

Phantasia

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Volume Seven

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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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Exhumed Remains of a Reanimated Nature

“That’s just the personage of supernatural significance,” said Phoenie, “What else could it be?”

What else indeed! The idea that there could be *more* secrets hidden in this run-down slum only piqued her curiosity further. At last her moment of glory was at hand! (Hadn’t she thought that before recently? Something else to note down in ‘the book’...)

“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,”

Katrina was taking auragraphic pictures, though. They would pick up all sorts of amazing things John would try and explain with his flawed science. It was only a matter of time before he was flummoxed for good and had to admit *she was right*. (If her intuition was right, tonight would be that night!)

The other key to the truth, Phantasia Celeste, didn’t look as eager to explore the ruins as Katrina. For some reason she was more inclined to stay downstairs with that paranoid schizophrenic, Dante Orpheus (quite why *he’d* been dragged into a serious paranormal investigation with his mental instability, she didn’t know). Phoenie pushed open a door and glanced back at the ethereal looking psychic.

“Are the two of you staying down there?” she asked, “I’m pressing on into the bowels of this mystery mansion. If you’re concerned, maybe you could meditate on—”

She’d turned around the check the contents of the room when the scream took an instinctual hold of her vocal chords. Andromeda and Katrina must have noticed the sagged grey flesh and bloodstained rags at the same time because they were screaming too. Even Theseus was terrified and uttered a string of foul expletives.

Run! That was the only option. Get out. Re-plan. *Arm themselves*. They stumbled out onto the balcony in unison, Phantasia and Orpheus standing oblivious below. Phoenie was about to warn them when she noticed another army of the frail-limbed monsters coming towards them. They’d never reach the stairs in time! They had to prioritise. Find another route. Another door. She barged through the closest, followed by her team, and hoped for the best.

They stumbled into the remains of a dining room, the door slamming behind them. A thousand years ago it could have served a large family or three but now all that remained was a broken table buried under a collapsed ceiling. But there was no time to take in minor details – *they* were right behind them. The door clattered and Phoenie imagined long fingernails clawing away at the decayed wood.

“We can’t stop here!” she said, urging her team onwards, “We need to find higher ground!” (*They* wouldn’t be able to climb. It was the logical option.)

The door crashed open and the figures flooded into the room. Andromeda and John fled for the other door while Katrina backed away taking auragraphs. Theseus slung himself between the group and their hunters, and then dug a powerful fist into the closest stomach. The figure keeled over but those behind shoved it aside.

“Damn, these guys are crazy,” said Theseus, taking cautious steps backwards, “Hell knows what they’re on, but I ain’t sticking around to ask ‘em,”

The group stumbled across a kitchen packed with rubble, though an adjoining hallway and then crashed through the first welcoming door. The gamble paid off – they were alone – and Phoenie breathed a deep sign of relief.

“The hell we all standing around for?” snapped Theseus, “Barricade the damn doors!”

What an excellent plan! It was at times like these that Theseus proved his worth as a member of Veritas. With his great strength he pulled a cobwebbed set of shelves over to

the door, while Phoenie did her best to help by digging out some broken chairs from beneath piles of foul smelling fungal matter. Half a table later and the mass of rotting wood stood as the only barrier between the group and their assailants. Phoenie had to confirm her suspicions.

"What was the sit-rep on those fiendish creatures?" she asked John.

"I got a reading on their body temperature and it wasn't normal. It was almost like..." He looked at Theseus, almost like he wanted approval, "Like they're not even alive,"

"Bollocks," said Theseus, "That's fucking *bollocks!*"

It confirmed Phoenie's suspicions (as she'd expected): they were trapped in a derelict old mansion with a spectral entity and an army of the reanimated corpses. Things didn't get much worse – or *better* – than that! As Theseus prowled the room for an escape route and John sat down to study his computerised encyclopaedia for some scientific excuse or another, Phoenie ushered her girls together.

"So, what are your theories on the situation?" she asked them.

"They *looked* like dead people," said Katrina, "But we won't find out for sure until I develop the pictures,"

Had Phoenie been the type, she would have thrown her arms around her taller friend. "Oh, Kat, you're so super!" she said instead, "This really is the day we hit the jackpot!"

"Don't get so cocky yet, lady," said Theseus, who was peering at the twilight world outside through the gaps in a boarded window, "Looks like there's some damned wild dogs outside or something. Keep seeing eyes in the trees. Might be wolves. We sure as hell don't wanna be going out there any time soon,"

"Lots of movement all around," added John, "I told you earlier we should've come during the day. The sun sets in half an hour and I'd advise we leave before then."

Phoenie turned back to her girls. "Who would've thought the boys would be running scared, hey?"

"Well, they *do* have a point," said Andromeda, "We're not in the most hospitable of places and there won't be much light around once the sun sets."

Phoenie gave her a sharp look. It was typical of Andromeda to ruin the mood by bringing common sense into play. At least Katrina was still enthusiastic!

"We should break through the roof and climb onto the next floor," she said, hands flailing with the sound of jangling bracelets as she tried to demonstrate her proposal through mime, "Then we'll be right near the attic!"

"Doesn't look like there's any movement above us," said John, "But that's not saying much. I think those people we encountered may have been under the influence of a drug called 'datura', which has effects similar to what we experienced,"

Theseus snorted his inevitable content. "And you thought they were *zombies*, didn't you?"

Exhumed Remains of a Reanimated Nature, to be precise, but Theseus had no respect for these matters. She watched as he pulled a metal curtain rail off the wall and began to poke around the ceiling for a weak point. As John chipped in to help with his all-seeing (as far as he was concerned, anyway) visor, Phoenie returned her attention to the girls. Katrina's face was screwed up in concentration and she was stroking the back of her plush toy's head – sure signs she was lost in her thoughts. Phoenie waved a hand to attract her attention and she blinked herself out of her trance.

"I was just thinking about stuff," she said, "Doesn't this feel familiar to you guys? Like we've broken into a place like this before?"

"Yeah," said Theseus, taking a break from his attempts at ceiling demolition, "Reminds me of that time Phoenie thought she'd unmask a local 'vampire',"

As if he was bringing *that* up again! "It was a case of mistaken identity and Chinese whispers," she said with a huff, "But now I think about it, Katrina does have a point,

There *was* an eerily familiarity about Veritas breaking into a mansion on a failsafe quest for the truth. Or maybe Phoenie had spent too long dreaming of infiltrating Godhand's manor and deposing Bishop Wotan. Those were good dreams – except for the one where they'd been caught and almost burnt at the stake!

Hold on...

"Dante's mentioned it before," said Katrina, "He thinks we forget things that really happen, like someone—"

"Kat!" Phoenie had to interrupt before this got out of hand, "How many times have I told you not to listen to that schizophrenic? He'll do you no good!"

"Now *there's* something supernatural," said Theseus, "How'd you explain Mr Broody down there?"

"I told you, he's a para—"

"What I *mean* is *why* he's here, lady," said Theseus, "Get over your little vendetta for a minute, will ya?" He stabbed at the ceiling some more, ignoring the sneer Phoenie was trying to chastise him with. "Hey, John, you're in his tutor group, what do *you* think?"

"It's certainly out of character," said the diminutive technician, "Dante has never shown an interest in our work before, mainly because of Phoenie's vendetta but—"

That was enough! "I do *not* have a vendetta!" How could they think—

"Whatever, lady," interrupted Theseus again, "John, you were saying?"

"Well, I have noticed Dante opening up to Phantasia recently. The two seem to get on quite well,"

"Aww, Dante's got a crush?" said Andromeda, "Kat, does Dante have a crush on Phantasia?"

Katrina looked thoughtful (as if such an absurd idea required *contemplating!*). "He's never said anything to me, but he spends so much time shut in his flat these days that I don't know what he thinks any more..."

But Phoenie knew *exactly* what he thought. "This is ludicrous talk! Ms Celeste is too clever to fall for that freak's stalkerish ways!"

"Too clever? You not noticed how naïve she is, lady?" Theseus, for all his usefulness, was reaching that line of insubordination he liked to dance along, "Phantasia's always talkin' to everyone with a smile. I'd say there wasn't a hint of distrust in her, like she's some kind of pure maiden who's not had her back stabbed before, ya know?"

Phoenie smirked. Time to put him back in this place. "Sounds like *Theseus* has a crush!" she said.

The ceiling came down with a sudden crash, covering Theseus with dust and plaster. He was gripping the pole tight with shaking hands and his teeth were grit so hard it looked as if they could shatter. For the briefest of moments, Phoenie cowered away from him, fearing he was about to lash out at his friends, but then the pole clanked to the floor, his posture relaxed and he wiped the dust from his face.

"There's your hole, *lady*,"

Phoenie was ranting about Dante again. Theseus jabbed the ceiling with his makeshift spear as the self-satisfied editor whined on about the so-called 'paranoid schizophrenic' like the hypocrite she was. Sometimes he wondered why he still hung around with her.

"This is ludicrous talk!" she said in her bossiest tone, "Ms Celeste is too clever to fall for that freak's stalkerish ways!"

For a girl who prided herself on her analytical journalism and cutting observations, Phoenie was just proving how little she really picked up on.

"Too clever?" he said, unable to resist the opportunity, "You not noticed how naïve she is, lady? Phantasia's always talkin' to everyone with a smile. I'd say there wasn't a hint of distrust in her, like she's some kind of pure maiden who's not had her back stabbed before, ya know?"

If he was honest, it creeped him out a little bit.

"Sounds like *Theseus* has a crush!"

Somehow those simple words ignited an inferno in the young man's heart. Gripping the pole tight he thrust it into the ceiling with all his anger only to be rewarded with a rain of dust and plaster. How could she even *suggest* that? Not everyone had abandoned Amanda like she had. As the rage subsided, he dropped the pole and looked up at his handiwork – a cabinet had torn through the mildew-covered ceiling and now provided a useful platform for the group's ascent.

"There's your hole," he said.

They were watching him. They were *waiting* for him. Once again he'd have to take the lead and keep the girls safe. It would be easy to just abandon them and make a run for it, to never be associated with the geeks of 'Veritas' again. He could lead a normal life. He could have *normal* friends.

Yeah right, like that's gonna happen. Time to bust some zombie heads open.

"Sit-rep on those drugged-up freaks?" he asked John, who checked his sensor array.

"Nothing moving close by. Looks like they lost the trail."

"So much for the creeping undead," said Theseus, throwing a sarcastic smirk in Phoenie's direction. She wasn't looking, though. She couldn't meet his eyes.

Bloody drama queens.

Whatever her problem, Theseus didn't have time to deal with it. He picked up the pole and hoisted himself onto the fallen cabinet. It rocked underneath him as he tried to balance himself but the metal was sturdy enough to support his weight. Confident with his footing he then felt around the edges of the tear between floors with his gloved fingers, seeking a secure grip. Some foundation near the wall gave him enough leverage to pull himself up enough to dig his hand into a deep crack in the upper wall, and with a boost from the pole he managed to scramble up into the room above. Being the year's top grader in Survival Ed had its perks.

Looking around he felt like he'd gotten himself caught in a spider's nest. The abandoned bedroom was a dense fog of dust-covered cobwebs filled with death, from clusters of tiny carcasses to fist-sized cocoons lodged in tight spaces. Finding out what was top of the food chain in a place like this wasn't on of his agenda. Returning to the tear he pulled up his spear and gave the others a thumbs up.

"Don't think we've got any zombies up here," he said, "Wouldn't want to be an arachnophobic though,"

Phoenie hated spiders and the look of fear in her eyes made the grim task at hand that much more gratifying. Using the pole he tore the webbing away to reveal more rusted and rotted furnishings. A moss-stained mirror shattered when the pole cracked into it; a handbag fell to the ground, spilling out a graveyard of dead insects; a bookcase whose contents had been regurgitated by vermin, faded by the sun or simply disintegrated into pulp, fell to pieces with just a small nudge sending up clouds of dust as the remnants thumped onto the floor.

"Is everything okay up there?" Phoenie called from the room below.

"It's bloody ain't okay," Theseus replied, shielding his face from the dust and potential infections that swam through the awakened death-nest, "If I were a lesser man I'd sure as hell be throwing up right now."

The bile was in his throat, though. Knowing that the others wouldn't be able to hack it, he rammed his spear through a boarded window in the hopes the fresh air might clear

things out. As the pale evening light filtered through the silk curtains he pulled himself through the cobwebs that dragged at his feet and managed to knock out two more windows. Then he noticed the decomposed body slouched in the far corner. Mice – or worse – had burrowed into the skeletal remains and something had created a nest in the skull, but Theseus didn't want to investigate the slither of movement he swore he noticed in the hollow sockets. He reasoned it would be a good idea to keep the others from visiting this side of the room. They'd never handle it – Theseus was having a hard-enough time holding back the vomit as it was. As an ineffective precaution he used the pole to sweep some of the web blankets over the body.

"Can we come up now?" asked Phoenie.

Theseus returned to the hole in the floor and reached down to help their leader up. Whatever fears she had must have been dispelled by her stubborn desire to expose the mansion's secrets to the world. She grimaced at the sight of the room but put on a brave face.

"Team, make sure you take a deep breath before you come up here,"

Katrina was testing her footing on the metal cabinet when a loud knock startled everyone. Theseus stuck his head through the hole and noticed the door, and its shoddy barricade, rattle with another. An unnatural rustling sound, like the skittering of a hundred spiders through a bed of leaves, followed and he could have sworn it was a voice saying '*will kill you all*'. Had this been a movie he was watching on John's home cinema system, Theseus would have laughed it off as cheesy, but the panic among his friends was very real.

"Hurry, team, they're after us!" urged Phoenie.

Theseus pulled Katrina up, and then the two of them helped Andromeda and John. The door shook with louder bangs and the sound of wood splintering, as if someone were on the other side attacking it with a battering ram. With everyone safe on the new floor, Theseus grabbed the nearby vanity table and tipped it over the hole, sending all manner of dust-covered trinkets, wooden splinters and glass shards tumbling into the room below.

It wasn't an adrenaline rush, he lied to himself.

First they'd been chased into a corner by exhumed remains of a reanimated nature and now her personage of supernatural significance was a malevolent incorporeal entity of a violent temperament – this adventure was the zenith of all Phoenie's investigations by far! Theseus, no doubt fuelled by his frustration and anger at the truth coming out, tipped a broken desk over to cover the tear in the floor. Everyone covered their faces to avoid the cloud of dust kicked up by the desperate manoeuvre and the sound of the desk's contents tumbling out into the room below camouflaged the supernatural break-in attempt. Time to escape before the entity realised!

"We've got to get to the attic before this escalates further!" she said (though hopefully it *would*). Theseus grunted his acknowledgement of her subtle command and cut his way through the fog of webbing to reach the solitary door leading out of the old bedroom. As he attacked it with his boot Phoenie took the opportunity to glance over her surroundings. The sight of fresh cocoons nestled in the corners of the room made her wish she hadn't.

"This whole room is a nest," said John, not helping the situation, "Hundreds of critters here, so tiny you can't see them. I can, obviously, though only with heat vision. They're starting to swarm, actually."

With the thought of a thousand invisible spiders devouring her flesh like the rogue nanobots of myth, and the sound of crashing cabinets below, Phoenie was glad when Theseus put his foot through the door. A few more attacks and it splintered open, and the

group were quick to follow him out into the hallway beyond. It was devoid of webbing in all but the most inaccessible of places and lit by low-energy strips plastered across the walls in haphazard lines.

“At least the décor's more inviting,” mused Theseus, “Where'd we go now?”

Phoenie was about to suggest the attic when another door crashed open only a few meters away. The reanimated dead were back, shambling towards the first sniff of flesh.

“We have to find the source of evil!” said Phoenie as the group ran. They were on the third floor, so the attic couldn't be far away. It was their only hope. Find the spirit. Bargain with it. Get out *alive*.

There was a howl.

Sunset.

John squealed as his foot crashed through a weakened floorboard. He stumbled over, his laptop spinning out of his grasp. Theseus turned to grab him, but the undead were upon them. With a surge of adrenalin the two boys struggled onwards, Andromeda scooping up John's beloved computer, but it had cost them valuable time.

Another door ahead. A cloaked figure, knife in hand stepped out to confront them. They diverted through the nearest door, stumbling through a decayed lounge filled with lifeless bodies. More howling. A *chorus* of howling followed by a verse of undead groans.

They opened another door and all hope was lost. Reanimated corpses lay in a pile as a cloaked figure knelt over them, its gloved hands rummaging through their tattered clothes. No doubt this was the mastermind behind everything: a sorcerer with the hideous talent for exhuming the recently deceased and possessing their decaying bodies with the spirits of demons hungry for living flesh. The figure stood at their arrival and turned to face them. The fate of Veritas was sealed. This mansion had shown them the truth and now it was time to pay the price. Soon they themselves would be shambling through the mansion, seeking out more innocent victims to continue the cycle of death. The poetic justice was too much.

Theseus strode forward like a proud knight ready to lay down his life to protect his friends, even if the fight was futile. Phoenie reached out a trembling hand to stop him but fear gagged her throat.

“Yo,” said Theseus. So casual, so calm, like a true hero. “Didn't expect to see you here,”

And as the rush of fear, paranoia and adrenaline slowed down and reality began to slip back into focus, and as the figured removed their hood, Phoenie realised just how consumed by the moment she'd been.

Chapter 32

Unnatural Dealings

“Why *did* everyone run away?” asked Phantasia.

“I think,” said Dante, making moves towards the entrance, “The reanimated dead might have something to do with it?”

Phantasia raised an eyebrow. “The 'reanimated dead'? What're you talking about?”

Dante pointed towards the shambling figure staggering its way down the stairs towards them, hand clasped tight on the railing as one foot struggled in follow the other in coherent movement.

Reanimated dead? It still didn't make much sense.

“What's so dead about him?” she asked, “He's just inebriated.”

Dante stopped his subtle escape. “Inebriated? You mean they're *not* zombies, they're just *wasted*?”

Phantasia nodded. It was a fair assumption, at least. The odd figures were human – there was no doubt about that – and their behaviour reminded Phantasia of the revellers in the World's End nightclub. There were odd inconsistencies in the auras of those on drugs – subtle enough that Phantasia had to focus to detect them – but it was the clumsy gait and distant expressions that gave them away.

“Figures,” said Dante and breathed a sigh of relief, “I was worried for a moment. Though all those stories about monsters and demons were gonna be real...”

The drugged figures were starting to congregate at the top of the stairs, and several more were beginning to shuffle their way down. Dante was inching his way back towards the entrance again, so Phantasia grabbed his hand and dragged him towards a side door.

“Let's see who gets to the ghost first!” she said before he could protest. He untangled his hand from hers as soon as he could, but continued to follow as she twisted her way through darkened rooms and corridors. The mansion was filled with life, from colonies of insects and vermin – many of them mutated to some degree – to moss and mildew covering the walls like a natural paint. As they delved deeper they passed through a room that looked like homeless squatters had once used it. Stained mattresses carpeted the floor and odd things had been scrawled on the wall, leaving a psychic impression of despair that stung Phantasia as she passed by.

She stopped in the remains of a kitchen, which had been torn apart by invading trees from the neighbouring forest. One in particular had grown through the tiled floor and thrown aside cabinets with its roots while its dark trunk had bludgeoned its way through the ceiling.

“I hope the others are okay,” she said as Dante sat down on a root to regain his breath. The corrupted miasma of the mansion made it difficult for her to see clearly, and things weren't helped by the dark olive titan that ripped its way through the room – even the tree itself had been contaminated by the area's corruption.

Oblivious to any of this, Dante smirked. It was the first time Phantasia had seen him smile as he usually kept his face hidden from view. “Phoenie'll be up there shitting herself; Kat will be taking photos of everything; John and Theseus are gonna try explaining it with science; and Andromeda is probably silently psychoanalysing the whole situation. Always the same story. I'm starting to think they just do it for the fun of it now,”

“You think they'd come all the way out here for fun?”

Dante huffed. “Well Kat's like a sister to me, so I've heard everything there is to know about that lot. Every week's a different mystery, and every mystery ends up with the same old answer. There're no ghosts or demons or anything like that around. Just a load of smoke and mirrors.”

Phantasia twirled around the remaining linoleum on her toes. “So why'd you bother coming along?” she asked, “You obviously *wanted* to!”

“Curiosity.”

“That it?”

Dante nodded and began to poke around a nearby cupboard with his foot. “This place is pretty eerie, ghost or not. Something about those junkies was all wrong. Joel's told me loads about various drugs because he keeps wanting me to try them, but none of their effects are like *that*. Those guys really *did* look like they were dead...”

Phantasia did recognise the effects, though. That feeling she'd had on entering the mansion and how its atmosphere reminded her of the World's End was starting to make sense now. Those drug users back there were lost in thought, as if their minds were trapped in an ethereal reality while their bodies continued to degrade on the physical plane. If only she could get closer to them again and observe things with her newfound insight, then she could prove the theory that was gathering strength in her head. Maybe all those years with the Water faeries *had* paid off, after all!

"We should get moving," she said, "I want to investigate this place a bit more, don't you?"

"No, I've had enough,"

"Aww, but aren't you the least bit curious about this ghost rumour?" She danced closer and attempted to peer into his evasive eyes.

"It's just a load of crackheads," he said, turning away from her, "You don't want to mess with them, especially if there are dealers around. Besides, I'd rather not...I don't want to get into a difficult situation. I dunno how I'll react,"

Was this something to do with the power he'd displayed in Godhand's manor? Could he remember that? Or was it a regular occurrence? Phantasia scanned his aura for irregularities, but it was as closed off as ever. Maybe if he was *forced* into one of those 'difficult situations' he'd have to open up a bit. It was better than running away!

"Well, you *know* Phoenie will be forcing the others to explore," she said, "Would you rather *they* ran into trouble?"

It was emotional blackmail, pure and simple, the sort of tactic a mischievous Wind faerie would use. She knew he wouldn't stand to see Katrina, his closest friend, hurt. The scowl on his face and his twitching muscles told her he was mulling over the possibilities in his head.

"Come on," she said, leaving, "You'll never know what'll happen unless you try!"

What was he doing here? Dante couldn't shake the thought as they penetrated deeper into the crack den at Phantasia's whim. Was it to protect Katrina? The messages she was sending him through the cell network didn't suggest she was in danger of any kind, and she was with Theseus. He could protect her from flailing drug addicts far better than Dante could. So if it wasn't for Katrina's sake, what was it?

The albino radiated an ethereal light in the darkness of the mansion. It wasn't the sort of light that cast shadows or illuminated the damp, rotting surroundings, but a slight haze that surrounded her pale features, as if her skin were glowing and her hair shimmering with inner radiance. And why was she always around when the weird shit happened? Following her was the only way he was going to get any answers – if answers were really what he wanted.

"There're two people up ahead," she whispered, urging him to stay back, "They're not like the others. They look less...intoxicated,"

Dante leaned into the corner and squinted to focus on the ill-defined figures slouched by the steep stairway that led into the attic. The albino had the eyes better than John Smith's high-definition zoom lenses, that was for sure.

"Probably dealers," he said, watching as a junkie came lumbering down from the attic and off in the opposite direction, "And whatever they're dealing is up there,"

Phantasia leaned in close – too close for comfort. "We need to get up there," she said, "Do you think we can trick them?"

His adrenaline levels were starting to kick in, his heart was beating and his breath came fast. It would be so much easier to run away and never come back, but then what? Live the rest of his life not knowing the answer? Always paranoid that it *might* be true? All the theories and possibilities were rushing into his head and creating an auditorium of noise that threatened to crush his mental stability into tiny pieces. If this continued there was only one possible outcome – he *had* to do something. He had to throw himself into the river and let the stream wash away the darkness.

He strode out into the open. There was no time to explain his thinking to the girl – he's just have to trust that those razor-sharp instincts of hers equated into equally sharp

improvisational skills. The dealers looked up as he shuffled towards them, imitating the drunken coordination he'd witnessed from their customers.

"You come for a fix, kid?" asked one. With skeletal faces, dirty hair and salvaged clothes, both men looked as much a victim of the drugs as their clientèle, yet the revolvers hanging at their waists made them much more of a threat.

Dante put on his best drunken slur as he gazed at them with vacant, half-closed eyes. "Hit me," he said, recalling slang he'd heard from Joel.

"You got cash?" asked the other dealer, moving his hand closer to the grip of his weapon, "Or you paying some other way?"

Cash! Of course he'd need to pay, why hadn't he thought of that before? He fumbled around inside the pockets of his coat, but all his fingers could grasp were a half-eaten protein bar and some pens – Not the sort of material goods that drug dealers would be interested in. Both were eyeing him with suspicion.

He didn't know if she'd sensed his trouble with some weird albino power or she'd just been paying attention, but Phantasia stepped out from behind the corner to save him in his moment of despair. At the sight of the teenage girl the two dealers perked up.

"Don't tell me *she's* your payment," said the first, his hand moving away from his gun.

"You dirty bastard," said the second, "Bringing your girlfriend here to pay the habit for you. I like your style."

Phantasia skipped towards them, a cheerful smile on her face. How ignorant was she? Didn't she understand their subtext? Or was she proving just how astute she was?

The first dealer attempted to comb his hair with his bony fingers. "Mate, you can have ten minutes with the Mistress," he said, "And we get twenty minutes with your bitch,"

Dante was losing his grip on the act as images plagued his mind of the things these men wanted to do and the guilt he'd feel for letting them. He glanced back at Phantasia, hoping that somehow she could read his thoughts.

"I'll give you *thirty* minutes," she said, "But *I* wanna go up there too."

The dealers glanced at each other. "You gotta pay up first," said the first, "Your boyfriend can wait here,"

"Okay!"

Dante wanted to speak up but knew that protesting – breaking the act – would be the end of them both. Could he really trust the albino not to get herself hurt? Could he really stand by as these two *animals* had their way with her? She was still smiling as they surrounded her with lustful eyes and groping fingers. Dante grimaced and turned away. He could hear their lecherous chuckling, their shuffling feet, the sound of a door opening, then closing, the lock turning, banging... He didn't want to hear the rest and went to put his hands over his ears.

"That was way too easy,"

Dante spun around, his long coat whipping up a cloud of dust. Phantasia was standing there, smiling, just as she had been a minute ago, while the sound of banging continued in the background. The banging sound of two lethargic men, muscles wasted away by drug abuse, trying to break down a locked door.

She was better than he'd given her credit for. Way better.

Without warning Dante slipped around the corner and began to shamble towards the two men. In that moment his aura opened wider than Phantasia had ever seen it, as if he had cast aside the shackles of introversion in his moment of sudden bravery. She held back and listened as he bartered with the dealers for passage to the attic, but when she felt his aura fluctuate and begin cocooning itself again she decided to take action. The

dealers had demanded payment and, from the way he was fumbling around in his pockets, it looked like Dante didn't have much to offer.

"Don't tell me *she's* your payment," said the dealer on the left as Phantasia slipped out from behind the corner. Although his aura didn't show the same damage she'd seen on the other drug users, his body bore all the signs of substance abuse. Already both men were slobbering their lecherous tendrils of attention up and down her slender body in ways that would make even Doyle blush.

"You dirty bastard," said the right-hand dealer, "Bringing your girlfriend here to pay the habit for you. I like your style."

Phantasia had learned a thing or two from watching girls like Elone flaunt themselves for male attention. Though it made her feel uncomfortable, she played with the loose tie hanging around her neck and bit her bottom lip.

"Mate, you can have ten minutes with the Mistress," said the left-hand dealer, attempting to improve his shaggy appearance, "And we get twenty minutes with your bitch,"

This is too easy.

"I'll give you *thirty* minutes," said Phantasia, reaching up to play with the buttons on her shirt, "But I wanna go up *there* too."

Both men were caught in a hormonal frenzy, their attention fixed firmly on Phantasia now. "You gotta pay up first," said the first, "Your boyfriend can wait here,"

"Okay!" she said. She hoped Dante would understand her ploy – at times like these telepathy would come in handy!

The two men shambled over to her, their auras reaching across the aether to smother hers. Their single-minded desire was on a whole other level to that of Doyle and their lustful emotions groped her body with little thought for her own feelings. When they surrounded her, their hands followed suit and she forced to use all of her strength to keep up her act and not collapse from disgust – it felt like she was being attacked by a leansídhe again and she was thankful she'd taken time to strengthen her defences.

Without speaking they guided her around a corner and into a darkened room. White sheets of webbing clung to broken cabinets packed against the walls, while scraps of mouldy food littered one corner of the room. A stained mattress covered part of the floor and it was this she was ushered towards. One dealer broke away just long enough to turn on a small, flickering blue light and lock the door.

"Let's see what you've got them," said the other. He grabbed the cuffs of Phantasia's shirt and tore it off. When he saw an identical replica materialise underneath he had to blink his eyes, as if trying to shake off the last vestiges of a hallucinogenic. When he tried to tear off the ethereal shirt, his hands slipped through the material and flew backwards, slapping the other dealer in the face.

"What the fuck're you doing?" said the other, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"I'm fucking stripping her," he said, "I can't get a fucking grip, that's all,"

He tried again, with identical results. The second dealer was not amused and pulled out his gun. As they bickered, Phantasia slipped over to the door.

"Where the fuck're you going?" said the first, waving his weapon in her general direction, "Get the fuck back here and get on your fucking knees, bitch,"

"You're boring," she replied, pulling the key out of the lock, "Have fun getting out!"

She flipped the key into the air, then caught it and slung it towards a hole in the wall. While one dealer dived to catch it the other came lumbering towards her, but she phased back through the door before he could lay a finger on her. Shaking off the tendrils of lechery and rage that filtered through after her, she returned to Dante to find him hiding in a corner with his hands over his ears.

"That was way too easy," she said, surprising him. He spun around in a whirl of white material, eyes wide with shock.

“Y-you! What did you just do? Where are they? What? How?”

“Oh, I just locked 'em in their own dungeon,” she replied, “We should go see the ghost now!”

Dante grunted reluctant agreement and stepped back so she could take the lead. The steps leading to the attic were steeper than most and re-enforced with wood salvaged from around the mansion. Each step emitted an echoing creep as Dante followed and Phantasia hoped his keen observation wouldn't pick up on her weightless steps. Standing before the door to the attic, Phantasia took a second to focus once again on the aura within.

She'd been observing it through the haze of corruption within the walls since they'd arrived, and the closer she got to the attic the more defined the image became. She had no doubts that there *was* some kind of spirit lingering there, but how and why remained a mystery. Spirits that lingered, refusing to enter the cycle of rebirth, were doomed to fall into darkness and become wraiths and shadows that preyed on the living, but this spirit was different – and that it was still so hazy, even though Phantasia was so close, suggested shenanigans were afoot.

Opening the door and ascending the final set of steps explained everything. Twilight filtered through gaping holes in the roof, falling across a floor made from planks of faded, rotted wood. A few metres from where they stood, drawn in blood, was the answer to all Phantasia's questions. From his sharp intake of breath and the mental barriers he was throwing up, she guessed Dante had seen the markings too.

“A demon-summoning circle,” he whispered, taking a few steps back towards the door.

Chapter 33

Witches of the Seelie

“Well, it's a *magic* circle,” corrected Phantasia, “There's nothing demon-summoning about it at all!”

Indeed, this was nothing like the circles used to communicate with other planes, manifest spirits in physical form, or even gather energy to create leansídhe – this was a binding circle, like the sort the rogue faerie Apeliotes had used for Bishop Wotan's benefit. Not that Dante would know any different – all he would see would be the markings on the ground – but Phantasia could see *everything*, including the spirit of a young woman shackled to the circle with ethereal chains.

Are you an angel?

Her voice had established a telepathic connection. That would help matters. Dante wouldn't have to hear a thing. Phantasia could be herself.

Nah, I'm just a faerie. Elemental spirit, guardian of the planet, or something like that.

A spirit? But you have a body... The girl was downcast, cheek stained with perpetual tears. Phantasia wanted to reach through the wall of dark power that created a barrier around the circle and send every drop of purifying energy she had to her.

It's not a body really, she thought, more a manifestation. I mean I can still touch and feel and all that, but not like humans do.

I've forgotten how to feel. I've forgotten the smell of flowers. I've forgotten the taste of chocolate. I've forgotten the touch of velvet and the sound of rain. All I can see are colours, a haze of colours...

Yeah, same here, see that all the time. Phantasia frowned, wondering if there was anything she could say to ease the girl's suffering. *Eh, guess I'm not helping much, am I? Say, eh, why you here anyway? I mean I know you're trapped here, but how and why?*

I've forgotten. It was so long ago. All I see are the colours coming to me. The people. I give them my feelings, my memories, my life...

Phantasia put a hand to her mouth in silent shock. The poor girl had been turned into a psychic drug! No wonder the residents of the mansion reminded her of the victims from the World's End – just like the desperate Ravens seeking transitory ecstasy the lumbering 'zombies' were trapped in a dream-like stupor of hallucinations. Instead of coming from their own desires, however, these feelings had been ripped from an innocent victim forced to serve until her very spirit crumbled to dust. A spirit chained to the spot, her malnourished body stripped naked as if she were a perverse model for the mansion's inhabitants to lust over.

Is this Hell?

As close as she would ever get, but Phantasia couldn't bring herself to tell her the truth – the girl had suffered enough already. She would have to break the circle – and the spell – and purify what was left of the weakened spirit.

I'm going to try and set you free, she thought. She reached out for one of the chains, wincing as the blazing corruption surrounding the circle seared her arm. She had to overpower the magic contained within the circle but, while she was in the middle of a decrepit mansion, her strength was weakened. The chain snapped but regenerated itself before Phantasia could even think to break another.

The spirit trembled, her eyes blinking back illusionary tears. *I'll never escape.*

Just as Phantasia was prodding the circle with wisps of her magic, contemplating if she could just flood the whole thing with her power, two figures entered the room behind a nonchalant Dante.

"D'ya make a habit of poking round things without tellin' anybody?" said Ceres, pulling down the hood covering her face, "What in the Goddess's name are ye doing here?"

I could say the same to you. "Just...trying to help...investigate rumours," replied Phantasia, "We found this funny symbol on the floor. Dante thinks it might be used for *demon-summoning!*"

Ceres huffed. "Right. Been hearing the rumours of the ghost, 'ey? Been plenty of 'em going about now that Godhand's bugged off. People ain't so scared to talk and I can be meself for once." She strode towards the circle and beckoned the other figure forward. "Korrie, give us a hand with this, will ya?"

Korrigan pulled off her hood, tossed Dante a friendly giggle, and joined Ceres, handing her an ornate knife she'd been hiding under her robes.

"Now stand back and let us deal with this," said Ceres.

"Ooh, now this doesn't look very welcoming," said Korrigan, leaning down to take a closer look at the magic circle. She jerked back and squealed. "It's blood! Ceres, it's drawn in *blood!*"

"It's a binding circle, Korrie," explained Ceres. She flicked a glance in Phantasia and Dante's direction. "You two pay attention an' all. This circle's for trapping stuff. Ain't too powerful by looks of it, an' you gotta have a greater power in the circle than whatever you're trying ta bind has, so whatever's caught here can't be a demon or anything dangerous. Judging by those creeps holed up 'ere, I'd say it were an innocent. Probably using it for a drug,"

"They're using someone's spirit as a drug?" cried Korrigan, "That's horrible! You've got to stop it, Ceres. You *have* to!"

"Ain't much that'll stop me," she replied. Taking the knife in one hand she used the other to sprinkle some powders and herbs over the edge of the circle. She mumbled some mantras, slashed at the air, and then performed a mudra with her free hand as she stabbed the knife into the circle's edge. The energy she'd focused through her various tools cut through the flow of magic encircling the oblivious spirit, beginning a chain reaction

that snapped each of the ethereal shackles in turn. One advantage humans had over faeries was that their strength wasn't relative to the world around them,

"May the Goddess bless your spirit," said Ceres, hands clasped in prayer.

While the purple-haired girl looked proud in her ability, unbeknownst to her the freed spirit lingered, weighed down by the corruption. Phantasia focused all her strength into extending a ribbon of her essence across the attic to meet her, just as a demon such as the leansídhe would reach out to devour another's energy. With the connection made, she funnelled her purifying energy into the ghost.

I... remember... said the girl.

Memories never leave you, thought Phantasia, but sometimes you just lose track of 'em. They could steal your spirit, but they could never steal you. You're safe now.

You...really are an angel...

The girl smiled, and then her spirit exploded into a thousand tiny particles that were caught in the streams of mana and swept away like dust in the wind. The joy and relief Phantasia had felt through their brief connection brought a tear to her eye, and she wondered how Death faeries coped dealing with this on a regular basis. No wonder they were so aloof!

Phoenie had never felt so frustrated – or so embarrassed. The hooded strangers weren't necromancers at all but something far worse: fellow student investigators. Fellow student investigators who were doing a far better job than Veritas. Fellow student investigators who, rather than being anyone Phoenie admired, were, in fact, two of the most air-headed individuals she'd ever known: purple-haired tomboy Ceres Mendoza and stupidly attractive sex-symbol and local pop-star Korrigan Wedekind.

It felt as if everything she'd been working towards had just been turned into a comedy show and beamed around the Seven Great Cities to the laughter of thousands. Amateurs had upstaged Veritas – and Phoenie was the only one who cared.

"It could've been worse," said Theseus, "Could've been Chris and Lance! At least those two have got some kind of mysterious aura going on around them,"

"What kind of 'mysterious aura' are you referring to?" asked Phoenie, "The last time I checked Ms Mendoza lived in a tree and Ms Wedekind sings songs about love and peace to adoring pre-teens. Since when were either of them 'mysterious'?"

"A little competition should be good for you," said Theseus, "Now you know you're not the only crazy freak around these parts!"

Phoenie growled and kicked another stone across the dirt and into the mire that could have been a lush green lawn centuries ago.

"They were certainly better prepared than we were," said John, still studying the powdered contents of a canister Ceres had handed him, "This stuff should be potent enough to knock a decent-sized mutant out. Even Theseus would be down after a sniff of this!"

Better prepared indeed! Phoenie would show them Veritas was not to be mocked – or rescued! When Ceres exited the mansion alongside Phantasia and Dante, she tried to hide her scorn behind a brave face.

"Hey, Purple, can we go yet?" asked Theseus.

"Ain't my problem you lot stayed behind," replied Ceres, "I told ya to leave, but you had to wait for these guys, didn't ya?"

"We don't abandon our comrades," said Phoenie, "Ms Celeste is a part of *our* team."

"Well now that everyone is safe, we can all go home, right?" said Korrigan, her cheerful demeanour grating at Phoenie's nerves, "I wouldn't want to stay out here past

sunset, if you know what I mean? There are all sorts of creepy monsters living in the wastelands that might come after us!"

"You should hook up with Phoenie here," said Theseus, much to her dismay, "Poor girl thought there was some kinda ghost living in that bloody place, if you can believe that! *And* she thought those crackheads were zombies!"

"That's what happens when you listen to rumours," said Ceres with a prideful smirk, "You people need to stop putting yourselves into dangerous situations on a whim. You could've gotten yourselves hurt."

"Who do you think you are, telling *us* what we can do?" asked Phoenie, doing her best to contain the rage building up inside her "Think you're better than us, do you? Better qualified?"

"Not to be rude," said Andromeda, "But why can you show up here and not us?"

"Because Mr Payne *asked* us to."

Phoenie almost choked. "Mr Payne? The headmaster? He *asked* you to investigate? Why? He never asks us to investigate anything like this!"

Mr Payne knew about Veritas. He knew they were dedicated to investigation. He'd sent them on assignments to cover things like sports and community activities but why not this? Why not what they were best at?

"Because, Ms Rogan," said Ceres, crossing her arms and trying to look like she was a teacher, "We *are* qualified. Now let's stop arguing and get out of here before something bad happens. We gotta inform the authorities about the drug den and get it sorted before everyone in there wakes up,"

Phoenie found keeping her true feelings in check was becoming more difficult by the second. "Yeah, like they'll do anything," she said with an unintended snarl, "Most of 'em were Inquisitors, and they're gone,"

"I was referring to a different authority," said Ceres.

"Oh, Mr Payne I bet."

Korrigan's eyes lit up. "Actually, Ms Chilte—"

Phoenie couldn't bear to listen to these airheads any longer. "Well, whatever," she interrupted, "Maybe we're not as 'qualified' as you, but we *will* prove we're superior."

She turned her back to them and walked away. What had started out as the chance for Veritas to prove themselves – and the truth – had turned into a farce.

Phoenie turned and marched off, followed by her team. Dante scuffed his feet then darted forward to catch up with Katrina, leaving Phantasia with Ceres and Korrigan.

"That girl," sighed Ceres, shaking her head.

"You're being too hard on them," said Korrigan, "They're only curious!"

"Curiosity'll get them killed sooner or later," said Ceres, "What if they found that dungeon beneath the town? That giant would've killed 'em!"

Since leaving the attic Ceres had admitted she was a witch, and that Korrigan was her 'apprentice', but they'd hadn't elaborated on what they'd really been doing in the mansion. Phantasia was no Water faerie, but she thought she had it figured out.

"You two work with the Seelie Court, don't you?" she asked. The two girls looked at her, then each other as if to confirm something between them, and then Ceres smiled.

"Yeah, we're in SEELIE," she said, "Should've guessed you'd heard of 'em."

"We're trainees!" added Korrigan, "Mr Payne was dead impressed with our rating over summer that he promoted us! We're totally at the same level as the third years now. We get to go out on these errands and stuff and make sure the town is safe and people aren't in trouble..."

"Know all about *you*," whispered Ceres, eyeing the backs of the other students who were now too far away to hear them now, "Only us, mind. Hermia's not got a clue. Kinda enjoyed that performance you've been putting on. Like a Fae wouldn't ace that bloody course in a minute,"

"All that stuff with the shadow demons and Godhand too," chirped Korrigan, "It's a shame everyone's oblivious 'cause you'd be such a hero right now if they remembered!"

"You remember *everything*?"

"Oh, you mean that spell that keeps gettin' cast?" asked Ceres.

"We're totally immune to it!" said Korrigan, "Once you know it's just a spell, it totally powerless! Course everyone else isn't trained to notice that yet, so it fools 'em every time! Looks like it's kinda weakening though. People keep remembering things without realising. Whoever's casting it must be pretty rubbish!"

"At least it keeps those lot safe," said Ceres, "Imagine if they remembered everything that's been happening. They *would* be dead from curiosity!"

Would they? How were they meant to learn if they forgot their mistakes? The spell appeared to be making things worse rather than helping protect everyone but Phantasia didn't feel like arguing the point in such an inhospitable place.

"We oughta be off anyway," said Ceres, "As Korrie so tactlessly announced, we gotta see Ms Chiltern about this assignment. She's one of my tribe as well, ya know? Not many of us left these days..."

"And we don't want to run into any nasty monsters!" added Korrigan, rolling her eyes around the shadows.

Phantasia walked with them until their paths diverged, the two girls heading towards the eastern forest while Phantasia continued in the direction of the church. Sensing Dante and Katrina weren't far ahead, she broke into a run until she caught them up in the middle of a flat expanse of concrete and collapsed houses.

"The others have gone home," said Katrina, "We both live at the Orphanage. Actually, now I think of it, I have something to talk to Phoenie about! I'd better chase her down. Sorry, gotta leave you two alone together!"

Dante winced them reached out to grab her.

"Sorry, gotta go!" she said, slipping free of his grasp and running off, glancing back every so often as if to make sure Dante wasn't following her. Alone with Katrina, his aura had been open to an extent Phantasia hadn't seen before, but now his barriers were back and his narrowed eyes focused on her.

"That was pretty cool what you did back in the mansion," she said, hoping to ease open his defences, "You know, when you went up to those guards? I never thought you could do something like that!"

"Whatever it takes," he grunted, "What do you want, anyway?"

Before she could reply Phantasia felt something underneath them. It was like a black blob of corruption was oozing its way up through the earth to the surface, a dark aura bubbling up like a volcano about to erupt.

"Well?" asked Dante, his arms crossed tight and his eyes glaring at her from the space between his scarf and his hair, "If all you're going to do is stand there looking awkward, I'm going home,"

She didn't want him to turn around because that was where the ground was starting to swell up and something was starting to take shape.

"We should hang out more!" she said, stopping him from turning away.

"Why?"

"Because it'd be fun!"

Dante grunted. "You mean like tonight?"

"Yeah!"

The ground was taking a definite shape now: long, pointed shoulders, a triangular head, stick-thin limbs that caught the street lights as if they were formed from diamond...

"If I wanted to hang out with junkies I'd hang around with Byron," said Dante, "And if I wanted to hang out with people who believed in ghosts..." He started to turn away once more.

"I—I thought you'd like some adventure," said Phantasia.

"You're not a good judge of character," he scoffed, "I just want peace and quiet, that's all. Now—"

Phantasia grabbed his arm while trying her best not to stare at the almost-formed creature behind him. Standing at nearly three metres tall it wasn't quite the stone giant that guarded the underground castle but there was no doubt it was of the same design.

"We should go the other way!" she said. Dante resisted her tugging and her hand slipped through his arm as she struggled to maintain a grip. He froze, looked at her with wide eyes, then began backing away as his aura began to fluctuate with wild throbs.

"I knew it," he said, "Get the hell away from me!"

Phantasia winced as he turned around only to be confronted by the sight of the stone creature. She dashed forward and flipped over Dante's to put herself between him and the creature. The introverted boy was trembling, his eyes wide with fear and his aura struggling to contain itself behind thick barriers of denial. Explaining away a ghost he couldn't see was one thing – convincing him that this wasn't real would be a whole different challenge altogether.

Chapter 34

The Dreamer

"Get out of here while I distract it," ordered Phantasia, but Dante was rooted to the spot.

"It's not real. It's not real. It's not real," he mumbled over and over to himself.

"Dante, this *is* real and—" Phantasia was interrupted as the stone monster took a few ground-shuddering steps towards them and pulled one of its lithe arms back to strike. She pushed Dante away as sharp fingers cut through the air and smashed into the concrete behind them. Dante shielded his eyes from shrapnel – or perhaps the sight of the creature – but was still too numb to react.

The creature, pivoting on its two pointed feet like some kind of three-tonne ballerina, swung its body towards them. Hiding her identity in the face of such danger wasn't an option so Phantasia threw her arms around Dante's waist and jumped away. He was still locked in catatonic shock when they landed twenty metres away behind a disused skip, his body shaking with vertigo after Phantasia's aerial gymnastics. She grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard.

"Look, I'm going to have to fight this thing," she said to vacant eyes, "Dante!" She bathed his tormented aura in her light, hoping even a slither might make it through the cracks. As the creature began twirling its way towards them, Dante came around.

"I need you to hide," said Phantasia, "Run away when you get a chance!"

Dante nodded and tried to take a few deep breaths, then turned and scurried like a rat into a tight gap between the skip and a wall. For the time being it would have to do, as Phantasia didn't have time to deal with him. The creature was getting close, its sharp feet stabbing the ground leaving a trail of bullet-holes in its wake. Phantasia shot backwards, passing between the creature's legs before it had a chance to react. A crystal hand dragged along the ground, sending sparks flying, as it swung its body around to face her.

Phantasia floated above the creature, probing its body and aura for a weak point. The main body, grey and cracked, looked like it had been moulded from the ground below

while the creature's aura wasn't so easy to explain. Unlike living creatures it had no effect on the mana flowing around it and unlike demons it wasn't absorbing or corrupting it. If only she'd paid more attention to her lessons in demonology back in the Innerworld then maybe she wouldn't have been so perplexed!

The creature noticed her presence and swivelled its featureless face around to face her. Then its stance changed. It fell on all-fours like an animal ready to pounce and then the triangular head, which had been resting atop broad, sloping shoulders, rose up on a blazing chain of dark energy connecting it to the base of the creature's would-be spine. Was it really a head? A tail? Which end of the creature was which? Phantasia was even more befuddled now. She dropped like a weight to avoid the head/tail, which whipped at her like a flail.

The creature's new weapon crashed into surrounding walls and rubble as Phantasia's superior agility evaded its every blow. One strike uprooted a disused streetlamp, while another smashed through the ground into an old basement, buried for centuries. Thanks to the disturbance the creature's offence was creation Phantasia could feel people coming to investigate. They could be innocents for all she knew, and easy victims should the creature decide to attack them. She had to finish the battle before they arrived.

She scanned for Dante and noticed he was still cowering behind the skip, head grasped between his hands as his aura began dancing in a pattern similar to what she'd witness in Godhand's manor. Maybe the creature noticed her distraction because it scrambled towards the hiding place. Phantasia dived forward but knew she couldn't reach Dante in time.

Yet the creature didn't attack. The head lurched forward and stopped dead in front of Dante's face. For a moment it appeared as if they'd locked eyes in a staring contest and then the head swung back to slam an off-guard Phantasia through a wall. As she picked herself up from the rubble the creature scurried towards her, but its successful attack had been the key to its defeat.

"You can't hurt me," she said, "Your attacks are all physical. That one just there didn't have an ounce of magic behind it. All your magical power is doing is..."

She darted towards it. The head/tail lashed out, but passed through her now-incorporeal body. The dark energy that tied it to the body passed through her and, as it did, she send her purifying power along it like electricity through water. As the corruption dissipated into light the body itself crumbled into dust.

Phantasia found Dante collapsed by the skip, unconscious. Sensing that people were close by, she picked him up and snuck away. The boy had been overwhelmed enough by the evening's events – leaving him to be found by strangers wasn't going to help. Hopefully a night of rest in the church, with Phantasia soothing his troubled aura, would help.

Dante turned and saw what Phantasia had been looking at but trying to hide from him: a three-metre tall giant of stone, its body formed from the very ground on which they stood. He wanted to run away but his body was rooted to the spot like some kind of stubborn tree. The next thing he knew Phantasia had flipped over his head like a top-level athlete and was staring the eyeless giant down.

Then it made towards them, claws swooping in to slice them apart. And Dante still couldn't move.

He found Phantasia's arms around his waist and, before he could prise her away, he was flying into the air. His head swam with vertigo as he glanced down at the earth

below, then the two of them plummeted. Had he not been in such a state of shock and confusion he might have screamed.

They landed as if they'd only jumped from a small wall. Phantasia ushered Dante into the space behind the skip, where vermin made their nests. He closed his eyes and buried his head in his hands, hoping everything would go away. Especially *that* voice.

When he next looked up, the creature's stone head was floating right there in front of him.

This isn't just a dream...

Dante turned to escape the monster and found himself standing in an exquisite mansion with crimson carpet at his feet and walls lined with velvet drapes. He had to find Katrina! She was trapped in here somewhere. They were going to execute her if he didn't do something about it!

He flung open door after door, finding nothing but empty studies and abandoned lounges, all with vacuumed carpets and polished tables. That such insidious, cruel people could afford all this whilst most people he knew had to struggle just to keep their cluttered apartments in order gnawed at his tolerance. The bag of explosive material he'd swiped weighed down in his pocket, begging to be used to tear apart the undeserved luxuries.

Then he opened a door into room filled with red robed cultists. Someone else might have uttered a witty retort to the shocked faces of the enemy, but Dante could only yelp fear and run away, his heart pounding as if in time with the stomps of chasing feet behind him.

He turned a corner and ran into another group of robes. These ones were taller, bulkier, their faces contorted with rage. Inquisitors. Dante crashed through the nearest door and his shoulder exploded in pain as it cracked into a shelf. Of all the times to run into a cupboard...

He fell to his knees and tried to scurry behind the vacuum cleaner, hoping that the small army of red robes hadn't noticed his blunder – but they had, and were soon surrounding him.

Then the voice came back.

Why does this always...

Dante turned and felt a chill sea breeze prickle his skin. The sky was a clear, rich blue and seagulls were squawking nearby as Lysander and Angelo tried to coerce them into mobbing Chris and Lance, who lay spread out across the green hill sunbathing.

Shielding his eyes from the burning sun, Dante swept his gaze over the scenery. Joel, Kaori and the other Ravens bundled out of an amusement arcade clutching ice creams and sweets while, down on the beach, Hermia, Korrigan and the other more active students played games with inflatable balls and throwing discs. Dante wondered where Katrina was and shuffled around the central green in search of her. She was with the rest of the 'Veritas' clique, following Phoenie as she led them towards the fringes of the town, with Mythology teacher Mr Baudin following discretely behind.

Then he looked out across the sea. Maybe he was the first to see it, or maybe everyone else was ignoring it, but he could have sworn he saw something flash in the distance. He squinted, wondering if it was just the reflection of sunlight on the waves – and suddenly wished he was. A pair of long horns rose out of the ocean, which were soon connected to a bulbous head. Those on the beach ran screaming towards the promenade as a large creature, at least ten metres tall, rose out of the ocean. Its muscular body was covered in scales, its lipless mouth quivered as water drained from its lungs, and its long, ape-like limbs dragged along the seabed, leaving a trail of foam in their wake. Some of the teachers darted forward, drawing weapons Dante didn't know they had, and stood battle-ready on the edge of the promenade, while their students huddled together in whatever shelter was nearby.

This isn't the way things were...

Dante turned and he found himself standing amongst a throng of oblivious people thrashing around under dancing lights. Loud music assaulted his ears, its heavy bass pounding at his stomach with what felt like a hundred beats a second, and he stumbled forward through the crowd. Glancing back he could see the distinctive ginger of Joel's head waiting at the bar for drinks, while Byron and Vincent loitered in a nearby cubicle behind a haze of smoke.

The World's End. *This is where it started...*

Dante turned to face the mural that dominated one long wall of the underground nightclub. His eyes were drawn away from the stylistic graffiti and depictions of a flaming destruction towards the blackness that crowned it. A familiar shadow – an all-too familiar shadow.

The voice began to reverberate in his head again. Then, like wet paint in a squall, the wall – and reality – began to wash away, leaving behind an expanse of lifeless trees whose withered branches stretched out towards the horizon. Somewhere in that army of death stood a tall figure, its horned form silhouetted against the full moon. Dante could feel a hand reaching out to him, a voice willing him to...

Come with me. Accept me.

Like he did every other time, Dante buried his face behind his hands and screamed until the nightmare shattered and reality returned.

Dante blinked open his eyes. A cat lazed on a patch of grass in the middle of a stony floor, watching him with three eyes, while morning light streamed through cracks in the wall and reflected through large multicoloured windows. Casting his gaze away from the mutant he noticed errant trees had forced their way through the masonry, while foliage crawled up the walls as if consuming them.

It couldn't be a dream. His dreams were recollections of places he'd been to or of places charred and withered by black clouds that swept across the sky. This was a new place – a place untouched by shadow and bathed in life. It *couldn't* be a dream...

Feeling numbness in his arm, he rolled over onto his back. He'd been sleeping, in his coat, on a bed of soft grass, straw pillows and cotton sheets – a world away from the stale blankets and uneven mattress he was used to. The ceiling didn't loom over him like it did in his apartment, either. Instead he looked up at a distant roof filled with holes and sustained by skeletal rafters showing signs of severe weathering. He glanced sideways and noticed a set of cabinets and a crude desk, and a familiar backpack sitting next to a pile of discarded clothes. *Girls* clothes.

As he pushed himself up into a sitting position he felt a dull ache on his head and poked it with finger, producing a sharp pain. He stroked it with more caution and realised it was a lump, as if he'd knocked his head hard. Maybe that was why it felt like a maelstrom of lost memories and he didn't know where he was. What was the last thing he remembered?

A mansion. And... crackheads? I was in a drug den?

It didn't sit right. Why would he be in a place like that? Had Joel tricked him? Had he taken the drugs himself and ended up on some crazy trip like the sort he'd only ever heard about?

No, Joel wasn't there. Kat was there! Kat and those lot... and...

What was that? Dante noticed a flash of white through the rafters above. Was it a mutated animal? Some kind of bird? Or...

Phantasia...

Dante's aura danced like a storm as he slept, spinning and crashing and tearing itself apart in ways that left lingering scars in the surrounding mana. The most violent tremor came in the moment before he awoke: Phantasia was sitting atop the spire when she felt the rising tension and was ready to dive down and do everything in her power to suppress it when Dante's aura condensed back to its usual, impenetrable state. He was awake, confused and disorientated – as was to be expected given the circumstances. Phantasia slipped down from the spire and across the roof, dropping down to ground level away from Dante's inquisitive eyes.

"You're awake!" she said, climbing into the church through a hole in the wall. He was nursing a bump on his head he'd received when he fainted. "You had a bit of a knock last night and passed out, so I brought you, eh... I brought back to my place..."

As if he didn't have enough to deal with already! Maybe the shock of realising this was her home would take his mind off things.

"I'm okay," he said. A flat reply, coupled with an expressionless face, didn't tell Phantasia anything. His eyes wandered his surroundings and she caught the tiniest hint of a blush on his cheeks. "I should get home," he said, picking himself up.

"I can walk you home!" she said. It was worth a try, at least.

Dante grimaced. "It's okay, I can find the way myself," he said, brushing down his coat.

Phantasia crossed her arms and pouted – something she'd learned from watching Kaori when she wanted something from Joel. "It's not fair," she said in her whiniest voice, "You got to see where I live!"

Dante raised an eyebrow and glanced around the church. "You really live here, huh? You really are a bigger freak than me..."

"No way," said Phantasia, "You can't prove that unless I get to see where you live too! Otherwise I've only got your word to go on and..." – she took a quick breath to prepare her ultimate attack – "I don't trust you yet!"

For a moment she was certain he was on the verge of smiling, but then he shook his head and turned away with a sweep of his coat.

"You'll just follow me anyway, won't you?" he said, glancing back from the corner of his eyes.

"You bet I will!"

Dante lived in one of the renovated apartments of the Orphanage, a cul-de-sac managed by Katrina's family to home children and teenagers who had no family of their own. He stood at his front door. Phantasia waited behind him, eager to take a closer look inside even though his aura was stretching out like a wall to keep her outside. He played with his keys, trying each one in turn.

"Can never get the right one first time," he said. Phantasia didn't need extrasensory perception to see through that lie.

After going through his three keys numerous times, Dante unlocked the door and stepped inside – then turned and clutched the door as is ready to slam it in her face, much like he would his own aura whenever she was trying to look into it. Looking past him she could see a short corridor leading to a small, uncluttered lounge with dark curtains.

"There, you've seen enough," he said, making the close the door.

Phantasia darted forward before his lacklustre reactions had a chance to kick in. He grunted his displeasure but moved away to let her through.

"You said I could have a look, so I'm going to have a look!" she said.

"Well there's not much to see," he said with a shrug.

On the contrary, however, there was *plenty* to see – at least for a faerie! Dante shuffled around the lounge, hands in pockets and eyes downcast as Phantasia took in the details: his limited furnishings – a sofa, a chair and a desk – were arranged at perfect right angles to the walls, as was the dark rug he was standing on; the shelves by his desk were filled with studious books on the Academy's various subjects, as well as on dream analysis and the theory of collective consciousness, while a batch of hard-backed diaries going back five years had a strong resonance with his aura; a similar attachment could be seen with a solitary photo sitting in a frame on the desk itself – the torn half of a photo, featuring a young woman. When Dante noticed Phantasia studying it from afar, he knocked his face down and glared at her. He had a similar reaction when her eyes wandered to the door leading to his bedroom. Before he pulled the door shut she could see a variety of sketches and paintings adorning the walls, many of which held powerful feelings and emotions she couldn't read – and the majority featuring shadowy images. With the closing of the door came the raising of barriers, not just around Dante's personal aura but also around the bedroom itself. Just as the world only told you what the world wanted you to know, so too did humans only show you what they wanted you to see. She could penetrate those subconscious barriers if she wanted to, but it would be disrespectful and against a faerie's nature – that was the sort of behaviour associated with fallen faeries and demons!

A rap at the door broke the silence. A startled Dante looked to be having an internal debate as to whether or not he should answer it and Phantasia wanted to reassure him – she knew it was Katrina, but how could she explain her psychic abilities? After another knock, Katrina called through the letterbox.

“Dante? Dante, is everything all right?”

He looked at Phantasia, took a deep breath and then shuffled over and let Katrina in. Before he could react she smothered him like a mother who had been reunited with her missing child.

“You didn't come home last night,” she said, “I was worried about you!”

“It's okay, he stayed over at mine,” said Phantasia, not expecting the shocked look Katrina gave her. The broad-shouldered girl with self-cut hair looked at Dante with inquiring eyes. “It was a rough night,” continued Phantasia, “We didn't get much sleep!”

“Excuse us a minute,” said Katrina, before taking Dante's hand and dragging him outside.

Even with her superior senses Phantasia couldn't make out what they were talking about, only that it involved Dante raising more barriers and a barrage of thoughts and emotions from both parties that she couldn't read. If Faye were here she'd be able to work out what was going on – but then she would also be liable to announce it to everybody! In a world where humans valued their silent thoughts, a tactless faerie such as Faye would be a disaster! Perhaps that was why Queen Thetis and Dionysus, having spent years in the company of humans, were so much more discerning.

“Is Katrina okay?” asked Phantasia as soon as Dante reappeared. His cheeks were burning red and his hair had been ruffled.

“I-I think she got the wrong idea,” he said, avoiding eye contact.

“Wrong idea?”

“You know, about me sleeping over at yours?”

“What's wrong with that? It's what people do, isn't it?”

“No, it's not that, it's...it's suspicious!”

Phantasia felt as if she'd walked into another of those complicated human situations that didn't make sense, like the bizarre antagonism between Kaori and Shelley, or the rivalry between good friends like Byron and Doyle. She made a mental note to research 'the wrong idea' when she had the chance.

"You need to get out more," she said, hoping a change of subject might relieve his anxiety, "You spend too much time shut away in your room. It's making you paranoid! We should go into town and meet everyone!"

"Aye—what—you?" Dante's face screwed up in cocktail of shock and disgust, "You're insane! You don't want to be seen with someone like me!"

"Of course I do," she replied with a cheerful smile, "And so do all your friends!"

Dante backed away towards the bathroom, his hand groping the air until it settled on the door handle. "B-but people...they'll get the wrong idea! You'll be laughed at! Don't do it! Find someone better!"

"Oh, Dante, you're being silly again! You're going out with me, and that's final!"

Chapter 35

Understanding Dante

Dante pulled his scarf over his nose, taking comfort in the warm damp of his breath. At least Phantasia wasn't holding his hand any more – he'd been quick to let her know he had his limits. The lithe albino was now skipping alongside him, eyes as brilliant and unnaturally white as always. As much as he disliked the current situation, he knew this strange girl held the key to his sanity. Anxiety churned away in his stomach as he contemplated how and where his future would be decided. Not in the Smith's electronics and repair store at any rate.

"John always has exciting things to look at!" said Phantasia, "Don't you think moving picture screens are amazing?"

'Moving picture screens'? He'd always suspected she was from some wandering tribe that shunned technology and emphasised all those naïve things Phantasia herself was fond of, like friendship and harmony. After all there were plenty of people in the world who believed civilisation's reliance on it had brought about... No, it was better not to let his thoughts dwell on *that*. The past did him no favours. He had to keep thinking of the future, like his councillor had told him before she'd abandoned him to fate.

John was adjusting a customer's palm computer when they entered, and almost slipped up the delicate rewiring when he noticed Dante. Not surprising, since Dante had only been in the shop once this year when he'd brought Katrina some new films for her photography.

Phantasia, ignoring all the rules he'd outlined before, grabbed Dante's hand and dragged him over to the wall-mounted televisions. "We should have a look at some stuff while John's busy!" she said with her usual giddy enthusiasm, like a child who was perpetually overdosed on sugar. Dante tried not to glare.

Without asking for permission she began rooting through a box of memory cards, tossing them around as if she were rooting for a lost button in a box of stones. With a squeal of glee she pulled one out and Dante waited with crossed arms as she slipped it into one of the screens. Some options swirled to life on the display but she just stood watching them, as if the random patterns had locked her into a trance. Had she come this far without realising?

"You know it's a touch screen, right?" asked Dante.

"Of course!" she replied, "I just don't like...touching them. I don't want to break it!"

Dante noticed John was smiling to himself. How many times had this girl blundered in here to do this? Dante reached forward and tapped the play icon for her and she made the sort of noise he'd expect to hear from an infant being shown images of crazy puppets. That the first image that appeared featured plumes of black smoke and tiny people running around in panic made her reaction all the more disturbing.

"Oh! Oh! This looks like something to do with the Great Cataclysm!" she chirped.

Talk about stating the obvious! It was another collection of news reports and documentary footage that had been salvaged from some collection or another. Dante avoided the footage and glanced over at John, who had just finished serving his customer and shuffling over to meet them.

"Hullo," he said.

"Hey," replied Dante.

Phantasia was engrossed in the video, watching scenes of destruction with her large white eyes like a child would watch primary-coloured cartoons.

"Watching more Old World reports, are you?" asked John.

"It's like I'm watching a totally different world," she said, "Everything is just so...different? Don't you think?"

"Well it was a long time ago," said Dante, who had resorted to scuffing his feet on the dull grey carpet, "It's not good to obsess over the past,"

"Phantasia just wants to work out the truth," said John and Dante could feel one of his lectures coming on, "We can't just ignore everything that happened back then or we'll never understand what caused so much tragedy – or be able to stop it from happening again. It really helps having someone like Phantasia come in and watch the footage because she notices things that we've missed. I really need to sit her down with my old man and get a roundtable discussion going."

Dante wasn't sure if Phantasia was interested in debating the complex contradictions of the lost history – by the innocent expression on her face as recordings of violence and death played out before her wide eyes, it looked more like she was enjoying the footage rather than analysing it. Maybe all the talk of friendship and love and understanding created a morbid shadow in her mind that was fascinated by death and destruction. It was a comforting thought, but one that was soon overthrown as the documentary turned its focus away from mindless wars and onto psychology.

'The Cult of Erebus' began the narrator, 'A few years ago it was a minor doomsday cult but now its symbol, a twelve-winged angel of darkness, can be seen in graffiti and carved into monuments across the world.'

Dante didn't like where this was going. He eyed the shop door and contemplated an abrupt escape. Phantasia was too engrossed to notice.

"I always thought the Erebus meme was a little creepy," said John, not helping Dante's mood.

The documentary continued, flashing up images all-too familiar to Dante. *'Adopted by youth culture across the world, the image of Erebus has seeped into the international consciousness as a symbol of looming apocalypse. Research has even claimed it has been recorded in remote cultures, suggesting unverified claims that humanity may be connected by a collective subconscious. Scientists have—'*

"See, now that *is* rubbish," said John, "Any reasonable person can tell those cultures we introduced to the meme by travellers. Problem is the whole New Age culture back then was so strong it corrupted even science. All anyone wanted was something to unite them – something to fight against and blame the state of the world on. Things like magic and demons and Erebus provided them with that." He ruffled his hair. "At least that's what my old man's always told me,"

Phantasia was smiling to herself as if she knew something they didn't. Another crazy story passed down through her tribe, no doubt, like the ones she'd spouted in classes. Dante eyed the door again as a bell jingled and a customer entered carrying a box of wires and chipboards. John excused himself, his face beaming like Doyle's whenever he saw a pretty girl.

"We should probably get going," said Phantasia, turning her back to the continuing documentary. Dante didn't hesitate to turn off the screen and toss the memory card back into the collection.

"You shouldn't watch that crap," he said as they left, "It's all ancient history. It doesn't matter anymore,"

"Of course it matters," she said, "Didn't you listen to John? If we ignore it then we'll never learn from the mistakes!"

"Yeah, but who's to say it ever even happened? That could just be some kind of weird entertainment like they used to have back in those times."

It was an argument he didn't want to get into – and one he knew he couldn't lose. Conceding defeat would be like admitting...

"Do you *always* stay inside at the weekend?" asked Phantasia, changing the subject almost as if she'd sensed his anxiety. She's just good at reading body language, he told himself.

"Don't see the point in what's outside," he replied. The only things out there were people. All people wanted to do was embrace what was similar to them and deride what was different – and Dante was different to *everybody*.

"You have to leave your room sometimes," she said, "You must *want* to!"

"Doesn't matter what I want," he said, "Me and the world don't see eye-to-eye, and that's that."

"You're just being silly again,"

She had a habit of saying that, of chastising him whenever he tried to explain his situation – and the worst thing about it was the feeling she was *right*. The more time he spent with her, the more he felt her infectious spirit eroding away at the barriers he kept up and the more he began to open up – and that was the *worst* thing that could happen. Opening up to people and forming bonds only led to pain, and approaching the brilliant light of happiness only created a deep shadow. Better to stay away from everything and not risk being hurt – or hurting others.

Yet she was the key, the one person who could dispel the anxiety and doubt that clouded Dante's world. If he opened up to her and she helped cast away...

Again he felt the anxiety and again his thoughts began to quarrel. Not much longer and things would be settled...

"So what happened to your parents?"

Once again the question came out of nowhere. Dante would have been annoyed – even angry – had anyone else asked, as had happened in the past, but there was something about Phantasia's naïve, matter-of-fact attitude that forced him to forgive her.

"I don't have a father. My mother was taken away."

Phantasia stopped and tried to take his hands in hers, but he shoved them deep in his coat pockets and avoided her diamond eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, "Was it Godhand?"

If only it were that simple! If only I could tell you the truth!

"No, before then," he found himself saying against his better judgement, "Years ago. For her 'safety', they said. They said she was..." – he couldn't believe he was telling her this! – "They said she was insane. Said she could..." He paused, his body trembling. Admitting this was one of the biggest steps to salvation. "That she could see things..."

He couldn't say it. He couldn't admit to the truth! All he had to do was lie and cover up the truth, and then he could go back into the comforting shadows...

"Like I do."

There. He'd said it. There was no going back now.

Phantasia looked quizzical. "You see things?"

How tactless could this girl be? For some reason Dante found it almost comforting. In Phantasia he'd found someone even more socially inept than he was. "Yeah," he replied. He refused to elaborate. No need to. Not yet.

"Oh well, these things happen," she said. Was she smiling? Cheerful? "Everyone sees things differently anyway, so who's to say what's the 'right' way to see the world?"

That was some crazy logic – and that it *was* logic *and* made sense disturbed him. As he contemplated her words it almost felt as if they themselves had penetrated his defences like bullets loaded with poison. He shook his head to clear away the thoughts and whatever it was Phantasia had tried to smother him with. A crazy girl with crazy logic and crazy charisma that challenged and changed his very beliefs was the last thing he needed! Or was it precisely *what* he needed?

“Let’s go find Joel!” she said, pulling him out of the introspective nightmare.

Joel and his friends were, as expected, loitering around Poe Street with the rest of their tribe. Dante wished he’d left his stand-out white coat at home because the dark-clothed Ravens all noticed him walking towards them, which was made worse when Joel came bounding up the street calling his name. All attention was turned his way. Worst-case scenario.

“Dude!” cried the red-headed musician, “Dude, you’re *out!*”

Joel grabbed him in a weak bear hug – the most someone so frail could muster – and gave him a hearty pat on the back. Utter humiliation.

“It’s so good to see you!” said Kaori, gliding up the street in a long dress decorated with fake flowers and leather belts, “Is this ‘Tasia’s doing?”

“I forced him to leave his room,” said Phantasia, “Couldn’t have him shut behind closed doors for the rest of his life, could we?”

Joel looked like he would fall to his knees in worship of the albino. “No way! We’ve been trying to get him out forever! Been shutting himself away ever since, well...” His brotherly honour stopped him saying more. “Dude. Just...*dude!*”

Then Byron sauntered over, ever-present spliff twitching between his fingers. “Never thought we’d see you out again after that stunt you pulled last time.” he said, showing none of Joel’s discretion, “Not gonna go psycho on us again, are you?”

There was a tense moment between the clique, but Byron was revelling in it. It just proved what Dante knew was true, and what Phantasia had yet to witness: Dante tore people apart.

“C’mon, Byron, don’t bring that shit up again,” said Joel, slinging an arm around Dante’s shoulder, “Dante’s a dude. Not his problem if crowded nightclubs ain’t his thing!”

Dante tried not to lose himself in the recollection, as hazy as those memories were. He still wasn’t sure how much of it was real and how much had been tainted by his dreams.

“You guys gonna stick around?” asked Kaori, attempting to settle the competitive atmosphere between the boys. Girls had a habit of doing that, which was why Dante preferred their company.

“We’re just stopping by,” said Phantasia, “We’re trying to meet as many people as we can. We’re off the gallery next!”

“Maybe you should stay here, Dante,” said Kaori, “You know what the Hawks are like.”

He knew all-too-well. The Hawks were the least accepting tribe around – even worse than Godhand in some respects! Unless you conformed to their rigid ideals of what was ‘cool’, you were excluded and mocked. They were the epitome of everything Dante hated about people and he had no doubts they hated him just as much. Yet spending the afternoon enduring Byron’s taunts and causing further ruptures in Joel’s stable friendship group was also a situation he’d rather avoid. At least, if he followed Phantasia, he would be in familiar company – the Hawks hated her just as much, surely? And why would she even *want* to visit them. It was a curiosity he couldn’t help but follow, much to Joel and Kaori’s long faces as he left them.

Less than a minute at the gallery and he was feeling regret for abandoning actual friends. The Hawks were arranged in small cliques, each sitting on a step of the gallery corresponding to their position within the larger group. The Academy Hawks, led by

Vincent, sat on one of the lowest steps and were unusually receptive to Phantasia's advances.

"Dante never leaves his room, so I brought him out!" she said, much to his own embarrassment. Did this girl ever realise who she was talking to?

"Why are we even here?" he mumbled to himself. That Phantasia turned to acknowledge him made him wonder if those weird ears of hers were designed to pick up the slightest sound.

"You can't just limit yourself to one group of friends, silly!" she said, maintaining her cheerful tone even as the collective scorn of the Hawks continued to focus on her mere presence, "And I thought that maybe..."

She tugged his coat again, demonstrating a strength her frail body belied. Before he knew it, Dante was sitting on the lowest step next to Shelley. He could hear the sudden intake of breath and exasperated mumbling from the tribal gangs as a stranger settled down on their sacred turf.

"You and Shelley should get along!" finished Phantasia, standing proud with hands on hips as if she'd just accomplished a miraculous task.

Dante glanced sideways at the diminutive dark-haired girl. Her appearance had changed over the past few weeks from the quintessential black-coat-and-white-top of the Hawks. Now she wore a loose tie and an unbuttoned waistcoat was lurking beneath the coat as if trying to hide from the ever-judgemental eyes of the Hawks. Even her hair was now parted at the side. It were as if Shelley was trying to discard her current image and replicate Phantasia's...

"I like the coat," she whispered, her large eyes glancing at him momentarily before returning to their focus on the ground.

"My mum made it for me," he said, doing his best to ignore the gallery of glares aimed in his direction. Shelley looked as uncomfortable here as he felt. "Not very fashionable..."

Shelley smiled, like she wanted to make further comment but was afraid of the repercussions. He could tell she hated it here but was too scared to leave, because he'd once felt the same hanging around with the Ravens. A distant part of him wanted to put an arm around her and say it was okay, that she didn't have to force herself to fit in and should just be herself.

Vincent cleared his throat to turn his little clique's attention his way. "This is all very touching, Dove girl," he said to Phantasia, "You finished yet?"

Phantasia grabbed Dante's arm again and pulled him away from the steps. "You people should open up more," she said, "I'm not giving up until I see some colour round here!"

Dante found himself dragged away from the Gallery by Phantasia's long strides, even though he was quite happy to escape himself.

"Those people!" she said once they'd left the Hawk territory, "I keep trying to open them up but all they can think about is themselves! It's not doing them or anybody else any good!"

"Maybe you oughta just leave 'em alone like everybody else does," said Dante, "They're Hawks. It's what they're like."

"And look at you!" she said, jabbing a finger at his chest, "You look exhausted! You don't get enough exercise!"

"And?"

"We're going to the forest! You can learn something from Hermia!"

It was funny how his feelings could change so much over the course of an hour. Not long ago he'd been contemplating how Phantasia would be the key to his sanity, but now she was just getting on his nerves. Why couldn't she just leave him – and everybody else – in peace? What gave her the right to saunter around telling people how they should live

their lives? Dante didn't want fitness lessons from some overenthusiastic athlete who sniped anyone who didn't enjoy sports like she did – he just wanted proof he was mentally ill!

Either because he was fed up with Phantasia's behaviour, or because he wanted to do things on his terms, he swivelled around and began walking in the opposite direction. She'd reach the forest without him or turn around and follow. Whatever she did, her self-righteous games were over.

Was it something she'd said? Dante's aura had never been the most readable of things, but the sudden shift after they left the Gallery was glaring. For a moment she'd noticed it cracking open a little as he sat next to Shelley, like he were scared to open up yet desperately wanted to, but as soon as they'd left and she'd suggested a trip to the forest his barriers were back up and warding her off like never before! When he turned and stomped off in the opposite direction, she decided to leave him be. Maybe if she weren't around he'd open up a little? Not that she *wouldn't* be around – she just had to make sure he didn't *think* she was!

Following him was easy. Dante's aura was like a heavy weight that tugged and pulled at the streams of mana around him, like a weak magnet swimming up a river of metal. At present it was only a minor disturbance but Phantasia worried that, if Dante continued to seclude himself, it might one day turn him into a beacon for more malevolent entities to prey on. It had been no coincidence that the leansídhe had latched itself onto depressed individuals such as Kaori and Shelley, after all.

And then the corruption stopped. Dante's was no longer a dense shell in the river. He was still as closed off as ever, but somehow he'd begun to relax and his aura showed signs she'd begun to associate with people who were *laughing*.

Dante was *having fun*?

Phantasia slipped through the alleyways towards him, throwing herself around with ethereal athletics whenever she was sure no one could see her. She couldn't miss this! There were two auras with him – open and blooming like flowers, unafraid of the world around him. Youthful, vigorous, like the wind... *Lysander and Angelo!*

Of all the people she'd expected to see Dante with, those two were the last: Dante, the boy who retreated within himself and saw the world in shades of darkness, and the two boys who had no concept of the term 'serious'. Yet there was no mistaking it – there they were in the middle of the street, Lysander and Angelo dressed in outlandish clothes and carrying shopping bags stuffed with more, and Dante laughing along with them. Phantasia kept herself hidden as she listened in on their conversation.

"We already tried dressing Angelo up as a girl," said Lysander, "A most excellent idea, though."

"I found the high heels a most challenging test of dexterity," added Angelo, "The fake chest not so much."

"But did it work?" asked Dante.

"Lance was confused for a bit," said Lysander, "But he's so desperate he'd shag a dog if you put it in a dress and called it Susan,"

"My dog did not approve of a lady's dress," said Angelo.

"I always thought it'd be fun to sign them up to a dating agency," said Dante, "One of the proper big ones from the city, you know?"

"Oh, I know all about them," grinned Lysander, "Helena hacked her way into their databases a few months ago. Talk about an embarrassing setback for the company – they had to explain how a thirteen-year-old girl changed everyone's status to 'polygamous and up for it!'"

Dante laughed again. Phantasia couldn't believe the sound she was hearing or the sight of his aura. Maybe this was her chance to open him up and banish those antisocial walls forever! She skipped out from her hiding place and towards the boys.

"Dante! Dante, I was wondering where you got to!" she cried, her skip turning into a run as she did her best to look like she'd only just noticed him, "Why didn't you tell me you were going this way?"

The moment Dante noticed her, however, his barriers returned.

"Looks like the crazy girl caught up after all," said Lysander, winking at Dante and taking a few steps away, "Don't let us get in the way of your super-awesome date!"

By the time Phantasia reached him, Dante's aura was back how it started: dense and impenetrable, while Lysander and Angelo were frolicking off down the street.

"You don't give up, do you," said Dante, shoving his hands in pockets and avoiding her eyes.

"I was worried..."

"Look, if I tell you everything will you leave me alone?"

"Well...I...don't know? I'm just trying to be friendly!"

Dante glanced back at her. "Fine, I'll tell you, okay? We'll go someplace private and I'll tell you. I'm fed up with you dragging me around and following me and trying to interfere in my life. Maybe if you know the truth you'll keep away."

This wasn't how she'd wanted it to be. She's hoped Dante would open up to her as a friend, not in anger! She couldn't deny him the chance to release his demons though, and followed him as he strode through the streets without saying another word. By some strange coincidence the private spot Dante chose happened to be the same run-down park on the fringes of the town that Shelley was also attached to. Phantasia wondered if the two of them were ever here at the same time.

Unlike Shelley, though, Dante preferred the sit facing the town and away from the demonic wastelands. His attention was focused on the church spire, which rose from behind the buildings like a sacred blade emerging from a miasma of despair. It hadn't been long since he'd woken up in that very church and Phantasia wondered if this was what plagued his thoughts.

"It's weird how you try get on with everybody," he said, "Yet they can't even get on with each other,"

"It's how I was brought up," she replied. The differences between the various types of faerie were a far bigger gap to cross than the differences between humans, who were very much made identical. That faeries could coexist without strife, and humans were always fighting one another, was a perplexing issue. "You get on with everybody too!" she said, "I mean, look at all the people we met today! All those different groups and types of people, and how many of them didn't like you?"

"Quite a few," he mumbled.

"Okay, there were a couple," she said, recalling the antagonism of Byron and the Hawks, "But things can never be perfect! Some people don't like me, either."

"Yeah, that's what happens when you're different. You never fit in anywhere,"

"You think I don't know that? Look at me! Do I *look* like I fit in anywhere? And you know what? I *like* it that way."

"What if being 'special' ain't all it's cracked up to be?" asked Dante, "Would you rather be special and alone, or normal and not?"

"Who said it has to be either? Why can't you be special *and* have friends?"

"You don't get it, do you? If you're different then people are scared of you,"

Phantasia leapt of the swing she'd been sitting on to face Dante head-on. "That's rubbish! Why would people be scared of you? You're just trying to make up excuses to explain why you keep yourself locked away all the time. Well guess what? They're not gonna work with me. I can see right through you, Dante Orpheus!"

She couldn't, of course. Her sight couldn't even penetrate his outer defences, but she had to try something!

"So you want to know why people are scared of me?" he asked, dragging his feet along the ground to stop the swing dead, "You want to know what makes me different and special?"

"You finally trust me enough to tell me?"

"No, I'm just hoping if you know the truth then you'll stop pestering me," he said, "So here it is: Like I said before: I see things, just like my mother did. I get crazy hallucinations about demons and angels and things that didn't happen, and sometimes I even think they're *real*. Like I was pretty sure we were attacked by some kind of crazy stone demon last night, and last week everyone was running around trying to fight Godhand!"

Was that it? Was that what all his angst and self-loathing was about? That he managed to recall real events better than everyone else?

"Oh, don't be silly, Dante, they *are* real!" she said. The reaction wasn't anything like she'd expected. He stepped off the swing and his condensed aura spiked out, as if turning into a thousand knives.

"DON'T PATRONISE ME!" he snapped, "I know those things aren't real! Why do you think I lock myself in my room? I've spent *months* trying to convince myself these things didn't happen! That there's no such thing as magic or demons or ... or *Erebus*!"

"But..."

He swung a clenched fist at the metal beams. "SHUT UP! I don't want you wrecking everything! I did this for Kat's sake. I did this because I didn't want them to take *me* away. Don't you understand? I'm not just 'special'! I'm *insane*! I thought you were a faerie! A faerie! Can you not see why I'm like I—"

He stopped mid-sentence because Phantasia had just let her human clothes fall through her body to the floor, revealing ethereal equivalents.

"I *am* a faerie," she said, "And someone is playing with your memories. Those aren't dreams or hallucinations you're having, those things really *did* happen. You *were* there a week ago fighting alongside the rest of us against Godhand. We *were* attacked by a demon last night."

Maybe this was the worst thing to do to the poor boy, but she couldn't stand by and let him tear himself apart because of some stupid illusion spell. All she had to do was make sure his true memories remained intact.

And then the threatening aura receded and condensed as Dante fell back onto the swing, face etched in conflicted denial.

"So, it's all true then..." he said, his voice hoarse, "It's really all true..."

Phantasia nodded. She reached out to brush his pulsating aura with her own, hoping it might shine even a glimmer of hope into his torn heart. Instead he pulled himself from the swing and turned his back on her.

"The demons, the magic, the darkness...Erebus...they're all real?"

There was that name again! "Erebus was the primordial darkness," she said, "Formed from the corruption in human hearts, at least according to my kind. I don't really trust their skewered viewpoints,"

"Darkness in our hearts," he said, "So that's what it is,"

"You okay?"

He glanced back with sorrowful eyes. "Yeah, guess I just realised a few things. Thanks for helping. I'm gonna head home now. Would rather you didn't follow."

Phantasia watched as he walked out of the park and paced up the cracked road towards the town, his white coat billowing around him while his aura remained dark and impenetrable, as if the truth had turned it to stone.