch of bare stone floor. "We used to live in Malkuth, but, well...we don't any more... Like I said, I'd rather not go there."

Korrigan cut into the downcast mood like a spring breeze sweeping away the winter cold. "I kinda live all over the place! Sometimes in the forest, sometimes at the orphanage, sometimes I ever stay overnight at the school! I don't have family either, so I can make the most of living like the wind! Staying cooped up in one place all the time is so boring,"

"And as you know," said Ceres, "I live in the forest. My tribe got scattered, most 'em hunted down an' killed by bastards like Godhand an' stuff. I was living alone 'til Korrigan here coerced her way into me bed... Room. *House*."

Hermia cleared her throat. "Moving swiftly on," she began, "Is there anything else you'd like to show us, Phantasia?"

Phantasia took them over to the second hidden door and down the next flight of stairs. As flashlights swept over the rows of books lining the walls even Hermia couldn't help but gasp in awe. Ceres and Horatio broke ranks in unison, both scrambling to grab the closest book they could.

"I'm not very good with reading," said Korrigan with a sigh, "Unless they're picture books, of course!"

Hermia pulled a thin, spiral-bound notebook off the nearest shelf and flicked through it. "Looks like a load of gibberish," she said, "Why'd anyone want to have a study all the way down here? Were they hermits or something?"

Ceres was standing at the desk, studying one of the larger tomes. "Nah, they really *were* warriors," she said, "Proper warriors who fought off proper demons who came from the depths of the planet! This is real stuff!"

Hermia rolled her eyes. "You sure it isn't just someone's fantasy story? Some nobody could've cooped themselves up in this room for years writing some overblown epic no-one else cared about,"

"It's pretty outlandish stuff," said Horatio, leaning over to study Ceres's book, "Probably corrupted retellings of actual events. It's because of people mixing fantasy and reality over the last millennium that no one knows the true history,"

"I tell ya, there were *demons* down here," said Ceres. She fluttered over to another corner of the room and began gorging herself on the books there. Even in the limited torchlight her eyes darted back and forth over the pages of bound grimoires, dog-eared diaries and thick dictionaries of esoteric terms. She moved from shelf to shelf like a bumblebee collecting nectar, while Horatio was content to sit at the desk taking his time to read the thickest of the journals. Korrigan busied herself hovering around, eyes scanning the darkness and fingers twirling through her blonde hair, but Hermia was tapping her foot with impatience within ten minutes.

"I'm getting claustrophobic," she said, "It's dark, it's damp and it's stuffy. We must be well underground by now. I hate being underground. If I liked it I'd have stayed, well... I hate it, okay?"

Horatio broke off from his intense study and was at her side in an instant. "We could leave them to it?" he said, "I don't mind. It's only a book."

There was a silent understanding between the two of them. Phantasia could see it in their bond – one of the strongest she'd seen – which appeared interwoven with layers of powerful memories she couldn't decipher. Whatever was haunting Hermia was reflecting in Horatio too – he'd just been hiding it by throwing all this attention into the books.

"Doesn't it remind you of things?" she said to him. He nodded and put a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

"Oh! Guys! There's another door over he---"

Ceres squealed as the wall rumbled to life in front of her, stone scraping against stone with a high-pitched grating sound that echoed around the underground.

"I think I pushed a brick!" she explained, "It just started movin' on its own!"

A warm breeze howled through the study, buffeting pages around as if they were caught in a violent storm. Phantasia felt a momentary dread as Ceres leaned into the

unknown – this door had eluded her faerie senses, just as the book she'd given Ms Anderson had concealed its secrets! If they were connected then this new passageway must surely lead down to...

The others gathered around the mysterious new opening. A rejuvenated Hermia pushed her way to the front and swung her torch into the depths. The stairway curved round as it descended. Without a word of explanation, Horatio pulled a cricket ball from his bag and tossed it into the darkness. He motioned the girls for silence as the thuds echoed into the distance.

"Goes on forever," he said.

"Let's go!" said Ceres, slipping through the others and skipping her way down the passageway. Korrigan followed, while Phantasia waited for Hermia and Horatio. Would they follow or would they be beaten by their pasts and flee?

"We can't let them go down there alone," said Hermia, "I hate the idea as much as you but..."

"But it looks scary!" said Horatio, "We might get lost and end up at the centre of the earth!"

Hermia's mouth curled into a slight smile at his cowardice. "Let's go, Horatio!"

"B-but it's--"

Hermia pulled him with her, his coordination kicking in just before he stumbled over and sent them flailing down the stairway like the ball Horatio had tossed in before them.

"Good job I don't need light," whispered Phantasia before skipping after them. It didn't take long for to see things from Horatio's point of view: they weren't just descending a stairway into the earth, they were moving further and further away from the stable reality of the Outerworld and sinking into its very fringes. The first physical sign – which she could hear the others gossiping about – were the walls. In the chambers above they were carved from the earth but here they were built from dark, crimson bricks with a faultless surface. Phantasia also noticed something else – something on the ethereal plane her human friends wouldn't see: the flow of mana thickening, turning from streams and rivers into forceful currents. When she was sure no one was looking, she phased her way through the wall.

It wasn't just a stairway they were descending, it was a *tower*. Phantasia found herself in a huge cavern, lit by an eerie red glow, looking down on a castle floating above a black abyss. The blood-coloured walls formed perfect geometric shapes, connecting tall shrines at the four cardinal points to a large dome in the centre. It looked like a giant magic circle – one sitting on the very fringes of the physical world, at a point where the currents of ethereal power crossed and where the walls between worlds were weakest.

This wasn't good *at all*.

Phantasia slipped back through the wall and dashed down the stairs to find the others, but the increasing ethereal current soon overwhelmed her senses and she lost track of them. Visualising their descent in her head, and correlating it from what she'd seen on the other side of the wall, she figured the base of the tower would arrive right about...

Ceres was flashing her torchlight over a lone statue, standing in an archway that led into the castle. About ten metres high, its sharp-angled torso was made from shimmering marble and marked with odd designs, while its long, slender limbs were crystal shards that reflected a rainbow of yellow hues whenever the light crossed them. A triangular head, lacking discernible features but marked with tribal designs that resembled them, sat perched between the broad, upswept shoulders.

"Maybe we should leave," said Horatio, "That thing looks like it doesn't want us here!"

"It's just a statue," said Hermia as she strode forward towards it, "We're just in some ancient castle buried by an earthquake."

The moment she stepped within five metres of the titan, a crystalline limb snapped forward and stabbed the hard ground in front of her with dagger-like fingers, sparks flying as the limb grated back along the stone. Hermia screamed, her body frozen in horror, and Horatio burst forward in a sudden show of bravery. Phantasia reached out to stop him, but he was too fast and jumped between Hermia and the statue. Again the limb lashed out, and soon Horatio was cowering again. Hermia grabbed his hand and dragged him back towards the stairs.

"It must be some kind of giant robot!" she gasped.

Ignoring her friends' flight, Ceres swept her light over the statue's body again. "Don't look like a robot t' me," she said with a sigh, "Korrie?"

"We totally can't be dealing with this right now," she said, "I think those two had the best idea!"

"Looks like you uncovered more than we bargained for," said Ceres as the two girls passed Phantasia, "Sure as hell don't wanna come back here if we can help it! C'mon, you're not gonna stay and make friends with that thing in the dark, are ya?"

Phantasia chuckled and skipped after them but, before she left the chamber behind, she took another look at the strange stone guardian. They might never want to come back here, nor ever have the capability to deal with the thing, but Phantasia's curiosity was aroused. You didn't leave a sentinel around if you didn't have *something* to hide, and there was no way she could live above this mysterious place knowing there were secrets lurking beneath her feet! She would return...but not today. Phantasia had learned from the adventures of her youth with Prince Dionysus and knew the dangers posed by the Underworld to ethereal beings like herself. She knew she needed to be stronger in order to face them. She would have to learn to endure the harsh conditions, learn how to shield herself against the forceful currents of mana, and learn more about the area and its strange guardian.

Give it a week and she'd be ready. That stone guardian wouldn't be going anywhere, after all!

### Chapter 30

## Personage of Supernatural Significance

Katrina held the magnifying lens to the image and tried to focus on the indistinct shape of the country mansion, hidden by a nebula of multicoloured auras. The derelict house, which sat abandoned on the border of the town, was encased in a shell of lifeless colour with a single brilliant speck piercing through like a newborn star. This auragraphic business was giving her a migraine – she swore she knew more about them than she remembered – but her curiosity wasn't satisfied by John's insistence that auras were just 'electromagnetic fields'. How did that explain why her pictures of Torhout Forest were vibrant and filled with brilliant pastel shades, but those of the western Industrial Zone looked like archaic sepia prints because of the lifeless shrouds surrounding every old warehouse and collapsed chimney?

She checked the notes she'd been keeping. Auras surrounded everything. They appeared to reflect moods and emotions, and living creatures had the brightest, most complex auras of all. The inkblot pattern of radiance coming from the attic of the mansion was no ordinary aura – that would be the 'ghost'.

She pinned the image alongside the rest of her collection. Over the past few weeks, Katrina had catalogued most areas of Torsten with her new camera and had images of almost every major location. Her favourite was the panoramic of the town she'd created after clambering onto the roof of her home, taking a film's worth of pictures, and spending hours piecing them together. It revealed what the smaller, stand-alone images couldn't:

that all these auras appeared to be affected by an invisible stream or wind that ran through the town, and that this flow was somehow distorted by certain places, landmarks and even people.

Such things transcended average human understanding and were too much – too deep – for her teenage mind to comprehend. What was important right now was this apparent evidence to support Phoenie's belief in the haunting. It was just the thing the *Veritas* editor needed to lift her out of the depression caused by Amanda's odd behaviour, and Katrina *really* didn't want to be thinking about that – it gave her a worse migraine than the auragraphs!

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Phantasia was about to push open the glass doors leading to Sapphire House when Phoenie's bellowing voice filled the main hallway, calling her name. Ignoring the contempt looks from the first years, the would-be paranormal investigator came bounding over, eyes gleaming with excitement. It was the happiest Phantasia had seen her since before the incidents surrounding Godhand.

"I have some wonderful news!" she said, "I have been informed that a mansion on the fringes of town is believed to be 'haunted' by a personage of supernatural significance,"

She twisted her clipboard around and thrust it in Phantasia's face. More auragraphs, this time of a large, run-down house on the edge of a dead forest. Judging by the environment and aura, it was from the decrepit northwestern boundaries, beyond the former territory of Godhand. Phantasia had noticed it from atop the church on several occasions, like a swamp of despair leading into the mire of wastelands beyond. This close-up image showed the local auras in greater detail than her eyes could see from the spire, and judging from their complexion, interaction and alignment (as best she could judge from a still image, anyhow!) there looked to be an ethereal entity residing in the upper floors of the mansion. There was every chance it could be the 'ghost' Phoenie looked desperate to find.

"These spirits are a tricky business," said Phantasia, "You can never be too sure what they really are until you confront them. Psychic imprints, emotional corruption—" She stopped – too much information. "So, are you going to investigate?" she asked.

Phoenie grabbed the clipboard back. "Of course we are! How could we let an opportunity like this slip away? We won't get those headlines if we don't follow up every lead we find, will we?" She leaned in close, her hyperactive voice turning to a serious murmur. "I'll be expecting your co-operation, of course. If events of an unscientific nature are indeed involved, everyone would feel safer with our resident psychic around,"

Phantasia knew there was no point in arguing otherwise. She couldn't stop them going, but she could at least protect them if they did. "Meeting after school in the office?" she asked.

Phoenie straightened up and looked ready to explode with pent-up enthusiasm again. "Absolutely! Make sure you're there!"

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After an invigorating music lesson, Phantasia separated from the mob of students heading for their lunch break and found what she'd begun to dub 'Dante's Wall'. It wasn't long before he meandered over, nibbling on a protean bar, which he slipped in a pocket of his oversized coat when he noticed Phantasia waiting for him. He sat down on the opposite end of the wall and pulled his clothes around him. Phantasia tried to engage him in pleasantries, but it was a while before he decided to speak.

"Ms Shimomura's become clingy towards Kaori of late," he said, "But it doesn't make sense. Ms Shimomura was never like this before, so why all of a sudden?"

It was one of those inconsistencies brought about by the illusions, and because the teachers weren't affected by them like their students were it was only a matter of time before some observant, like Dante, noticed the hints. Phoenie too would likely have a book filled with paranoid observations, which Theseus and John would delight in rebuking. If only it were easy to just tell them the truth outright!

"It's making me suspicious," continued Dante, "I dunno why, but I'm sure stuff's been happening that hasn't happened. I mean..." He paused, his face screwed up behind his scarf, head shaking as if disagreeing with an invisible voice. "I dunno if it's all a dream. I've seen things in my dreams that---" He pulled his collar up around his scarf, increasing his defences. "No, it's not important."

Phantasia inched across the wall, watching Dante's dark aura for the slightest hint he might flee her advancements. "I'd still like to hear about them," she said, "I don't really dream, so I'm kinda curious."

"I told you before, didn't I? I don't trust you,"

At least he didn't run away this time, though. A sign she was starting to break through his many defences, perhaps. He lowered the collar and looked at her for a moment with sad eyes, the rest of his face hidden behind the scarf and his dark hair.

"Well, if that's the case," she said, "Maybe you should come to the haunted mansion!"

Dante raised an eyebrow. "*Haunted mansion?*"

Phantasia cracked a smile and jumped down from the wall. This was too good an opportunity to lose! Dante could learn to socialise with his friends, she could dig further into his personality and maybe there was a chance she could observe what dark power he used in the Godhand incident, too.

"Yeah! Phoenie found out about it. You should join in. It'll be fun! And you're great at the whole observation and deduction thing, so you'd be the perfect contribution to the team. I'm surprised you're not involved with them already!"

Dante looked away and Phantasia wished she could see his facial expression. "You really think Phoenie would invite *me*?" he snorted, "That girl's got a grudge against me if you haven't noticed. Besides, I doubt I'd be of any use anyway. That's their thing; I'm not a part of it. If I wanted to do stuff like that they'd laugh at the very idea,"

Phantasia didn't need to be a mind reader or empath to see through his blatant lies. "But, you *do* want to join in, don't you?"

His aura receded and for a moment it looked like he might stomp off in another fit of self-loathing, but then he said, with a resigned sigh, "That's not the point."

"Of course it is," she said, "If you want to come along, then you're coming along! I'm making you!"

Dante glared at her with the sort of eyes she'd expect to see from Astrid, but his aura didn't back up the appearance. It was flirting around in anticipation, confusion. "But why?" he asked.

She had him. "Because I *can*!"

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Phoenie's team were assembled in their self-made office. Theseus, at the back of the room with his feet up on a desk, sat munching on an apple with the same look of boredom on his face he always carried when Phoenie was about to talk about 'those bloody schizophrenic delusions', as he referred to them. John was close at hand, working to fine-tune the archaic lens system on the auragraphic camera. Katrina's attention was fixed on his work as she clutched her plush toy close to her chest.

Phoenie was at the front of the room, pacing back and forth with one hand rubbing her chin and the other drumming on her thigh. Behind her, in her unique, uniformed handwriting, the words 'PERSONAGE OF SUPERNATURAL SIGNIFICANCE' were written across the whiteboard. Underneath was a chart that listed various 'forms' this 'P.O.S.S' could take, such as 'malevolent incorporeal entity of a violent temperament' and 'dangerous astral abomination with penchant for body-stealing machinations'. It was common knowledge that Phoenie hated generic terms for anything she deemed supernatural because, in her paranoid worldview, such 'slang names' could be deemed 'entitist', a word Theseus liked to mock because it contained the word 'tit'.

Phantasia arrived late to the meeting after Hermia had badgered her into some after-school practise in the forest but Phoenie had been waiting for their resident 'psychic' to arrive before she started. Once Phantasia was seated, the editor stopped pacing and stood before the whiteboard, hands clasped behind her back.

"Team Veritas, tonight we will finally hit the big time!" she said, ignoring a sarcastic mumble from Theseus, "Without the Inquisition around rumours of supernatural and occult happens have begun to spread. The ones I've been researching in particular are of super-special importance!" – she slammed an enlarged photograph of the derelict house on the whiteboard – "This auragraph, taken several weeks ago by Katrina during her analysis of the town's 'spiritual field', lends creditability to these rumours." She jabbed her pointer at the aura in the mansion's attic. "This is a 'personage of supernatural significance'. It is our job as professional paranormal investigators to search the premises and contact this spiritual entity, so as to persuade it to pass on to the world beyond,"

Theseus leaned back on his chair, head resting on his arms. "Great, I'll make sure to pack my key to the afterlife,"

Phoenie ignored him. "We will be relying on our experienced skills of negotiation and the powers of our resident psychic, Ms Celeste," she said, "I fully believe we can come to an amicable solution with the personage of supernatural significance, don't you, Ms Celeste?"

"I hope so," said Phantasia. It was more important that she protected her friends, though, as the real reason the residence was abandoned would be because it lay just outside the town's designated 'safe zone'. The chances of a demonic encounter were slim, but she couldn't take that chance with all the strange events Torsten was famed for. "I'm bringing Dante along as well, if that's all right?" she added, almost as an after-thought. It gained more surprised gasps and whispers than anything Phoenie had mentioned.

"Mr Orpheus?" said Phoenie, breaking the silence, "Why on earth would *he* want to be involved?"

"Yeah, the kid's never been one for getting involved with, well, *anything*," said Theseus, "Unless it's 'cause of Kat?"

Whereas Phoenie had her arms crossed and was tapping her foot from nervous disapproval, Katrina's face had lit up and her grasp of her happy mascot loosened.

"You managed to convince him to come with us?" she said. "You managed to get thought to him? Oh, at last!" she blundered over and hugged Phantasia, the cat toy abandoned for a rare moment. "I've been trying for so long, but he'd never listen to me. He always insisted we wouldn't want him. That we didn't need him around. I'm so glad!"

John was looking at Phantasia over the top of his glasses, the camera sitting unattended in front of him. "H-how on earth *did* you convince him?" he asked.

"I just told him he was coming, and that was that!"

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The borders of Torsten were not somewhere anyone would want to spend much time. Located past the slums, they were the last line between the town and the wastelands

beyond. The air was thick with dust and the smell of death intensified the deeper the group descended into the abandoned purgatory of skeletal wrecks of buildings pulled apart by scavengers. However, for all its physical hostility Phantasia found the slum's aura enduring, almost neutral. With few humans and with the occasional mutated animal the only hint of demonic presence there wasn't much around to corrupt the leylines.

The mansion they were heading for was a different story. Surrounded by dead trees, whose withered black branches resembled demonic claws that had torn their way through the earth, the large house was surrounded by a pulsating corruption. Windows were boarded up, brick walls smashed and the roof had collapsed in several places. The sight of a skeletal corpse in the muddy remains of the garden, bones picked clean by whatever beasts lived nearby, was enough to make even Theseus gag.

"Man, we should've come armed," he said, "You dunno what's out here. Bloody dregs of society hole up in these shacks. They'd slit your throat if it'd feed 'em,"

"You're being paranoid," said Phoenie. She had led them through the slums with her head held high, unconcerned by the homeless and desperate lurking in the shadows. "There's no sign that corpse was killed. It could have died from starvation, or maybe even *fear!* Who knows what powers this person of supernatural significance has? So long as we have Ms Celeste, we don't need *weapons!*"

They stopped at the path leading up to the mansion's front door, the carcass feet away. Katrina flashed her camera in its direction, while Phoenie prodded it with a stick while she recited her finding into a dictaphone.

"It would appear the deceased has been here for some time." She glanced over to John, who observed the remains through his scanners while keeping a comfortable distance away.

"Years," he said, "And no, I'm not getting any closer,"

"The deceased has been here for several years," she continued, "Cause of death unknown. Perhaps it is this individual whose spirit now resides ahead of us? That is what we must investigate!"

She was the first to trek up the path, unconcerned by the layer of brown slime that coated the stones. Phantasia was barefoot, as usual, and Theseus gave her feet a cautious look before he began his own journey towards the mansion.

"You *sure* you're gonna be all right?" he asked, "I mean, who the hell knows what crap this path is covered in? Probably *is* crap!"

"I wash easily," she replied, flashing her trademark 'innocent' smile. Theseus raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"You're even weirder than I am," said Dante, breaking the silence he'd been in since the group has first gathered some twenty minutes ago.

The group assembled outside the front door and, after a half-minute's awkward silence and nervous glances, Phoenie decided to check everyone's equipment for the third time since they'd met up.

"Lady, you're so damned paranoid I've been having dreams about this standing outside mansions checking our equipment shit," said Theseus. Phantasia heard Katrina gasp and noticed Dante's eyes narrow in concentration, but neither said anything. Were those dreams repressed memories of the Godhand incident? Dreams they all shared? Phoenie shook off her own momentary confusion, strode towards the door and gave it a couple of raps with her knuckles.

"The front door appears to be surprisingly intact," she said into her dictaphone, "I have also noticed that the path to the door appears to be worn slightly, suggesting some sort of recent activity." John spun around to scan the dark path himself, while Phoenie continued, "Perhaps this is from previous investigators. How deeply they penetrated into the abode of the personage of supernatural significance I do not know, but I shall be looking for signs once we are inside,"

She continued to muse aloud as she led the group through the creaking metal door and into the lobby. John and Theseus swung torches around to illuminate the cracked walls, unhinged doors and faded paintings that had once made up an extravagant residence.

“Many of the rumours speak of shadows on the higher floors,” said Phoenie, more to her recorder than her friends, “Therefore I propose we start our investigations from the top,”

Without asking her team for their opinion she began to creep up the large staircase that dominated the centre of the hallway. Covered in rotting carpet with a creak on every step, it took the others a moment of consideration before they followed. Dante, however, remained at the base, arms crossed.

“It's not right, is it?” he asked Phantasia, “You're supposed to be psychic, can't you feel anything?”

Phantasia stopped and tried to focus her senses in the corrupted atmosphere. “It's hard to say,” she said, “This whole mansion has a heavy aura I can't really penetrate,”

“That's just the personage of supernatural significance,” said Phoenie from atop the stairs, “What else could it be?”

“Paranoia,” replied Theseus, “You idiots are all as bad as one another,”

“Nothing on the night vision,” said John, “I could try heat, but I severely doubt that will pick up anything,”

Phantasia ignored the banter and tried to focus again. The aura reminded her of the World's End. It wasn't the hopeless, hedonistic despair of the Ravens, nor the enmity of the Erebus mural or the dark ritual. It was something else, a feeling she'd only experienced for the briefest of moments that she'd forgotten about until now.

“Are you two staying down there?” Phoenie's voiced echoed down from above as the group slipped through a door, “I'm pressing on into the bowels of this mystery mansion. If you're concerned, maybe you could meditate on—”

She screamed, soon followed by Andromeda and Katrina's screams, while Theseus joined in with some harsh expletives. A moment later they came crashing out of the room they'd just entered and stumbled towards the stairs, only to freeze in their tracks and flee through another door instead.

“I knew something was up,” said Dante.

Phantasia could see them now, like amorphous stains emerging from the fog of corruption. Shambling humanoid figures with skin as grey as stone and blood-shot eyes burrowed deep into their sockets, emitting guttural moans from lipless mouths. They stumbled out of the cracks as if they'd been living as part of the walls themselves, their stick-like arms covered in filthy rags stained with dry blood and vomit, hands ending in searching, twitching fingers. One noticed Phantasia and Dante and redirected its uncoordinated stupor towards them.